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About Foreign Policy

A Look at the U.S. Strategy for Iran

The core objective of President Trump’s Iran Strategy is the systemic change in the Islamic Republic’s hostile and destabilizing actions, including blocking all paths to a nuclear weapon and exporting terrorism. Under the President’s direction, we have prioritized the maximum pressure campaign placing unprecedented stress on Iran’s economy, forcing Tehran to make increasingly difficult choices. As the Islamic Republic marks its 40th anniversary it is appropriate to assess how this strategy is proceeding, and how we will continue to implement President Trump’s guidance in the coming year.

The nine months since the President’s decision to exit the misguided, one-sided Iran nuclear deal have given us considerable insight into the impact of re-imposing the sanctions relaxed under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) while also applying new sanctions. Predictions that unilateral U.S. sanctions would weaken and isolate America as the rest of the globe pursued instead do business with Iran have proven false; conversely, Iran has found itself increasingly alone and bereft of the anticipated influx of foreign investment that was to save its moribund economy. As Iran continues to target Europe as well as its regional neighbors with nefarious disinformation campaigns in addition to cyber and attempted terrorist attacks, their governments should decide to re-impose sanctions, adding materially to Iran’s economic pain. This combined pressure would accelerate Iran’s return to the negotiating table under circumstances highly-favorable to the United States and responsible nations around the world. As President Rouhani himself admitted, Iran will move into a period of unprecedented stress on its economy in the second quarter of 2019. We want this pressure to be decisive and we are supplementing sanctions with broader efforts to increase the cost of Iran’s destructive and destabilizing policies to an intolerable level as the President Trump’s strategy requires.

Iran’s malign behavior in the region is a direct and significant threat to the United States’ economic and strategic interests and to the American people, and risks triggering a wider conflict. Not only does Iran threaten the Straits of Hormuz, but through its Houthi proxies, Tehran is also trying to establish a beach head on Yemen’s coastline, which would represent an unprecedented capacity to threaten two of the world’s great shipping lanes simultaneously. In Syria, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) members along with Hizballah and other proxies have been wreaking havoc for years as they attempt to prop up the murderous Assad regime so they can use Syria to threaten Israel, while at the same time exploiting Lebanon for illicit financial gain, to advance their terrorist agendas and expand their regional political influence. In Iraq, Shi’a Popular Mobilization Forces trained and equipped by the IRGC-QF are attempting to infiltrate Iraq’s nascent political process in imitation of Hizballah. And in Iran, the regime continues to use hostage-taking as a tool of state policy, in violation of international laws and norms. Robert Levinson, Siamak Namazi, and Xiyue Wang are wrongfully detained in Iran, as are numerous other American and Western citizens. This shameful and barbaric practice must end, and Iran must return Americans and other innocent civilians at once.

There is more we can do to roll back Iran’s activities within its borders and in the region. We can continue to encourage warmer ties between Iraq and the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. We have already made substantial progress aligning Israel, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in support of the President’s Iran Strategy. Increasingly overt Israeli cooperation with a range of Arab countries across the economic and security sectors benefits them all. We must seize every opportunity to make this collaboration the “new normal” to the benefit of all involved.

While engaged in this campaign we must remain vigilant to ensure this violent and unpredictable regime does not acquire a nuclear weapon and the capability to deliver it. Thanks to the Israeli revelation of Iran’s secret nuclear archive, we know their protestations that their nuclear program has always been peaceful are flat lies. We will redouble our efforts to expose and disrupt Iran’s illicit procurement networks and prevent Iran’s import of dual-use and proliferation sensitive items. We will also hold accountable those governments that allow Iran and its agents to use their territories to purchase, finance, or transfer items that support their nuclear and missile programs.

The 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution brings into sharp focus the regime’s failure to provide the radical change from entrenched corruption promised in 1979, as well as the dismal future prospects for Iran if it continues on the current path. Popular criticism of Tehran for economic mismanagement continues to resonate, and taboos surrounding public discussion of the Supreme Leader’s succession process continue to erode. Our key message to the Iranian people, the long-suffering victims of the regime, should be loud and clear: Forty years from now, your outlook can be radically different. We saw this trajectory in the 20thcentury when the imperialist powers who ignited World War II took a different path and are now some of our greatest democratic allies and economic partners. Iran’s leadership could and should choose such a path to a brighter future for the Iranian people.

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