



INSS Insight No. 896, February 14, 2017

A Threefold Challenge for Trump against Iran

Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov

The Trump administration has commenced with a tempest of policy implementation of promises made during the election campaign in areas of policy such as immigration, trade, health care, the Supreme Court, and many others. They mostly related to domestic policy and the American economy. Regarding the Middle East, the administration has adopted a different style of rhetoric from that of the previous administration. Nevertheless, there is no strong evidence for a new regional policy: whether in relation to Iran and the nuclear deal, the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria, or the issue of intensifying the war against ISIS and all forms of radical Islam. When shaping its Middle East policy in general and its policy on Iran in particular, the new administration will need to come to terms with major tensions within its policy targets—declared and undeclared—vis-à-vis Iran (regarding nuclear issues, regional influence, terror and subversion, long-range missile development, cyber warfare, and soft power) and other rivals (ISIS, Russia, China, North Korea). All of this must be dealt with under the guiding principle of “America first.”

This article expounds upon the proposed American policy vis-à-vis Iran, and the inputs that Israel can contribute to shaping this policy.

Where does Iran Challenge the United States?

The first front on which Iran challenges the new American administration is that of the nuclear agreement. In response to Trump’s call during the campaign to reopen the July 2015 agreement between Iran and the P5+1, Iran declared that it is unwilling to do so. Recently, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran even stated that it intends to input enriched material into advanced centrifuges (IR-8), in order to advance the research and development program of centrifuges that are more efficient than those currently used in Iran. The Iranian goals are to develop its technological ability to enrich uranium, to quickly amass fissile material, to reduce the size of installations required for future industrialized enrichment, and to make it easier to hide enrichment facilities should it choose to do so. This is not a blatant violation of the nuclear agreement, but rather “gray area” activity that depends on one’s interpretation of the agreement. Iran is attempting to force its interpretation, which naturally is more permissive than the American interpretation, and is testing American resolve to enforce the agreement in accordance with its own interpretation.

The second front pitting the Trump administration against Tehran appeared in the headlines this month thanks to a failed Iranian test of a North Korean-model ballistic missile, capable of carrying a nuclear

warhead some 4000 kilometers. Although the United States and Germany declared that the test launch violated UN Security Council resolution 2231, this resolution does not unequivocally prohibit Iran from performing such a test, but “calls” for it not to carry out tests of ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear weaponry. Just as with the nuclear issue, Iran is not violating the resolution, but challenging it in practice and testing American willingness to respond. Furthermore, it has been reported that Iran tested a cruise missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. This action also does not violate the Security Council resolution, which does not relate to cruise missiles, but only ballistic missile tests.

The third front where Washington faces Tehran is in the non-nuclear realm. Iran works to expand its regional power against its main enemies—Israel and Saudi Arabia—by establishing militias and military proxies, as well as by providing Iranian weaponry and support to terror organizations. Against Israel, Tehran continues to support Hezbollah and supply it with advanced weapons, with the aim of enhancing its ability to threaten Israel. Iran also solidifies its power in Syria and Lebanon, including through ethnic cleansing of Sunni areas and settlement of Shiite populations in their stead, creating zones of Iranian influence. This is all undertaken while strengthening the alliance with Assad and Hezbollah.

Iran supports the Houthi rebel organizations fighting US allies in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Iran deals in subversion, destabilization, and terror among Shiite populations in the Gulf states, with a focus on northeastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In the last few months, the conflict has even spread from land to sea: reports were published this week that Houthi forces attacked a Saudi ship in the Red Sea, killing two seamen. This follows the October 2016 attack by Houthi forces on a UAE ship, and the unsuccessful attempt to attack an American destroyer with Iranian surface-to-ship missiles. Generally, these attacks have been directed against US allies, not against American forces. On this front, too, Iran does not directly defy Washington, but aids the fight against its allies in an attempt to undermine the strength of the American-Sunni alliance in the Middle East.

From Iran’s perspective, this is merely a continuation of the cautious strategy of “testing boundaries” that was applied against the previous American administration. The Obama administration was determined to reach a deal with Iran regarding its nuclear program. For this purpose, it was willing to compromise on American interests and the interests of American allies while avoiding a significant escalation with Iran that could have endangered the administration’s diplomatic achievement in the nuclear issue. The assumption of the previous administration was that the alternative to an agreement was regional war, and that an agreement should be reached, even a non-optimal one, which should then be diligently implied.

Furthermore, it appears that Iran’s own self confidence has grown stronger due to Russian support and the increased cooperation between Tehran and Moscow since the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Russia took advantage of the American passivity in Iraq and Syria in order to reassert its hold over the Middle East, finding a partner for this in Iran. Although this is not a strategic alliance, and there is mutual suspicion between Iran and Russia, both have made sure to successfully coordinate their actions in Syria, and to promote further common interests in preserving the Assad regime, expanding the supply of advanced Russian weaponry to Iran, and collaborating in the field of civil nuclear power.

American Resolve is required

In response to the ballistic missile test conducted by Iran, the Trump administration announced sanctions against Iranian organizations and persons connected with terror activities and the Iranian missile program. In addition, an American battleship was sent to the Bab el-Mandeb region to secure trade routes against Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are supported by Tehran. The objective of the American response, as stated by President Trump, was to refuse to show restraint in the face of problematic Iranian conduct and to deter the Iranian regime from continuing its wayward regional policy. Nevertheless, the statement by Defense Secretary James Mattis that he is not considering to increase American forces in the region shows that the new administration has yet to fully formulate a strategy that will significantly change the strategic reality vis-à-vis Iran as shaped by the Obama administration. Thus, the challenge facing the new American administration is, on the one hand, to block Iran on all the fronts where it is challenging the United States, while on the other hand to avoid escalation at an undesirable time.

The change in American rhetoric—as expressed in the statement of General Michael Flynn that Iran is “on notice,” and as reinforced by President Trump’s statement that Iran is “playing with fire”—was necessary to make clear to Iran that the rules of the game have changed. But words must be backed up by equivalent deeds that display the same level of force. The Trump administration should restore the credibility of American policies and declarations in order to deter Iran from taking negative policy steps, while strengthening Middle East stability and protecting the interests of the United States and its allies in the region.

In order to formulate a different policy on Iran, the Trump administration must confirm the following basic assumptions: a) rejection of the Obama administration’s assumption that there is no alternative to an agreement; this assumption paralyzed the previous administration. The new administration should start with an assumption that the alternative to an agreement is not necessarily war; b) the alternative to the existing agreement, should Iran pull out of it, is the restoration of significant sanctions and a credible military option. If Iran should move to nuclear breakout, the response should be a surgical military strike only against nuclear facilities and containment of the incident. Against a strong and determined administration, the possibility of escalation should scare Iran rather than the United States.

Based upon these decisions, it would be appropriate to define a strategy for two main time frames: the short-medium term, and the long term. In the short and medium terms, the Trump administration should work with other world powers to form a consensus regarding which actions by Iran would be considered a violation of the nuclear agreement. Even without Russian or Chinese agreement, the United States and its European allies should agree on interpretation and coordinate a response for the “gray area” violations. It should be clear that the United States, United Kingdom, France and Germany are committed to the agreement solely in accordance with a strict interpretation.

In parallel, Washington should push for a new Security Council resolution to replace Resolution 2231, which would unequivocally prohibit the test of Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles that can carry a nuclear warhead. Such actions would demonstrate—to both Iran and other world powers—American resolve to create new rules of the game.

Russia is a key country for implementation of this strategy. President Trump has stated that he intends to act in coordination with Russian president Vladimir Putin. In a future agreement between these leaders, it

is essential to include a demand to weaken Iran's hold in Syria, with a focus on Iranian deployment in southern Syria and the Golan Heights. Another important issue is the cessation of the supply of advanced Russian weaponry to Assad, and from him to Hezbollah rendering a direct threat against Israel.

Furthermore, the American administration should increase pressure on Iran's alliances and relationships with terror organizations in the region, using counterterrorism and deterrence. This policy should include a joint intelligence effort of the United States and its regional allies, as well as Israel, along with the employment of targeted force aimed at stopping Iranian weapon deliveries by sea and air. Also in this arena, an aggressive policy against Iran's system of alliances, and injury to the Quds Force, is necessary so that Tehran will understand that the Trump administration intends to deal with Iran and take risks not taken in the past by the United States.

The Trump administration seeks to make clear that it is not willing to permit provocative Iranian actions, but it is important to avoid uncontrolled escalation during the years when Iran is far from the nuclear threshold. The suggested strategy demonstrates that there is an alternative to an agreement, which will further regional stability while not lead to a regional war. For this purpose, it is important to avoid tactical and local responses, and to formulate a comprehensive strategy intended to weaken Iran.

Regarding the long-term, the American strategy should include preparatory plans with the aim of preserving the credibility of the American threat, even after some of the main restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program are removed, beginning at the end of the seventh year of the agreement. A major component of the strategy must be amending the agreement, which currently allows in the long term for Iran to become the legitimate, unrestricted owner of nuclear infrastructure. For this purpose, the US administration must create, together with its allies, deterrent and punishment mechanisms that will deter Iran from developing its nuclear program and approaching the nuclear threshold, and being a mere few months or weeks from a bomb. The enforcement mechanisms should also include the possibility—coordinated with the world powers that signed the agreement—of restoring a significant sanctions regime, which in the past led Iran to the negotiating table and to compromise.

The US administration should be ready for Iran to decide to withdraw from the agreement, or in the future to exploit the removal of restrictions as prescribed by the agreement and advance to nuclear weapons. Then, the ability to harm the Iranian economy's financial and energy sectors and a credible threat of focused military force as a last resort to prevent a nuclear Iran will be a key to deter Iran. These deterrent mechanisms might be the only tools capable of preventing a nuclear Iran while also avoiding a large-scale regional military conflict.

The Israeli Input

For Israel, too, words must lead to deeds. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has declared that he intends to make the Iranian issue the main priority in the talks he will be holding with President Trump. Iran and its proxies, especially Hezbollah, are the greatest strategic threat currently facing Israel. Since summer 2015 we have been recommending an American-Israeli "parallel agreement" for coping with the consequences of the JCPOA and Iran's malignant activities. Today there is an additional Israeli interest in establishing a strong regional front under American leadership against the extensive Iranian activities in the region. Formation of such a front would be a crucial and meaningful achievement for the stability of the Middle East and containment of Iran.

The formation of this type of regional anti-Iranian alliance may obligate Israel to make significant adjustments in the Palestinian issue. If President Trump would be willing to pursue bilateral agreements with his allies and perhaps even work towards convening a regional coalition with the participation of the United States, the Sunni Gulf states, and Israel, it is imperative that the Israeli government initiate moves that would not foil these efforts. This would be the optimal way to advance the most important Israeli interests in the long term against Iran while advancing an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

