The Trump administration has taken office determined to halt the expansion of Iranian influence across the Middle East. A less accommodating approach toward Iran than the one pursued by President Barack Obama is now warranted, as Tehran has been exacerbating regional turmoil at little cost for most of the past decade. President Obama tried mightily to reach an accommodation with Iran and begin a process of rapprochement, but as they have done repeatedly in the past, Iran’s leaders dismissed the American overtures out of hand. Americans may want a normal relationship with Iran, but the Iranian regime carries no torch for America.

Confronting Iran is no longer a choice, it is a necessity borne of the Iranian regime’s persistent enmity toward the United States and all of its key regional partners. The Islamic Republic has been a nemesis to seven consecutive American presidents, but there are no options to address the regional challenge Tehran presents that are low-cost, low-risk, and simultaneously carry a high probability of success. Consequently, an appropriate U.S. policy to address the various threats Iran poses must begin with a realistic appraisal of how each option measures up on these considerations, and must end with a deliberate decision to adopt one, resolutely accept its shortcomings, and commit the necessary resources to ensure it has the greatest chance of success.

Any such policy must also proceed from a clear statement of America’s main interests and objectives in the Middle East. In the case of Iran and its role in the region, Washington’s principal goal should be to see Tehran meaningfully and durably change its behavior without the need to engage in open war, which most probably would upend regional stability and entail exorbitant costs for the United States.

Kenneth M. Pollack is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (Kenneth.Pollack@aei.org). Bilal Y. Saab is a senior fellow and the director of the Defense and Security Program at the Middle East Institute (BSaab@mei.edu).

Copyright © 2017 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 40:3 pp. 97–108
https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1370334
The behavior that the United States should aim to end, or at least significantly reduce, is Tehran’s aggressive efforts to overturn the regional status quo by subverting governments and intervening in the Middle East’s civil wars to the detriment of all but its own interests. Tehran has consistently buttressed anti-American regimes, stoked chaos wherever possible, and waded into every civil war it could—and typically on the side opposed to the United States or its partners. All of this is threatening to American interests because it inflames the conflicts of the Middle East and weakens American allies there.

In this essay, we make the case for a U.S. strategy of “pushback,” one that seeks to dramatically weaken Iran’s regional influence and hopefully eliminate it from key states. We also identify the strategy’s pros and cons, and compare it to other possible strategies also meant to address Iran’s regional challenge.

**Shared Concerns, Different Priorities**

The United States shares many of the concerns of its Middle Eastern partners about Iran’s ambitions and policies in the region. Whether it is Iran engaging in terrorism and political violence against U.S. interests and partners, or fomenting instability in neighboring countries, these are forms of behavior that the United States, its European allies, and its regional partners deem unacceptable and detrimental to regional order. But to say that there is no daylight between Washington and Riyadh or Abu Dhabi—or even Tel Aviv—for example, on the issue of Iran would be untrue.

There is no reason to celebrate such differences, as they are obvious fissures for Tehran to exploit. However, they need to be acknowledged and become the basis for a more candid exchange between Washington and its regional partners regarding Iran. Such a conversation is the ultimate key to fashioning a realistic strategy that both the United States and its Middle Eastern partners can commit to implementing.

Because of the differing perspectives on the threat from Iran, all sides owe it to one another to acknowledge their priorities—where they are willing to commit resources, and where they are not—so that everyone will understand what to expect. America’s regional partners often complain—sometimes with justification—that what Washington says and what it does regarding Iran and the Middle East is seldom the same. If the United States and its partners are going to embark on a more confrontational

---

*A more candid exchange between Washington and its regional partners is the key to a realistic strategy.*
approach toward Iran, even if it is only a relative shift from the previous decade, then U.S. friends and allies will seek (and the United States ought to be willing to offer) an honest sense of what it will, and perhaps more importantly, what it will not do. If asked to pick between a fine-sounding but unpredictable U.S. policy and an unsatisfactory but clear U.S. policy, Arab, Turkish, and Israeli officials would much prefer the latter, particularly in this era of tectonic shifts and increasing strategic uncertainty in the region and around the world.

The View from Washington

For the United States, Iran poses both extant and latent challenges to four key interests in the Middle East: energy stability, nuclear nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and the physical security of America’s regional partners. Iran threatens the stability and freedom of navigation in the energy-rich and strategically vital Persian Gulf region by subverting regional governments, feeding insurgencies, and stoking civil wars.

Although the October 2015 nuclear deal with Iran has mollified fears of a cascade of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East—a profoundly destabilizing scenario for regional and international security—this is only a temporary solution (assuming the regime honors the current deal) because the strictest terms expire in 2025 and 2030, after which the Iranians will be able to revive their enrichment program.

Iran has not been involved in a terrorist attack on the United States for at least six years (prior to 2011, Iranian-backed Iraqi terrorist groups routinely attacked American personnel and facilities in Iraq), but it remains an active sponsor of various terrorist groups including Hezbollah, the PKK, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah that target U.S. interests and partners in the region.1 Moreover, there is a very tangible latent threat that Iran might begin targeting the United States directly again at any time. Once ISIS has been driven out of Iraq, it is unclear how Tehran would react to a continued U.S. military presence there. Most Americans and Iraqis view such a residual presence as desirable, but Iran may not; it might order its Iraqi allies and proxies to once again target Americans in the hopes of driving the United States from Iraq all over again.

If Iran seeks to weaken U.S. partners in the region, it matters to Washington because this raises the costs of its main pursuits and priorities in the Middle East including regional stability, reform, and prosperity. America’s partners have often exaggerated the extent of the Iranian threat they face. From the Houthis in Yemen before 2014 to the popular uprising in Bahrain in 2011, the Gulf states have tended to blame internal opposition on Iran long before the Iranians actually supported them—and it is often their actions against these groups that opens the door to Iranian influence that previously did not exist. At times, Arab governments have done this to shift blame from their real domestic problems to the Iranian
bogeyman. In other cases, they truly do believe the Iranians to be responsible for virtually any problem to arise. This divergence over the extent of the Iranian threat is an important difference between Washington and its Middle Eastern partners, and it deserves to be discussed openly so that neither side has a false set of expectations.

The View from the Region

There is no single, monolithic view from the Middle East about Iran’s regional challenge (or any other issue, for that matter). Not surprisingly, different states in the region see the Iranian threat differently, just as they prioritize and pursue their interests differently.

The Omanis tend not to be overly alarmed by Iran because they have enjoyed cordial relations with Tehran for decades. In contrast, the Saudis, Emiratis, and Bahrainis believe they face an Iranian threat that is nothing less than existential because they are convinced that Iran is an expansionist Shia power bent on subverting Sunni governments. (They aren’t necessarily wrong, although they do tend to exaggerate Iranian capabilities.) Between these two extremes lies a group of countries including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and Turkey, who have concerns about Iran but less acute threat perceptions. They also are more pragmatic in their approach toward the Islamic Republic for reasons having to do with geography, history of bilateral relations with Iran, commerce, domestic societal considerations, and leadership style and policy.

What is rarely recognized across the Middle East is the lack of consensus among regional states over what to do about Iran. The Egyptians loathe Iran and agree that the country represents a major threat to the stability of the Middle East, but Cairo wanted nothing to do with Saudi Arabia’s 2015 anti-Iranian military intervention in Yemen. Likewise, throughout the nuclear crisis with Iran, Oman adopted a much more accommodating stance toward Tehran than the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and even played an active role in mediation between the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) and the Iranians. Kuwait is clearly bothered by Iran’s antics and oftentimes feels threatened, but has shown little willingness to do anything about it other than complain to Washington. Despite Saudi and Emirati claims to the contrary, Qatar is relatively indifferent, too—neither embracing Tehran as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi claim, nor fighting it wholeheartedly as they would like. These regional differences explain why real
alliances, or drastically improved security cooperation and collective action in the region, have been especially difficult to establish.

Finally, there is one additional difference between the United States and its regional partners that needs to be addressed. The United States has demonstrated repeatedly that it will go to war to defend its regional partners from direct, overt, military attack: the 1987–88 Tanker War (the attacks against oil ships during the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War), the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, the containment of Iraq from 1991–2003, and the invasion of Iraq itself in 2003 were all motivated in part by a desire to protect U.S. regional partners from attack by Iran or Iraq. That is certainly important to America’s Middle Eastern partners.

However, increasingly, the primary threat that these partners face is internal: protests, terrorism, insurgencies, and the potential for further popular revolutions. In truth, the greatest threat that Iran poses to them is its efforts to stoke these home fires. But it is entirely unclear whether the United States would make any effort to defend a friendly regional government from a domestic effort to unseat it that emerged from its own people. Many of America’s Arab partners were horrified when the United States made no effort to help the Hosni Mubarak regime in fending off the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Their perception, probably a correct one, that the United States would be unlikely to aid them against such a threat in their own country in a moment of crisis, even if it were aided or inspired by Iran, creates a major divergence in perceptions of the nature and extent of the Iranian threat.

The Importance of Reform

The divergence between the United States and its Arab partners over the threat from Iran to their internal stability is a critical one. The best and perhaps only way to address it is for the United States to embrace and enable real reform—political, social, and economic—among its partners in the Middle East. Historically, Iran has had little success creating rifts in other countries, but has had great success in exploiting pre-existing problems. Thus, the best way to limit Iran’s ability to exacerbate the internal problems of other Middle Eastern states is to help those states address those problems, something that can only be done by comprehensive reform programs.

Thus, any strategy to counter Iran would be greatly helped by substantial reform efforts in virtually all of America’s regional partners. The best news is that after decades of refusing to acknowledge the need for reform and preferring repression instead, most of the countries of the Middle East now recognize the need for reform, even if many are so far too frightened

Any strategy to counter Iran would be greatly helped by substantial regional domestic reform efforts.
to take the painful, practical steps necessary to do so. Thus, the real question is the extent to which the United States is willing to encourage and help foster those efforts. Such assistance can take many different forms. Some countries, like Egypt and Jordan, will probably require major financial support to address the economic costs of reform and help assuage the pain of political and socio-cultural change. Other countries, including Saudi Arabia, have already begun their own programs of far-reaching reform and have the resources to do it themselves. What they lack is expertise, technical assistance, and help addressing their external challenges—of which Iran is the most important—so that they can concentrate their resources and attention on the reforms. Many other countries fall somewhere in between, requiring a mix of the two.

It should be understood, and we have attempted to make clear in the second half of this essay, that while all of the different policy options would greatly benefit from meaningful reform among America’s Middle Eastern partners, some of the options would entail the commitment of greater American energy and resources to help make that a reality.

The Case for Pushback

Before we argue for a strategy of pushback and explain why it is the right option at this time, it is important to once again clarify what America’s overall or ultimate objective regarding Iran should be. In our view, this is to cause a meaningful and durable change in Iranian behavior while avoiding a large-scale military conflict. It is a difficult balance to achieve because of the challenges Washington faces in managing escalation. The United States has an overwhelming advantage at the higher end of the escalation spectrum because of its total conventional and nuclear superiority over Iran (assuming Moscow – whose ties with Tehran have deepened following Russia’s military intervention in Syria on Iran’s and Assad’s side – does not get involved militarily in any potential conflict). However, because the United States much prefers to avoid war, which is almost always unpredictable once it starts, Washington typically is more tolerant of aggressive Iranian behavior at the lower ends of the escalation spectrum. The problem is that this is precisely where Iran has a considerable advantage, given its experience and freedom of action in contrast to Washington’s constraints and relative inexperience in asymmetric warfare.

Alternatives

Different hypothetical American strategies would affect this delicate balancing act differently. The United States’ default option regarding Iran is to retain its policy of minimalist containment, which has been the bare minimum of U.S. policy toward Iran since the 1979 revolution. The biggest flaw here, however, is that
this could aggravate the tension between the United States and several of its key regional partners, who view Iran as a mortal enemy. Worsening relations with America’s core Middle East partners would, in turn, affect a variety of other American interests such as counterterrorism cooperation and the potential for American partners to take matters into their own hands by becoming more aggressive toward Iran in ways that could exacerbate regional stability (e.g., the Saudi intervention in Yemen). It also would leave Tehran with tremendous room to maneuver and expand its influence across the region, as it has for the past decade.

Alternatively, the United States could adopt a somewhat less passive version of the current policy, which would start by making more of an effort to assist regional partners not just by selling them more arms, but also by improving security relations and consultative mechanisms at tactical, operational, and strategic levels, which Obama tried to do but failed because of mistrust on both sides. However, this approach may still fall short of what America’s regional partners want, leaving them with little reason to restrain themselves for such potentially insignificant enhancements. Also, it probably would do little to diminish Iran’s presence across the region.

Third, the United States could go with a policy of ‘sandbagging,’ designed to modestly enhance resistance to Iran to prevent it from securing outright victories and mire it in attrition battles across the region that could slowly undermine its economic strength and domestic political control. Of course, doing so would mean committing additional resources to what is likely to be a protracted struggle, and the American public may tire of the fight before the Iranian leadership does.

Another option would focus on regime change in Tehran. Despite its maximalist or extreme nature, this high-risk, high-reward option cannot be ruled out because the idea is favored by some on the far right in Washington including senior officials in the Trump White House. This policy assumes that the Iranian leadership will never change its problematic behavior and odious policies in the Middle East simply because of its identity and raison d’être—an ideological regime committed to exporting its set of radical ideals and beliefs, unable to become or act like a non-revolutionary state. Therefore, regime change seeks to topple the theocracy in Iran through a range of primarily covert measures. This option runs the greatest risk of escalation and has the lowest likelihood of success (at least, ostensible success), although even then it could still help to achieve other, secondary goals.

“Pushback”
We believe there is a better alternative to these options. We argue for a strategy of pushback that would deliberately challenge Iran more forcefully in areas where Tehran is trying to spread or deepen its influence and where core U.S. interests
are at risk. Some would argue that the Trump administration is already pursuing a “lite” version of this option by deepening its involvement in Yemen (where U.S. assistance to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates is geared toward not just combating al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula but also degrading the capabilities of the Iranian-backed Houthi-Ali Abdullah Saleh alliance) and Syria (with the U.S. strikes against an airfield from which Syrian jets took off to drop chemical weapons on Syrian civilians).

Pushback envisions more direct involvement by the United States against Iran. To be clear, it would not mean that the United States would go it alone or escalate a ground war in the Middle East by sending thousands of U.S. soldiers to do battle with the regionally deployed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces and other Shia militias. Instead, the policy should go hand-in-hand with more serious investments in capabilities that allow the U.S. military to operate in grey zones, using them to fight back against Iran’s preferred mode of warfare either directly or through proxies and allies.

Pushback would likely mean finding creative new ways either to sanction Iran or impose additional financial costs on it if new sanctions threatened the nuclear deal (the JCPOA, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). In particular, Iran’s endless, indefensible human rights violations furnish both a moral imperative and excellent method of exerting additional financial and political pressure on Tehran. The Iranian regime is highly sensitive to internal protest, believing (rightly) that a great many of its own people would like to see it gone. It cracks down hard and arbitrarily, and in ways that most Western populations find appalling, like the imprisonment and torture of various Iranian-Americans on absurd charges. Making a greater effort to mobilize international support to hold Iran accountable for these abuses, and forcing it to pay a price if it won’t, would put Tehran on the defensive, force it to expend resources at home rather than abroad, and potentially deny it access to overseas markets.

Pushback would certainly mean bolstering American partners under pressure from Iran, like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—although that should take the form of enabling a range of reforms more than anything else. It likely would entail taking a more active role in the civil wars in Iraq, Syria, and possibly Yemen to ensure that Iran’s allies do not prevail, and hopefully engineer a stable end to those conflicts that would allow the countries to rebuild. (Yemen is harder as Iran gains less there. American interests are less directly threatened, so even under a pushback approach there, there is a case for minimizing the U.S. commitment to Yemen.) Nevertheless, a key difference between this approach and
sandbagging is that pushback would entail a much greater American effort to bring at least some of the regional civil wars to quicker ends in order to eliminate the opportunities these create for Iran to expand its influence and mischief.³

Pushback could also entail more direct means of confronting Iran, diplomatically and militarily. In the diplomatic realm, it could mean opposing Iranian participation in international organizations, hindering Tehran from negotiating deals favorable to itself with other countries, and making it a priority to prevent Iran from achieving its goals whenever possible. For instance, after the JCPOA, Iran sought wider access to European and East Asian markets and the United States did nothing to hinder it. Under the pushback strategy, Washington might once again lobby its allies to minimize their dealings and deals with Tehran. In the military realm, the United States might loosen its rules of engagement in the Persian Gulf, encouraging American naval vessels not to back down from Iranian provocations, enforcing the law of the sea and freedom of navigation more robustly, and standing their ground when Iranian naval vessels harass them and otherwise act in an unprofessional and dangerous fashion. Making clear to Iran’s Revolutionary Guard naval forces that the United States won’t back down if they continue to act in the same reckless and aggressive fashion they have indulged for over a decade could send an important signal both to Tehran and America’s regional partners that Washington is not going to retreat in the face of Iranian aggression, even if it is just the Revolutionary Guard’s usual puerile bluster.

Like other options to counter Iran, pushback has its pros and cons. It offers the greatest prospect of significantly limiting Tehran’s power in the region in the (relatively) near term. It also would send a clear and strong message to Tehran that its bellicosity will no longer go unchecked. By substantially increasing the costs of Iran’s pursuit of its problematic regional agenda, Tehran might scale back its expansionist ambitions and opportunist approach. It would solidify the United States’ relations with regional partners most concerned about Iran and encourage them to offer not only greatly increased cooperation on a range of issues but also larger payoffs from those commitments. It also offers them the biggest and most tangible quid pro quo for engaging in real, sustained reform. Pushback also might communicate to Moscow and possibly other adversaries that the United States is serious about countering hybrid or asymmetric warfare across the globe where U.S. interests lay. Finally, it would much improve the readiness of the U.S. military with respect to today’s and tomorrow’s military challenges, which most likely will include a heavy dose of sophisticated hybrid warfare. This option would give strategic planners and defense policy officials at the Pentagon the opportunity to adjust various U.S. military postures around the world and make them more dynamic, flexible, and able to deal effectively with the challenge of hybrid warfare.
Although the costs of pushback do not need to be as ruinously expensive as the Iraq and Afghan wars (because it would not employ large numbers of American troops as they did), it would not be cheap either. It would entail the allocation of tens of billions of dollars over the next four to eight years for asymmetric warfare, covert action, tighter sanctions, expanded military assistance to regional partners, and stabilization and peacekeeping operations. Part of the costs stem from the fact that Iran has mastered the art of operating unconventionally in the region. Therefore, Iran has a sizeable advantage over the United States and its regional partners, who have only pursued this to a much more limited extent.

Moreover, the policy also entails certain risks. In particular, such a muscular policy might provoke Tehran to challenge aspects of it—especially early on. This could escalate tensions rather quickly and encourage Iran to dial up its destabilization campaign and even hurt the United States in places where it has vital interests, such as in Iraq and the Gulf. Such an escalation might even draw in Russian engagement and theoretically lead to a general war. That strikes us as unlikely, but it is not impossible and it is important to start down this path with a clear understanding of the risks and costs involved, even if they seem impossible today.

Because of the resources the United States would have to deploy to pursue this option, it would have to be effectively coordinated on an inter-agency level. The worst thing Washington could do is start building up new indigenous forces in the region or even just deploying more military capabilities without having a complementary diplomatic strategy. Historically, this has been hard for the United States to do, but certainly not impossible.

Finally, the American public may have strong reservations about the United States expanding or deepening its military involvement in the Middle East—the elites certainly do, although public opinion polls have shown important differences between elites and the majority of the people. This does not have to be a deal breaker, but it certainly represents a challenge that the administration would have to overcome or risk deeper polarization and possibly a political crisis.

The Best of Bad Options

Weighing carefully the many advantages and disadvantages of each option presented above leads us to conclude that pushback offers the most effective
method of shifting Iran’s behavior without causing open war. We believe this option has an affordable price and an acceptable level of risk, even as we acknowledge that both will be significantly greater than those the United States has undertaken against Iran so far. But, given that Washington’s current approach has manifestly failed, it seems equally clear the United States will have to pay more and risk more if it is going to secure its vital interests in the Middle East. The only question is whether Washington wants to pay on an installment plan—one in which it does not get anything until the last payment is made, as would be the case with sandbagging or either of the containment options—or pay more up front and be able to help the region toward greater stability, reform, and normality sooner, as would be the case with pushback.

Pushback does not necessarily threaten the nuclear deal with Iran: the Iranians have demonstrated that they see such an agreement as unrelated to their regional activities. Since the signing of the JCPOA, Iran has amped up its support to its proxies in Yemen, willingly fighting GCC regular forces there. It has also expanded its own direct participation in the Syrian civil war, where its regular forces are now fighting the GCC’s proxies. Nor is there any sign that Iran is limiting its activities in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, or anywhere else out of deference to American interests and a desire to avoid confrontations with Washington. Instead, Tehran has pursued its preferred regional strategy aggressively and without fear that doing so would jeopardize the JCPOA. There is no reason that the United States could not do the same.

Pushback is certainly not a panacea when it comes to countering Iran. Like all of the options, it has drawbacks. Pushback is likely to work best if it is married to elements of a more assertive containment regime, including upgrading security relations with regional partners. The United States may also have to adopt aspects of sandbagging in places of lesser importance where it is not ready to pay the costs and run the risks of more decisive action. While it will take some time to reap the full benefits of pushback, it has a higher chance of succeeding if the United States commits, unlike in previous years, to becoming more active players and real partners. The ball is still in the court of America’s partners because domestic reforms are crucial to the success of the joint enterprise of countering Iran, but the United States also has a big say in moving this long-overdue process in the right direction.

Notes


3. While the common wisdom assumes that it is impossible for third parties to peacefully end “somebody else’s civil war,” a superb body of scholarly literature makes clear that the opposite is the case. Indeed, studies have found that nearly 40 percent of the civil wars since 1990 have ended in this fashion. For more on this question, and particularly how it might be done in the contemporary Middle East, see Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, “Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East,” The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2015), pp. 29-46.