



PERSPECTIVES

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Leveraging Iran

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Mainstream analysis of the current crisis in US-Iran relations revolves around “maximum pressure” sanctions and potential American military contingencies. There is another move, however, involving a unique set of knights on the regional chessboard – and one that comes straight out of Tehran’s own playbook.

The Trump administration’s sanctions and shows of force against Iran have thus far only elicited the usual defiance and threats from Tehran, which is reportedly accelerating production of enriched uranium, [is not in compliance with the Iran nuclear deal \(JCPOA\)](#) according to the Americans who walked out of it, and is still seeking [illegal technology](#) for WMD. Meanwhile, the Europeans led by Germany continue to appease the Islamist regime in Tehran, despite the [revelation](#) that its Hezbollah proxy was engaging in terror activity in the UK shortly after the conclusion of the 2015 JCPOA. Despite [wishful thinking](#), insightful [analysis](#) indicates that sanctions are unlikely to cause Iran to behave, break Hezbollah, or affect Iraqi proxies [funded by Baghdad](#). Predictions of a [major US-Iran conflict](#) are nothing new.

[Pressure on Iran](#) does work, but it needs to be the right kind of pressure. There are plenty of kinetic [options](#) for targeting Iranian assets and proxies without ground forces, but the administration does not want [war in the Gulf](#). Tehran knows this and is continuing its malign activity in the grey zone of plausible deniability, using proxies and covert operations.

How, then, to curb Iranian threats to Gulf allies, regional trade, and Israel? What can be done about Tehran’s WMD, ballistic missile, proxy, and terror activities, support for Assad’s genocide, hostage-taking, and malign regional and global activities, that will not involve the use of ground forces or cause high-intensity conflict and soaring oil prices? How can Iran be leveraged

without causing further chaos in the region and unwanted consequences beyond it?

There is relatively little open source analysis on clandestine operations short of direct open conflict – exactly the kind of [grey area](#) in which Iran prefers to operate due to its relative conventional military weakness compared to the US, Israel, and the GCC states. Analysis is also thin on how to go about this, what the end game should be, and what consequences might ensue. [Recommendations for covert action](#) “to destabilize” Iran predate the current crisis.

Because the regime in Tehran came to power through revolution, survival is its primary objective and counterrevolution its greatest fear. To pressure Iran and bolster deterrence, the US should leverage this fear through psy-ops, cyber warfare, economic warfare, and covert action.

The last of these could include instigating and supporting rural and urban insurgency with lethal aid for anti-regime groups, assassination of regime figures, and sabotage of critical infrastructure. Such thinking has resurfaced recently, [advocating](#) “low-profile, deniable actions” to impose significant costs on Iran, complicate Tehran’s cost/risk analysis, and demonstrate that other actors can utilize plausible deniability. The regime would be forced to divert significant resources and attention from malign regional activities to internal security, and would accordingly have less inclination to misbehave.

There are a number of important considerations here. Which internal opposition groups would be suitable candidates for external support? Which external actors would provide that support, and what forms could it take? What would be the likely ramifications of possible unintended consequences, like total state collapse or retaliatory regime terror operations, missile launches, and/or adventurism from Hezbollah against Israel? It was not so long ago that the current US national security advisor was advocating [provision of assistance](#) to the whole range of minorities in Iran, unions, and other groups. One prominent US think tank posited [regime change](#) during Iran’s 2017-18 civil unrest, and an [uprising in Tehran](#) was another suggestion – something President Trump has signaled he does not want.

Some policy recommendations can be discounted on grounds of cost-benefit analysis and likelihood of success in forcing Iran towards desired behavior without unintended consequences. Any student of [coups and counter-coups](#) will appreciate that taking and holding Tehran, in the absence of external invasion forces, would require the Artesh (regular Iranian army) or IRGC to use their tanks – assuming coup preparations were not discovered (and coup preparations by nature tend to be conspiratorial activities). There would have

to be fuel, munitions, and logistics available, with air support, to prevent a counter-coup.

In December 2017, an Iran-based [AQ-linked jihadist group](#) claimed to have targeted an oil pipeline in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province. These militants are normally associated with attacks in the southeastern [Sistan and Baluchistan](#) province bordering Pakistan, where other Sunni radicals operate. Tehran blamed the usual suspects – the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UK – for supporting the Baluch insurgency and [others](#), including the [Mujahdeen-e-Khalq](#). Riyadh would be unlikely to support Iran's Baluch militants, who have sought sanctuary in Pakistan, a close ally with its own [Baluch problem](#). [One scholar assesses](#): "The Arab opposition in the southwest is limited and regional and has marginal strength at best...the Baluchi movement in the east is too small and narrowly ethnic to be more than a minor challenge." Unsubstantiated regime claims of [foreign meddling](#) are standard, although there have been [foreign-instigated covert ops](#), notably assassination of nuclear scientists.

Iran's western Zagros Mountains and the [Iranian Kurd militias](#) operating there present a major geostrategic vulnerability for Tehran. The Zagros have been the Persians' Achilles' heel from Alexander to the Anglo-Soviet invasion, the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and the US occupation of Iraq. Iran's Kurds straddle a region of vital importance for a number of reasons:

- territorial defense
- prevention of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) independence
- consolidation of a northern corridor through PKK and PJAK (an Iranian Kurd PKK-aligned group) chokepoints to allies Syria and Hezbollah as part of Iran's [land bridge](#) to the Mediterranean
- long-term strategic competition with Turkey for influence
- cross-border infiltration of terrorist proxies from Iranian havens
- destabilization operations and facilitation of illicit trade, including energy and [arms proliferation](#).

For years, the regime projected the likes of Ansar al-Islam, al-Qaeda Kurdistan Battalions, and Abdullah Azzam Brigades into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Iraq itself. It is therefore somewhat ironic that some of these militant Sunni Kurds would later turn to ISIS and [attack Tehran](#).

It is not just the physical security of the Zagros that concerns Iran's rulers. The Zagros represent a key element of Tehran's domination of disparate ethno-religious groups, a region it has long struggled to subjugate and a black hole sucking up military and financial resources needed elsewhere.

Some key takeaways from pre-revolutionary times, the revolution itself, and the devastating Iran-Iraq War were the dangers presented by unrest and/or external exploitation of Iran's minorities along the Zagros, the requirement to maintain large armed forces for internal security and external defense, and the need to avoid mass casualties. Hence Iran's preference for expending the lives of cannon fodder from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan over Iranian lives.

External support for Iran's Kurds would complicate the situation considerably. One observer's [assessment](#) that "Iran's Kurds have never posed a serious threat to the regime" simply does not fit the [historical evidence](#). Based upon [on-the-ground primary research](#), this author has seen ample evidence of the combat effectiveness of Iranian Kurd groups operating in the mountains they know so intimately. The PJAK, which is [consistently underestimated](#) by external observers who take Tehran's propaganda at face value, fought and won a major defensive engagement in the summer of 2011 that resulted in hundreds of regular IRGC, Quds Force, and Iran-based Sunni militants killed. According to local sources, this battle could best be described as Iran's Hamburger Hill. The PJAK not only blunted a major IRGC offensive but operated deep inside Iran to ambush military supply convoys, attack isolated IRGC outposts, and sabotage critical infrastructure, including the Tabriz-Ankara [gas pipeline](#).

The terrain of the Zagros is infantry-intensive, and the bleeding of regime elite troops is bad for both morale and appearances – especially as the regime claims it is divinely favored. Operations in the Zagros limit use of direct fire support by armor, require the investiture of significant indirect fire support, and make for difficult, vulnerable logistical trails in the mountains and far from the forward edge of the battle area. Fast-changing weather conditions and elevation make Iran's use of airpower more problematic, especially if American aircraft are present and liable to respond from Iraqi airspace or the Gulf.

The regime will have been dismayed by contacts between the Americans and [other Iranian Kurds](#). The PJAK remains terror-listed as a sop to America's increasingly bad ally Turkey, with the latter and Iran also designating the group and cooperating militarily against both the PKK and PJAK – although the EU has not listed the group and the US continues to support the Syrian Kurd YPG, which is another PKK/PJAK affiliate.

The various Iranian Kurd militias suffer the [same inability](#) as their ethnic kin in the KRI to [unite](#), even in the face of combinations of stronger powers Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. However, they don't have to be united to be militarily effective, as they have demonstrated. PJAK appears to be patiently biding its time ahead of a future civil uprising in Kurdish majority areas, while the regime used the [Kurdish referendum crisis](#) to further [pressure](#) the KRG to [end](#)

[sanctuary](#) for Tehran's enemies. PJAK and other groups will likely be ready to politically and militarily exploit any [US-Iran conflict](#).

Overall, Iran's Kurds are the regime's most lethal internal pressure point, given their proven combat effectiveness, local knowledge, support networks, largely secular nature, gender-equality, democracy of sorts, lack of western antipathy, and focus on local autonomy and federalism in Kurd-majority areas. The questions are what form external support might take and who would provide it. The Americans are without doubt the best placed to provide training and logistics, with possible financial contributions from GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The ideal situation would see a suitable number of US trainers deployed, a force protection element, a field hospital, and planeloads of weapons and cash, together with US airspace control along the KRI-Iran border and preparedness to take out Iranian aircraft and artillery systems engaging Iranian Kurd groups. The Kurds could use decent-ranged advanced anti-armor systems (useful against vehicles, bunkers, and helicopters), plus secure communications, logistics, and rear areas, as well as intelligence and targeting packages. The combination of US intelligence assets and the Kurds' own HUMINT networks would be formidable, especially if one wanted to develop problems for Iran beyond rural insurgency and into the cities further down the line.

Political issues would be [opposition from Baghdad and likely the KRG](#) with its rival Erbil and Sulaymaniyah statelets, unless the latter were guaranteed long-term US protection from Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara. Another problem is the American reputation, rightly or wrongly, as a short-term friend likely to change policies and abandon allies (precedents would include the Sunni Awakening and the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds). Iran's Kurds are unlikely to be amenable to being used as pawns, when they have been playing the long game since the fall of the Mahabad Republic in 1946. The Americans would need to convince all players that they were in it for the long haul as the most powerful "tribe" in the region. A good start would be delisting the PJAK, which has never threatened Western interests. This would send a powerful message to Tehran.

The other option would be a much more clandestine operation to supply the Iranian Kurds through middlemen and/or by air, without the above-listed benefits of operating from secure areas in the KRI. At present, the Trump administration appears to want to ratchet up pressure on Iran without crossing key regime red lines, which is what arming and supporting the Kurds would signify. This would, however, constitute the strongest form of kinetic leverage over Tehran short of threatening direct intervention.

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