



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Why No Deal with the Islamic Republic of Iran Will Ever Last

by Irina Tsukerman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,319, October 24, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Rumors of an impending meeting between Iran's President Rouhani and President Trump have quieted down somewhat amidst the uprisings in Iran and Iraq and the sudden US foreign policy reversal on Syria, which paved the way for Turkey's incursion and bombardment of northern Syria. The attack has been described by Erdoğan as an offensive against the YPG, and widely condemned as a betrayal by the US of its Kurdish allies. However, while much attention has been paid to the apparently impulsive and [uncoordinated](#) last-minute decision to withdraw a small remnant of the US contingent from Syria, few are discussing the events unfolding in Iran and Iraq, with the latest news including Iran's decision to send [7,500 troops](#) to Iraq.

Iran has decided to send 7,500 troops to Iraq, supposedly to [provide protection](#) for Shiite pilgrims. But once they are there, there will be little accounting of the extent to which those special forces units will partake in the ransacking of anti-Iran media offices or the [targeted sniper shootings](#) of Shiite protesters, who are on the streets demanding that Iran withdraw from Iraq. With 130 protesters reported dead and over 6,000 wounded, the US-backed *Al Hurra* publication suspended for three months for exposing corruption, and *Al Arabiya* and multiple other foreign and domestic news agencies ransacked and silenced, Iraq is facing a crisis over increasing Iranian involvement that has been developing ever since the election of the new government a year ago.

The US embassy has been largely silent over concerns that further pressure on the government will "lose Iraq." The Iraqi government claimed not to have authorized the killings of the protesters and said it did not know who was responsible, and Iranian passports were reported found in the areas of the protests and attacks. Journalists in the ransacked offices reported seeing Iranian officers in uniform in

addition to masked gunmen who were likely from the Iran-backed PMUs, which were supposedly integrated into the Iraqi army under orders from Baghdad several months prior to these events.

As Baghdad seeks to distance itself from any responsibility for the ongoing crisis, Iraq appears to be lost to US influence – unless, of course, Washington chooses to see the mostly young Iraqis leading the uprisings and calling for the downfall of the government, which they describe as “radical” and a “puppet of the ayatollahs,” as its natural allies against Iranian hegemony rather than ineffectual, paralyzed, pro-Tehran Baghdad.

Washington's silence raises the question of just what alliance the US is trying to preserve – perhaps a seemingly inevitable rapprochement with Tehran? The non-reaction conforms to a broader pattern of intelligence failure and belated response that has plagued US foreign policy ever since the “Arab Spring.” However, the failure to predict events and develop plans to cope with them was not due solely to lack of information. Maher Gabra, one of the participants in the early stages of the protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt, described warning the US State Department about a high likelihood of mass protests breaking out following the preceding events in Tunisia – only to have his warnings dismissed.

At the beginning of the uprisings, the US did not know how to react and ultimately sided with the Islamist contingent, eventually coming to back Muhammad Morsi. This pattern repeated itself in Benghazi: following the abandonment of Libya's Qaddafi, the US seemed to grasp at straws to provide explanations for the outbreak of violence that cost the US ambassador and three others their lives in September 2012. A debunked theory of an incendiary video was used to explain the Americans' abject failure to interpret readily available information and predict a likely chain of events.

The recent attack on the Saudi ARAMCO sites, which may have originated in multiple sites in Iran's Ahwaz (Khuzestan) and southern Iraq, led to a temporary shutdown of 50% of Saudi Arabia's oil production. That attack, presumably spearheaded by Tehran, was another instance when – in addition to the technical failure of the Patriot system and lack of a coherent deterrent response by the US and its allies – intelligence failure in forecasting and preemption was at fault.

Can the combined forces of US, British, and Israeli intelligence really have lacked resources that could have foreseen such a major cruise missile and drone attack? Or is a dismissive and entrenched “Beltway” bureaucratic mindset among analysts processing the information to blame for the intelligence not reaching the powers that be in time? It is also conceivable that some circles feared that taking any action to prevent the attack would have exposed Iran as the culprit, which would in turn have created the need to react and pressure Tehran directly. By waiting until after the event,

blame could be pinned on proxies, and it could be claimed that the exact location of the source of the attacks and the chain of command responsible for the initial order were unknowable.

Regardless, it appears that some of President Trump's advisers still believe Iran's geopolitical strategy will ultimately be responsive to limited sticks and carrots. They hold that responding even to clearly escalating attacks will not deter Tehran's aggression, but will only bring about the need for a greater, more direct, and undesirable US involvement. The alternative to persistent and growing aggression, from that perspective, appears to lie only in forging some sort of an agreement, however temporary, with Tehran, especially since the Trump administration has clearly signaled it will not involve itself in regime change.

Initially, blame for the escalation was foisted upon the Saudis. The kingdom had, in fact, approached Iran with [conciliatory gestures](#) on multiple occasions, indicating both publicly and privately that it preferred diplomacy and a political solution and would not knowingly drag the US into another war. Such overtures are not new and are not likely to lead to any positive outcome, permanent or temporary. No deal with the Islamic Republic is likely to last, no matter who is proposing them.

Why not? The reasons lie in the ruling ideology of the Islamic Republic, which is dedicated to these principles:

- [Exporting the revolution abroad](#) as a central tenet of the resistance. This is reflected in Ayatollah Khomeini's expressed dedication to exporting revolutionary techniques, organizational strategies, spiritual and logistical support, and, with time, outright interventionism to other Muslims around the world, as well as the use of "[cultural centers](#)" to attract converts and other followers).
- The consideration of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as responsible for "fulfilling the Islamic mission of Jihad in God's way and of struggling for the cause of extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world." As the declassified CIA documents from 1980 linked herein show, Iran has looked for ways to create a Shiite crescent and resurrect an empire based on Khomeini-ist Shiite principles since the fall of the Shah. Despite major obstacles, including the Iran-Iraq War, the regime has never veered from this course.

The targets at risk in the Gulf today, including Bahrain, Iraq, and the Levant, have been the targets of Iran's ideological outreach and strategy since the early post-revolutionary days. As Tehran's ideology is driven by an apocalyptic vision and a sense of divine mission, no pragmatic consideration can ultimately deter it from its

goals, and “deals” are seen as no more than temporary stopovers on the way to the fulfillment of that mission. Iran sees the IRGC not as a terrorist tool with which to fulfill its power needs and ambitions, but as a force carrying out a divine undertaking: first enforcing the way of jihad among Muslims (who have thus far been the primary targets), and then anyone else who refuses to bow before it.

The West’s willful blindness to the theological motivations behind Iran’s ideological strategy stands in the way of any coherent response to its growing aggression, as well as its increasingly successful spread of influence and entrenchment of forces and proxies around the world despite seemingly overwhelming odds and crushing sanctions. The events observable in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere today are predictable echoes of the revolution’s not only being exported, but enforced as part of a jihadist messianic vision promulgated by the progenitors of the Islamic Republic. Defying conventional logic, Washington doublespeak, and the wishful thinking of all looking to avoid conflict, the Islamic Revolution carries on.

*Irina Tsukerman is a human rights and national security attorney based in New York. She has written extensively on geopolitics and US foreign policy for a variety of American, Israeli, and other international publications.*