



PERSPECTIVES

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Why Coronavirus Hasn't Stopped Iranian Aggression

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,533, April 16, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In sum and substance, Iran has a clear objective, a strategy, and the willingness to invest and take risks to fulfill it. The US demonstrates exactly the opposite in every respect. Thanks to its unswervable focus and determination even in the face of calamity, the Islamic Republic's march through the Middle East is likely unstoppable.

Despite the deadly spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) throughout Iran, which may have affected as many as 500,000 people according to internal reports, Iran's aggression and military adventurism continue unabated. It is pushing the envelope in Iraq, planning attacks on US targets, continuing to arm Houthis in Yemen, and defying calls for a ceasefire in that country to combat the pandemic. According to the latest reports, Iranian authorities just [killed](#) 36 Ahwazi Arab prisoners who had tried to break out of overcrowded, unsanitary prisons known for their brutality after the regime failed to liberate any Ahwazi prisoners either for holidays or for humanitarian reasons related to the outbreak.

According to Israeli academic Raz Zimmt, this regional aggression is likely to [continue unabated](#) no matter what the obstacles and despite all predictions that tough sanctions or an increased US military presence will deter Tehran and force it to backtrack. There is a variety of reasons for this.

First, as Zimmt correctly notes, Iran's regional and nuclear agenda predate the Islamic Revolution. The Shah contemplated developing nuclear capabilities, shelved the idea temporarily, and never had a chance to revisit it. As Zimmt writes:

...time and time again, Iran has proved that, despite its limitations and weaknesses, it manages to hold on and turn threats into opportunities that

preserve not only the regime's survival, but its regional influence, as well. Iran certainly knows how to play the regional game in comparison to other nearby players. Tehran has the patience to wait until its ambitions are fulfilled and is highly determined and pragmatic, knowing how to adapt its strategy to meet new challenges.

Iran's persistent ground game, also known as its "ideological land bridge," has been noted by many other scholars, including Al Hurra's Alberto Fernandez, Jonathan Spyer, and Reza Parchizadeh.

Reported planned attacks on US targets, despite increased US willingness to push back against Iran-funded militias and the relocation of air defense to the region, are an illustration of this ground game. Far from being reckless ideological fanatics when it comes to military strategy in the narrow sense, Iran has utilized its strong understanding of the geopolitical context to advance its agenda. From Iran's perspective, it is at an advantage right now for several reasons.

Unlike Western societies, Iran is willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to get where it wants to go. That is why the propaganda about "endless wars" presumably resulting from any strong response to Iran's aggression has worked so well in the US, which has demonstrated a lack of stamina for protracted asymmetrical conflicts and a lack of tolerance for even minimal loss of American lives over anything that is not a direct defense of US territory. Part of this has to do with the media coverage of conflicts, part to weariness resulting from past failed involvements in the Middle East, and part to a changing culture increasingly unwilling to deal with any perceived pain, however distant.

The US loss to the Taliban in Afghanistan is due not so much to the inherent superiority of local knowledge as to a lack of willingness to a) summon the sufficient political will to set realistic parameters, b) commit to long-term investments in the region, and c) confront and challenge state actors backing terrorist groups. A similar dynamic can be observed in Iraq, where Iran has been willing to invest in "state building" for its supporters while the US has limited its involvement to minimal necessary military operations. Iran is willing to divert infinite resources away from the needs of its own population for the support of its militias and for outreach to potential recruits. At the same time, the regime views the Iraqi militias and its other foreign troops, including Afghanis and Pakistanis, as expendable. Throwing these forces at the US will always be a "win" for Iran.

Even if they cost the lives of some leaders, Iran's attacks demonstrate its unabating fervor and dedication to expelling the US from the region. The Americans' continued exclusive focus on ISIS and unwillingness to treat the Iraqi government as a colony of Iran—a sort of willful blindness conveyed by the US administration to its own

people—play into Iran’s hands. With the US increasingly treated as an unwelcome guest in Iraq while the US government grasps at straws to defend its relationship with Baghdad, Iran is successfully weaponizing the supposedly nationalist Muqtada Sadr and using the cover of the coronavirus pandemic to push ahead. While it is unlikely that the US will exit Iraq altogether after moving forces from Syria to that country, it will likely continue to play defense for the foreseeable future. That’s all Iran needs at this point.

Iran has correctly calculated that the US is highly unlikely to be willing to commit to anything that could possibly increase the optics of violence and increased commitment abroad in an election year—especially in the middle of a pandemic. Coronavirus has put a strain on US naval resources, and the Iranians proliferating throughout Iraq and Syria are a walking biohazard. Limited retaliatory airstrikes are the most that can be counted on in response to violent provocations.

Iran, meanwhile, is continuing to receive the infusions of cash it needs to proceed down its path. That cash flow is not hindered in any way by the striking down of Iranian officials by the virus thanks to the regime’s denialism and the country’s poor medical care. European willingness to provide humanitarian aid; continuing business with Europeans, Chinese, and Russians; civil nuclear waivers provided by the US; and the acquiescence by various countries to the circumventing of sanctions offset the economic pressure delivered by the Americans’ unwillingness to lift those sanctions. Furthermore, Iran’s shadow economy, which is based in overlooked ventures in Oman and other places, illicit investments, drug trafficking, and organized crime schemes, continues to be a stable source of income even in these trying times.

Iran also has the advantage of a clear objective and strategy in terms of exporting its revolution and asserting its presence beyond the Levant into the Mediterranean. The US, while claiming an interest in rolling back Iranian influence, has put forth no vision of what that entails. It has already tacitly admitted that containment has failed, and despite tough talk from the White House, there appears to be no possibility of an internal coup that would topple the regime from within. “Rolling back” Iranian ideology and outreach would require a detailed plan, close cooperation with other major regional actors, ideological involvement, and the dedication of financial, intelligence, and technological resources. The US is in no position to dedicate itself to such a project right now, and in any case is not willing to do so.

Furthermore, this is a new era. Where once the US had the bold vision and willingness to strategically invest in goading the Soviet Union into underwriting space and arms programs that drained its resources, revealed its weaknesses to the public, countered decades of propaganda, and inspired generations on both sides of the Iron Curtain to admire the US as a vanguard for scientific progress, the US today is focused on domestic political spats and lags China on investment in AI and

quantum technology. And while the US is by far superior to Iran in terms of military force, Iran's reliance on asymmetrical warfare, combined with the American unwillingness to decisively use its formidable power, essentially neuter this operational superiority in terms of both its physical and its psychological impact on the adversary.

Despite the many challenges it faces, the Iranian revolutionary establishment is empowered by its successful division of all opposition movements, ability to manipulate portions of the population, and that population's continued dependency on the regime.

While uprisings occasionally send Basiji or other Iranian regime apparatchiks fleeing in the periphery, the opposition movements lack the level of cohesion that might tempt key players inside the sprawling Iranian bureaucracy to abandon their positions and undermine the regime into a state of collapse. Furthermore, the IRGC has taken on an increasingly central role in the running of the state. Despite obstacles, it is still a formidable, disciplined, aggressive, and well-armed machine and it remains vigilant about preventing any penetration by the perceived adversary. US policy experts have shown no understanding of the political divisions inside the Iranian government or its intelligence apparatus that could be effective if played against one another until the regime is enfeebled and self-destructive. (Neither has anyone else.)

Finally, the regime has observed US internal divisions and [inconsistency](#) in shaping any sort of foreign policy strategy and has learned to take advantage of the wealth of information the US reveals about its [own vulnerabilities](#).

The combination of all these factors explains Iran's brazen push forward despite the seemingly tough rhetoric emanating from the White House. Actions speak louder than words, and while Iran is willing to walk the walk, the US does not back up its escalating talk with anything more than an occasional show of force. When the US appears to have no plan of any kind, Iran's strategy wins by default.

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