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CONFRONTING THE FULL RANGE OF IRANIAN THREATS

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SUMMARY

The greatest danger facing the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East today is Iran, allied with various surrogate forces and to some degree Russia. The U.S. as yet does not have a comprehensive policy to confront Iran. Any such policy cannot hold the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear Agreement with Iran sacrosanct. Options concerning that agreement must be considered but as part of a larger strategy. Focusing only on the JCPOA to the exclusion of Iran's destabilizing actions through the Middle East would be a fundamental mistake. To deal with those actions, the first priority is the Levant, from Iran to Lebanon. The U.S. must convince the international community, the Russians, and indirectly Iran, that the internal situation in both Iraq and, especially, Syria, and the presence of foreign forces there including Iranian, Iranian surrogate, and Russian, is a major security concern for the U.S and an existential threat to our allies and partners beginning with Israel, Turkey, Jordan and the GCC states. The stakes here are high: if America does not stop the Iranians on this front, they will soon emerge with their allies as the dominant force in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The United States in negotiating the JCPOA bet implicitly on that diplomatic approach not only as a means to constrain temporarily Iran's nuclear weapons program, but to engender a transformation of Iran from an anti-status quo, in some respects revolutionary Islamic movement, into a 'stakeholder' for regional stability. As the JCPOA Preface states, "full implementation of this JCPOA will positively contribute to regional and international peace and security."

The reality in the region since the Summer of 2015 when those words were agreed could not be more at odds with that hope. Iran, after indirectly triggering ISIS's expansion by empowering anti-Sunni Arab policies through its allies PM Maliki in Iraq and President Assad in Syria, forged an alliance that brought major Russian military forces into the region, and with them accelerated a genocidal campaign that has cost almost half a million deaths, to end the Syrian civil war on Assad's maximalist terms, symbolized by the carpet

bombing of Aleppo. It has also intervened ever more in Yemen, arming both the Houthis there and Hizbollah in Lebanon with offensive missile systems that threaten respectively the Bab al Mandeb Straits and the Israeli homeland. Consequently every Middle Eastern friendly leader I have spoken to in the past 24 months has emphasized that Iran, not ISIS or al Qaeda, is the major security threat. Apart from the JCPOA, the last Administration did little to counter it. The Trump Administration has taken a more active position, at least rhetorically. During his May meetings with Arab leaders in Riyadh, President Trump signed up to a joint Communiqué which accused Iran of "malign interference," branded its activities as "terrorist," and committed signatories to act collectively against it. The President heard similar concerns from Turkish President Erdogan and Israeli PM Netanyahu. Nevertheless, while a new Presidential policy on Iran is about to be announced, it is not yet clear whether the U.S. is ready to deal with all the implications of a serious containment policy against a foe that has seen nothing but success in recent years, executing a carefully thought out and resourced regional strategy. The U.S. must have an equally thoughtful, resourced response.

Any such response should focus on the 'hows' and 'whys' of containment strategy, as discussed below.

THE ULTIMATE MISSION WITH IRAN

To succeed with any policy toward Iran, the United States must set clear final goals. Does it want to push back on Tehran's regional aggression, as it did with Slobodan Milosevic in the 1990s? Or does it seek a long-term containment policy to effect fundamental policy changes in Iran (i.e., George Kennan's initial prescription for the Cold War), or even regime change? If so, how would this policy be carried out in practice? Iran experts in the United States are divided on goals and means, from toppling the regime to continuing Obama's policy of outreach as the best way to contain Iran; Washington's potential international allies are split on this issue as well. In view of the need for as broad an international coalition as possible, the mission should focus on containing Iran's illegitimate influence in the region, with emphasis on its military and para-military initiatives, rather than more ambitious internal transformation which the U.S. has seldom achieved anywhere. Finally, it is crucial that the U.S. make its goals clear to all including Iran, to win adherents at home and abroad.

IRAN AS FIRST PRIORITY

To succeed, any containment plan against Iran must be the first U.S. priority in the region short of aborting terrorist attacks against the U.S. homeland. Specifically, U.S. military and diplomatic resources now should be prioritized away from ISIS and towards Iran.

WHO IS THE ENEMY

Some of America's partners in the region see Iran not only as a state, but as a "malign" Shia movement in a largely Sunni Middle East. But the more that this formulation is adopted, the more absolute the contest becomes, with less potential "give" from Iran (which cannot simply surrender its religious essence) and the more some of America's allies would balk.

Thus to maximize common policy ground within the international community on Iran, given widely variant threat perceptions, the Trump Administration should focus on Iran as a nation state to be deterred, not a cause to be destroyed.

THE JCPOA

Since taking office, the president has been ever more critical about the JCPOA, and has signaled that next week when he is required to again certify a series of questions related to the Agreement, as per the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA) of 2015, that he will not so certify. This certification process regardless of what he decides does not directly impact the Agreement or U.S. commitments within it, but any Presidential refusal to certify would raise the question whether the U.S. should continue adhering to the agreement, pull out of it, or attempt to negotiate a better one.

It is easy to visualize a 'improved' version of this JCPOA—longer time periods, ability of the International Atomic Energy Agency to more easily inspect all suspect sites including military, more clarity on the "possible military dimensions" of the Iranian program, inclusion of certain missile systems and research. But Iran's technical compliance with the Agreement and refusal to countenance new negotiations, and the reluctance of other key international partners, especially the P5+1 States, to entertain new negotiations, argue for a policy of 'constructive ambivalence' concerning, and scrutiny of, the Agreement, with options for improving it held for later. The short term goals should include stripping the agreement of its psychological value as a 'seal of good approval' for a state that does not deserve it, and undercutting the willingness of the international business community to fund Iran's economy, which will inevitably increase its power projection capabilities to the detriment of regional security.

Obtaining a fundamentally new agreement, e.g., Iran foreswearing all enrichment activities, would require, short of war, international sanctions far stronger than those in the period 2010-15. And those sanctions, especially the most effective—the Iranian oil import sanctions under the 2012 National Defense Authorization Act--were controversial with America's European allies and Asian trading partners at the time despite clear Iranian violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, inflammatory rhetoric by then President Ahmadinejad, and risk of war over the Iranian program. None of those conditions is present today. Furthermore, any U.S. strategy to call Iran to account for the gamut of its

activities requires a reasonably supportive international community, and too aggressive a U.S. campaign against the JCPOA would undermine such support.

DEALING WITH IRAN IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Although Iran is challenging regional security from Yemen to Afghanistan, the key front is Syria and Iraq, the core of the Levantine Middle East, where Tehran has long influenced Bashar al-Assad's regime and the Shia-centric government in Baghdad. Following the 2011 "Arab Spring," Iranian leaders pushed these surrogates to exert greater control, but such efforts also exacerbated the catastrophic developments unfolding in each country, namely, the mass uprising against Assad and the emergence of ISIS.

Iran has since undertaken an all-out campaign to keep Assad in power and expand its influence in Iraq -- aided, ironically, by the U.S.-led war against ISIS. As ISIS forces are ground down in their last redoubts, Tehran's surrogates are scurrying to establish a land corridor between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The geostrategic shift this portends is extraordinary. As the Bipartisan Policy Center recently pointed out, this could leave 20 million Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq under de facto Shia rule, likely incubating a new Sunni extremist movement to replace ISIS.

Such a corridor is destabilizing for other reasons as well. The United States and its allies have established footholds in northern Syria, along the Jordanian border, and in Iraq, primarily to fight ISIS. Once the group is defeated, these positions will either have to be abandoned or held against inevitable Iranian-orchestrated (and possibly Russian-supported) political, terrorist, or military, pressure intended to push U.S. forces out. Remaining in Syria indefinitely would require complicated political arrangements with Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, and various sub-national Kurdish and Sunni Arab factions -- and with Russia as well.

The U.S. must convince the international community, the Russians, and indirectly Iran, that the internal constitution of both Iraq and especially Syria, and the presence of foreign forces including Iranian, Iranian surrogate, and Russian, on the territory of those states, is a major security concern for the U.S., including stirring up Sunni extremist movements as was the case with ISIS, and an existential threat for our allies and partners beginning with Israel, Turkey, Jordan and the GCC states.

The U.S. thus must recognize the stakes: if America does not stop the Iranians on this front, they will soon emerge as the dominant force in the region, deeply inimical to the United States and its partners, and allied with Putin's Russia.

To that end U.S. forces should remain in a train and equip capacity in Iraq, as well as in Syria, ostensibly to protect enclaves and U.S. partners from a resurgence of terrorism, but

also, implicitly, to put military pressure on Syria and Iran to negotiate seriously in the Geneva process in accordance with UN Security Council 2254 on the future political situation in Syria.

RESPONDING WHEN IRAN STRIKES BACK

Any U.S. effort to confront Tehran could generate attacks on U.S. interests. Since 1979, the regime has struck at U.S. targets directly or through surrogates on multiple occasions, from Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Yemen to a thwarted plot in Washington, D.C. In response, Washington has either eschewed obvious retaliation against Iranian forces or territory (with the exception of the “Tanker War” thirty years ago), or taken action against surrogates outside Iran with mixed results. U.S. officials need to determine in advance how the U.S. will react in response to Iranian retaliation, and in particular if the U.S. will or will not strike back at Iran directly. And Iran needs to know that decision.

COMMUNICATING WITH TEHRAN

Limited U.S. technical communications with Iran continue (e.g., between forces in the Persian Gulf). But Washington needs to consider whether, and if so, under what conditions, and for what purpose, it should communicate “politically” with Iran, bearing in mind that both the Obama and (in Iraq) the Bush Administration did so. And if so, with whom: Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif or the shadowy Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, who is largely responsible for carrying out Iran's regional policies? Would such contacts be open or secret (as they were initially with the Obama administration)? If brokered by a third party, whom? Will Iran even be willing to engage in such dialogue, and at what price? Finally, what end would these talks serve?

However the Administration answers this question specifically, it must ensure that its overall goals and specific intentions are made known in some way to the Iranian leadership. The risks of misunderstanding and resulting escalation will remain high in U.S.-Iranian relations.

KEEPING THE ANTI-IRAN ALLIANCE STRONG

The military, economic and diplomatic power of the potential anti-Iran alliance which the U.S. can forge with European and Middle Eastern partners is extraordinary, and far greater than Iran's capabilities even including Russian military forces in the region. But this alliance is more theoretical than real, thus the U.S. should prioritize its strengthening. With European allies and the UN, that means clarity on what the U.S. wants to achieve with Iran, and a certain respect for international agreements and protocols which are taken much more seriously outside than inside the U.S. With regional partners the main risk is diversion of effort into internecine spats. The Saudi-Emirati-Egyptian political campaign

against Qatar, Iraqi Kurdistan leader Barzani's push for independence, and the dispute between the U.S. and Turkey over the Syrian Kurdish PYD, are examples of such disunity and disagreements.