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Getting Iran Right: A Way Forward on Deterring Iran's Malign Activities

By: Lieutenant General (Ret.) Keith Kellogg and Jacob Olidort, Ph.D.

The recent escalation in violence by Iran-backed Hamas against Israel offers a stark backdrop to the ongoing talks between the Biden Administration and Iranian officials in Vienna. In light of this violence and new calls by some U.S. lawmakers to halt talks, the Biden Administration faces the urgent opportunity to rethink its approach to Iran in a manner that builds on the successful approach over the previous 4 years by the Trump Administration that emphasized strategic deterrence while also securing a deal that truly ensures the safety of Americans, Israelis, and people across the Middle East.

Going forward, the Biden Administration could consider restoring the previous administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against the Iranian regime. Halting talks altogether or proceeding with them but eliminating the option of sanctions relief could send a different message that the administration is open to a nuclear deal, but that as a precursor to negotiations, the administration would consider holding Iran accountable for its actions. The talks with Iran could serve as a forum to rein in the gamut of Iran's malign activities and to impose additional consequences on violations of the terms of the deal that have come to light over the last 4 years, including its economic dependence on China and Russia.

WHERE AMERICA IS NOW

Notwithstanding the recent attacks against Israel by Iran-backed Hamas, the Biden Administration has inherited an overall more stable and quieter Middle East than the one the Trump Administration inherited in 2017. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) no longer has the territorial foothold it once controlled, Israel is benefitting from expanded diplomatic relationships through the Abraham Accords, and there have been no attacks against Israel by Hamas or other terrorist groups until earlier this month. According to one analysis, Iraq saw 902 civilian deaths in 2020—the lowest since 2003—and consistently falling numbers in 2018 and 2019 ([Hamourtziadou, 2020](#)).

U.S. policy toward Iran over the last 4 years was critical to achieving and sustaining these milestones for the region. Defining and addressing the threat that Iran poses is vital for devising policies that keep the region safe and stable. The current administration, which includes President Obama's Middle East team, has made talks with Iran one of its first foreign policy priorities ([Reuters, 2021a](#)). On January 29, 2021 Secretary of State Antony Blinken appointed Rob Malley as his envoy for Iran, who formerly led Obama's negotiations regarding the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as "the Iran deal." Secretary Blinken's words the following week seemed to suggest a change in course from how the Obama Administration approached Iran:

If Iran returns to compliance with its obligations under the nuclear agreement, we would do the same thing, and then we would work with our allies and partners to try to build a longer and stronger agreement, and also bring in some of these other issues, like Iran's missile program, like its destabilizing actions in the region that need to be addressed as well ([Blinken, 2021](#)).

Despite Blinken's words, the timeline of events since that statement suggests the Biden Administration is going back to the Obama Administration's approach. On April 6, 2021 the Biden Administration sent a team to Vienna to begin talks with Iran and several days later announced it would lift sanctions ([Klein, 2021](#)). Meanwhile, the very next Friday, April 16, the Iranian government began enriching uranium to 60 percent purity—after having raised it to 20 percent purity in January—following an attack on one of its nuclear facilities ([Gambrell, 2021](#)).

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM: DEFINING AND INTEGRATING THE THREATS

In comparing how the Trump and Obama Administrations defined the threat from Iran, one difference is that the latter narrowly prioritized the nuclear threat whereas the former viewed the nuclear threat as part and parcel of Iran's broader problematic behavior—sponsorship of terrorism, its reach beyond the Middle East, its human rights abuses, and its taking of American hostages. Indeed, Secretary Blinken's words above, if not his actions, indicate that this should be the way to define the threat from Iran.

For the Obama Administration, Middle East policy was directed at enhancing the incentives for Iran to reach a deal and subordinating other regional priorities under this overarching goal ([Hof, 2016](#)). As such, the years 2012-2016 saw an increasingly violent and unstable Middle East, much of which was either directly caused by Iran or its proxies or indirectly facilitated through conditions that an emboldened Iran created. Specifically, the JCPOA alienated the region's Sunni communities while leaving unchecked Iranian-backed Shiite proxies in Syria and Iraq, which saw increasing sectarian bloodshed ([McEvers, 2013](#)). An example of the latter was the rise of ISIS and the dozens of Syrian jihadist groups, which exploited sectarian violence and the disenfranchisement of the region's Sunnis.

The Trump Administration took a different approach. Not only did they rescind the JCPOA because of the terms of the deal (particularly its problematic "sunset clauses," or the dates by which the terms of the deal expire, thereby only delaying Iran's ability to acquire nuclear weapons) but also because Iran was systematically violating the JCPOA, as was uncovered by Israel's Mossad ([Mistry, 2018 and Warrick, 2018](#)). By narrowly entering into a deal focused on nuclear issues—and by viewing other regional policies through the narrow lens of how they might affect the prospects for reaching a nuclear deal—the Obama Administration, in fact, enabled Iran to get away with its other malign activities. Indeed, the unfrozen \$100 billion in Iranian regime assets went directly into the pockets of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Shiite

militias ([Maloney, 2015](#)), each of which sparked waves of violence between 2012 and 2016, with two wars against Israel (in 2014 initiated by Hamas in Gaza, in 2016 initiated by Hezbollah in Lebanon) and a spike in violence across Iraq from 2012 through 2016.

Replacing the JCPOA with its “maximum pressure” campaign, the Trump Administration acknowledged and responded to all aspects of Iran’s interrelated malign activities. It was a shift in thinking about Iran that viewed all Iran malign activities as emanating from Iran’s leadership and advancing the same regime agenda ([Pompeo, 2018](#)). That policy change in 2018 was reflected in the 12 demands announced by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, which ranged from giving the International Atomic Energy Agency unfettered access to all of Iran’s nuclear facilities to ending Iran’s support to terrorist proxies and releasing all U.S. hostages ([Gordon, 2018](#)). It reinforced the “maximum pressure” campaign, which was designed to bring the Iranians back to the table if they met all 12 demands, by responding to the killing of an American citizen with a lethal attack on Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, thereby restoring a significant deterrent against Iranian malfeasance ([Mastrangelo, 2020](#)).

BLACK SWAN SCENARIOS

There are at least three “black swan” scenarios for events that could take place over the coming years that can affect how the threat of Iran evolves. The most significant is the successor to the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. The likelihood of this event marking a change in overall direction, however, is slim as the question of his succession has loomed for years, and a vetting process is in place to ensure it will be someone who preserves the regime’s direction ([Khalaji, 2016](#)).

The expansion and evolution of the Abraham Accords will be an interesting space to watch. Just as President Obama’s Middle East policies alienated Israel and the Sunni Gulf states, thereby indirectly causing them to find common ground, Biden’s Middle East policy could bring other Sunni-majority countries to join them. This indeed might be the only silver lining of the Obama Administration’s approach to the Middle East. With the increasing disenfranchisement of Israel and Gulf states that will likely result in deeper talks between the United States and Iran, the expansion of the Abraham Accords will not only include economic opportunities but potentially also new military upgrades and partnerships.

The most difficult to predict is how the Biden Administration’s policies will alter regional power dynamics and alliances. President Biden’s rhetoric concerning Russian President Putin and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan could have implications for how Russia and Turkey might act in the region ([Schnell, 2021](#), and [Katmer, 2021](#)). Namely, repeated public condemnations of both states could have the effect of both or either Russia and Turkey deepening relationships in the region in ways that stymie the Biden Administration’s efforts, including the Iran talks (in which Russia is involved).

MAXIMUM PRESSURE 2.0

With the current administration intent not only on pursuing a nuclear deal but, as White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki clarified last week, avoiding “the tactics of the previous administration” on the Middle East, the deterrent the Trump Administration established against Iran will erode. The escalation of attacks by Hamas, an Iranian proxy, against Israel over the last 2 weeks is evidence of that already happening.

This means that not only will the gains of the “maximum pressure” campaign be reversed, but Iran will likely find itself in a much stronger and more confident place in the region and potentially beyond. As mentioned earlier, Iran has steadily been enriching uranium to unprecedented levels over the last 5 months ([Gambrell, 2021](#)). It has also deepened its economic relationship with China, which provided it an economic lifeline amidst the Trump Administration’s sanctions by deceptively increasing its Iranian oil imports through tactics banned under a United Nations international maritime treaty ([Erdbrink, 2017](#) and [Forsythe and Bergman, 2019](#)). These covert actions, which by the end of 2020 resulted in nearly 500,000 barrels per day (B/D) of Iranian oil sent to China, have offset whatever losses Iran experienced through sanctions ([Northam, 2020](#)).

Despite Iran’s sanctions evasion, the previous administration’s sanctions policy had a noticeable effect on crippling the Iranian economy. In 2019, a year after the Trump Administration reimposed sanctions against the regime, Iran quickly began to feel the consequences. That year, Iran’s Gross Domestic Product was estimated to shrink 9.5 percent in addition to the approximate 5% it had shrunk the year before ([BBC, 2019](#)). Furthermore, Iran’s unemployment rate rose from 14.5 percent to 16.8 percent, and their oil exports plummeted from an average of 2.3 B/D to a minuscule 260,000 B/D by October 2019 ([BBC, 2019](#)).

Iran repaid the debt numerous times to China over recent years, including staying silent as China persecuted its Muslim Uyghur population ([Esfandiari, 2020](#)). A recent milestone in the Sino-Iranian relationship took place in March 2021, when both nations signed a 25-year cooperation agreement totaling approximately \$600 billion ([Reuters, 2021b](#)). A deepening China-Iran relationship will create a new challenge for future administrations, not only in setting back America’s interests in the region but in also enhancing Iran’s global reach through mutually-reinforcing efforts with China, particularly through multilateral institutions.

If the U.S. were to wisely return to a maximum pressure approach, it would need to take into account not only the range of Iran’s malign activities but also the range of Iran’s backers and proxies. An effective “maximum pressure 2.0” campaign should include consequences for Iran’s illicit economic lifelines, just as it would for issues like its systematic violations of human rights, including its persecution of religious minorities and members of the LGBTQ community and its repression of women. Examples of such strong responses from the United States include visa restrictions imposed in December 2019 on Iranian officials

implicated in suppressing protests and sanctions the United States imposed in November 2020 on Iranian charity organizations that funded suppression of protesters ([Namdar, 2021](#); [Kelly, 2019](#); [Lee, 2020](#)).

Arguably, the most effective tactic negotiating with Iran would be to first cut off the Iranian regime's economic lifelines while sending strong messages that its malign activities, ranging from sponsorship of terrorism to human rights abuses, will not be tolerated. Doing so will require that the United States recognize not only that all of Iran's threats are connected but that they are all directed by Iran's leadership.

WAY FORWARD

Just as it did for the previous administration, an integrated assessment and response to threats from Iran would lead to improved policy outcomes in the region for the current administration. Such an approach necessitates showing resolve about imposing consequences for Iran's malign activities. By contrast, if it does not take this approach, the Biden team risks committing one of the cardinal mistakes it made during the 2009-2016 years of emboldening Iran as it tries to bring about a nuclear deal. While Iran is in a relatively more vulnerable position today in terms of its capabilities, regional influence, and leadership—following 3 years of crippling sanctions, the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the Abraham Accords, and a looming leadership succession—it may only be a matter of time before it regroups and advances its agenda in the region and beyond.

Just as the Biden Administration should not take for granted Iran's current vulnerabilities, it should also not assume that America will have the unwavering backing of its allies in the region as it seeks to mollify Iran in an effort to bring it a nuclear deal. The previous administration was able to cement the Abraham Accords as a framework for peace and stability in the region because it consistently demonstrated that it stood on the side of its allies and friends and could be relied upon to take decisive actions against adversaries. The Trump Administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem while also withdrawing the United States from the JCPOA and instituting an administration-wide effort to rein in the range of Iran's activities. These actions likely resonated with Israeli audiences, the region's Sunni communities, and the Iranian people repressed by their government. A new vision for the region was possible, but it was possible because they knew America could be trusted to stand with allies.

Talks with Iranian officials may be more fruitful if accompanied by a robust sanctions regime and not substitute it. Those talks must also result in strong enforcement of penalties for uranium enrichment but also for any other malign activities, particularly any targeting Americans.

AUTHORS BIOGRAPHIES

Lieutenant General (Ret.) Keith Kellogg is Co-Chairman of the Center for American Security at the America First Policy Institute.

Jacob Olidort, Ph.D. is Director of the Center for American Security at the America First Policy Institute.

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