**Taking stock of Trump’s Iran policy**

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Where to even start to make sense of the current imbroglio with Iran? How about here: U.S. President Donald Trump’s Iran strategy is working, but it’s probably not going to work.

The economic pressure the administration boasts about is doing tremendous harm to Iran’s economy. However, it is still very far from accomplishing Trump’s goals. In May 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [laid out a dozen far-reaching steps](https://www.state.gov/after-the-deal-a-new-iran-strategy/) that Iran will have to take to get the administration to reverse course. While nothing short of regime change in Tehran would realistically fulfill those conditions, these were probably part of a maximalist bargaining position — an opening bid. Trump never expected to get all or even most of them. So, what does the president want?

[](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/trump-iran-taking-stock-600-352.jpg)

US President Donald Trump speaks before signing an executive order imposing fresh sanctions on Iran as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Vice President Mike Pence look on in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, US  
REUTERS/Carlos Barria

It seems increasingly clear that all Trump really wants is a new nuclear deal with Tehran. He wants it to be better than the one his predecessor Barack Obama sealed — the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Trump believes that by placing enormous economic pressure on Iran, he will force the Iranians back to the negotiating table. Once there, Trump believes he will have the leverage he needs to extract bigger concessions from Tehran than what Obama got, possibly in return for fewer benefits than Obama gave.

The core risk with any kind of coercive strategy is that it is always up to the target state to decide how much pain it can take. For 40 years, Iran has been willing to take a lot more economic pain than other states. Time and again, it has shown itself able to crush popular unrest created by the economic pain that Tehran has chosen to endure. It is not surprising, then, that so far Iran shows no sign of restarting nuclear negotiations with Trump.

**A team of one**

This is Trump’s policy, no one else’s. Most of his original advisors — former Defense Secretary James Mattis, former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson — all disagreed with this approach. They wanted to preserve the JCPOA and pursue a follow-on agreement to address its shortcomings. It’s not at all clear where current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stands, but if it were up to National Security Advisor John Bolton, the United States would be pursuing a far more aggressive approach aimed at toppling the regime in Tehran, even if came at a higher price. Most of his current and former advisors, reportedly including Pompeo, have tried to get Trump to expand the pressure on Iran beyond the narrow economic realm, but he has steadfastly refused. The current American approach thus belongs to the Donald.

This is a problem because Trump has never seemed to understand the Iranians. Nor does he see how every aspect of his Iran policy undercuts or contradicts every other aspect of it. As a result, and particularly because of the way that Trump’s handling of Iran has shifted that country’s domestic politics, his approach looks self-defeating.

**The view from Tehran**

Although simplistic, it is not wrong to say that Iran’s leadership is divided into two different groups. There are the pragmatists, led by President Hassan Rouhani, and the hardliners, dominated by the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, among others. At the hinge of these groups sits Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Supreme Leader has increasingly favored the hardliners over the years, but he seems to recognize that his people generally favor the pragmatists. It was the pragmatists who negotiated and then argued in favor of the JCPOA in 2015 — and it was a bitter fight. Their argument was that in return for limits on Iran’s nuclear program, the JCPOA would mean the end of international sanctions. This would allow Iran’s economy to revive, make the Iranian people happy, and secure the regime’s continued rule.

It is crucial to understand the hardliners’ counterargument. They argued that the JCPOA was a bad deal for Iran. It gave too much to the Americans while getting too little for Iran. (Sound familiar?) They warned that the United States would never fully lift its sanctions, and they insisted that Washington would inevitably renege on any commitments made to Iran under the JCPOA. For his part, Khamenei was reportedly torn by these arguments. He has always believed that the United States was determined to destroy Iran and overthrow his regime, but he decided to give his president a chance in hope that the lifting of sanctions would alleviate the unhappiness of the Iranian people.

Since then, Rouhani and the pragmatists have been proven completely wrong and the hardliners completely right. Even under Obama, the United States was not able to lift or waive all of its sanctions, because many of the penalties are also tied to Iran’s support for terrorism, its ballistic-missile development, and its human rights abuses. The Americans warned Iran that the JCPOA would not lead to the removal of all American sanctions, but many Iranians chose not to listen. This was their first disappointment. Iran’s economy picked up a fair amount in relative terms, but not nearly as much as most Iranians had hoped. Sanctions are only partly to blame for the stalled economic revival. It was also the result of the hideous mismanagement and graft that have afflicted Iran’s economy for 40 years. However, what the Iranians saw was that they had agreed to the JCPOA and adhered to their obligations, and yet their economy was not flourishing as the pragmatists had promised.

Then, just as the hardliners predicted, Trump arbitrarily pulled the United States out of the JCPOA. The hardliners screamed and wailed and gnashed their teeth, but Rouhani and the pragmatists argued that Iran should continue to abide by the terms of the JCPOA in the hope that this would move the rest of the world to help Iran, and perhaps even force the United States to return to the deal. It is widely believed that they also argued in private that Trump was likely to lose the 2018 American mid-term elections and that the Democrats would force Trump to moderate his behavior.

Khamenei went along with that approach, despite the raucous disagreement of his hardliners. As always, we don’t really know his motivations, but it seems reasonable to assume that he once again wanted to give his president a chance to be proven right or wrong. It’s also possible that he did not trust Trump and worried that Washington was looking for a pretext to attack Iran. Continuing to adhere to the terms of the JCPOA put Iran in the right and America in the wrong, and so avoided giving Trump any such excuse.

From Iran’s perspective, the hardliners were once again proven right. The reimposed American sanctions cut Iran’s oil exports by more than half. They crippled growth, boosted inflation, and gutted Iranian finances. Meanwhile, the Democrats did win the midterms, but their victory had no impact on Trump’s Iran policy. If anything, the situation got worse for Iran, with Washington declaring in April 2019 that it would no longer condone any purchases of Iranian oil by anyone and was [ending the waivers](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=15&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiLiY2buYDjAhXrmuAKHSRHDroQFjAOegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2019%2F04%2F22%2Fworld%2Fmiddleeast%2Fus-iran-oil-sanctions-.html&usg=AOvVaw1_lCoGg0Ex0AvLnV6VxDnQ) it had previously granted to U.S. secondary sanctions. This cut Iranian oil exports by half again, so that today they are roughly a quarter of what they had been at the start of the Trump administration.

Yet the world did nothing. Most countries kowtowed to Trump’s bullying and abandoned Iran. Once again, the pragmatists were proven completely wrong. As a result, their political stock has fallen dramatically. Khamenei has gone so far as to [publicly chastise](https://www.apnews.com/6da4cc57a6ad4b50b11b880e29eb216a) Rouhani for the JCPOA.

**Unintended consequences**

Thus, as a result of Trump’s Iran policy, the hardliners are gaining ground in Tehran, with Khamenei leaning their way even more than usual. The pragmatists have been proven wrong time and again, and their policy toward the United States has left Iran in dire straits. The hardliner narrative and its policies seem like the only reasonable alternative in the halls of power in Tehran. That is not necessarily the case, but it is how Iranian leaders see things.

What we are now seeing play out more prominently is the foreign policy of Iran’s hardliners. The recent spate of attacks by Iran and its allies against oil tankers, American facilities, and the facilities of U.S. allies, plus Tehran’s decision to produce low-enriched uranium in excess of that permitted by the JCPOA, seem to show that the hardliners have gained the upper hand in Iran’s foreign policy. They have decided that rather than compromise with or “appease” the Americans as the pragmatists might want, they want to turn up the heat on the United States by driving up the price of oil, conjuring the threat of a wider conflict in the Middle East, and threatening to abandon the limits on their nuclear program. They seem to hope that this will galvanize enough international pressure on the United States to force Trump to back down.

Trump’s role in bolstering Iran’s hardliners now has profound consequences for his policy. The hardliners are uninterested in another nuclear deal — hell, they didn’t want the first one. They wanted to keep their nuclear program. Many probably wanted to field a nuclear arsenal to deter the United States and Israel. And all of them agreed that the terms of the original deal were too favorable to the United States. They have zero interest in making further concessions to the United States. That does not exactly furnish a basis for renewed negotiations with Trump.

The president seems to believe that enough economic pressure on Iran will overcome all of these problems. Maybe. Anything is possible, and Iran has caved to enormous pressure on occasion in the past. However, there are three more factors that make it less likely right now. First, Iran’s hardliners always believed that the United States would never honor any agreement it signed.  Now that Trump has proven them right, they are even less likely to sign another agreement, especially with Trump himself.

Second, the narrow economic focus of Trump’s pressure hits where the Iranian people hurt most, but the hardliners hurt least. American sanctions have consistently helped the Revolutionary Guards gain greater and greater control of the economy through illicit commercial activities and extortion. Confrontation with the United States also tends to bolster their domestic political clout. And as hard as the sanctions are biting, there is no sign yet that they could trigger a popular revolt that could overthrow the regime or change Khamenei’s mind about the wisdom of his hardline position. Although gauging public opinion in Iran is never easy, most Iranians seem uninterested in revolution. Their prior bids in 1999, 2000, 2003, 2009, and 2017 all failed miserably.

Finally, the Iranians no doubt see America’s 2020 presidential elections looming on the horizon. Just as they hoped that the 2018 midterms would tie Trump’s hands, so they now seem to hope that the 2020 elections will oust him from the White House and replace him with one of the many Democratic candidates, nearly all of whom have [pledged to](https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-2020-democrats-promise-to-re-enter-the-iran-deal-and-israel-is-concerned-1.7157623) [return to](https://thehill.com/policy/defense/439712-2020-dems-rebuke-trump-on-iran-say-theyd-put-us-back-in-nuclear-deal) the JCPOA. More than anything else, that suggests that the Iranians will not negotiate seriously with Trump anytime soon. From their perspective, they just need to hang on until January 2021.

**The latest crisis in perspective**

It’s not just that Trump’s Iran policy has always had a low probability of success, it’s also that he has executed it about as badly as possible. Recent events merely underscore that point.

It was a mistake to use only economic pressure to try to force Iran to agree to a new, tougher nuclear deal. A better approach would have started by pushing back on the gains Iran has made in the Middle East over the past ten years. It would have sought to limit Iran’s influence in places like Iraq and Yemen, and force Tehran to waste resources in Syria and Lebanon. This approach would have kept Iran from enjoying the strong allies and freedom of action they currently have — advantages that allow them to attack American interests and allies as they have over the past several weeks. Most attacks attributed to Iran have been carried out by aligned forces in the region (including in Iraq and Yemen) and have targeted U.S. allies (in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq). Our allies are unwilling to take a more active stance because they fear the allies of Iran. America’s weak position in the region should have been addressed from the outset to better enable us to withstand Iran’s inevitably violent response.

A second mistake was to put such heavy pressure on Iran and assume that doing so would not risk a war, something Trump clearly meant to avoid. It was always obvious that putting this kind of pressure on Iran would prompt the regime to strike back. Responding to Iranian belligerence would mean courting escalation. Refusing to do so would mean allowing the Iranians to use violence against American interests with impunity. Neither is good for the United States and its allies.

Trump’s inability to recognize that bellicose policies and rhetoric might prompt a bellicose response led him to make another foolish mistake, that of announcing repeatedly that he did not want a war with Iran. He doubtless hoped that this would reassure centrist and isolationist American voters who don’t want a war. He may also have believed that this would cause the Iranians to be less aggressive.

Much as I may oppose going to war with Iran now, this was stupid. Telling a vicious, aggressive, antagonistic regime like Iran’s that you won’t use force against them could embolden them — especially the hardliners in Iran who are typically eager to attack American interests. They often believe that the United States doesn’t have the stomach for a protracted fight with them. We don’t know what the debates in Tehran looked like in past weeks, but I will note that Iran’s violent attacks did not cease after Trump reassured Tehran that he did not want a war. Nor has it caused them to abide by the terms of the JCPOA.

It was still another mistake to suddenly [threaten Iran](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=16&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwj3oJW-woDjAhWiiOAKHTZSAbQQFjAPegQIBhAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.chicagotribune.com%2Fnation-world%2Fct-nw-iran-united-states-tensions-20190620-gsooqbln6fcfrilazt7a344tsu-story.html&usg=AOvVaw3mN3DDbPt25IykfI6uDaif) with military action after it [shot down](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=14&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjHm77IwYDjAhVwh-AKHS2cCvcQFjANegQIAhAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vox.com%2F2019%2F6%2F20%2F18692644%2Firan-drone-attack-war&usg=AOvVaw16F7krH1erYt6HPC_BfDR5) an American RQ-4A Global Hawk drone. It was an unmanned drone, and Iran has [shot down others with no repercussions](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=10&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjCv8uWwoDjAhUEZN8KHVIBDgUQFjAJegQICBAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fworld%2Fnational-security%2Firan-says-it-downed-us-stealth-drone-pentagon-acknowledges-aircraft-downing%2F2011%2F12%2F04%2FgIQAyxa8TO_story.html&usg=AOvVaw3DL0rOiRQ6FgxUoKt2Losx), so no one was expecting the United States to respond with force. Trump probably made the threat because he was trying to walk back his earlier statements that he did not want a war with Iran. He probably hoped to restore his leverage by implying that there are circumstances under which he will go to war.

Still another mistake was to tell the world that he had planned a military strike in retaliation for the drone shoot-down and had then [chosen not to execute](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=26&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjuu_b1woDjAhXsT98KHVCqCssQFjAZegQICBAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nytimes.com%2F2019%2F06%2F21%2Fus%2Fpolitics%2Ftrump-iran-attack.html&usg=AOvVaw35T5WXSi6qxCZ3Kt3FVnRV) the strike because it might have killed as many as 150 Iranians. I can’t prove it, but I’m quite convinced the “non-strike” was a bluff all along. Regardless, this has probably reinforced the hardliners’ belief that the United States is too casualty-averse to confront Iran militarily. As American hardliners have rightly argued, that’s likely to make Iran more aggressive, not less.

It could all work out fine. To paraphrase Napoleon, it’s better to be lucky than good, and Lord knows that Donald Trump is lucky. Perhaps Khamenei believes he dodged a bullet because Trump really was ready to launch a military strike.

But let’s consider where we are now. Iran has not agreed to renegotiate the nuclear deal, let alone make further concessions. Instead, Iran has restarted uranium enrichment and surpassed the first limit it had agreed to under the JCPOA, while Khamenei has [publicly stated](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/29/world/middleeast/ayatollah-khamenei-trump-nuclear.html) he has no interest in striking a new deal with Trump. In his words: “We said before that we will not negotiate with America, because negotiation has no benefit and carries harm.” Meanwhile, Iran has launched multiple attacks against American facilities, American allies, and oil tankers in the most important oil-producing region of the world. Trump claimed he was going to retaliate for the loss of an unmanned drone, but then claimed he wouldn’t for fear of Iranian casualties. He has pissed off doves by repeatedly bringing us near to war with Iran, while simultaneously pissing off hawks by allowing Iran to conduct violent attacks on the United States and its allies without suffering any consequences.

**A bumpy ride**

Is there a path out of this situation? A better way for the United States to handle Iran? Sure. But why bother to [lay it out](http://www.aei.org/feature/pushback-countering-iran-blog-series/)? Trump isn’t going to adopt it. It’s an approach that his initial foreign-policy team tried to get him to pursue, only to fail and get fired for it. What’s more, having made Iran one of his signature foreign policy initiatives, and having repeatedly insisted that he is right and everyone else wrong about this policy, Trump seems exceptionally unlikely to reverse course now.

So buckle up and brace yourself. This all seems likely to get worse before it gets better. I will say again that this might work out fine and Trump might be proven right. It’s not impossible. It’s just very unlikely, given the state of Iranian politics, the fraught history between the two countries, and the interactions between Trump and Iran so far. If this history is any guide, it suggests that Iran is likely to be an even bigger problem for our next president, whenever he or she gets to start the clean-up.

This article was found online at:  
http://www.aei.org/publication/trumps-iran-policy/