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Exploiting Iran's Imperial Overstretch

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Quite suddenly, the Islamic Republic finds itself facing serious setbacks in the Middle East. After years of strategic gains fueled by the dividends of its 2015 nuclear deal with the West, Iran's clerical regime has started to weather significant reversals in the region in recent weeks. These developments – from unrest in Iraq and Lebanon to renewed grassroots protests within the Islamic Republic itself – suggest that, contrary to the public proclamations of its officials, Iran's geostrategic position is in fact far from secure. These same indicators also suggest that the United States now has a crucial opening to further weaken the regime in Tehran, should the Trump administration choose to seize the opportunity.

Iranian Advances After the JCPOA

Iran's current troubles are both sudden and unexpected. They follow years of strategic expansion on the part of the Islamic Republic made possible by its 2015 nuclear pact with the "P5+1" nations (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). While at its core the JCPOA was tactical in nature, designed only to delay and complicate the Islamic Republic's path to nuclear status, the way in which the agreement was negotiated by the Obama administration – entailing hundreds of billions of dollars in direct and indirect



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economic relief to the ailing Iranian economy¹ – succeeded in putting Iran’s clerical regime on a path of sustained expansion.

For Iran’s leaders, this represented a signal opportunity. These clerical elites have long viewed the Islamic Republic as “the center of the universe” – the geopolitical fulcrum of the Middle East, around which regional politics and economics are destined to revolve.² Yet, for years before the signing of the JCPOA, economic realities and international pressure prevented them from realizing this vision. The JCPOA, however, ushered in a new and more permissive regional environment, and the Iranian regime wasted no time taking advantage of it.

Concurrent with the passage of the JCPOA, the Islamic Republic initiated a significant expansion of its defense budget,³ with emphasis on increasing the size, accuracy and lethality of its already-formidable strategic arsenal.⁴ It also broadened its already-extensive network of proxies through the creation of the “Shi’ite Liberation Army” (SLA), a cadre of as many as 200,000 Shi’a irregulars drawn from Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere, trained and equipped by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and deployed to foreign theaters such as Syria.⁵ Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts – from Syria’s grinding civil war to Yemen’s protracted internal conflict⁶ – likewise deepened.

The results were dramatic. Years ago, Iranian officials were already boasting that their government had succeeded in capturing and controlling four separate Arab capitals in the Middle East – Damascus, Syria; Baghdad, Iraq; Beirut, Lebanon; and Sana’a, Yemen.⁷ The message was clear: Iran had successfully exploited the “post-JCPOA era” to erect an incipient empire of influence and zone of control stretching from Afghanistan in the east to Lebanon in the west.

Reversals of Fortune

So the situation has remained. Iran’s activities and influence in the region are today at their broadest point in four decades. Yet there are now clear signs that the Islamic Republic is coming under significant stress in those places, as local populations push back against Iran’s political interference.

Iraq provides what is perhaps the clearest case in point. Beginning this past October, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets throughout the country in what has become Iraq’s most significant political crisis in more than a decade. The protests reflect popular discontent over widespread government mismanagement and rampant corruption, which have paralyzed the country’s political system and fostered widespread socio-economic stagnation.⁸ But they also reflect a deep wellspring of anger at the pervasive political influence that the Islamic Republic of Iran wields on the territory of its western neighbor.



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That represents a sea-change in the sentiments of ordinary Iraqis. While the Iranian regime exploited the vacuum created by Saddam Hussein's ouster back in 2003 to create an extensive network of proxies, political clients and subservient politicians, in recent years more and more Iraqis – including Iraqi Shia – have come to view Iran as a threat to their sovereignty, rather than as a constructive political partner.⁹ In turn, the ongoing unrest reflects a persistent demand by Iraqis for national politics to return to a more authentic, representative state in which Iran's extensive influence is curtailed, if not eliminated outright.¹⁰

Iraq's ferment, however, is far from an isolated incident. A similar rejection of Iranian influence has taken shape in recent weeks in Lebanon, where Iran's principal terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, holds significant political sway. At issue there is, among other things, the persistent presence of the Shi'a militia – and, by extension, its patron, Iran – in national politics. To date, the unrest has forced the resignation *en masse* of the politically-compromised cabinet of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, and at least a temporary rollback of Hezbollah's previously unassailable standing in the country.¹¹

Most significant, however, have been the changes taking place within Iran's own borders. In November, the Islamic Republic was convulsed by a new round of domestic unrest precipitated by the regime's decision to significantly hike the price of gasoline. These "petroleum protests" quickly became a broader outpouring of discontent directed at the Islamic Republic and its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. In response, the Iranian regime launched an extensive crackdown throughout the country – one that included a comprehensive Internet shutdown that prevented opposition forces from organizing.¹² This technological suppression was accompanied by a more direct and brutal response; an estimated 1,500 people were killed by regime forces in the second half of November as part of an offensive authorized by Khamenei himself to quell dissent by any means necessary.¹³ Yet the potential for grassroots opposition remains, which is why the Islamic Republic is now estimated to be spending close to \$25 million a day to fund its domestic "suppression machine," which encompasses the country's Intelligence Ministry, its police, IRGC, and its feared *Basij* domestic militia.¹⁴

Crisis and Opportunity

This regional ferment serves as the backdrop for fundamental changes in America's approach toward Iran. On January 3rd, a U.S. airstrike killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, commander of the regime's feared Qods Force paramilitary arm, in Iraq in what amounts to a dramatic shift in the Trump administration's approach toward the Islamic Republic. Up until then, the year-and-a-half-old "maximum pressure" campaign waged by the United States had succeeded in imposing heavy economic costs on the Iranian regime,¹⁵ but had done little to diminish its regional presence or curtail its destabilizing influence in the Middle East. The killing of Soleimani, however, was designed to reestablish American deterrence vis-à-vis



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Tehran after repeated unanswered provocations, as well as to impose real costs upon the Islamic Republic for its regional activities.¹⁶

In its aftermath, the risks of U.S.-Iranian confrontation have increased dramatically. Iran's leadership has publicly pledged significant retaliation against the United States for the killing of its top military commander, and has attempted to rally regional allies and domestic opinion to this cause.¹⁷ The contours of that response are likely to take shape in coming weeks, as Iran's regime carefully calibrates its actions to safeguard its revolutionary credentials while avoiding an overt military conflict with the United States in which it would have a distinct disadvantage.

For America, too, the current moment in the Middle East is proving to be a pivotal one. In the near term, at least, Soleimani's death has helped to galvanize regional opinion against the United States.¹⁸ In due course, however, the latent dissatisfaction with Iranian political interference and manipulation in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere can be expected to resurface. This, in turn, will present a potential opening for the United States. If the Trump administration redoubles its outreach to the region, emphasizing the very things that have animated protestors within Iran's zone of influence — among them human rights, good governance, and representative institutions — it can draw a clear, compelling distinction between American values and the corrupt (and corrupting) influence that has accompanied Iran's involvement in those places. By doing so, the Trump administration can set in motion a more comprehensive Middle East strategy that begins to capitalize upon Iran's imperial overstretch.

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