

In Search of an Iran Strategy

By Jon B. Alterman

RAPPING AGAINST RADICALISM

A bald man with a thick beard raps in a parking lot in northern Lebanon. “Islam is not Khomeini and his Iranian colonialist ride, Islam is not Wahhabi twin pimps,” he says with urgency and disdain. “Islam is not al-Azhar, enough for insulting the mind,” [he continues](#), and “Islam is not the Daesh-ists and the idiots killing us.”

[El Rass](#), who performs in literary Arabic and Lebanese dialect, is one of several artists behind the counter-radicalism rap movement. The movement addresses religious and social issues affecting at-risk youths in Lebanese border towns and beyond through music. It gained momentum around 2013 and has exploded in recent years, pushing back against a wave of violent rap across the border in Syria.

Jihadi rap, or “[Jihadi Cool](#)” as it is sometimes known, emerged in the early 2010s. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group encouraged Western rappers who converted to Islam to instrumentalize their art as a recruitment tool. But while Islamist rap lives in the shadows, its reactionary counterpart [seeks the spotlight](#), tackling radicalization problems head-on and forging a connection between Islam and youth culture.

The new rappers are empathetic. El Rass discusses the link between social immobility and extremism in “[Beirut Volcano](#),” while Syrian-Filipino rapper Chyno’s “[Ballad of an Exodus](#)” explores disenfranchisement resulting from displacement. The singers stress that correct Islam provides solace, while its deviations provoke conflict. Through [international tours](#) and concerts in border towns, the artists are reaching out to new, often disillusioned Muslim audiences. The rage is understandable, they suggest, but it cannot become consuming. ■ CH

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he United States needs an Iran strategy. The Islamic Republic has been so troubling to so many U.S. policy makers across such a wide array of issues for so long that it would be irresponsible not to have one. Similarly, Iran needs a U.S. strategy. U.S. antagonism not only presents the pre-eminent threat to Iranian forces, but it has shaped the way the entire world understands Iran.

Now, it feels like neither country has such a strategy. The United States has a set of policies to punish Iran and a set of ambitious goals for changes in Iranian behavior, but the path between the two is anything but clear. Iran, for its part, seems befuddled by the Trump administration. The regime that has long been used to being a disruptive factor in world affairs is now confronting a president who not only has a love of unpredictability, but who also seems especially enamored of the awesomely powerful arsenal at his disposal.

The danger is that in the process of jostling each other, the two governments fall into a set of actions that neither seeks and which harms both. Even if neither side can see a clear path to solving the problems between them, each should recognize that a path of mitigating hostility is likely to provide a better outcome than the available alternatives.

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump campaigned on the idea that the Obama administration allowed Iran to have a normal economy without being a normal state. In his view, Iran could continue its regional proxy wars and support for terrorism and only needed to put its nuclear weapons program on a brief hiatus, and the world would pour billions of dollars into the Iranian economy. President Trump’s announcement in May 2018 that the United States would no longer abide by the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) started the clock to re-impose direct and secondary U.S. sanctions on Iran. The first set went into effect on August 7, with the second set to come into force on November 4.

Other than punishing Iran and weakening its government, it is unclear that the Trump administration has a strategy in mind. There seems no set of criteria to determine the sanctions’ success. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlined a list of 12 demands that any new deal with Iran

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NEW REPORT: AID AND CONFLICT: PITFALLS IN YEMEN

The CSIS Middle East Program released a new report by Jon B. Alterman, “Aid and Conflict: Pitfalls in Yemen.” The report discusses some of the challenges that international actors face when providing relief in the midst of Yemen’s conflict. While donors aim to alleviate civilian suffering, aid provision can in fact perpetuate conflict, as local actors and warring militias instrumentalize aid by diverting it to their own followers. Yemen is in desperate need of relief, but those seeking to assist should be aware of the unseen consequences. Read the full report [HERE](#). ■

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Ala Qasem discussed Yemen's reconstruction at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable. He argued that efforts to rebuild Yemen should begin now and will have to address humanitarian issues and economic reform simultaneously. Read a summary of the event [HERE](#).

You can see more on the Gulf Roundtable series and other CSIS Middle East Program Gulf events [HERE](#).

CSIS Associate Fellow Will Todman explores the link between forced conscription and refugee resettlement in Syria in his latest [article for Defense One](#).

IN THE MEDIA

Jon Alterman spoke to [PRI's The World](#) about the impending attack on Idlib and the lack of a clear U.S. strategy in Syria. (September 4, 2018)

Will Todman commented on the Islamic State group's capabilities in Syria in an [interview with Foreign Policy](#). (August 1, 2018)

The Middle East Notes and Comment

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CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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must contain that is as breathtaking in its ambition as it is unachievable. The overt ambition seems to be an Iranian surrender to the United States, which is politically and ideologically unthinkable to the Islamic Republic. If it has a covert intent of collapsing the government, there is little reason to think that the public would support a pivot toward the United States, or that a successor government would seek to do so.

Outside of Iran, U.S. sanctions seek to take millions of barrels per day of Iranian oil off the market when there is no immediate substitute available, spiking prices for consumers and encouraging defiance of the United States. While most European allies' companies are winding down Iran operations, China, Russia, Turkey, and India have many more options and seem likely to pursue them. The United States has myriad issues with all of these countries. It seems unlikely that Iran sanctions will lead the agenda when there is so much competition for primacy.

Iran is also in an unenviable position. The rial has plummeted in value, sparking widespread dissatisfaction. Pragmatists who sought a less confrontational relationship with the outside world have been humbled, and hard-liners who argue that the world is irredeemably hostile to Iran have ascended. Yet, there are a few signs that the government is at risk or that the security services have lost their grip. There is no revolutionary fervor, and there is no visible alternative for the population to favor.

The Iranian government seems inclined to wait out the Trump administration, but doing so means years of financial pain—not only until the president leaves office, but also until a successor is in place and has concluded a new set of negotiations with Iran. That probably means at least four years, and not just two. Within that time, Iran will have to undergo its own political transition, as President Rouhani's term will end and the search for a successor to the ailing Ayatollah Khamenei may be concluded.

Under pressure, Iran seems most likely to do what it has often done—pursue low-cost, high-yield regional adventures that defy clear attribution but remind adversaries of Iran's ability to disrupt, and which invite incentives to discontinue. Iraq, in which the United States has invested more than a trillion dollars and into which a rising amount of Saudi and Emirati money has been flowing, seems a likely arena for increased conflict. Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and arguably the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council states, are all countries where Iran has assets on the ground and the West has interests at stake.

Part of the Iranian calculus will surely be how to antagonize outside powers without inviting all-out war. There is little question that should it decide to fight Iran, the United States could decimate much of Iran's conventional capability in short order. But another disturbing scenario is possible. That is that Iran creates conflict in the Middle East that stops short of outright provocation. The United States, looking to reduce its presence in the region, provides a measured response that raises pressure on Iran, which the regime uses in turn to rally the population around the flag. The outcome is a more secure government in Iran, a more unstable Middle East, and a United States that both bears the blame for Iranian recalcitrance and has surrendered the ability to rally the world. The loser in that scenario is the United States, and not Iran.

The United States would be better served by a more modest policy of incentives and consequences with a bold destination and a clearer idea of how to get there than the current policy offers. The Iranian government considers the U.S. government as unalterably hostile. Hoping that it might fold might make some Americans feel good. At the same time, though, it plays into the hands of Iran's most malign actors.

■ 9/21/18