

Punishing Iran Is Not a Strategy

By Jon B. Alterman

MORAL TEST

If your grandmother gives you a sweater you don't like, what should you do? Students in the UAE will soon be asked to identify the "right" answer to the conundrum, as the country becomes the first in the world to administer a standardized test evaluating children's moral judgment.

The UAE piloted its Moral Education Program in 2016, out of concern that young people in the UAE are confronted with "interferences from all over the world" which disrupt the Emirati moral compass. A year later, the government expanded the program, making it compulsory for all students from grades one to twelve. Over a million pupils now study topics ranging from ethics to civics to Emirati culture. While the course does not explicitly teach theology, it includes material on Islamic culture and Islamic finance, in addition to the importance of tolerating other traditions.

To assess the program's effectiveness, the UAE has worked with the developers of the U.S.-based ACT college entrance exam to develop a 45-minute computer-based test. This year, 10,000 students from 70 public and private schools will take the first exam, which will ask multiple-choice, scenario-based questions. According to the developers, each test question will have one fully correct answer, one partially correct answer, and two incorrect answers.

Scores will reportedly be used to compare schools and instructors and fine-tune the curriculum. Teachers, many of whom are expatriates, privately worry whether they are equipped to shape Emirati students into a narrow moral and cultural mold. Even more pointedly, they wonder if it is even possible to create a unified moral standard, let alone measure it. ■ WT



The Trump administration's Middle East strategy has often appeared erratic. It sought to craft the "Deal of the Century" between Israelis and Palestinians and to double down on fighting the Islamic State group, while simultaneously seeking to limit U.S. engagement in the region. The zeal with which initiatives were pursued obscured the fact that, together, they did not add up to a strategy.

Even before the Warsaw conference last week, it had become clear the Trump administration does have a strategy in the Middle East: punishing Iran until the government is more compliant. Unfortunately, it's the wrong strategy to pursue.

U.S.-Iranian enmity has deep roots. Many Iranians believe that the United States has threatened Iran's sovereignty for decades, and many in the United States have long viewed Iran's ambitions as a major security threat. The emotions remain raw on both sides.

For decades, the core of the Iranian response has been to demonstrate that it will not be cowed. It portrays itself as the principal U.S. rival in the Middle East, it supports guerrilla groups that have targeted U.S. soldiers, and it aids Palestinian and Lebanese groups that have actively targeted Israeli civilians. It has fitfully pursued a nuclear program, it has developed powerful ballistic missiles, and it supports proxies that attack U.S. allies throughout the Middle East. Its leadership issues language that is hostile and uncompromising.

And yet, Iran is no superpower. Despite bold ambitions and vast reserves of oil, Iran is hurting. Its GDP ranks somewhere between the states of Maryland and Michigan (and well below North Carolina), and its per capita GDP is one-seventh the GDP of Mississippi, the poorest state in the Union. Its air force and navy rely heavily on fleets from the 1970s. By any conventional measure, Iran is no match for the United States.

For that very reason, Iran has absolutely no intention of confronting the United States conventionally. Over the last 40 years, it has honed tools that it deploys on the cheap. They are inadequate for Iran to achieve positive goals, but are used often enough to prevent other powers from achieving their goals without Iranian acquiescence. For Iran, this feels like success against long odds.

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NEW COMMENTARY: SETTLING KURDISH SELF-DETERMINATION IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

In a new brief from CSIS's Middle East Program, "Settling Kurdish Self-Determination in Northeast Syria," Associate Fellow Will Todman draws lessons from our recent publication, *Independence Movements and Their Aftermath*, to argue that the United States should facilitate a limited autonomy settlement in Northeast Syria when the area is formally reintegrated into regime-controlled territory. Failing to achieve such a settlement between Kurdish and regime officials would harm U.S. interests in various ways. Read the full brief [HERE](#). ■

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

A new commentary by Haim Malka, “Beyond Algeria’s Presidential Election,” argues that, regardless of the outcome of Algeria’s next presidential election, what matters is whether the country’s power-brokers can build a consensus on how to address widespread socioeconomic grievances. Read the full commentary [HERE](#).

Iraqi foreign minister Mohamed Ali Alhakeem visited CSIS on February 7 to discuss issues facing Iraq. Listen to the full event [HERE](#).

IN THE MEDIA

Jon Alterman spoke to [TIME](#) about Trump’s assertion that the intelligence community underestimates the Iranian threat. “If the intelligence community says something with a high degree of confidence, it’s not something they feel, it’s not something they guess.” 2/6/19

[Jon Alterman](#) and [Will Todman](#) were quoted in two articles in *Foreign Policy* about Trump’s announced withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. “By saying we are leaving unconditionally and immediately, all of those parties will make all of their own deals,” Jon Alterman said. “U.S. interests and U.S. ability to influence what endures was reduced overnight from a reasonable amount to virtually zero.” 1/28/19 and 1/16/19

The Middle East Notes and Comment

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CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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The Trump administration has concluded that Iran has tried the world’s patience for long enough. Judging the Obama administration’s strategy of engaging Iran as both naïve and unsuccessful, it has sought to push back on Iran comprehensively. Sanctions are back, diplomatic engagement has ended, and the United States is pulling out all the stops to back Iran into a corner. While precise U.S. goals are unclear, the message seems to be that the United States will tighten the screws until Iran backs down, or the government falls.

There are several problems with this approach. First, the Iranian government seems to have reconciled itself to the idea that the United States is irredeemably hostile. That is, changes in Iranian behavior will not end U.S. pressure, but only invite further demands. Second, there are not many good reasons to think either that the Iranian government is about to fall or that if it does, its replacement will be more aligned with U.S. interests. But two other problems are even bigger.

One is that history suggests that bilateral sanctions rarely modify behavior. Unilateral U.S. sanctions on Cuba since 1961 did not hasten the fall of Fidel Castro, but broad, multilateral sanctions—such as those on South Africa in the 1980s, on Libya in the 1990s, and against Iran in the 2000s—brought about change. The current U.S. push against Iran enjoys support mostly from neighbors that have little to do with Iran anyway, minimizing the impact on Iran. Instead, the new round of sanctions builds antipathy to the United States among allies it needs for other regional priorities without appreciably changing Iranian behavior.

Even more importantly, though, by making an Iranian retreat the cornerstone of its regional strategy, the Trump administration has simultaneously lowered the bar for Iranian success while setting an unreachable standard for itself. Iran is embedded in low-cost and sustainable operations in Lebanon and Yemen. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is active in Syria and has deep influence in Iraq. The IRGC Navy harasses U.S. Navy ships in the Gulf and presumed Iranian intelligence operatives continue attacks in cyberspace. Every time these Iranian forces and their proxies survive to fight another day, the Iranian leadership sees this as a victory against improbable odds. The more the United States isolates itself from its allies and partners, the better off Iran is.

The wiser strategy for the United States to pursue is a much broader one. Rather than beat the Iranians, it should be working with allies and partners to shape a future U.S. role in the Middle East that is both sustainable and durable. Almost 30 years after Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, the American public has tired of playing the role of regional hegemon. Trillions of dollars of investments in Iraq and Afghanistan have left fragile governments that still require support; the experiment of European leadership in Libya is just as unsatisfactory (yielding competing governments rather than a single weak one). U.S. economic assistance to most of the region has dwindled, and its diplomatic strategy is a shambles. Two years into the administration, only a tiny handful of U.S. embassies have ambassadors, and the number is dwindling.

The United States has hard decisions to make in the Middle East, less about what it would like but more what it will accept. It needs to develop a broader range of tools to advance U.S. interests, using diplomacy and economic statecraft—backed by military tools and covert capabilities—to persuade governments and populations to seek U.S. partnership. And most importantly, it needs to find ways to lead in which it does less on its own and more through finding effective ways to mobilize allies and partners to act in concert. The administration’s policy on Iran does the opposite. The administration needs a broad coalition to support U.S. interests in the Middle East, Iran included. Instead, the administration has assembled a narrow one. ■ 2/19/19