

# American Bluster and Blunders Have Made Iran its Fourth Long War

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The last thing the United States needed was to add Iran as a fourth war to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria that already make up its “long wars.” That, however, seems to be what has already happened. If one looks beyond the most recent round of the attacks on Saudi Arabia, the outcome seems to be American participation in yet another long-term conflict with no clear path to victory, lasting stability, or some clear end. For all the current focus on the details of the oilfield attacks and Saudi Arabia’s air defense capabilities, the most recent attacks are only likely to be another episode in a lasting gray area or hybrid warfare between the U.S. and Iran.

Iran has been a source of extremism ever since the rise of Khomeini. While it was initially the victim of an Iraqi invasion when the Iran-Iraq War began in 1980, it became the aggressor and sought to invade Iraq after 1984. Ever since, it has sought to increase its influence in the region by providing military support to non-state actors like the Hezbollah, through a series of terrorist attacks, by seeking to acquire nuclear weapons and missiles, and by exploiting the tensions between Arab Sunnis and Shi’ites. Its Supreme Leader and Revolutionary Guards had repeatedly taken hardline position, and sometimes used force instead of words.

This fourth war did not, however, begin with Iranian aggression, but with an exercise in diplomatic bluff and bluster by the United States. The U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on May 18, 2018 – an agreement that called for Iran to end its nuclear weapons program in return for an end to U.S. and international sanctions. It did so at a time when there seemed to be some real-world possibility that the agreement could not only end Iran’s nuclear efforts but gradually trade its return to a normal economic position for its efforts to expand its military influence in the region.

Instead, the U.S. chose to withdraw by taking a hardline ideological position towards the JCPOA that went far beyond Iran’s nuclear weapons program. The U.S. made 12 hardline demands that Iran halt virtually every key part of its behavior that the U.S. objected to in the entire region. It did so at a time when Iran seemed to be complying with the terms of the JCPOA, and when America’s allies were still seeking to improve the JCPOA. The U.S. did not offer any practical negotiating options, and then unilaterally re-imposed crippling sanctions on the Iranian economy. As a result, America’s hardline rhetoric seemed to many as more an effort to destabilize the Iranian regime than achieve any kind of regional settlement.

The U.S. then relied on sanctions and hardline rhetoric as a substitute for a strategy that linked its withdrawal from the JCPOA to creating an effective common approach with its Arab strategic partners to deterring and defending against Iran, and meeting the other strategic challenges in the region. It did so regardless of the fact that the U.S. was already engaged in a serious competition with Iran for influence in Iraq.

At the same time, the U.S. focused on burden sharing and compensating for its costs in deploying to the Gulf, instead of trying to create effective Arab security forces and stability within the Arab Gulf states to deal with Iran. It pressed – and sometimes bullied – its Arab strategic partners for more Arab spending on military forces at a time when Arab partners like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq,

and the UAE were already spending some three times more as a percentage of their GDPs on military forces than the U.S. level of some 3.2%.

The U.S. pressured its Arab allies for major increases in national arms purchases from U.S. manufacturers rather than worked with its strategic partners to create an integrated Arab Gulf defense posture that could deter and defend against Iran. It did this at a time when the Congressional Research Service had already reported that the U.S. calculated that the six Arab countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) had spent \$162,500 million on new arms agreements between 2008 and 2015, that Iraq had spent another \$29.1 million, while Iran had only signed \$900 million worth of such agreements.

The U.S. also engaged Iran over the JCPOA without making consistent serious attempts to heal the deep and self-destructive divisions in Arab Gulf security efforts caused by the Saudi and UAE-led boycott of Qatar that had begun in June 2017 – a boycott that divided much of the Arab world — as well as states outside it — including Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, the Maldives, Mauritania, Senegal, the Libyan government based in Tobruk, and the Hadi-led government in Yemen. This boycott further divided America’s Arab strategic partners because Oman chose to stand aside and tilt towards Qatar, because Kuwait took the middle ground and attempted to arbitrate, and because Turkey sided with Qatar against Saudi Arabia.

The end result was that the U.S. pushed Iran towards extremes without creating an effective approach to regional security. In fact, the U.S. continued to threaten Iran and increase sanctions while it also talked increasingly about U.S. withdrawals from Iraq and Syria and force cuts in the region. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that a combination of U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, U.S. sanctions that crippled the Iranian economy, the reactions of Iran’s hardline leadership, and the weakness of an increasingly divided and self-destructive Arab world, then triggered Iran’s escalation to tanker and oil field attacks.

The high level of Iran’s escalation was not predictable, and its attacks on the Saudi oil fields have undermined European and other outside support for some negotiated compromise. At the same time, the U.S. has further undermined its own position. The U.S. has so far responded to Iran’s escalation to the tanker and oil field attacks by mixing a series of new U.S. military threats with diplomatic efforts that talked about meetings between top-level U.S. and Iranian officials, and by removing its 12 demands as preconditions for such talks, without creating a viable climate or set of proposals for serious negotiation.

Bluster, bullying, and blunders are no substitute for effective action. In fact, it is hard to think of a worse approach to deterrence than making grandiose threats, publicly coming to the very edge of military action, and then publicly pulling back at the last minute. The end result is that the U.S. has effectively encourage Iran rather than deterred it. It has undermined its already tenuous diplomatic options while seeming to demonstrate that it cannot use force decisively and effectively.

As a result, the U.S. is now caught up in what seems all too likely to become yet another war of attrition – one that will involve a long series of low to moderate level clashes with no clear ending, or one that suddenly escalates into a far more serious conflict that the U.S. may be able to “win” in terms of the military outcome, but where the U.S. will have no clear way to terminate on favorable and long-lasting terms.

Diplomacy remains the best option if some viable initiative is possible, and our European allies may still offer that route. If they don't, more sanctions are not the answer. More provocation will not deter. Just the reverse.

The U.S. can and certainly should help its Arab allies improve their missile, air, and naval defenses – and real-world military capabilities and levels of deterrence rather than focus on making them spend more, U.S. force reductions, and more arms sales for the sake of arms sales. It should make ending the boycott of Qatar, dealing with the war in Yemen, strengthening Iraq's unity and self-defense capability, and uniting the Arab Gulf states critical objectives. It should see its current ties to Jordan and to the Arab-Kurdish forces in eastern Syria as key potential firebreaks that limit Iran's influence. Here the ties between USCENTCOM and the different Arab military forces can play a critical role if the U.S. sets the right priorities and does so consistently.

The fact remains, however, that the best defense against any future Iranian attacks and escalation may well consist of a carefully calculated offense; one where joint U.S. and partner attacks show Iran that it will face a decisive response to each new step in escalation. *That is if* the U.S. and its Arab partners show that their goal is to negotiate and create a new level of stability in the Gulf and the region – not to impose regime change from the outside.

The U.S. may well have to use force against Iran, and use it decisively enough to make it clear to Iran that any new step up the escalation ladder will only make things worse. Iran becomes highly vulnerable if it faces a coherent U.S. and Arab partner military effort of the kind that was created to deal with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Iran's refineries, the key links in its power grid, its major air defense radars, its key missile sites and facilities, its energy export capabilities, and key links in its ability to attack shipping in the Gulf, are all examples of groups of targets that U.S. stealth systems and U.S. and partner precision strikes can hit. All involve targets where such strikes will not hurt or kill significant numbers of civilians or create serious long-term recovery problems.

But, if the U.S. does need to carry out such strikes, then it needs to act, not threaten. It may not have to speak softly, but it does need to carry a real stick. It should be ready to act immediately after any new round of Iranian strikes and to any given level of Iranian escalation. It should have already developed a range of options tailored to what Iran actually does, rather than relying on it to do the expected. It should be able to immediately demonstrate Iranian responsibility within reasonable limits. It should have prepared the leaders of Congress. Above all, immediately after the U.S. does strike, it should present clear and realistic options for negotiating.

More broadly, the U.S. should never again threaten when it does not mean to actually attack, or publicly back down after coming to the very edge of action. Above all, any tactical approach it chooses should be some part of a longer-term strategy to end the conflict with Iran on favorable terms. Tactics without strategy are a near certain path to yet another self-inflicted wound, and one that will again heal slowly and painfully.

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