

## U.S.-IRAN POLICY

U.S. and Iranian policymakers hold competing visions for the future of the Middle East. A lack of trust between the nations makes negotiating compromises exceedingly difficult. But instead of a policy of “maximum pressure,” U.S. policymakers should prioritize sustained engagement to develop trust and mutual respect and to lay the foundation upon which a durable relationship can be constructed and conflict can be avoided.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Reenter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and reestablish direct diplomatic channels.** The JCPOA is the best path to peacefully prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state. America should comply with the deal, abide with sanctions relief obligations, ensure International Atomic Energy Agency inspections resume, and in the process, reengage in direct communication with Tehran.
- **Disentangle policies on contentious issues.** Policy to deter Iranian support for terrorist groups should be distinct from policy focused on nuclear nonproliferation, which should be kept separate from policy addressing Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.
- **Let vital U.S. national security interests guide policy.** Narrowing America’s interests in the region to those of true concern to U.S. national security would reduce the risk of adopting policies that are unnecessary, ineffective, or counterproductive.

### BACKGROUND

The United States has sought to counter Iranian influence, including its support for Shiite factions throughout the Middle East, primarily by using sanctions and covert action and by supporting anti-Iranian factions in regional conflicts. However, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” policy—and Tehran’s response to it—have increased the probability of an outright military conflict between the two nations.

The administration’s maximum pressure campaign against Iran is not working. The Obama administration’s diplomacy convinced Iran to forfeit 98 percent of its stockpile of enriched uranium and significantly roll back all elements of its nuclear program while opening the country to intrusive international inspections. The current policy, by contrast, has seen Iran threaten to expand its nuclear program and, at least according to the White House, increase hostile and destabilizing behavior in the Persian Gulf by repeatedly attacking ships and tankers.

The current policy is unlikely to persuade Iran to stop supporting groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, or the pro-Assad forces in Syria. The maximum pressure policy has, however, angered and alienated U.S. allies in Europe as well as China and Russia, who, while not friends of America, are sufficiently powerful to make things difficult for the United States on a range of issues.

By repeatedly escalating the situation—particularly in the military realm—America’s current policy risks an unplanned clash with Iranian-backed forces in the Gulf, Iraq, or Syria. The United States should take steps to deescalate tensions with Iran and pursue a policy that repairs relations with allies and prioritizes diplomacy with Tehran.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

[“Will John Bolton Finally Get His Iran War?”](#) by Emma Ashford and Trevor Thrall, featuring Colonel Lawrence B. Wilkerson (Retired), *Power Problems*, podcast, May 7, 2019.

[“Trump’s Iran Policy: Strategy or Strategy?”](#) by Sahar Khan and Trevor Thrall, featuring Barbara Slavin, *Power Problems*, podcast, August 27, 2018.

[“Unforced Error: The Risks of Confrontation with Iran”](#) by Emma Ashford and John Glaser, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 822, October 9, 2017.

[“Preserving the Iran Nuclear Deal: Perils and Prospects”](#) by Ariane Tabatabai, Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 818, August 15, 2017.