

## OPINION

# Why can't the Trump administration produce an Iran strategy that works? | Trudy Rubin

Updated: February 8, 2019 - 2:54 PM



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On the [40th anniversary](#) of Iran's Islamic revolution, which falls on Feb. 11, the rhetoric between team Trump and the ayatollahs has risen to fever pitch.

In his [State of the Union](#) address, President Trump labelled Iran the "world's leading state sponsor of terror" and "a radical regime" that does "bad, bad things." The United States has withdrawn from a 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran and reimposed harsh economic sanctions.

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Pushing back, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, [said Friday](#) that the Iranian slogan "Death to America" means death to Trump and [national security adviser John] Bolton and [secretary of state Mike] Pompeo." Khamenei's website said the slogan would remain alive until the United States changed its "evil and mean" ways.

Yet squeezing the Tehran regime has become the centerpiece of what passes for Trump's Mideast strategy. The president and his top officials have made pretty clear their real goal is regime change. Bolton even publicly [predicted](#) to a fringe Iranian opposition group in 2017 that the Tehran regime would fall by 2019.

This kind of magical thinking about Iran infuses Trump policy (although Pompeo, at least, should know better). Rather than check Tehran's Mideast misbehavior, it sets the United States up to fail.

Before I get to why, let me emphasize that Iran does indeed meddle dangerously in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf. Some prime examples: Shipping tens of thousands of missiles to the Lebanese Hezbollah militia to point at Israel, vastly expanding the wretched Syrian civil war, and heating up the Syrian border with Israel.

But the U.S. response has been confused and contradictory. Rather than work with European and key Arab allies, such as Iraq, to check Iran, the White House has tried to bludgeon them into confronting Tehran directly. And it has made [maximalist demands](#) on the ayatollahs that they cannot meet without committing suicide.

This approach will not work.

Let's start with the Europeans.

Our key allies, Britain, Germany, and France, wanted to keep the nuclear deal in place, while squeezing Iran toward a second pact that addressed the deal's loopholes (such as missile production). The allies also stood ready to join Trump in pressuring Iran on its Mideast mischief. Instead, Trump [junked the deal](#), asserting that he was countering Iran's nuclear threat. He called his own intel chiefs "naïve" and "wrong" when they said Iran was adhering to the deal.

The result: Trump has split the key alliance against Tehran. The Europeans are seeking ways to work around new U.S. sanctions vs. Iran, with Russia and China ready to help. The allies want to prevent Iran from leaving the deal, which could set them back on the path to a bomb.

Next, let's look at Trump's efforts to rally the Sunni Arab world against Tehran.

The president is relying heavily on Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman as his point man – yes, the same MBS who appears to have ordered the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The crown prince has also made a military mess in Yemen, effectively increasing Iranian influence there.

Meantime, Trump's sudden decision to swiftly pull all U.S. troops out of Syria ([by April, says the Wall St. Journal](#)) will increase Iranian influence in that country. Yet, even as the troop withdrawal removes U.S. leverage in Syria, Pompeo claims, magically, that the U.S. aims to get all Iranian-backed forces out of that country.

As for Iraq, Trump and Pompeo again display magical thinking. The president's public proclamation this week that U.S. troops there will "watch Iran" was rejected even by America's closest Iraqi allies. "Don't overburden Iraq with your own issues," President Barham Salih, a Kurd, said this week.

What Salih meant is that Iraq shares a 905-mile border with Iran, along with historic and religious ties, and can't afford to be a pawn in Trump's anti-Iran crusade. On the other hand, a quiet U.S. policy to continue training Iraq's army in order to balance Tehran's immense influence – would be welcome in Baghdad. But a Trump bludgeon won't work.

Indeed it is Trump's public Iran-bashing, and his demands that allies join in, that guarantees his policy's failure.

On Feb. 13, Secretary of State Pompeo will convene a [high-level international conference](#) in Warsaw which was meant to build an anti-Iran coalition. The E.U. won't send its foreign minister, and doesn't want to provoke Iran to quit the nuclear framework. Pompeo isn't likely to make much progress toward his goal.

That's because the U.S. [demands on Iran](#) are clearly aimed at toppling the regime, not at assembling an effective coalition to make Tehran curb its geopolitical excesses.

"Given the highly public nature of Trump's position on Iran, it is hard to see where his Iran policy goes," says Ryan Crocker, former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, who has had many difficult dealings with Tehran. "You need a broad global policy into which Iran fits."

Instead, we have tweets and a flawed assumption that the Iranian regime will collapse under the pressure of sanctions. Instead, by alienating useful allies and relying on magical thinking, Trump enables the ayatollahs to keep destabilizing the Middle East.



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