



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 4, Issue 12, October 2020

ISSUED BY



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

THE US AND THE REGIONAL INFLUENCE OF IRAN

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POLICIES AND THE LEVELS OF INFLUENCE

Dr. Ali Fares al- Shammari

Associate Professor in International and Strategic Studies at Nahrain University

ABSTRACT

Following the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) in 2015, the effectiveness of Iranian strength and influence resulting from this deal has become one of the principal concerns of research centers and policy institutes in the United States. The change in Iranian political behavior towards the regional arena provided a greater opportunity for Iranian expansion considering the gains Iran made from signing the deal, contrary to what was expected. It also contributed to changing the nature of international pressure to contain Iranian power. This study aims to assess the pressure imposed by the United States as one of its tools to curb Iranian influence in the region. This is in addition to revealing how far Iran is capable of countering this pressure for an extensive period of time, and then identifying the alternative tools adopted by the United States during the final part of President Trump's term and the scope of their impact on Iran's strategy of confrontation. Finally, the study examines how developments in the US maximum pressure strategy — at the regional level via more effective policies — will help push Iran towards more engagement instead of the confrontational strategy it has adopted over the decades.

Introduction

It is agreed that the scope of Iranian strength ebbs and flows according to the nature of opportunities and threats surrounding Iranian decision-makers. It is not possible for Iran's national security strategy to achieve its objectives and national interests without balancing between the exercise of power that is at the disposal of decision-makers and the actual power needed to achieve Iranian goals. Although Iran's ideological beliefs are critical in determining its vital spheres, Tehran's ability to influence areas also plays an important part in setting these spheres of influence and are ranked in accordance with their importance to Iran. This means that foreign affairs analysts and strategic thinkers, when shifting between vital interests and the tools needed to secure them, take into consideration the circumstances impacting regions.

The vision embraced by President Donald Trump after coming into office was in response to reassessing Iran's power and influence. The gains which Iran had made internationally following the signing of the nuclear deal, and regionally in Iraq and Syria, become a concern for the United States. This prompted Washington to seriously consider weakening Iran's role on a strategic scale by changing its approach of pressure towards Iran. This was intended to limit Iran's regional role and the influence it sought following the nuclear deal.

But the problem lies in the fact that US pressure on Iran has never, over the course of history, contributed to containing Iranian clout in its zones of influence and geopolitical depth. Iran is used to adopting escalation and tit-for-tat responses according to logical calculations in the regions where it has conflicting interests with the United States. This behavior significantly contributed to making it difficult to evaluate and forecast the response that Tehran might undertake in the face of US pressure. Iran has continued to adopt this approach towards the United States. But the situation changed after US President Donald Trump took office, who made profound changes to the US strategy towards Iran. The nature of US pressure imposed on Iran changed, and Trump worked to limit the elements of Iranian strength in its geopolitical spheres of influence.

While Iran has been working to address the new US pressure by expanding its strength overseas – which also helps secure the Iranian home front – the United States directed the course of its pressure towards Iran within the grey zones. This shall significantly impact Iran's regional clout and push it to reconsidering its calculations and the power equation in the region. Thus, the study assumes that the US pressure strategy towards the grey zones will weaken Iran's regional standing and its geopolitical influence overseas.

I. US Pressures: The Aim to Change Iran's Regional Behavior and Its Ability to Confront

Throughout history, the US pressure strategy based on imposing sanctions has been a bedrock of the US containment policy towards Iran. The US pressure on

Iran intends in the first place to change Tehran's behavior and adjust the scope of its interference in neighboring countries. This pressure is focusing on reassessing the strategic policies which impact Iran's reactions towards its surrounding environment, especially with respect to its presence in deep geopolitical areas, such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries.⁽¹⁾

Thus, the nature of the US pressure on Iran aims firstly to change Tehran's regional behavior on the one hand and prevent it from gaining strategic superiority to reshape the regional order on the other hand. According to this strategy, George Friedman, a geopolitical forecaster and strategist on international affairs, believes that the US strategy has overlapping characteristics and is utterly complicated. It seeks to weaken Iran and at the same time maintain the regional equilibrium. This kind of strategy is characterized by a continuity of chaos because the intent is not to support a certain force but to maintain a balance of power among multiple forces. Therefore, in Yemen the United States provides intelligence and planning information to the Saudi-led Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen against the Houthis and their ally, Iran. In Iraq, the United States offers support to Shiites and their allies through bombing ISIS positions. Friedman says, "In Syria, US strategy is so complex that it defies clear explanation. That is the nature of refusing large-scale intervention but being committed to a balance of power. The United States can oppose Iran in one theater and support it in another. The more simplistic models of the Cold War are not relevant here."⁽²⁾

According to American experts, the US pressure and the sanctions imposed on Iran have not achieved any positive results since 2001. The expansion of Iranian influence in the region since 2003 was a natural outcome of the ineffectiveness of Washington's pressure strategy towards Tehran, which produced different results from what was expected.⁽³⁾ Moreover, Iran actually managed to boost its influence and move towards securing new opportunities in strategically important areas. The nuclear deal also empowered it with the influence its needs to deal with its neighboring sphere.⁽⁴⁾

The US pressure strategy has not been efficient enough to change Iran's behavior in the region. Since the administration of George W. Bush until President Donald Trump took office, US administrations have not been keen to address the loopholes within its pressure strategy towards Iran. In addition, the US pressure strategy, according to many experts, did not deter Iran. Iran can exploit the loopholes to carry on with its confrontational strategy.

Among the most critical loopholes is that the sanctions do not suspend trade and monetary transactions between Iran and the world but instead work to limit their scope. This is because there are small and medium-sized banks that continue to cooperate with Iran despite the sanctions and in addition to Iran's struggle to keep its economy afloat via its neighboring countries, at the top of the list comes Iraq — Iraq is Iran's major trading partner after China. Furthermore,

the US pressure strategy does not target the electricity sector through which Iran is working to circumvent US pressure. Iran is seeking to evade sanctions through the gas sector as well. Iraq imports 850 megawatts of energy per year.⁽⁵⁾

In addition, the nature of the trade transactions with Iraq significantly contributes to strengthening the regional standing of Iran. At the economic level, Iran, especially when it comes to commercial exchange, comes in second place with 13 percent posted in 2018. This is equivalent to \$12 billion according to data released from Iran's Commercial Attaché amid a surge which observers expect could amount to \$20 billion.

Turkey is considered the regional neighbor which has had the biggest impact on Iraqi economic relations with its regional neighbors until 2018. It comes in first place in relation to the level of commercial exchange with Iraq with 22 percent. However, the policies of the Iraqi government which aim to diversify investments could negatively impact Iran and Turkey in light of the economic openness which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seeks to achieve after the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazimi to Riyadh.⁽⁶⁾

Through the grey zones, Tehran is working to prevent US pressure from impacting Iranian national security. Iran maintaining links with non-state actors, as is the case with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the Houthis in Yemen, exerts pressure on the United States and allows it to maneuver against it in the areas outside the calculations of the US pressure strategy and sanctions.

Yet, Iran works on countering the US pressure strategy via exerting influence on US allies in the region without engaging in a direct confrontation with them. This policy entails bigger complexities and boosts Iran's negotiating position, especially as Ali Khamenei has stated that Iran will not negotiate with the United States and will not accept the conditions that Washington seeks to impose on Iran. The Iranian experience in managing crises causes it to change the equation via boosting its strength and not yielding to the pressure imposed on it by the international community.

In summary, it could be said that the nature of the US pressure strategy on Iran until 2020 did not meet the expectations of strategic experts and neither did it meet its desired objectives. Thus, it has given Iran the opportunity to escalate in its spheres of influence to mitigate the impact of the internal pressure Tehran is facing. In addition, the US pressure strategy does not include all the areas of Iran's influence and strategic positions. This has contributed to Iran expanding the scope of its maneuverability, which can be noticed when measuring Iranian influence in terms of its ability to impact and influence its areas of geopolitical depth.

II. The US and Its Supporting Policies Limit Iran's Regional Clout

As a result of Iran's strategic moves and the increasing scope of its clout in its areas of influence, the Trump administration adopted new strategic options to realize

the goal of its pressure strategy towards Iran: to limit Tehran's influence. The most important among these new strategic options were the following:

1. Working in the Grey Zones

The Trump administration's new strategy towards Iran, based on what is known as operating in the grey zones, intended to counter Iran's increasing influence in the Middle East despite the ongoing pressure it faces.⁽⁷⁾ This new strategy was crafted by evaluating past US pressure strategies as well as by the expected Iranian responses to curbing Tehran's ability to confront. The US pressure strategy targeting Iran did not have a significant impact due to Iranian ability to maneuver in the grey zones. Therefore, the United States resorted to maneuvering with Iran to achieve the desired response from Iran (change its behavior).

Here, the US pressure strategy relied on restricting the sources of strategic support for Iran. For example, Iraq, according to this US perspective, became a party putting at risk the security interests of the United States due to its existence in the grey zones, as is the case with the non-state actors in Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. Hence, the US strategy included promoting deterrence, re-dividing the strategic zones, and targeting the grey zones.⁽⁸⁾

Strategically speaking, maneuvering in the grey zones is important for Iran to find new opportunities to include within its confrontation strategy. Iran works to create opportunities so that it can continue to exert pressure and weaken the ability of other parties to impose pressure on it. This is an important characteristic of Iran's strategic plan which shifts the pressure to the grey zones to mitigate its impact on the domestic scene.

There is no doubt that Iran not responding to US pressure as expected by Trump's administration led to Washington pulling out of the nuclear deal and engaging in the grey zones. Hence, the new US pressure strategy seeks to confront the increasing elements of Iranian strength in addition to stepping up the strategic movement towards weakening Iranian influence within the boundaries of its regional neighbors. This resulted in the Trump administration focusing on multiple objectives in relation to US strategic behavior towards Iran.⁽⁹⁾

Thus, Trump's pressure strategy towards Iran intended to contain Iran's expansion in the grey zones and suspend the indirect power supplies which have enhanced Iran's position at the domestic and external levels. This strategy has evidently taken shape since mid-2019.

2. Restricting Iran's Soft Power in Its Areas of Influence

The United States took advantage of the growing public awareness in Iraq and Lebanon against the dangers of Iranian sectarianism. The decline of Iranian soft power in Iraq was evident when Iraqi voters cast their ballots during the 2018 parliamentary elections in favor of the Sairon Alliance, which transcends sectarianism and supports the demands of the protesters who took to the streets

in 2018, 2019 (July and September), and 2020 (October). This is in addition to the protests in Lebanon in November 2019, which included demands to end Iranian interference in the country.⁽¹⁰⁾ In addition, the bond of the so-called Islamic revolution (also known as the 1979 revolution) to Persian identity did not grant Iran the soft power abilities it sought to strengthen its strategic moves within its areas of influence. Iran's social values, cultural influence, and popular diplomacy are limited to when Tehran is unable to realize its influence without using hard power.⁽¹¹⁾ This made Trump's administration work on advancing its soft power in the grey zones. This limited the opportunities available to the Islamic Republic to advance its soft power in the areas of geostrategic importance.

The ideological orientation of Iran could potentially lead on many occasions to rivalry and conflict in its areas of influence. This includes the case with the Najaf marjaya at the level of Iraq and the nature of the sect-level differences with the Shiites in Yemen and Syria. All these indicators make Iran's surrounding spheres uncondusive to the expansion of Tehran's soft power.⁽¹²⁾

The challenges facing Iran regarding the application of soft power in its areas of influence have become noticeable. They became apparent in 2019 when popular protests broke out in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as in other geopolitical areas of influence. This indicates that Iran's hard power was fragile as it was unable to survive the popular protests in Lebanon.

3. Deterrence and Undermining the Elements of Iranian Strength

One of the pillars of advancing the US pressure strategy towards Iran is to undermine the elements of Iranian strength at home and overseas. The United States stepped up its pressure to confront Iran's unceasing advancement of its influence. This escalation of pressure included the following:

A. Intensifying Pressure on the Neighbors of Iran

Iran's land and maritime borders are viewed as an opportunity to enable it to counter US pressure and curb the impact of sanctions. Although the United States allows Iraq to import gas and electricity from Iran, it is reviewing its policies on sanction waivers granted to Iraq to import gas and electricity. Washington attempts to secure alternative options to reduce Iranian influence and clout in Iraq. In addition, Washington exerts pressure on the Iraqi government to weaken the clout of militias and urges it to limit weapons to the state as well as to restore the prestige of sovereign state-apparatuses. Washington threatened to close its embassy in Baghdad to place further pressure on the Iraqi government to curb militias in the country.⁽¹³⁾

In Syria, the strategy of deploying US forces intended in the first place to deprive Iran of wresting control over the country's oil fields. The United States also recently promulgated the Caesar Act, which will negatively impact Hezbollah and Iran in Syria. In addition, the United States exerted pressure on Turkey and

the other neighboring countries to implement the sanctions imposed on Iran, especially in the oil and energy sectors. These countries observed the sanctions to a great extent as they were concerned about facing US sanctions.

B. Targeting the Chief of the Quds Force and Striking the Positions of Iranian Militias

The killing of the Commander of the IRGC Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, and the Deputy Commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces, (PMF) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on January 3, 2020, was the strongest US message to Iran. The message led to consequences for Iran overseas because Soleimani was a national figure who had a key role in implementing Iran's regional schemes and a major role in coordinating the movements of Iran-aligned militias in the region, serving Iran's interests and boosting its levers regionally.⁽¹⁴⁾

The US sending this important message was preceded by the United States and Israel coordinating on the targeting of Iranian militias in Syria and their headquarters — which reportedly included their arms depots and caches in 2019. This is in addition to the US targeting Hezbollah's headquarters in 2019 and early 2020 and the reconsideration of deploying US troops to Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf.⁽¹⁵⁾

C. Embracing New Security Initiatives to Counter the Iranian Danger

The United States has exerted various efforts on the regional and international levels; it organized an anti-Iran summit in Warsaw — which held its first meeting in January 2019. Although the theme of the 2019 Warsaw Conference was securing stability in the Middle East, it sought to rally the international community to counter the Iranian dangers.⁽¹⁶⁾

In addition, the US led efforts to establish the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), which aims to protect shipping in the Gulf. It was launched at the end of 2019 following continued Iranian attacks targeting commercial as well as oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.⁽¹⁷⁾ This is in addition to security arrangements with some countries of the region, foremost among them being the Gulf states, to create a new security architecture such as the Arab NATO to counter the Iranian dangers.

III. The Ramifications on Iran: The Limits of Its Strength and the Reassessment of the US Pressure Strategy

The diverse US options in relation to dealing with Iranian regional influence, which combined pressure, deterrence, and engaging in grey zones, led to several results, the most notable ones include the following:

1. The Failure of the Iranian Strategy to Secure Its Surrounding Sphere

During the terms of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, US pressure contributed to forcing Iran to focus on its influence in its surrounding environment in what is known as Iran's strategy of securing its surrounding sphere. It epitomizes the core ideas laid out by Ali Akbar Salehi. The strategy emphasized the need to

strengthen and deepen relations with two important regional actors: Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This was welcomed in late 2010 and early 2011. But the developments in Syria obstructed any movement on this front.⁽¹⁸⁾

In the context of this strategy, Iran's leadership attempted to lay out all the positions and initiatives needed to increase Iranian influence in the regional environment. Iran had attempted to implement this strategy — of securing its surrounding sphere — via adopting positions and carrying out certain initiatives even before launching the strategy — illustrated by the overture of Iran's Ministry of Defense in 2006 to conclude a pact on security and defense with the Gulf states.⁽¹⁹⁾

Despite Iran's great willingness to adopt positions and engage in initiatives to meet the goals of its strategy, it failed to build genuine and integrated strategic formulas due to the accelerating developments in Syria and the Turkish and Saudi positions on the Syrian crisis. The significance of Syria for Iran represents a cardinal part of the vital interests of Iran. In addition, the Turkish and Saudi rush to oust the Syrian regime forced the Iranian government to adopt a divergent position in this respect. Also, the security vision of the Gulf states did not seek rapprochement with Iran due to its expansionist policy but sought to besiege it in the security and economic aspects via a package of UN sanctions. The Gulf states seek to deprive Iran of its ability to carry out strategic maneuvers in the region through the continuation of sanctions, which will be much more instrumental when Iran is isolated in the region.⁽²⁰⁾

The seriousness of the sanctions imposed on Iran will gradually contribute to changing its regional behavior. It seems that the strategy to prevent Iran from securing its neighborhood is an attempt to change its behavior, and this forced Iran to shift from its hard power approach to address conflicting interests to an approach based on understanding and dialogue.

2. The Decline of the Reformist Influence and the Rise of the IRGC

The reformist policies adopted since President Hassan Rouhani came to power contributed significantly to reassessing the standing of the presidency versus the clout of the IRGC, particularly in relation to files linked to national security. The Iranian nuclear file and the advancement in negotiations until the signing of the nuclear deal was considered, according to Iran's second-generation leaders, a major victory for the presidency at the expense of the IRGC.⁽²¹⁾ This will enlighten researchers and specialists on issues regarding Iranian national security, particularly on the thinking of Iranian decision makers which is in line with the power calculations within the Iranian political framework.

The outcomes of the Iranian presidential dialogues have been instrumental in shaping the country's strategic perspectives and moves: adopting the soft power approach instead of the hard power approach. Though the soft power approach was used by the Iranian presidency in its policy with Washington, it did not extensively impact Iran's external behavior. Though the Iranian presidency

succeeded in the soft power approach with America, this did not prevent the sudden shifts benefiting the IRGC since Trump came to power. However, the continuous maneuverability in the grey zones weakened the role of the presidency and the Foreign Ministry in maintaining dialogue and resulted in the Ministry of Defense handling the confrontation against the US pressure strategy instead of the Foreign Ministry.

3. The Differences Over Foreign Policy Orientations Following the Killing of Soleimani

The killing of Qassem Soleimani was a significant turning point in revising Iranian foreign policies. The IRGC is divided into two teams: commanders who want to reconsider past IRGC policies in the regional sphere and others who believe that the time is not ripe yet for war with the United States.⁽²²⁾

The first team includes IRGC commanders from the 1979 revolutionary generation who believe that the best option to protect the borders of their country is via using hard power. Meanwhile, the second team represents the second generation of commanders who believe that all the options adopted in the past to manage the surrounding dangers and threats were counterproductive. Perhaps the most notable criteria for assessing the validity of the second generation's view is the situation in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Therefore, the second-generation inclines towards sponsoring Iran-affiliated factions but without provoking the United States — as was the case with the targeting of Soleimani.⁽²³⁾

The leaders in Iran have been preoccupied with reassessing their plans in Iran's spheres of influence or the grey zones, according to some American strategic analysts. The strategic situation after the killing of Soleimani will be of huge consequence in terms of Iranian influence in these areas.

Soleimani had exercised huge influence in planning and executing Iran's national security strategy. Thus, the absence of commanders who are capable of convincing the outside world and influencing the choices of Iran's allies will have huge repercussions in terms of implementing tactics in relation to Iranian national security.⁽²⁴⁾

In the same vein, the same problem could be found in Iran's areas of geopolitical significance. In Iraq, the killing of the deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Units, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, had an impact on maintaining the discipline of the movement's factions and volunteers inside and outside the Popular Mobilization Units. It is hard to find commanders who are as charismatic as Muhandis.

There is no doubt that the killing of Qassem Soleimani sparked major reviews in terms of assessing Iran's strategic actions in its regional sphere. The killing of Soleimani was the starting point on the path of changing the course of US pressure towards Iran. It contributed to triggering serious discussions about assessing Iran's behavior towards the regional sphere and how far its options are effective in terms

of making actual gains on the ground. In principle, the supreme leader's approach is based on continuing the use of military power to address Iran's challenges, and it is difficult to give up on the use of military force as it shall deprive Iran of the ability to address the dangers and threats surrounding it.

Meanwhile, the reformist approach believes that the supreme leader's approach needs to be reconsidered because they believe that the continued excessive use of hard power deprives Iran of its strategic depth in its spheres of influence. In Iraq, there is a decline in the percentage of those supporting Iran, particular in the central and southern provinces, following the October protests in 2019.

In addition, Iran's political weight in its relations towards its neighboring sphere began to decline due to the failure of multilateral political dialogue with actors which have governmental weight. In Iraq, the October protests reflected new characteristics of the Iraqi political position towards Iran; Iraq will not continue the same policy after the October 2019 protests. This is in addition to the deterioration of the economic and political situation in Lebanon where Iran cannot exercise its influence and support Beirut due to US sanctions.

One of the most important elements of power in revolutionary institutions is the charisma of its leaders — which has a far-reaching impact. Now, the Iranian military commanders like Brigadier General Ismail Qaani, and Brigadier General Mohammad Hossein-Zadeh Hejazi, lack Soleimani's charisma.⁽²⁵⁾ This will lead to Iran's strategy weakening in the grey zones.

4. Restricting the Iranian Ability to Support Armament Programs and Delivering Arms to Its Proxies

Iran's policies are based on responding to the political actions taken by influential global powers in the region. The Iranian republic works in response to the policies targeting it from the outside world. This was the hallmark of Iranian policies during the era of President Barack Obama when compared to its policies during the tenure of President Donald Trump. However, the nature of the West's flexibility displayed in general towards the Iranian republic and the economic bonanza which occurred following the lifting of sanctions contributed to enhancing ongoing Iranian efforts to acquire and develop conventional weapons such as ballistic missiles.

Although the nuclear deal continues the embargo imposed on the sale of major weapons systems to Iran, it is less clear about the issue of Iran selling major weapons systems. In both cases, Iran can buy or sell light and small weapons systems. The increase in Iranian financial sources will contribute to enhancing this aspect on a bigger scale.⁽²⁶⁾

On the contrary, the tough sanctions and targeting Iranian networks for circumventing sanctions will contribute to curbing Iran's ability to support its defense budget and develop ballistic missiles. It will also limit Iran's ability to offer material and military support to militias, and in the end, weaken its influence and clout in the region.

5. Relations With Militias and the Decline of Clout in the Areas of Influence

Changing the behavior of Iran-affiliated factions in the areas of geopolitical significance after the killing of Soleimani will have a major impact on Iranian strategic planning. Even though the shift of the approach from hard to soft power (inclination towards de-escalation), remains unclear, there are three important indicators in this respect. The first indicator is the change in Iraqi political positions towards Iran, which have become unambiguous after Kazimi took office as prime minister. Some political blocs expressed hesitation at Kazimi's candidacy. This was evident in the statements made by some resistance factions rejecting his appointment.

The second indicator is the presence of influential entities in Iraq and Lebanon which support the options of the Iranian government to negotiate with the United States or other countries deemed among Iran's important allies, which is considered a departure from its position of rejecting talks.

The third indicator is that a significant part of Iran's policy towards Iraq and Lebanon is losing a great deal of its effectiveness. This was accompanied by social movements expressing their rejection of the Iranian presence. These indicators and adopting new approaches in relation to strategic action have become one of the necessities of Iran's strategic policy, which it focuses on in the regional sphere.

However, the scope of soft power to realize Iranian objectives remains the subject of discussion among commanders within the IRGC, and the supreme leader's establishment in general. The scope of using soft power is also linked to the changes at the leadership level and the charismatic nature of IRGC leaders.

6. Restricting Iran's Financial and Commercial Movements

One of the hallmarks of the US pressure strategy is to restrict Iran's financial and commercial movements in the grey zones, especially in Iraq and Lebanon. Both countries suffer from economic crises and huge budget deficits, which will restrict the financial movement of Iran in these areas. Further, the targeting of non-Iranian parties and institutions by the United States indicates that it is difficult to pursue the same old approaches when dealing with Iran.

7. Further Complications Regarding Geopolitical Expansion

One of the most significant results of the US pressure strategy on Iran is the weakening of its influence in the areas of geopolitical depth. The latter began to see shifts in troop deployment on the one hand, and transformations across the centers of influence on the other. The political transformations in Iraq have caused a big shift in Iran's influence. When it comes to the Popular Mobilization Units, there is a fragile harmony among the formations making it up, especially when it comes to the shrine brigades, volunteers, and the resistance factions. Hence, the lack of harmony among these formations may lay the foundation for new transformations which could impact Iran. In addition, the popular uprising

which the areas of geopolitical depth are witnessing, whether in Lebanon and Yemen, will add more to the complexities of Iran continuing to impose influence in these areas.

Perhaps Iran's laying out of the Hormuz Peace Initiative came about because of the United States developing its strategy and the intensive pressure imposed by this strategy on Iran, especially intensifying the presence of international military forces in the Gulf. The latter, in turn, deprived Iran of the possibility of moving ahead with its threats and curbed its operations intended to impact navigation and trade movements and oil exports.⁽²⁷⁾

The Hormuz Peace Initiative mainly centers on arriving at a regional understanding to foster security in the region, while neutralizing the role of world powers. But given the lack of confidence in Iran's behavior, the regional powers dismissed Iran's offer and opted for a security formula of an international nature.

Conclusion

The US pressure strategy towards Iran shifted to adopting new options commensurate with the level of transformations in Iranian strength. The United States has attempted to work on weakening Iran in the areas of influence, and perhaps this issue is related in one way or another to what is known as "capricious assertiveness," which was introduced to President Donald Trump by the Chairman of the European Council Donald Tusk to address the questions regarding commercial issues and the effectiveness of US sanctions on several countries, with Iran being at the top of the list.⁽²⁸⁾ This is in addition to their effectiveness in impacting Iran's movements in the grey zones and the areas of geopolitical depth. Without reducing the influence of Iran in these areas, Iranian strength cannot be curbed.

These new policies have had a significant impact on Iran, especially considering the change in US pressure towards Iran's grey working zones and the requirements of Iranian national security. This is in addition to domestic criticism inside Iran on the use of military power in foreign policy. Hence, Iran will be facing complicated options which shall most probably dictate avoiding escalation and military confrontation with the United States, and instead resorting to engagement and understanding. This is added to changing its approach by adopting soft power as an alternative to maintain its regional influence and clout considering the challenges it faces in this regard. This comes as the United States and the regional powers specifically want nothing from Iran but to be a normal neighboring country which respects the principles of neighborliness, non-interference, and constructive cooperation.

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