

SMA Reach-back

Question: *What internal factors would influence Iran’s decision to interfere with the free flow of commerce in the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb?*

Contributors: *Anoush Ehteshami (Durham University); Yoel Guzansky (Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University); Belinda Bragg and Sabrina Pagano (NSI); Alex Vatanka (Middle East Institute; Jamestown Foundation)*

Editors: *Belinda Bragg and Sabrina Pagano (NSI)*

Executive Summary

Dr. Belinda Bragg and Dr. Sabrina Pagano, NSI

Iran’s Strategic Interests

All of the SMEs either directly or indirectly referenced Iran’s strategic interests, and how these are informed by its overarching goal of regional hegemony. Dr. Belinda Bragg and Dr. Sabrina Pagano from NSI characterize these interests into three categories; prestige, economic; and security, all of which are moderated by domestic political constraints and pressures. Iran’s prestige interests center around ensuring that it does not lose face in its interactions with the US, and can increase its regional influence. Its economic interests focus on increasing Iran’s economic influence and security. Iran’s security interests include reducing threats from the US, Israel, and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, reducing the threat from ISIL, and broadcasting strength and challenging US influence and position in the region. Its domestic constraints and pressures include resisting cultural infiltration from the west, delivering economic improvement, and broadcasting strength. Together, these interests, and Iran’s overarching regional hegemony goal (Guzansky; Bragg & Pagano), ultimately shape the strategies that Iran pursues, including its decisions regarding the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb.

Iranian naval capabilities and desire for regional hegemony

Dr. Yoel Guzansky, of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University, discusses how Iranian strategic thinking on the sea is no longer limited to the Persian Gulf, but instead extends to intended naval bases in Syria and Yemen, as well as influence in the Red Sea or even the Atlantic—ultimately “making every effort to demonstrate that its naval power is not limited to the Gulf alone.” Guzansky further indicates that these are more than just aspirational statements; the Iranian Navy has already extended its reach to the Red Sea and Bab el Mandeb, as well as Pakistan, China, and South Africa. These developments are consistent with Bragg and Pagano’s assessment that developing and demonstrating military capability is a key security strategy for Iran, as well as being seen, by hardliners and conservatives in particular, as an integral part of their regional hegemony goal. Guzansky draws a similar conclusion, adding that greater naval power will also increase Iran’s ability to help its regional allies. However, he also notes that “[t]o do so, Iran will need vast resources it doesn’t yet have.”

Guzansky indicates that, historically, Iran has prioritized the development of asymmetric capabilities (including anti-ship missiles, mines, and small vessel swarms), to enable it to better

confront the U.S. Navy in the Gulf. Iran can leverage these same capabilities, and others, to interfere with the flow of commerce in the Strait of Hormuz, and to a lesser extent, the Bab el Mandeb.

Internal factors influencing Iranian interference in the Strait or Bab el Mandeb

The contributors identified the following internal factors as potentially influencing Iranian actions in the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el Mandeb:

Iran's revolutionary doctrine:

- Frames Iran as involved in an existential fight against US imperialism
- Makes it critical for Iran's leaders, particularly conservatives and hardliners, to demonstrate to the Iranian people that they will not be bullied by the US
- Supports and informs Iran's goal of regional hegemony

Domestic political competition

- The role of factions—conservative / hardliner; moderate/pragmatist—in the prioritization of Iranian interests and the preferred strategies for achieving these interests
- With an election coming up in May, conservatives have incentive to switch the domestic political focus from cooperation with the US toward confrontation, to both appease their base and put greater pressure on Rouhani

Economic conditions

- Slow pace of improvement following JCPOA leaves moderates such as Rouhani politically vulnerable, and creates the belief that their promised benefits of greater openness and cooperation were unrealistic
- As the salience of economic concerns wanes relative to prestige and security concerns for the Iranian public, there is a greater likelihood that leaders (both conservative and moderate) will employ more bellicose rhetoric with regard to the Strait of Hormuz
- Closing the Straits will have significant short-term negative economic consequences for Iran, and depending on international and US response, may have longer-term consequences for Iran such as the re-imposition of sanctions and loss of trade and foreign investment
- Given Iran's current economic situation and growing dependence on oil exports, it is unlikely to take action to close the Strait or Bab el Mandeb, as doing so would harm their economic interest further and thus be self-defeating

Popular perception that the US is not living up to terms of JCPOA

- Plays into hardline and conservative narratives emphasizing Western (especially US) hostility and untrustworthiness, giving credence to their own economic strategy, which seeks to limit openness to the West
- Increases the likelihood that the balance between the economic costs of interfering with commerce in either the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb, and the perceived benefit of demonstrating Iranian power and status, may swing in favor of the latter

External factors influencing Iranian interference in the Strait or Bab el Mandeb

The contributors argue that external factors also play a role in Iran's decision-making with respect to its activities at sea.

Competition with Saudi Arabia

- Saudi Arabia's opening of naval bases in Djibouti and Eritrea affords it an advantage in the Red Sea area
- Iran may wish to do "more to limit the Saudis by pushing harder on the question of access/use of both straits" (Vatanka)
- Retaliation for Saudi's restricting Iranian access to the SUMED pipeline and selectively blocking Iranian ships in the Bab el Mandeb, which has stifled Iran's establishment of trade with Europe
- Iran has potential to weaken Saudi government domestically by disrupting oil revenues and thus creating the conditions for greater internal unrest and instability
- Iran's support of the Houthis, including provision of supplies to which the Houthis already have access, may actually serve to signal to and threaten Saudi Arabia and demonstrate Iran's reach

Use of proxies

- The "effective blockade on Yemen," which Iran's current naval capabilities cannot challenge, creates a barrier to Iran helping the Houthis
- The Houthis may not be particularly dependent on Iran, given that they already have many of the supplies it provides, and Iran is unlikely to provide additional forms of support
- Ultimately, "I don't think the Houthis want their tail in the trap of the Iran-Saudi conflict anyways" (Ehteshami)
- Yemen imports 90% of its food, much of this using foreign shipping. Further reduction in security in the Bab el Mandeb would threaten this supply, and therefore is not in the interests of the Houthis.

US actions and rhetoric

- Reinforce the perception that the US acted dishonestly with regard to JCPOA, seeking to thwart Iran's efforts to increase trade and foreign investment
- Given the current domestic political climate, both conservatives and hardliners, as well as moderates, have greater incentive to frame any US action relative to Iran as threatening and conflictual, rather than cooperative

Iran's strategic calculus with respect to interference in the Strait of Hormuz

Alex Vatanka, an Iran scholar from the Middle East Institute, and Bragg and Pagano of NSI indicate that closing the Strait may in fact work against Iran's own interests, since it is as dependent on oil moving through the Strait as are its rivals. In this way, Iran may gain more value from threatening to close the Strait, which may increase oil prices, than from actually closing the Strait, which is sure to result in retributive actions, most likely from the US. As Vatanka indicates, a continued US presence in the Strait all but guarantees that Iran will use this strategic lever sparingly, if at all. Both Guzansky and Pagano and Bragg suggest that factors enhancing Iran's likelihood of plausible deniability (use of asymmetric methods or proxies), by reducing the expected costs of such action, may, if other interests are met, instead increase the likelihood that Iran will choose to interfere.

Iran's strategic calculus with respect to interference in the Bab el Mandeb

The strategic calculus for Bab el Mandeb may be different, as Bragg and Pagano note. There are two issues to consider with respect to potential Iranian interference in the Bab el Mandeb. These relate to both its capability to interfere and its motivation to do so. At present, Iran's degree of control over the Houthis is unclear, and thus its ability to exact precise control over their activities may be limited. However, if Iran's continued support of the Houthis gains them

greater influence, then we can expect that the present Houthi control over Yemen's ports might translate into greater Iranian interference in the Bab el Mandeb, assuming appropriate motivation.

This is where the Iranian calculus for the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el Mandeb may come to differ. If Iran continues to pivot its trade toward greater interaction with China, India, and Southeast Asia, it will become less dependent on commerce in the Bab el Mandeb. Ehteshami also indirectly provides some support for this conclusion, indicating that the Bab el Mandeb represents more of a security rather than economic interest to Iran. As Bragg and Pagano indicate, this trade pivot means that the Bab el Mandeb becomes less strategically important to Iran as a source of economic power, but more strategically useful to Iran as a source of economic and other manipulation of its perceived rivals, such as Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this is accomplished while making Iran less vulnerable to economic and other manipulation from its rivals through selective blocking of its own ships' passage. Iran does not have the same alternatives in the Strait of Hormuz, and cannot decrease its dependence on an open Strait for sea transportation, critical to its economic well-being. In these ways, the strategic calculus in favor of Iranian interference in the Bab el Mandeb, but not the Strait of Hormuz, may come to evolve over time in favor of increasing interference or escalation. For the time being, however, as Guzansky notes, this may be a more distant reality, given some of the present limits of Iran's naval force, including the effective blockade on Yemen that prevents Iran from accessing Yemen's shores.

Despite these challenges, Iran's focus on achieving and maintaining regional hegemony, and its naval and other actions toward this goal, should not be ignored. Iran is increasingly likely to pursue strategies such as new trade partnerships that minimize the harm that its rivals can inflict, as well as those that enable it to increasingly project power, whether through the use of proxies or otherwise. As Guzansky notes, "unless improved Iranian naval capabilities receive a proper response, Iran in the future will be able to threaten crucial shipping lanes, impose naval blockades, and land special forces on distant shores should it deem it necessary."

SME Input

Excerpts of NSI Team Telephone Conversation with Dr. Anoush Ehteshami, 12/12/2016

Allison Astorino-Courtois: We have another question which deals with internal Iranian politics, and it's this: what internal factors would influence Iran's decision to interfere with the free flow of commerce in the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb?

Anoush Ehteshami: Yeah, I found that question really interesting, Allison, because to be honest with you, I don't myself see it in the immediate term, let's say, the prospect of Iran interfering with both of those choke points actually. I don't see that serving their national interests.

Allison Astorino-Courtois: Both or either?

Anoush Ehteshami: Either of them, yeah. I don't see them doing it for Hormuz or for Bab el Mandeb. I don't think it's in their national interest at all, and I think for the establishment in

Tehran, at least that kind of thing is self-defeating. They might poke a missile, in the worst-case scenario, across the Persian Gulf and target shipping probably, and without doubt, focus on the American naval presence and western Coalition there, but interfering with the whole Strait of Hormuz, even though RGC keeps bragging about this, I simply do not see it happening. Even the RGC, it's clear that they don't have the capacity to block it, and it's interesting that the question doesn't pose blocking the Strait of Hormuz but it talks about interfering. That interference is what happened in the 1980s, poking at maritime trade, poking at the US Navy and what have you. You know, given their economy and their, again, growing dependence on all exports, I simply don't see that happening. That is, at one level, suicidal.

Allison Astorino-Courtois: So, even the Islamic or, I'm sorry, even the Revolutionary Guard, if they feel that they're losing political influence relative to the [central] government or, for some reason, their fortunes are heading downward, would they act on their own to harass shipping? I mean, is there a domestic political impetus for this kind of action?

Anoush Ehteshami: Again, I don't see it. So long as the RGC takes orders from their Leader, and you know, I mean, that's an if that we can talk about, and analysts have a different view of this now about how much influence the leader actually has over the RGC, but if we assume that they still report to him and that the establishment as a whole sees the RGC accountable to their Leader and therefore the National Security Council, if that assumption is correct, I don't myself see a scenario in which they would make a policy decision to disrupt shipping in these strong points. Bab el Mandeb, I would put it actually in the last analysis in different categories. I think the Strait of Hormuz is a national interest issue. Bab el Mandeb is a bit more open, given that not so much of Iran's trade is to the east and given that it is trying to open up its land routes to get over into Europe. Bab el Mandeb has more of a security rather than economic importance to Iran, and therefore, it's something that they might be prepared to play with, but I don't see them having the resources, Allison, to be honest.

Allison Astorino-Courtois: Well, they could certainly harass from the shoreline by, I don't know, giving Houthis some kind of weapons to shoot at passing ships. Is that a possibility? Then they'd have plausible reliability if it's coming from Yemen.

Anoush Ehteshami: Possibly, possibly. But you know they've got SSMs anyways, so it wouldn't be difficult to do that, but I'm not so sure that the Houthis are that dependent on Iran either to be honest. That's a whole different can of worms, but the Houthis are much more of an indigenous force to Yemen than we give them credit for, and in a different configuration, the Houthi-Saudi thing can be managed in a much smaller theater arrangement than what we have now. So, you know, how much say Iran will have in persuading the Houthis to use their weapons in Iran's interest is questionable in terms of what can Iran really do for the Houthis that's more than what they've done so far. You know, there isn't much else that Iran can provide for the Houthis right now, and that stalemate is unlikely to change unless Iran moves the RGC directly into Yemen, but in that scenario, we're actually talking about an open war fare between Iran in Saudi Arabia, really. I don't think we're there yet. I don't think we're anywhere near that to be honest, and I don't think the Houthis want their tail in the trap of the Iran-Saudi conflict anyways.

Allison Astorino-Courtois: So, they have a limit and no real incentive to expand their mission to helping Iran in...

Anoush Ehteshami: Right now, I don't see it.

Response to Round 2, Question 9

Dr. Yoel Guzansky

Hoover Institution, Stanford University and Institute for National Security Studies,
Tel Aviv University

External factors, more than internal ones, influence Iran decision making at sea. However, Iran Strategic thinking on the sea is no¹t limited anymore only to the Persian Gulf arena. A few days ago, in a highly unusual statement, Iranian Chief of Staff, Major General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri remarked that, in the future, Iran may need naval bases in Syria and Yemen. Tasnim, Iran's semi-official news agency, quoted the general as stressing the deterrent potential of such bases or, alternately, floating platforms and Islands bases, "which could be ten times more efficient than nuclear power". Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has striven to establish itself as a leading regional power, and the naval branch is a key component of this scheme. But this is the first time that a senior Iranian official has publicly referred to the possibility that Iran might build naval bases beyond its own borders.

In the past, Iran has used its fleet to communicate strategic messages and indicate political preferences, and in recent years the Iranian navy has trained itself for action outside the Persian Gulf. In November 2015, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei spoke of the naval arena as the optimal sphere "for powerful confronting enemies" and "effective cooperating with friends," adding that Iran should consider the advantages inherent in the naval arena for defending the country. Indeed, Iran is making every effort to demonstrate that its naval power is not limited to the Gulf alone. A day after the Iranian chief of staff's extraordinary remark, the Iranian naval commander announced – not for the first time – Iran's ambitious intention to have a presence in the Atlantic and, to achieve this, to send warships that would for the first time circumnavigate the African continent.

The statements issued by these senior Iranian officials are reflective of more than simply empty threats. The Iranian Navy is indeed sailing farther afield: Iranian Navy ships have "visited" Pakistan, China, and recently South Africa. Since 2009, Iran's naval presence has increased in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandeb strategic straits. In 2009, Iran has begun to conduct independent operations in the region (claiming to be fighting naval piracy) and, in 2011, even sent—in a first show of strength of its type since the Islamic Revolution—two ships through the Suez Canal en route to Syria.

Since 1979, Iran established its naval doctrine of guerrilla and attrition, with emphasis placed on the ability to disrupt freedom of shipping through the Straits of Hormuz. Accordingly, because of the embargo that was imposed on it, Iran's naval force construction prioritized asymmetrical capabilities meant to confront the technological advantages of the U.S. Navy in the Gulf: land base anti-ship missiles, underwater mines, and the small vessel swarms. Preference was given to strengthening the naval branch of the Revolutionary Guards over building the regular navy, which remains small and outdated. In 2007, the realms of responsibility of the two navies were split: while the Revolutionary Guards' navy received overall responsibility for the Gulf arena, the function of the regular navy was reduced to activity beyond Gulf waters.

Because of the weakness of the regular Iranian Navy, most of whose vessels date to the era of the Shah, and the United States' naval supremacy in the Gulf, Iran preferred to purchase and construct a large number of small, fast vessels (some of which are unmanned) and miniature

submarines, and to repurpose civilian ships to military missions. Some of the vessels of the naval branch of the Revolutionary Guards are armed with anti-ship missiles; some have been adapted to lay underwater mines and some are laden with explosives. One of the motivating factors in adopting these methods lies in their plausible deniability and the reasoning that a response to damage using these means will be less painful than it otherwise might be if it is difficult to pin the blame on Iran. Iran's naval presence in the Gulf has therefore adopted the features of a guerrilla force in every way that matters. The so-called primitive nature of the Iranian tactic – where quantity outweighs quality – will continue to pose a challenge to the Fifth Fleet of the U.S. Navy.

When it comes to Iranian activity on the high seas, the purpose of the long Iranian Navy voyages is mainly political, aka gunboat diplomacy, with no evidence yet to indicate full operational capabilities. Yemen is an example of the limits of Iran's naval force, given the latter's difficulties in helping the Houthi Shiites that Iran supports. The effective blockade on Yemen doesn't allow Iran access to Yemen's shores, as evidenced by the fact that Iranian shipping carrying supplies for the Houthis were forced to turn back after the United States threatened to intercept them, forcing Iran to reroute its smuggling operation through Oman.

Sudan is another example of Iran's difficulties in establishing a grasp on the naval sphere. Khartoum extended aid to Iran, serving as a port of entry for Iranian weapons to the Mediterranean and Africa. In the last two years, Sudan has changed its policy, moved closer to Saudi Arabia, and closed its ports to the Iranian Navy, making it difficult for Iran to smuggle arms to Hamas and to Hezbollah. Furthermore, in the regional battle under way between Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other, the latter have gained an advantage and seized hold of the Red Sea arena with the opening of their naval bases in Djibouti and Eritrea.

Despite these difficulties, the development of Iran's conception of the sea as a critical arena of action for Iran's national security is particularly worthy of attention. Iran's plans, should they come to fruition, will give Iran – in addition to the ability to project military might far from its shores – the ability to help its regional allies more than it's been able to do in the past. Unless improved Iranian naval capabilities receive a proper response, Iran in the future will be able to threaten crucial shipping lanes, impose naval blockades, and land special forces on distant shores should it deem it necessary.

Iran sees itself as the regional hegemon, and its two naval branches are meant to support this impression as it continues to develop and improve its available methods and means of warfare. To do so, Iran will need vast resources it doesn't yet have. Until it does, Iran is using other means against its enemies. For example, it provides its proxies in the region with land base anti-missiles and other arms to impede their activity at sea. Only recently the Houthis fired several shore-to-sea missiles at U.S. and Emirati warships imposing the naval blockade on Yemen.

Iran's naval challenge will require Israelis and Arabs alike to develop better infrastructures to facilitate naval activity in the Red Sea (for Israel, rapid transport of naval platforms from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea). Alongside the potential threat of greater Iranian naval activity in the Middle East (it should be mentioned that Iran depends on Egypt's goodwill in providing passage through the Suez Canal), it could also present considerable intelligence and operational opportunities.

Israel is particularly interested in Red Sea activity, both to deter Iranian activity in that arena and to serve, when necessary, as a shipping route to and from Iran. In recent years, Israel has given prominence to the passage of its missile ships through the Suez Canal heading south to the Red

Sea, to signal to Iran that Israel views the Red Sea as its own backyard. Increased Iranian naval activity in the Red Sea resulted in 2009 in several Arab nations announcing the establishment of “an Arab naval task force in the Red Sea.” While this initiative was never realized, the exposure of Iran’s intentions now can lead to increased cooperation between Israel and many in the Arab world also seeking to curb Iran’s negative influence, this time at sea.

Response to Round 2, Question 9

Alex Vatanka
Middle East Institute

Iran is as dependent on Hormuz as anyone else. To close it becomes only a viable option for them if they are the only state deprived of using it. It is not on the cards at the moment so not really debated as such in Tehran. If the hardliners in Tehran gain more momentum and can push some of their pet projects then one can see a scenario of Iran doing more to limit the Saudis by pushing harder on the question of access/use of both straits but I suspect this can only happen when the US/West leaves the region to its own devices, which is again not on the cards. With Iran, its always about calculated risk-taking even by the hardliners. No one in Tehran is suicidal.

Response to Round 2, Question 9

Dr. Belinda Bragg and Dr. Sabrina Pagano
NSI, Inc.

Our analysis² of Iran’s potential actions in the Strait of Hormuz starts from the assumption that actors in the international environment act to protect and forward their interests. Most broadly, we categorize actor interests as either security (preservation of the state and military security), economic (economic prosperity and development), or prestige (international influence and standing) interests. These interests generate economic, social, and international prestige objectives for actors, which inform their foreign policy and responses to specific issues that arise in regional relations.

For state actors, domestic constraints and pressures can intervene between interests and foreign policy objectives, potentially changing the nature of that objective, its relative salience, or both. In the case of Iran, there is significant variation in how political factions respond to these domestic factors as a function of their base of popular support and policy positions. Conservatives, such as Khamenei, draw legitimacy and political support from their religious authority, and from their role as protectors of the principles of the Iranian Revolution. Moderates, such as Rouhani, draw support and legitimacy primarily from their ability to improve domestic economic conditions and relations with the West.

This interest-based approach contends that the potential of an issue to create conflict or cooperation is a function of how the interests of actors align. In this context, it follows that Iran is likely to step up the aggressiveness of its activity in the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el Mandeb as a direct function of its interests being violated, or being perceived as violated. Determining how Iran defines its interests, and threats to those interests, therefore provides us with the context

² Please note: we have provided in-text citations only where our work directly references the opinions of specific experts or specific data and statistics. Our full reference list, organized by interest topics, is provided at the end of this report.

that can help identify the activities and conditions—both domestic and international—that may trigger such as response. The salience and valence of interests at stake in an issue, and the associated domestic political implications, help to illuminate how Iran may respond to a fluid regional situation. A profile of Iran’s key interests and variations in approach to these between moderates and conservatives and hardliners is provided in Appendix A.

The Strait of Hormuz and Bab el Mandeb as potential levers for Iran’s interests

In the sustained pursuit of its regional hegemony goal, Iran has a key strategic lever in the Strait of Hormuz, which controls access to one fifth of the world’s oil supply (Energy Information Administration, 2015), and one third of oil traded by sea (Robbins, 2016). While only one quarter the volume of oil passes through the Bab el Mandeb, it comprises part of the shortest trade routes between Europe, North Africa, India, and East Asia. Closure of the Bab el Mandeb would interfere with tankers from the Persian Gulf reaching the Suez Canal or SUMED Pipeline, instead forcing them to reroute around the southern tip of Africa. The Bab el Mandeb thus is also critical for international trade.³ The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) indicates that the impact of the Bab el Mandeb chokepoint goes beyond energy, to include not only the cost and security issues noted above for every cargo ship passing through the Suez Canal, but also the security of U.S. and other combat ships.

Range of actions available to Iran

Iran has several possible options it can consider with respect to the Strait of Hormuz. These include outright closure, damage to infrastructure or commercial shipping, harassment or diversion of commercial shipping, continued provocation and harassment of US naval vessels, continued threats of closure, or backing down/ceasing threats.

Unlike the Strait of Hormuz, Iran does not have direct control over the Bab el Mandeb. However, it potentially can exert influence through its ties to and support of the Houthi rebels operating in Yemen, who control a majority of ports along Yemen’s Red Sea coast, thereby yielding access and control over the Bab el Mandeb. Despite this support, however, the Iranians may not have tight control over Houthi actions. As Zimmerman (2016) indicates: While the Iranians characterize the Houthis as part of their “Axis of Resistance,” the Houthis remain somewhat ambivalent, despite their acceptance of support from Iran—likely to avoid prolonging existing conflict with Saudi Arabia and partners. As such, unlike other proxies such as Hezbollah, some authors argue that Yemen is not truly an Iranian proxy. The evolution of the situation in Yemen and between Iran and the Houthis will determine whether Iran can exploit Houthi control of the ports to effectively shut down the Bab el Mandeb to oil and other traffic.

If Iran were successful in gaining Houthis’ cooperation for disrupting shipping in the Bab el Mandeb, they would have several options, similar to those in the Strait of Hormuz, including harassment or diversion of commercial shipping and damage to infrastructure or commercial shipping, as well as provocation and harassment of US naval vessels. Such actions have occurred in the Bab el Mandeb in recent months,⁴ although the Houthis have not claimed responsibility

3. Closure or other interference with the flow of commerce and other traffic through the Bab el Mandeb would be detrimental across multiple dimensions for other regional and international actors. First, doing so would increase both time and cost for shipping. Moreover, the threat of closure would increase perceived risk in the area, thereby increasing the price of insurance for ships choosing to continue regional operation (Potheary, 2016). *Additional potential costs include those related to close-protection deployments on-board, and compensating employees for working under conditions of heightened risk, which may in turn open up maritime logistics operators to legal consequences in the case of substantial damage or loss of life on a civilian vessel* (Potheary, 2016).

⁴ Most recently, the Houthis launched cruise missiles at the *USS Mason* in multiple confirmed attacks that ostensibly were in retaliation for U.S. actions, including support of the Saudi-led coalition whose goal it was to expel the Houthis from the capital.

for all instances. One point to consider regarding the likelihood of Houthi support is Yemen's dependence on shipping. Yemen imports 90% of its food, much of this using foreign shipping. Further reduction in security in the Bab el Mandeb would threaten this supply, and aid agencies have warned that Aden faces a potential humanitarian crisis. This suggests that cooperating with the Iranians to interfere with the free flow of commerce in the Bab el Mandeb may run counter to the Houthis' interests by undermining their support among the Yemeni population.

Though Iran's current degree of power with respect to the Bab el Mandeb is less than that for the Strait of Hormuz given its direct control of the latter, there may be some strategic benefits to Iran interfering in the Bab el Mandeb versus the Strait of Hormuz, were Iran to gain tighter control through their Houthi counterparts. These include a lower likelihood of direct and aggressive retribution (e.g., against the Iranian military) from the U.S., which would have a harder time justifying such action given Iran's plausible deniability. As such, the perceived cost of such interference would be lower.

Implications for Iranian interests

Prestige and security interests

Iran frames security of the Persian Gulf and the Strait as a priority, connecting it to their focus on **countering external threats to security and sovereignty**. Both historically and in recent months, however, Iran has threatened to close the Strait in the face of a perceived increase in threat from the US and its allies, which also aligns with their prestige interest in **broadcasting strength and challenging the US regional position**. Many of the statements regarding closing the Strait from IRGC commanders reference Iran's military capabilities in the Gulf and its ability and willingness to confront US naval presence. Khamenei and, more recently Rouhani, also reflect this view in their comments regarding US presence in the Gulf.

The Persian Gulf coast and much of the coasts of the Sea of Oman belong to this powerful Iranian nation, therefore we have to be present in this region, [stage] maneuvers and show off our power...when we hesitate and refrain from showing off the principles and elements of our power to the enemy or if we are scared, the enemy will grow brazen.

— Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khamenei, May 1, 2016

Demonstrating military capability and **broadcasting strength** are strategies that, for conservatives and hardliners in particular, are also integrally linked to Iran's perception of how it will reach its goal of regional hegemony. These strategies help strengthen Iran's positioning as

The security of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is among the main priorities of the Republic of Iran and this security should be durable so that all countries of the region can protect and defend their interests and those of the region. Any further impairing of this security will threaten the national interests of the regional states.

— Ramin Mehman-Parast, Foreign Ministry Spokesman, July 19, 2012

the logical alternative source of power and support for Arab groups and states that distrust the US and Gulf States. Threatening closure of the Strait is therefore a means of both signaling displeasure at the actions of the US, and emphasizing Iran's potential as a regional power. It is less clear, however, that escalation would strengthen this signal. In fact, depending on the scope and nature of the US and international response, such an escalation could undermine Iran's security and prestige interests, as such actions will likely result in significant damage to Iran's military capabilities and infrastructure. As such, escalation is unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term, thus creating the

inevitability of defeat and subsequent loss of face.

While the extent of Iran's role is still being determined, Iran's ongoing rivalry both with the U.S. and with Saudi Arabia would provide a clear motive for supporting these attacks (Toumaj, 2016).

Similar to its interference in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran's potential control over and restriction of traffic (or as indicated, the threats of such) in the Bab el Mandeb serves its overarching goal of achieving regional hegemony. The strategic elements working to enable the regional hegemony goal and its associated prestige interest include **broadcasting strength**, both to the U.S. and to Saudi Arabia. Iran may similarly be motivated to **broadcast strength** through interference in the Bab el Mandeb, as a form of retaliatory action against Saudi Arabia for interfering with its economic outcomes by restricting access to the SUMED pipeline and selectively blocking Iranian ships, thereby stifling Iran's establishment of trade with Europe. The difference for Iran's security and prestige interests in acting in the Strait of Hormuz versus the Bab el Mandeb may in some ways be a function of the target of the message it seeks to send, both domestically and internationally. Actions in the Strait of Hormuz would appear more consistent with a focus on **pushing back against US/Western pressure**, whereas acting in the Bab el Mandeb could signal an emphasis on **reducing the external threat from Saudi Arabia**.

Though Iran's interest in the Bab el Mandeb is likely to be characterized as an expression of regional power politics, its stand against Sunni Saudi Arabia through its support for the Shia Houthis also furthers its strategy of **supporting and protecting Shia populations and culture** in the region. Further, the tighter Iran's grasp over the Bab el Mandeb, the more that it can increase its **regional political influence**, through threats or actions intended to manipulate oil tanker and other traffic in the area. Achieving control over the Bab el Mandeb would represent a significant gain in Iran's footprint in the region, as well as a major loss for Saudi Arabia, thus aiding Iran's goal of regional hegemony.

Economic interests

Another means by which Iranian leaders, in particular reformists and moderates, seek to increase Iran's regional influence is by **delivering economic improvement** and opening Iran to increased trade and investment. Any action that threatens commerce in the Strait of Hormuz is likely to trigger a re-imposition of sanctions by the US and possibly other states, jeopardizing the gains Iran is just beginning to see from the implementation of JCPOA. Previously, when Iran threatened to close the Straits, it faced significantly different consequences to its economic interests, as it was already under sanctions and real or perceived threats to the global oil supply generally increase prices. However, the oil market is currently much tighter, and has already recently weathered significant risks such as ISIL's control in Iraq, the war in Yemen, and upheaval in Venezuela and Libya without showing much effect.

Balancing this, however, would be Iran's security interest in reducing the threat from Saudi Arabia. After years of low oil prices, Saudi Arabia's economy is less able to absorb temporary decreases in revenue from oil exports. The Saudi government's ability to mitigate popular pressure for political reform through economic spending is therefore also constrained. By disrupting Saudi oil exports, even temporarily, through interference in either the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb, Iran may see the potential to **reduce the external threat** it perceives from Saudi Arabia, and thereby weaken a key rival to its regional hegemony goal, by creating the conditions for greater internal unrest and instability there.

Additionally, as Iran continues to pivot toward a trade strategy increasingly focused on trade with China and India, thereby bypassing use of the Bab el Mandeb, its ability to interfere there while minimizing impact to its own economy and remaining resilient also increases. This trade pivot also minimizes the potential harm that Saudi Arabia can exert upon Iran through its selective blocking of Iranian ships. In this way, the Bab el Mandeb becomes less strategically important to Iran as a source of economic power but more strategically useful to Iran as a

source of economic and other manipulation of its perceived rivals. Once again, the perceived cost of interference in the Bab el Mandeb would be reduced, yielding a more favorable cost-benefit ratio that focuses on harming its regional competitor, Saudi Arabia.

Overall our interests-based assessment suggests that, at this point in time, the potential economic cost of any action to disrupt commerce in the Strait of Hormuz is much higher for Iran than it has been in the past, and it is unclear how significant the benefit (through a potential increase in the global price of oil) would be. Iran's pivot toward increasing trade with China and India, however, may lead them to view acting, via proxy, in the Bab el Mandeb as less detrimental to their ability to deliver economic improvement than acting in the Strait, therefore making it a preferred option. Nonetheless, though the motivation might be there, the capability to interfere in the Bab el Mandeb may not—while the converse holds true for the Strait of Hormuz.

*Interfering with commerce in the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el Mandeb:
Implications for Iran's interests*

- *As a demonstration of Iran's willingness and ability to confront US power, actions to close either the Strait or the Bab el Mandeb could be seen as a means of enhancing Iran's prestige among regional actors, embodying their aspirations for regional influence. However, in the case of the Strait, much of this can be achieved, with significantly less risk, through continuing to simply threaten rather than act to disrupt free flow of commerce.*
- *Any interference of commerce in the Strait risks Iran losing much, if not all, of the economic gains and opportunities it has made with the implementation of JCPOA. This loss in turn would have negative consequences for both its prestige and economic interests.*
- *If Iran is successful in pivoting its trade away from Europe and toward India and China, the economic cost it would incur from disruption to shipping in the Bab el Mandeb would decrease both absolutely and relative to its rival Saudi Arabia. However, Iran's capability here is contingent on the continued, and even heightened, influence on and cooperation of the Houthis.*
- *Actions in the Strait of Hormuz would appear more consistent with a focus on pushing back against US/Western pressure, whereas acting in the Bab el Mandeb could signal an emphasis on reducing the external threat from Saudi Arabia.*

Domestic political constraints and motivations

Our interests-based assessment identified three key strategies that Iran's leaders use to maintain domestic political support and control: broadcasting strength and challenging the US position in the region; delivering economic improvement; and resisting cultural infiltration by the West. While these strategies are common among all political factions, conservatives and moderates define and prioritize these strategies differently. Consequently, there is a significant interplay in the balance of political power between conservatives and moderates, and the approach Iran takes to its foreign policy.

Broadcasting strength and challenging the US position in the region

As discussed above, broadcasting strength is a strategy that serves Iran's security and prestige interests, particularly for conservatives and hardliners. However, it is also influential domestically. "[R]ejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it," and achieving regional hegemony are enshrined in Iran's constitution (Article 152). Any popular perception that Iran's leadership, in particular the Ayatollah or his clerics, is failing in this respect can severely undermine their domestic legitimacy and support. Conversely, for conservatives and hardliners, appealing to well-established narratives demonizing the US, and

emphasizing Iran's willingness and strength to confront US regional influence, is a powerful tool for rallying support among conservative and also rural Iranians who hold consistent views.

As the international landscape continues to change and actors such as Donald Trump, supporting a more aggressive posture with respect to Iran, come into power in the United States, the gap between these two factions is likely to narrow. Both conservatives and moderates will have incentive to move toward more adversarial rhetoric and actions in an attempt to retain domestic political support in response to an increase in perceived external threat from the US.

Iran's upcoming election further increases both factions' sensitivity to short-term popular opinion. Recent opinion polls conducted in Iran by the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland found that more than 70% of Iranians polled are not confident that the US will live up to its obligations under JCPOA, and a similar percentage view the US government negatively. This suggests that, particularly in an election year, there is political motivation for moderates such as Rouhani to employ the strategy of broadcasting strength and challenging the US more than they have in the past. The Persian Gulf has often served as a venue for Iran's leaders and the IRGC to demonstrate their commitment to broadcasting strength and challenging the US. It has a symbolic and aspirational dimension for the Iranian population that the Bab el Mandeb lacks. This increases the salience of the Strait both as a strategic bargaining tool and a means to create a rally effect domestically.

Delivering economic improvement

Popular disillusionment, occasioned by the failure of JCPOA to deliver the economic benefits many believed were promised, places moderates such as Rouhani in a much more politically vulnerable position than they were after the 2016 elections. A perceived or actual failure of the nuclear deal will have dire consequences for re-election for Rouhani given that he staked his political capital on its achievement and its projected economic benefits for Iran. This issue has become more critical for Rouhani following a recent congressional vote to extend unilateral sanctions against Iran, which has been interpreted by many Iranians as a signal that the nuclear deal has failed. This development adds greater salience and credibility to the long-standing conservative and hardliner position that the US cannot be trusted and seeks only to destroy Iran.

The domestic economic situation, in combination with the current political climate, both domestically and internationally, will exert pressure on the moderates to become more aggressive in their approach, to appease both the public and the conservatives. This likely movement by the moderates away from openness and cooperation, portended to result in significant economic gains, does have the perceived benefit domestically of garnering public and conservative support based in decreasing the risk to western cultural infiltration. For example, there has in recent months been a shift in Rouhani's rhetoric, changing from emphasizing cooperation and win-win solutions (Rouhani, 2013) to emphasizing that Iran will not allow an abrogation of the nuclear deal, and that doing so would result in consequences (Erdbrink, 2016). Recent opinion polls conducted in Iran by the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland support the assessment that economic factors and the fate of JCPOA are likely to affect Rouhani's political support more than that of his rivals. A June 2015 poll found that, if expectations of economic improvement following the nuclear deal were not fulfilled, disappointment would be higher among Rouhani's supporters than among conservative Iranians (Gallagher & Mohseni, 2015). A 2016 poll in turn found that, although Rouhani's approval ratings were high, there were significant negative trends. "While immediately after the

signing of the nuclear deal 61 percent said they had a very favorable opinion of Rouhani, today only 38 percent express such feelings...In contrast, favorability ratings of most of Rouhani's potential opponents in Iran's June 2017 presidential elections have been improving (Mohseni, Gallagher, & Ramsay, 2016).

Popular disillusionment with the economic outcome of the nuclear deal reinforces perceptions that the US acted dishonestly, seeking to thwart Iran's efforts to increase trade and foreign investment. This plays into hardline and conservative narratives emphasizing Western (especially US) hostility and untrustworthiness, and gives credence to conservatives' own economic strategy, which seeks to limit openness to the West. In such a political environment, it is possible that the balance between the economic costs of interfering with commerce in either the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb, and the perceived benefit of demonstrating Iranian power and status, may swing in favor of the latter. Furthermore, if US actions or policies continue to limit foreign trade and investment in Iran, the threat of re-imposition of sanctions against Iranian oil exports is less likely to be effective.

*Interfering with commerce in the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el Mandeb:
Domestic political considerations*

- *Iran's revolutionary doctrine (that it is leading an existential fight against the forces of US imperialism) makes it critical for Iran's leaders, conservatives and hardliners in particular, to demonstrate to the Iranian people that they will not be bullied by the US.*
- *The domestic political climate in Iran, influenced by the slow pace of economic improvement following JCPOA, leaves moderates such as Rouhani politically vulnerable, increasing the likelihood they will move toward the more bellicose rhetoric of the conservatives in order to regain credibility.*

Bottom Line

At the moment, the balance of interests does not favor Iran acting in either the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el Mandeb. However, moving forward, changes that Iran is making to decrease its economic vulnerabilities could in turn decrease the cost of acting in the Bab el Mandeb. Furthermore, its increasing naval capability makes this more viable, and reduces Iranian reliance on help from the Houthis, which is potentially unreliable.

Conversely, if Iran faces new sanctions or fails to see economic improvement from JCPOA, more aggressive behavior in the Strait may come to be seen as critical to maintaining their prestige interests and domestic legitimacy. Additionally, the economic implications of such actions would be lessened if the increase in trade and foreign investment expected after JCPOA does not materialize.

The more the US is seen as unreliable or untrustworthy, and the more the nuclear deal appears at risk, the more viable the conservative position of resistance to the West seems, and the better a rhetoric of belligerence will play to the Iranian domestic audience. As such, we would expect to also see a shift in the moderates' rhetoric away from openness and cooperation toward greater protection against external threats, as well as more aggressive and proactive demonstration of power and capability. Ultimately, this situation would produce a more unified Iranian political leadership and public, one oriented more toward the conservative viewpoint and thus less likely to engage in cooperation with the West and more likely to see the US as an immediate threat to Iranian interests.

The worst-case scenario would be one in which Iran feels backed into a corner; its only remaining choice to move from threat to action in order to save face and attempt to preserve its

interests in the service of its overarching goal of regional hegemony. Doing so could create an escalatory situation, in which both Iran and the US are positioned to take actions that ultimately will be to the cost and detriment of both sides in the longer-term given the creation of greater instability and uncertainty in the region overall. Though Iran's plays are at present limited, their options for using the Bab el Mandeb as a strategic lever may improve over time. Actions in the Strait of Hormuz may also be prompted if the domestic and regional benefits come to outweigh the costs of US and other retaliatory action.

Given political changes in the US following the recent elections, and the shifting position of more moderate leaders as well as the public's priorities within Iran, it is clear that the current situation is one characterized by uncertainty and risk. In light of the dynamics discussed here and the inherent instability introduced by this uncertainty, we may expect to see Iran take a more aggressive stance, employing all of its levers of influence moving forward.

Appendix A: Iran's national interest profile

Iran has as an overarching goal, codified in its Constitution, as well as in its 20-Year Prospective Document (Vision 2025), of achieving and maintaining regional hegemony. Conservatives and moderates share this goal, although there is variation in their preferred strategy for achieving it that has implications for how they frame and define Iran's interests more broadly. This regional hegemony goal is informed by Iran's worldview; its revolutionary ideology (Islamic Resistance), the belief that it is leading an existential fight against the forces of US imperialism and religious extremism, and its desire to be seen as the guardian of Islamic, and increasingly Shiite, values. Iran's actions to protect and further its interests are best understood through the lens of its regional hegemony goal. This overarching goal and the worldview that underpins it, appear to drive and subsume many of Iran's economic, prestige, and security interests. Iran's prestige interests center around ensuring that it does not lose face in its interactions with the US, or power in its ability to influence regional events or actors. Its economic interests focus on defending and developing Iranian economic assets, expanding regional and Western trade ties, regaining its pre-sanctions oil market, and increasing its receipt of foreign investments. Iran's security interests include reducing threats from the US, Israel, and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, reducing the threat from ISIL, and broadcasting strength and challenging US influence and position in the region, as well as within Iran's borders.

Implications of Iran's national interests and worldview

- *Iran's sense of threat and vulnerability leads it to engage in efforts to shape its own sphere of influence through actions that the US views as aggressive but Iran views as defensive.*
- *Conservatives consistently use narratives that demonize the US, framing it as the enemy of Iran. Any appearance that Iranian cooperation is not fully recognized and reciprocated will therefore be perceived as proof of the inherent danger, and futility, of trusting the US.*
- *The domestic political climate in Iran, influenced by the slow pace of economic improvement following JCPOA, leaves moderates such as Rouhani politically vulnerable, increasing the likelihood that they will move toward the more bellicose rhetoric of the conservatives in order to regain credibility.*
- *Blanket and public condemnation of Iranian policy and actions, and actions by the US such as the recent Senate vote to continue sanctions, are likely to be interpreted as evidence of US desire to dominate Iran and obstruct Iran's normalization of economic relations with other states.*

Variation in how Conservatives and Moderates perceive and pursue Iran's interests

Both conservatives (including actors such as the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and the IRGC) and moderates (including actors such as President Rouhani) appear to share the goal of achieving

regional hegemony for Iran. There is also some consistency in their definitions of key prestige, economic, and security interests. However, as shown in Table 1 below, there is considerable variation in the prioritization of these interests and even more in preferred strategies for achieving these interests.

Table 1: Comparison of Conservative and Moderates' preferred strategies for achieving interests

KEY INTERESTS & RANKINGS			PREFERRED STRATEGY	
Interest	Cons	Mod	Conservatives	Moderates
PRESTIGE	Equal first	Equal first	Broadcast strength / challenge US position in the region	Increase Iranian regional political influence
			Support / protect Shia populations & culture	Increase engagement with the international community
			Develop and demonstrate military capability	Support / protect Shia populations & culture
ECONOMIC	Third	Equal first	Resistance economics	Expand regional and European trade ties
			Defend and develop economic assets	Regain pre-sanctions oil markets
			Regain pre-sanctions oil market	Increase foreign investment
SECURITY	Equal first	Second	Reduce external threats, in particular from US, Israel, KSA	Reduce external threats, in particular from US, Israel, KSA
			Push back against US/Western pressure	Stand up to US/Western pressure
			Develop and demonstrate military capability	Develop and demonstrate military capability
DOMESTIC	Second	Third	Resist cultural infiltration of west	Deliver economic improvement through greater openness
			Broadcast strength / challenge US position in the region	Broadcast strength / challenge US position in the region
			Deliver economic improvement through resistance economics	Resist cultural infiltration of west

Green = Conservatives and Moderates differ in strategy or ranking of strategies

As Table 1 shows, Rouhani and the moderates tend to favor a strategy that emphasizes the pursuit and sustainment of economic growth and prosperity, aided by opening investment and trade ties with Western actors, including the United States. In contrast, Khamenei and the IRGC place an emphasis on confrontation and the demonstration of strength, along with resistance to Western influences. These two factions do not operate in a vacuum however, but instead share some dependencies on one another. Rouhani, for example, ultimately requires the approval of the more powerful Khamenei on many policy areas, especially foreign policy, while conservatives recognize that economic improvement, even under their resistance economy policy will require some degree of openness. However, as indicated in the narrative above, the moderate and conservative stance may be converging given current international events, toward a more aggressive and less open stance to the US in particular.

References by Topic (Bragg and Pagano)

Sunni-Shia balance of power

Bazoobandi, S. (2014). Iran's Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges, and Ambitions (Analysis No. 275). ISPI. Retrieved from http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_275__2014_0.pdf

- Cook, S., Barkey, H., & Natali, D. (2015, April 9). The Kurdish Challenge in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. American University. Retrieved from <http://www.american.edu/sis/events/TheKurdishChallenge.cfm>
- Mohammed, R. (2015, March 18). How Iran Is Taking Over the Middle East. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/03/18/How-Iran-Taking-Over-Middle-East>
- Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>
- Rafizadeh, M. (2013). Will Rouhani alter Iran's policy on Syria? - CNN.com. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/16/opinion/iran-rouhani-syria-rafizadeh/>
- Tamiz, S., & Johnson, H. (2015). How Iran Dominates the Middle East | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-iran-dominates-the-middle-east-13136>
- Wehrey, F., & Sadjadpour, K. (2014). Elusive Equilibrium: America, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in a Changing Middle East - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/22/elusive-equilibrium-america-iran-and-saudi-arabia-in-changing-middle-east-pub-55641>

Broadcasting strength / Challenging US position in the region

- Botelho, G. (2013). Iran's President Hassan Rouhani urges "constructive" dialogue in op-ed - CNN.com. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/19/world/meast/iran-president-nuclear/index.html>
- Crompton, P. (2016). Dire strait? Iran threatens to close Hormuz to US - Al Arabiya English. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/05/04/Iran-threatens-to-close-Strait-of-Hormuz-to-US.html>
- Eastaugh, S. (2016). Iran's Rouhani slams US "lack of compliance" with nuclear deal - CNNPolitics.com. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/22/politics/rouhani-iran-attacks-us-over-nuclear-deal/>
- FNA. (2016a, July 13). IRGC: US navy warned to stay 12 miles away from Iran's territorial waters. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950423000486>
- FNA. (2016b, July 16). IRGC navy commander: Iran able to cause irreparable damage to A. Arabia if needed. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950426000429>
- Gladstone, R. (2015). Strait of Hormuz Once Again at Center of U.S.-Iran Strife - The New York Times. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/world/middleeast/strait-of-hormuz-once-again-at-center-of-us-iran-strife.html?_r=0
- Griffin, J., & Tomlinson, L. (2016). Iran lashes out, threatens to shut Strait of Hormuz over GOP rep's bill | Fox News. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/05/07/iran-lashes-out-threatens-to-shut-strait-hormuz-over-gop-reps-bill.html>
- Hutchison, H. (2016). Here's how Iran could threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz - Business Insider. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-iran-could-threaten-to-close-the-strait-of-hormuz-2016-8>
- Johnson, K. (2016). Iran's Hollow Threats to Close the Strait of Hormuz | Foreign Policy. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/05/irans-hollow-threats-to-close-the-strait-of-hormuz/>
- Katzman, K., Nerurkar, N., O'Rourke, R., Mason, R. C., & Ratner, M. (2012). Iran's Threat to the Strait of Hormuz (CRS Report for Congress No. R42335). Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA584459>
- Levs, J., & Krever, M. (2013). Iran's new president: Yes, the Holocaust happened – Amanpour - CNN.com Blogs. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2013/09/25/irans-new-president-yes-the-holocaust-happened/>

- Rouhani, H. (2013). President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to engage - The Washington Post. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe_story.html?hpid=z1&utm_term=.773c4f78e88a
- The Iran Project. (2014). Iran war games showing regional security: Navy chief. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2014/12/29/iran-war-games-showing-regional-security-navy-chief/>
- Vahdat, A. (2016, April 4). Could Iran Shut the Strait of Hormuz to U.S. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-05-04/iranian-commander-threatens-to-close-strait-of-hormuz-to-us>
- Zacharia, T. (2011). Closing Strait of Hormuz not so easy for Iran: analysts | Reuters. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-hormuz-idUSTRE7BR1DG20111228>

Iranian regional political influence

- al Dossary, S. (2016). With “Friends” Like Iran... - The American Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/09/19/with-friends-like-iran/>
- Aleksashenko, S. (2015). A three-sided disaster: The American, Russian, and Iranian strategic triangle in Syria | Brookings Institution. Retrieved November 20, 2016, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/10/16/a-three-sided-disaster-the-american-russian-and-iranian-strategic-triangle-in-syria/>
- Barfi, B. (2016). The Real Reason Why Iran Backs Syria | The National Interest. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-real-reason-why-iran-backs-syria-14999>
- Bazoobandi, S. (2014). Iran’s Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges, and Ambitions (Analysis No. 275). ISPI. Retrieved from http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_275_2014_0.pdf
- Ginsberg, A. M. (2016). Iran’s Plan to Destabilize Iraq | The Huffington Post. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amb-marc-ginsberg/irans-plan-to-destabilize_b_10831910.html
- Halpern, M. (2016). Boatload of Trouble: The US and Iran Set Course for a Battle at Sea | | Observer. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://observer.com/2016/10/boatload-of-trouble-the-us-and-iran-set-course-for-a-battle-at-sea/>
- Kagan, F. W., Majidyar, A. K., Pletka, D., & Sullivan, M. C. (2012). Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan | Institute for the Study of War. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-influence-levant-egypt-iraq-and-afghanistan>
- Khajepour, B. (2014). Decoding Iran’s “resistance economy.” Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/decoding-resistance-economy-iran.html>
- Khatib, L. (2014, November 4). Interview.
- Martin, P., Cowan, T., & Mcalaster, T. (2015, April 16). Ten maps that explain Iran’s power play in the Middle East. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/irans-middle-east-power-play/article23845609/>
- McInnis, J. M. (2016). Is Iran’s Iraq policy coming apart? - AEI | Foreign and Defense Policy Blog » AEIdeas. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <https://www.aei.org/publication/is-irans-iraq-policy-coming-apart/>
- Mohammed, R. (2015, March 18). How Iran Is Taking Over the Middle East. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/03/18/How-Iran-Taking-Over-Middle-East>
- Naji, K. (2015). What is Iran’s game plan in Iraq? - BBC News. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33075894>
- Reed, R. (2016, February 20). Why The Iran-Russia-Syria Alliance Is The Biggest Problem In The Middle East | The Daily Caller. Retrieved November 20, 2016, from <http://dailycaller.com/2016/02/20/how-the-iran-russia-syria-alliance-is-the-middle-east-number-one-problem/>

- Rosen. (2015). Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen just captured a military base along one of the world's major oil lanes. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/houthis-captured-base-on-bab-el-mandeb-2015-3>
- Salem, P. (2014, August 20). Interview.
- Shay, S. (2016). The Battle over the Bab al Mandab Straits | Israel Defense. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/content/battle-over-bab-al-mandab-straits>
- Tamiz, S., & Johnson, H. (2015). How Iran Dominates the Middle East | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-iran-dominates-the-middle-east-13136>
- Toumaj, A. (2016). Yemeni Houthis fire at ship with Iranian-supplied missile | The Long War Journal. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/yemeni-houthis-fire-at-ship-with-iranian-supplied-rocket.php>
- Viaud, A. (2016). The Iran nuclear deal: the Iranian and US domestic factors that put its implementation at risk.

Develop / demonstrate military capability

- Naji, K. (2015). What is Iran's game plan in Iraq? - BBC News. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33075894>
- Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>
- Press TV. (2016). PressTV-Iran showcases defense achievements. Retrieved December 7, 2016, from <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/08/21/480978/Iran-Hassan-Rouhani-Hosseini-Dehqan>
- The Iran Project. (2014). Iran war games showing regional security: Navy chief. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2014/12/29/iran-war-games-showing-regional-security-navy-chief/>
- Wilkin, S. (2015). Iran's Rouhani says military power not affected by nuclear deal: state TV | Reuters. Retrieved December 7, 2016, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-military-idUSKCN0QY0IQ2015082>

Improve economic security and influence

- Arnold, A. (2015). Just How Vulnerable Is Iran to Sanctions? | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/just-how-vulnerable-iran-sanctions-13475>
- Botelho, G. (2013). Iran's President Hassan Rouhani urges "constructive" dialogue in op-ed - CNN.com. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/19/world/meast/iran-president-nuclear/index.html>
- Eastaugh, S. (2016). Iran's Rouhani slams US "lack of compliance" with nuclear deal - CNNPolitics.com. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/22/politics/rouhani-iran-attacks-us-over-nuclear-deal/>
- Fishel, J. (2016). Could Donald Trump Really Dismantle the Iran Nuclear Deal? - ABC News. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from <http://abcnews.go.com/International/donald-trump-dismantle-iran-nuclear-deal/story?id=43521933>
- Viaud, A. (2016). The Iran nuclear deal: the Iranian and US domestic factors that put its implementation at risk.
- Zacharia, T. (2011). Closing Strait of Hormuz not so easy for Iran: analysts | Reuters. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-hormuz-idUSTRE7BR1DG20111228>
- Resistance economics
- Arnold, A. (2015). Just How Vulnerable Is Iran to Sanctions? | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/just-how-vulnerable-iran-sanctions-13475>

Khajepour, B. (2014). Decoding Iran's "resistance economy." Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/decoding-resistance-economy-iran.html>

Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>

Toumaj, A. (2014). Iran's economy of resistance: implications for future sanctions. Critical Threats Project at American Enterprise Institute.

Defend economic assets

FNA. (2016, June 28). Persian Gulf port to turn into hub of energy, fuel. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950408000955>

Press TV. (2015, May 18). Assad urges closer Syria-Iran trade ties. Retrieved October 5, 2015, from <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2015/05/18/411705/Assad-Qasemi-Syria-Iran-economic-relations>

Rafizadeh, M. (2013, January 4). Iran's economic stake in Syria. Retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/04/irans-economic-stake-in-syria/>
Expand regional and European trade ties

Arnold, A. (2015). Just How Vulnerable Is Iran to Sanctions? | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/just-how-vulnerable-iran-sanctions-13475>

Goldenberg, I. (2016). Judging the Iran Nuclear Deal, Six Months In | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/judging-the-iran-nuke-deal-six-months-14875>

Mousavian, S. H. (2015). A rejection of the nuclear deal could lead to radicalism in Iran - The Washington Post. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-pragmatism-in-iran/2015/08/28/f0ffd630-4ccf-11e5-bfb9-9736d04fc8e4_story.html?utm_term=.ca6dd0c45171

Regain pre-sanctions oil markets

Energy Information Administration. (2016, January 21). This Week In Petroleum. Retrieved November 20, 2016, from https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/weekly/archive/2016/160121/includes/analysis_print.cfm

Lee, J. (2016, June 26). Iran's Oil Boom Is Fizzling Out. Bloomberg Gadfly. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com/gadfly/articles/2016-06-26/iran-s-oil-boom-fizzles-out>

Thirarath, I. (2016, July 7). China's Crude Oil Imports from Iran. Retrieved November 20, 2016, from <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/chinas-crude-oil-imports-iran>

Verma, N. (2016, April 4). India's Iran oil imports set to surge to seven-year high in 2016/17: sources. Reuters. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-iran-oil-imports-idUSKCN0X11ZH>

Increase foreign investment

Kalantari, H., Motevalli, G., & Dipaola. (2016, October 17). Iran to Boost Oil Output as OPEC Plans Cut. Bloomberg.com. Retrieved from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-10-17/iran-to-boost-oil-output-to-4-million-barrels-as-opec-plans-cut>

McDonnell, P. J., & Mostaghim, R. (2016). After sanctions, politics in Iran are the next hurdle to better ties with U.S. - LA Times. Retrieved November 23, 2016, from <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-hurdles-20160120-story.html>

Mousavian, S. H. (2015). A rejection of the nuclear deal could lead to radicalism in Iran - The Washington Post. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-pragmatism-in-iran/2015/08/28/f0ffd630-4ccf-11e5-bfb9-9736d04fc8e4_story.html?utm_term=.ca6dd0c45171

Tamiz, S., & Johnson, H. (2015). How Iran Dominates the Middle East | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-iran-dominates-the-middle-east-13136>

- Toumaj, A. (2016). Yemeni Houthis fire at ship with Iranian-supplied missile | The Long War Journal. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/yemeni-houthis-fire-at-ship-with-iranian-supplied-rocket.php>
- Wehrey, F., & Sadjadpour, K. (2014). Elusive Equilibrium: America, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in a Changing Middle East - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/22/elusive-equilibrium-america-iran-and-saudi-arabia-in-changing-middle-east-pub-55641>

Factors aiding Iran's rise

JCPOA

- Bazoobandi, S. (2014). Iran's Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges, and Ambitions (Analysis No. 275). ISPI. Retrieved from http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_275_2014_0.pdf
- Erdbrink, T. (2016). Iran's President Says Donald Trump Can't Tear Up Nuclear Pact - The New York Times. Retrieved December 6, 2016, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/world/middleeast/hassan-rouhani-donald-trump-nuclear-agreement.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur&r=0>
- Gladstone, R. (2015). Strait of Hormuz Once Again at Center of U.S.-Iran Strife - The New York Times. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/world/middleeast/strait-of-hormuz-once-again-at-center-of-us-iran-strife.html?_r=0
- Goldenberg, I. (2016). Judging the Iran Nuclear Deal, Six Months In | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/judging-the-iran-nuke-deal-six-months-14875>
- Huessy, P. (2016). strait-hormuz-danger-Navy. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/commentary/2016/06/08/strait-hormuz-danger-navy/85599208/>
- Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>
- Robbins, J. S. (2016). How Iran Wins in the Strait of Hormuz | World Report | US News. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2016-06-07/how-iran-wins-in-the-strait-of-hormuz>

Sanctions

- Arnold, A. (2015). Just How Vulnerable Is Iran to Sanctions? | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/just-how-vulnerable-iran-sanctions-13475>
- Mousavian, S. H. (2015). A rejection of the nuclear deal could lead to radicalism in Iran - The Washington Post. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-pragmatism-in-iran/2015/08/28/f0ffd630-4ccf-11e5-bfb9-9736d04fc8e4_story.html?utm_term=.ca6dd0c45171
- Smith, L. (2015). Iranian Vulnerability - by Lee Smith. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.hudson.org/research/11160-iranian-vulnerability>
- Tamiz, S., & Johnson, H. (2015). How Iran Dominates the Middle East | The National Interest. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-iran-dominates-the-middle-east-13136>
- Toumaj, A. (2014). Iran's economy of resistance: implications for future sanctions. Critical Threats Project at American Enterprise Institute.
- Viaud, A. (2016). The Iran nuclear deal: the Iranian and US domestic factors that put its implementation at risk.

Arab Spring

- McInnis, J. M. (2016). Is Iran's Iraq policy coming apart? - AEI | Foreign and Defense Policy Blog » AEIdeas. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <https://www.aei.org/publication/is-irans-iraq-policy-coming-apart/>

Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>

ISIL

Huessy, P. (2016). Strait-Hormuz-Danger-Navy. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/commentary/2016/06/08/strait-hormuz-danger-navy/85599208/>

McInnis, J. M. (2016). Is Iran's Iraq policy coming apart? - AEI | Foreign and Defense Policy Blog » AEIdeas. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <https://www.aei.org/publication/is-irans-iraq-policy-coming-apart/>

Naji, K. (2015). What is Iran's game plan in Iraq? - BBC News. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33075894>

Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>

Counter external threats to security and sovereignty

Threat from US, Israel, and KSA

Bazoobandi, S. (2014). Iran's Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges, and Ambitions (Analysis No. 275). ISPI. Retrieved from http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_275_2014_0.pdf

Khatib, L. (2014, November 4). Interview.

Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>

Salem, P. (2014, August 20). Interview.

Push back against US and western pressure

McInnis, J. M. (2015). The U.S. Cannot Influence Iran's Domestic Politics. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.newsweek.com/us-cannot-influence-irans-domestic-politics-409141>

Toumaj, A. (2014). Iran's economy of resistance: implications for future sanctions. Critical Threats Project at American Enterprise Institute.

ISIL

Almukhtar, S., & Yourish, K. (2015, March 30). Old, New and Unusual Alliances in the Middle East. The New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/30/world/middleeast/middle-east-alliances-saudi-arabia-iran.html>

Ginsberg, A. M. (2016). Iran's Plan to Destabilize Iraq | The Huffington Post. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amb-marc-ginsberg/irans-plan-to-destabilize_b_10831910.html

Martin, P., Cowan, T., & Mcalaster, T. (2015, April 16). Ten maps that explain Iran's power play in the Middle East. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/irans-middle-east-power-play/article23845609/>

Mohammed, R. (2015, March 18). How Iran Is Taking Over the Middle East. Retrieved June 23, 2015, from <http://www.thefiscaltimes.com/2015/03/18/How-Iran-Taking-Over-Middle-East>

Nuruzzaman, M. (2016). Iran's Unstoppable March Toward Dominance | The National Interest. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-unstoppable-march-toward-dominance-16182>

Maintain domestic political control

McInnis, J. M. (2015). The U.S. Cannot Influence Iran's Domestic Politics. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.newsweek.com/us-cannot-influence-irans-domestic-politics-409141>

McInnis, J. M. (2016). Is Iran's Iraq policy coming apart? - AEI | Foreign and Defense Policy Blog » AEIdeas. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <https://www.aei.org/publication/is-irans-iraq-policy-coming-apart/>

Deliver economic improvement

- al Zghool, M. (2016). The Nuclear Agreement and Contemporary Iranian Domestic Politics - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-nuclear-agreement-and-contemporary-iranian-domestic-politics>
- Khajepour, B. (2014). Decoding Iran's "resistance economy." Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/decoding-resistance-economy-iran.html>
- Laub, Z. (2016). Why Iran's Elections Matter - Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://www.cfr.org/iran/why-irans-elections-matter/p37573>
- McInnis, J. M. (2015). The U.S. Cannot Influence Iran's Domestic Politics. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.newsweek.com/us-cannot-influence-irans-domestic-politics-409141>
- Mousavian, S. H. (2015). A rejection of the nuclear deal could lead to radicalism in Iran - The Washington Post. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-pragmatism-in-iran/2015/08/28/f0ffd630-4ccf-11e5-bfb9-9736d04fc8e4_story.html?utm_term=.ca6dd0c45171
- Wehrey, F., & Sadjadpour, K. (2014). Elusive Equilibrium: America, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in a Changing Middle East - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved December 3, 2016, from <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/22/elusive-equilibrium-america-iran-and-saudi-arabia-in-changing-middle-east-pub-55641>

Combat against perceived external threats

- Gladstone, R. (2015). Strait of Hormuz Once Again at Center of U.S.-Iran Strife - The New York Times. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/02/world/middleeast/strait-of-hormuz-once-again-at-center-of-us-iran-strife.html?_r=0
- Griffin, J., & Tomlinson, L. (2016). Iran lashes out, threatens to shut Strait of Hormuz over GOP rep's bill | Fox News. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/05/07/iran-lashes-out-threatens-to-shut-strait-hormuz-over-gop-reps-bill.html>
- Huessy, P. (2016). strait-hormuz-danger-Navy. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/commentary/2016/06/08/strait-hormuz-danger-navy/85599208/>
- McDonnell, P. J., & Mostaghim, R. (2016). After sanctions, politics in Iran are the next hurdle to better ties with U.S. - LA Times. Retrieved November 23, 2016, from <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-hurdles-20160120-story.html>
- Trofimov, Y. (2016). Domestic Issues Fuel Saudi-Iranian Crisis - WSJ. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/domestic-issues-fuel-saudi-iranian-spat-1451940039>

Domestic factors influencing Iranian actions

Weakened political competition and state capacity

- al Zghool, M. (2016). The Nuclear Agreement and Contemporary Iranian Domestic Politics - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-nuclear-agreement-and-contemporary-iranian-domestic-politics>
- Laub, Z. (2016). Why Iran's Elections Matter - Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://www.cfr.org/iran/why-irans-elections-matter/p37573>
- Viaud, A. (2016). The Iran nuclear deal: the Iranian and US domestic factors that put its implementation at risk.

JCPOA / removal of sanctions

- al Zghool, M. (2016). The Nuclear Agreement and Contemporary Iranian Domestic Politics - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-nuclear-agreement-and-contemporary-iranian-domestic-politics>
- Laub, Z. (2016). Why Iran's Elections Matter - Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://www.cfr.org/iran/why-irans-elections-matter/p37573>

- McDonnell, P. J., & Mostaghim, R. (2016). After sanctions, politics in Iran are the next hurdle to better ties with U.S. - LA Times. Retrieved November 23, 2016, from <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-hurdles-20160120-story.html>
- Toumaj, A. (2016). Yemeni Houthis fire at ship with Iranian-supplied missile | The Long War Journal. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/yemeni-houthis-fire-at-ship-with-iranian-supplied-rocket.php>
- Viaud, A. (2016). The Iran nuclear deal: the Iranian and US domestic factors that put its implementation at risk.

Popular perception of corruption / economic mismanagement

- McDonnell, P. J., & Mostaghim, R. (2016). After sanctions, politics in Iran are the next hurdle to better ties with U.S. - LA Times. Retrieved November 23, 2016, from <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-hurdles-20160120-story.html>
- Potential conservative backlash against JCPOA and opening to west
- Laub, Z. (2016). Why Iran's Elections Matter - Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved November 29, 2016, from <http://www.cfr.org/iran/why-irans-elections-matter/p37573>
- McDonnell, P. J., & Mostaghim, R. (2016). After sanctions, politics in Iran are the next hurdle to better ties with U.S. - LA Times. Retrieved November 23, 2016, from <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-hurdles-20160120-story.html>
- Mousavian, S. H. (2015). A rejection of the nuclear deal could lead to radicalism in Iran - The Washington Post. Retrieved December 1, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-new-pragmatism-in-iran/2015/08/28/f0ffd630-4ccf-11e5-bfb9-9736d04fc8e4_story.html?utm_term=.ca6dd0c45171
- Trofimov, Y. (2016). Domestic Issues Fuel Saudi-Iranian Crisis - WSJ. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/domestic-issues-fuel-saudi-iranian-spat-1451940039>
- United States Institute of Peace Staff. (2016). Poll 4: Domestic Politics and Issues | The Iran Primer. Retrieved November 22, 2016, from <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2016/jul/14/poll-4-domestic-politics-and-issues>
- Viaud, A. (2016). The Iran nuclear deal: the Iranian and US domestic factors that put its implementation at risk.

Bab el Mandeb

- Al-Ghabiri, A. (2016). U.S. Calls for Retaliation, Securing Bab el-Mandeb Strait from Iran-Backed Houthis - ASHARQ AL-AWSAT English. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://english.aawsat.com/2016/10/article55360022/u-s-calls-retaliation-securing-bab-el-mandeb-strait-iran-backed-houthis>
- Bayoumi, Y., & Stewart, P. (2016). Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons supply to Yemen's Houthis via Oman - officials | Reuters. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-iran-idUSKCN12K0CX>
- Bender, J. (2015). World's eight oil chokepoints - Business Insider. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/worlds-eight-oil-chokepoints-2015-4>
- Cordesman, A. H. (2015). America, Saudi Arabia, and the Strategic Importance of Yemen | Center for Strategic and International Studies. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/america-saudi-arabia-and-strategic-importance-yemen>
- Cordesman, A. H., & Peacock, M. (2015). The Changing Security Balance in the Gulf: Joint and Asymmetric Warfare, Missiles and Missile Defense, Civil War and Non-State Actors, and Outside Powers (A report of the CSIS Burke chair in strategy). Washington, D.C.: CSIS. Retrieved from https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/151014_Cordesman_ArabUSStrategicPartnership_Web.pdf
- Dorell, O. (2016). Iranian support for Yemen's Houthis goes back years. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/04/20/iran-support-for-yemen-houthis-goes-back-years/26095101/>

- Egypt Oil & Gas. (2015). Yemen's "Gate of Tears": the Strategic Red Sea Strait of Bab El Mandeb. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.egyptoil-gas.com/publications/yemens-gate-of-tears-the-strategic-red-sea-strait-of-bab-el-mandeb/>
- Energy Information Administration. (2015, April 23). Oil trade off Yemen coast grew by 20% to 4.7 million barrels per day in 2014. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=20932>
- LaGrone, S. (2016, October 13). USS Nitze Destroys 3 Houthi Controlled Radar Sites. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <https://news.usni.org/2016/10/13/video-uss-nitze-destroys-3-houthi-controlled-radar-sites-retaliatory-strike>
- Laub, Z. (2016). Backgrounder: Yemen's Civil War, the Houthis, and the Saudi Intervention - Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/yemen-crisis/p36488>
- McGarry, B. (2016, October 16). USS Mason Fired on a Third Time Near Yemen, CNO Says [Text]. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/10/16/uss-mason-fired-on-a-third-time-near-yemen-cno-says.html>
- Pothecary, J. (2016, November 22). Dangers of the BAM. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.marsecreview.com/2016/11/dangers-of-the-bam/>
- Reuters. (2015, April 9). Shipping lines pull back from Yemen as conflict escalates. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-shipping-lines-pull-back-from-yemen-as-conflict-escalates-2076162>
- Rosen, A. (2015). War in Yemen could threaten one of the world's most important oil chokepoints - Business Insider. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/war-in-yemen-could-threaten-one-of-the-worlds-most-important-oil-choke-points-2015-3>
- Ryan, P. (2015, April 14). The Yemen Crisis and the Bab el-Mandeb Maritime Chokepoint. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://susris.com/2015/04/14/the-bab-el-mandeb-maritime-chokepoint/>
- Shay, S. (2016a). The Battle over the Bab al Mandab Straits | Israel Defense. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/content/battle-over-bab-al-mandab-straits>
- Shay, S. (2016b). The "Decisive Storm" that Changed the Geopolitical Balance of the Red Sea. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://mackinderforum.org/the-decisive-storm-that-changed-the-geopolitical-balance-of-the-red-sea-by-shaul-shay/>
- The National. (2016a, October 3). US condemns Houthi attack on UAE ship | The National. Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/us-condemns-houthi-attack-on-uae-ship>
- The National. (2016b, October 4). UAE civilian ship hit by Houthis in "terror act." Retrieved December 12, 2016, from <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/uae-civilian-ship-hit-by-houthis-in-terror-act>
- Toumaj, A. (2016). Yemeni Houthis fire at ship with Iranian-supplied missile | The Long War Journal. Retrieved November 21, 2016, from <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/yemeni-houthis-fire-at-ship-with-iranian-supplied-rocket.php>
- Young, A. (2015). War In Yemen: Tankers Moving Unimpeded Through Bab Al-Mandeb Oil Shipment Choke Point, Says Kuwait Petroleum Corporation. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.ibtimes.com/war-yemen-tankers-moving-unimpeded-through-bab-al-mandeb-oil-shipment-choke-point-1863060>
- Zimmerman, K. (2016). Signaling Saudi Arabia: Iranian Support to Yemen's al Houthis | Critical Threats. Retrieved December 13, 2016, from <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/zimmerman-signaling-saudi-arabia-iranian-support-to-yemen-al-houthis-april-15-2016>

Author Biographies



Dr. Belinda Bragg

Dr. Belinda Bragg is a Principal Research Scientist for NSI. She has provided core support for DoD Joint Staff and STRATCOM Strategic Multi-layer Analysis (SMA) projects for the past six years. She has worked on projects dealing with nuclear deterrence, state stability, U.S.–China and U.S.–Russia relations, and VEOs. Dr. Bragg has extensive experience reviewing and building social science models and frameworks. She is one of the two designers of a stability model, (the StaM) that has been used analyze stability efforts in Afghanistan, state stability in Pakistan and Nigeria, and at the city-level to explore the drivers and buffers of instability in megacities, with a case study of Dhaka. Prior to joining NSI, Dr. Bragg was a visiting lecturer in International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station. Her research focuses on decision-making, causes of conflict and political instability, and political uses of social media. Dr. Bragg earned her Ph.D. in political science from Texas A&M University, and her BA from the University of Melbourne, Australia.



Dr. Anoush Ehteshami

Professor Anoush Ehteshami is the Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Chair in International Relations and Director of the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme in International Relations, Regional Politics and Security. He is Joint Director of the RCUK-funded centre of excellence, the Durham-Edinburgh-Manchester Universities' Centre for the Advanced Study of the Arab World (CASAW), whose research focus since 2012 has been on the 'Arab World in Transition'. He was the University's Dean of Internationalisation, 2009-2011 and was the founding Head of the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University (2004-9). He has been a Fellow of the World Economic Forum, and was elected in 2011 as a member of the WEF's foremost body, the Global Agenda Councils. He was Vice-President and Chair of Council of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) 2000-2003. He has collaborative links with many international organizations, including the German-based Bertelsmann Foundation, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, and the Gulf Research Centre, and has acted as Advisor and consultant to the International Crisis Group, and has been Governing Board Member of the International Dialogues Foundation in The Hague.

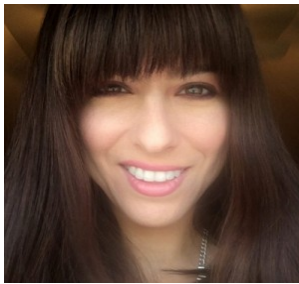
In addition to having published 21 books and monographs, he also has over 90 articles in learned journals and edited volumes to his name. His current research revolves around five over-arching themes:

- The Asian balance of power in the post-Cold War era
- The 'Asianization' of the Middle East and the wider international system
- Foreign and security policies of Middle East states since the end of the Cold War
- The impact of globalization on the Middle East
- Good governance, democratization efforts, in the Middle East

Editor of three major book series on the Middle East and the wider Muslim world, and is member of Editorial Board of five international journals. He is a regular contributor to global news networks – print, online, radio and television.

Dr. Yoel Guzansky

Yoel Guzansky is a visiting fellow at Hoover Institution, Stanford University. He is also 2016-2017 Fulbright Scholar and a 2016-2017 Israel Institute post-doc Fellow. Dr. Guzansky is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University. Before he joined INSS, he was in charge of strategic issues at Israel's National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office, coordinating work on the Iranian nuclear challenge. He served under four National Security Advisers and three Prime Ministers. Dr. Guzansky completed training offered by the US State Department; the US Department of Energy; the Israeli Foreign Ministry and the Israel Atomic Energy Commission. He specializes in issues of Gulf security and Middle East strategic issues. He is the author of the recently published books "The Arab Gulf States and Reform in the Middle East" (Palgrave, 2015), "The Arab World on the Road to State Failure" (INSS, 2016) and "Between Resilience and Revolution: The Stability of the Gulf Monarchies" (INSS, 2016).



Dr. Sabrina Pagano

Dr. Sabrina Pagano is an experienced project leader and principal investigator, with almost 15 years of experience leading teams and projects both in academia and industry. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology (minor in Statistics) from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a dual BA with highest honors in Psychology and Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has led and been an active contributor to work in both the government and commercial domains. Though supporting a wide variety of projects and proposals, her work at NSI has focused in three main areas, including serving as the Principal Investigator and Project Manager for a multi-year contract investigating progress in conflict environments, providing project oversight as the project manager for two AAA titles at a top gaming company, and as one of two developers of a corporate offering focused on enhancing dignity in interactions with customers and employees. Prior to NSI, she served as the Director (Acting) of a growing behavioral sciences program, as well as a Faculty Fellow Researcher and Lecturer at UCLA. Dr. Pagano's work has spanned a wide variety of topics, with particular depth in intergroup relations, injustice, basic and moral emotions (e.g., empathy, moral outrage), and prosocial/antisocial behavior. She maintains an active knowledge base in the broad field of social psychology, and knowledge that spans multiple fields given over a decade of experience and leadership specifically on multidisciplinary projects.



Alex Vatanka

Alex Vatanka is a Senior Fellow at the *Middle East Institute* and at *The Jamestown Foundation* in Washington D.C. He specializes in Middle Eastern regional security affairs with a particular focus on Iran. From 2006 to 2010, he was the Managing Editor of *Jane's Islamic Affairs*

Analyst. From 2001 to 2006, he was a senior political analyst at Jane's in London (UK) where he mainly covered the Middle East. Alex is also a Senior Fellow in Middle East Studies at the US Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) at Hurlburt Field and teaches as an Adjunct Professor at DISAM at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

He has testified before the US Congress and lectured widely for both governmental and commercial audiences, including the US Departments of State and Defense, US intelligence agencies, US Congressional staff, and Middle Eastern energy firms. Beyond *Jane's*, the *Middle East Institute* and *The Jamestown Foundation*, he has written extensively for such outlets as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The National Interest*, the *Jerusalem Post*, *Journal of Democracy* and the *Council of Foreign Relations*.

Born in Tehran, he holds a BA in Political Science (Sheffield University, UK), and an MA in International Relations (Essex University, UK), and is fluent in Farsi and Danish. He is the author of *"Iran-Pakistan: Security, Diplomacy, and American Influence"* (2015), and contributed chapters to other books, including *"Authoritarianism Goes Global"* (2016). He is presently working on his second book *"The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy: Contested Ideology, Personal Rivalries and the Domestic Struggle to Define Iran's Place in the World."*