

SMA Reach-back

Question (LR2): *What will be Iran’s strategic calculus regarding Iraq and the region post-ISIL? How will JCPOA impact the calculus? What opportunities exist for the US/Coalition to shape the environment favorable to our interests?*

Executive Summary

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois, NSI

Iran’s Approach in Iraq

A number of the Iran SMEs who contributed to this Quick Look characterized Iran’s approach in Iraq as “flexible” and “opportunistic,” rather than determined by a strict set of guidelines or strategies. Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights of the Washington Institute find Iran’s “strategic style” in Iraq to be “subtle and thrifty,” for example, in pursuit of what Alex Vatanka, an Iran scholar from the Middle East Institute, highlights as its ultimate security objective. That is, to prevent Iraq ever becoming a state that could threaten Iran as was done during the Iran-Iraq War—a time that remains in recent memory for many Iranians. This does not mean a failed state in Iraq, but does imply a militarily weak Iraq. In this regard, Iran could see US and Coalition efforts to build the Iraqi security forces into an inclusive and strong national force as a direct threat to its security.

Iran’s Post-ISIL Strategic Calculus

Cognitive decision researcher, Allison Astorino-Courtois (NSI), points out that an actor’s strategic calculus is context-dependent, and implies that a choice of behaviors is under consideration. There is therefore not a single strategic calculus that would explain the range of Iranian foreign policy choices and behaviors that US analysts and planners are likely to encounter. The good news is that while Iran’s tactics may change slightly, there is little to suggest that Iran’s key strategic interests will change with ISIL defeat: Iran saw what is perceived as Saudi-backed Sunni extremism as a significant threat before the emergence of ISIL, and surely will be prepared for the emergence of similar groups in the future.

The contributors to this Quick Look identified the following enduring strategic interests that should be expected to feature in almost any current Iranian calculus, as well as after the immediate threat of ISIL violence has weakened considerably. These are:

Safeguarding Iran’s national security by:

- Ensuring Iranian influence in the future Iraqi government, Syria, and the region as a whole to maintain the leverage to defeat threats to Iran posed by a pro-US and/or Sunni-inclusive Iraqi government
- Mitigating the security threat from Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, and decreasing Saudi influence throughout the region
- Eliminating the existential threat to Iran and the region’s Shi’a or Iran-friendly minorities from Sunni extremism, violent Wahhabism, and the re-emergence of ISIL-like groups
- Retaining and growing its influence in Lebanon and Gaza as leverage against Israel
- Combatting US regional influence in general

Defending Iran's internal sovereignty by:

- Managing public dissatisfaction within Iran; quelling unrest
- Securing Iran's borders and seacoast

Relieving economic stress and associated public discontent by:

- Defending Iranian economic assets and investments in Syria and gaining a foothold in the post-conflict economies (e.g., via construction contracts) in Syria and Iraq
- Working with other suppliers to increase global oil prices
- If and when Reformists are given leeway by the clergy and conservative forces in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), opening economic relations with the EU¹

Defending the Islamic identity and leadership of the regime by:

- Clergy and Supreme Leader balancing the independent political influence of the IRGC against popular and reformist views in the government

Impact of JCPOA

Although as reported in SMA Reachback V6, other experts disagree on this point, Eisenstadt and Knights (The Washington Institute) believe that an unintended consequence of the JCPOA has been greater Iranian assertiveness in the region, and that “the more the US steps back in Iraq, the more Iran will step forward.” As a result, they argue, deterioration in US-Iran relations—perhaps as the result of a JCPOA-related crisis—could prompt an increase in Iranian challenges to US vessels in the region and arming of proxies. The implication is that the JCPOA may have increased the IRGC's ability to argue for a more assertive regional policy, and that a new nuclear crisis could further strengthen their hand in this regard.

A political football? The success or perceived failure of the JCPOA may have important domestic political implications in the run-up to Iran's May 2017 presidential election. Specifically, the perceived failure of the Agreement to produce widely anticipated improvements in the Iranian economy is a point on which President Rouhani and other reform-minded thinkers will be particularly vulnerable.² In fact, Gallagher et al. (2016) reported this summer that while Rouhani was still the front runner, his lead over former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had dropped to a narrow margin largely on account of Rouhani's perceived failure to improve the economy—a significant basis of the popular support for the JCPOA including that of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This fall, apparently at the express request of Khamenei, Ahmadinejad announced that he would not run in May 2107 citing a meeting he had had with the supreme leader in which he was told that his candidacy would not serve the interests of the country. (Quds Force commander

¹ Even Iranian officials perceived as more moderate, such as Abbas Araghi, a senior nuclear negotiator, have consistently stressed that “enmity between . . . [Iran] and America is still in place. . . . America from our view is still the Great Satan and nothing has changed.” From: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/22/elusive-equilibrium-america-iran-and-saudi-arabia-in-changing-middle-east-pub-55641>

² When it was first concluded, the JCPOA was a domestic win for Rouhani and Reformist voices in Iran, and Rouhani saw a large spike in already high public approval, while approval of conservative politicians declined (Gallagher et al. 2015). At the time, polls indicated that the Agreement was overwhelmingly popular with Iranians, many of whom anticipated rapid improvements in their quality of life as a direct result. By summer 2016, however, support had fallen but remained greater than 50% of those polled. Gallagher et al. (2016) surmise that this drop-off occurred because a majority had not seen expected improvements in their standards of living.

Major General Qasem Soleimani who also had been mentioned in the press as a potential candidate has similarly announced that he does not intend to run.) Speculation is that the Khamenei is determined to both avoid a repeat of the 2009 popular protests following Ahmadinejad's divisive "stolen election", and to put up attractive conservative candidates to challenge the relatively moderate Rouhani. However, there is also conjecture that Khamenei, who has been a vocal opponent of the JCPOA and a number of Rouhani's other policies may not approve Rouhani's run for re-election either. The official, vetted candidate list will be announced in April 2017.

Finally, Eisenstadt and Knights (The Washington Institute) argue that to compensate the IRGC for acquiescing in the JCPOA, it has been given greater latitude to "(flex) its muscles abroad to demonstrate that it remains in control of Iran's regional policies."

Shaping Opportunities

The SMEs offer a number of suggestions for opportunities to:

Counter Iranian influence in Iraq

- Ensure long-term, multi-national commitment and funding to security in Iraq lasting beyond the war against ISIL (Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights, Washington Institute)
- Help the Iraqi Government resist Iranian pressure to institutionalize the PMUs as a military force independent of the Iraqi Security Forces (Eisenstadt and Knights, Washington Institute)
- Encourage Arab states to view the current Iraqi Government and press for influence on the basis of their common Arab identity, rather than continue to see the government as Shi'a first, and thus an inevitable ally of Iran (Alex Vantaka, Middle East Institute)

Increase stability in the region

- Provide Iran incentives for "positive behaviors" that reinforce its perception that it is succeeding in "re-creat[ing] the international order" (Bob Elder, GMU and Hunter Hustus, HQ USAF)
- Recognize that Iran views the Syrian War as "an existential matter for the Alawites in Syria and Shiites in neighboring states" and adjust US and partner activities to allay Iranian perceptions of sectarian threats (Bob Elder, GMU and Hunter Hustus, HQ USAF)
- Coordinate with Iran on pursuing the US shared interest in shoring up the stability and legitimacy of the Abadi government among Sunni Iraqis to reduce the appeal of violent jihadism among disaffected Sunni Iraqis (Bob Elder, GMU and Hunter Hustus, HQ USAF)
- Provide security/prestige guarantees to Iran in exchange for its encouraging sincere efforts at sectarian power-sharing by the Abadi government in Iraq (Allison Astorino-Courtois, NSI)

Contributors: Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy); Alex Vantaka (Middle East Institute; Jamestown Foundation); Allison Astorino-Courtois (NSI); Robert Elder (George Mason University) and Hunter Hustus (HQ USAF); Alireza Nader (RAND)

Editor: Allison Astorino-Courtois (NSI)

SME Input

The Fall of Mosul, the Next Sunni Insurgency, and Iran's post-JCPOA Role in Iraq

Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Neither the JCPOA nor the eventual defeat of ISIL in Iraq will likely prove game changers. The future of the nuclear agreement remains uncertain, and Iran will probably continue the more assertive regional policy it adopted in its wake. And barring major changes in Iraqi politics, the defeat of ISIL will most likely herald the rise of "the next Sunni insurgency." Historically, developments in Iraq have been the main driver of Iranian actions there, though US actions have also shaped Iranian behavior. Accordingly, the more the US steps back in Iraq, the more Iran will step forward. For this reason, the US should lock-in the multinational Coalition's support for Iraq via a multi-year ITEF II package, rethink how to be a more effective Security Force Assistance partner, help Baghdad resist pressure by Tehran to institutionalize the PMUs as a separate, parallel military organization, and bolster deterrence against Iranian-sponsored proxy attacks on US personnel in Iraq.

The JCPOA has not altered the fundamentals of the US-Iran relationship, or Iran's policy toward Iraq and the region; in fact, post-JCPOA, the IRGC has succeeded in moving Iran in a more assertive direction, ramping up support for the Assad regime (in part by convincing Moscow to intervene and by deepening cooperation with Russia), increasing harassment of US ships in the Gulf, conducting highly publicized missile tests, and continuing with arms shipments to regional allies (the last two in violation of the spirit, if not the letter of UNSCR 2231, which gave international legal force to the JCPOA). Tehran, moreover, still hopes to diminish the threat posed by a US-backed government in Baghdad or by US forces there (a threat that it fears may increase once ISIL is defeated), and it continues to work to ensure the predominance of the Shiite community, to minimize the influence of the Sunni Arab states, and to be the most influential outside power in Iraq.

Iran, Iraq, and the JCPOA

The negotiations with Iran over the JCPOA are not over. Rather, the "negotiations after the negotiations" are likely to continue, with ambiguities in the implementation of the JCPOA being ironed out, while Iran presses forward in other areas in order to see what it can get away with. A

"A decision by the new US administration to take a tougher line after January 2017 regarding JCPOA implementation or to support the Syrian opposition with arms, safe havens, or no-fly zones could cause Iran to respond with countermeasures in Iraq (once Mosul has been "liberated") or elsewhere in ways that might put the JCPOA under pressure."

decision by the new US administration to take a tougher line after January 2017 regarding JCPOA implementation or to support the Syrian opposition with arms, safe havens, or no-fly zones could cause Iran to respond with countermoves in Iraq (once Mosul has been “liberated”) or elsewhere in ways that might put the JCPOA under pressure. A new Iranian administration that could take office in the wake of the May 2017 elections might likewise take steps that could further strain the fragile nuclear accord.

Iran’s strategic style in Iraq is subtle and thrifty. It does not push on closed doors: it rarely asks Iraqi leaders to take actions that are clearly opposed to Iraqi interests. Instead it works with the grain as often as possible, helping Iraqi leaders to achieve their objectives where they broadly coincide with Iran’s. This strategy of pushing on open doors or half-open doors has served them well, and will continue.

The IRGC, which oversees policy in Iraq, has many commercial interests there, particularly in religious tourism, but Iran does not have ambitious economic goals in Iraq. Development of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) into an IRGC equivalent would be a plus for Tehran, giving it more leverage in Baghdad, but it is not a driver of Iranian policy. In this sense, Iranian policy in Iraq is “solution-agnostic.” As long as the aforementioned objectives are furthered, the Iranians will work with (and if need be, abandon) any faction in Iraq.

One area to watch are the so-called Iranian “red lines” that Tehran’s allies like Hadi al-Amiri regularly communicated to the United States in 2015. One red line was US involvement in combat operations in Iraq; this line seems to have been crossed when the US launched special forces raids and artillery fire missions from Iraqi territory. Another red line was US unilateral bases, but this line was substantively crossed in locations like the Kara Soar Base (previously Firebase Bell). But Tehran’s non-response to the crossing of these “red lines” has more to do with the Iraqi government’s urgent needs and stated policies (and Iran’s desire to see the most urgent of these needs met), rather than any constraints imposed on Iran by the JCPOA.

“Unless there is a fundamental change in the nature of Iraqi politics, the fall of Mosul (and its potentially messy aftermath) may simply pave the way for “the next Sunni insurgency” ...”

If Iran-US relations were to deteriorate significantly, perhaps due to a JCPOA-related crisis, Iran might double down in areas where it (or its proxies and partners) are already challenging the U.S. and its allies: harassing U.S. vessels in the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa; providing arms and EFPs to Shiite militants in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; and transferring advanced weapons (such as antiship cruise missiles) to Shiite militias in Lebanon (Hizballah) and Yemen (the Houthis). In Iraq too, the driver of Iranian conduct is likely to be related to Iraq

or, after the fall of Mosul, internal power struggles in Iran, with the IRGC flexing its muscles abroad to demonstrate that it remains in control of Iran’s regional policies and to show that “the age of missiles” has not passed, as former president Rafsanjani recently claimed. The US knows how Iran tends to escalate in Iraq, which is likely to use proxy warfare to try to hasten a US drawdown in Iraq after the battle of Mosul. Iran’s leaders are creatures of habit, and generally operate from a well-worn playbook. Their repertoire of actions is fairly predictable, even if the course of action they decide on in any particular case is not.

Impact of the eventual fall of Mosul

The success of the coalition campaign against ISIL in Iraq will likely result in their being driven underground, rather than out of Iraq; this will create opportunities for Iran. To the degree that ISIL has a fair amount of Baathist DNA in its makeup (a significant number of its leaders are former Iraqi military and intelligence officers), it will likely go to ground to fight another day—as previous generations of Baathists did after the 1963 pro-Nasserist coup, the 2003 U.S. invasion, and the 2007 U.S. surge—rather than fight to the death. ISIL has shown that it can function very well as an underground terrorist network (as it did between 2011-2014) and that Baghdad lacks the capabilities to deal with this threat. Unless there is a fundamental change in the nature of Iraqi politics, the fall of Mosul (and its potentially messy aftermath) may simply pave the way for “the next Sunni insurgency”—whether ISIL 2.0, son of al-Qaida in Iraq, a revived neo-Baathist JRTN organization (the Army of the Men of the Naqshabandi Order), or something else. This will be especially so if ISIL remains ensconced in Syria, and can use its presence there to stage operations in Iraq.

Such an outcome will likely ensure that there is an enduring need on the part of Iraq for a capable security assistance partner/provider, whether Washington or Tehran. The United States has a keen interest in being that partner of choice, but the realities of geography and questions about America’s steadfastness ensure that Iraq will hedge with Iran in any case. Meanwhile, Tehran’s local proxies will continue to engage in the sectarian cleansing of “liberated” areas in order to secure critical lines of communication and safeguard isolated or beleaguered Shiite communities.

Iran will also try to supplement its air corridor to Damascus, which it uses to resupply Hezbollah and the Assad regime and to project power in the Levant, with an overland route through Iraq to Syria. Iran generally seeks redundant lines of communication to provide resiliency to its network of proxies and partners. And while the air corridor will, in most circumstances, remain its route of choice, a land corridor will broaden its options in the (unlikely) event that the U.S. eventually establishes a no-fly zone over Syria, or that Israel closes down Damascus airport during a future war with Hezbollah.

Drivers of Iranian Conduct

The key driver of Tehran’s conduct in Iraq will not be a change in Iran’s perception of the US threat there; the IRGC already considers America a threat but is unlikely to act as long as Iraq needs America as an ally. Instead of being threat-focused, Iran will likely be opportunistic. The US should therefore focus on the kinds of opportunities in Iraq that might present themselves to Iran in the years ahead. These might include:

- The defeat of ISIL in Mosul and their elimination as an overt threat might lessen Baghdad’s need for the US and hence Tehran’s incentive to restrain its proxies in Iraq. Thus, the post-Mosul phase could bring with it certain dangers for US personnel in Iraq. This may especially be the case if the defeat of ISIL is seen as a triumph for the kind of professional military forces that the United States is trying to create in Iraq, versus Iran’s militia proxies.
- A surge of popular support for PMU-linked politicians in Iraq, including former premier Nouri al-Maliki, in the 2017 provincial elections and 2018 national elections (assuming they are held as planned) might cause Iran to provide them money, media and political support.
- A repeat rapid drawdown and disengagement of Coalition forces from Iraq (as occurred previously in 2009-2011) might tempt Tehran to become more assertive in Iraq. Moreover, if the multinational aspect of CJTF-OIR were to dissolve in the

wake of the fall of Mosul and to once again become a unilateral U.S. effort, Iran would find it easier to foment domestic opposition to the US military presence in Iraq.

- The death of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani could offer opportunities for Tehran to support actors in the political and religious establishment who are closer to it. This is a moment that Iran has been preparing for, though it is possible that less change may occur during a post-Sistani transition than expected.

“Iraq’s government and religious establishment is the key shaper of Iranian policies in Iraq. The stronger the US relationship with Baghdad, the better protected US equities in Iraq will be.”

The above analysis suggests that developments in Iraq will be the main driver of Iranian actions there, though the defeat of ISIL may reduce Tehran’s incentive to restrain itself, and may create the potential for events in Iraq to be influenced by developments elsewhere—for instance, as a result of changes in US policy toward Syria, or Iran’s evolving perceptions of the benefits that the JCPOA has, or has not yielded.

US Actions and Options

In this respect, US actions are one of the most important shapers of Iranian behavior in Iraq. The more the US steps back, the more Iran will step forward. The less the US is cloaked within the multinational effort of CJTF-OIR, the more Iran can afford to treat the coalition as a US proxy rather than as an assembly of the world’s most powerful economies and diplomatic actors, as it currently is (including EU countries that Tehran hopes will invest in and transfer technologies to Iran, post-JCPOA). Finally, Iraq’s government and religious establishment is the key shaper of Iranian policies in Iraq. The stronger the US relationship with Baghdad, the better protected US equities in Iraq will be.

For these reasons, the U.S. should consider four steps to counter Iranian influence in Iraq and prevent the return of ISIL:

Steps to Consider

First, the United States should lock in the international Coalition’s commitment to Baghdad, helping it to secure its borders (especially with Syria) and to deal with the heightened terrorism threat that is almost certain to emerge in the wake of ISIL’s defeat as a quasi-conventional military force, to create the basis for a multi-national security venture that will outlast the current phase of the war against ISIL. CJTF-OIR should be extended and maintained as a broad-based multinational coalition, and not be allowed to shrink back into a U.S. mission with a few minor allies as “window dressing.” A new three-year Iraq Train and Equip Fund II funding package for the Iraq Security Forces (ISF) should be approved to cover 2017-2020, to supplant the first three-year ITEF which covered 2014-2017.

Second, the CJTF should rethink its approach to Security Force Assistance, building on the training successes of the last year to create a more effective ISF counter-insurgency force by considering new approaches that do not try to create a miniature US military but that account for local cultural realities, and that deal more effectively with an incentives structures that breeds corruption and prevents the ISF from training and preparing properly for combat and stabilization operations. Beyond political change in Baghdad, this would be the best way to stave off the return of ISIL, and the growth of Iranian influence via the PMUs.

Third, Washington should help Baghdad resist inevitable pressure from Tehran and its Iraqi proxies to institutionalize the pro-Iranian PMUs as a large, well-funded parallel military force as a rival to the ISF. The continued presence of a robust and effective SFA effort is probably the best way to accomplish this. US attention to the situation of the many Counter-Terrorism Service officers in the senior ranks of the ISF is important. The US will have no greater long-term partners than these US-trained officers and they need to be listened to, protected against militia intimidation, and supported in their careers.

Finally, Washington should seek to deter Tehran by quietly indicating that it will not tolerate attacks on its personnel in Iraq by the latter's proxies there, and that doing so will have adverse consequences for Iran's own trainers and advisors in the region, as well as for the future of the JCPOA. To bolster the credibility of such warnings, the United States should continue to push back against the destabilizing activities of Iranian partners and proxies in the region, such as Houthi efforts to disrupt freedom of navigation in the Bab al-Mandeb.

To this end, an inform and influence campaign documenting malign Iranian activities in Iraq—including unfair business practices, undue influence in politics, and sponsorship of violence against Iraqis—might provide leverage against Tehran, especially if such information were used as warning shots and released via non-US-leaning media outlets. In particular, Iraqis might be interested to know how expensive Iranian military support and gas and electricity imports can be, the violence that underpins Iranian domination of the religious tourism industry, or the impact on Iraqi farmers of customs-free Iranian food exports to Iraq.

Comments on Iran's Decision Calculus

Alex Vatanka

The Middle East Institute

The official Iranian line is that ISIL is an "existential threat" to Iran. I think there is plenty of hype here and the Iranian regime likes to show its fight against ISIS as a way of legitimizing itself at home and in the international community, but by and large I do not believe Iran has a desire to see ISIS become a permanent feature of the regional landscape (as was the case with the Taliban in the 1990s). There are people who believe Iran benefits from the rise of ISIS in the region, and while that might be true for Tehran's short term aims, I do not believe that Iran as multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state can afford to have ISIS stay in the picture as a pseudo state for too long. It simply raises too many threat scenarios that this regime in Tehran is unable to tackle and there will want to move against it before it becomes a bigger test with more domestic implications for Tehran and no longer just a foreign policy issue.

Transcript of 10/7/2016 Mideast Memo Interview with Alex Vatanka (Middle East Institute)³

“..., the Mideast Memo spoke recently with Alex Vatanka, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute who specializes in Middle East security and Iranian foreign policy. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

RCW: *Let's start with Mosul and the PMUs. What kind of an effect, if any, will these militias have on the bid to reclaim the city?*

VATANKA: The first thing to point to is how the PMUs first came about. This goes back to 2014, when Islamic State was rapidly taking territory in Iraq, prompting Iraqi spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a fatwa calling on Iraqi Shiites to take up arms against the jihadi militant group. If we don't get this important point right, then we're going to mistakenly point to Iran and blame them exclusively for the development of Shiite militias in Iraq, and in the process miss the real dynamic in the country. This of course does not mean that Iran's role has been minor, but it is important to understand what was evolving politically in Iraq at that time, and why that moment has since passed. It is no longer 2014, and the need for the formation of militias has dissipated. For the Iraqi army, this is going to be a long-term struggle not just against ISIS, but also the sons of ISIS. Defeating these extremist forces in the country will also require a political solution, however, and one that involves Iraq's Sunni communities. This cannot be accomplished through sectarian militias.

“For the Iraqi army, this is going to be a long-term struggle not just against ISIS, but also the sons of ISIS.”

RCW: *How does Iran view the PMUs? Do they hope to model them after their own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)?*

VATANKA: The Iranians are pretty clear that they would prefer to establish a state within a state inside Iraq -- something like the Revolutionary Guard or Hezbollah in Lebanon, if they could get away with it, which is doubtful. In truth, the Iranians have some fundamental objectives in Iraq. First and foremost, nobody in Iran wants to see Iraq ever again develop into a power that could threaten Iranian security. Outside of this, however, the Iranians have demonstrated some flexibility. If Tehran's baseline preference is to keep Iraq militarily weak, it still has a tremendous amount of middle ground to bring in aggrieved Sunni communities to help stabilize the country. Iran knows as well as anyone that these communities will be essential to not only defeating ISIS, but ISIS-ism. They've seen firsthand the longevity of groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan.

RCW: *So Tehran doesn't want Iraq to be a failed state?*

³ http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2016/10/07/what_does_iran_want_in_iraq_alex_vatanka_mosul_popular_mobilization_units.html

VATANKA: Iran doesn't want a Gaza as its neighbor, no. Why settle for that when it could instead exert influence over a much stabler country? Iraq has developed into one of Iran's biggest trading partners -- we're talking billions of dollars. Sure, Iran could sell weapons to Iraq, but you can't sell cars and refrigerators to a failed state.

In Tehran there is a minimum consensus on Iraq. The Rouhanis of the world want to develop state-to-state relations, whereas the IRGC sees Iraq more as a little brother. But Iranian officials need to come up with a more uniform approach, because while its current policy might make perfect sense in Tehran, it is the image of the meddling Revolutionary Guard that is most prevalent.

RCW: *And that is the image being broadcasted to the world.*

VATANKA: It's a real problem for them. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the Revolutionary Guard is the face of the Islamic Republic around the world.

RCW: *Mosul is about 85 km from Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdish region, and Kurdish Peshmerga forces have played a key role in the fight against ISIS. How do policymakers in Tehran view the Kurds in post-ISIS Iraq?*

VATANKA: Iran has traditionally been closer to one particular Kurdish faction, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, but it has also worked in more recent years to keep longtime

“the Arab states in the Gulf and the Middle East have missed an opportunity to match Iranian influence in Baghdad. If, instead of looking at Iraqi Shiites as Shias first and Arabs second, the region's Arab powers should try to view it the other way around, and really focus on the Arab character of Iraq..”

Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani in power. Iran has never really taken full Kurdish independence seriously, but Iranian generals got a taste for fighting the Kurds about 40 years ago during the 1979 Kurdish rebellion. Iran, remember, is an imperial state with many different minority groups, not just its own Kurds. It has multiple restive communities to worry about and keep in check.

RCW: *Would Iran accept more Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq as a tradeoff for stability in the region?*

VATANKA: Iran has already accepted a great deal of Kurdish autonomy, and in 2014, when Iraqi forces were dropping their weapons and fleeing, it was the Iranians who rapidly moved into Iraq to assist in the fight against ISIS. The Kurds haven't forgotten this.

RCW: *The political situation in Baghdad remains tenuous. What role does Iran have in the country's current political discord, and how does it hope to exert influence in Baghdad moving forward?*

VATANKA: I look at the Iraq-Iran relationship a different way. I believe the Arab states in the Gulf and the Middle East have missed an opportunity to match Iranian influence in Baghdad. If, instead of looking at Iraqi Shiites as Shias first and Arabs second, the region's Arab powers should try to view it the other way around, and really focus on the Arab character of Iraq. Iraqi Shiites fear that Arab states ultimately want to install another Sunni

strongman in Baghdad. If the Gulf states, rather than disregarding these fears, instead examined and exploited the differences between Arab and Persian societies, and also how unusual the model of government in Iran is as compared to Shiite history, this could present them with an opportunity.

RCW: *It's a rather modern concept, the Iranian supreme leader.*

VATANKA: It was completely made up by one man in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Compare that to Iraq, where you have Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, more of a quietist, and you have a model that could not only work in Iraq but throughout the Shiite world. But if Iraqi Shiites remain convinced that marauding Sunnis are going to come and murder them, this will only continue to push Iraq's Shia toward Tehran.

Transcript of 9/29/2016 SMA Speaker Series Telecon with Alireza Nader (RAND Corporation)

Moderated by Meg Egan, SRC

Meg Egan, SMA Office: Today, we have Mr. Alireza Nader, and he is a senior international policy analyst at the Rand Corporation and an author of *The Days After the Deal with Iran: Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*. His research is focused on Iran's political dynamics, elite decision making, and Iranian foreign policy. Prior to joining Rand, Nader

“We often think of the conflicts in the Middle East as being between the Shia and the Sunni, but Iranian officials see it differently. They don't like to emphasize the difference between the Shia and Sunni ... Iran is very careful not to emphasize sectarian divides in the region because the Shia are a minority, and Iran still aspires to leadership of the Muslim world -- the entire Muslim Middle East and not just the Shia.”

served as a research analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses. He is a native speaker of Farsi. He also received his MA in International Affairs from the George Washington University. Today, Ali is going to discuss Iran's regional policy after the nuclear agreement.

So Ali, I'll turn it over to you now.

Alireza Nader, RAND: Thank you very much, and Good Morning. I want to give a brief presentation, then we will open up the discussion to questions and answers so we can have more of a discussion. I want to briefly talk about Iran's approach towards the United States after the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPOA or the nuclear agreement) and then really focus on what Iran has been doing in the Middle East, Iran's threat perceptions, its military and national security doctrine, and what we could potentially expect in the future.

There was a lot of talk after the nuclear agreement that either Iran's approach to engaging the United States would change after President Hassan Rouhani became president and

delivered the nuclear agreement. A lot of people, in Washington DC especially, argued that the nuclear agreement provided a ripe opportunity for Iran and the United States to engage each other and cooperate in the Middle East, whereas a group of people argued that Iran would be emboldened or empowered by the nuclear agreement and that it would gain more power in the Middle East. I don't think either approach is entirely correct. The nuclear agreement hasn't provided the dividends that were expected in terms of US-Iran cooperation, and there are a number of reasons, but, I think, largely, Hassan Rouhani in Iran has not been able to reshape Iran's foreign policy. Iran's political system is largely led by the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the revolutionary guards and a number of other reactionary or conservative forces in Iran, and they have been driving Iran's policy from the very beginning. The Supreme Leader in Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated his belief that even with the nuclear agreement, the relationship with the United States would not change, that fundamentally, the Islamic Republic and the United States had major ideological and national differences. We see today that the United States and Iran may have reached some sort of a *détente*, if you will, in the region, but they are still opposed to each other on a number of issues.

But I don't want to really focus too much on the US-Iran relationship but instead talk about how Iran sees the region. I would argue, for now anyhow, that Iranian leadership does not view the United States as the most immediate threat to Iran's interests in the Middle East but rather, the biggest threat from Tehran's perspective is Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism (or Takfirism as Iran defines that), and Daesh or ISIS or the Islamic state, whatever you want to call it (I'll call it Daesh). Those are the most immediate threats to Iran's national security interests, and today, we see that the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is increasing every day, and I think Iran's focus is very much on defeating jihadi forces in the Middle East through a variety of means. Today, I'll talk more about Iran's use of political warfare to combat Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism. We often think of the conflicts in the Middle East as being between the Shia and the Sunni, but Iranian officials see it differently. They don't like to emphasize the difference between the Shia and Sunni; rather, the divisions for them are between what they call *takfiris* or Saudi-supported Wahhabis that maintain the Shia are not true Muslims. So, Iran is very careful not to emphasize sectarian divides in the region because the Shia are a minority, and Iran still aspires to leadership of the Muslim world -- the entire Muslim world, especially the Muslim Middle East and not just the Shia. However, Iran's strategy is often dependent on the Shia; it's very much isolated in the Middle East among the Sunnis, and it relies on Shia militant groups to expand its power. But, I think it's important to remember that the Islamic Republic of Iran has always had pan-Islamic aspirations and sees itself more than just the Shia revolutionary power.

Now, I'd like to focus on two specific areas where Iran is very active in terms of its political warfare strategy and expanding influence: Iraq and Syria. I'm sure many of you are very familiar with both, and some of the information I'm going to present is not going to be new to you, but in terms of Iran's strategy in Iraq, as you know, Iran has gained a lot of power in Iraq since the 2003 US invasion and the ascendance of Shia parties are in Baghdad. I argue that the rise of Daesh actually has been beneficial to Iran because it has allowed it to expand its power in Iraq. The failure of the Iraqi Shia-led military forces in countering Daesh in the very beginning ... really helped Iran expand its power in Iraq because a lot of the Shias turn to Iran for support, and Iran was really one of the first countries or parties to directly get involved in the fight against Daesh. If you remember, in the Kurdish regions, Iran really stepped up its support for the KRG or the Kurdish regional government, and there were

reports even of Iran sending troops and military equipment into those areas in Iraq, and both the Shia in Iraq and the Kurds were very much appreciative of that.

Iran is pursuing a multi-prong warfare strategy in Iraq. It has cultivated relations with a number of Shia and even non-Shia political parties, and I think when you look at Iran's strategy, it plays kind of a divide and conquer game because a lot of Iraqi Shia are suspicious of Iran; they don't approve of the Islamic Republic, ... or rule of the supreme leader. But, Iran does rely on a few key Iraqi Shia militias to maintain power, and whenever one party gets too powerful, Iran expands support for another Shia militia. Overall, Iran does not want the Iraqi Shia to be a monolithic force that might oppose Iran. Although Iran's sponsors political parties and wants them to vote in a bloc, Iran knows that it has certain vulnerabilities in Iraq and faces a lot of opposition. Iran isn't particularly worried that if Ali al-Sistani passes away that a more anti-Iranian figure will take power in Iraq; so, it has, in addition to sponsoring militias, has trained many junior Iraqi clerics and has expanded its religious influence ... something it's been doing since 2003. So, I've been working on this for a very long time, and I think when Sistani passes away, then Iran is going to have a large role in shaping who succeeds him because it has so much soft and hard influence in Iraq.

When we look at Iraq today, the many Iraqi Shia militias in that country are going to play a very big role once ISIL or Daesh has been defeated from Mosul and has been mostly conquered in Iraq. If you look at Iraq today, there are many Iraqi militia leaders who look to Iran as a model and even talk about emulating the paramilitary forces and the revolutionary guards in Iraq, and many of them have very close ties to the revolutionary guards ... So, I wouldn't be entirely surprised if a parallel state structure or militia structure like the revolutionary guards emerges in Iraq, and I think that we're witnessing that today actually. My guess is that it's going to become much stronger in the future, and you can make the argument that the United States doesn't have a plan really to address that in the future. You can argue against me on that point.

I'm going to briefly turn to Iran's strategy in Syria in terms of political warfare. I think, in terms of Iran using political warfare and religious influence in Syria, it has faced many more challenges than it has had in Iraq. Syria has been tough for Iran in terms of expanding its ideological influence, but it has done certain things in Syria that we find in other places, like Iraq. For example, Iran played a big role in setting up the national defense forces in Syria, and it has attempted to indoctrinate the national defense forces with Iran's revolutionary ideology, probably not with much success. As you know, Syria has a very, very small Shia population, about 300,000 people (that is an estimate). The Alawites are not really truly Shia; they're depicted as being Shia, but religiously, they're very different than the Iranian Shias ... The Alawite elite tend to be secular, so Iran has had a difficult time indoctrinating the largely Sunni and Alawite and Christian populations in Syria. It has even tried indoctrinating some of the Christian forces fighting with the Syrian regime. However, one area in which Iran has been very successful is using religious appeal to attract foreign fighters to Syria. One of Shia Islam's holiest sites is near Damascus, the Zaynab shrine, and Iran has used the Zaynab shrine to motivate Shia fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and of course Iran to come and fight on behalf of the Syrian regime. So, in that regard, Iran's political warfare has been relatively successful because it has created what I call a foreign legion in Syria to fight for it.

Iran has also taken advantage of Syria's terrible economic situation to create an economic dependency on Tehran; there have been reports of Iran providing billions of dollars to the

Assad regime. I haven't found very precise figures, but I think it would be safe to assume that Iran is providing a lot of economic assistance to Syria, and if the conflict ends in Syria, I think the Syrian government is going to be economically dependent on Iran to a large extent.

In terms of public diplomacy, I think Iran has had less success than it has in Iraq ... I think even though Iran faces popular hostility in Iraq, Iraqi Shia to some extent identify with Iran, whereas I don't think Syria's population naturally would identify with Iran in any shape or form. So, overall, Iran has been more successful in terms of political warfare in Iraq and less so in Syria, but it has made some inroads into Syria. Once the conflict ends, we're going to see a weak Syrian central government with many militias funded and trained by Iran, which tends to be Iran's MO throughout the region.

Now, what can we expect in the future? I made the argument that Iran's policies are largely driven by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the revolutionary guards. I think, even if President Rouhani is reelected in 2017, his chances of reshaping Iran's foreign policies are very minimal, and I would expect US-Iran relations to actually potentially become more hostile with the next US president coming and with the fact that forces that shape Iran have not changed. It will be interesting to see what happens when Ayatollah Khamenei dies and his successor is chosen. Right now, there are not any major indications of radical change after Khamenei, although I don't really think we can predict what happens after him. So, that will be interesting to watch. In terms of the Saudi-Iran competition, once Daesh recedes and becomes less of a threat, we can actually expect the Saudi-Iran rivalry to heat up even more. Looking at the Saudi leadership, there is really very little enthusiasm for engaging Iran or even communicating with it, and while figures in Iran like President Rouhani were in the past eager to engage Saudi Arabia, I don't think chances of that are high even if Rouhani is reelected. With that, I'd like to open the discussion to questions on any issue that you may have. Thank you.

Meg Egan: Great, thank you very much, Ali. Alright, at this point, we're going to go into our questions and answers session. If you have a question, please state your name and your organization.

Question 1: Sir, [could you] speak a little on the IRGC's role in the Syrian conflict, just kind of a general question?

Alireza Nader: Sir, I think the revolutionary guard is really the premiere force shaping everything Iran does in Syria, from military strategy to economic assistance to intelligence cooperation to political warfare. We've seen them appear repeatedly in key battle fields ... Iran is in a lot of ways driving the Syrian regime's military strategy against the opposition in tandem with Russia. ... So, the revolutionary guards play a huge role in shaping Iran's policies in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere, and when we look at the guards, this is a very important institution in Iran. It is the most powerful internal intelligent security force in Iran. It has huge business interests in Iran, and it's also the most powerful military force. It gets a large share of the budgets, the military budget, and big resources to develop missiles and a number of other equipment. So, really, the guards are the key to understanding Iran's regional policies and also a lot of its domestic politics as well, even though there is a "moderate" president in Iran today.

Question 2: I am originally from Syria, and I have two questions. First is do you think that the rival of Shia militias, like the NPU in Iraq, are an answer for the rise of Sunni extremists like ISIS and AQ? Second, talking about the economic dependency, many articles in Arabic are stating that the Iranians are buying land in the heart of Damascus and are resettling Shia Iraqi families. In that regard and the Russian of taking over the airport, do you think that along the way, if we manage to stop the armed conflict, do you see along the way some kind of clash between Iran and Russia on a piece of the cake? Thank you.

Alireza Nader: Those are both very good questions, and yes. There are many reasons for the rise of Daesh and Sunni jihadism, and not all of them have to do with Iran and the Shia, but I think Iran sectarian policies in Iraq and Syria and throughout the Middle East do contribute to the rise of Sunni jihadi groups. I can never really separate the factors and say what Iran does contributes the most, but it is a big factor, and when we look at Iran's involvement and Iraq's especially, but to a smaller extent in Syria, Iran does use religion as a motivating force to get people to fight for it. So, that's definitely a factor. I've also read that Iranians are buying a lot of land around Damascus and probably close to the Zaynab shrine; part of it is probably because Iran wants to have a lot of influence after the conflict.

In terms of differences with Russia, I think right now, Iran is more of a junior partner to Russia and Syria. Iran tried to keep the military balance against the opposition, but it didn't really succeed before the Russian era of intervention in Syria. So, Iran is very much dependent on Russia and Syria, but I'm not sure if the differences between the two countries are going to lead to an overt clash because even before the conflict in Syria, both Russia and Iran had a lot of influence in Syria, and they were able to coexist and respect each other's sphere of influence. So, I'm not necessarily sure that they're going to clash over Syria once the conflict ends.

Question 3 (Doc Cabayan): Thank you so very much for briefing us today; it's much appreciated. My question to you is, I guess, very simplistic. What is Iran's long term view of itself and its neighbors, particularly to the West? I mean, does it realistically believe, and you mentioned all the moves they were making in Syria, is it realistic for them to expect to have that degree of influence that they would like to have in Iraq through Syria and Lebanon? Do they believe that's sustainable or are they trying to get the best they can during this turmoil so when this situation stabilizes, say years from now, they have a pretty good geopolitical position in the region? What are they thinking long term?

Alireza Nader: That's a great question, and the short answer is yes. They think they can be predominant in the region or in places like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon... areas where the Shia are either a majority or have a lot of influence or are a strong minority. I would argue right now that because of the weakness of central states like Iraq and Syria and Lebanon, Iran is able to gain a lot of influence in those countries. So, it's not so much because Iran is very strong because Iran also has its own problems; economically, the situation hasn't really improved since the nuclear agreement, the country is divided, there's a lot of public dissatisfaction in Iran, but because the surrounding states are so weak, and that gives Iran a lot of leverage. I think Iranian officials are at a point where they're very comfortable with their position in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. I would make the argument actually that right now, the military balance is tipped in Iran's favor in Syria and Iraq, of course, and in terms of negotiating Assad's departure, Iran can maintain a much more firm position and not really have to give in. It's not really because of the nuclear agreement per say; I don't think that has empowered Iran as much as the regional dynamics.

I think Iranian officials are still very worried about Saudi Arabia. There's a genuine fear in Iran that Wahhabi forces and *Takfiris* pose a major threat to Iranian national security. So, yes; Iran sees itself as a natural power in the Middle East, but also, there's a major sense of insecurity because when we think of Iran, we have to remember that it fought an 8-year devastating war with Iraq, and during that war, the Saudis and a lot of other gulf states supported Iraq. You can debate who deserves blame for that conflict, but Iran worries that in the future, a major Sunni bloc is going to wage war against them, and it was to make sure that places like Iraq and Syria and Lebanon don't fall to Sunni forces backed by Saudi Arabia. So, Iran's strategy is defensive but in a sensitive way, if you will. Iranian officials, a lot of them have talked about fighting Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabis in Syria and Iraq so they don't have to fight them on Iran's borders or even within Iran.

Question 4: You mentioned how, well, we've heard for a while that Khamenei has had terminal cancer, and he said that the situation would be interesting given who his successor is, are there any inklings in Iran as to who has been chosen to be or groomed to be his successor, or is that something that has yet to be determined?

Alireza Nader: That is something that has to be determined. There is not a lot of public discussion about Khamenei's successor, and I think if Khamenei indicated who would succeed him, it would undercut his authority right now. It's not clear if he has terminal cancer; there have been rumors about his health. He had a prostate surgery, which was very much publicized 2 or 3 years ago, but there's an expectation that like everyone else, he's going to die one day, and that might be soon. Now, one figure that's often mentioned lately is Ayatollah Raisi, who just took over the shrine foundation in the city of Mashhad, but there have been other figures like Ayatollah Shahrudi who have been discussed as a potential successor to Ayatollah Khamenei. Shahrudi is an Iraqi, Ayatollah, former head of the judiciary in Iran, but also former head of the Islamic supreme council of Iraq. Although, some argue that he can't become Iran's leader because he's not even really Iranian; he's Iraqi, but I think that both the process and the outcome are very unpredictable. If you're interested, a few years ago, I wrote a study on this called "The Next Supreme Leader." It's on RAND's website, and I describe or discuss some of the factors that would shape succession in Iran. This study's a little dated, but it will give you a good idea of how succession has worked in the past and how it might work once Khamenei passes away.

Question 5: What do you believe Iran sees in terms of the effectiveness of the United States to make a difference in the region from its perspective? How do you see it evaluating the US as an adversary?

Alireza Nader: I think that there is a great amount of respect and fear and distress for the United States among Iran's elite. I think that there are different approaches toward the United States. For example, Khamenei and much of the guards and more conservative forces think that Iran should be aggressive towards the United States, whereas president Rouhani and foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif argue for a more diplomatic, pragmatic approach towards the United States and see the United States more as a traditional rival than a hardcore ideological competitor, which is really Khamenei sees in the United States. I don't get any indications that the Iranian leader still thinks the United States is about to go away from the Middle East, that its position is fundamentally in decline in the region necessarily, although Iranian officials have exploited opportunities in Iraq and Syria to extend their power. In terms of the next US president, Iranian officials are not

hopeful that major changes will come. Khamenei always says that it doesn't matter who is president of the United States, whether it's a democrat or republican; the fundamental US position towards the Islamic Republic will not change. So, I think for the immediate future and for the long term future, Iran's leadership views the United States as a rival to be countered, and that rivalry is not going to go away any time soon. So, a lot of Iran's approach toward developing its military is going to be focused on combatting the United States and US allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel in the future.

Questioner: Yes, a follow up. What I'd really like to try to understand is how you believe how effective they think the United States is in the region in taking on their own interests.

Alireza Nader: I think they believe the United States is still very effective. I mean, in the United States, there's this discussion of the US withdrawing from the Middle East and not being interested in the region. That's not the way that Iranian officials really perceive the United States because they still believe the US maintains a very strong alliance with Saudi Arabia and Israel and that the US is still a worthy competitor in the region. So, I think they still view the United States as being very effective, but they also believe they have effective ways of countering the United States through political warfare, ideological warfare, soft power, supporting "proxy militias." So, yes, the United States is powerful, but so is the Islamic Republic.

Question 6: I wondered... our speaker used the term political warfare a couple of times. I'm wondering as to how he defines it so that we can define how it differs from other types of warfare, military particularly.

Alireza Nader: Well, in terms of political warfare, I'd define it basically as anything non-kinetic, so, Iran's support for political parties for non-governmental organizations throughout the Middle East, Iran's economic activities, its support for religious institutions ... its use of the Zaynab shrine in Syria. So, it's, you know, a very broad description, but really, anything non-kinetic Iran does in the region. So, I didn't really talk about what kind of weapons Iran provides to the various militias or how it's fighting the military or it's conducting its military strategy in Syria and Iraq.

Two Elements of Iran’s Strategic Decision Calculus

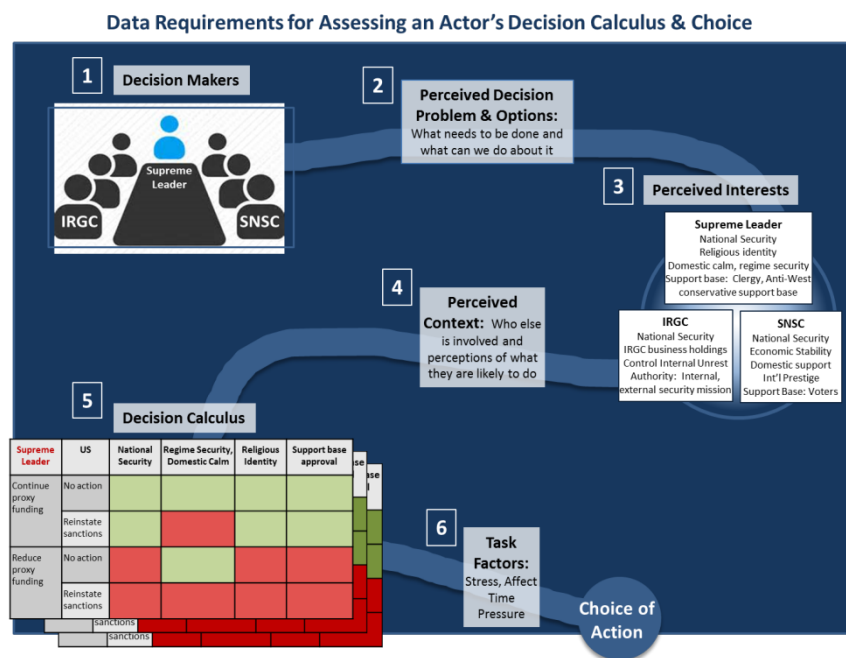
Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois
NSI, Inc.

Previous research⁴ shows the pivotal role that Iran will play in the way the future unfolds in the Levant and Gulf region. Specifically, the courses of action that Iranian leaders choose in order to further security, economic, prestige and domestic political interests can either 1) quell tensions and facilitate Shi’a-Sunni reconciliation in Iraq and Syria, or 2) very easily keep the region in persistent sectarian conflict. What factors will determine Iran’s strategic calculus? And, more importantly, is there anything that the US or Coalition actors might do to incentivize Iran to choose the first, less conflict-prone path?

The elements of a strategic calculus

Before turning to Iran, it is helpful to clarify some of the terms we are using. First, in decision science, a “decision calculus” refers to a specific step in an actor’s decision process. It implies that a decision maker has already: 1) identified and framed a problem or circumstance that requires a choice; 2) completed at least an initial search to identify possible courses of action he may take; 3) identified which of his interests he believes are at stake relative to that problem; and 4) has identified other actors he believes are involved and the options he believes they would consider in response to his chosen action.

Combining each of the decision maker’s perceived options with those attributed to his opponent generates a list of potential outcome scenarios. The decision calculus is an evaluation of each of the outcomes and associated actions based on the degree to which interests are satisfied.



What is “calculated”?

We can best understand the decision calculus as the evaluation that occurs when the actor’s decision options and outcomes are evaluated against its interests. What is “calculated” are the acceptable trade-offs on the potential loss or satisfaction of interests associated with each potential option across the actor’s interests. Decision calculuses that require no trade-offs between interests are, quite literally “no brainers.” That is, where all interests point to

⁴ The study, Allison Astorino-Courtois (2015) Analysis of the Dynamics of Near East Futures: Assessing Actor Interests, Resolve and Capability in 5 of 8 Regional Conflicts is available on request from the SMA office.

a single choice (e.g., the cheapest car is also the sleekest, most fuel efficient and safest) very little cognitive energy is required to make the choice. In general, these are also the more difficult choices or behaviors to influence. However, applying influence at points where an actor must make trade-offs between conflicting interests often can guide the actor's choice in one direction or another.

The data that an analyst would need to assess an actor's calculus and ultimate COA choice mirror those of the decision steps outlined above with the addition of one additional input: information about the setting in which the decision is taken, i.e., the "task factors." The presence of decisional stress, positive or negative emotions or highly complex choice problems among other factors impact the ways in which people make their decisions (choice rules) and thus the outcome and final choice of action.⁵

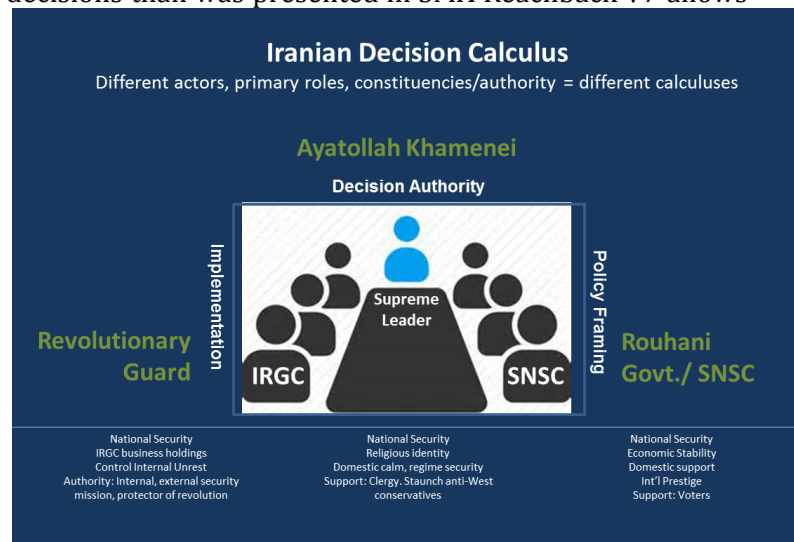
Iran's Decisions

Identifying Iran's post-ISIL decision calculus in specific, operational terms requires a specific decision or choice problem as perceived by Iranian leaders. Lacking that, we still can discuss two important inputs to modeling Iran's decision calculus: who the decision makers are likely to be on a security-related topic, and which strategic interests might be in play.

Decision Unit: Whose calculus is it?

A closer look at Iranian security decisions than was presented in SMA Reachback V7 allows

us to represent the elements of the Iranian foreign policy decision process at a bureaucratic (rather than nation-state) level. The key actors are 1) the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who espouses conservative views; 2) Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – the officer corps of which can also be characterized as conservative; and 3) the Government of President Rouhani who was elected as a Reformist.⁶



Key Actors in the Decision Process

The Government. Although most Iran watchers would identify Iranian security policy as directed by the conservative views (and interests) of the Supreme Leader and the

⁵ Note that the decision model described here illustrates a cognitive or subjective decision analysis. While structured it relaxes rational choice assumptions about value trade-offs (there are none in rational choice) and allows the possibility that decision makers or decision units would employ less than normative (strictly rational) choice rules.

⁶ Although in reality none of these is a unified bloc organ but is comprised of individuals with a range of primarily conservative to primarily reformist views, for the purposes of a broad decision analysis it is reasonable to consider them three entities on the presumption that the differences in interests and preferences between the three groups are greater than the differences among them.

Revolutionary Guard, reality may not be so black and white.⁷ True, Ayatollah Khamenei is the ultimate decision authority. However, the views of Rouhani and other Reformist voices can enter policy calculations in the pre-decision stage by way of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) chaired by the President.⁸ The SNSC is tasked with researching and framing foreign policy issues, and typically reports the pros and cons of options to the Supreme Leader. In terms of the decision model discussed above, the SNSC functions to shape problem identification, identify options and evaluate these over various interests (i.e., pros and cons); if not always Step 1, the SNSC is involved in setting up the decision calculus by taking on Steps 2, 3 and some of 4.

The Supreme Leader. According to the Iranian Constitution, authority for Step 5 in the decision process – “solving” the decision calculus to make the final choice – rests with the Supreme Leader. However, in practice Shahidsaless (2015)⁹ reports that Khamenei often serves as a balancer between the popularly elected Rouhani government and more conservative views typically associated with the IRGC and military although in the “overwhelming majority of cases,” Khamenei has decided in line with the views of the majority of the Council.

The IRGC. While the views and interests of the IRGC clearly influence Iran’s strategic decisions both via IRGC representation on the SNSC and the broad network of Iranian civilian authorities who are retired IRGC officers, it can be argued that the Revolutionary Guard’s role in implementing security-policy one decided offers its greatest latitude to influence Iran’s security behaviors. In other words, much of the IRGC’s direct power over Iranian strategic behaviors happens after the decision calculus and choice in how (or whether) that choice is implemented.¹⁰

Why is this important to consider when assessing Iranian security decisions and behavior?

Because the different worldviews and competition between the IRGC and Government can insert domestic political concerns into Iranian security decisions that have nothing to do with the security problem but reflect the domestic political competition for power within the leadership. Leaving these real issues out of analyses of the Iranian security calculus can greatly skew our understanding of the real motivations and processes the drive Iranian behaviors.

⁷ Shahidsaless, Shahir. Iran Pulse, Al Monitor March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-khamenei-decisions-snsc.html>

⁸ President Rouhani appoints the SNSC Secretary (a representative of the Supreme Leader, and currently, a former head of the IRGC Navy) and the Government Ministers (e.g., intelligence and security, interior) who serve as members of the Council (the Speaker of the Parliament is elected by Parliament which has of late been supportive of Rouhani). Still, the other members of the Council, namely the Chief of the Army Staff, Chief of the Army, Chief of the IRGC, the Chief Justice and of course his own representative are appointed by the Supreme Leader.

⁹ Shahidsaless, Shahir. Iran Pulse, Al Monitor March 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/iran-khamenei-decisions-snsc.html>

¹⁰ While the primary mission of the IRGC is internal protection of the revolution, it has operational responsibility for the Strait of Hormuz and engages in foreign activities notably via its Al Quds brigade. As is the case with the military establishments of many countries in the region (e.g., Syria, Pakistan) the IRGC is both a security organization and has accumulated significant economic clout mainly via its control of major engineering and construction conglomerates and holding companies in Iran. CRF Backgrounders, Council on Foreign Relations, June 14, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-revolutionary-guards/p14324>

Strategic Interests

While its tactics may change, there is little to suggest that Iran’s key strategic interests will be changed with ISIL defeat. What may change however, and may be open to US/Coalition shaping, are the priorities that the Iranian leadership assigns to these interests. By and large the three groups involved in foreign policy decision making in Iran hold many of the same strategic interests. The differences among them are the priorities each gives to these, which trade-offs are seen as acceptable, and therefore what each sees as the best choice of action.

Key, enduring strategic interests that we can be confident will feature in decision calculus for most issues in the near to mid-term are outlined briefly as follows:

Prestige; National Security: Increase Iranian political influence in Iraq, the region

SUPREME LEADER	REFORM, ROUHANI	IRGC	
X	X	X	Iran’s grand strategy is to become a regional powerhouse by expanding its influence, support, and power within the region (Morell, 2015). It has long sought to establish itself as a key cultural, political, and economic player in the Middle East by strategically engaging Shia populations in the region (Bazoobandi, 2014; Cook, Barkey, & Natali, 2015; R. Mohammed, 2015) and pro-Iran governments in Iraq and Syria. Providing military support to Iraq and aid to Shiite militias in the fight against ISIL (Almukhtar & Yourish, 2015; Martin et al., 2015; R. Mohammed, 2015) both strengthens Iran’s influence in Iraq and addresses the existential threat posed by ISIL-like Sunni jihadism. In Syria, Iran has worked to safeguard the survival of the Assad regime which enhances its influence in Syria – a strategic location that is the lynchpin of Iran’s influence over the Arab-Israeli conflict as it provides a transit way for Iran to ship arms and resources to Hezbollah (Bonsey, 2014). Iran’s backing of Hezbollah also provides it considerable influence in Lebanon, which provides leverage against Israel (Khatib, 2014; Salem, 2014).

National Security: Dominate/ sustain Shi’a balance of power; mitigate threat from Israel, Saudi Arabia, US

SUPREME LEADER	REFORM, ROUHANI	IRGC	
X	X	X	Iran has a demonstrated interest in providing support to Shiite groups in the region with the intent of reinforcing Shiite-led governments or overthrowing Sunni Arab regimes (Morell, 2015). Sunni grievances in the region have increased in recent years, fueled by these “endless interventions” by Iran and the staunch support given to Maliki and Assad who are seen as persecuting Sunnis. Syria is the lynchpin of Iran’s deterrent against Israel. It provides a transit way for Iran to ship arms and resources to Hezbollah (Bonsey, 2014). Iran’s backing of Hezbollah also provides it considerable influence in Lebanon, which provides leverage against Israel (Khatib, 2014; Salem, 2014).

Economic; Domestic/Constituent Support: Expand economic/trade ties in region and perhaps with Europe

SUPREME LEADER	REFORM, ROUHANI	IRGC	
	X		Beyond a tactic for strengthening Iran’s economy, President Rouhani and Reformist voices support improving relations with the EU and Western countries – what the Reformist Shargh Daily referred to as Rouhani’s task of “breaking taboos.” Conservatives not so much. Perhaps unexpectedly, the success or perceived failure of the JCPOA may have important domestic political implications in Iran now and in

the run-up to the May 2017 presidential election. Specifically, the perceived failure of the Agreement to produce widely anticipated improvements in the Iranian economy is a point on which Rouhani and other reform-minded thinkers will be particularly vulnerable to advances by conservative opponents.¹¹ In fact, Gallagher et al (2016)¹² report that although President Rouhani is still the front runner for the 2017 presidential election his lead over former President Ahmadinejad has dropped to a narrow margin largely on account of Rouhani's perceived failure to improve the economy – a significant initial hope associated with the JCPOA. As popular support for the Reformists diminishes, the IRGC gains influence in the policy decision process. Eisenstadt and Knights (The Washington Institute) point to IRGC harassment of US forces in the Gulf as related to domestic political competition. Specifically, it is the IRGC “flexing its muscles abroad to demonstrate that it remains in control of Iran’s regional policies.” In a recent example of the push and pull of political power in internal Iranian politics, the Foreign Ministry sent the kind of crossed messages that illustrate the different priorities of reform and conservative factions. At the end of October Mohammad Javad Larijani, head the Human Rights Council of Iran’s judiciary criticized an EU resolution calling for opening an embassy in Tehran saying “They should know that the judicial system will definitely not allow such a nest of corruption to be established in Iran.” On November 6, Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi announced that, “It is now crucial to open the EU office in the Iranian capital... ‘Since we have more collaborations [with the EU] due to new developments, it is unmanageable for an ambassador of another European country to take care of Iran-European Union relations.” The next day however a Foreign Ministry spokesman denied there was a “decisive and comprehensive view” on opening an EU office in the city.

Economic; Domestic/Constituent Support: Defend economic assets in Syria and Iraq; gain foothold in post-conflict economy

SUPREME LEADER	REFORM, ROUHANI	IRGC
X	X	X

Syria remains a focus of Iranian economic activity and foreign investment, particularly in the face of remaining Western sanctions. Since civil conflict broke out in 2011, and Turkey and Qatar halted Syrian aid, the Islamic Republic has provided nearly \$5 billion in loans to Syria to prop up its economy and rebuild infrastructure (al-Saadi, 2015). If Assad survives, Iran - the largest producer of cement and iron in the Middle East - will be in a good position to benefit from post-conflict reconstruction projects - a point reiterated by the top Iranian economic official in Damascus according to an 18 May 2015 news report (Press TV, 2015). Iraq has also been the recipient of large amounts of Iranian investment and has become Iran’s largest trading partner.

¹¹ When it was first concluded the JCPOA was a domestic win for Rouhani and Reformist voices in Iran and Rouhani saw a large spike in already high public approval while approval of conservative politicians declined (Gallagher et al 2015). At the time polls indicated that the Agreement was overwhelmingly popular with Iranians many of whom anticipated rapid improvements in their quality of life as a direct result. By summer 2016 however, support had fallen but remained greater than 50% of those polled. Gallagher et al (2016) surmise that this drop off occurred because a majority had not seen expected improvements in their standards of living. Gallagher et al (2016) report that although President Rouhani is still the front runner for the 2017 presidential election his lead over conservative former President Ahmadinejad has dropped to a narrow margin largely on account of Rouhani's perceived failure to improve the economy – a significant initial hope associated with the JCPOA.

¹² Gallagher, Nancy, Ebrahim Mohseni and Clay Ramsay. 2016. “Iranian Public Opinion, One Year after the Nuclear Deal,” Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, <http://cisssm.umd.edu/publications/iranian-public-opinion-one-year-after-nuclear-deal>.

Regime Security: Defend Islamic identity and leadership of the regime

SUPREME LEADER	REFORM, ROUHANI	IRGC
X	x	x

The Supreme Leader and his conservative religious colleagues have the most to gain from maintaining the religious identity of the Iranian state – the main justification for their political power and authority. This amounts to the security of their leadership of the regime. For this reason, Khamenei is not likely to rule exclusively in

line with the preferences of the IRGC – or exclusively in opposition to it, but to check IRGC power with that of the government, especially as the Revolutionary Guard gains independent political and economic strength and with it pose a potential threat to the religious leadership.

Constituent Support; Security: Ensure domestic calm; Iranian internal security and sovereign control

SUPREME LEADER	REFORM, ROUHANI	IRGC
X	X	X

Threats to the internal stability of Iran emanate from both inside and outside of the country and at present involve two critical concerns: protecting Iran’s borders and assuring stability in the southwest. In the past, the regime has faced separatist movements from Azeris – the Arab population in the southwest oil production

area of Khuzestan. Especially as sanctions are lifted, Reformist voices are keen to avoid unrest that would cause concern among foreign investors. The IRGC of course has the mission of protecting the revolution from both internal and external threats. More immediately, Iran has worked to avoid ISIL or other Sunni extremist groups taking up residence on its borders. From the outset Iran has sought to keep the fighting in Iraq contained (at the same time that it extends its influence there) for example, by training and funding the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and providing support to the Iraq Security Forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga (one of the groups along with Syria who supported Iran in its devastating war with Iraq during the 1980s).

Opportunities for Shaping

The Iranian interest matrixes presented below were developed for a larger study of drivers of regional stability and instability.¹³ They outline Iran’s interest-based preferences in three of eight important regional conflicts: the war against ISIL in Iraq, its use of regional proxies to diminish the threat from Saudi Arabia, and the nature of the post-ISIL government in Iraq and are a useful way to identify shaping opportunities that might shift Iranian preferences to align with US/Coalition interests.¹⁴

¹³ The study, Allison Astorino-Courtois (2015) Analysis of the Dynamics of Near East Futures: Assessing Actor Interests, Resolve and Capability in 5 of 8 Regional Conflicts is available on request from the SMA office.

¹⁴ Note that these are not precisely a decision calculus as it does not reflect a decision or choice to be made. Each interest is considered independently (down the column) and possible outcomes are ranked according to which best satisfies that interest (1=best). Unweighted ranks are totaled to produce a score or overall rank.

ISIL in Iraq: Iranian interests align with US objectives without necessity for shaping.

As shown in the matrix at right, Iran’s interest-based preferences in the war against ISIL in Iraq are easily calculated. Each of Iran’s interests is best served by the same outcome: the defeat of ISIL in Iraq. This is very much in line with US/Coalition objectives and thus requires no shaping efforts.

Regional Rivalry with Saudi Arabia (KSA): Perceived security threat and desire for regional influence strongly incentivize Iranian proxyism to combat KSA. Shaping efforts that provided Iran security guarantees and economic incentives would be required to change Iran’s strategy.

A second, critical issue for eventual regional stability is the intensity of Iran’s regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Of the posited outcomes the pattern of Iranian interests shows that moderation of the conflict and some stabilization of Iran-KSA relations but continuation of proxy funding and interference in other states best satisfies Iranian interests. This is driven by prestige and security interests. The highlighted column shows the Reformist interest in economic opening to Europe and the West.

Disincentivizing Iran’s use of regional proxies could occur by linking its proxy funding to economic interests – specifically its ability to expand regional and European trade ties,

ISIL in Iraq	IRAN INTERESTS			SCORE (rank, 1=best)
	PRESTIGE; NATIONAL SECURITY Increase Iranian influence in Iraq, region	SECURITY Dominate/ sustain Shi’a balance of power; mitigate threat from Israel, Saudi Arabia, US	ECONOMIC; DOMESTIC/ CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Defend economic assets (e.g., in Syria); gain foothold in post-conflict economy	
Outcome A. ISIL ousted, fully defeated and/or neutralized as a force in Iraq	1	1	1	3 (1 = best outcome)
Outcome B. No resolution/ war of attrition; ISIL contained but retains territory in Iraq	2	2	3	7 (2)
Outcome C. ISIL solidifies, expands its control over currently held Iraq territory	3	3	2	8 (3)
Outcome D. ISIL expands into Baghdad and returns attention to south	4	4	4	12 (4)
Outcome E. ISIL dominates, controls most of Iraq	5	5	5	15 (5 = worst outcome)

Iran-KSA Rivalry	IRAN INTERESTS				Score (rank, 1=best)
	PRESTIGE; NATIONAL SECURITY Increase Iranian influence in Iraq, region	SECURITY Dominate/ sustain Shi’a balance of power; mitigate threat from Israel, Saudi Arabia, US	ECONOMIC; DOMESTIC/ CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Expand acceptance and trade with Europe, West	ECONOMIC; DOMESTIC/ CONSTITUENT SUPPORT Defend economic assets (e.g., in Syria); gain foothold in post-conflict economy	
Outcome A. <i>Cooperate.</i> KSA/ Iranian relations stabilize: regional accommodation ; each ceases violent proxy funding; cooperate on future of Iraq	3	3	1	3	10 (3)
Outcome B. <i>Stabilize.</i> KSA/ Iranian relations stabilize but funding of Sunni and Shi’a proxies, and meddling in Iraq continue	1	1	2	2	6 (1)
Outcome C. <i>Low level interference.</i> Proxy funding and regional interference continue; occasional indirect intervention in hostilities. No direct confrontation between state forces	2	2	3	1	8 (2)
Outcome D. <i>Direct Warfare.</i> Iranian-Saudi proxy funding/ interference prompts regional warfare including larger actors (e.g., Egypt; Turkey) more funding and direct confrontation between state forces	4	4	4	4	16 (4)

while mitigating security threats from Israel and Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, given what we know of the relative influence of the key actors in the decision process, it is unlikely that the US or Coalition countries could do much to encourage conservative forces in Iran to prioritize this interest above others. Looking at multiple Iranian interests suggests that shifting Iran's preference to cooperation (Outcome A) in line with US preferences requires that Iran sees that outcome as offering both greater prestige and security against its major threats than continuing its current practices. Given that the US remains one of these security threats, this may be a difficult sell. One other potential opportunity is to encourage Iran to give priority to satisfying its interest in expanding economic ties with Europe. Again, another hard sell as conservative forces in Iran have thus far held the day against the Rouhani government's reformist efforts.

Governance in Iraq: Iran has little incentive at present to press for stabilizing governing reforms in Iraq at the cost of its own influence there. Shaping efforts to reinforce Iranian influence in Iraq and downplay US/coalition influence may succeed in encouraging Iran to press for significant governance reforms in Iraq.

Finally, under current circumstances, Iran has very little incentive to influence the Iraqi government to be more inclusive of non-Shi'a voices – precisely what experts point to as a critical requirement for post-ISIL stabilization in Iraq. Rather, Iran's interests are best served by the Abadi government offering political changes that appease Kurdish and Sunni groups but fall short of extending significant political power to them. Incentivizing Iranian leaders to support inclusive government in Iraq would require convincing them that 1) they would not lose influence – especially to Saudi Arabia or the US in such a government and that such a government in Iraq would not become a security threat to Iran in the future.

	IRAN INTERESTS				SCORE (rank, 1=best)
	PRESTIGE; NATIONAL SECURITY	SECURITY	ECONOMIC; DOMESTIC/CONSTITUENT SUPPORT		
Domestic Outcome in Iraq (Gol v. Sunni v. Kurds v. Shi'a hardline)	Increase Iranian influence in Iraq, region	Dominate/sustain Sunni-Shi'a balance of power; mitigate threat from Israel, Saudi Arabia, US	Defend economic assets (e.g., in Syria); gain foothold in post-conflict economy		
OUTCOMES					
Outcome A. Stable, unified, inclusive Gol seen as legitimate and fair by all sides	4.5	3	1.5		9 (3)
Outcome B. Gol makes concessions to address Kurdish, Sunni (and former Bathist) grievances but does not devolve power	2	1.5	1.5		5 (1)
Outcome C. Gol does little to address Kurdish, Sunni grievances or constrain/control Shia militia; sectarian hostilities	1	1.5	3		5.5 (2)
Outcome D. Gol grants Sunni, Kurdish areas semi-autonomous control	3	4	4		11 (4)
Iraq breaks into autonomous Sunni, Kurdish and Shi'a regions	4.5	5	5		14.5 (5)

Comments on Iran's Decision Calculus

Dr. Robert Elder
George Mason University
and
Dr. Hunter Hustus, HAF/A10

Iran's Strategic Interest in Iraq

With progress in the battles to retake former ISIS strongholds, questions about the future are being asked: What will be Iran's strategic calculus regarding Iraq and the region post-ISIS? How will the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) impact that calculus? And what opportunities exist for the US/Coalition to shape the environment favorable to U.S. and partner interests?

In thinking about Iran, it is useful to consider a multi-level framework that recognizes that its strategic calculus will be shaped not only by its global and regional objectives, but also by its strategies to advance its key interests in the region and hedge against new threats, as well as the motivations of its key actors as they posture to advance their own internal domestic agendas.

Strategic Calculus

"If Iran saw the [Syrian] war in strictly strategic terms, talks might also have the potential to produce immediate progress toward peace. But the war is seen differently in Tehran than in Washington or Moscow. Iran is far less inclined to compromise than Russia or the United States, because its interest in Syria is not only strategic: It considers the war a personal, sectarian, and even existential matter for the Alawites in Syria and Shiites in neighboring states. If the Assad regime loses Syria, Iran and its allies feel they may lose the region. Iran has thus not wavered from its support for Assad and has not appeared to have done anything to temper Assad's ambitions in the conflict."¹⁵

Iran has demonstrated a tendency to use foreign policy for internal ends and leverage the fact that some of its political factions are more hostile to [the U.S.] than others. "We thus often end up faced with Iranian actions intended to provoke a response from [the U.S.] that will empower more anti-American currents."¹⁶

Identifying "Iran's interests in Iraq are not straightforward: it needs both the government in Baghdad and the Shiite militias to succeed in their own ways. The militias must continue to expand their influence domestically and in Iraq's security sector. The more critical territory the militias effectively control (such as military bases, highways, checkpoints, border crossings, and key towns and villages), the easier it will be for the IRGC to conduct its business in Iraq. Iran needs the Iraqi government, however, to reassert its authority in Mosul and to have that authority appear legitimate to the largely Sunni residents of the area. To do that, sectarian abuses must be avoided. For now at least, Baghdad has been able to keep the pro-Iranian militias on the margins of the Mosul campaign."¹⁷

¹⁵ (It's Time to Negotiate with Iran Over Syria War, 2016)

¹⁶ National Review, 2016

¹⁷Ostovar, 2016

“Post-Saddam Iraq represents the main area where Iran has achieved some foreign policy success. By supporting and prodding them to cooperate, Tehran has played since 2003 a major role in consolidating the dominance of Shi’i political and armed groups. This, in turn, has helped ensure that Iran’s key interest in Iraq has been fulfilled: that Iraq would be neither led by a pro-United States or anti-Iran Sunni Arab nationalist regime, nor that it would collapse or break apart.”¹⁸

“The potential involvement of Turkey further complicates matters. Although Iran has better relations with Turkey than with Saudi Arabia, both are enemies in Syria, and perhaps now in Iraq, where Turkey has military advisors and is training proxies. To the objections of Baghdad and Tehran, Ankara has recently asserted its right to be involved in liberating Mosul. It has also mobilized a large force along the Turkish–Iraqi border, threatening that it is willing to advance toward Mosul.”¹⁹

In short, an ISIS defeat will have limited impact on the overall regional environment. “The expulsion of the militants from Iraq will probably neither decrease the number of armed groups in the country nor limit the potential for violence there. Far from portending the end of Iraq’s current turbulence, ISIS’ demise could have the opposite effect, creating opportunities for violent competition in the areas that the militant group abandons.”²⁰

JCPOA Impact

According to Professor Charles Hill, Distinguished Fellow of the Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy at Yale University, “Iran has leveraged the American desire for JCPOA compliance to frustrate America efforts to reduce Iran’s sphere of Shiite influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by preventing the US from taking more proactive retaliatory measures. Should the U.S. push too hard, Iran can always walk away from the deal.”²¹

Despite expressions of concern, there is a “more cynical strategy. Iran is using ISIS’ ascendance in the Middle East to consolidate its power. The country is now the key ally keeping Iraq’s Shiites and the Alawite Bashar al-Assad regime standing against well-armed and tenacious Sunni jihadists. In those battles, Tehran will likely do just enough to make sure the Sunnis don’t conquer the Shia portions of Iraq and Assad’s enclave in Syria, but no more. Meanwhile, in ISIS’ wake, Tehran will strengthen its own radical Shia militias.”²²

“With the rise of ISIS, and the consequent rise of Iranian hard power, Tehran has become noticeably less concerned about Iraqi perceptions and intra-clerical harmony. Gone, too, are the days in which Tehran worried much about moderate Sunnis...By embracing sectarianism, Iran now plays a pivotal, if not dominant, role throughout the region.”²³

“Iran’s biggest gains were handed to it by America when, after the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, it removed hostile regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran has continued to extend its influence, even after a wave of Sunni uprisings that started in 2011 seemed likely to weaken the Shia regime’s pull. The Quds Force, the foreign wing of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, has exploited the region’s instability. Its tactics include assassinations and bombings overseas, and supplying arms and training to militias deemed helpful to its interests. “The Iranians are experts at taking advantage of chaos,” says Shimon

¹⁸ Juneau, April 2015

¹⁹Ostovar, 2016

²⁰ Mironova, 2016

²¹ He, 2016

²²Takeyh, 2016

²³Takeyh, 2016

Shapira, a retired military man now at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, a think-tank. ... Similarly Syria has fallen ever more under Iran's spell. Where Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president, kept Iran at arm's length, his son "sold Syria to the Iranians," says a defected general. Mr Assad relies on Tehran for cash, advice and training for its paramilitary fighters. In Lebanon, Hizbullah's military force rivals that of the country's army, and it has maintained a tenuous military balance with Israel."²⁴

Turning to the effect of the JCPOA on Iran, "Many other aspects of Iranian behavior– and US-Iran relations– remain unchanged," Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said. "Iran has not ceased its support for terrorist organizations like Hezbollah or its threats toward Israel. Iran has continued to test ballistic missiles. From Iraq to Yemen, Iran has continued to engage in destabilizing support for proxy organizations... "In short, Iran's approach to its nuclear program has changed, but thus far, its broader foreign policy– and the nature of its regime– has not." ²⁵

"At the end of the year [2016], the Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) expires — and with it, the regime of existing U.S. sanctions lawmakers say are essential to ensure Washington can "snap back" punitive measures against Tehran should Iranian leaders violate the terms of the nuclear deal that went into effect earlier this year. But if lawmakers go too far in their bid to renew and possibly stiffen the sanctions, the White House fears Tehran could interpret it as a U.S. violation of the deal — and take that as a cue to fire up their nuclear reactors again."²⁶

A year ago, Iran seemed on the verge of a new relationship with the United States and the world. In his address to the United Nations last fall, President Hassan Rouhani said the nuclear deal just signed, lifting sanctions and setting limits on Iran's nuclear program, was a foundation for change. "We were not solely seeking a nuclear deal," he said. "We want to suggest a new and constructive way to re-create the international order." Flash forward a year, and Rouhani's optimism has been replaced by disappointment and finger-pointing. In his U.N. speech and a wide-ranging news conference this week, Rouhani bitterly accused the United States of failing to live up to its obligations under the nuclear deal. In the eight months since the deal was implemented, he said, Washington had delayed licenses for business transactions and blocked Iran's access to banks. "The lack of compliance ... on the part of the United States in the past several months represents a flawed approach that should be rectified forthwith," he said Thursday [22 Sep 2016]."²⁷

Shaping Opportunities

Turning to opportunities to favorably shape the regional environment, "If Iran saw the [Syrian] war in strictly strategic terms, talks might also have the potential to produce immediate progress toward peace. But the war is seen differently in Tehran than in Washington or Moscow. Iran is far less inclined to compromise than Russia or the United States, because its interest in Syria is not only strategic: It considers the war a personal, sectarian, and even existential matter for the Alawites in Syria and Shiites in neighboring states. If the Assad regime loses Syria, Iran and its allies feel they may lose the region. Iran

²⁴The Long Arm, 2015

²⁵Wilner, 2016

²⁶Demirjian, 2016

²⁷Morello, 2016

has thus not wavered from its support for Assad and has not appeared to have done anything to temper Assad's ambitions in the conflict."²⁸

"If we want to help the moderate factions within the Iranian government, we should be happy with Amir-Abdollahian's removal [as deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs] and encourage our Arab and European partners to seek a new understanding with Tehran. We could interpret the nuclear deal in a more lenient way and hold back from tougher sanctions in separate areas. We might even look at pursuing further negotiations, offering the Iranians a possibility of further concessions on our side. On the other hand, if we look at Soleimani's [General Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force] firm statement of support for our ally, and possibly further actions (joint exercises, deeper military cooperation and so forth) would be natural. The key problem is that these policies, pursued together, could undermine each other. The soft, moderate-centered approach would only amplify GCC concerns and would suggest U.S. indifference to an IRGC-funded "bloody intifada" outside the gates of its bases—the sort of signal that might make Iran more likely to see that as a viable policy approach if the cleric is harmed. ... And a tough U.S. response would undermine those same moderate figures: their critics would argue that Rouhani and others had shown weakness, and they in turn would have to show their mettle. Further escalation could be the result, and securitizing politics tends to benefit the security services."²⁹

Nevertheless, the U.S. and its partners do have opportunities to increase stability in the region as a precursor for a long-term improvement in the strategic environment. The United States and Iran approached the JCPOA nuclear deal from very different perspectives: For Iran, it was an opportunity to re-create the international order. Consistent with its own objectives, the U.S. can provide Iran incentives for positive behaviors that reinforce their sense of progress toward this objective. Secondly, recognizing that Iran views the Syrian War as an existential matter for the Alawites in Syria and Shiites in neighboring states, the U.S. can tailor its activities to allay Iranian concerns in this area and encourage its partners to do the same. Thirdly, steps to improve the legitimacy of the Iraqi government among the Sunni population offers areas for cooperation with the Iranian government and reduce the attraction of ISIS-like organizations to disaffected elements of the population. Finally, given the diverse motivations which drive different elements of the Iranian government and its population, the United States and its partners can avoid actions that while appearing in Iran's best strategic interests (from a U.S. perspective) inadvertently empower more anti-American currents.

References

(2016, June). *National Review*.

Demirjian, K. (2016, November 3). Congress' other must-pass measure: Iran sanctions. *Washington Post*.

He, W. (2016, September 18). Turkey vs. ISIS vs. The Kurds: U.S. Grapples With Allies at War. *The Politic*.

Iran's Foreign Policy Since Nuclear Deal. (2016, June 17). *Jerusalem Post*.

²⁸It's Time to Negotiate with Iran Over Syria War, 2016

²⁹National Review, 2016

It's Time to Negotiate with Iran Over Syria War. (2016, October 2016). *Foreign Policy*.

Juneau, T. (April 2015). *Iran's Failed Foreign Policy: Dealing from a Position of Weakness*. Middle East Institute.

Mironova, V. a. (2016, November 5). Iraq After ISIS. *Foreign Affairs*.

Morello, C. (2016, September 23). A year after the nuclear deal, Iranian optimism turns sour. *Washington Post*.

Ostovar, A. (2016, November 5). From Tehran to Mosul. *Foreign Affairs*.

Takeyh, R. a. (2016, November 5). Iran's ISIS Trap. *Foreign Affairs*.

The Long Arm. (2015, January 24). *Economist*.

Author Biographies



Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois is Executive Vice President at NSI, Inc. She has also served as co-chair of a National Academy of Sciences study on Strategic Deterrence Military Capabilities in the 21st Century, and as a primary author on a study of the Defense and Protection of US Space Assets. Dr. Astorino-Courtois has served as technical lead on a variety of rapid turn-around, Joint Staff-directed Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA) projects in support of US forces and Combatant Commands. These include assessments of key drivers of political, economic and social instability and areas of resilience in South Asia; development of a methodology for conducting provincial assessments for the ISAF Joint Command; production of a "rich contextual understanding" (RCU) to supplement intelligence reporting for the ISAF J2 and Commander; and projects for USSTRATCOM on deterrence assessment methods.

Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a STRATCOM liaison to U.S. and international academic and business communities. Prior to SAIC, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX (1994-2003) where her research focused on the cognitive aspects of foreign policy decision making. She has received a number of academic grants and awards and has published articles in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She has also taught at Creighton University and as a visiting instructor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Astorino-Courtois earned her Ph.D. in International Relations and MA in and Research Methods from New York

University. Her BA is in political science from Boston College. Finally, Dr. Astorino-Courtois also has the distinction of having been awarded both a US Navy Meritorious Service Award and a US Army Commander's Award.



Michael Eisenstadt

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. A specialist in Persian Gulf and Arab-Israeli security affairs, he has published widely on irregular and conventional warfare, and nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East. Prior to joining the Institute in 1989, Mr. Eisenstadt worked as a military analyst with the U.S. government.

Mr. Eisenstadt served for twenty-six years as an officer in the U.S. Army Reserve before retiring in 2010. His military service included active-duty stints in Iraq with the United States Forces-Iraq headquarters (2010) and the Human Terrain System Assessment Team (2008); in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Jordan with the U.S. Security Coordinator (USSC) for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (2008-2009); at U.S. Central Command headquarters and on the Joint Staff during Operation Enduring Freedom and the planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom (2001-2002); and in Turkey and Iraq during Operation Provide Comfort (1991).

He has also served in a civilian capacity on the Multinational Force-Iraq/U.S. Embassy Baghdad Joint Campaign Plan Assessment Team (2009) and as a consultant or advisor to the congressionally mandated Iraq Study Group (2006), the Multinational Corps-Iraq Information Operations Task Force (2005-2006), and the State Department's Future of Iraq defense policy working group (2002-2003). In 1992, he took a leave of absence from the Institute to work on the U.S. Air Force *Gulf War Air Power Survey*. Mr. Eisenstadt earned an MA in Arab Studies from Georgetown University and has traveled widely in the Middle East. He speaks Arabic and Hebrew, and reads French.



Dr. Robert Elder

Lieutenant General Robert Elder (USAF, retired) joined the George Mason University faculty as a research professor with the Volgenau School of Engineering following his retirement from the Air Force as the Commander of 8th Air Force and U.S. Strategic Command's Global Strike Component. He currently conducts research in the areas of integrated command and control, operational resiliency in degraded environments, strategic deterrence, and the use of modeling to support national security decision-making. General Elder served as the Central Command Air Forces Deputy Commander for Operation

Enduring Freedom and later as the Air Operations Center Commander and Deputy Air Component Commander for Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was the first commander of Air Force Network Operations and led the development of the cyberspace mission for the Air Force. General Elder also served as Commandant of the Air War College, and holds a doctorate in engineering from the University of Detroit.



Dr. Hunter Hustus

Hunter Hustus is technical advisor to the Assistant Chief of Staff, Strategic Deterrence & Nuclear Integration at headquarters US Air Force. He was previously a foreign policy and congressional affairs advisor to US Air Forces in Europe. On active duty, he served as a B-52 electronic warfare officer and NATO staff officer. He has a PhD from Northeastern University in Boston.



Dr. Michael Knights

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. Dr. Knights has traveled extensively in Iraq and the Gulf states, published widely on security issues for major media outlets such as *Jane's IHS*, and regularly briefs U.S. government policymakers and U.S. military officers on regional security affairs. Dr. Knights worked as the head of analysis and assessments for a range of security and oil companies, directing information collection teams in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. He has worked extensively with local military and security agencies in Iraq, the Gulf states, and Yemen.

Dr. Knights has undertaken extensive research on lessons learned from U.S. military operations in the Gulf during and since 1990. He earned his doctorate at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and has worked as a defense journalist for the *Gulf States Newsletter* and *Jane's Intelligence Review*.



Alireza Nader

Alireza Nader is a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation and author of *The Days After a Deal With Iran: Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy*. His research has focused on Iran's political dynamics, elite decisionmaking, and Iranian foreign policy. His commentaries and articles have appeared in a variety of publications and he is widely cited by the U.S. and international media.

Nader's other RAND publications include *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*; *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran*; *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*; *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*. Prior to joining RAND, Nader served as a research analyst at the Center for Naval Analyses. He is a native speaker of Farsi. Nader received his M.A. in international affairs from The George Washington University.



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."*