Research Brief

RAND PROJECT AIR FORCE

A New U.S. Policy Paradigm Toward Iran

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Iranian power projection and regional ambitions are among the most pressing foreign policy challenges that the United States faces. U.S. observers have noted with alarm Iran's new assertiveness on the Middle Eastern stage, its buildup of conventional military capability, and its apparently inexorable drive for nuclear energy in defiance of international criticism. The challenges posed by the Islamic Republic are especially acute from the perspective of the U.S. Air Force: Airpower will likely be the military instrument of first resort to project U.S. power into Iran's unstable neighborhood, reassure allies, and dissuade Iran from aggression or adventurism.

Recommendations:

The United States should consider a new approach to Iran that integrates elements of engagement and containment:

- **Continue strengthening international sanctions and other financial pressures targeted on the nuclear issue, but avoid unilateral measures that are not likely to generate broad international support.**
- **Pursue bilateral dialogues related to areas of common interest, such as instability in Iraq and Afghanistan, narcotics trafficking, natural disaster relief, refugees, and other humanitarian crises.**
- **Issue unambiguous statements about U.S. interests and intentions in the region, particularly regarding Iraq.**
- **Engage in efforts to build a multilateral regional security framework that is simultaneously inclusive of Iran and sensitive to the needs of U.S. friends and allies in the region.**

Iran Is Dangerous, But Not Omnipotent

To accurately gauge future strategic challenges from Iran, RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) sought to assess the *motivations* of the Islamic Republic, not just its *capabilities*. In an analysis grounded in the observation that, although Iranian power projection is marked by strengths, it also has serious *liabilities* and *limitations*, the study assessed four critical areas—the Iranian regime's perception of itself as a regional and even global power, Iran's conventional military buildup and aspirations for asymmetric warfare, its support to Islamist militant groups, and its appeal to Arab public opinion.

The study concluded that the Islamic Republic does not seek territorial aggrandizement or even, despite its rhetoric, the forcible imposition of its revolutionary ideology onto neighboring states. Instead, it feeds off existing grievances with the status quo, particularly in the Arab world. Ideology and bravado frequently mask a preference for opportunism and realpolitik—the qualities that define "normal" state behavior.

Moreover, there are significant barriers and buffers to Iran's strategic reach, stemming from regional geopolitics and from Iran's limited conventional military capacity, diplomatic isolation, and past strategic missteps. Similarly, tensions between the regime and Iranian society—segments of which have grown disenchanted with the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideals—can also act as a constraint on Iranian external behavior.

Inclusive Multilateralism Is a More Promising Strategy Than Containment

Given this assessment of Iran's motivations and capabilities, traditional containment options may actually create further opportunities for Tehran to amplify its influence in the Arab world. A more useful strategy is one that exploits existing checks on Iran's power and influence. These include the gap between its aspiration for asymmetric-warfare capabilities and the reality of

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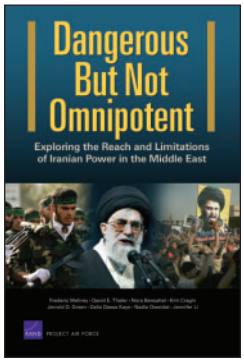
its rather limited conventional forces, disagreements between Iran and its militant "proxies" (such as Hezbollah and Hamas), and the potential for sharp decline in the opinion of Iran among the Arab public. Early in his administration, President Obama made conciliatory statements to Iran and indicated a willingness to join multilateral dialogues with Iran on Afghanistan and the nuclear issue. Building on these gestures, the United States should consider a new approach to Iran that integrates elements of engagement and containment:

- Continue strengthening international sanctions and other financial pressures targeted on the nuclear issue, but avoid unilateral measures that are not likely to generate broad international support.
- Pursue bilateral dialogues related to areas of common interest, such as instability in Iraq and Afghanistan, narcotics trafficking, natural disaster relief, refugees, and other humanitarian crises.
- Issue unambiguous statements about U.S. interests and intentions in the region, particularly regarding Iraq.
- Engage in efforts to build a multilateral regional security framework that is simultaneously inclusive of Iran and sensitive to the needs of U.S. friends and allies in the region.

An inclusive multilateral security structure in the Persian Gulf region—perhaps modeled on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—would contribute more to regional stability over the long run than would continuing to rely solely on competitive, balance-of-power strategies designed to isolate Iran. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, by Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer Li, MG-781-AF, 2009, 230 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8330-4554-6 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG781/). This research brief was written by Robert A. Guffey. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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