

Iran's Grand Strategy Has Fundamentally Shifted

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Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's leadership has single-mindedly attempted to dominate the Middle East and drive the United States and Israel out. Throughout, Tehran has relied overwhelmingly on the proverbial stick to do so: trying to subvert the Arab states by blackmail or insurgency while waging a relentless terrorist campaign against the United States and Israel.

While those goals haven't changed, the Iranians appear to have altered their grand strategy in a fundamental way. We can never be certain because Iranian decision-making is always opaque, but Iran suddenly seems to have discovered that carrots can be useful tools of foreign policy as well. Almost everywhere you look, Tehran is now offering positive inducements to cooperation and mostly throttling back on its strong-arm tactics. The question now facing the United States is how to adjust its own policy in return.

There are many examples of Iran's shift. With Chinese mediation, Iran struck a deal with Saudi Arabia that, on its face, gives Riyadh far more than Tehran gets. As a result, the two states have [resumed](#) diplomatic relations after a decadelong break. They are even talking about cooperating to prevent Sudan from [descending](#) deeper into civil war.

The Iranians have also [resumed](#) diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, and Tehran is looking to [cooperate](#) with Abu Dhabi on air transport and infrastructure issues as well. The Emirates has gone so far as to withdraw from the U.S.-led naval coalition in the Persian Gulf and agreed to [join](#) a rival one with Iran.

They have even [started](#) quiet discussions with Bahrain, whose government has still not forgiven Iran for various attempts to stoke revolution by the country's Shiite majority. Iran also [has](#) a new development deal with Oman and is [normalizing](#) ties with Egypt.

The Iranians have likewise resumed talks with Turkey (and Russia and Syria's Assad regime) about [finding](#) a solution to their mutual problems in Iraq and Syria. They have a new oil-for-gas barter [arrangement](#) with Iraq, where their allies dominate the government even more than in the past.

Most striking of all, Iran has [proposed](#) a regional forum without the United States or Israel, which is getting some traction in a way that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. The Iranian foreign minister just [finished](#) a four-country tour of the Gulf that netted the Iranians plaudits like they have never received before.

Of course, it's not all wine and roses between the Iranians and the Arabs. Tehran being Tehran, it can't entirely avoid spats with Kuwait over a shared gas field, with the UAE over a trio of islands that the Shah seized before he fell, and with the Saudis over their continued supply of weapons to the Houthis in Yemen. But overall, it has been a veritable charm offensive by Iranian standards.

Yet all this peace, love, and friendship to their neighbors has not extended to the United States and Israel. There, the Iranians continue to wield their cudgels as best they can. Against the United States, Iran's navies continue to [harass](#) U.S. vessels in the Gulf, and Iran has attacked or seized U.S.- or Israeli-connected tankers [at least](#) five times in the past six months. The Iranians have [ramped up](#) support to various Palestinian terrorist groups, and their allies and proxies among Iraq's Shiite militias have likewise stepped up their [harassment](#) of U.S. forces there. Along with their Syrian and Russian allies, Iranians are [doing the same](#) next door [in Syria](#). Even the recent prisoner release between the U.S. and Iran seems to be more about Iran's desperate need for cash than any interest in genuine détente.

Like the old Buffalo Springfield song put it, there's something happening here, but what it is ain't exactly clear.

What seems most likely is that the United States' continued disengagement from the affairs of the Middle East (under Presidents Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and now—to a lesser extent, but still continuing the trend—Joe Biden) has created an opportunity for Tehran.

All of the United States' regional allies are terrified that it will no longer protect them against Iranian subversion or even direct aggression. Biden has done better on that score, but none of them has forgotten how Trump scoffed at the idea of defending Saudi Arabia and the UAE from direct Iranian attack in 2019, overturning 40 (or 75) years of U.S. policy, probably without even understanding that he was doing so.

As a result, over the past several years, the United States' Middle Eastern allies have felt the need to reduce their dependence on the United States and cast about for new friends and potential backers. That has been the source of a recent flurry of Middle Eastern flirtations with China, Russia, India, and some European states.

Iran's new foreign policies may be intended to take advantage of this situation. After 40 years of unmitigated subversion and aggression, the Arab states know very well what Iran is capable of—especially if the United States isn't around to block it. To this real threat, Tehran seems to be adding the inducement of better relations if the Arab world will shed its U.S. dependency and accept Iranian suzerainty instead.

Since the Americans seem ever less interested in the Middle East, Russia is tied down in Ukraine, and China still lacks the military muscle to take over as the regional strongman, a kinder, gentler Iran now seems inviting to frightened Arab states. It is why the new Iranian charm offensive has proven so effective, at least to a limited extent so far.

Meanwhile, Tehran's continued aggressiveness toward the United States and Israel appears to complement its Arab strategy. Iran likely believes that continued attacks on Washington's people and interests in the region will help speed the U.S. departure.

As for Israel, heating up the conflict there helps Iran to present the Arab states with a sharper dilemma: You can either join us and have peace and trade, or join Israel and have war. Especially with a far-right Israeli government determined to act against the Palestinians in ways repugnant even to the most jaded Arabs, some distance from Israel has its benefits for many Arab regimes. Thus, the dual approach of coddling the Arab states while amplifying attacks on the United States and Israel is probably meant to drive a wedge between the Arab states and Iran's principal nemeses.

Inherent in that statement is the obvious counter to it. What Iran fears most is reconciliation between the United States and its Arab allies, and further rapprochement between them and Israel. Indeed, this new strategic approach suggests that Iran has finally realized that its bullying drives its foes together, hence the new emphasis on dividing to conquer.

To date, the principal impetus to the Abraham Accords and other rapprochements between the Arab states and Israel has been their desire to band together out of a common fear of Iran and its allies and minions.

Here as well, the Biden administration is right that Saudi-Israeli reconciliation and an eventual alliance, formal or informal, would be dangerous for Iran and potentially quite beneficial to the United States. Bringing together the most powerful regional military and the most powerful Arab economy would present a daunting obstacle to further Iranian aggression. It is why the Iranians are working so hard to court the Saudis and the other Arab states and to alienate them from the Israelis and the United States.

The Biden administration deserves credit for recognizing both aspects of such a Saudi-Israeli breakthrough and working hard to try to bring it about. But there is a lurking danger as well. While an Israeli-Saudi alliance would invariably be a threat to Iran, whether it proves a boon to the United States will depend heavily on how involved the United States is in that coalition. The Iranians do not have the same respect for Saudi (or even Israeli) military capabilities as they do for U.S. military power and therefore have never been as deterred by it as they are by U.S. capabilities.

In part because they recognize this and in part because they simply do not have the same spectrum of intelligence-gathering capabilities as the United States, both the Israelis and the Arab states have often overreacted to suspicious Iranian moves in ways that could have blown up had Washington not stepped in to allay their fears and deter their foe.

What all this means is that absent an active U.S. role in the region and in such an alliance, a new Israeli-Saudi coalition could both provoke greater Iranian aggression and trigger its own escalation, leading to a wider conflict that would be disastrous for the region, and potentially for the United States and the world if it affected Middle Eastern energy flows.

That's why an Israeli-Saudi alliance needs to be seen as part of a U.S. commitment to the Middle East, not a substitute for one. Iran appears to have learned a new trick. It remains to be seen if the United States can as well.

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