

the guardian

The Trump administration's Iran policy is dangerous and flawed

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May 23, 2017

Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia was a huge success. The Saudis wisely pandered to the new president's foibles, rolling out the red carpet for [a lavish celebration](#). Even Trump's speech on Islam, a potential minefield, was generally well-received by his hosts.

Yet while Trump's speech – and his strong criticism of [Iran](#) – may have been pleasing to his Gulf States' hosts, it should worry Americans. Pushing back on Tehran allows Trump to symbolically break with Barack Obama's policies and is popular among congressional Republicans, but it is also dangerous, with the potential to undermine the nuclear deal, slow the fight against Isis, and embroil the United States more deeply in parochial regional struggles.

Indeed, though Congress and the White House are at odds on issues from healthcare to Russia, they generally share a determination to ratchet up pressure on Iran, whether via sanctions, regional military support or arms sales. This pushback is often attributed to Iran's ballistic missile testing: though the nuclear deal does not in fact obligate Iran to stop testing, policymakers have pushed for a US response, arguing that the tests violate the spirit of the agreement.

More broadly, congressional Republicans and the White House have consistently portrayed the Obama administration as “soft” on Iran, arguing that the nuclear deal has allowed Iran to destabilize the region. During the Republican primaries, most candidates called for the nuclear deal itself [to be overturned](#).

Thankfully, Trump's cabinet appointees – and the president himself – have since shied away from unilaterally ending the nuclear deal. Yet most express support for a more assertive policy towards Iran, including the secretary of defense, James Mattis, who has [described Iran](#) as “the biggest destabilizing force in the Middle East”.

And while Trump's first [national security adviser](#), [Mike Flynn](#), may have departed the administration, the Riyadh speech appears to echo many of the ideas expressed in Flynn's book, in particular conflating Iran with Isis and al-Qaida.

Unfortunately, the new administration's approach to Iran is fundamentally flawed.

Take Congress' perennial favorite policy – sanctions – as an example. In response to the missile tests, the Trump administration has already added to existing sanctions lists. But [a bill working its way through the Senate](#) would be much more impactful, giving the president broad authority

to sanction those who deal with Iran's missile program, and potentially applying broad terrorism sanctions to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Yet most of the proposed sanctions would probably be more symbolic than practical. And while applying sanctions to the IRGC could impose economic costs on the Iranian economy, it carries substantial risks. Adding new sanctions, even if they do not technically violate the terms of the Iran deal, could strain the deal, driving a wedge between the United States and our European allies, who are broadly satisfied with Iran's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action compliance.

The results of the Iranian election on Friday confirm that the Iranian people continue to support the deal and seek increased engagement with the outside world. The nuclear deal itself is hardly perfect, but it prevents Iran from developing a nuclear weapon; failure of the deal would be a step backwards. Worse, if new sanctions cause the deal to fail, it is the United States that will appear culpable to the international community.

The Trump administration also appears to be seeking a regional pushback against Iran. On a recent trip to Riyadh, the defense secretary, James Mattis, discussed Yemen, telling the press: "We'll have to overcome Iran's efforts to destabilize yet another country." Though he went on to reference a United Nations process, off the record, defense officials say the administration is seriously considering providing additional military support and weaponry to the campaign in Yemen.

The administration has signaled its support for Saudi Arabia's assertive anti-Iranian foreign policy in other ways too: Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia included the announcement of a multibillion dollar arms sale, including a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery like the one recently deployed to South Korea.

Again, however, these steps are primarily symbolic and carry risks. Though Iran has sent some weapons to Yemen's Houthis, the group is not truly an Iranian proxy like Hezbollah. Getting the US military more deeply involved in Yemen's civil war – helping the Saudis with their assault on Hodeidah port, for example – would only bog down American forces, worsen Yemen's dire humanitarian situation, and cost Iran little.

Raising tensions with Iran in Yemen and elsewhere also risks slowing the anti-Isis campaign in Syria, one of the few places we share a common goal with Iran. It could even place US troops in Iraq and other war zones in danger of retaliation from Iranian-linked Shia militia groups in that conflict.

Ultimately, despite the president's remarks in Riyadh, neither he nor congressional Republicans appear to have a coherent strategy towards Iran. The desire to appear tougher than Obama on Iran is understandable, but the administration's approach risks collapsing the Iran deal and undermining American interests elsewhere in the region. Hardly a winning strategy.

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