



Washington needs to anticipate Iran's next provocation

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Signs are mounting that in Tehran, which faces rising pressures at home and abroad, the country's powerful hardline conservatives are circling the wagons, raising the odds of still more Iranian global provocations. The question is whether Washington — which continues to tighten the economic screws on Tehran — is ready for what might come next.

In the latest conservative effort to solidify power, the country's Guardian Council recently barred 9,500 prospective candidates (almost two-thirds of the 14,500 prospective candidates) in next month's parliamentary elections, from running. The 12-member Guardian Council — an unelected body that includes six designees of the nation's ultimate authority, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei — routinely bars hundreds if not thousands of would-be candidates from elections because they're not conservative enough or committed enough to the regime's revolutionary goals. This time, however, the barred candidates include nearly a third of the current parliament. The signal was clear. The Council not only wants to prevent new reformist candidates from winning office; it also wants to purge the parliament of members it considers too moderate.

Meanwhile, as Washington intensifies its "maximum pressure" campaign of economic sanctions in order to force Tehran to negotiate a broader deal to replace the 2015 global nuclear agreement, Tehran is thumbing its nose at the notion. Iranian officials have boasted of their government's nuclear progress of late, and now claim that the country can enrich uranium to any level of purity (presumably to include nuclear weapons-grade enrichment).

These moves, however, come as much out of weakness as strength.

Though the public seemed to temporarily rally behind the regime in the aftermath of the U.S. killing of Qassem Soleimani, Iran's top military commander, support was soon replaced by revulsion after the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps tried for days to cover up its mistake in downing a Ukrainian passenger plane that left nearly 200 dead. For an Iranian population already increasingly chafing from the lack of political liberty and economic opportunity, the IRGC's incompetence and obfuscation was bound to create still more alienation. Indeed, earlier this month — even before the Ukrainian plane debacle — polling found that 49 percent of residents don't even plan to vote in the Feb. 21 elections, while 26.5 percent said they'd vote only if the Guardian Council approved their favored candidates, and 55 percent expressed cynicism about the process.

Looking ahead, the question is whether the regime, facing rising domestic discontent and surely worried about its grip on power, will seek to rally public support by again targeting U.S. interests — especially in the aftermath of elections that will likely usher in a more conservative body.

We shouldn't be surprised to see Tehran flex its muscles by increasing its support for terrorist and militia groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and — in light of President Trump's efforts to craft an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement — in the Gaza Strip as well. Nor should we be surprised to see more direct Iranian regional action of the kind that we've witnessed in recent months, such as another attack on tankers in the Gulf of Oman or another strike at Saudi oil facilities.

Finally, a more conservative regime that's determined not to bow to U.S. economic pressure could withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal altogether, rather than just back away from it in stages. That, in turn, will stoke fears across the region and beyond that Tehran will rush toward nuclear weaponry, forcing the United States, Israel, Sunni Arab states, and Europe to decide whether to employ military action to prevent it.

Presuming that Washington will continue to tighten the screws on Iran economically, the coming months could prove more dangerous, not less. One hopes that Washington is preparing for all the possibilities.

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