

B-52s in the Middle East

by George Friedman - March 9, 2021

For all the world's vastness and complexity, my attention is constantly drawn back to the Middle East, where there is much to think about. Last week, for example, two B-52 bombers flew over the Middle East, the fourth time since Joe Biden became president of the United States. Washington said the flybys were due to instability in the region, but the subtext was very clearly about Iran.

What was more unusual about these flights than the previous was that U.S. Central Command announced that the B-52s were accompanied by supporting aircraft from Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. There has been much talk about the **emerging political coalition in the region**, but this represents a more remarkable grouping. Israel is a U.S. ally. Saudi Arabia has been under attack by the Biden administration for human rights violations, and has been **cooperating with Israel for years** but has still not recognized Israel. Qatar sits across the Persian Gulf from Iran, has perhaps the closest relationship with Tehran of any Persian Gulf country, and is a key intermediary between Iran and the United States.

If the purpose of these flights is to warn Iran of what it could expect in a confrontation with the United States, it likely landed flat; warnings like this wear thin the fourth time they are issued. It is hard to make the routine appear threatening. If the U.S. intends to lull Iran into a sense of complacency, then multiple missions might help, but there is very little about the United States that makes Iran feel complacent. So over time these overflights leave the status quo ante.

The Iranians have become somewhat more hostile. They have launched attacks, or their proxies have, at U.S. bases in Iraq. They have also damaged an Israeli merchant vessel off the Lebanese coast while continuing to provide significant support to the Houthi rebels in the Yemen civil war. In other words, there is no evidence that the Iranians plan to change their regional policy. The Biden administration's pledge to **revive the nuclear treaty with Iran** that former President Donald Trump discarded has been rejected by Iran, which is first demanding concessions from the United States before considering returning to the treaty.

Iran is now in the business of refusing to be seduced or intimidated. It is maintaining, even increasing, its tempo of operations in conflict areas. It has refused what the Biden administration seemed to assume would be a welcome concession to Iran, and it has shown (or at least feigned) indifference to **the Abraham coalition** that has emerged to its west. From a negotiating point of

view, it seems that Iran doesn't want to renew the treaty because it would renew inspections and perhaps reveal the advanced state of Iran's nuclear program. Or, more likely, it does not want to appear over-eager for these talks to restart. If it did, its bargaining position would evaporate. Since Biden made restoring the agreement an important objective of his presidency, the Iranians may feel that it is Biden who is desperate for a deal. Iran walking away would both confirm Trump's view of Iran and disprove Biden's. Appearing inflexible while hiding its program that it had agreed to allow monitoring of could create political problems for Biden, or so the Iranians calculate.

Given the political and military reality Iran is trying to create, and given that the Iranians didn't blink at the B-52 flights that were seen as mere shows, the Biden administration had to shift its approach by strengthening its bargaining position without taking decisive military action. The flight of the B-52s didn't matter. Including two of Iran's greatest enemies – Israel and Saudi Arabia – added some to the threat, but not very much. Israel appears eager to strike Iran but sees itself as restrained by the United States. I am not sure how eager Israel is to strike because military actions can fail, and failure would undermine the credibility of Israel's threat. Accompanying U.S. bombers would seem to increase the possibility that Israel will be unleashed. The presence of the Saudis drives home to Iran its isolation west of the Persian Gulf and the fact that it stands alone – unless Russia has an appetite for risk. But the most important component of the mission was Qatar. Qatar is much friendlier with Iran, and it is the interlocutor in U.S.-Iranian negotiations. The willingness of Qatar to join the flight signals Qatar's displeasure at the Iranian inflexibility, and the possibility of a break.

If geopolitics ran on signals, all of this might shift Iran's position and herald the restoration of the nuclear treaty. But geopolitics is both more simple and complex. Iran's primary goals are to restore its economy and prevent an attack from the West. It must make certain that Iraq remains incapable of posing a threat, and therefore must do what it can to maintain instability there, or at least deny the U.S. a secure base from which to act in the region as it chooses. It can't leave Iraq alone, nor can it abandon its allies in Yemen and elsewhere. Demonstrating real regional power is a foundation of its security. It can't afford to appear weak to its people, yet it can't afford to continue suffering Western sanctions.

From the U.S. geopolitical point of view, Iran is a minor player, unable to affect its interests in places such as China. From a political point of view, this minor geopolitical issue has been elevated to a major issue through Biden's attack on Trump's policy. Iran knows its relative importance to the United States, and that gives it a sense of security. Politically, it knows that Biden, having attacked Trump for an excessively aggressive policy toward Iran, can't follow up with a B-52 campaign, marshaling others in the Middle East – including human rights violators such as Saudi Arabia – to

join in.

That means Iran is in a good position, save for the sanctions, which it has to have removed, and which are the main American lever. Trump's position was to impose sanctions and let Iran stew in its own juices. Unless the flybys force Iran to rapidly become flexible – which I think they will not – Biden's options are the same as Trump's: increase sanctions to see if Iran buckles. For Washington, it's low risk. For Tehran, it's existential.

And so the odd flight leaves me with the sense of the power of geopolitical reality, and the difficulty of moving against it. Many political leaders encounter this moment. Breaking countries without waging war is difficult, and Iran is not worth a war to either Trump or Biden.

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