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The Evolution of U.S. Threat Perceptions of Iran's Regional Activism in West Asia: From Clinton to Trump

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Extended Abstract

Over the past four decades, the United States has consistently portrayed the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional challenger seeking to establish regional hegemony and ultimately undermine the U.S. presence in West Asia. Consequently, countering Iran's regional influence has remained a persistent component of U.S. regional policy. However, much of the existing literature, as well as domestic analyses of U.S. policy toward Iran, tends to treat Washington's perception of Iran as a constant and linear phenomenon. This study examines how U.S. governments from Bill Clinton to Donald Trump have assessed the level and nature of Iran's regional threat and argues that U.S. threat perception has gradually evolved from the separate assessment of individual dimensions of Iran's regional activism toward a more comprehensive and network-based understanding.

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The study employs a historical research methodology based primarily on documentary and library sources. The conceptual framework focuses on two principal variables—the level of Iranian threat and the regional distribution of power—and one intervening variable, the level of regional threat. The study distinguishes between benign and malign levels of threat according to the combination of an actor's operational capabilities and political will to harm or challenge a major power. It also differentiates between a regional order in which the United States enjoys predominant power and one characterized by competition among major powers.

The findings demonstrate that although U.S. core interests in West Asia have remained relatively stable, the interpretation of Iran's threat has changed considerably. These enduring interests principally involve maintaining secure and stable access to energy markets, strategic waterways, military bases, and regional partners, while protecting U.S. citizens, forces, and territory from threats originating in the region. The way Iran is perceived as a threat depends largely on how its regional activities intersect with these interests and on Washington's broader assessment of the regional and international balance of power.

During the Clinton administration, the United States viewed itself as the dominant global power and generally regarded the regional security environment as relatively benign. Iran was portrayed as a potential challenger to the regional order, particularly because of its efforts to expand its military capabilities, including missile and naval capabilities. However, Iran's actual ability and willingness to directly threaten U.S. interests remained limited. Consequently, the perception of Iran as a threat was driven more by its potential capabilities and by U.S. political priorities—particularly the Arab-Israeli peace process and the need to reassure Israel—than by sustained, concrete Iranian actions against U.S. interests.

The George W. Bush administration marked a significant transformation. Following the September 11 attacks, the regional environment was perceived as substantially more dangerous, while the United States still considered itself the dominant global power. Iran increasingly came to be viewed not only through the lens of conventional military capabilities but also as a source of irregular and disruptive challenges. Its support for regional partners, asymmetric capa-

bilities, and alleged assistance to militant groups in Iraq directly affected U.S. forces and Washington's ability to maintain its presence and influence. Iran was therefore increasingly perceived as capable of combining conventional and unconventional tools to challenge U.S. regional objectives.

Under Barack Obama, the United States faced a more competitive international environment and increasingly sought to reduce its military overextension in West Asia in order to devote greater attention to emerging major-power competition, particularly with China. Iran remained a source of regional instability, but the Obama administration distinguished between Iran as an opportunistic actor and the deeper structural causes of regional conflicts. The nuclear issue received priority because it was viewed as a potential trigger for a major regional war. Consequently, Washington sought to prevent Iran's nuclear program from becoming an additional source of conflict while avoiding excessive pressure on Iran's regional activities that could undermine the nuclear agreement.

The Trump administration represented another major shift. Iran's regional activism was increasingly understood as an immediate and concrete threat, comparable in urgency to the nuclear issue. Particular attention was given to Iran's ballistic missiles, drones, maritime capabilities, support for regional armed groups, and activities in the "gray zone." The administration also increasingly rejected the traditional notion of plausible deniability, explicitly attributing attacks conducted by Iran-aligned groups to Tehran itself. At the same time, U.S. policymakers increasingly emphasized Iran's vulnerabilities, including the geographic expansion of its regional commitments and the limitations of its support networks, as potential pressure points.

Overall, the study concludes that U.S. threat perception of Iran has not followed a linear or uniform trajectory. Rather, it has evolved in response to changes in Iran's capabilities, regional conditions, and the distribution of power. Three major trends are particularly significant: first, differing U.S. administrations have attributed different degrees of responsibility to Iran for regional instability; second, U.S. assessments have gradually moved from separating Iran's nuclear and regional activities toward viewing them as increasingly interconnected; and third, since the mid-2000s, Washington has increasingly focused not only on Iran's capabilities but also on its vulnerabilities. These develop-

ments demonstrate that understanding the evolution of U.S. threat perception is essential for accurately anticipating Washington's future policies toward Iran and for avoiding inappropriate policy responses based on the assumption that U.S. perceptions of Iran have remained constant.

Key words: America perception, Threat Assessment, Iran Threat, Iran influence, West Asia,

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.