



IRAN

Strong Opposition to Trump Administration’s ‘Maximum Pressure’

By Brian Katulis, Peter Juul, and John Halpin October 25, 2019

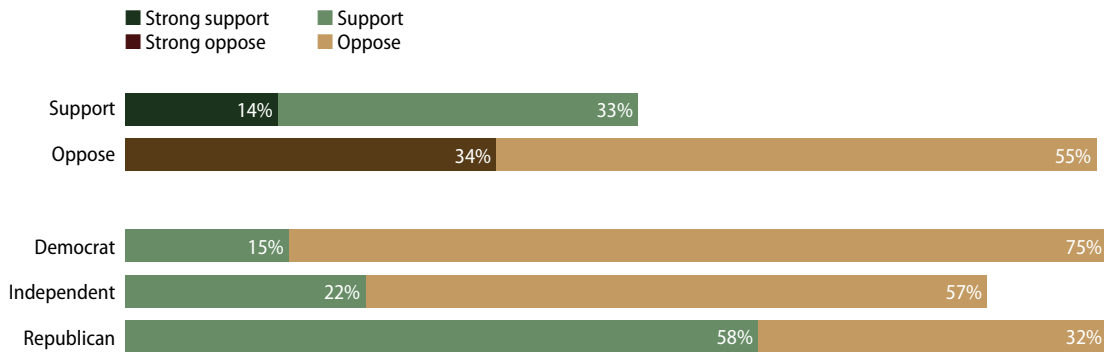
America and Iran remain in a dangerous pattern of escalation.¹ Tensions with Iran have increased after the Trump administration pulled America out of the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 and introduced costly economic sanctions on Iran. Iran’s destabilizing actions in the Middle East have put the region on the edge.²

Views of American voters

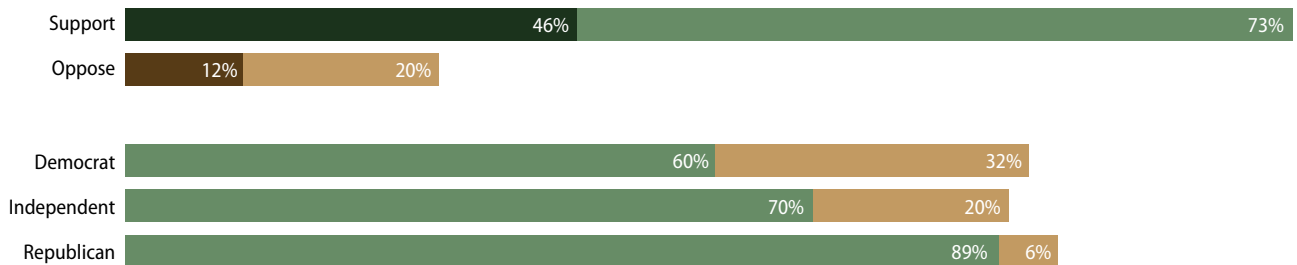
Americans oppose preemptive strikes but back retaliation against Iranian aggression

Share of respondents, by political affiliation

Q. "Would you support or oppose President Trump ordering preemptive military strikes against Iran to attack its nuclear program?"



Q. "Would you support or oppose President Trump ordering military action against Iran if the country or groups it supports attacked U.S. soldiers or civilians?"



Source: Center for American Progress and GBAO, "Foreign Policy Research – Phase III" (Washington: 2019), available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/07/29142002/FP-condensed.pdf>.

Americans do not want war with Iran, but they also don't want to accommodate a nation they see as a hostile foreign power.

- **Iran a leading security concern for voters.** Dealing with nuclear threats in Iran and North Korea tie with combating global climate change as the fifth-highest priority for U.S. foreign policy, with 29 percent each. Republicans, at 38 percent, view Iran's nuclear program as a higher priority than Democrats or independents, at 29 percent and 23 percent, respectively.
- **Widespread public hostility toward Iran.** A strong majority—71 percent—of Americans see Iran as mostly an enemy of the United States, just behind North Korea, at 76 percent. Together with North Korea and Russia, at 57 percent, Iran is one of only three countries seen by majorities of Americans as mostly enemies. Two-thirds of Democrats and independents, at 63 percent and 65 percent, respectively, view Iran as mostly an enemy, along with an even higher proportion—81 percent—of Republicans.
- **Support for negotiations over pressure on Iran.** A majority, or 57 percent, of Americans favor de-escalating tensions with Iran and negotiating a return to the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement over the Trump administration's approach of "maximum pressure"³ on Tehran until it capitulates to U.S. demands (43 percent). Partisan differences on Iran policy are strong: More than three-quarters, or 78 percent, of Democrats and a majority, or 57 percent, of independents support negotiations, while two-thirds—68 percent—of Republicans back the "maximum pressure" strategy.
- **Opposition to a preventive war.** A majority, or 55 percent, of Americans oppose President Donald Trump ordering preventive military strikes against Iran and its nuclear program. Strong partisan splits emerge again, with three-quarters, or 75 percent, of Democrats and a majority—57 percent—of independents opposing preventive strikes. Meanwhile, a majority, or 58 percent, of Republicans support such strikes. A plurality, or 46 percent, of Americans also oppose preventive strikes against Iran's Revolutionary Guard, recently designated a terrorist group by President Trump.⁴
- **Support for military retaliation against possible Iranian aggression.** Almost three-quarters—73 percent—of Americans support President Trump ordering military action against Iran if Iran or its proxies attacked American soldiers or civilians. A weaker majority—58 percent—of Americans support President Trump ordering military action against Iran if Iran or its proxies attacked a close partner in the Middle East, such as Israel.

Key points

- There's a real risk of miscalculation and escalation leading to a full-blown war—and the last thing America needs right now is another war in the Middle East.
- Trump is a man without a serious plan on Iran. The Trump administration has no clear and realistic goal in Iran and no sense of how to achieve it. The administration has backed itself and the Iranians into a corner with no plan on how to get out.
- The Trump team has weakened America's options and put it in a dangerous position by withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and ratcheting up tensions with a regime in Tehran that's prone to take risks.

The progressive policy alternative

1. **Prioritize diplomacy.** The United States and its allies should take pragmatic steps to de-escalate the situation through diplomacy. It should open channels to talk with the Iranians without preconditions, probably through trusted regional partners such as Oman.
2. **Take active measures to stabilize the region.** The United States, its worldwide allies, and its regional partners should make clear to Iran that actions taken by Iranian-sponsored groups that destabilize the region and impair freedom of navigation will not be tolerated. It should continue defense and security cooperation with key countries such as Iraq and opening up lines of communication to reduce the prospect of inadvertent conflict.

By and large, American voters disagree with President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. While they do not trust Iran or view it favorably, they prefer diplomacy over a hard line to resolve disputes with Tehran.

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This information is based on a national poll of 1,200 registered voters conducted July 10 to 14, 2019, by the Center for American Progress and GBAO. It is also informed by a series of focus groups, qualitative interviews, and a national poll of 2,000 registered voters conducted February 25 to March 3, 2019. Polling results are on file with the authors.

Endnotes

- 1 For further reading on this topic, see Kelly Magsamen and others, "The Trump Administration's 10 Most Dangerous Actions Concerning Iran," Center for American Progress, May 21, 2019, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/news/2019/05/21/470174/trump-administrations-10-dangerous-actions-concerning-iran/>; Brian Katulis and others, "Strengthening U.S. Options on Iran" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2017), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2017/09/28/439957/strengthening-u-s-options-iran/>.
- 2 For further reading on this topic, see Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Iran's Expanded Missile Arsenal Presents Challenge for U.S., Saudi Arabia," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2019, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-expanded-missile-arsenal-presents-challenge-for-u-s-saudi-arabia-11570959055>; *The Economist*, "Tensions between Iran and the West have the Gulf states on edge," July 25, 2019, available at <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/07/25/tensions-between-iran-and-the-west-have-the-gulf-states-on-edge>; Afshon Ostovar and Ariane M. Tabatabai, "Iran, the Unitary State," *Foreign Affairs*, October 18, 2019, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2019-10-18/iran-unitary-state>.
- 3 Nicholas Miller, "Maximum Pressure Is Failing: Fact-Checking Pompeo on Iran," *War on the Rocks*, August 15, 2019, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/maximum-pressure-is-failing-fact-checking-pompeo-on-iran/>.
- 4 Nicole Gaouette, "Trump designates elite Iranian military force as a terrorist organization," CNN, April 8, 2019, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/08/politics/iran-us-irgc-designation/index.html>.