



Marine with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Marines, carries sandbag to strengthen security post during reinforcement of U.S. Embassy Compound in Baghdad, January 4, 2020 (U.S. Marine Corps/Kyle C. Talbot)

# Disciplined Lethality

## Expanding Competition with Iran in an Age of Nation-State Rivalries

By Scott J. Harr

The United States had formerly enjoyed distinct competitive advantages prosecuting armed conflict in the war on terror around the globe. However, the swift ascension of states such as China, Russia, and Iran in terms of regional and global capabilities to project power, coupled with the exhausting U.S. focus on defeating violent extremist organizations over the better part of two decades, requires a reevaluation of strategy. This shift is

neither new nor unanticipated. As articulated in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), strategic competition between the world's Great Powers will define the new operational environment moving forward.<sup>1</sup> Rising near-peer competitors are using innovative technology and seizing on ambiguities within the new and emerging battlespace to make strategic gains on the margins of peace that nullify or bypass traditional American strengths.

The NDS has fittingly put a premium on “expanding the competitive space” with adversaries.<sup>2</sup> While prioritizing lethal force, the NDS also identifies the imperative to leverage all elements of national

power in efforts to “expand” the competition, which implies a preference to keep competition at levels of confrontation at the level beneath open warfare. As one of the four states identified in the NDS and the Middle East's preeminent near-peer adversary of the United States, Iran naturally dominates discussions on emerging security challenges, and senior leaders from the highest echelons of defense policy have prioritized countering Iran's “malign” influence in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Given the above, the intent of this article is to analyze the nature and prospects of expanding strategic competition with Iran in the Middle East. In order to best understand the nature of strategic

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Major Scott J. Harr, USA, is a Company Commander in 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (Airborne).



Republic of Korea army soldiers stand resolute at Joint Security Area where South and North Korean soldiers stand face-to-face across Korean Demilitarized Zone, Panmunjom, South Korea, June 19, 2018 (U.S. Army/Richard Colletta)

competition with Iran, it is first necessary to identify some unique aspects of Iran as a near-peer adversary compared to other states. This article first distills the salient factors that impact approaches to strategic competition with Iran. Next, it analyzes the pertinent dynamics governing strategic competition given the prevailing competitive approaches that undergird each country. Finally, based on the preceding analysis and findings, it offers recommendations for strategic actions to guide U.S. competition against Iran and steer approaches to favorable outcomes for U.S. interests. Competitive actions and strategies that are attuned to the unique aspects of Iran as a near-peer adversary and that account for the existing dynamics governing Iran's approach to competition in the Middle East stand a better chance of thwarting Iranian attempts to undermine U.S. power and influence in the space between war and peace. Such actions also represent

the best chance to stabilize the Middle East amid robust Iranian efforts to the contrary.

### **Gray Zone Competition: A Near-Peer Without Peer**

The NDS primarily speaks of national threats emanating from four nations: China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. All these states currently compete against the United States in what some have termed the gray zone, which, as noted by scholar Van Jackson, generally denotes types of conflict "short of war" or, essentially, "non-war competition" between states.<sup>4</sup> Near-peer competition in the gray zone is not created equal, and the four states identified in the NDS go about their competition differently and take up decidedly diverse competitive strategies and tactics undermining U.S. interests and sovereignty. Therefore, in order to isolate the character of Iran's competi-

tive strategy with an eye toward recommending effective counterstrategies, it is useful to compare the attributes of how the four states *directly* compete with the United States on the global stage. In defining direct competition, the avenues available for direct engagement, the presence or lack of direct threats emanating from competitor countries, and the level of innovation involved in actions that directly target the United States comprise the lens for this analysis. While other important and significant indirect categories of interaction exist, such as economic relations and the third-party allies and adversaries of the state threats, this analysis focuses on direct actions only. In this way, unique elements of Iran's direct competitive tactics and strategy emerge that ultimately impact the range of feasible and desirable U.S. approaches to engaging in strategic competition with Tehran.

As a starting point for analyzing the direct attributes of near-peer competition from the four states, it is perhaps best to examine what (if any) other elements of national power (besides military action) exist as a venue for engagement. Both Russia and China maintain diplomatic relations with the United States, which instantly expands the possibilities for strategic competition by leveraging diplomacy as a cornerstone element of U.S. power. President Donald Trump has held direct talks with both his Russian and Chinese counterparts during his term.<sup>5</sup> Such avenues for dialogue make communicating intentions and potentially de-escalating tension profoundly simpler and, by default, augment the range of options available during gray zone conflict. By contrast, limited diplomatic channels exist between the United States, North Korea, and Iran. This characteristic is primarily what distinguishes these states as “rogue” regimes in the NDS. While President Trump has held direct talks with Kim Jong-un and offered to meet with President Hasan Rohani, the lack of official relations and absence of U.S. Embassies in either country promote hostility while straining efforts at communication.<sup>6</sup>

Related to the presence or lack of diplomatic channels between the United States and the four states is the presence or absence of overtly hostile threats of force emanating from these competitors. Both China and Russia have refrained from issuing direct threats of lethal force against the United States despite pointed clashes over issues of sovereignty and economic flashpoints. Indeed, the United States and Russia have gone to great lengths to coordinate and de-conflict their respective actions in the military conflict in Syria to avoid direct confrontation, despite finding themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> For its part, China and the United States have recently entered a period of détente in a bitter contest of wills regarding international trade and commerce.<sup>8</sup> These dynamics signify that nations, while fiercely competitive and assertive in fighting for their interests, are reticent to escalate competition to open warfare. As

such, a broader range of options likely exists for the United States to engage in strategic competition options that integrate all elements of national power and imply a supporting role for the military. On the other hand, both North Korea and Iran routinely issue hostile threats of lethal force against the United States while openly flaunting destabilizing military activities such as ballistic missile testing. These bellicose threats, coupled with the lack of diplomatic relations, restrict the elements of national power that can be leveraged in competition while also instantly ushering the military to the forefront of competitive actions to counter the threats.

Finally, the nature of strategic competition between the United States and the four states can be examined in terms of the level of innovation demonstrated in competitive actions. As noted by General Joseph Dunford, modern warfare is changing with the advent of new technologies that near-peer states exploit to make operational gains at the expense of U.S. power.<sup>9</sup> For instance, Russia has used information operations in creative and plausibly deniable ways to hedge the sovereignty of neighboring states and even allegedly influence democratic elections in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, North Korea allegedly perpetrated a massive cyber hack of Sony to undermine and delay the release of a commercial film portraying the North Korean regime in a negative light.<sup>11</sup> Not to be outdone, China continues to build man-made islands to extend its sovereignty in the South China Sea and use “debt warfare” in Africa to assume control of massive resources and infrastructure on the continent.<sup>12</sup>

All these activities represent innovative competitive actions that exploit technological advances that make attribution difficult or sovereignty issues where policy to guide behavior is currently limited or vague. Iran stands alone in its competitive activities in that it has primarily relied on more traditional tactics to compete in the gray zone. Using a network of proxy forces across the Middle East (notably in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen), Iran successfully projects power

and asserts its foreign policy objectives even without a buildup of conventional military power. Lacking the resources of a Great Power state, Iran nevertheless effectively undermines the security interests of more powerful ones (namely the United States and Israel) by training, arming, and advising capable nonstate actors. As noted by Van Jackson, the use of proxies is a classic tactic employed in gray zone competition and allows the aggressor to offer credible threats of force/retaliation while also obfuscating the actual role of official state apparatus in the support of proxy forces.<sup>13</sup>

Using the analytical framework discussed above, Iran’s direct approach to strategic competition is unique among the four states. In general, it may be stated that the Iranian “brand” of competition restricts the use of all elements of national power, takes an overtly hostile tone, and employs traditional tactics of gray zone warfare. In this sense, Iran represents a “near peer without peer”—that is, competitive responses to Iran will have to address a distinctly Iranian brand of competition. These aspects also ensure that the starting point for strategic competition with Iran appears decidedly more aggressive in nature than other threat states and perhaps diminishes the prospects for expanding competition using softer elements of national power that keep the competition beneath thresholds of warfare.

## Hard Truths About Soft Approaches

In addition to seemingly having fewer elements of national power at its disposal to expand competition with Iran, the United States must contend with several constraining dynamics regarding its competition with Iran that impact its strategic approach. Perhaps chief among these dynamics is what might be termed the *competition paradox* that governs the competitive actions of both the United States and Iran in the Middle East. Simply put, the competition paradox theorizes that the freer a country’s civil society, the less free it is to compete in the gray zone. Counterintuitively, a free society’s liberal

values and democratic processes have a constraining effect on the range of competitive actions available in gray zone competition. Societies based on liberal democratic ideals that cherish pluralism, individual liberty, and universal human rights will in general impose limits on their leaders that restrict competitive actions that fall outside liberal societal values. Activities such as arming terrorist groups, conducting cyber attacks on civilian populations, and blatantly violating national sovereignty (all actions taken recently by nondemocratic near-peer competitors) represent unacceptable actions that will likely not be sustainable or viable by the ruling elite in a democratic country with a free civil society.

Naturally, there is some subjectivity and relativism at play here. The United States, as a leading democratic state, has undoubtedly perpetrated questionable or dubious competitive actions to achieve its interests in the past in spite of societal values. However, the important principle that undergirds the competition paradox is that in a free civil society, opposition voices are always present and active, and when thresholds of discontent emerge from the public, democratic mechanisms exist to transition the ruling political power to entities more aligned with the dominant societal values. Conversely, in less free states (like Iran), no mechanisms exist to transition political power, which makes leaders freer to pursue whatever agenda and interests they choose with little restraint and no political constituency to worry about. In Iran, the religious ruling elite have effectively eliminated civil society and concentrated all meaningful political power in unelected bodies and individuals. Their actions and foreign policy agendas are carried out with limited or no opposition and with nothing but the whim of the supreme leader to guide and direct them. This is one reason why Iran can arm paramilitary groups and nonstate proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen that degrade regional stability and engage in terrorist tactics that have been widely condemned by the international community. While the United States enjoys vastly greater individual

and societal freedom than Iran, from the strategic competition standpoint dictated by the competition paradox, Iran is free and the United States is not. Iran, therefore, enjoys a competitive advantage as it presses its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East.

Iran's competitive advantage over the United States is not only derived from the greater degree of freedom it enjoys prosecuting its competitive actions but also stems from diverging and misaligned perspectives on the stakes of the competition itself. For Iran, the stakes of its competition are its very existence, and it therefore perceives its competitive actions as moves made in a "war of necessity," waged for its survival. As noted by Afshon Ostovar in his seminal work *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and the Revolutionary Guard*, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Iran has viewed Israel as a mortal and existentially threatening enemy. Its foreign policy actions, therefore, endeavor to combat and ultimately defeat Israel. Indeed, Iran has persistently framed its wars and conflicts in terms of creating a "road to Israel" to destroy its nemesis.<sup>14</sup> In this regional power imbalance, as Kenneth Waltz observes, Iran views itself as a lone Persian state surrounded by Arabs and within striking distance of an enemy capable of destroying it.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the stakes could not be higher for Iran, and thus Iran's risk tolerance and resolve to engage in competition are high.

Conversely, for the United States, conflicts in the Middle East represent a war of choice, where only interests—not existence—are at stake. The risk tolerance and resolve for competitive actions in wars of choice are decidedly lower. This misalignment in perspectives between Iran and the United States regarding strategic competition is presumably why Iran is seeking to develop its lethal capabilities, apparently unafraid to escalate the conflict, while the United States is seeking to de-escalate the competition by expanding it to elements of national power that stand a better chance of keeping the competition beneath the level of open warfare.

According to the competition paradox, Iran is both freer to compete in the Middle East and more resolved to do so. Perhaps no one better personified these advantages and their effects on Iran's approach to competition in the Middle East than General Qasem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's special forces (Quds Force) and trusted advisor and instrument of the supreme leader himself. His recent death only highlights his impact within Iran and in the region. As a main architect and executor of Iran's foreign policies in the Middle East, Soleimani was revered in military circles for his success in prosecuting asymmetric military operations that stymied many regional adversaries and blunted the objectives of regional and foreign powers—including the United States—in the Middle East. While Soleimani was undoubtedly a gifted leader who deserved credit for his role helping Iran achieve its foreign policy objectives through asymmetric military approaches, he did not have the mystical prowess or supernatural special warfare abilities frequently alluded to or ascribed to him in contemporary literature. He was, rather, the beneficiary of the dynamics described above: freer to compete and competing with more resolve. Bluntly, Soleimani's gloves were off in competitive approaches designed to preserve and save the Iranian state, while U.S. gloves remain cautiously on as it fights to merely protect its interests abroad. The implications of the U.S.-Iranian competitive dynamics described conveyed decisive advantages to Iran and cast doubt on the viability and prospects of U.S. efforts to expand the competition using reciprocal and/or softer means. Only time will tell if his death will change these dynamics and in what ways.

### **A Color Evolution: Green-Lighting Red Lines in the Gray Zone**

Those who are quick to call for regime change or war with Iran are often pejoratively labeled *Iran hawks* for their aggressive stance. By definition, Iran hawks have given up hope on the prospects for competition in the gray zone. Yet even given the grim prognosis on the current state of competitive play between

the United States and Iran, prospects for effective competition in the gray zone with Iran exist and should be fully explored before giving in to the gravitational pull of yet another large-scale military conflict in the Middle East.

Van Jackson notes that aggressors often make operational gains in the gray zone by taking advantage of either weak or nonexistent red lines from defenders.<sup>16</sup> In this context, *red lines* refer to explicit, clearly communicated, and/or codified in international law boundaries that serve to govern behavior in the gray zone. These lines specify consequences for aggressive actors that cross them. Additionally, the consequences specified for crossing red lines must be credible in order to have the desired deterrent effect. That is, aggressors must believe that defenders will follow through on the punitive actions promised for violations of red lines. Without clear and credible red lines, aggressors can exploit ambiguity and a lack of credibility to make competitive gains. In the current U.S.-Iranian competitive environment, Iran exploits this dynamic to increase its capabilities to wage war in the Middle East at the expense of U.S. credibility. U.S. responses lack either the force or credibility to deter Iranian competitive gains. Sanctions, for example, while crippling the Iranian public and inducing massive hardship in society, are too easily circumvented by the ruling regime and its international allies to stand a real chance at dislodging the regime or compelling it to change its foreign policies. In this case, the U.S. competitive action lacks the force necessary to counter Iranian competition. A competitive action that is an example of a lack of credibility is the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). With that agreement in 2015, the United States and its allies attempted to impose limits on Iran's potential to develop nuclear weapons capabilities in exchange for sanctions relief. However, less than 2 years after the deal's implementation, President Trump withdrew from it. Among other consequences of scrapping the JCPOA, the withdrawal likely sent a clear message to Iran that American actions and agreements lack credibility

and that negotiations with U.S. officials represent fruitless and capricious efforts. As a result, the Middle East remains a gray zone competitive arena that has seen an increase in Iranian capabilities and influence with a corresponding decrease in U.S. credibility and capability to deter Iranian behavior.

To decisively reverse this trend, the United States can introduce and implement red lines that clearly specify unacceptable Iranian behavior and, critically, enforce them with disciplined lethal actions to ensure Iran pays a proportionate price for unacceptable competitive actions. Implementing red lines with lethal consequences yields two advantages to U.S. competition with Iran. First, it clearly delineates acceptable and unacceptable behavior in the gray zone that would diminish Iran's ability to exploit ambiguity in the Middle East. Identifying such actions as transporting lethal aid shipments to proxy forces, conducting ballistic missile tests, and closing the Strait of Hormuz as unacceptable and punishable behavior begins to clarify expected behavior in U.S.-Iranian competition. Second, imposing disciplined, lethal costs on Iran for unacceptable behavior activates and leverages the main U.S. strength in interstate competition: lethal capabilities. Targeting the Iranian military, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or the regime's infrastructure after red line violations would be lethal enough to send a strong message. It would degrade Iranian capability but be sufficiently targeted to impose costs only on the offending security or state apparatus so as not to signal an appetite for large-scale combat. Imposing red lines in the U.S.-Iranian competition enforced with lethal capabilities applied in a targeted fashion represents the best way to effectively compete in a Middle Eastern gray zone, where Iran already holds many advantages, without giving in to hasty and myopic Iran hawk impulses advocating regime change through large-scale combat.

Critics of this recommendation are likely to raise two main issues with the red line and lethal strike competition strategy. First, they are likely to see the

lethal response as inevitably escalating the conflict into just the type of open and large-scale warfare that competitive strategies should be avoiding. However, lethal responses to Iran should not be automatically equated with an invitation to open warfare. It is possible to leverage lethal capabilities in competition without escalating the conflict to open warfare. The U.S. response to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in Ghouta illustrates this point. After the Syrian regime reportedly used chemical weapons in an attack on opposition fighters, U.S. planes bombed regime infrastructure to send a message that such behavior would not be tolerated.<sup>17</sup> In a crisis where U.S. and regime forces have delicately avoided direct confrontation, the bombing did not lead to an escalation in conflict. Additionally, it is worth reiterating that the centerpiece of Iranian competitive activity in the Middle East hinges on proxy forces created and leveraged *specifically because Iran lacks the military resources to support large-scale conflict* with an advanced state. Bluntly, Iran uses proxy forces because it *has* to use them, as it lacks fully developed conventional military capabilities. This reality lessens the chance that targeted lethal strikes against Iran would goad it into a war that it is clearly unprepared to fight.

Second, critics of this proposed strategy will also cite the risks to U.S. and allied forces from the highly capable Iranian proxies in the region. In this line of thinking, lethal strikes from the United States would beget lethal responses from Iranian proxies that could potentially devolve into a violent back-and-forth contest of wills between U.S. allies in the region and Iranian proxies leading to destabilization. But these proxies are already destabilizing the region with relative impunity. Backing Palestinian terrorist groups against Israel, stalling the formation of a legitimate government in Lebanon, forming paramilitary forces in Iraq, and arming a violent insurgency in Yemen show that Iran's destabilizing fingerprints are all over the major regional conflicts. Implementing red lines that carry a lethal response would simply make Iran pay a price for actions it already conducts. Furthermore, Iran's

ability to scale and obfuscate its support to its proxies helps them persist. An uptick in violent actions from proxies would increase Iran's signature in the region and perhaps fully bring the threat into the open to help coalesce Arab allies against Iran's conduct of violent activities in their own backyard.

At its core, implementing red lines in the Iranian gray zone is a call to reinvigorate American sovereignty in the face of a direct threat. It asserts that the United States has a fundamental right to *directly and unilaterally* challenge direct competitive actions that threaten U.S. interests or allies. Indirect efforts to expand competition with Iran and/or impose meaningful costs on Iranian malign activities do not appear to be working, as Iran nimbly outmaneuvers U.S. efforts to engage the international community. Neither does covert action seem efficient or effective given the fact that U.S. covert actions in 1953 (supporting a coup d'état) ostensibly fomented the mistrust and resentment from Iran that persist to this day and underpin the hostility from the Iranian regime. There are certainly risks involved with implementing red lines with lethal consequences. Striking a sovereign country with military force (even when employed with discipline and scoped to avoid escalation) is no small thing. However, given the competitive advantages Iran currently enjoys in the region and its plethora of malign and destabilizing activities, decisionmakers must ask themselves, "What about the current U.S.-Iran competitive status quo is going well?"

In direct competition between states, lethality still rules the day, and capabilities and competitive overmatch in force-on-force destruction should not be begrudged, marginalized, or discounted. Strategic competition with Iran bears out these truths. Prospects of expanding competition with Iran by leveraging nonmilitary elements of national power are dim from the start given the lack of diplomatic relations between the countries, the overt hostile threats emanating from Tehran, and Iran's tactical reliance on proxy forces in its competitive

approach. The competition paradox and the misalignment in perspectives on the stakes of the competition (wars of necessity versus wars of choice) give Iran further advantages in the competition. The sum of all these factors implies that the United States will not outcompete Iran by trying to expand the competition into realms that are either infeasible or do not activate traditional U.S. overmatch strengths. Rather, introducing the lethality resource into the competition enables the United States to outcompete Iran and compete from a position of strength. To avoid escalating the competition to open warfare, the lethality resource should be introduced in a disciplined capacity that aims to keep competition in the gray zone. Delineating red lines in the gray zone to define acceptable behavior, set expectations, and lay ground rules for competition is a measured way to introduce U.S. competitive advantages that would allow for success in the gray zone while keeping competition beneath large-scale combat. JFQ

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, R44017 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated October 8, 2019), available at <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> Van Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition: Gray Zones, Red Lines, and Conflicts Before War," *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2017).

<sup>5</sup> "Read a Transcript of Trump and Putin's Joint Press Conference," *Time*, July 31, 2018, available at <<http://time.com/5339848/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-summit-transcript/>>; Yen Nee Lee, "What to Expect from the Crucial G-20 Meeting Between Trump and Xi This Weekend," CNBC, November 30, 2018, available at <[www.cnbc.com/2018/11/30/g-20-donald-trump-xi-jinping-meet-to-discuss-us-china-trade-war.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2018/11/30/g-20-donald-trump-xi-jinping-meet-to-discuss-us-china-trade-war.html)>.

<sup>6</sup> Anna Fifield, David Nakamura, and Seung Min Kim, "Trump Accepts Invitation to Meet North Korean Leader Kim

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<sup>7</sup> Connor O'Brien, "Dunford: U.S. Will Work to Re-Establish Deconfliction Effort with Russia in Syria," *Politico*, June 19, 2017, available at <[www.politico.com/story/2017/06/19/russia-syria-us-general-joe-dunford-239720](http://www.politico.com/story/2017/06/19/russia-syria-us-general-joe-dunford-239720)>.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Baccardax, "Stocks Rally on U.S.-China Trade Detente; Trump Blasts Fed Chair Powell," *The Street*, November 28, 2018, available at <[www.thestreet.com/markets/stocks-rally-on-u-s-china-trade-detente-trump-puts-fed-chair-powell-on-blast-14793893](http://www.thestreet.com/markets/stocks-rally-on-u-s-china-trade-detente-trump-puts-fed-chair-powell-on-blast-14793893)>.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., "The Character of War and Strategic Landscape Have Changed," *Joint Force Quarterly* 89 (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Sprang, "Russia in Ukraine 2013–2016: The Application of New Type Warfare Maximizing the Exploitation of Cyber, IO, and Media," *Small Wars Journal*, n.d., available at <<https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/russia-ukraine-2013-2016-application-new-type-warfare-maximizing-exploitation-cyber-io-and>>.

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<sup>13</sup> Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition."

<sup>14</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and the Revolutionary Guard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August 2012), 2–5.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, "Tactics of Strategic Competition."

<sup>17</sup> Jon Sharman et al., "Syria Strikes—As It Happened: Bashar al-Assad's Chemical Weapons Capability 'Set Back for Years' by Bombing, Pentagon Says," *Independent* (London), April 14, 2018, available at <[www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-us-tensions-live-updates-syria-trump-theresa-may-assad-action-chemical-latest-a8302341.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-us-tensions-live-updates-syria-trump-theresa-may-assad-action-chemical-latest-a8302341.html)>.