



TURNING THE TIDE ON TEHRAN:

An Iran Strategy That Restores Deterrence and Protects U.S. Interests





Photo by Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/ Reuters.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the keystone of radical jihadist terrorism across the Middle East – posing a clear threat to the United States and constituting a persistent obstacle to long-term regional and global stability.

The Iranian regime's fundamental opposition to normalized relations between Arab nations and Israel nullifies any hope of advancing peace in the Middle East. U.S. policies that have sought to appease Iran's theocratic regime in the hopes of inducing better behavior have failed.

The Obama administration's 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) did not curtail the country's nuclear ambitions; what's more, by lifting sanctions and removing other forms of financial pressure, the Obama administration lined the pockets of the regime and enabled them to expand their support for terrorist proxies throughout the region.

→ With the rise of the China-Russia-Iran axis and the return of great power competition on the global stage, the case for a robust U.S. strategy to contain and deter the Iranian threat has become all the more urgent. At the same time, Iran is also weaker than it has been in years – its terrorist brain trust and proxies have been decimated by Israel; the economy is in dire straits; and the Iranian people are hungry for change.

The Threat

The threat posed by the Islamic Republic extends far beyond Iran's borders. Tehran remains committed to obtaining a nuclear weapon through any means necessary so that it can expand its ability to exercise power throughout the region and the wider world.

When the JCPOA remained in force, Iran regularly denied inspectors access, enriched uranium beyond allowed limits, and developed advanced centrifuges. Information gathered by intelligence services and dissident groups such as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK) and National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) have also revealed the existence of secret nuclear facilities and missile programs.

A nuclear Iran would destabilize the region, embolden the regime's aggression abroad and repression at home, deepen ties with rogue states like North Korea, and would likely trigger an arms race in the Gulf.

Iran also sows instability through its network of proxy militias and other armed groups, known as

the “Axis of Resistance.” Using these proxies, the regime seeks to destabilize the Middle East, erode U.S. influence, and ultimately destroy the Jewish state of Israel and inflict as much damage as possible onto the United States.

Operating through its parallel military institution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian regime funds and supports terrorist actors, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Shia militias throughout Iraq and Syria. Operations outside of Iran are conducted by the IRGC-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) component, which pursues the regime’s interests through asymmetrical warfare and by shelling out billions in subsidies for terrorists and rogue militias.

Iran also plays a crucial role in the burgeoning China-Russia-Iran partnership. These nations, working in concert with North Korea and Venezuela, represent a new axis of authoritarianism intent on exporting its model around the globe.

These malign actors seek to create a world in which personal and religious freedoms are curtailed and controlled by the state; neighboring countries can be invaded, coerced, and abused without consequence; and economic colonialism is the

norm. The alliance is bound together by significant shared economic and geopolitical interests: China remains Iran’s largest trade partner and relies on the country for its oil exports; Russia relies heavily on Iran for its war efforts; and North Korea continues its partnerships with the Iranian regime in defense technologies. The U.S. must continue to monitor the relationship among these countries and their efforts to disrupt America’s vital national interests.

Obama’s Appeasement

The Obama administration’s failed Iran policy was based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the goals and incentives driving the Iranian regime.

The original sin of the JCPOA was to assume that the theocracy would liberalize in accordance with greater economic opportunity and prosperity; in reality, the JCPOA only served to shore up the power base of the world’s leading sponsor of terrorism. The deal was all carrots and very few sticks – it allowed Iran to preserve its nuclear research and development, failed to address its missile program, and permitted the regime to have access to financial systems that benefited its interests.

After four years of maximum pressure by the Trump administration, the Biden administration reversed the progress made in containing Iran by seeking to revive the JCPOA – enriching the regime and demonstrating profound American weakness in the process.

The consequences of these policy failures came to a head on October 7th, 2023, when the Iran-backed terrorist organization Hamas invaded southern Israel, slaughtered more than 1,400 innocent Israelis, and abducted 251 hostages. In support of this attack, Iranian proxy Hezbollah began firing into Israel from its bases in Lebanon.

October 7th was a test not just of Israel, but of America’s diminished power in the region. In the months to come, Iranian-backed attacks increased on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria. In Yemen, the Iran-aligned Houthis rebels executed drone and missile attacks against Israel and blockaded the Red Sea for months on end, causing massive disruption to global commerce. And at the same time, Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons continued apace.

The obvious failures of the Obama/Biden approach to Iran should serve as both a warning and a call to action for future administrations. President Trump and his team should start by following the successful sanctions model of his first administration, and reinvest in the diplomatic approach embodied in the Abraham Accords.



Maximum Pressure

President Trump and Secretary Pompeo recognized the power of sanctions to squeeze the Iranian regime while incurring a low opportunity cost for the United States. In contrast to the JCPOA, President Trump's Maximum Pressure Campaign had three main goals: maximize economic pressure, increase diplomatic engagement, and restore deterrence.

Under the Maximum Pressure Campaign, over 970 Iranian entities and individuals were designated to more than 26 rounds of sanctions; more than 70 Iran-linked financial institutions were sanctioned; 1.5M barrels per day of Iranian oil were ousted from global markets, resulting in a loss of \$10B in revenue; and over 100 corporations have exited the Iranian market.

In a speech entitled "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," delivered at the Heritage Foundation in May 2018, President Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlined the administration's approach to the Iranian threat and the failure of the JCPOA:

"No more. No more wealth creation for Iranian kleptocrats. No more acceptance of missiles landing in Riyadh and in the Golan Heights. No more cost-free expansions of Iranian power. No more. The JCPOA put the world at risk of its fatal flaws."

The first Trump administration also recognized the fact that deterrence could never be restored without a willingness to use hard power against Iran where necessary. The bold decision to strike Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in retaliation for his role in attacks on U.S. servicemen

throughout the Middle East demonstrated to the Iranian regime that it could no longer act with impunity. This strengthened America's position in the Middle East and helped to create the conditions in which Arab states felt secure enough to enter into the Abraham Accords.

In this speech, Secretary Pompeo outlined twelve demands for the Iranian regime:

- Declare to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) a full account of the prior military dimensions of its nuclear program and permanently and verifiably abandon such work in perpetuity;
- Stop enrichment and never pursue plutonium reprocessing, including closing its heavy water reactor;
- Provide the IAEA with unqualified access to all sites throughout the entire country;
- Cease proliferation of ballistic missiles and halt further launching or development of nuclear-capable missile systems;
- Release all U.S. citizens being held prisoner in Iran, as well as the citizens of U.S. partners and allies;
- End support to Middle East terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad;
- Respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi government and permit the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of Shia militias;
- Withdraw its military support for the Houthi militia and work towards a peaceful political settlement in Yemen;
- Withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria;
- Cease support for the Taliban and other terrorists in Afghanistan and the region and cease harboring senior al-Qaeda leaders;
- End the IRG Quds Force's support for terrorists and militant partners around the world; and
- Stop its threatening behavior against its neighbors, many of whom are U.S. allies, including threats to destroy Israel, firing missiles into Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and threats to international shipping and destructive cyberattacks.





The Path Forward

Restoring deterrence through robust economic, diplomatic, and – where necessary – kinetic pressure was crucial to Secretary Pompeo’s broader vision for Middle East peace, embodied in the Abraham Accords.

This historic set of peace and normalization agreements between Israel and her Arab neighbors fortified an alignment of nations committed to a free, open, and prosperous Middle East, while forming a bulwark capable of containing and deterring Iran. These successful policies should serve as the model for the new administration.

President Trump announced his commitment to resuming this policy with a February 4, 2025 National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) “... restoring maximum pressure on the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” This is a welcome development. As pressure grows for a new nuclear deal with Iran, President Trump’s policymakers should heed the experiences of the first Trump administration and ignore the siren song of seeking a nuclear deal at any cost.

The idea that there is a binary choice between a nuclear deal and war with Iran was always a false and dangerous premise; with the Iranian regime severely weakened, it is even more so today. As Secretary Pompeo has argued, “fake deals”

with Iran offer the illusion of progress while empowering Tehran to bypass restrictions and gain legitimacy – strengthening the hand of a regime that is fundamentally at odds with America’s interests.

The conditions articulated by Secretary Pompeo remain as relevant today as they were in 2018, and should be considered the baseline requirements for any resumption of talks with Tehran.

AS SECRETARY POMPEO SAID IN 2018,

“Now is the time for the Supreme Leader and the Iranian regime to summon the courage to do something historically beneficial for its own people, for this ancient and proud nation. As for the United States, our eyes are clear as to the nature of this regime, but our ears are open to what may be possible. Unlike the previous administration, we are looking for outcomes that benefit the Iranian people, not just the regime.”

America’s key demands should be:

- 1 Fully and verifiably dismantling all uranium enrichment sites and components related to enrichment activities, with Americans on the ground and unqualified inspection access for the IAEA going forward.
- 2 The end of financial, military, and political support to Iran’s proxy forces throughout the Middle East and the surrender of the senior leadership of al-Qaeda (currently harbored by the Iranian government) to the U.S.
- 3 A commitment to making peace with Iran’s Gulf Arab neighbors, an end to hostilities against Israel, and the full dismantling of the IRGC.

America should also act quickly to exploit Iran’s unprecedented weaknesses. Thanks to Israel, the Islamic Republic can no longer project power through its proxies to nearly the extent possible prior to October 7th. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has removed a crucial partner in Tehran’s regional enterprise.

In short, Ayatollah Khomeini’s strategy of using the assault on Israel as a means of deflecting an impending domestic uprising and asserting regional power to undermine the Abraham Accords backfired. However, the extent to which his miscalculation proves fatal depends in large part on a tough new American strategy.

Support the Iranian Opposition

Empowering the Iranian people in their fight for freedom is another crucial piece of the puzzle.

No external or internal influence is likely to alter the fundamental nature of the Iranian regime, which is grounded in brutality and extremism and has proven itself to be immune to reform. The liberation of Iran will be achieved only through the efforts of those who have endured decades of sacrifice in pursuit of a democratic future.

The Iranian regime is not popular with the people of Iran – as evidenced by the mass pro-democracy protest movement that gripped the country in recent years – and the deepening economic crisis and depleted political legitimacy pose a serious challenge to the survival of the dictatorship.

The 2022 popular uprising saw broad participation across all sectors of society and was firmly anchored to democratic aspirations. The brutal suppression of this movement has further alienated the regime from the people, and widespread human rights abuses have isolated Iran globally.

“Iran can only be freed by those who have sacrificed for decades, who have paid the highest price. Who have withstood massacres and imprisonments.

“The message I have for the Iranian people and the Resistance Units fighting on their behalf is this: Keep up the fight.”

– Secretary Mike Pompeo, Speech to the National Resistance Council of Iran, January 2025

In many authoritarian countries, democratic opposition movements lack the coordination and critical mass of popular support to make change possible. Yet this is not the case in Iran, which has a longstanding organized opposition movement that commands a broad base of support inside the country. Recognizing Iran's organized opposition as a key factor in shaping U.S. policy on Iran and the Middle East has been long overlooked, and this oversight must be addressed.

This is not, as some critics have charged, equivalent to supporting regime change. In fact, this approach acknowledges the reality that no lasting positive change can occur in Iran unless it is achieved by the Iranian people and organized resistance. We have both a strategic and moral obligation to recognize the Iranian youth fighting the IRGC so that they can determine their own destiny.

The swift collapse of the Assad regime last year demonstrated just how quickly a tyrannical government can fall apart. Yet unless proponents of democracy with the legitimacy and capabilities to fill the void are ready to step in, there is a real risk that the sudden collapse of the Irani-



an regime will leave a power vacuum exploited by other malign actors.

The organized opposition must stand ready with a clear plan for a peaceful democratic transition – for example, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) has proposed a 10-point plan that would require free elections within six months of the regime's overthrow; the separation of religion and state; gender equality; and end to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

It is in America's strategic and moral interest to support the brave Iranians who are risking everything to oppose



their tyrannical government. America should continue to advocate for their freedom both in Iranian prisons or in response to threats against the Iranian dissident community at Camp Ashraf-3 in Albania, and improve our coordination with the democratic opposition to set them up for success.

The Iranian regime threatens the freedom and security of the U.S. and our partners in the Middle East and beyond. As Tehran races to become a nuclear power there is no time to waste. The U.S. should build upon the successes of the first Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign as envisioned by President Trump and implemented by Secretary Pompeo.

America can take advantage of Iran's historic internal and external weaknesses to isolate the regime, facilitate greater expansion of the Abraham Accords, give relief to opposition forces inside the country, and deal a serious blow to the burgeoning China-Russia-Iran alignment. ■



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