



What Comes after Engagement or Isolation?

America's Policy on Iran & Its Missing Strategic Depth

The Organization of Iranian American Communities
(OIAC)

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Abstract

The Iranian regime has unleashed a steady torrent of threats against U.S. national security, especially since 2015. Policy responses have oscillated between isolation or engagement. But both of these approaches rely on blind faith that the regime will one day change its behavior, a supposition that is logically unfounded and evidentially unpersuasive. The unmitigated policy failures stem from a lack of strategic depth vis-à-vis Iran policy that has unfortunately proven detrimental to the people of Iran as well as the United States. Specifically, what is expected to come after engagement? The answer remains foggy at best. Iranian-Americans have long offered responsible alternatives, foremost among them a persistent focus on human rights and democracy in Iran, as well as the regime's state-sponsored terrorism abroad. The following memo outlines concrete options for a sustainable strategy that has enough depth to effectively counter the Iranian regime's threat, benefit the people of Iran, and to bolster regional peace and security.

Background: Regime's Suppression and Terrorism

The regime's egregious human rights record has worsened considerably. The regime is now the last executioner of children¹ and has the highest per capita executions in the world.² It has been condemned 67 times by various United Nations bodies for its gross violations.³ In 2019, House Resolution 194 condemned serious human rights abuses by Tehran and called for the imposition of additional sanctions.⁴ House Resolution 752, which passed the House in January 2020, while standing with the people of Iran that are engaged in legitimate protests against an oppressive regime, urged "the President and the Secretary of State to work with the international community to ensure that violations of human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with and regarding Iran."⁵

At the same time, International terrorism is an essential instrument of statecraft for Tehran.⁶ Additionally, Tehran has used hostage-taking and blackmail over the last four decades to win various concessions from Western countries. Finally, Tehran's enduring sponsorship of regional terrorist proxies like the Lebanese Hezbollah and a wide array of militias in Iraq and Syria have systematically undermined peace and security in the region. The Pentagon, for example, has estimated that at least 603 American troops have been killed by Iranian-backed groups in Iraq alone.⁷ Since 2018, European nations have convicted and imprisoned one Iranian diplomat,⁸ and expelled⁹ seven more¹⁰ for their involvement in terrorism plots.¹¹

Current State

Pressure and isolation have been more impactful than pure engagement.¹² Even back in March 2019, shortly after the previous administration's maximum pressure campaign took effect, the regime's financial crisis undermined its support for its regional mercenaries and proxies.¹³ The regime is clearly at the weakest point in its history. Since the JCPOA, there have been multiple unprecedented popular uprisings in Iran. In November 2019, protests targeted the regime's Supreme Leader while calling for regime change.¹⁴ The Iranian people rejected both the "moderate" and "hardliner" factions. The protesters also deliberately targeted and torched the regime's centers of suppression and corruption.¹⁵ In a brutal crackdown, the mullahs ended up killing at least 1,500 people,¹⁶ including teenagers.¹⁷

The realities on the ground have worsened since the uprising. The unprecedented systemic and widespread corruption, and the absolute control of the Iranian nation's resources by the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is considered as

the main cause of economic disaster that the country is facing. At least 60 million Iranians (70%) live below the poverty line.¹⁸ The purchasing power of each Iranian rial has decreased by about one-third compared to 2011.¹⁹ And, the death toll of the coronavirus pandemic surpassed a staggering 215,000 by mid February 2021, according to opposition tallies.²⁰ All this has made domestic dynamics all the more significant for the regime.

Tehran's main concern is the explosive situation of the Iranian society, as the uprisings in Iran are persistently getting more focused on the goal of ending the rule of the Ayatollahs. For instance, the November 2019 uprising which engulfed about 190 cities in all 31 provinces of Iran, showed the vulnerability of the regime as the public targeted the main symbols of repression, theft, and corruption. Young Iranians showed that they are ready to pay the price to unseat the Ayatollahs.

In all of the protests, the role of the organized opposition was evident and regime's officials conceded to it. The regime is particularly concerned about the appeal of the main opposition, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), among the youths. The MEK has formed Resistance Units, which has been blamed by the regime for acting as engine for change in Iran. Supreme leader Khamenei has blamed the uprising on a pyramid of hierarchy scheme. "The third side of the triangle consists of the US submissive henchmen: Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, the murderous MEK," said Khamenei of the leading opposition movement role when the new round of uprising started in January 2018.

Additionally, a wave of terrorism launched by the Iranian regime since the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, gained new height since 2018, when the role of the opposition in the protests was evident. In August 2018, the FBI arrested²¹ two Iranian citizens, for conducting covert surveillance of and collecting identifying information about American citizens and U.S. nationals who were members of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.²² The two Iranian agents pleaded guilty and were sentenced to imprisonment.²³ In July 2018, European authorities neutralized a major terrorist plot that targeted an Iranian opposition rally²⁴ near Paris, France.²⁵ Significantly, the commander of the terror squad who also brought the bomb from Iran and provided it to the assigned bombers was an accredited Iranian diplomat, who was put on trial²⁶ and convicted to 20 years of imprisonment in Belgium.²⁷ And, in December 2018, Albania expelled Iranian Ambassador Gholamhossein Mohammadnia and one other for "involvement in activities harmful to national security" of the NATO member state.²⁸ In January 2020, Albania expelled two more Iranian diplomats. All four were involved in the March 2018 terror plot in Albania against the main opposition, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK).

Policy Assessment

In these circumstances, the proclivity to deal with the regime diplomatically may risk dissipating the considerable U.S. leverage attained through the maximum pressure campaign, something the administration seems to grasp. In his first official comments concerning the JCPOA, Secretary of State Antony Blinken put the onus on the Iranian regime, underscoring that Tehran must reverse its present course and abide by the terms of the deal first, before the U.S. makes any change to its current policy.²⁹ President Biden, in an interview with the CBS Evening News, made it clear that the United States will not lift the sanctions on Iran to bring the regime to the table.³⁰ Senator Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, applaud President Biden position adding, "I...concur that Iran must stop enriching uranium...the administration must work closely with our allies and should not be motivated by artificial deadlines from the Iranians or any external actors."³¹

Thus far, the nascent Biden policy does not explicitly incorporate the full spectrum of issues, most notably the situation of human rights in Iran or the regime's espionage and terrorism against dissidents, especially in the U.S. Abandoning human rights would deprive U.S. policy of a major leverage because it frees the regime to suppress dissent at home with impunity, become more emboldened regionally, and thus survive long enough to multiply its threats. Attempts to engage Tehran without due attention to human rights and terrorism have failed for two primary reasons: 1) They have operated under the mistaken assumption that Tehran can and will change its behavior to align with the west as long as it obtains meaningful concessions; 2) They ignore the driving force for the regime's calculations: survival at home.

A healthy Iran policy would jettison the misguided supposition that Tehran can simply change its behavior. It should also dispense with the artificial distinction between perceived "moderates" and "hardliners." The Iranian people have certainly taken this approach, with millions shouting on the street: "Reformer Hardliner, the game is now over!" This spurious distinction is now only echoed by the regime's agents and lobbyists, against the core national interests of the Iranian people.

Alternatives

Instead of devoting excess attention to the regime's discredited lobbies, U.S. policy would be better served by listening to the voices of Iranian dissidents in the U.S., who have been consistently targeted by the regime for offering a real alternative. The regime's international terrorism, its meddling in regional affairs, and support for proxies presents the most serious threat to the U.S. and Europe. The new administration can lead its allies in reassessing strategic assumptions about the Iranian regime's nature and its domestic dynamics, not just its behavior.

The regime's priority is not to satisfy U.S. demands and desires. Rather, for Tehran, the most vital and essential policy orientation is to survive among a hostile population at home and to avoid being overthrown. On his first day as Secretary of State, Mr. Blinken said, "I can promise an open door and an open mind...I'll seek out dissenting views and listen to the experts, because that's how the best decisions are made."³² That is why the voice of Iranian dissidents in the U.S. - a microcosm of Iran's society - should be more accessible in policy circles, to contribute to a richer, more coherent and realistic set of policy options that are in sync with the Iranian population's desires. In the eyes of the Iranian-American community, the official U.S. policy on Iran lacks the strategic depth to effectively counter the regime's assortment of long-term threats. Isolation and engagement have not worked. The Biden administration should now integrate all elements of American and allied foreign policy instruments with the power of the Iranian people and opposition.

Recommendations

1) The administration should tether any potential engagement to the regime's verifiable measures for curbing its excesses at home. The regime is a serial violator of human rights. By shedding a spotlight on its gross violations, the Biden administration will achieve three significant outcomes: a) Strengthen ties with Congress, which has persistently raised bipartisan concerns about the human rights situation in Iran;³³ b) Bolster the role of international institutions like the United Nations;³⁴ and c) Stays in line with American values, by standing on the side of the Iranian population against the regime's brutality.

2) The administration should seize the moral high ground and immediately address high-profile human rights cases. As underscored by Congress, the regime massacred as many as 30,000 political prisoners in 1988.³⁵ To this day, officials in Tehran have not been held accountable. The regime has viewed this impunity as a blank check to commit more crimes against humanity. The administration should bolster Congressional calls by coordinating global efforts to launch investigations into the 1988 massacre, in line with recent calls by top UN human rights experts.³⁶ U.S. Congress has also called for it.³⁷

3) The White House must increase the cost of rights violations. Since the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the regime has cracked down on several large uprisings. Thousands have been killed, and tens of thousands more arrested or tortured. The administration can mobilize multilateral efforts with European allies to increase the cost of human rights violations on the regime. In particular, pressure should be raised to release Iranian political prisoners, and to allow international inspections of its prisons. Tehran should also be held accountable for taking foreign nationals as hostage, instead of being rewarded for their release, which would only lead to more hostage-taking.

4) Avoid easing or removing sanctions in the absence of substantial shifts in regime policies.

The regime's regional meddling through terrorist proxies presents the most serious security threat for the region, the U.S. and Europe. It has extended its web of terror against the opposition and has conducted espionage against Iranian dissidents in the U.S. itself. Therefore, the full range of the regime's terrorist threats must be addressed. Tehran's retreat must be meaningful and enduring, not half-hearted or transient. The regime's regional predations, blackmail and espionage tactics must be effectively confronted through a firm policy from the White House.

5) Hold the regime accountable for its terrorist and espionage plots on Western soil.

Members of Congress have censured the regime's attempts to bomb a gathering of tens of thousands of Iranian dissidents in Paris in 2018.³⁸ Hundreds of American citizens and dignitaries were in attendance. State Department officials have said that "Iran uses embassies as cover to plot terrorist attacks."³⁹ The Belgian judiciary ruling on February 4th, 2021, stated, "The court found that the four defendants are part of a larger terrorist group within a specific Iranian intelligence service." This is a clear and latest case of state-sponsored terrorism, which the United States should hold the regime and its Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to account. The White House should condemn this terror plot in the strongest terms. Washington should also work closely with European allies to prevent the malign activities of the regime's diplomatic missions, with the goal of closing them down in the case of serious violations.

6) Shut down Iranian regime's network in the United States.

Since the Iranian regime embassies and representative centers run a secret network of agents, it is important for the United States law enforcement entities to identify and prosecute any such agents in the United States. In January 2021, the Justice Department announced, "For over a decade, Kaveh Afrasiabi pitched himself to Congress, journalists, and the American public as a neutral and objective expert on Iran...However, all the while, Afrasiabi was actually a secret employee of the Government of Iran and the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations (IMUN) who was being paid to spread their propaganda."⁴⁰ Two other agents were arrested and convicted for espionage in 2018.⁴¹ The Iranian regime's network of espionage, terror and propaganda in America must be dismantled and its UN mission must not operate as a terrorism, espionage or illegal lobbying hub.

7) Support the Iranian people's democratic aspirations.

For over 40 years, the Iranian people have sought democratic change. The people have said that there is no difference between “moderates” and “hardliners.” Therefore, U.S. policy must take into account the people's desire to change the regime. Specific measures should support the Iranian people's personal freedoms, freedom of expression, and democratic rights. They should also facilitate technical aid for secure and free access to the Internet without the regime's disruption or surveillance. At the same time, the White House can join Congress to vocally support the plight of women, religious and ethnic minorities, and the organized opposition movement that seeks a free Iran. By targeting its affiliates in Iran and plotting terror against its members abroad, the Iranian regime has shown that it considers the National Council of Resistance as the viable alternative to its rule. Congress has also spoken on this. In a bi-partisan resolution co-sponsored by 222 members, a House Majority in the 116th Congress noted the “support for the Iranian opposition leader Mrs. Maryam Rajavi's 10-point plan for the future of Iran, which calls for the universal right to vote, free elections, and a market economy, and advocates gender, religious, and ethnic equality, a foreign policy based on peaceful coexistence, and a non-nuclear Iran.”⁴² In 117th Congress, the bi-partisan, H.Res.118, recognized “the rights of the Iranian people and their struggle to establish a democratic, secular, and nonnuclear Republic of Iran.”⁴³

Endnotes

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Mission

The Organization of Iranian-American communities-US (OIAC) advocates for a democratic, secular and non-nuclear government in Iran, founded on the respect for human rights, gender equality, religious and ethnic tolerance, as well as social, economic justice, and security for America. Our goal is to organize Iranian-American communities in the United States to promote these values.

Vision

The Organization of Iranian-American communities-US (OIAC), all-volunteers non profit organization, believes democracy and human rights in Iran are imperative to the national security of America and peace in the Middle East and beyond.

Goals

OIAC does not support a foreign war, nor does it support an appeasement policy towards Iran. Our goal is to promote a third option in dealing with the Iran, one which supports the Iranian people's struggle for democratic change. We hope to serve as a platform and resource for Iranian-Americans working on human rights issues and standing in solidarity with the Iranian people for democratic change in Iran. Click [HERE](#) for our 10 principles for a future Iran.



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