

TWO IRANS, TWO POLICY DIRECTIONS, NO STRATEGY

A Contrarian View

by Lincoln Bloomfield Jr.





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*Time to revisit assumptions, connect the dots,
and defend the future against a geopolitical blight*

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SUMMARY: The time has come for the U.S. and fellow democracies to take full account of Iran's unremittingly hostile activity, serial violation of international norms, and massive deceptions to avoid such a reckoning. The true, corrected accounting of 45 years of clerical rule will differ materially from prevailing commentary and reportage. Official Western policy positions will be understood to have inconvenienced Tehran again and again for ephemeral rewards. Now Iran's crimes and malignant handiwork have become too prolific to deny and too grave to ignore, exposed at home, across the Middle East, and throughout Europe and North America. Not to revisit assumptions underlying U.S. policy on Iran will be to invite future risk to U.S. power and influence. As an urgent first step, Washington should question its own mastery of the facts.

Iran instigated the Hamas attack on Israel last October 7, to keep Saudi Arabia from normalizing relations with Israel. Palestinians of Gaza have suffered great harm, but their interests and cause were not the motivation for the attack, which was an extremist religious mission to kill and terrorize Jews in symbolic defense of Islam's third holiest mosque. Iran knew that had the Saudi-Israeli normalization proceeded, its nuclear program would have lost much of its coercive power over the Arab Gulf states. More importantly, with the regime facing widespread opposition at home, and with no further prospect of benefiting from bilateral ties between Iran and Western capitals, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his circle could not afford a major regional shift that could cause their core security forces – vital to regime survival – to reconsider their own commitment to a futile quest. Tehran's rulers launched this war to prevent the spectacle of Israel being formally accepted by the Arab world, with Islam's three holiest mosques clearly beyond the reach of their power. For the U.S., Europe, and the Arab world, it is imperative that they fail.

The regime's greatest vulnerability – organized Iranian Muslims rejecting Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretation of Islam and the resulting religious dictatorship – has for 45 years led it to retain power only through internal repression and external hostility, lately with diminishing

effectiveness. It has for decades mounted a robust propaganda and disinformation campaign at home and abroad, with well-placed agents of influence throughout the diaspora. Washington and other capitals, hoping for cooperation, have generally embraced narratives that very likely bear Tehran's coercive fingerprints. They have not squarely assessed the clerics' weaknesses and historic mistakes that best explain the latter's harsh repression at home, hostage-holding and terrorism abroad, needless perpetuation of the Iran-Iraq War, disruption of neighboring moves toward representative government, and readiness to engage in nuclear diplomacy.

This essay, a contrarian view, explores these dimensions and suggests the basis for a new consensus on the Iran threat, and a comprehensive Western strategy to defend the rules-based order against it.

Why There Is No Consensus View on Iran

The Cannes Film Festival might not strike foreign policy experts as an occasion for insight on why the world lacks a consensus view, or a strategy, for coping with the unceasingly perverse behavior of Iran's clerical dictatorship that took power in 1979. Americans hold diverse opinions about Russia and China but generally acknowledge the threat each poses to democratic societies around the world. Iran is different, and Western capitals need to pay closer attention to its elaborate deceptions, which are key to its survival in power. When they do, the need for a more coherent strategy and supporting measures will be self-evident.

Mohammed Rasoulof is an Iranian film director who [fled the country secretly](#) and turned up in Cannes on May 25 to preview his politically-charged film "Seed of the Sacred Fig" as the Tehran authorities were planning to arrest and imprison him. His predicament illustrates why the Western conversation on Iran is unfocused, hence unthreatening to the continued rule of an irredeemably malignant regime. Rasoulof is something of a rarity: an Iranian exile who left his entire life behind. His bridges to Iran are burned. He faces the lonely challenge of making a new life in the West, but he is also liberated to speak his truth with nothing left to lose in his native land.

Not so with a large community of exiled or second-generation Iranian experts instructing Western publics on all matters Iran, the reporters who quote them, or the policymakers who welcome their counsel. There are hostages that governments must try to recover, for which Iran is either the captor or the actor controlling their release. There is Iran's nuclear enrichment program, concerning enough that governments will never abandon hope that Tehran may be willing to negotiate meaningful restraints. Iran's leverage over the West's policies and actions is undeniable.

The Western press has repeatedly compromised its journalistic standards, validating narratives confected and endlessly repeated by the Tehran regime that it cannot verify because they are false, and ritually quoting sources known or suspected of being under Tehran's influence. For media companies to cross the regime's red lines, as Rasoulof did with his film, would be to forfeit their correspondents' access to Iran and any prospect of securing official interviews. The list of embarrassing episodes where Western media organizations have endorsed regime disinformation is not short.

The writings and commentaries of many Iran experts, bilingual and academically credentialed, seem never to stray beyond tacit regime guardrails best known to themselves, their relatives, and their funders. In stark contrast to the Washington Beltway's blunt strategic talk about potential war with Putin's Russia or Xi's China, the Iran commentariat promotes the fiction that the political ups and downs of personalities within Iranian government circles hold overriding significance for U.S. national security. As fascinating as some might find coffee-house political speculation about the sparring for position among Tehran functionaries, differences between the two main factional faces of Tehran's political elite have demonstrated negligible relevance to the central realities that matter to U.S. security interests: the revolutionary mission that defines the Supreme Leader's role, and the resources and military power he allocates to carry it out.

"Moderate" Iranian leaders, while befriending Western envoys, have continued Iran's enrichment program and prolific executions of citizens on spurious charges and with no due process; maintained Iran's unbroken status year-on-year for decades as the world's leading state support of terrorism; and conducted covert or proxy militia acts of lawless international hostility on several continents, many under cover of diplomatic privilege. Both former President Hassan Rouhani and Iran's newly-installed President, Masoud Pezeshkian, gained favor around the time of the revolution by enforcing the compulsory hijab on Iran's women. Even then, [according to](#) Lebanese author and journalist Kim Ghattas, women marched chanting "in the dawn of freedom there is no freedom". Iran's protesters have long since adopted the mantra that political colorations of "moderate" and "principlist" are all shades of the same tyrannical franchise.

The durable Western illusion that moderates may one day reform this regime is, it must surely now be recognized, a time-tested tactic for keeping international opinion divided and unfocused on its true nature. As Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment has [explained](#), the Supreme Leader and his circle "believe that trying to reform the regime would actually hasten its collapse just as Gorbachev's attempts at Perestroika hastened the Soviet Union's collapse". Exiled critics of the Tehran dictatorship all say they want to end clerical rule; the regime's information operations have led many opposition figures, some of them perhaps wittingly, to reserve their most toxic criticisms for each other.

Over the decades, the regime's periodic overtures implying a readiness to achieve a functional peace with the democratic West – all insincere with the debatable exception of President Muhammad Khatami, the one-time propaganda chief, who could not deliver it – have advanced the clerics' tactical need for Western help in maintaining power despite their negligent governance and deep unpopularity. The prospect of rapprochement has lured the U.S. and allies into, for example, deputizing their own criminal justice establishments against the regime's most influential exiled opponents with no valid evidence, or trading temporary and hard-to-monitor restraints on nuclear enrichment to obtain the release of financial assets, lifting of economic sanctions, and an end to UN prohibitions on ballistic missile development and arms transfers.

Self-censoring voices on Iran issues are not hard to spot. Their obligatory criticisms – how could one not criticize at least some of Iran's behavior? – adhere to the 'safe' themes: the regime has a brutal

human rights record and faces unrest at home; it supports terrorist activity by proxy militias in the Middle East. One has heard it all for years, such that these perennial laments about Iran offer no new impetus to action beyond boiler plate criticism, parked in annual reports and congressional testimony. Even most self-identified ‘opposition’ groups, including that around the late Shah’s son, [retain links](#) to the regime, or live under some Tehran-induced constraint. As a result, their messaging remains aligned with Iran’s about the one group of exiled opponents that is truly independent, unable to be coerced, and serious about bringing about an end to the religious tyranny spawned 45 years ago by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Why Does It Matter?

That is ultimately for the reader to judge. The U.S. foreign policy community, including journalists, seems to process news about Iran through a lens shaped by an accepted narrative. It goes like this:

Ayatollah Khomeini arrived to a hero’s welcome in 1979 after the Shah fell, and had to contend with Iraq’s invasion the next year, along with some violent domestic dissent. The clerics practice a strict version of Islam that may entail severe punishment. Despite these challenges, Iran has repeatedly tried to improve its economy by building commercial ties with Europe and the U.S., but each time the benefits have been elusive, as punitive Western sanctions have remained in place. Tehran’s support for Shia militias and extremist Palestinian groups in the Middle East, and its nuclear enrichment program, are opposed by the West but provide deterrence against threats from Israel and possibly the U.S.

Iran (the conventional wisdom continues) was uninvolved in the October 7 Hamas attack, and in fact was surprised to learn of it, but quite naturally Iran shares the view of Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and the Shia militias in Iraq that Israel’s continued denial of Palestinian rights is unacceptable. Although there have been protests inside Iran, mainly relating to how women should wear the hijab, there is no credible threat to the ruling system under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The exiled National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) and the affiliated Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), now resident in Albania, are an undemocratic cult, with the blood of Americans on their hands, who fought on Iraq’s side in the 1980s war. They enjoy no support inside Iran, and have no relevance to the future of the country. The responsible policy is to continue trying to address the primary threat from Iran – its nuclear program – through diplomacy, and to hope that more moderate elements will temper Tehran’s hostility toward the U.S. and allies, and limit its collusion with Moscow and Beijing.

The above summary, which could, one supposes, have been generated by an artificial intelligence program referencing the past 20-30 years of policy statements, academic and think tank commentaries, and news articles, has one defining quality: it is exactly what the rulers in Tehran want Western policymakers to think. That is no accident.

Alternative Reality

Imagine, if only for the sake of testing and revalidating existing assumptions, that documented research, official investigations in the U.S. and several allied countries, and court cases in the U.S.,

U.K., EU, France, Canada, Belgium, and Sweden have debunked most of the core narratives long held to be true, not only in the West, but inside Iran thanks to decades of enforced information control.

Consider the policy expectations that might flow from a very different Western understanding of how this amoral yet resourceful regime gained and maintained power through eight U.S. Presidencies, summarized with five major themes.

1. The regime took power by force, and has never received a legitimate mandate from the people.

Before returning to Iran, Khomeini spoke of democracy. Once in Iran, he presented a constitution investing himself as Supreme Leader with divine authority, the embodiment of the 12th Imam of the Prophet. He lobbied political leaders to endorse it, including Massoud Rajavi, leader of the Muslim People's Mujahedin (MEK). When Rajavi told Khomeini the people would never accept another dictatorship after ending the Shah's reign, Khomeini reportedly condemned him to death. Rajavi had planned to run for President, endorsed by several parties representing students, women, and ethnic minorities, but was the only candidate banned from the ballot; he would have won "several million" votes according to a March 1980 dispatch by *Le Monde's* correspondent. The U.S. Embassy takeover elevated Khomeini; Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and his government resigned in protest.

Popular protests led by Rajavi and President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr against the totalitarian trend culminated on June 20, 1981 with Khomeini's fateful decision to open fire on the crowds and rule by force. A long 'reign of terror' ensued, marked by "mass executions" and "extensive torture", [according to](#) U.N. Rapporteur on Iran Javid Rehman. Tens of thousands were jailed, with many executed, as Khomeini rebuffed offers to end the war with Iraq, although all Iranian territory had been recovered by mid-1982, in order to maintain the state of emergency at home. Years later, the Iranian people have found no respite from institutionalized repression by those in power.

U.N. Rapporteur Rehman, briefing MPs at the UK Parliament on July 18, 2023, cited the Iranian regime's "almost complete absence of accountability", and a political and judicial system permeated by "institutional impunity". Following the extensive protests that erupted in November 2019, and again following the September 16, 2022 death of the Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at the hands of security forces, the regime has engaged in the "widespread practice of unlawful lethal use of force", and several hundred protesters have been killed, including 68 children and 48 women. Among the "very serious and grave human rights abuses", the regime has "weaponized" the death penalty; it uses sexual violence and has engaged in the "poisoning" of girls in schools. Rehman said that multiple crimes against humanity by Iran's leaders, including torture, genocide, persecution, murder, extermination, and forced disappearances, have been reported to the U.N. Human Rights Commission, noting that his predecessor as Rapporteur on Iran, the late Asma Jahangir, had said the same. Iran habitually denies all such charges.

In no Presidential election since 1981, when Ban-Sadr was violently impeached, has the Supreme Leader's office allowed more than six percent of lawfully registered candidates for President to appear on the ballot. For every Presidential election in the last quarter-century until 2024, over 98 percent of aspirants have been [denied](#) a place on the ballot. Perhaps the most striking aspect of Iran's July

2024 Presidential election is the way that Western media outlets unskeptically repeated Tehran's [highly suspect claim](#) of 40 percent voter turnout.

2. Ali Khamenei became Supreme Leader only because of a major crime against humanity. In 1988, nearing death, Ayatollah Khomeini was frustrated by his forces' inability to defeat Iraq and gain control over the Shia holy cities in Southern Iraq, and by his failure to quell anti-fundamentalist sentiment inside Iran – notably that of MEK supporters who disputed his illiberal interpretation of Islam. Khomeini ordered his security forces to kill all known MEK sympathizers. Some were in jail; others had completed sentences and gone home. None had been charged with capital crimes. They were brought before 4-judge panels and briefly interrogated about their beliefs; most stood by their views and were taken to one or another venue for rapid, mass execution. Between July and September, up to 30,000 political prisoners were executed, most of them MEK sympathizers.

Under Khomeini's constitution, the Supreme Leader should be the most eminent Shia cleric, worthy of emulation throughout the Islamic world. Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, the designated successor, complained bitterly to Khomeini and warned the clerics to stop the killings. Khomeini accused Montazeri of paving the way for the MEK to take over the country, and issued a decree bypassing him as successor. Ali Khamenei, a loyal regime stalwart with unexceptional religious credentials, became Khomeini's choice instead. Iran denied this crime to a UN Special Envoy sent to investigate in 1988. Montazeri's complaints came to light years later when his son released his papers; audio recordings of Montazeri's warnings surfaced in 2016. British human rights authority Geoffrey Robertson compared the 1988 massacre of political prisoners to the 1995 Srebrenica massacre and the Bataan Death March.

Ebrahim Raisi, a regime prosecutor from the age of 19 who would become President in 2021, was a central figure leading Tehran's "death panel" during the massacre. Until Raisi's death this year in a helicopter crash, a global movement was building to demand international judicial accountability for his actions in 1988. In 2022, Sweden convicted another official, Hamid Noury, of war crimes for his role in carrying out the 1988 massacre. Iran seized EU diplomat Johan Floderus, a Swedish citizen, as a hostage, and pressured Sweden to agree to a prisoner exchange. It worked. On June 15, Noury returned to Iran, and Floderus along with a second Swedish hostage, Saeed Azizi, was freed from prison in Iran and returned home. Although Raisi is now gone, other regime figures remain at risk of prosecution.

3. Iran has used its nuclear program as a distraction to obscure more urgent survival measures.

The secret enrichment program was already underway when Ali Khamenei became Iran's second Supreme Leader in 1989. Evidence [suggests](#) that the clerics accelerated the nuclear program as one means of compensating for Khamenei's lack of stature and religious charisma in the Shia world, much as Saddam Hussein had overstated his WMD capabilities even among his ministers. This was accompanied by a worldwide spree of Iranian assassinations and terror, from bombings of Israel's Embassy and the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires to assassinations of prominent Iranian critics in Paris, Rome, and Geneva, the machine-gun killing of Iranian Kurdish leaders in a Berlin restaurant, attacks in Norway, Turkey, Italy, and Japan on the translators of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic*

Verses, the killing of 19 U.S. airmen in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and other major crimes, all meant to impress and intimidate. In this manner, Tehran kept Western capitals from focusing on the clerics' brutality at home and destabilizing meddling in neighboring states.

Few in Washington questioned the motives behind Tehran's readiness to engage with the P5+1 for an extended negotiation leading in 2015 to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) curbing its nuclear program. After all, Iran was burdened by sanctions, including by the UN Security Council (UNSC), and presumably the governing clerics decided that increased commercial engagement with the West was necessary to bolster the nation's economy. President Obama, addressing the UN General Assembly in 2013, touted the prospect that a nuclear accord with Iran would be "a major step down a long road towards a different relationship, one based on mutual interests and mutual respect". More than a decade later, perhaps an alternative interpretation of this episode should be considered.

Despite President Muhammad Khatami's loquacious initiative in the late 1990s to promote a "dialogue among civilizations", his tenure coincided with a string of killings and disappearances of dissident Iranian intellectuals that became known as the "Chain Murders". The regime faced a serious revolt in 1999, with security forces [throwing students out of university windows](#), according to the State Department. The MEK's political umbrella organization, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, exposed Iran's secret enrichment activities in August 2002. This led to inconclusive nuclear negotiations – future President Hassan Rouhani later bragged about having deceived Western envoys to "buy time" for the program – and restrictive UNSC sanctions by the late 2000s. The widespread suspicion of fraud supporting President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election led once again to the use of lethal force against protesters, thousands of whom had gathered in Tehran.

When the Arab Spring toppled entrenched autocrats and then jumped eastward from Tunisia and Egypt to southern Syria in 2011, Tehran took it to be an existential threat. A senior cleric, Mehdi Taeb, was reportedly heard warning a gathering of *Bassij* units on February 14, 2013, that while they could survive the loss of the Khuzestan region of Iran, if Damascus were to fall, they could not hold Tehran. Without Assad ruling Syria, Iran could lose the ability to flow weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and with it a credible threat of escalation against Israel – vital to the regime's defining mission. The West took little notice of Iran's exorbitant commitment of arms and men from the Quds Force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and even child soldiers as young as 12 – used as the "first wave" and suffering higher casualty rates, [according to](#) the State Department – stationed at many bases throughout Syria. Author and journalist Kim Ghattas referred to the Shia fighters in Syria, numbering between 20,000 and 80,000, as "Iran's very own transnational army" that "stole the Syrian revolution".

Hezbollah, abandoning the pretense of existing to resist Israeli 'occupation' of Lebanon, showed itself to be a true proxy of Tehran and faced heavy criticism in Lebanon for warring against Sunni Arabs next door in Syria. Saving Bashar al-Assad's regime became an imperative, by obstructing the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2254 and the 'Geneva' process mandating a transition to legitimate government in Syria. Close observers including the State Department saw that Assad

facilitated the emerging ISIS terrorist threat, freeing prisoners, opening his borders to jihadis, and buying oil from ISIS, to [create a distraction](#) that would defuse international pressure to replace him. Today, six million displaced Syrians citizens reside in neighboring countries, afraid to return with their families while Assad still sits in his Presidential Palace. In Iraq, eight major Shia militias funded, armed, and strategically guided by Iran's Quds Force ensured that Iraq's fragile republic would remain fragile, and thus not add to pressures next door in Iran for democratic change.

Iran's population hoped the nuclear talks would bring economic relief, but came to realize, as protestors have since loudly complained, that their own well-being is simply not a regime priority.

Poverty in Iran, however measured, is alarmingly high and increasing, while [unemployment exceeds 25 percent among 'economically active youth'](#). The Iranian Rial is the [world's weakest currency](#) against the U.S. dollar. Inflation has risen steadily to [over 43 percent](#). The notion that concern for the economy was ever a prime policy consideration for the Supreme Leader, whose private financial assets were [estimated](#) by Reuters at \$95 billion in 2013 at the height of the P5+1 nuclear negotiations, is unsupportable.

Today, even as Iran [calls for](#) new nuclear negotiations, one would also be hard-pressed to argue that Khamenei ever wanted a grand bargain with the West, forgoing the bomb in exchange for sanctions removal, robust trade, and repaired political relations. With Iranian drones now raining death on Ukraine, missiles having been repeatedly fired from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, and most recently the barrage of warheads launched toward Israel from Iranian territory, a thousand miles away, the conclusion seems unavoidable that lifting UN prohibitions on both arms transfers and ballistic missile development were primary negotiating objectives for Iran, arguably more relevant to the regime's quest for survival than the nuclear concessions offered in return.

Tehran, in sum, has repeatedly held out the nuclear proliferation threat as policy catnip to Western governments, knowing this would bring them to the table, saturate the finite "Iran policy" bandwidth at senior U.S. Government levels with arms control details and modalities, and divert the West's focus from the regime's unrelenting campaign to weaken prevailing norms of international peace and security.

4. The regime's crimes at home and abroad are principally aimed at marginalizing the MEK and NCRI. Here is where truth and conventional Beltway wisdom inhabit distinct, separate universes. Some readers, having heard nothing else for decades, believe that Iran's organized resistance is untrustworthy, violent, ideologically bizarre, brainwashed, guilty of terror attacks, hated by average Iranians, politically irrelevant, and sustained only by a secret patron such as the CIA, Mossad, or the Saudis. This is a false portrayal, continuously promoted at home and abroad. The reason is as obvious to the regime's countless victims and their families as it is unrecognized by Western policymakers.

More than any other threat to fundamentalist rule, the Supreme Leader – deriving his unchallengeable power from Khomeini's novel politicization of Twelver Shiism – fears the impact of educated Muslim Iranians openly disputing the Islamic interpretation on which his claim of authority rests, a greater *Achilles heel* even than the regime's illusory political legitimacy. To voice support for the MEK inside

Iran is to risk imprisonment, torture, amputation, execution, or exile for engaging in “war against God”. The risks are hardly less perilous for resistance members and active supporters abroad.

The scope of [Tehran’s disinformation and propaganda effort](#) is hard to overstate. Consider these facts: the terrorists who killed Americans in Iran during the 1970s were not part of the MEK, but secular extremists who opposed them. The MEK played no part in the U.S. Embassy takeover, which empowered their fundamentalist rivals. After Iraq invaded in 1980, MEK members fought to defend Iran; some were captured by Iraq and detained as Prisoners of War until the war’s end. At no time did the MEK’s armed force, the National Liberation Army, which was mobilized only in 1987, ever participate in a military operation with Iraqi forces. Indeed, throughout its nearly 60-year existence, no member of the MEK or NCRI has ever been prosecuted and convicted of terrorism by a democratic government with due process of law. Several Western courts have investigated, and all have exonerated, the MEK.

In the years soon after these criminal acts against U.S. interests had occurred, American politicians corresponded with Massoud Rajavi, saluting his courage in standing against Khomeini’s repression, championing human rights and promoting legitimacy through the ballot box. No one at that time associated these anti-American crimes with Rajavi and his followers. It was understood that the Shah’s spokespeople, during his final years, had poisoned public opinion against all dissident student groups, above all the popular MEK, by calling them Marxists and blaming them for the extremists’ actions. The clerics found it expedient to do the same. Rajavi even [joked](#) to *Time* magazine that “if Jesus Christ and Mohammed were alive and protesting against Khomeini, he would call them Marxists, too”.

Starting in mid-1981, the regime relentlessly sought to exterminate the MEK as an organization, with the latter’s victims numbering in the many tens of thousands imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Facing a mortal threat, MEK supporters took up armed resistance against ruling institutions and their most notorious oppressors in the regime; to signal that the reign of terror would not succeed, the MEK usually took public credit for its attacks. Western governments attached terrorism allegations to the MEK and NCRI only later, in the early to mid-1990s, at the urging of Tehran’s envoys in diplomatic exchanges.

When Secretary of State Madeleine Albright designated the MEK as a terrorist organization in 1997, a senior State Department official acknowledged that this had been a political gesture to the new Khatami government in Iran. The FBI was not consulted in advance. Thereafter, the MEK dossier in the State Department’s annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* was [altered and embellished](#) from one year to the next, creating ever more damning accounts of events that had occurred decades earlier.

During the ensuing 15 years until 2012 when, pressured by the DC Court of Appeals, Secretary Hillary Clinton removed the terror designation, no credible evidence surfaced to justify this legal constraint on Iran’s exiled resistance. U.S. security officials, including heads of the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and CIA, as well as a U.S. Counterterrorism Coordinator, later said they had never seen terror intelligence implicating the MEK.

After the 2003 U.S.-led intervention in Iraq, the MEK sought a meeting with U.S. forces and handed over all the weapons in its possession. A U.S. law enforcement and intelligence team interrogated every MEK member in Iraq, finding [no past crimes](#) by anyone. Each signed a contract with the U.S. and was issued a Protected Persons Identity Card under the Fourth Geneva Convention. [Iran's central role](#), working through Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki and Iran-backed sectarian militias, in mounting seven attacks between 2009 and 2016 on the defenseless MEK men and women, drew no response from Washington, even when U.S.-supplied weapons were used. Over 140 of these 'Protected Persons' were killed, more than 1,000 wounded, and seven were abducted.

Major court cases challenging the terrorism allegations in France, the EU, the U.K. and the U.S., completely vindicated the MEK and NCRI. An eight-year investigation by French authorities concluded in 2011 that at no time had the MEK ever targeted innocent civilians; the 20-year period of armed resistance, ending in 2001, had been a legitimate exercise of “resistance against tyranny”.

Exonerations notwithstanding, Washington's 'Iran hands' disparaged former civilian and military officials who spoke at NCRI rallies in Paris and visited the MEK campus in Albania once the group had relocated from Iraq in 2016. For these prominent Americans to court such an unsavory group was an embarrassment, many said. Their most common refrain was that the NCRI and MEK were utterly irrelevant to Iran and its future.

The contrast between the “irrelevance” narrative, continuously heard in Western capitals, and the regime's own actions, could not have been sharper. Tehran's security services have been consumed by the challenge from a globally-connected political opposition, led at every level by women. The pro-NCRI Alliance for Public Awareness, representing exiles in Europe who support the resistance, counts 538 anti-MEK books by the regime as of 2020 – an average of more than one per month for 41 years. During the past 20 years, more than 1,200 articles per year on average defaming the resistance have been put out by the regime – an average of more than 100 per month. Can any other regime opponents point to an information warfare campaign of comparable magnitude aimed at them by Tehran?

Iran's hostile operations aimed at the resistance movement throughout the West, even while relations were supposed to be flourishing under the JCPOA, dramatized the depth of its concern. When a court in Antwerp, Belgium convicted Assadollah Assadi, an accredited “diplomat” at Iran's Embassy in Vienna, of planning to bomb the annual resistance rally in Paris in June 2018, the court report [described](#) a branch of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), Section 312, dedicated to external operations against the NCRI and MEK. Khamenei had authorized a mass-casualty attack in the heart of Europe, with the JCPOA still in full effect. Two other bombings in Europe were also being planned (see below). The powerful TATP bomb, designed to be detonated at a distance of 800 meters, was tested in Iran and transported, apparently under diplomatic cover, on a commercial flight from Tehran to Vienna.

Tehran's response to Assadi's 20-year sentence mirrored that pursued in Sweden to free Hamid Noury. Iran seized a Belgian hostage, Olivier Vandecasteele, a humanitarian worker for the Norwegian Refugee Council, and sentenced him to 40 years in prison and 74 lashes for ‘spying’. Iran then

pressured Belgium to sign a mutual extradition agreement, and traded Vandecasteele to obtain Assadi's release.

Albania became a target of Iranian threats and coercion, having provided sanctuary to the MEK since 2016. Authorities in Albania foiled a plot to bomb the MEK residence known as Ashraf 3 in March 2018, as they were celebrating the traditional Persian New Year, and a second [planned attack](#) at an Albania-Israel football game. Iran's Ambassador was expelled. In mid-2022, Tehran conducted a crippling cyber-attack on Albanian government agencies, disrupting plans for the annual resistance rally. Tirana severed relations with Iran. Former MEK members living in Tirana, whose disparaging narratives about life with the MEK had been featured in *BBC* and *New York Times* stories, were later [investigated](#) by the Albanian security service as MOIS agents, with one arrested for illegal wiretapping of Albanian communications on Tehran's behalf. In December 2023, the Albanian Parliament, along with an air carrier and a telecom network, [suffered](#) another major Iranian cyberattack, apparently targeting their data systems.

Denmark authorities in 2018 accused the MOIS of planning the assassination of a separatist leader on their territory. In Madrid, Spain on November 9, 2023, 78-year-old Alejo Vidal-Qadras, former Deputy of the European Parliament and a prominent advocate for human rights in Iran, was shot in the jaw outside his home by a gunman who escaped by motorcycle but has now been arrested in the Netherlands; his 'Mocro Mafia' criminal group has been [linked to two murders of Iran regime opponents](#) in the Netherlands, in 2015 and 2017, on Tehran's behalf. In the UK, MI5 Director General Ken McCallom [revealed](#) in November 2022 that British authorities had discovered at least 10 threats linked to Iran during that year to "kidnap or even kill British or UK-based individuals".

In the U.S., the Department of Justice [arrested two Iranian intelligence operatives](#) in August 2018 for activities targeting two NCRI officials in Washington, DC. Iran is the obvious suspect behind the August 12, 2022 attack on Salman Rushdie, the July 28, 2022 [attempted abduction](#) of regime critic Masih Alinejad, and recent [threats against John Bolton](#) among other former officials, some of whom now require [24-hour government-supplied protection](#) against Iranian threats. In January, the Department of Justice revealed an Iran-backed "[murder-for-hire](#)" scheme in Maryland. On March 18, the White House circulated a [warning](#) to governors that Iran was behind cyberattacks that could disrupt Americans' access to clean drinking water. Iran has most recently been [tied to assassination threats](#) against former President Trump.

If the Supreme Leader and his aides hoped that these and similar high-risk transgressions would deter Western leaders from associating with NCRI leader Maryam Rajavi and her message, they have lost their bet. With Tehran's wall of propaganda stripped away, the truth has emerged not only that Mrs. Rajavi has consistently advocated her [10-point plan](#) for the future of Iran for 18 years, but that the plan's core principles of democratic legitimacy and citizens' rights mirror the stance of Massoud Rajavi over four decades earlier. The NCRI and MEK are not only one-time admirers of Bazargan and his pro-democracy Liberation Movement, but the ideological heirs of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, famously driven from office in the 1953 CIA-engineered coup. American leaders who have thought it appropriate to express official remorse to regime officials for Operation

Ajax clearly did not know that Iran's leading clerics at the time cheered the return of the Shah and called for the deposed nationalist to be executed.

Some Western officials and policy analysts who still do not see the tectonic shifts under the feet of Iran's dictators will be surprised by the success of the NCRI as an agent of political change in Iran. As this is written, 125 former Presidents and Prime Ministers, 4,000 Parliamentarians from legislatures in 40 countries – including 34 majorities – and 75 Nobel Laureates, have all endorsed Maryam Rajavi, the NCRI, and the 10-point plan. Governments have long understood that official recognition of NCRI as Iran's political opposition, and dialogue with NCRI representatives such as is done with opposition parties in many countries, would cross the reddest of red lines for the mullahs of Tehran. Yet, realizing now how much deception and disinformation has been fed to them by Iran's envoys and agents, Western policymakers should be thinking ahead, even preparing for a *fin de regime* scenario.

Had they done so already, it might not be necessary to revisit flawed assumptions about the provocation that set the Middle East on fire.

5. Iran was the arsonist behind the October 7 Hamas attack; the goal was preventing Saudi normalization with Israel. Nine months of sudden combustion in the Middle East has produced a gripping, exhausting spectacle: the Hamas attack on southern Israel – a gruesome Pearl Harbor of atrocity, digitally showcased to inflict maximum psychological torture; the fearful, enraged Israeli military response; the devastating harm to Palestinian civilians and infrastructure as well journalists and aid workers; the mobilization of U.S. forces to provide defense and deterrence; the saga of yet-unreturned Israeli and American hostages held by Hamas; the bitter polarization of pro- and anti-Israel sentiment worldwide; the controversial pursuit of international judicial verdicts against Israel; the elusive diplomatic quest to end the standoff; and the impacts of all these dynamics on the electoral fortunes of leading politicians.

The one question that has sat unexamined is why. Why did this happen? A week before the Hamas attack, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [said](#) the region was “quieter...than it has been in two decades.” Within days, non-state militias were firing rockets, drones and missiles from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen as well as Gaza. Who wanted the status quo to be upended?

The Administration preempted any speculation, citing “[exquisite](#)” intelligence that Iran had been “surprised” by the Hamas operation. Sullivan [took pains](#) to advertise that the U.S. lacked information implicating Iran in the Hamas attack. As U.S. warships steamed toward the eastern Mediterranean, in part to deter Hezbollah from unleashing its [huge missile arsenal](#) across Israel's northern border, Iran's late Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian [warned](#) that if “the scope of the war expands” because of U.S. escalation, Iran could not remain a “bystander”, and the U.S. would face “heavy losses”.

The Washington conversation about October 7 embraced the intuitively-obvious theme that the Hamas attack was a manifestation of deep Palestinian grievance – exacerbated by the right-wing Netanyahu government's refusal to treat the Palestinian community as anything other than a security

burden rather than a potential peace partner. Since October 7, the plight of the Palestinians has dominated the headlines and policy analysis.

Except that, this is not why the crisis happened. Of course the assault by Hamas reflected opposition to the Jewish state, but it was not a protest on behalf of the Palestinian community.

Nothing about the Hamas attack points to Palestinian political grievances. The assault was not conducted in an area defined under international law as occupied territory, but within territory recognized by 165 countries as the State of Israel. The victims were not settlers. There was no accompanying manifesto citing legal or territorial issues, or any political demands at all. The attackers' [messages](#) left no doubt that their mission was to kill and terrorize Jews, even at the cost of their own lives, in fulfillment of a religious duty.

The Hamas *Al-Aqsa Flood* operation simultaneously blasted through Israel's border wall at "[dozens of points](#)"; the invasion force was equipped with bulldozers, four-wheel drive vehicles, explosive-dispensing drones to knock out Israeli security towers, and hang-gliders transporting commandos on motorcycles. Hundreds of fighters in full combat gear carried an assortment of firearms including sniper rifles as well as ammunition, grenades, explosives, thermobaric rockets, and communications gear. As [more than a dozen shipments](#) of IRGC weapons had been interdicted transiting by sea toward Yemen since 2015, it is reasonable to wonder [how many ships from Iran made it to Yemen and beyond](#), with weapons reaching the Sinai and the tunnels into Gaza.

It is not credible that the elusive Hamas commando Yahya Sinwar, from his subterranean Gaza redoubt, secretly conceived and executed such a major military operation entirely on his own; nor is it believable that Hamas and Iran's other client militias would all so quickly join in a regional war while issuing consequential foreign policy pronouncements, without the foreknowledge and consent – indeed, explicit orders – of Iran's Supreme Leader through his top lieutenants.

The [evidence is abundant](#) that Iran was the instigator and sponsor of *al-Aqsa Flood*. Soon after the attack, citing Hamas and Hezbollah sources, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that they had been planning it with Iran's Quds Force since August. Two months later, an IRGC spokesman [characterized](#) the Hamas attack as retaliation for the U.S. killing, in January 2020, of Qasem Soleimani, Commander of Iran's elite Quds Force. Foreign Minister Abdollahian – a Quds Force ally of Soleimani who moved over to the Foreign Ministry in 2003 – held [two meetings](#) with top Hamas operatives in Beirut hosted by Hezbollah during the week leading up to the attack. Supreme Leader Khamenei himself, hosting an Islamic unity event in Tehran four days before the attack, [predicted](#) that the "Zionist entity...will be uprooted by the resistance groups from across the region"; on October 7, he posted a [message](#) on Western social media that "the usurper Zionist regime is coming to an end", and in 2024 he continues to post [taunting messages](#), gloating over his ruinous handiwork.

The Palestinians of Gaza were destined to suffer. Was there any possibility that Israel would refrain from unleashing its military power in Gaza after the entire population of Israel watched Hamas videos celebrating mass murder, rape, and the sadistic brutalization of their infants and elders? The answer is no, not under Netanyahu and not under the most dovish Israeli prime minister imaginable. Israel's reflexive, ferocious response was inevitable. It was guaranteed to happen.

It was part of Iran's October 7 plan.

Hamas fighters were brainwashed, with their families likely compensated, to execute this irreligious orgy of moral depravity, murder and martyrdom for the convenience of their Persian patrons. One day, the Palestinians of Gaza will plainly see, if they do not already, that Hamas has been entirely uninterested in their well-being, inviting Israeli destruction of their homes along with the schools and hospitals where its forces hid and operated. They should also take note that the Arab world all around them moved away years ago from the "rejectionist front" stance denying Israel's right to exist, while Hamas fighters follow Iran's anachronistic credo, calling for the elimination of Israel.

The Palestinian Authority, Hamas' political rival based in Ramallah on the West Bank, clearly sees that Palestinian lives have been lost for the benefit of Iran's rulers. On June 3, the Palestinian Presidency issued a [public rebuke to Khamenei](#), stating, "*The Palestinian people... do not need wars that do not serve their ambitions for freedom and independence...*" An advisor to President Mahmoud Abbas was more explicit: "*Tehran is sacrificing the blood of the Palestinian people for its own interests.*"

Tehran's *modus operandi* of working through surrogates to avoid attribution for its aggressions did not last long after October 7, even as Iran tried to walk back the statements claiming credit. Veteran Middle East watchers knew that Hezbollah, in [lecturing](#) Saudi Arabia that the Hamas attack had been "a message to those seeking normalization with Israel", was speaking for Tehran. Similarly, Iraq's Shia militias, nominally committed to the Iraqi state but sponsored by the Quds Force, [warned](#) the United States against escalating its involvement. The Houthis of Yemen, also armed by Iran, had never been vocal about the Palestinian cause, yet now began [firing](#) Iran-supplied missiles toward Israel's port of Eilat on the Red Sea and attacking shipping. Before long, the entire network of proxy militias armed and [coordinated by Iran](#) had staged [at least 180 attacks](#) on U.S. military sites. Once an Iranian warship [arrived](#) in the Red Sea on January 1 to manage Houthi attacks against U.S. and allied vessels, Iran's role at the center of the conflict was on full display. When an Israeli strike on April 1 [killed two Iranian generals](#) and five other officers operating from a diplomatic facility in Damascus, it was not unreasonable to surmise that they had been commanding the regional war effort.

Historians will see that October 7 and the Gaza crisis were, for Iran, a needed disruption, a brutal crime intended to upend the trend of Arab-Israeli reconciliation. Fundamentalist Iran and Saudi Arabia were historic rivals, but the enmity between the Supreme Leader's circle and the House of Saud had intensified in recent years. As Iran's nuclear program prompted growing international concern in 2008, Saudi Intelligence Director Prince Muqrin al-Saud announced, at the IISS conference in Manama, Bahrain, that the Kingdom would initiate a civil nuclear program. The UAE did the same; Kuwait formed a committee to study the issue. The Kingdom's message was clear: Saudi Arabia would not allow Iran to have a strategic capability that it did not. Soon after, in a private (non-official) courtesy visit by a former U.S. cabinet member with Saudi Crown Prince Sultan al-Saud, attended by the author, the Crown Prince left no doubt that the civil nuclear capability could, if necessary, be converted for military purposes.

Referring to the JCPOA nuclear accord, Saudis have chided U.S. officials that 'your friends' should be trusted with capabilities at least as powerful as those permitted to 'your enemies'. The two rivals

exchanged threats implying support for regime change in each other's capitals. After a stampede during the *Hajj* in 2015 killed [464 Iranian pilgrims](#), President Rouhani prefaced his UN General Assembly address by [denouncing](#) “the incompetence and mismanagement of those in charge”. Chief Prosecutor (later President) Raisi [called](#) for the Saudi royal family to be charged with crimes in “international courts”. “Those in charge”, of course, referred to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, i.e., the King.

The following summer, addressing the annual NCRI resistance rally outside Paris, former Intelligence Director and Ambassador to the UK and U.S. Prince Turki al Faisal [described](#) Iran as a “Khomeinist cancer”, [adding](#), “The Arabs...completely reject submitting to any plan that may be drawn up by the most skillful politicians in Iran today....The suffering and humiliation of the Iranian people must not continue.” Prince Turki pledged support to the “legitimate struggle” of the resistance led by Mrs. Rajavi. The Saudi Foreign Ministry confirmed that his address had been approved in advance. Houthi missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, all enabled by Tehran, and Iran's drone and missile attack on the oil gathering station at Abqaiq in September 2019, reflected the state of relations between the two regional powers.

When Saudi and Iranian envoys, with China's facilitation, convened in Baghdad in March 2023, this was widely interpreted as a warming of ties. An alternative interpretation is that Tehran, having failed for two years to secure the Biden Administration's agreement to revive the nuclear accord in some form, now had no ready excuse not to cross the threshold and build a bomb. Iran needed to persuade Riyadh not to pursue its own nuclear weapons capability, by itself or possibly by obtaining a weapon from Pakistan or North Korea.

The mounting indications over the summer of 2023 that Saudi Arabia might soon normalize relations with Israel animated the regime's worst fears. It would have been alarming enough had citizens throughout Iran not been in the streets, regularly protesting the mismanagement, hypocrisy, and brutality of their clerical rulers. Tehran no longer had the option of turning to Europe and America for a feel-good, high-profile diplomatic engagement; the security services in almost every Western capital were on alert for attempted bombings, assassinations, hostage seizures, cyberattacks, and disinformation spread through Iranian spies and [agents of influence abroad](#).

Saudi-Israeli normalization would have instantly deflated Iran's capacity to intimidate the Gulf countries with their “ring of fire” militia forces. Escalation would thereafter need to account for Israel's suspected nuclear forces, even if never acknowledged. More important even than Tehran's immediate loss of coercive power in the region, normalization would place Mecca, Medina, and al-Aqsa, Islam's holiest sites, under the collective security control of Saudi Arabia and Israel in full partnership. Millions of Iran's women already detested clerical rule. How much longer would the footsoldiers of the IRGC, Quds Force, Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and Justice Ministry be prepared to carry out their masters' schemes of warfare and repression once it was clear that history had bypassed Ayatollah Khomeini's fanciful dream of planting his fundamentalist flag “from Karbala to Quds”?

To stop a momentous reversal of fortune in the Middle East, threatening to debilitate the indispensable pillar of his support base, the Supreme Leader “broke glass”, and sent in Hamas.

Conclusion: What to Do About It

There is no going back to the world before October 7. A better Middle East can be forged from the terrible suffering of the past several months, but it will require willpower, leadership, and a strategy.

The Gaza war forced the U.S. into a perpetual firefighting mode, such that the valiant, exhausting efforts of America's best diplomats and military service members are necessarily reactive. Strategic ambition would seem out of place. To achieve a cease-fire and recovery of all hostages from Gaza, and then to enable the Palestinians to rebuild under local leadership free of Hamas influence and ideology, will be hard. To put Saudi Arabia and Israel back on track toward normalization, the Saudi precondition of which will be committing all parties to a new Israeli-Palestinian negotiating process based on UN resolutions, will be harder still. These are the right steps. Israel's long-term security depends on cooperative relations with its Arab neighbors, now strained by the continuing harm to Palestinian civilians.

But even if the U.S. and others manage to disentangle the combatants and refocus them on recovery, security, and plans for a better future, Iran's ability to blow up the best laid plans of Israel and its Arab neighbors remains intact, and must be addressed. They did it this time. They can do it again.

The beginning of wisdom will be to admit, after decades of destructive provocations and serial violations of international norms, that Iran is not a normal state – not even a hostile state by historical measures – and does not deserve to be treated as such. In reality, the borderless Shia religious kingdom envisioned by Ayatollah Khomeini could arise and endure only on the ashes of the Westphalian state system.

Any lines that may have been drawn to deter malign Iranian behavior have been crossed, brazenly. While the Iranian people suffer and protest, Iran is aiding Russia's war in Ukraine; its drones are now [fueling conflict as well in Sudan and Ethiopia](#). It has repeatedly seized hostages to blackmail Western governments into contravening the judgments of their own judicial systems. It has planned major, sophisticated terrorist bombings in Europe with the JCPOA in full effect. It has conducted, or been caught planning, major cyberattacks in the U.S. and Albania. It has stalked and surveilled, and in some instances tried to murder or abduct, critics in Europe and America. And now it has triggered a catastrophic war, knowing it would victimize both Israel and the Palestinian people.

Iran's threats against commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf have tied up U.S. F-35 assets; its shiploads of arms heading for Yemen and beyond have tied up U.S. and allied maritime assets; its missile threats in the Red Sea have tied up additional naval combat power; and its threat of escalation against Israel after October 7 tied up a carrier battle group. These deployments, while necessary, impose costs on America's global defense posture, none of which would be needed but for Iran's aggression.

How is it that Washington allowed this threat to grow year after year? One reason is that the U.S. has higher priorities, notably threats from major powers Russia and China. Another may be political partisanship, inhibiting party stalwarts from critiquing their own policies. "Moderate" President

Hassan Rouhani, whose team negotiated the JCPOA with, among others, President Obama's envoys, is described by author-journalist Kim Ghattas as "a centrist with a reputation for running the clock in negotiations with the West, letting talks drag on to maintain the impression of moderation and engagement but without making concessions". Rouhani presided over [major abuses](#) of human rights; his 2013 campaign promise to release Green movement leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi from house arrest within one year, went unmet during his 8-year term. His Defense Minister, Hossein Dehghan, as a young IRGC brigadier in Lebanon, supervised the initial training of Hezbollah fighters and oversaw the terrorist bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine Barracks. His Justice Minister, Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, who recently stood as a regime-approved candidate for President, remains a [potential target for international judicial accountability](#) for his role in the 1988 massacre of political prisoners.

Rouhani's Foreign Minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif, led Western diplomats and observers to believe that ties were warming while Iran was abusing its diplomatic privileges to enable covert terror operations, including transporting a powerful bomb on a commercial airline flight to Europe. This year, Zarif reprised his role as the regime's most demonstrative faux critic-reformer, hoping to persuade Iranians to reject the widespread election boycott and vote for Pezeshkian as a symbol of hope for relief from economic hard times and harsh internal security. His candidate's victory means that Western capitals can look forward to a new Zarif charm offensive, as Pezeshkian pursues his avowed role in advancing the Supreme Leader's interests.

As for Republican policies, former Trump Administration officials can cite the killing of Soleimani and the economic impact of the "maximum pressure" campaign as having weakened Tehran's hand, but the Supreme Leader could not have missed President Trump's statements during a visit to Japan in May of 2019, a year after exiting the nuclear accord. Trump [announced](#), "We're not looking for regime change. I want to make that very clear." His priority, and the reason for squeezing Iran economically, was to produce a better nuclear deal with Iran than President Obama had achieved. Far from denouncing the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, Trump enthused that Iran "has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership."

Although Soleimani's shoes were hard to fill, neither political party in Washington took concerted action to impede the growth and capabilities of his regional network of armed non-state militias, now threatening the sovereignty, security, and future outlook of Gulf Arabs and Israel alike. An impediment to peace and prosperity that would, in any other region, inspire a wealth of political-military strategic planning, instead finds credentialed Iran-watchers [curiously arguing](#) that the West should accept a measure of blame for the emergence of this cancerous tumor on the Middle East's political order, and learn to live with it as a natural extension of Iran's legitimate defensive needs.

There are unusually strong grounds for skepticism about Washington's analysis of Tehran's maneuvering. One reason U.S. intelligence on Iran may be "exquisite" is that the regime is feeding it information through well-placed contacts. Given the magnitude of Iran's disinformation effort, the [revelation](#) in September 2023, following the hacking of over 50 Terabytes of documents from Iran's Foreign Ministry, that some policy advisors in Washington, including inside the Administration, had [secretly](#)

[corresponded for years](#) with ranking regime figures, was disappointing if not entirely surprising. New and troubling evidence of [previously-undisclosed Iranian influence](#) within trusted American institutions continues to surface, suggesting that more remains to be discovered.

Despite these impairments, the Biden Administration has exhibited sound instincts in its tactical management of the crisis. It has privately pressured Israel not to misuse U.S. weapons but resisted public calls to cut off security assistance to Israel, which would have handed an historic victory to the Supreme Leader. It has avoided setting new “red lines”, a fine sounding idea except that this would, implicitly, exonerate Iran for 45 years of crimes against the U.S. so long as the new line was respected. A worse idea would be hard to conceive. And, again contrary to popular wisdom, it counseled Israel to limit the destructive force of its strike against Iranian territory following Iran’s April 13 attack on Israel which had [reportedly](#) included 170 drones, over 30 cruise missiles, and more than 120 ballistic missiles. This denied the regime its likely hope, in firing from its own territory, of provoking a destructive Israeli response against Iran, one enabling Iran to pose as the victim, mobilize demonstrations supporting the Supreme Leader, and thereby try to marginalize the protest movement at home.

The change much of the world hopes to see in Iran can come only from within. But until it does, halting the damage Iran is causing requires coordinated action by others, led by the United States. Only through steps that will weaken this regime can constructive statecraft by the U.S. and others hope to succeed. A new Iran strategy must be purposeful, principled, and pursued with allies. Here are some elements that might be considered:

1. **Block the flow of Iranian weapons to Yemen and Gaza.** The U.S. Fifth Fleet and allied navies have increased their surveillance in the Arabian Sea. The U.S. should work with UAE, Oman, and Egypt to develop a comprehensive land and sea interdiction effort to keep IRGC weapons from reaching the Houthis, Hamas, or Iran’s other terrorist clients.
2. **Deter further Iranian hostage-taking.** Of course the families of hostages such as Olivier Vandecasteele, Johan Floderus, and the Americans released by Iran last August are grateful to have their loved ones returned safely. But this pattern of bilateral extortion must end. Western governments should inform Tehran that any further hostage incidents could result in serious consequences, such as preventing Iran’s oil exports from exiting its territorial waters.
3. **Expel the Iranian diplomatic presence from Western capitals.** Iran has abused the Vienna Conventions long enough in support of its covert terror activities. All democratic governments should restrict Iran’s access to diplomatic privileges, closing embassies and expelling diplomats, as Canada did over a decade ago, and make clear why this is appropriate. Tehran knows how to send official messages through designated intermediaries.
4. **Challenge Congress to update the Authorization for the Use of Military Force.** The goal is to give U.S. forces in Syria, Jordan and elsewhere broad enough Rules of Engagement to answer threats from Iranian client militias with robust self-defense operations. This is key to weakening the fundamentalist regime. Attacks on Iranian territory may backfire and should

be a last resort; retaliation against Quds Force and IRGC positions outside Iran will, more than any other step, create dissension in their ranks and undermine the regime's internal support.

5. **Help the people of Iran communicate internally and connect to the outside world.** Inside Iran, the regime is continuously seeking to deny citizens' access to all but government-approved communications platforms. The U.S. and allies should deploy systems to help the Iranian people communicate free of government surveillance.
6. **Stand with Albania against Iranian coercion.** Albania has faced major cyber threats and foiled two bombings by Iran. The Tehran regime is of course seeking access to the MEK residents living outside Tirana, and has tried to blame them for offensive cyber operations, following the 2022 hacking of 14 regime websites and the major compromise of files from government networks. Tehran's accusations have been [examined](#) by a Chicago-based consultancy. Given Iran's internet download speed of 11.8 megabits per second, the Foreign Ministry compromise alone, if done by a party outside the country, would have required 392 days of continuous transmission, not accounting for Iran's frequent internet interruptions. Albania, admirably, gave sanctuary to the men and women of the MEK in 2016; its NATO allies should step up efforts to defend it from Tehran's hostile threats.
6. **Conduct a comprehensive counter-intelligence investigation to identify agents of influence in the U.S.** At the risk of plagiarizing one's own idea – promoted for over a decade in testimony and writings – the recommendation stands. Recent revelations, including Tehran's success in leveraging the 2023 American hostage release to gain clemency for a widely-published Iranian-American academic who, for over a decade, [“sought to influence the American public and American policymakers for the benefit of his employer, the Iranian government, by disguising propaganda as objective policy analysis and expertise”](#), should elevate the urgency of clarifying who is and is not under Iran's influence.
7. **Conduct, with allied and UN participation, an official investigation of the 1988 massacre of up to 30,000 political prisoners in Iran.** The Western diplomats who participated in official condolence proceedings marking the death of President Ebrahim Raisi are entitled to know why so many informed citizens around the world were aghast that his culpability in a crime against humanity was overlooked. Other regime officials played major roles as well, as noted. This inquiry should, as the Swedish court did, receive testimony from MEK survivors at their Ashraf 3 residence in Albania. Implicated officials should be referred to an empowered tribunal.
8. **Resist the normalization of Arab state relations with Assad of Syria, and sustain the U.S. and allied commitment to implementing UNSC Resolution 2254.** UN Resolutions, particularly when passed unanimously as was this one in 2015, are meant to be carried out, not defied. The Assad government is Tehran's indispensable bridge to Hezbollah, and the Tehran regime's indispensable enabler to hold Israel at risk of costly escalation. Millions of Syrian families languish outside the country, unable to return home safely until the “political transition

process” required by UNSCR 2254 occurs. Some may dispute the premise, stated above, that Iran’s ruling clerics feared that the loss of Damascus would undermine their own grip at home. Western capitals should hope to test that proposition.

9. **Stop letting Iran use the nuclear program to paralyze U.S. policymaking.** It is hard to find leading U.S. politicians, in the legislative or executive branches, who have not vowed that Iran will never be allowed to have ‘the bomb’, and yet Tehran sees no evidence that they meant it. The author’s previous [proposal](#) for the President to formalize this commitment and seek congressional endorsement has not found favor. There are no easy ways to discourage Iran from a nuclear breakout. Asking the regime has been tried. Tehran’s latest appeal to reach a nuclear agreement surely reflects its fear that Saudi Arabia will take action to match its capability. Achieving normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel would create substantial deterrence, as Iran recalculated the potential risks of escalation. But nothing would more reliably lessen the dangers from Iran’s nuclear program than debilitating the clerical hand now controlling it.
10. **Remove existing blinders, and treat Iran as the national security threat it has been for decades.** While the nuclear program and proxy militia threats keep the U.S., Europe, Israel and the Arab world on the defensive, this regime survives mainly through coercion, its vulnerability masked by deception on a global scale. While prioritizing the Iranian people’s human rights, the U.S. and allies should pursue international accountability against their rulers. As Tehran tries to sustain the loyalty of Hezbollah, the Houthis, and its own IRGC, Quds Force, and MOIS, the West should relentlessly highlight the human toll of their crimes, the illegitimacy of their religious pretensions, and the futility of their goals. Cynicism and hypocrisy abound in the pro-Iran camp; there is no need to distort the facts. There is, however, a clear need to know those facts; and to do this, Western governments must overcome their phobia of displeasing the clerics, admit that policy assumptions have been flawed for years, and engage with the organized resistance.

With support for Iran’s clerical system of government eroding, change is possible. Change is needed. Encouraged by enlightened policies pursued with purpose by societies whose personal freedom and opportunity they most covet, Iran’s nearly 90 million citizens can succeed in demanding an end to tyranny and, at long last, hold a great nation’s future in their own hands.

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