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Ending the Threat from Iran

Amb. Robert Joseph brought together the group of experts that developed the following policy paper outlining a new approach to end the threat from Iran. Other members were Joseph DeTrani, Keith Payne, David Shedd, and Robert Torricelli. Brief biographies are at the end of the document.

Since the revelations of Iran's nuclear program in 2002, the United States has employed diplomacy, sanctions and, most recently, force to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Each successive administration has sought to convince Tehran that the pursuit of nuclear weapons is not worth the costs. While policies have differed substantially concerning concessions and coercive measures, all have failed to end Iran's quest for nuclear weapons.

For over two decades, U.S. policy has been based on the false hope that Iranian leaders can be convinced that it is in their best interest to moderate and abandon their goal of nuclear weapons. This hope has been consistently disappointed but never abandoned. Every administration has shared the same flawed premise: there are only two choices—negotiations or war. Given that stark choice, every president has opted for negotiations, even while Tehran repeatedly showed that it was using negotiations to buy time to advance its nuclear ambitions. While there have been clear differences, from appeasement under Obama and Biden to maximum pressure in Trump's first term, the objective was always the same: to negotiate limits on Iran's nuclear activities that would block the pathway to a nuclear weapon.

President Trump's attacks targeting Iranian nuclear sites, fully justified because of Iran's refusal to end enrichment, have not changed the pattern. The attacks were both impressive operationally and tactically successful, causing substantial damage that has set back the program for many months or years. But the dynamics have not changed at the strategic level. President Trump remains committed to negotiating an agreement, using additional sanctions and the threat of further strikes as leverage. Yet, there is no indication that Iran will abandon



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enrichment. In fact, statements by Iranian officials, often wrapped in nationalistic and legalistic language, continue to affirm the intent to enrich uranium.¹

An alternative policy, supporting the Iranian people in their determined effort to overthrow the religious dictatorship, has gone largely ignored. Yet this option offers perhaps the only means to end both Iran's nuclear program and its central role in destabilizing the vital Middle East region through terror and the export of its toxic brand of ideology. It is essential to recognize that Tehran's nuclear program, while receiving the greatest attention, is inseparable from the full range of threats posed by Iran. It has been a mistake to address the nuclear threat in isolation, as the failure of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) demonstrated. The massive resources the Obama Administration gave to Tehran under that agreement were used to expand the nuclear and missile programs, supply Iran's terrorist proxies with arms, support Assad in Syria, and acquire more tools for domestic repression.

Given Iranian leaders' pronouncements that Iran will continue to enrich uranium and resupply its terrorist proxies, it is essential to accept that the regime will not change. Its survival is based on domestic repression, regional instability, and nuclear weapons. Iran's leaders, while willing to play cat and mouse on negotiations, will not negotiate their own downfall. In fact, the attacks and the additional sanctions that have since been imposed on Iran may have convinced Iran's leaders that it is more urgent than before to acquire nuclear weapons to deter future attacks and serve as a shield against outside intervention if the Iranian people revolt.

This policy paper advocates for a new option of supporting the end of Iran's theocratic dictatorship. Support does not include U.S. military intervention or even the provision of military equipment or financial assistance. Support does include the recognition of the self-determination of the Iranian people to create a government that protects their basic rights of life, liberty and pursuit of economic advancement. Support also includes the endorsement of the opposition's determination to establish a democratic, secular and non-nuclear Iran. The Iranian people are the foremost victims of the regime and represent the greatest threat to its existence. Supporting their freedom is a moral imperative and the most effective means to achieve U.S. security goals.

Despite the failures of the past, baseless hope remains pervasive in and out of government that, with the right combination of concessions and negotiations, or sanctions and threats, Iran will accept effective limits on its nuclear program. This view dominates mainstream academia and most of the think tank community. Some blame Trump's use of force for undermining the prospects for a successful negotiation and recommend even more concessions. Others argue that the attacks have established a new reality that is conducive for a successful negotiation. All share the view that the regime remains strong and suggest that it is wishful thinking that it can be overthrown by the people. Yet, it is exactly wishful thinking that has long been the predominant characteristic of U.S. policy as reflected in decades-long failures to move the regime from its revolutionary goals.

Today, Iran's leaders are more desperate and vulnerable than ever. They have suffered tremendous losses with the decimation of Hamas and Hezbollah, the overthrow of Assad, the



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effective attacks on its nuclear facilities, the reinstatement of “snap-back” sanctions, and the rising internal opposition of their own citizens who reject the economic malfeasance, pervasive corruption, and brutal repression that deprives them of their fundamental rights. The Iranian people are ready to end the repression they have long endured and possess all the requisite experience and skills to succeed.

The United States and the West must end the threat from Iran – not just the nuclear and missile threats, but the full spectrum of threats, including efforts to foment destructive revolution in the Middle East, its support to terrorist proxies, and its own use of terror across the region, in Europe, and in the United States. The time that has been bought by the attacks on the nuclear sites must be used to support the Iranian people in bringing an end to the regime. If, instead, that time is used to repeat past failed approaches, the next Iranian surprise could be a nuclear detonation.

Enduring Threats

Since Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini assuming absolute power the following year, Iran has been in conflict with the United States. The ruling clerics’ posture toward the United States is best described as perpetual hostility while the regime promotes a radical ideology fixated on spreading revolution abroad. Their regional and arguably global fixation on attacking American interests has gone unabated.

Iran’s bellicose posture extends across the political, economic, cyber, and ideological spectrums. The Supreme Leader applies a “whole of regime” doctrine to destabilizing the region. No instrument of national power is off limits if that capability contributes to the regime’s goals.

Iran has insisted that its nuclear ambitions are peaceful, yet manifest realities belie that claim. Beyond developing its own advanced ballistic missiles, Iran continues to supply missiles and drones to its terrorist proxies, underscoring Tehran’s role in fomenting instability. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) engages in terrorism worldwide and its elite Quds Force operates covertly to advance Iran’s geopolitical interests.

The theocratic regime has conducted numerous attacks against U.S. personnel and interests. The regime has sponsored assassinations in the U.S. homeland and issued fatwa-like orders to kill the U.S. president and former U.S. Government officials. As for the history of Iranian state-sponsored terrorism, just two examples are the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, killing hundreds of Americans, and the 1996 fatal bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. Iran has long provided training, weapons and funding to proxy terrorists such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Shi’ite militias in Iraq, all of which have threatened the United States and its allies.

Iran has more recently emerged with sophisticated cyber capabilities weaponized against its adversaries. Tehran has been linked to numerous cyberattacks against foreign governments, infrastructures, and private sector entities. These attacks have targeted regional adversaries and global powers, notably including attacks on U.S. financial institutions and the 2012



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Shamoon virus that affected Saudi Aramco. These continuing threats pose a serious challenge for the United States and U.S. allies.

Nature of the Regime

The overthrow of the Shah ushered in an even more oppressive regime. The new leaders imposed a series of medieval dictates that led to the execution of tens of thousands of Iranians and the reversal of the status of Iranian women who were now held in captivity. Political dissent was eliminated, including the execution in the late 1980s of all individuals associated with the opposition group MEK in what the UN investigation would describe as a crime against humanity.²

Brutal repression remains a central characteristic of the regime under Ayatollah Khamenei. Each time the Iranian people have risen, the response has been to kill or imprison, torture and execute. The protests in 2009 over the fraudulent presidential election, in 2017-2018 and again in 2020 over gross corruption and economic malfeasance, and in 2022-2023 over the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, all led to the deaths of thousands more Iranians seeking an end to the repression.

The chant of “death to the dictator be it Shah or Ayatollah” has been heard across Iran as the people sought freedom but received only more oppression; the regime will not reform. Despite optimistic expectations for positive change, repression has increased. Executions have risen to record levels. Iran is now the world’s per capita leader in executing its citizens.

Externally, the Khamenei regime has focused on destabilizing the region through terrorist proxies. When civil war erupted in Syria, Iran became the principal backer of the Assad regime. The “ring of fire” strategy was promoted as the means to destroy Israel and defeat the United States. But the strategy has failed spectacularly. Following the October 2023 Hamas assault on Israeli civilians, the proxies have been decimated. The Assad regime has fallen. And Iran itself has been severely weakened by Israeli and U.S. strikes.

Nevertheless, throughout its existence, the regime has demonstrated that it is unwilling to change. To reform or moderate internally would risk the survival of the regime. Teheran’s dictators rely more than ever on the repressive security apparatus to stay in power. Today, there are large-scale arrests and calls from regime-related entities to return to the mass executions of the 1980s.³

Externally, the regime has shown the same rigidity. Following the collapse of Assad and defeat of its proxies, and the effective military strikes on its nuclear facilities, the regime is once again responding by doubling down on its previous policies: attempting to provide arms to its proxies, stating its intent to resume enrichment, and demonstrating that it will continue to develop ICBM-class missiles.

The regime’s unwillingness to reform is based on the accurate assessment that, if it is to survive, it cannot change. Yet, paradoxically, it cannot survive if it fails to change. The regime knows that the greatest threat it faces is from its own people who have abandoned the regime.⁴



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Failure of Negotiations

For over 20 years, negotiations with Iran have sought to block Iran's pathway to a nuclear weapon by prohibiting or strictly limiting uranium enrichment. Yet, Iran has successfully played a cat and mouse game with negotiations to buy time to advance its nuclear program. Different formats have been tried, including the EU3, the P5+1, direct and indirect talks with the United States and, currently, the E3. All have failed. Different combinations of incentives and disincentives have been tried, from appeasement to maximum pressure through economic sanctions, to military attacks on the principal sites. All have failed to convince Iran to stop enriching uranium. While sanctions have had dramatic effects on Iran's economy and military force has ended enrichment for a time, neither has changed the dynamics at the strategic level.

Negotiations with Iran began only after Tehran was caught cheating on its Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) safeguard agreements. In August 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) publicly revealed the existence of several undeclared nuclear-related sites. Soon after, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found Iran to be in violation of its NPT safeguards obligations. Almost immediately, the EU3—France, Germany and the United Kingdom—initiated diplomatic efforts to bring Iran into compliance and prevent uranium enrichment. In April 2006, Iran announced that it had begun enrichment at Natanz.⁵

Multiple diplomatic initiatives followed, principally by the three European states. Over the next decade, Iran made promises about restricting the level of enrichment, but none were kept. The number of centrifuge cascades and the sophistication of each successive generation of centrifuges grew steadily. Equally disconcerting, in November 2011 the IAEA released a report identifying key weaponization-related activities, including warhead design verification, high-explosive tests, plans for covert fissile material production, and research on a warhead able to be delivered by the Shahab-3 missile. The IAEA evidence found that some of the activities had stopped in 2003, but others had continued.⁶ The latter judgment contradicted the principal finding of the declassified 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate assessment that Iran had "halted" its weapons program in 2003.⁷

Alternating sanctions and concessions followed but the Iranian nuclear program continued to expand. In July 2015, after months of negotiations led by the Obama Administration, the P5 +1 and Iran agreed to the JCPOA that recognized Iran's right to enrich uranium. The agreement limited enrichment to 3.67 percent purity; restricted the number and sophistication of centrifuges; capped the enriched stockpile; and, provided for comprehensive access for IAEA inspections.

In return, UN sanctions related to the global arms embargo, ballistic missile activities, and the ban on nuclear materials and technology, were lifted. The European Union also lifted sanctions on oil and gas, removed banking restrictions, and unfroze Iranian assets. For its part, the United States lifted nuclear-related sanctions, ended its embargo of oil and gas, and removed the National Iranian Oil Corporation and Iranian banks and other entities from the sanctions lists. Hundreds of billions of dollars flowed to Iran.



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The JCPOA failed to address Iran's missile programs, its destabilizing regional activities, its supply of arms to its proxies, and its egregious domestic human rights abuses. Iran soon failed to meet its commitments to cooperate with the IAEA investigation of military-related activities and to provide access to undeclared suspect sites. For these violations of the agreement and other reasons, President Trump rightly withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and introduced a campaign of maximum pressure through stringent economic sanctions.

Following the U.S. withdrawal, Iran began enriching at 20 percent purity and later at 60 percent. Iran's stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium continued to grow to over 400 kilograms, sufficient for multiple nuclear weapons when further enriched. It also introduced advanced centrifuges that produced even more enriched uranium in shorter time. In mid-June 2025, concerned with Iran's status as a threshold nuclear weapons state and IAEA concerns about Iran's nuclear program, Israel and the United States conducted airstrikes on three principal nuclear sites: Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan.

After the strikes, the E3 has continued negotiations with Iran but, meeting Iranian intransigence, decided to trigger the snap-back sanctions under the JCPOA. The decision is fully justified by Iran's clear violations of the JCPOA.

Current U.S. efforts to reengage with Iran on their nuclear program are now contingent on Iran's stated conditions: compensation for the airstrikes, no further attacks, and Iran's freedom to pursue a peaceful civilian nuclear program, including enrichment.⁸ This latest set of conditions is consistent with Iran's playbook for negotiations: begin with a negotiation over the negotiations and demand concessions. When concessions are granted, demand more. When needed, violate any agreement. The goal has always been to buy more time to advance the nuclear program.

Value and Limits of the Use of Force

The Twelve-Day War illustrated the value and limits of military power. Israeli and U.S. military power severely degraded the threats posed by Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, and destroyed much of Iran's air defense, missile capabilities, and nuclear infrastructures—including its intellectual and leadership structures. Israeli and U.S. airstrikes set back the nuclear program by a period of time that will become clearer as damage assessments mature; some Israeli estimates suggest two years.⁹ This use of military power has spared the world the near-term prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran.

More broadly, the use of military force has revealed the fallacy of common expectations that have shaped past U.S. policy. The attacks did not lead to Iranian military escalation or to Russian or Chinese wartime support for Iran. In addition, the attacks exposed a surprising level of Iranian military weakness which may encourage opposition groups to the current regime.

The Twelve-Day War also revealed the limits of military power, despite the tactical victories over Iran's proxies and the degradation of its nuclear program. The lesson for Iranian leaders may be an even greater determination to expand nuclear and missile capabilities, likely covertly, and to rebuild more robust air defenses, all with potential assistance from Moscow,



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Beijing and Pyongyang. In the context of a rebuilt, more robust Iranian air defense network, Israel's "left of launch" offensive air operations may not be as practicable.

At the strategic level, U.S. and Israeli military operations did not end Iran's nuclear and missile threats or alter the nature of the regime. Absent the defeat of the regime through military occupation, which is not practical, the regime will attempt to maintain its power and modus operandi, including ever harsher internal repression. The only lasting solution to the full range of threats from Iran is regime change carried out by the Iranian people.

The Way Forward

It is essential to alter fundamentally the approach to counter the full spectrum of threats from Iran. The first step is to recognize that, after more than 40 years of efforts to appease, dissuade, and coerce the regime to change its behavior, all attempts have failed. Iran's leaders are doubling down and continuing past practices for the same malign goals.

The path to designing an effective strategy is through the Iranian people and their ongoing struggle against the regime. Most people have abandoned the leaders that have long ruled through brutality, and with incompetence, across all sectors of government. The economy, which is especially vulnerable to the maximum sanctions, is headed toward bankruptcy. At the societal level – due to the pervasive corruption, government incompetence, and the war on women – there is no prospect for meaningful change. Except for those tied directly to the regime, the government has lost all sense of legitimacy. Large segments of the population – the youth, the middle class, and even the merchants in the bazaar – are ready to pay the price of overthrowing the dictatorship.

Continuing the ineffective policies of the past is to encourage more failures, but with the prospect that things could get worse. Iran is likely to be more inclined to pursue nuclear weapons covertly and with possible foreign assistance. Western intelligence agencies may believe that they will know if Iran decides to build the bomb, but little credence should be given to such assessments, as demonstrated by past "nuclear surprises" with the Soviet Union, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea. But, independent of nuclear and missile threats, Iran's leaders have made clear that they will never change course in their support for terrorist proxies, in undermining U.S. and Western interests, and in the use of terror and assassinations. This is the future, and worse, if the regime endures.

For many years, the United States and the West have accepted the false narrative that there are only two choices for dealing with the regime: negotiation or war. War – a full-scale attack and occupation of Iran – has rightly been ruled out. And negotiations have consistently failed.

It is time for a different approach: supporting the Iranian people in their struggle to achieve regime change from within. This strategy does not involve U.S. military engagement. Iran is not Iraq or Ukraine. And Iran is not Libya with the risk of a failed state. Iran has a largely westernized population with a demonstrated determination to establish a democratic government.



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While the overthrow of the regime must be accomplished by the Iranian people, the United States can play an important part in advancing their cause by implementing the following recommendations.

Abandon Failed Policies

The United States should:

- Reject the false belief that Iran’s leaders will change and become more moderate over time; the regime cannot and will not reform.
- Stop throwing lifelines to the regime by making concessions that provide resources that are then used to resupply the arms of their terrorist proxies, expand the missile and nuclear programs, and acquire the tools of repression against the Iranian people.
- Abandon the illusion that negotiations and/or economic sanctions, or even the use of limited force, can lead to an effective agreement to block Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Chart a New Course

As President Reagan did for those living under Soviet rule, the United States should provide moral support to the Iranian people by recognizing their right to self-determination, to have a government that provides for their fundamental rights and freedom. Reagan spoke eloquently about the Soviet leadership’s disregard for human rights and its efforts to prevent the Soviet people from hearing the truth about their own country and the world. He also engineered ways to get information, denied by Moscow, to Soviet citizens about global events and even their own literature and culture. Reagan was both as patient and determined as he was confident of the final outcome.

The United States should:

- Bring pressure on the regime through public statements transmitted inside Iran about the nature of the regime—its pervasive corruption, brutal repression and crimes against its own people.
- Tailor different messages and delivery means to influence different sectors of Iran’s population, placing particular emphasis on tech savvy youth without connections to the regime.
- Support all components of the democratic opposition. Give official support to the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) Ten Point Plan calling for a democratic, secular and non-nuclear Iran.¹⁰
- Create relationships with the global Iranian diaspora to undertake actions that increase pressure on the regime.



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- Impose maximum pressure to isolate and weaken the regime. Implement a comprehensive approach that builds pressure on the regime using diplomacy, sanctions and other economic means, and intelligence tools.
- Cut off the regime's access to hard currency by enforcing sanctions on Iran's oil and gas.
- Deter Iranian provocative behavior through military presence and other means and, as needed, defend against Iranian use of terror and military force. Deterrence and, if needed, defense, will be strengthened by fielding an effective missile defense of the United States and by continuing to contribute to the missile defenses of U.S. allies.

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