



Atlantic Council

SCOWCROFT MIDDLE EAST
SECURITY INITIATIVE



THE FUTURE OF US STRATEGY TOWARD IRAN

A BIPARTISAN ROADMAP
FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The destabilizing actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its armed proxy groups, known as the Axis of Resistance, threaten vital US interests in the Middle East and beyond, ranging from the security and stability of US allies to the free flow of energy and maritime commerce—and deterring Iran from becoming a nuclear-weapons state requires urgent attention. How the United States should approach Iran will remain one of Washington’s primary foreign policy challenges for years to come. This report aims to provide a comprehensive strategic plan that can guide US executive branch leadership, members of Congress, the military, diplomats, and others who have roles in shaping US foreign policy toward Iran for the next four years, with an eye toward the next two decades.

Like the Soviet Union before it, Iran is a deeply ideological regime that is unlikely to change its fundamental outlook on the world. Dealing with Iran, therefore, calls for a bipartisan, long-term strategy that can span administrations, in which the United States works patiently and resolutely to counter Iranian efforts to drive the United States out of the Middle East, dominate the region, and destroy Israel. To accomplish its goals, the United States must work closely with allies and partners in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia to deter hostile actions by Iran.

The goals of US strategy should be to reduce Iran’s influence in the region by strengthening weak states and countering Iran’s military and financial support to proxy militias; to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon; and, where possible, to support the aspirations of the Iranian people to have the freedom to choose the direction of their country’s future, without pursuing regime change through military action.

COUNTERING KINETIC MILITARY THREATS FROM IRAN AND THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

Deterring the threat posed by Iran and its proxies requires a multifaceted approach that includes maintaining an adequate military presence in the region and a willingness to respond with appropriate force to attacks on US interests and those of US allies; working with allies to enhance cooperation on regional security; collaborating with partners on ways to reduce conflicts and instability that create openings for Iran to exploit; and expanding security cooperation beyond traditional realms.

- In seeking to deter the military threat from Iran and its proxies, the United States should respond proportionally to every attack on US forces and interests in the region and must be cognizant of the inevitable challenge of finding the right targets to reestablish deterrence, while avoiding escalation and civilian casualties.
- The United States also needs to foster more effective security collaboration among the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan through a regional security architecture centered on an integrated air- and missile-defense (IAMD) capability. The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between several Arab states and Israel, provide the basis for eventually allowing Israel to participate openly in the network.
- Expanding security cooperation beyond defense and physical security—to include issues related to public safety, the environment, medical emergencies, and disaster management—can help ease Gulf state concerns about Iranian retaliation and make fractures in the group less likely.

REDUCING IRAN AND ITS PROXIES’ INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

Reducing Iran’s ability to support proxies, and diminishing it and its proxies’ regional influence, entails a threefold strategy: increasing economic pressure against their destabilizing regional actions; spotlighting the corrosive effect of Tehran’s policies on the region; and working with regional and international partners to reduce regional state weakness and instability, which Iran and its network exploit.

- **Increase economic pressure.** The United States should increase economic pressure on countries that continue to evade US sanctions by importing Iranian oil and petroleum products. This would prevent the Iranian regime from earning billions of dollars from oil exports, particularly to China.
 - ▶ To accomplish this, Congress must provide additional resources to the Treasury Department and other agencies charged with monitoring and enforcement, and diplomats must press allies to investigate Iranian sanctions evasion within their jurisdictions.
 - ▶ The United States must also recognize that tougher sanctions enforcement is likely to increase hardships for some Iranians and, when possible, act to ease

Executive summary

restrictions that affect ordinary Iranians while targeting the regime and its allies. To incentivize Iranian cooperation, the United States should be prepared to ease some sanctions in return for a qualitative change in Iranian funding and arming of its proxies.

- **Spotlight corrosive policies.** New US public diplomacy, diplomatic engagement, and assistance programs, regionally and bilaterally, are needed to address the destructive impact that Iran's development of proxy militias has had on countries including Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. US officials should regularly highlight how these proxies' violence and allegiance to Iran warp domestic politics, worsen corruption, and weaken governments' ability to protect their people, secure their borders, and deliver services.
- **Reduce regional state weakness.** Countering the role played by Iran and its proxies in the region—in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—will require the United States, working more closely with regional and international allies, to engender diplomatic settlements to long-standing conflicts, engage militarily in the region to prevent an expansion of conflicts, and address the governmental weakness and instability that Iran and its partners exploit to expand their influence.

PREVENTING IRAN FROM GETTING A NUCLEAR WEAPON

- The advances Tehran is making in its nuclear program, and its spurning of efforts to negotiate a new deal, urgently require a reinvigorated US strategy to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear-weapons state. The United States must pursue a multilateral campaign of economic, political, and military pressure to demonstrate US seriousness about preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear-weapons threshold.
- The goal of US policy should be to induce Tehran to engage in new, serious negotiations aimed at placing restrictions on its nuclear program that would leave Iran at least several months from a breakout capability to a weapon, and, concurrently, address Iran's regional malign influence and conventional weapons capabilities.
- While addressing all issues simultaneously poses challenges, approaching them independently risks—as demonstrated in the post-nuclear deal period—enabling Iran to advance its conventional weapons efforts and destabilizing activities in the region, with insufficient leverage to convince Tehran to curb its malign behavior.

- The United States needs to maintain a declaratory policy, explicitly enunciated by the president, that it will not tolerate Iran getting a nuclear weapon and will use military force to prevent this development if all other measures fail. To support this policy, the United States should refrain from stressing that it does not seek conflict with Iran; announce that it will conduct yearly joint exercises with Israel, such as Juniper Oak; and seek additional funding in the next budget cycle to speed research and development of next-generation military hardware capable of destroying Iran's nuclear program.
- But pressure alone will not bring Iran back to the negotiating table. Iranian leaders will need to have confidence that halting Iran's program and curbing its regional malign influence will result in incentives that are not dependent on the whim of the US electorate; hence, US policy toward Iran needs to be bipartisan.

BROADENING MULTILATERAL PRESSURE ON IRAN

The United States should organize a broad-based international effort to pressure Iran and Iranian officials, in international forums and directly, over the regime's abuse of its citizens' human rights, its malign behavior in the Middle East region, and its flouting of international law as part of carrot-and-stick diplomacy.

- The State Department, in a dedicated effort co-led by the Offices of the Special Envoy for Iran and Multilateral and Nuclear Affairs, should put together a small tiger team to develop and execute work with international allies to oust Iran from United Nations (UN) institutions whose *raison d'être* Iran violates on a consistent basis. The same tiger team should also lead a more concerted, multilateral effort to target regime officials and their families who engage in or benefit from corruption, or who engage in human rights abuses, both of which are major sources of popular anger at the regime. The tiger team should also publicize the regime's corruption and human rights abuses to ensure they are widely known by the Iranian people.
- Even while seeking to organize broad-based pressure on Iran by targeting specific, malign policies of the regime, which might include downgrading diplomatic representation, the United States should oppose calls to isolate Iran diplomatically by closing diplomatic missions in Tehran. Such an approach would be counterproductive.

COUNTERING IRAN'S PERSONALIZED WARFARE: HOSTAGE TAKING AND ASSASSINATIONS

The United States should work with its allies in Europe and elsewhere to develop a common set of penalties, both diplomatic and economic, that would be automatically triggered when Iran takes a new hostage. And because assassination plots against current or former US officials are a direct threat to US sovereignty, and in order to enhance deterrence, the United States needs to consider a standing policy of a kinetic military response against Iran in retaliation for a successful—or even close to successful—plot.

SUPPORTING THE IRANIAN PEOPLE

Consistent with long-standing US support for people seeking freedom around the world—and recognizing the continued existence of the Iranian opposition that gave rise to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and various economic and other protests—the United States should enhance its efforts to provide tools and opportunities to the Iranian people to determine the political future of their country.

- US and allied policy, however, should publicly eschew seeking regime change through external military intervention. Explicit statements in support of regime change could push Iran to be more aggressive in the region, advance its nuclear program, and increase the prospect of a brutal domestic crackdown.

- The US approach should focus on slow, steady, and deliberate policies that can be sustained for decades—meaning they must be bipartisan to endure across shifts in political power—recognizing that they might not have immediate impact or success, and that more intensive efforts could make the outcomes that the United States seeks less likely.
- US initiatives should include increased funding for educational tools, more access to independent media and voices, more funding for tutorials on Iranian government corruption, tools to enhance internet access, and more Persian-language news.

A NEW ROLE FOR CONGRESS TO SUPPORT A BIPARTISAN IRAN STRATEGY

Congress needs to play a leading role in helping to forge bipartisanship on Iran policy. A good model is the US House of Representatives Select Committee on the Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, which has developed a holistic, whole-of-government framework to guide policy toward China. An alternative approach would be a joint House-Senate select committee or a commission, similar to one proposed by members of the Senate vis-à-vis China, which would include Senate and House members as well as representatives from the executive branch and the private sector.

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FOREWORD

Almost two years ago, the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative set out to create a different approach to developing US policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The goal was to bring together an ideologically diverse and bipartisan group of former senior officials and experts—mostly, but not all, American—to develop a holistic US policy toward the IRI for the next four years, regardless of who sits in the Oval Office.

In simple terms, the goal was to develop a US policy toward Iran, not a Democratic or Republican one. We termed the effort the Iran Strategy Project (ISP). And when we began recruiting experts to join our advisory committee and working group, we did so with two overriding principles in mind.

First, ideological diversity and bipartisanship could not just be talking points—they were requirements. The wild swings of US policy toward Iran over the last decade created significant policy gaps that Iran exploited to more rapidly advance its regional malign influence and nuclear program. Moreover, the inconsistency of US policy undermined Washington's credibility with its allies in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, who were no longer convinced they could rely on the United States and in its approach to the region.

The goal to have a nonpartisan effort on this issue represented a departure from the norm. US policy toward Iran has become among the most hyper-partisan of foreign policy issues in Washington and it was not originally clear that this endeavor would get off the ground. But through the concerted effort of everyone involved, hard conversations, and the development of thoughtful and creative approaches, this report is proof that a bipartisan strategy to address even the hardest of foreign policy challenges is still possible.

The second principle was that addressing Iran's regional malign influence can no longer be subordinate to addressing its nuclear program. Whether sidestepping the issue was the right decision or not during the negotiations for the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) more than a decade ago, relitigating either the JCPOA or the subsequent maximum-pressure campaign now is an unhelpful distraction.

In 2024, the geostrategic landscape is vastly changed, and Iran's nuclear program and its regional malign influence must be viewed as equal priorities and addressed simultaneously. They both represent threats to vital US interests and those

of US allies in the region. The preference of many to prioritize negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program because of the threat it represents—and because Iran has been previously unwilling to negotiate beyond JCPOA parameters—is understandable. But, even if successful, these negotiations would leave insufficient levers of influence and assets available for negotiations regarding Iran's regional malign influence. This would ensure that Iran's malign influence in the region would not only continue, but strengthen, as sanctions on its nuclear program are removed in accordance with an agreement.

With these principles in mind, the recommendations in this report are designed to guide policy for the next four years while providing a framework for the coming decades. And while the overwhelming majority of the proposals are unanimously endorsed by the advisory committee and working group, a few are not. In such instances, we've laid out the proposal of the majority but also highlighted that an important minority view exists that recommends an alternative and, in some cases, more robust, course of action.

A final note about this report. There are three people without whom this effort simply would not have been possible: Alan Pino, the former national intelligence officer for the Near East on the US National Intelligence Council, whose unrivaled skill and dedication are the backbone of this report, as he stitched together more than fifty different contributions into a cohesive narrative and provided some of his own; Alex Elmagdy, a colleague of mine who managed the excessive operational and graphics requirements, without which the report would be far less rich and thoughtful; and Manal Fatima, ISP's organizational mastermind, who kept this effort moving forward no matter the logistical impediments that arose.

In just a few weeks, the American people will elect their next president. When the campaigning is over and either Vice President Kamala Harris or former President Donald Trump walks into the Oval Office as the forty-seventh president of the United States of America, she or he can do so confident that a strategic, holistic, and bipartisan US strategy toward Iran already exists. It does, in this report.

Jonathan Panikoff

*Director, Iran Strategy Project and
Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative*

OCTOBER 3, 2024

Geography of Iran in the Middle East



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The content of this report primarily reflects the expertise, insights, analysis, and proposed policies of its advisory committee and working group members (as well as its primary drafter and the ISP director). They engaged in countless hours of discussion, and occasional debate, with each other and authored myriad smaller pieces to enable us to distill a truly nonpartisan US strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Their generosity of spirit, time, and thoughtfulness made this report possible. It also includes inputs from a handful of outside contributors who generated meaningful language, ideas, and criticism that helped make the report far better than it would have been otherwise.

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INTRODUCTION AND KEY PILLARS

Iran has posed a major challenge for every US administration since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which turned Iran from a US ally under the shah to an ardent foe of the United States.¹ Shia Iran's cleric-led government has sought to advance a revolutionary Islamic agenda and deter threats by working to subvert Tehran's traditional regional Arab adversaries, conducting and supporting terrorist attacks against the United States, Israel, and others in the West, and developing a network of allied militias across the region to expand its power and influence. The regime in Tehran has become increasingly hardline and repressive at home, engaging in widespread abuses of the Iranian people's human rights.

Given that solving the problem of how to deal with Iran is likely to remain one of Washington's top priorities for years to come, this report aims to provide a comprehensive strategic plan that can guide US policymakers, members of Congress, the military, and others who have a role in shaping US foreign policy toward Iran for the next four years, with an eye toward the next two decades. For more than a decade, US policy toward Iran has swung wildly from engagement over its nuclear programs under former President Barack Obama, to a complete reversal and the deployment of a maximum-pressure campaign under former President Donald Trump, to a stalled effort by President Joe Biden to lure Iran back into a nuclear deal and reduce tensions with the Islamic Republic. Moreover, beginning with the Obama administration, US officials have signaled their intent to reduce the US presence and role in the Middle East, end US involvement in "endless wars," and pivot resources to Asia to combat the rising threat from China.

These pendulum swings, and the perception of US retreat from the region, have been disorienting to allies in the United Kingdom, European Union (EU), Asia, and the Middle East, including Israel, making them hesitant about cooperating with the United States, and emboldening adversaries such as China, Russia, and Iran itself to exploit US inconsistency. In the absence of clarity, Iran has used the interceding periods

of policy recalibration and partisan infighting to advance its nuclear program, such that Iran is now within easy reach of having enough enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. Equally troubling, Iran has also made remarkable strides in capacity and capability in its ballistic missile, land-attack cruise missile, and drone programs during this time. These weapons number in the thousands and are capable of reaching any country in the region.

Moreover, Tehran has doubled down on its regional malign efforts, to which new President Masoud Pezeshkian recommitted, resulting in a more lethal Hezbollah, Shia militias in Iraq and Syria targeting US forces, a Houthi group that has paralyzed global shipping, and, of course, Hamas, which—thanks to years of training, weapons, and money from Iran—on October 7, 2023, was able to execute the most lethal terrorist attack against the Jewish people since the Holocaust.¹ What is less commonly known is that October 7 was also the third-deadliest terrorist attack against US citizens in the last twenty-five years, after 9/11 and the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016.

Iran has strategic patience, and the West needs a consistent strategy to counter it. The threat that Iran poses to the United States resembles, in many ways, the one the United States faced from the Soviet Union after World War II. In this regard, the policy that George Kennan outlined for dealing with the Soviet Union in his famous 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs*, authored as "X," has some applications for Iran.^{1,2} Kennan's idea was that the United States needed to work patiently and resolutely to thwart Soviet expansionism and threats to free nations until the Soviet empire collapsed from within because of its own internal contradictions. In the decades after Kennan published his article, the policies of successive US administrations toward Moscow varied at times, but all operated with the same broad strategic outlook toward the threat Moscow posed, guided by the recognition that the Soviet regime was deeply ideological, would not change its fundamental approach to the world, and needed to be countered rather than appeased.

I See Annex I for a comprehensive examination of how Iran views the world; the ideas that motivate its decision-makers; what policies the regime in Tehran has pursued, both at home and abroad; the results the regime has achieved; its strengths and vulnerabilities; and its goals in the coming four years. See Annex VI for a discussion of the history of US-Iran relations.

II There are, of course, significant differences between the challenges the United States faced from the Soviet Union compared to those it faces from Iran today. The United States and the Soviet Union maintained full diplomatic relations, with ambassadors in each other's capitals, and were able to communicate directly with each other at the highest levels of government, while the United States and Iran normally communicate only through intermediaries. Moreover, the United States and the Soviet Union negotiated numerous treaties to limit the danger of war, including agreeing to restrictions on strategic nuclear weapons and intermediate-range nuclear forces, controlling anti-ballistic missiles and chemical weapons, and regulating maritime boundaries. Conversely, the only agreement between the United States and Iran, the JCPOA, was abrogated less than half a decade after it was signed.

Introduction and key pillars

As with the Soviet Union, the United States needs to work patiently and resolutely to counter Iranian expansionism until the Islamic Republic collapses from its own contradictions. Such an approach would not imply a passive stance on the US part that merely seeks to contain Iran. Rather, it highlights our view that, while there are no quick fixes, US policy toward Iran requires a long-term strategy in which the United States works steadily and deliberately to counter and push back against Iranian efforts to drive the United States out of the Middle East, dominate the region, and destroy Israel.

Such a strategy needs to be grounded in a realistic assessment of the overall situation in the region, including the US position and standing, as well as US commitments and priorities elsewhere in the world, particularly regarding the threat from China. This assessment mandates a balancing of already limited and taxed US resources, but it also reflects an understanding that the Middle East, including Iran, is central to and entwined with broader US global strategy to ensure stable supply chains, prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and resist adversaries' efforts to refashion the international order.

Therefore, we advocate the policy proposals enclosed in the following pages as the beginning of a long-term US strategy to deal with Iran. This strategy is designed to run four years, through the end of either Harris's first term or Trump's second term. But it is also intended to provide a framework, over a much longer timeframe, for guiding US policy resting on the following pillars.

- First, it is critical to work closely with allies and partners in the region to deter and respond to hostile actions by Iran and its Axis of Resistance, and to undermine their military and political influence. This requires recognition that Iran's relationship with Russia and China has evolved in a manner that makes it difficult to convince either country to support new economic or military restrictions against Iran.
- Second, the JCPOA is no longer a viable pathway for preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear-weapons state. Doing so will instead require a smarter application of sanctions, diplomacy, and a credible US declaratory policy that expresses a willingness to use force with the goal of achieving a negotiated agreement placing limits on Iran's program.
- Third, the United States should do more to support the Iranian people's ability to determine the future political direction of their country. It can do so by leveraging an array of soft-power tools, especially increased access to independent media not influenced by the IRI. The United States should not pursue a strategy of regime change in Iran by military force but should not hesitate to use force to defend itself or its regional partners if they are attacked by Iran or its proxies.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Finally, to be credible and sustainable, US policy must be bipartisan. When US policy toward Iran shifts in the future, it should be a result of facts on the ground changing, not domestic politics. Even then, the broader aims should remain constant, including protecting the free flow of commerce and energy; the security of Israel and key US allies; deterring and preventing Iran's development of a nuclear weapon and regional nuclear-weapons proliferation; avoiding US overcommitment through effective alliances; and avoiding war by demonstrating US strength and resolve.

iii We use the term "proxies" throughout this report as a catch-all for non-state entities that align with Iran. We recognize, however, that the relationships between Iran and each of those groups—Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, various Iraqi and Syrian Shia militants, and others—vary greatly in terms of responsiveness to Iranian preferences; provision of weapons, training, and financial support Iran provides; and the strategic, tactical, ideological, and religious nature of the group's ties with Iran.

COUNTERING MILITARY THREATS FROM IRAN AND ITS AXIS OF RESISTANCE

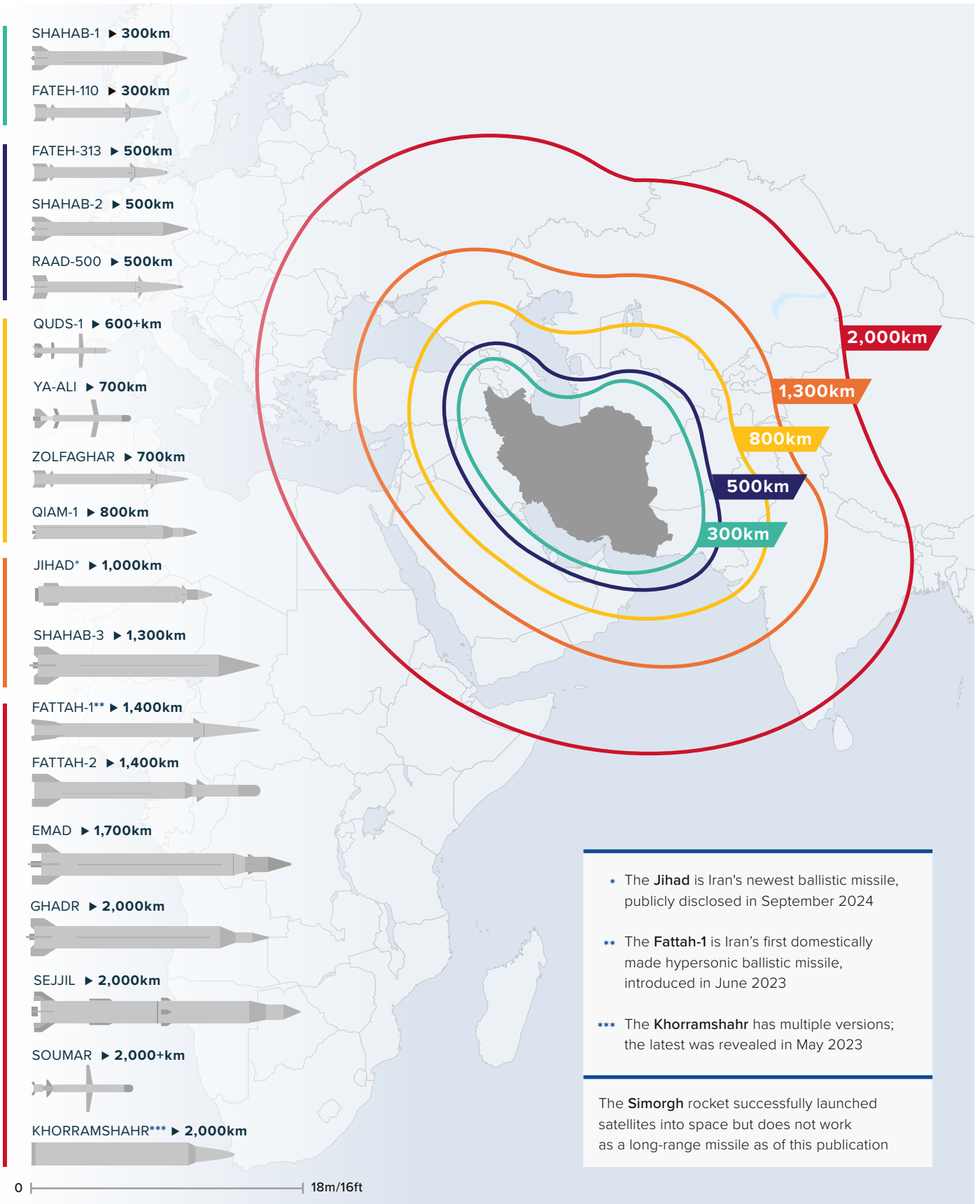
Deterring the threat posed by Iran and its proxies requires a multifaceted approach that includes maintaining an adequate military presence in the region and a willingness to respond with appropriate force to attacks on US interests and those of US allies; working with allies to enhance cooperation on regional security; and expanding security cooperation beyond traditional realms.

All advisory committee and working group members agree that there is a need to better ensure deterrence against Iran by having a consistent policy on the US use of force in response to attacks by Iran or its proxies on US personnel or interests. In seeking to achieve such deterrence, the United States shall respond proportionally to every attack on US forces and interests in the region, recognizing the inevitable challenge of finding the right targets to reestablish deterrence while avoiding escalation and civilian casualties. However, barring an attack carried out by the Iranian army

or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) itself, the US use of force should be directed at the partner or proxy that carried out the attack, and not at the Iranian homeland. An attack on Iranian territory could compel Tehran to strike back against US targets in the region, against US allies, or both, risking the potential of a direct conflict with Iran and a regional war.

A minority of advisory committee and working group members argue that the United States should hold Iran directly responsible for any attacks by its proxies and retaliate disproportionately for such attacks, including overt use of US force against the Iranian homeland. A few members go even further and advocate that the US Congress enact an authorization for use of military force against Iran to signal to the Islamic Republic that Washington has both the will and capability to destroy Iran's military if Tehran continues to back attacks against the interests of the United States and its allies in the region.

Iranian missile and drone inventory and ranges



- * The **Jihad** is Iran's newest ballistic missile, publicly disclosed in September 2024
- ** The **Fattah-1** is Iran's first domestically made hypersonic ballistic missile, introduced in June 2023
- *** The **Khorranshahr** has multiple versions; the latest was revealed in May 2023

The **Simorgh** rocket successfully launched satellites into space but does not work as a long-range missile as of this publication

MAINTAINING A CREDIBLE US FORCE POSTURE IN THE REGION

The US ability to effectively manage aggression from Iran and its proxies requires a substantial force presence in the region. There is simply no way to avoid that fact, even as we recognize competing requirements for force posture, especially in East Asia. While cognizant of the costs associated with long-term military requirements—including protecting international shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, and, therefore, the need to burden share with allies—the United States will need to maintain air, naval, and anti-missile capabilities deployed in the Gulf and broader region at roughly current levels (and might need to increase the number of warships). These capabilities would allow for a robust and timely response to current and potential future threats to freedom of navigation, the free flow of oil, and regional allies.

There are currently about forty thousand US forces deployed at bases in the Arab Gulf states, Iraq, Syria, and a few other locations in the region. The United States has ground forces in Kuwait, the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, and an air base in Qatar, as well as several thousand personnel at Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and access arrangements for US forces in Oman. The Gulf states pay a substantial amount of the cost of maintaining these bases, and the US deployment of these forces both gives the United States the ability to deter and respond to threats from Iran and demonstrates its commitment to Gulf allies' security.

In the wake of October 7, a firm and public US commitment to maintain a robust security presence in the Middle East will help shore up allies' resolve and willingness to partner with Washington on their security needs. US deployment of a substantial number of air, naval, and air-defense assets out of the Gulf to the Indo-Pacific and Europe in the two years prior to October 7, even as Washington enforced a ban on offensive arms sales to Saudi Arabia and reduced sales of defensive weapons to the kingdom, reinforced Gulf states' perceptions that the United States was withdrawing from the region. These adjustments to the US force posture—often without making US resource constraints clear to the Gulf states—along with the rapid US withdrawal from Afghanistan, contributed to partners hedging by seeking to improve ties with Iran and enhance security cooperation with US great-power adversaries Russia and China.³

The United States must also seek to maintain a troop presence in Iraq, with US forces training and supporting the Iraqi military in the fight to eradicate what remains of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) organization in the country. The threat from ISIS has diminished significantly, but the group remains capable of regenerating if efforts to combat it end prematurely. The lesson of the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, only to need to return in 2014 when ISIS was taking over large parts of northern and western Iraq and threatening Baghdad, should stand as a painful reminder of the dangers of declaring “mission accomplished” too quickly.

Nevertheless, domestic pressure in Iraq for a US withdrawal has reached new heights, following US retaliation against Iranian-backed Iraqi militias for their attacks on US forces since October 7. The US-Iraqi Military High Commission has met to discuss the terms for drawing down or ending the US presence. While the United States should be open to the possibility of lowering military numbers and its profile over time (see the section on reducing Iran and proxies' influence in the region for more on this issue), an agreement now to end the US role would deal a blow to US credibility in the region by giving the appearance that Iran had forced the withdrawal.⁴

A withdrawal of US forces from Iraq would have the further downside of forcing the United States to remove its troops from eastern Syria, who depend on the US military presence in Iraq for their operations, including guarding tens of thousands of ISIS prisoners and their families. US forces in eastern Syria continue to support the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in preventing an ISIS resurgence. US bases in Syria also constrain Iran's efforts to use the “land bridge” to send weapons through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The US presence further signals to Russia, Iran, Gulf states, and Israel that Washington intends to remain in the region and gives the United States leverage to influence the long-term outcome in Syria and counter Russian and Iranian influence there. It also enables the United States to continue strengthening the Iraqi military's capability to manage security threats from ISIS and, potentially, from Iranian-backed Shia militias.^{IV}

IV Press reports indicate that the US and Iraq have concluded an agreement to end the US-led coalition's anti-ISIS mission by September 2025. Some US forces will remain in Iraq to support Iraq's continuing operations against ISIS until September 2026, after which the “US military mission will transition to a bilateral security relationship.” US forces will be able to continue using their presence in Iraq to support US troops in Syria, as recommended in this strategy document. ^[a]^[b]

CREATING A DEFENSIVE DETERRENT

The starting point in creating a balance of power in the region that acts as a check on Iran and its proxies involves fostering more effective collaboration among the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan regarding their own security. Previous attempts to establish a Middle East regional security structure foundered, due to concerns about its being perceived as anti-Iran and to deep-seated mutual distrust among potential member states.

Given this reality, the United States has been playing a leadership role in coordinating regional security cooperation. For the past several years, US Central Command (CENTCOM) has convened chief of defense-level regional meetings to outline the foundations for a regional security construct, with the most recent meeting taking place in Bahrain in June 2024.^V US leadership can help to deepen regional dependence on US platforms and weaponry, discourage adversaries from trying to build their own security relationships with regional states, and lay the groundwork for involving Israel at an appropriate time once the Gaza conflict ends. Finally, the United States should expand efforts to develop effective security cooperation among the Gulf states to include issues such as “water security, food security and pandemic response,” which might help ease Iran’s perception that the initiative poses a threat and also enhance Gulf states’ willingness to participate.^{VI, 5}

The core of a US-led effort to build a regional security architecture involves CENTCOM continuing work with the militaries of the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan to build an integrated air- and missile-defense (IAMD) capability. CENTCOM’s Combined Air Operations Center integrates radar and air-picture information, while Air Force Central Command and Army Central Command conduct air-defense exercises with regional countries. This structure allows regional states to participate at a pace that they consider politically feasible, while demonstrating the value of

integration and functionality of equipment among all the countries involved. US diplomats and policymakers should focus their efforts on supporting continued operational-level integration, while reducing the barriers for any regional defense acquisitions from the United States that would enable better region-wide integration.

The successful, region-wide defense of Israel during Iran’s April 13 attack dramatically demonstrated the need for an effective regional security structure and previewed the effectiveness of the network that has been developed. According to the 2022 CENTCOM Posture Statement, “the greatest threat to the region’s security—Iran’s missile force—is also a catalyst for increased cooperation in the form of an [IAMD].” An IAMD also can strengthen Gulf states’ leverage with Iran in any talks about mutual nonaggression.⁶

US leadership in working with Gulf partners to develop an IAMD network helps demonstrate to these nations, and to Iran, that Washington is committed to the security of its Gulf allies. The creation of this network, along with efforts to fashion a defense treaty between the United States and Saudi Arabia as part of an Israeli-Saudi normalization agreement, will also combat perceptions of the United States leaving the Middle East, while “creating conditions to allow a lower level of US combat troops.”⁷ Moreover, working with Gulf states to “procure and implement IAMD” would be more effective than deploying ad hoc systems in times of crisis, especially in an environment where the United States has redeployed air-defense systems away from the Gulf, anticipating they might be needed by the US Indo-Pacific Command.⁸

Successful development of an IAMD under US leadership can help overcome distrust of one another among Gulf nations. With the United States serving as the focal point in a hub-and-spoke model, members share information with the United States, which manages and disseminates what is necessary to others.⁹ Individual members can choose not

V The United States and Bahrain signed a strategic security and economic pact in September 2023—titled the Comprehensive Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) and intended “as a template for strengthening ties with other Persian Gulf countries.” Under C-SIPA, the United States “pledges expanded defense and technology cooperation and intelligence capacity-building.” The agreement encourages Bahrain to “purchase... interoperable US security equipment and develop joint strategy for confronting Iranian aggression.” The bilateral agreement does not constitute a mutual security pact, but pledges the two countries to consult with one another on the best means to “confront external aggression” and could be used as a model for similar future agreements.^[c]

VI The 2022 US-led Summit with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries plus Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, provided the following framework for a US-Saudi-based initiative on integrated air defense: “The two sides reviewed developments in improving air defense integration and protection of Saudi Arabia’s territory and people from external threats, including missiles, drones, and [unmanned aerial vehicles]. This cooperation includes U.S. military support and far-reaching foreign military sales cases with emphasis on defensive systems and advanced technology. The United States affirmed it would accelerate our cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other partners in the region to counter unmanned aerial systems and missiles that threaten the peace and security of the region. President Biden affirmed the United States’ commitment to working with Saudi Arabia and other allies and partners in the Middle East to integrate and enhance security cooperation. In particular, the United States is committed to advancing a more integrated and regionally-networked air and missile defense architecture and countering the proliferation of unmanned aerial systems and missiles to non-state actors that threaten the peace and security of the region.”

to participate in certain IAMD network security exercises if they have concerns about Iran’s reaction or fears of other states having access to information about their weapons systems and operations.

The Gulf states will continue to have specific desires related to their security that should be fully recognized. For example, Kuwait will remain more focused on the Iraq threat than on threats from Iran, and Saudi Arabia might want to pursue security guarantees with the United States outside the context of integrated Gulf defenses. While the United States should do all it can to make such bilateral arrangements compatible across the Gulf, it should not expect unity of interests, capabilities, or intentions from its Gulf partners. Rather, Washington’s goal should be to ensure that no Gulf allies view their interests as being ignored.

The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between several Arab states and Israel, can provide the basis for eventually allowing Israel to participate openly in the network. The accords have already spurred significant Gulf-Israeli security and economic cooperation. According to Daniel Mouton, the former director for Middle East and North Africa defense and political-military policy at the US National Security Council, “one-quarter of Israel’s 2022 defense exports went to Abraham Accords countries.”¹⁰

An IAMD can also help the United States signal to its great-power competitors, Russia and China, that it intends to remain in the Middle East and bolster Washington’s role as the Gulf states’ key security guarantor at a time when Moscow and Beijing are becoming more attractive as potential security partners.¹¹ An IAMD network sends a message to Iran that the United States is ready to counter Tehran’s efforts to acquire advanced weapons systems from Russia, which it could use to threaten regional states.

GOING BEYOND TRADITIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENSE

Expanding security cooperation beyond defense and physical security—to include issues related to public safety, the environment, medical emergencies, and disaster management—can help ease Gulf states’ concerns about Iranian retaliation and make fractures in the group less likely. Including this broader set of issues can also make membership “easier to sell to populations...distrustful of military alliances or other... members.”¹² Making this more robust set of issues part of security cooperation can help sustain interaction among states in the alliance, even when engaging in defense cooperation is problematic or not a priority. In the 1990s, the Arab states continued to engage with Israel on the issues that were part of the multilateral track created at the peace-focused Madrid Conference, such as water management and the environment, even when peace process discussions between Israel and the Palestinians were on hold.¹³

CENTCOM’s focus on wider security cooperation with Gulf partners should accompany an expansion of traditional diplomacy led by the State Department and US embassies in the region. These embassies should have more language-qualified officers in Arabic and Farsi, and should have more resources at their disposal for people-to-people and professional exchanges in a variety of fields. Congress should see this as a priority and increase State Department funding for this express purpose, rather than requiring the department to cut spending on other programs and shift it to this effort.


To varying degrees, the Gulf states have considerable insight into what is going on in Iran and, with their expanded diplomatic representation in Tehran, they should gain more knowledge over time. US consultations with Gulf states regarding Iran should not be restricted to security concerns or sanctions enforcement, but should also cover internal social, economic, and religious developments, and also focus on present and future Iranian leadership and intentions.

Key Iranian proxies in the Middle East



IRAQ

	PROXIES AND INFORMAL PARTNERS	YEAR OF CREATION	LEADER(S)	FORCE SIZE
	ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ (AAH) or "The League of the Righteous"	2006	Qays al-Khaz'ali , <i>Secretary General</i> Head of AAH's central shura; split from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia in 2006 to establish AAH, pursuing a more violent opposition to the US presence in Iraq Laith al-Khaz'ali , <i>Senior Leader and Deputy Secretary General</i> Brother of Qays; suspected of orchestrating attacks on US service members	10,000
	BADR ORGANIZATION (formerly known as the Badr Brigade)	1982	Hadi al-Amiri , <i>Secretary General</i> Regarded as the most militarily experienced among Iraq's militia leaders; former Iraq Minister for Transport	10,000–50,000
	HAKKAT HEZBOLLAH AL-NUJABA (HHN) or "The Movement of the Noble Ones"	2013	Akram Al-Kaabi , <i>Secretary General</i> Former commander of the Syrian branch and founder and secretary general of the group; key operative of the IRGC's Quds Force in Iraq Nasr al-Shammari , <i>Deputy Secretary General</i> Chairman of HNN's Executive Council; trained as an engineer	8,000–10,000 1,500–3,000 deployed to Syria
	KATAIB AL-IMAM ALI or "The Imam Ali Battalions"	2014	Shibl Mohsen Obaid al-Zaidi , <i>Secretary General</i> Former commander in Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army; thought to be one of Iraq's wealthiest militia leaders; founded the group in 2014	7,000
	KATA'IB HEZBOLLAH (KH) or "Battalions of the Party of God"	2007	Ahmad al-Hamidawi , <i>Secretary General</i> Reportedly joined KH in 2007 and has received political, military, and intelligence training from the IRGC	10,000
	KATA'IB SAYYED AL-SHUHADA (KSS) or "The Masters of the Martyrs Brigade"	2013	Hashim Finyan Rahim al-Saraji , <i>Secretary General</i> Was a member of Kata'ib Hezbollah before joining KSS Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani , <i>Senior Leader and Commander</i> Helped establish KSS; founder of the Sheibani Network, an Iraqi militia backed by the IRGC	5,000–15,000
	SARAYA TALIA AL-KHURASANI or "The Khorasani Brigades"	2013	Seyed Ali al Yasiri , <i>Secretary General</i> Longtime opponent of Saddam Hussein's regime; acknowledged the group's close ties to Iran and reliance on it for training, weapons, and manpower Hamid al-Jazaeri , <i>Deputy Secretary General and Military Commander</i> Previously lived in exile in Iran; reportedly carried out operations against Hussein's regime in the 1990s	3,000

LEBANON

	HEZBOLLAH or "The Party of God"	1985	Naim Qasim , <i>Deputy Secretary General</i> Appointed deputy secretary general in 1992; widely regarded as one of the group's leading media personalities Hashem Safieddine , <i>Head of the Executive Council</i> Key member of the group's Shura Council who oversees Hezbollah's educational, social, cultural, and other programs aimed at consolidating support	45,000–100,000
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PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

	HAMAS <i>(Harakat al Muqawama al Islamiyah)</i>	1987	Yahya Sinwar , <i>Chairman of the Political Bureau</i> Succeeded Ismail Haniyeh; released by Israel in a prisoner swap in 2011 after being sentenced to four life sentences Khalil al-Hayya , <i>Deputy Chairman of the Political Bureau</i> Serving as Hamas's chief negotiator for the indirect negotiations with Israel over the war in Gaza; former head of Hamas's parliamentary bloc in the Palestinian Legislative Council Khaled Mashal , <i>Head of the Diaspora Office</i> Former Chairman of the Political Bureau; based in Doha, Qatar	20,000–25,000
	PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD (PIJ) <i>or "Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine"</i>	1979	Ziyad al-Nakhalah , <i>Secretary General</i> Has held the post since 2018; leads PIJ's leadership council, having assumed the role after serving as deputy secretary general for over two decades Muhammad al-Hindi , <i>Deputy Secretary General</i> Elected in 2018; heads PIJ's Political Bureau, as well	1,000

SYRIA

	LIWA ABU FADL AL-ABBAS <i>or "The al-Abbas Brigade"</i>	2012	Maher Ajeeb Jaza , <i>Leader</i> Appointed to his position by the IRGC; reportedly arrested by Syrian military intelligence at the behest of Russia	10,000
	LIWA AL-IMAM AL-BAQIR <i>aka Liwa al-Baqir or "The Baqir Brigade"</i>	2012	Khalid al-Hassan , <i>Commander</i> Known as the "Protector of Aleppo"; one of the primary founders of the group; participated in the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War Hamza al-Hassan , <i>Commander of Special Forces</i> Younger brother of Khalid and co-founder of the group; oversees the group's sniper division and created its rapid reaction force	3,000
	LIWA AL-IMAM AL-HUSSEIN <i>or "The Imam Hussein Brigade"</i>	2016	Zulfiqar Hinawi , <i>Head of Regional Command</i> Served alongside former IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in Syria	6,000
	LIWA FATEMIYOUN <i>or "The Fatehiyoun Brigade"</i>	1980s; revived 2012	Currently unknown	10,000–12,000
	LIWA ZAINEBIYOUN <i>or "The Zainebiyoun Brigade"</i>	2013	Currently unknown	800–2,500
	POPULAR FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE – GENERAL COMMAND (PFLP-GC)	1968	Talal Naji , <i>Secretary General</i> Former longtime Deputy Secretary General (1973–2021), succeeding PFLP-GC founder Ahmad Jibril; earned a PhD in political science in Moscow in 1984 Khaled Jibril , <i>Deputy Secretary General</i> Son of Ahmad Jibril; responsible for the group's military activities	500–1,000
	QUWAT AL-RIDHA <i>or "The Ridha Forces," aka Liwa al-Imam al-Ridha or "The Imam Ridha Brigade"</i>	2013	Currently unknown	3,000–3,500

YEMEN

	THE HOUTHIS <i>officially, Ansar Allah; "Supporters of God"</i>	1990s as the Believing Youth movement; renamed The Houthis in 2004	Abdul-Malik al-Houthi , <i>Leader</i> Spiritual, political, and military leader of the group; first came to power in 2004 Mohammed Abdulsalam , <i>Spokesman</i> Served as Houthi Chief Negotiator over the group's war with the UAE and Saudi Arabia	15,000–60,000
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REDUCING IRAN AND ITS PROXIES' INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

In addition to maintaining a robust military presence and cooperating on regional security to deter Iran, addressing the malign influence that Iran and its network of proxies exercise in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq will require the United States to pursue a long-term strategy. In the current post-October 7 environment, focusing on reducing Iran's ability to support militias and terrorist groups should be a bipartisan starting point. Both Democrats and Republicans have emphasized the need to reduce, and eventually eliminate, Iran's ability to provide financial military support for groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.

Reducing Iran's ability to support proxies, and diminishing Iran's regional influence more broadly, entails a threefold strategy: increasing economic pressure to drive home the consequences of Iran and its proxies' destabilizing actions, spotlighting the corrosive effect of Tehran's policies on the political and social fabric of the region, and working with regional and international partners to reduce regional state weakness and instability that Iran and its network exploit.

INCREASING ECONOMIC PRESSURE BY TIGHTENING SANCTIONS: TARGETS, GOALS, AND DRAWBACKS

The United States can add to the economic pressure on Iran and highlight the destructive effect of the IRI's provision of arms for militias by working collaboratively with the Europeans, given their newfound willingness to impose sanctions on such weapons transfers following Tehran's missile and drone barrage against Israel.^{vii} This should include new joint efforts to impose sanctions on Iran's burgeoning drone sales to countries in Central Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which are bringing millions into Iran's coffers.^{viii} Including sanctions on dual-use items related to drone production would significantly increase their

impact by reducing the willingness of companies to supply the components and slowing the pace of production.^{ix}

While tightening the implementation of sanctions measures, policymakers should recognize the drawbacks of sanctions, not just their strengths. Decades of sanctions on Iran have increased the regime's monopoly on various economic sectors and put pressure on the country, but also strengthened the regime vis-à-vis the globally minded, middle-class, private-sector demographic. If Washington can find ways to use sanctions relief as a carrot for good behavior, the net impact inside Iran may well advance moderate change. As a result, Washington should seek tougher sanctions with humility, cognizant of the reality that, no matter how much effort it puts into targeting only the regime, tougher sanctions enforcement is likely to increase the economic hardships experienced by some Iranians.

Therefore, the United States should increase sanctions that target, to the extent possible, the regime and the individuals in charge of implementing government policies that threaten the interests of the United States and its allies. At the same time, Washington should ease restrictions on certain goods and transactions that affect ordinary Iranians, such as the export of carpets and pistachios.^{ix}

The United States should heighten domestic and regional pressure on Iran to cut back on its financing of allied militias in the region by declassifying intelligence on how much aid and what types of armaments Iran provides to Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Iraqi Shia militias, and the Houthis. A renewal of protests directed at this issue—either in Iran or in countries such as Iraq, where there is considerable anti-Iranian sentiment over the role of IRI-backed militias—might spur the regime to rein in its aggressive actions in the region and those of its proxies. Anti-Iranian protests in Iraq in 2019, focused on the role of Iranian-linked militias in the killing of hundreds of demonstrators, led Iran to support

VII Sanctions on Iranian weapons transfers to proxies would not have a significant economic impact by themselves, because Iran provides most of these arms without being reimbursed. However, they would be symbolically important by highlighting for the Iranian people and countries in the region the political and economic isolation that Tehran incurs from its malign regional policies.

VIII The Treasury Department made a push in May 2024 to target Iran's drone sales with new designations of Iran's UAV sector. ^[d] For a discussion of working with the Europeans and Group of Seven on Iran's provision of drones to Russia, see the nuclear section below. Danny Citrinowicz writes, "The strategy to counter Iran must be broad and holistic, encompassing a wide range of... geographic locations. The current Iranian leadership works to tighten its ties with the 'global south' and sees these ties as providing a[n] economic and political... [lifecycle]... The more Iran can expand its global influence, the more the ability to increase... political and economic pressure on it will [weaken]."

IX Some experts on sanctions believe it is better to focus on total enforcement of sanctions rather than expend energy trying to develop carve-outs. These experts argue that such efforts tend not to be effective and would send the wrong message to the regime in Iran.

Reducing Iran and its proxies' influence in the region

the pro-Western chief of intelligence Mustafa al-Kadhimi for prime minister in 2020, despite his pledge to bring the militias under government control.¹⁵

To increase the chances that pressuring Tehran with tougher sanctions would succeed, the United States should also offer Tehran an off-ramp for a sustained reduction of destabilizing actions in the region. Tehran might be more inclined to respond to US sanctions pressure over its support for proxies if Washington indicated that certain sanctions directed specifically at Iran's malign regional activities could be eased

in return for qualitative changes in IRI financial support, arms deliveries, and regional aggression by Tehran and its Axis of Resistance partners. Any easing of US sanctions should require two to four consecutive quarterly reports by the US Intelligence Community documenting a reduction or halt to Iranian support and attacks by Iran's proxies. To strengthen the incentive for Iran, an easing or elimination of sanctions could focus on areas that would allow the Gulf states to expand trade and financial interaction with Tehran, a key goal of Iran's effort to boost ties to oil-producing Gulf countries over the past several years.^{X,16}

X For an extended discussion of using both pressure and incentives to induce Iran to engage in negotiations about its support for proxy militias in the region, its nuclear program, and its conventional weapons capabilities, please see the section below, "Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon."

Iran's estimated support to select terrorist and militant groups*

	LOCATION	ASSESSED PROVISION OF WEAPONS	ESTIMATED FUNDING (USD)
IRGC-QF <i>Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force</i>	Iran	N/A	~\$6,000 million (2024)
HEZBOLLAH	Lebanon	Light arms, mortars, short and long-range unguided and precision guided rockets, anti-tank guided missiles, sophisticated anti-aircraft systems, drones and anti-ship missiles, ballistic missiles, drones	~\$700 million (2020)
HAMAS	Palestinian territories	Light arms, mortars, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, drones, short- and long-range unguided rockets, anti-tank guided missiles	~\$70–100 million (2023)
PIJ <i>Palestinian Islamic Jihad</i>	Palestinian territories	Light arms, mortars, short- and long-range unguided rockets, anti-tank guided missiles, drones, shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles	At least \$30 million (2018)
THE HOUTHIS <i>Ansar Allah</i>	Yemen	Light arms, rocket launchers, antiship and cruise missiles, drones (UAVs), explosive devices and mines, antitank, surface-to-air missiles, mortars, ballistic missiles	Unknown**
AAH <i>Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq</i>	Iraq	Light arms, Iranian-produced arms as well as Soviet-era vehicles, tanks, drones, ballistic missiles	Unknown
BADR ORGANIZATION <i>formerly the Badr Brigade</i>	Yemen	Conventional weapons, communications and electronic surveillance systems, drones, tanks, armored vehicles	Unknown
HHN <i>Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba</i>	Iraq	Conventional weapons, armored vehicles, drones, ballistic missiles	Unknown
KH <i>Kata'ib Hezbollah</i>	Iraq	Conventional weapons, armored vehicles, drones, ballistic missiles	Unknown

* For a more comprehensive list of Iranian-supported proxies, please see page 8 (Key Iranian proxies in the Middle East)

** Much of the Houthis funding is not direct payments but revenue the group generates from illicit shipment of Iranian commodities

TARGETING COUNTRIES BENEFITING FROM IRAN'S SKIRTING OF SANCTIONS

A combination of sanctions evasion and weak sanctions enforcement has provided Iran some economic breathing room by allowing the regime to earn about eighty billion dollars from oil exports to China. Tehran has probably been able to funnel hundreds of millions of that additional revenue into financial and military support to its Axis of Resistance allies.

Iran remains the most highly sanctioned country in the world, and US sanctions target every sector of Iran's economy, with carve-outs for humanitarian goods such as food and medicine. The United States has designated the Central Bank of Iran and has identified Iran as a jurisdiction of primary money-laundering concern.¹⁷ These actions severely restrict Iran's access to the US dollar and financial system, making it nearly impossible for Iran to trade and transact in the world's primary reserve currency. Sanctions have affected Iran's economic growth and reduced the government's revenue.

However, countries such as China have publicly repudiated these sanctions and continued to transact with Iran, propping up the regime. The next US administration should also prioritize reexamining the economic and financial transactions that countries such as the UAE and Iraq have with Iran, which substantially benefit the Islamic Republic. At the end of the last Iranian fiscal year in March 2024, the UAE was Iran's top source for imports and Iran was the UAE's third-biggest export market.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Iraq continued to benefit from US sanction waivers for electricity.¹⁹ The new administration should seek to help these countries determine if there are other alternatives that can take the place of trade with Iran. If not, it should make a deliberate and explicit policy choice determining whether providing these US partners with sanctions waivers is worth sacrificing pressure on Iran.

But Iranian trade with the UAE—much of which is in raw commodities such as food imports—or even Iraqi electricity imports don't compare to Iran's illicit oil sales to China, which purchases the majority of Iran's oil exports.²⁰

Much of the imported oil comes at reduced prices and through a complex network of small refineries supported by actors in third countries. Transactions are often done through small Chinese financial institutions and outside of the US dollar.²¹ The United States needs to commit significant additional collection and analytic resources toward this challenge to uncover the financial networks facilitating these transactions and identify potential links to US financial institutions and systems.^{XI}

Doing so successfully will unlock two critical potential policy options. The most aggressive and impactful route would be to leverage US secondary sanctions authorities to directly target Chinese and third-party institutions, individuals, and entities involved in evading US sanctions on Iranian oil, and, where appropriate, use US enforcement authorities such as criminal and civil penalties to hold sanctions evaders accountable. A second, less direct option—but potentially an equally or more effective one, given that China and Iran are transacting oil sales in renminbi rather than dollars and have developed various subterfuges to evade detection—would be to instead focus on the actors in third countries and go after third-party brokers, such as Malaysian companies involved in helping to facilitate the Chinese-Iran oil transactions.

Moreover, as part of its effort to increase economic pressure, the United States should increase and better coordinate engagement with Western allies, to encourage them to investigate Iranian sanctions evasion within their jurisdictions and ensure that their own financial institutions are not running afoul of US sanctions. To do so, a joint tiger team consisting of representatives from the US Departments of Defense, Treasury, and Commerce, along with representatives from the US Trade Representative, the Intelligence Community, and the National Security Council, should work together to develop messaging and assistance it can provide to allies, and travel together to speak with allies about enhancing their own sanctions evasion investigations. When sanctions evasion is found, the United States should leverage secondary sanctions or enforcement actions unless the activity stops.²²

XI China's small, "teapot" refineries, for example, are not connected to the US financial system, use already sanctioned Chinese financial institutions, and transact outside the US dollar. As a result, sanctioning them would not have much of an impact, limiting the value of trying to target them. Instead, we advocate for identifying and targeting the financial linkages enabling the movement of oil.^[E]

How to improve sanctions enforcement

To develop a comprehensive understanding of how Iran is transacting with China and other countries that are not complying with US sanctions or are transacting outside the reach of US sanctions (e.g., outside of US jurisdiction, US financial institutions, and the US dollar), the United States must prioritize reviewing existing information-sharing agreements with foreign partners for national security and intelligence purposes, as well as financial information that traditionally resides in banking regulatory authorities, financial-intelligence units, and law-enforcement channels.

The United States also needs to review existing regulatory guidance regarding the sharing of information among financial institutions. Financial information, which may include suspicious activity, financial transactions, and other types of financial records, is sensitive and tightly controlled to protect privacy. However, sharing relevant information with the appropriate competent authorities can illuminate illicit financial networks and connect dots to identify sanctions evasion, money laundering, and other financial crimes.

These efforts will require additional resources for the Departments of Treasury, Commerce, and Justice, and other competent authorities responsible for investigating, implementing, and enforcing economic measures.²³ These departments and agencies are spread extremely thin as economic tools such as sanctions and export controls have become the go-to options to advance national security and foreign policy objectives. Competing priorities and limited resources restrict what these departments and agencies are able to achieve and affect, which can reduce the effectiveness of sanctions.

The United States must augment the budgets of organizations charged with sanctions enforcement and increase their staffing to ensure that the Treasury Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence (TFI) has the resources, information, and effective coordination with interagency partners to carry out this task. A fully resourced and empowered under secretary for TFI would help to raise the profile, political clout, and bureaucratic effectiveness of the enforcement enterprise.²⁴

SPOTLIGHTING THE CORROSIVE EFFECT OF TEHRAN'S POLICIES

Delegitimizing Iran's support for its proxy militias should be a central organizing principle of US policy toward the Islamic Republic. While Iran's popularity with Arab publics has increased since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, because of Tehran's perceived role as defender of the Palestinians, the poll numbers point to a real vulnerability that the United States and its allies can exploit. Polling from 2022 showed that almost two-thirds of young Arabs viewed Iran as an adversary, a majority of Arabs of all ages wanted Iran out of regional conflicts, and more than half of Arab states had unfavorable views of Iran.

This deep antagonism suggests that more recent support for Iran is related to the current crisis and would decline significantly over time once fighting in Gaza ends—and if the United States and its partners can establish a credible political and security pathway toward a Palestinian state, along with rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.

In addition, US public diplomacy, diplomatic engagement, and assistance programs, both regionally and bilaterally, should address the destructive impact that Iran's development of proxy militias has had on countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. US officials in Washington and diplomats in the Middle East should begin to routinely use their speeches and public statements to highlight how these proxies' violence in their operation outside of state control and their allegiance to Iran warp domestic politics, exacerbate sectarian differences, worsen corruption, and weaken governments' ability to protect their people, secure their borders, and deliver needed services. The United States should publicly signal to the Iranian people that the Iranian regime will remain under sanctions targeting its support for proxy forces as long as Iran continues to finance and supply weapons to these groups. In doing so, Washington and European capitals should be explicit that they regret that some of their efforts to pressure the regime will probably involve some additional pain for ordinary people.²⁵

REDUCING REGIONAL STATE WEAKNESS

Countering the role played by Iran and its proxies in the region will require a sustained effort by the United States, working closely with regional and international allies, to address the governmental weakness and instability that Iran and its partners exploit to expand their influence. Iran and allied militias' ability to enhance their power and standing in the region have benefited significantly from the collapse of the Iraqi state after the US invasion in 2003; the subsequent rise of jihadist terrorism in Iraq, Syria,

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and the broader region; and the civil wars and disintegration of central authority throughout the Middle East that resulted from the Arab uprisings of 2011. It is important to reverse the Iranian and Axis of Resistance narrative that they are standing up to US “colonialism and imperialism” and Israeli occupation and repression of Palestinians, which they use to defend violence and avoid responsibility for contributing to the economic and security problems in their countries.

The goal of US policy should not be to try repeating the flawed efforts at state building that characterized the US operations in Afghanistan post-2001 and Iraq post-2003. Nor should the United States seek to completely eliminate the influence of Iran and its proxies. Given Iran’s size, population, geostrategic location, regional ambitions, and ideological appeal, it will remain a major player in the Gulf and the broader region. Iranian-allied groups represent important constituencies in their countries.

Moreover, each country or area where Iran’s proxy network operates—Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—represents a different set of challenges. Their dysfunction and instability have been decades in the making, and the problems they face are daunting and will require years to see improvement. US policy, therefore, needs to focus on realistic, achievable goals, and recognize that any success is likely to be gradual and incremental, focusing on reducing the instability and state fragility on which Iran capitalizes to build its influence. Such a deliberate pace is going to be frustrating for some. Viewing the Iran challenge as a long-term challenge, not just an immediate one, promises to be a far more successful approach.²⁶

With these caveats in mind, the United States should press its allies in the region to take the lead on initiatives to promote stability wherever possible, and Washington’s European allies have a role to play in some cases. Turning to the countries in the region where Iranian-backed militias are now operating, the United States and its allies have a number of options for trying to strengthen state capacity and promote stability in ways that, over the long term, could reduce the influence that Iran and its proxies are able to exercise.

Pursuing peace in Yemen

In Yemen, the United States must continue working with the UN and Saudi Arabia to end the civil war through a permanent ceasefire and a return to negotiations on a long-term settlement. The United States must first reestablish deterrence against the Houthis, instead of merely defending against their attacks on international shipping. Houthi attacks on international shipping through the Red Sea have led to a more than 50 percent drop in ship traffic

through the Suez Canal, causing shipping companies to make the longer and costlier trek around the Cape of Good Hope.²⁷ The United States can accomplish this by mounting a large-scale campaign to destroy Houthi capabilities to launch missiles and drones, and targeting the leadership itself until the group halts such attacks. The United States has considerable experience carrying out this type of mission in Yemen from its years of experience going after the leadership of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which significantly degraded the group’s capabilities over time.²⁸

The United States, in collaboration with Saudi Arabia, should reinforce the impact of its military operations by making clear to the Houthis that they will only be included in political discussions about the future of Yemen when the shipping attacks stop. A ceasefire in Gaza would help advance this strategy by removing the rhetorical reason for the Houthis to attack Middle East shipping. Washington and Riyadh should also put additional pressure on the Houthis to focus on a political settlement by mounting a public relations campaign highlighting their failure to address Yemen’s severe economic problems, the challenge of rebuilding the country, and the humanitarian crisis, all of which have generated rising criticism of the group from Yemenis chafing under Houthi control.²⁹ The United States can draw further attention to the Houthis’ failures in governance by working with the UN and the Gulf states to ensure continuing humanitarian aid to the more than 21 million Yemenis who rely on this support for their survival.

Nevertheless, a political resolution to the conflict in Yemen must be based on the recognition that without a significant role for the Houthis in the central government—as unpalatable as this may be—the group will return to the battlefield to try to achieve its goals. The group has essentially prevailed in the civil war in Yemen against the Saudi-led coalition and controls a large part of northern Yemen, including the capital city of Sanaa. However, the prospect of a leadership role for the Houthis in any future unified Yemeni government must be conditioned on the Houthis agreeing to permanently end all threats to freedom of navigation and commerce, as well as their missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In return for meaningful Houthi participation in a political settlement, the United States also should press Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other oil-rich Gulf states to publicly pledge money to revitalize the economy and facilitate the reconstruction of a country devastated by a decade of civil war.³⁰

A resolution to the civil war and Houthi participation in a new government will not end the group’s relationship with Iran. However, it will significantly diminish the Houthis’ need for Iranian weaponry and training, leading to a diminution of Iran’s influence over time.

Diminishing Iranian influence in Iraq

In Iraq, the United States should encourage Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbors—particularly the Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—to develop a strategy for enhancing political, economic, and, ultimately, security ties to Baghdad as a way of weaning its Shia government off its growing dependence on Iran. The United States should prioritize diplomatic efforts that encourage the Gulf states to resume discussions with the Iraqi government on terms for connecting Iraq to the Gulf energy grid. In principle, this would allow the Gulf states to provide Iraq with electricity, reducing or eliminating its need to purchase electricity from Iran. The United States could also work with Iraq to upgrade its own energy infrastructure to facilitate domestic generation of the country's electricity needs.

The United States should also work with regional states to build on regional forums such as the Baghdad Conference on Partnership and Security, which met in Baghdad in 2021 and Amman in 2022, and which brought together previous rivals including the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey, and Iran to discuss Iraqi stability. Regular meetings of this and similar forums would strengthen regional security and economic cooperation between Sunni Arab states and Iraq.

Because Iran is a participant in the Baghdad Conference, such an approach by the United States could help signal to Tehran that Washington and Sunni Arab states don't see developing relations with Iraq as ending Iranian influence there. By announcing that a key goal of such initiatives is to stabilize and strengthen the government in Baghdad, the United States can appeal to an interest, which Iran itself has always publicly espoused, in having a stable Iraqi neighbor that does not pose a threat to the Islamic Republic.³¹

The United States must also encourage and support Iraqi government efforts to bring militias in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) under the control of the regular Iraqi military and the prime minister's office. The United States should also get strongly behind Iraqi government efforts to strengthen organizations such as the Counter Terrorism Service, which are loyal to the Iraqi state rather than Iran, as a replacement for the role the PMFs seek to play in countering terrorist threats. US use of military force against the leaders and arms depots of pro-Iranian militias that target US forces—while necessary to deter threats against US personnel—have not dissuaded these groups from their allegiance to Iran. However, the United States can potentially have an impact through toughening sanctions against the leaders of pro-Iranian militias and the banks used by the groups for involvement in such activities as terrorism, corruption, and embezzlement.³²

The United States also should push for stepped-up efforts by Baghdad to coopt militia leaders with a more nationalist bent into the regular military, which is loyal to the Iraqi state and people. But the United States must also demand that Iraq accompany such steps with measures to improve accountability and transparency in government finances to prevent militia leaders from using their roles in government as a means to enrich themselves and their allies.³³

Finally, even as the US plans to withdraw almost all of its troops from Iraq by the end of 2026, it is imperative that the United States keep at least a small contingent of forces there.³⁴ Keeping at least a few hundred forces in Iraq—the Kurdish government would welcome a continued US presence even if Baghdad did not—would allow for support of the US military presence in Syria and a quick US response when helping Iraqi counterterrorism forces deal with emerging threats. The United States would, of course, need to communicate clearly and unequivocally to its allies in the region that any drawdown in US forces was not another sign of a US decision to shift its focus and resources away from the region in the face of messaging from Iran to the contrary.³⁵

Preventing war and promoting stability in Lebanon

In Lebanon, the need to address the ongoing threat of war between Israel and Hezbollah, which could devastate and destabilize the country, is particularly urgent. Both Israel and Hezbollah have become more aggressive and attacked deeper into each other's territory, violating each other's red lines, since the conflict began following the October 7 Hamas attacks. Hezbollah, which started launching rockets into northern Israel on October 8 in support of Hamas, has said it won't stop until there is a ceasefire in Gaza. Some eighty thousand Israeli residents cannot, and will not, return to their homes in the north unless the danger of the ongoing rocket and missile barrages and the threat of a Hamas-style attack are eliminated. With pressure on the Israeli government building to deal with the threat, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant announced in mid-September 2024 that the return of citizens to the north had now become one of Israel's principal war aims and that the army was moving thousands of troops who had been operating in Gaza to the north.³⁶

Gallant's comments coincided with an intensification in Israel's operations against Hezbollah, first disrupting the group's communications systems, by causing thousands of members' pagers and walkie-talkies to explode, then dramatically increasing airstrikes that killed dozens of senior and mid-level Hezbollah commanders, and destroyed hundreds of launch sites and weapons depots. Israel capped this campaign with an airstrike on September 27 that killed long-time Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, whose death is a significant blow to the organization. Nasrallah, who has

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led Hezbollah for over three decades, is credited with the group's rise to political and military preeminence in Lebanon and its emergence as a vital partner to Iran. He is widely revered among Hezbollah rank-and-file and across the region for his leadership of resistance to Israel, and had close ties to Supreme Leader Khamenei and other Iranian leaders. Iran vowed to avenge the killing of the Hezbollah leader and on October 1 retaliated against Israel with a barrage of over 180 ballistic missiles, most of which were shot down by Israeli defenses, with support from a US-led coalition, resulting in minimal damage to property and life. Israel has said it will respond soon.³⁷

Whether Israel intended its actions as a prelude to war or simply to compel the group to halt its attacks and pull its forces back from the border, the provocative nature of Israel's operations sets the stage for a broader conflict in the near future. But no matter what form revenge might take, Hezbollah, Iran, and Israel all have compelling reasons to avoid a full-scale war in the coming months and perhaps beyond. Hezbollah is wary given the state of the Lebanese economy, with memories of being blamed throughout Lebanon for the destruction associated with the 2006 war. Iran is hesitant, not wanting to lose its most important proxy in Hezbollah or risk regime stability and security in Iran. Israel has to contend with an already exhausted IDF, weapons depletions, and an economy struggling after a year fighting in Gaza.³⁸

While the danger that the conflict could spiral to war increases the urgency for the United States to press for a ceasefire, the constraints all three actors are facing creates an opportunity as well. The United States should continue its efforts to broker an agreement for Hezbollah to withdraw all ground forces and weaponry at least ten kilometers from the border, as required by UN Resolution 1701. The United States should also work to strengthen and clarify the resolution's language regarding the UN peacekeepers' presence in southern Lebanon to expand the size of the force and enhance its policing power.

Reaching an agreement in which Hezbollah forces withdraw seven to twelve kilometers from the border, allowing the northern Israeli population to return home, should be priority one—and not linked to a broader demarcation plan as France has sought.³⁹ However, if that were to happen, the United States should then work with the UN and France on plans to demarcate the Lebanese-Israeli border. Disputes between Lebanon and Israel over Israel's presence or assertion of control in areas that Lebanon considers part of its sovereign territory have been used by Hezbollah to justify continuing its operations against Israel.

In addition to addressing issues aimed at preventing war between Israel and Hezbollah, the United States should get behind French-led international efforts to help Lebanon find a way out of the economic collapse that has devastated the country during the past four years. France and other European countries in recent years have pushed a proposal to provide billions of dollars in financial support to the government in Beirut in return for the Lebanese parliament selecting a president and developing a credible economic reform plan.^{40, 41} Doing so could pressure Hezbollah to compromise on its opposition to selecting a new head of state. The group has blocked a selection since October 2022, effectively paralyzing the government because Hezbollah cannot gain enough support for its favored candidate.

To generate additional leverage over Hezbollah, the United States should work with European countries to strengthen multilateral sanctions against the organization for its ties to Iran, attacks on Israel, and actions that weaken the central government in Beirut. This effort should include pressing the EU to follow the lead of the United States and the United Kingdom in designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, which would cut Hezbollah off from engaging in banking and business activity in European countries where the group has investments. The United States and European countries should make clear to Hezbollah that these measures will only be relaxed in return for a demonstrable and sustained change in the group's harmful policies in Lebanon and the region.

Moreover, through increased information and intelligence sharing, Washington should strengthen cooperation with European, Latin American, African, and Asian countries where there are Lebanese Shia communities to target Hezbollah's criminal activities, such as money laundering, which are also a lucrative source of income for the organization. Such cooperation has been effective in the past in reducing the group's financial flow, isolating it politically, and tainting its image among Shia in Lebanon.

The United States should also continue to provide funding and training to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)—which have developed into a capable pro-Western military—to enhance the LAF's role in helping preserve internal order and countering threats from Sunni terrorist groups. The United States has provided more than two billion dollars in weapons and training to the LAF since 2005.⁴² One benefit from this aid came in 2017, when the LAF engaged more than six hundred ISIS militants, who had established themselves in the mountains between Syria and northeast Lebanon, and defeated them in less than a week.

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Moreover, during several months of anti-government demonstrations in 2019, with Lebanon's financial system melting down and Hezbollah sitting on the sidelines, the LAF struck an effective balance between allowing the protests to take place and preventing the situation from turning into complete anarchy and societal breakdown. While the LAF, which is composed of various Lebanese sectarian groups, is not strong enough to challenge Hezbollah, its weakening due to a lack of funding would only strengthen Hezbollah's dominance and Iran's ability to exert influence in the country.⁴³

Seeking a sustainable peace in Gaza

US success in shaping the future of post-war Gaza will be important for countering Iran's efforts to extend its power and influence in the region.^{xii} Iran's popularity among Arab publics has soared post-October 7 because Tehran is seen as the defender of the Palestinians. For many Arabs, the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza and more than 650 Palestinians in the West Bank from Israeli military operations since October 7, as well as the violence against Palestinians in the West Bank by Israeli settlers, vindicate the narrative of Iran and its proxies that only force—not talks—will bring an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian areas.

For the United States to have a chance at long-term success in this effort, the conclusion of the conflict must ensure security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis will insist on an outcome in which Hamas can no longer pose a significant military threat or be part of a government in Gaza. At the same time, the United States must ensure that Israel cooperates with the international community to meet the humanitarian needs of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, protects Gazans from predatory elements and Hamas remnants, and establishes an effective transitional government, with an eventual role for the Palestinian Authority, to oversee the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.⁴⁴

Arab states and their publics are likely to focus on addressing the suffering and displacement of Palestinian civilians and the need to give them hope for a better future as minimally necessary conditions for participating in the reconstruction of Gaza. But Arab states, responding to the anguish of their publics over the massive Palestinian death toll in Gaza, also insist that there must be a clear path to Palestinian statehood, as well.

PUSHING SAUDI-ISRAELI NORMALIZATION: A REALIGNMENT THAT COULD HELP CHECK IRAN

US success in forging a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement underwritten by the United States can serve as a powerful counterweight to Iranian ambitions for regional dominance and influence. Progress toward a deal that includes a path to Palestinian statehood—a Saudi condition for normalization—would undercut regional support for Iran and its proxies' anti-Israeli and anti-US narrative and their use of force to achieve their ends.

Linking the issue of a two-state solution with Saudi-Israeli normalization gives the United States leverage to push Israeli and Saudi leaders to be more forward leaning on shaping the conditions that could lead to a Palestinian state. In the aftermath of the horrific Hamas attack on October 7, the Israeli leadership and people are united in opposing the idea of a Palestinian state. However, many Israeli political and security officials strongly support a normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia. They view such a deal as key to securing Israel's integration into the region and countering the threat from Iran. This provides the United States an opening to engage with Jerusalem on how to create a credible political horizon for the Palestinians that does not threaten Israel's security.

The United States can also exploit Saudi desire for a deal, which Riyadh sees as helping to stabilize the region by creating a bulwark against Iran and fostering economic integration. Iran's direct attack on Israel from Iranian territory in April 2024, with missiles and drones, has probably heightened Riyadh's concern about its own security needs and its interest in bringing a normalization with Israel to fruition. Washington should press the Saudis to bolster their political and economic support for the Palestinians and to prod the Palestinian Authority to undertake reforms that Israel and the United States are demanding as preconditions for any progress toward a Palestinian state.⁴⁵

An agreement would also open the door to overt and robust Israeli security cooperation with Arab states and strengthen the potential for the regional IAMD and counter-drone network discussed above, which the United States has long sought to bring into existence. The combination of a strengthened regional air- and missile-defense network and a US defense pact with Saudi Arabia—which is also a Saudi requirement for normalization with Israel—would provide a strong deterrent against Iranian threats, and would

XII While the outcome of the conflict in Gaza will undoubtedly have an impact on Iran's regional standing, clout, and ability to leverage Hamas or its remnants as a proxy in the future, the success or failure of US, Qatari, and Egyptian efforts to secure a ceasefire, as well as a hostage and prisoner exchange, should not fundamentally alter long-term US strategy toward Iran and therefore is not assessed as part of this report.

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demonstrate to Iran and to US allies that the United States is committed to allies' security and the stability of the region.^{XIII} The prospect of joint training exercises between the Israeli Defense Forces and Arab militaries would send a potent message to Iran about Arab states' determination to defend their vital interests.⁴⁶

To head off efforts by Iran and its proxies to sabotage a Saudi-Israeli deal, the United States should communicate to Iran that normalization and expanded security cooperation are not intended as threats to the Islamic Republic, but that efforts by Tehran or proxies to conduct attacks aimed at undermining the accord would be met by a direct US response. Maintaining ambiguity as to which behaviors would draw a response, rather than making clear red lines, is more likely to have success in ensuring Iran does not simply undertake malign efforts that are severe but do not technically cross an explicit red line. Preserving regime stability is an overriding concern for Tehran, making it reluctant to "undertake actions that could provoke a broader war and jeopardize the Iranian homeland."⁴⁷

COMPETING AGAINST CHINA⁴⁸

China is unlikely to wield any influence it might have over Iran, or any other country, at the US government's request unless it perceives a direct threat to its interests—and even then, it would likely be hard pressed to do anything it judges would benefit Washington. This was evidenced when Beijing requested Iran's help in reining in Houthi attacks against ships in the Red Sea earlier this year, making it "clear it would be very disappointed with Tehran if any vessels linked to China were hit, or the country's interests were affected in any way."⁴⁹ The Houthis have stated that they won't target Chinese or Russian ships "as long as vessels are not connected with Israel."⁵⁰ In another example, Beijing has pushed Afghanistan's Taliban regime to prevent attacks on Chinese personnel and interests in Pakistan, offering Kabul investments in return.⁵¹

Rather than fearing instability overseas—the domestic front is another matter—Beijing is quite confident in its ability to navigate global crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as it continues to maintain the façade of a neutral party while facilitating Moscow's assault without any substantial repercussions. China also benefits from US attention and resources being stretched across multiple crises. Beijing has even taken advantage of recent conflicts to push the narrative

that Washington is responsible for creating a "peace deficit" globally and to convince the world that its problems can be solved by China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiatives (GSI).⁵²

The GDI and GSI reveal how Beijing sees the world as essentially divided into two camps, with one side led by Washington and the other implicitly by China. As such, Beijing is focused on winning over, and becoming the de facto leader of, the Global South while trying to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies and partners where it can. In May, Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to unite and strengthen the Global South through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS (the economic grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa that, as of January, officially includes Iran and others) as part of their efforts to "steer global governance in the right direction."⁵³

Washington should focus its efforts on competing against, instead of trying to find common ground with, Beijing on addressing the threats presented by Tehran. This includes not only working with allies but also developing ties and partnerships with other countries, including in the Global South, on addressing threats emanating from Iran. For example, Riyadh and Washington share similar concerns about Iran.⁵⁴ The US government likely would be better served approaching Riyadh rather than Beijing to try reining in Iran, based on Saudi and Iranian mutual interest in preserving the détente they reached in March 2023. Similarly, Saudi Arabia may be better positioned to ask China to intervene with Iran. Not only are Sino-Saudi economic ties more developed than those between China and Iran—Riyadh was China's main supplier of oil until Russia replaced it in April 2023—but Beijing also sees Riyadh as a key regional player and, therefore, a focal point of China's Middle East policy.⁵⁵

As alluded to earlier, China has played a key role in facilitating and prolonging major crises by blunting US and international action against countries including Iran, Russia, and Venezuela. China has watered down multiple UN resolutions against Iran, and has provided Iran, Russia, and Venezuela a lifeline by importing their oil despite sanctions.⁵⁶ The Biden administration's recent threats to impose secondary sanctions against China for its enabling role with Iran and Russia suggests an understanding that Beijing is the common denominator in the intractability of major global crises. However, US follow-through will be key if the threat of sanctions alone does not compel a change on Beijing's end.

XIII In addition to requiring an "irrevocable" Israeli commitment to a two-state solution and a US defense pact, Saudi conditions for normalization include US help with a domestic nuclear program with the right to enrich and the ability to purchase advanced weapons from the United States.

COMPETING AGAINST RUSSIA⁵⁷

Russia is also unlikely to wield any influence it might have over Iran at the US government's request. While Moscow acted to pressure Iran to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) strictures on its nuclear program, this ended when Russian forces first invaded Ukraine in February 2022.⁵⁸ Given Russia's dependence on Tehran for armed drones and other assistance in its war against Ukraine, Washington cannot expect Moscow to join renewed efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Indeed, the Putin regime might even welcome the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran for distracting US and other Western countries from its war against Ukraine.

The United States also cannot count on Russia to influence Iran to rein in its regional proxies. While Russia has been inconvenienced by Houthi attacks on Russian-linked shipping, as well as by the costly and time-consuming necessity of rerouting vessels around the Cape of Good Hope to avoid them, it has not been willing to join the West in attempting to halt these Houthi attacks.⁵⁹ Moscow may actually see Houthi attacks on Western shipping in the Red Sea as useful for forcing the United States to expend considerable energy and resources away from the European theater. On the other hand, Russian interests could be hurt if an Israeli-Hezbollah

conflict led to Hezbollah withdrawing forces propping up the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria to fight the Israelis in Lebanon.⁶⁰

As with China, Washington should focus its efforts on competing against, instead of trying to find common cause with, Russia on addressing threats presented by Tehran. Washington should seek to warn its Middle East allies and partners—some of whom have convinced themselves that their cooperation with Russia gives it an interest in restraining Iran—that Moscow's support for Tehran only enables hostile Iranian action against them. Washington should encourage Arab partners to test their leverage with Moscow by asking Russia not to supply Iran with Su-35 fighter aircraft or S-400 air-defense missiles. Moscow's likely negative response would help Washington convince its partners in the region that their hopes that cooperation with Russia would result in Moscow restraining Tehran are illusory.

In response to those Arab state partners who worry that the attention Washington is devoting to the Russian war in Ukraine is distracting the United States from the threat posed by Iran, Washington should point out that a Russian victory in Ukraine is likely to result in even greater US focus on Europe and even less Russian restraint on malign Iranian actions.

PREVENTING IRAN FROM GETTING A NUCLEAR WEAPON

While Iran’s behavior in the region has preoccupied US policymakers since the Hamas attack against Israel on October 7, the advances Tehran is making in its nuclear program urgently require a reinvigorated US strategy to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear-weapons state.^{xiv} A year after the Trump administration withdrew from the deal in 2018, Iran ended its compliance with JCPOA restrictions. It has since advanced close to the nuclear-weapon threshold through its stockpiling of uranium enriched to 60 percent, development and installation of more advanced centrifuges, experimentation with uranium metals that could be used in making a bomb, and restricting IAEA access to nuclear sites.^{xv}

The difficulty of tracking Iranian activities potentially aimed at developing a nuclear weapon adds to the urgency of this challenge. According to Axios, US and Israeli officials in March 2024 detected Iranian computer modeling and metallurgical research that some officials believe could be intended for developing a bomb.⁶¹ In response, the United States and Israel have agreed to step up joint monitoring of Iran’s nuclear program for signs that Tehran has decided to acquire a weapon.⁶² Even if Iran does not pursue the bomb, its current nuclear activities risk spurring nuclear proliferation by prompting other states to begin developing their own nuclear programs.

The prerequisite for an effective strategy is to recognize that efforts to return to the JCPOA are a dead end—although the potential for pursuing a diplomatic path forward remains—and that both Republicans and Democrats need to stop relitigating who was right and who was wrong about the nuclear deal and its aftermath. The focus that many in Washington have on the history of this issue has impeded efforts to develop a united front on new policies that address the challenge of Iran’s nuclear program in the strategic environment that exists today.

Given Iran’s alarming nuclear advances and its spurning of offers to negotiate a new deal, the United States must urgently pursue a multilateral campaign of economic, political, and military pressure to demonstrate its seriousness about preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear-weapons threshold. Pressure needs to be the immediate focus of US policy because deterrence against Iranian nuclear advances has eroded as Iran has come to believe it can defy international warnings regarding its nuclear activities with impunity.

But pressure for the sake of pressure, or merely as a measure of retaliation, lacks a clear strategic objective. And applying intense pressure with a singular, near-term goal of toppling the IRI regime is unlikely to succeed. It may be a goal preferred by many, but it also inherently misunderstands the internal dynamics of the country and the broader geostrategic alignment of the global community at the end of 2024. Iran’s foreign ties are now so bolstered and buoyed, particularly by China, that isolating Tehran is far more difficult than ever before—though the United States must try to do so.

The realistic goal of US economic, diplomatic, and military policy toward Iran should instead be to induce Tehran to engage in new, serious negotiations aimed at placing restrictions on its program that would leave Iran at least several months from a breakout capability to a nuclear weapon, and that would concurrently address Iran’s regional malign influence and conventional weapons capabilities.^{xvi, xvii} While it is harder to address both issues simultaneously, approaching them independently risks enabling Iran to advance its conventional weapons efforts and destabilizing activities in the region, with insufficient pressure points remaining to convince Tehran to curb its malign behavior—as demonstrated in the post-negotiation period of the JCPOA.




XIV For a discussion of the implications of Iran getting the bomb, see: Eric Brewer, “A Nuclear Iran Is Not Inevitable” and Ray Takeyh, “The Bomb Will Backfire on Tehran”,^{[f] [g]}

XV For details on the technical advances Iran has made in its nuclear program since it began exceeding the JCPOA’s limits in 2019, and alternative ideas about how to deter Iran from further nuclear advances and reduce proliferation risk, see Annex VII.

XVI According to Kelsey Davenport, “Achieving a twelve-month breakout in a future deal to match the JCPOA’s results will be difficult, if not impossible. Even with JCPOA-like restrictions on enrichment level and centrifuge deployment, the knowledge Iran has gained from the operation of advanced machines and near-weapons-grade enrichment would allow it to ratchet up its program much more quickly. As a result, the United States will likely need to contend with a future in which Iran will be closer to a nuclear weapon than it was when the JCPOA was implemented.”

XVII A small minority of working group members assess that the United States cannot reach a comprehensive and sustainable diplomatic agreement with Iran on its nuclear program and malign behavior in the region as long as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and likeminded successors remain in power in Iran. That same small minority agrees that the United States—working with regional and international allies—can leverage the military, economic, political, and other policy options outlined in this report to prompt Tehran to moderate its most problematic behavior but believes the United States must focus on a deterrence-only strategy because diplomacy is unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes.

Key Iranian nuclear program facilities

-  Nuclear site/Research center
-  Uranium mine
-  Possible undeclared site



Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon

It is critical that Iran not be encouraged to believe that a new nuclear deal would give it a pass on its threatening regional posture, nor that easing its support for its proxies or its own direct acts of aggression—for example, against shipping lanes or Israel—would lead to a decline in pressure over its nuclear program. The United States and its allies must make clear to Iran that sanctions on its malign regional behavior would not be eased solely because it curbs its nuclear advances, and vice versa.

But a strategy that relies on pressure alone will not bring Iran back to the negotiating table and, instead, could convince Iran that pursuing a nuclear weapon is its best way to deter threats to its survival. Tehran refused to enter into negotiations in the face of the Trump administration's maximum-pressure sanctions campaign and made steady advances toward a breakout capability in its nuclear program. During the Biden administration, the effort to restart the JCPOA or reach an understanding showed promise at points, but ultimately fell apart for a variety of reasons. Among the most prominent was that Iran distrusted that any incentives it received in exchange for halting work on its nuclear program would remain intact under a future US administration that disagreed with the policy. Iranian leaders will need to have confidence that halting the program and curbing Iran's regional malign influence will result in incentives that are not dependent on the whim of the US electorate. For Iran to glean the incentives it seeks (see the box below for an extended discussion of potential incentives), US policy toward Iran needs to be bipartisan and any negotiations must address both Iran's nuclear program and regional malign influence.

REIMPOSING SNAPBACK SANCTIONS

As part of the effort to bring pressure on Iran, the United States should press European parties to the JCPOA to invoke the snapback sanctions mechanism provided for by UN Resolution 2231, which allows countries to reimpose sanctions on Iran that were suspended following implementation of the accord. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the EU have been reluctant to impose the snapback sanctions for fear of heightening Iran's sense of threat, causing Iran to retaliate, withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), or advance its nuclear program more rapidly.⁶³ A key consideration for invoking the snapback mechanism is that it expires in October 2025, only nine months after a new US administration comes into office, creating the risk that the deadline would be missed if the United States and European countries cannot agree on the red lines for taking action.⁶⁴

A decision to reimpose snapback sanctions immediately is likely to alter the decision-making calculus of Iranian policymakers, who assume that the United States and European countries will come back to the negotiating table no matter what steps Iran takes. Invoking snapback sanctions would restore UN resolutions imposing restrictions on Iran's sale and purchase of conventional arms and its missile program.

The UN conventional arms embargo lapsed in October 2020, and restrictions on Iran's missile program expired in October 2023 under the provisions of UN Resolution 2231. The sunset of the UN conventional arms embargo on Iran enabled Moscow to obtain drones from Tehran to use in Ukraine and allowed Russia to consider selling advanced fighter jets to Iran. Since the lifting of UN restrictions on Iran's missile program, Moscow has begun helping Iran improve its space-launch and missile programs, which employ technology that can aid development of an intercontinental ballistic missile that can be used to deliver nuclear weapons, according to Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns.⁶⁵

Whether or not European countries agree to invoke snapback sanctions, the United States should seek agreement with the original European signatories to the JCPOA—the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the EU—on a common approach to deter Iran from crossing agreed-upon red lines that would facilitate development of a nuclear weapon, such as enriching uranium to 90 percent purity, halting or further restricting the IAEA's ability to inspect the program, withdrawing from the NPT, or resuming weaponization efforts. Indeed, in the face of ongoing European reluctance to consider snapback sanctions, the United States could offer to forgo pushing their implementation in return for agreement to a united stance on actions to take should Iran violate the above conditions. European anger and alarm over Iran's generally more aggressive behavior, including its willingness to continue advancing its nuclear program and to support Russia's threat to European security, provide the United States an opportunity to forge a unified front against Iran becoming a nuclear-weapons state.⁶⁶

In 2023, the United States, the EU, and the United Kingdom sanctioned Iran over its provision of drones to Russia, and in September 2024, the United States, Britain, France, and Germany imposed new sanctions on Iran for delivering ballistic missiles to Russia for its war against Ukraine. The sanctions included restricting Iran Air's ability to fly to the United Kingdom and Europe and freezing the assets of individuals and entities involved in transporting the missiles to Russia.⁶⁷ The EU is likely to follow suit, having previously indicated that it would consider adding new sanctions to those already in place if Tehran sent Russia ballistic missiles.^{XVIII}

XVIII The EU maintained its sanctions on Iranian missiles, despite the end of the UN curbs on the program in October 2023, saying that Iran had failed to abide by the UN restrictions.^[h]

Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon

The United States should also pursue a major diplomatic campaign, including statements from the Security Council Permanent Five (P5) and the G7 outlining the consequences for the NPT regime and its essential contribution to international security of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Iran's growing relationship with Russia and China, and the significant frictions that exist between them and the United States, will make this challenging. But these great-power rivals have an interest in preventing the instability and proliferation in the Middle East that results from Iran being a threshold nuclear-weapons state.⁶⁸

The United States also should forge a coalition of countries, going beyond European and G7 allies, to agree on new multilateral sanctions against Iran and aggressive enforcement of existing ones to broaden the pressure on Iran. The policy should be to target and enforce sanctions against Iran's leadership class and those specifically involved in advancing Iran's nuclear program, malign regional activities, and repression of its people, rather than the Iranian people as a whole. US allies such as South Korea and Australia might be willing to join such an effort out of concern about the destabilizing impact a nuclear Iran could have on the Middle East and the risk such a development would pose for nuclear proliferation knock-on effects related to North Korea and stability in Asia.

The United States should encourage countries to regularly raise with Iran the international community's expectation for effective cooperation with the IAEA. This should be done through bilateral dialogue in Tehran as well as in Vienna, and in any bilateral dialogue with Iranian ministers.

This will need to be a persistent campaign and will have greater impact if it is undertaken by a wide range of countries, including some from the Global South. This, in turn, will require dialogue with such countries on why full Iranian cooperation with the IAEA serves their interests and is not just another manifestation of a long-running feud between the United States and Iran.

The United States should consider working, in a low-profile way, with China to curb Iran's nuclear advances by appealing to Chinese leaders' "strong self-interest in preventing a crisis in the region."⁶⁹ As noted previously, China is likely to look for ways to challenge the United States rather than cooperate, unless Beijing perceives a direct threat to its vital interest. Arguably, Chinese concerns about the destabilizing effects of Iran becoming a nuclear-weapons state could lead Beijing to see an interest in collaborating with the United States to prevent that specific outcome.

For this reason, some observers believe that gaining Chinese cooperation to pressure Iran may be possible, noting that "China's economy is dependent on energy from the Persian Gulf" and that Beijing does not want to see a war in the Middle East—which could occur if Iran tries to acquire a nuclear weapon—that would disrupt the flow of oil from the region and cause a significant spike in energy prices.⁷⁰ To increase pressure on Iran regarding its nuclear program, the United States could "work quietly with China to curtail [Beijing's] imports" of Iranian oil, aided by a warning to Beijing that "Washington is prepared to enforce US sanctions" if China continues to ignore US requests for cooperation on this issue.⁷¹

Examining potential incentives

The effort to pressure Iran over its nuclear program will not be successful unless it is accompanied by an offer to gradually increase economic incentives in return for Iran freezing its nuclear activities, engaging in serious negotiations, and, finally, agreeing to a deal placing restrictions on its program. Incentives could include not just sanctions relief but, in conjunction with a lifting of specific sanctions, pledges of direct investment by and increased trade with regional states. This has been a major objective of Iran's efforts to improve ties to the Gulf states in the past several years, and already exists, in part, including its longtime trade ties with the UAE.^{XIX} To facilitate Iran-Gulf state economic ties, the United States and the EU could exempt an Iranian-Gulf free-trade agreement from sanctions. Deepening economic ties between Iran, its Gulf neighbors, and other Arab states would give them leverage to press Iran to rein in its malign regional influence as well.

The United States and Western powers could also offer Iran assistance on cooperative civil nuclear efforts that do not pose a proliferation risk, but that address objectives Iran has laid out for its civil nuclear activities. This could include joint projects on medical isotope production, nuclear applications for agricultural purposes, and assistance in developing and building proliferation-resistant reactors for power production. The United States and EU could also commit to supporting joint Gulf-Iran activities to strengthen nuclear security and safety, such as training programs and joint exercises targeting shared areas of concern, such as response and mitigation in the event of a nuclear accident or attack on a facility and protecting against insider threats.

Strengthening nuclear governance is another area in which the United States and Europe could support states in the region. That could include workshops on the implementation of treaties such as the Amended Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials and other IAEA nuclear security guidelines. Enhancing civil nuclear cooperation between regional states would also build ties between scientific and expert communities. Engagement between these communities could enhance

transparency and lay the groundwork for further cooperative nuclear activities that reduce proliferation risk, such as bilateral or multilateral agreements on nuclear limitations and enhanced monitoring. Any such US initiative would need to be done in consultation with Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and must involve US commitments to work with these Gulf allies on developing or strengthening their civil nuclear programs (as already discussed, US help in developing a civil nuclear program is one of Riyadh's conditions for normalizing relations with Israel).

Political incentives for Iran, in return for agreeing to restrictions on its nuclear program, could include a commitment by Arab states—particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt—to bring Iran more formally into discussions on regional security arrangements and economic cooperation aimed at bolstering the stability of weak states. However, Iran's full political integration would depend not only on progress in the nuclear arena, but on a conviction among Arab states that Iran was curbing its own aggressive actions—such as the seizing of ships in the Gulf—and its support for militant allies in the region.⁷²

DEVELOPING A CREDIBLE MILITARY OPTION

Given the advances in Iran's nuclear capabilities, the insulation from economic and political pressure Iran believes it receives from its relationship with Russia and China, and Tehran's likely perception that the United States and Israel are reluctant to attack its nuclear sites, the United States must also enhance the credibility of a military option against Iran's nuclear program.^{XX}

First, the United States needs to maintain a declaratory policy, explicitly enunciated by the president, that it will not tolerate Iran getting a nuclear weapon and will use military force to prevent this development if all other measures fail. Biden went on record in July 2022, in the Jerusalem US-Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration, to affirm the United States' "commitment never to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon" and readiness "to use all elements of its national power to ensure that outcome."⁷³

XIX One idea for getting Iran to agree to limits on its nuclear program that has garnered bipartisan support in the US Senate is the development of a regional nuclear fuel bank. Under this proposal, participating countries in the Middle East can be guaranteed supply for their commercial nuclear reactors from an IAEA fuel bank. But, in turn, they would be prohibited from domestic uranium enrichment and reprocessing. Senators raised the prospect of offering Iran greater sanctions relief in return.^[1]

XX For a discussion of what a war with Iran would look like, please see: Ilan Goldenberg, "What a War with Iran Would Look Like."^[1]

Preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon

In connection with this policy, the president and senior administration officials should refrain from stressing that the United States does not seek conflict with Iran, which risks reinforcing a perception held by Iranian leaders that the United States might have the capability but lacks the will to engage in a direct military confrontation with the Islamic Republic. To back up such a declaratory policy, the United States should announce that it will conduct yearly joint exercises with Israel, such as Juniper Oak in January 2022, that simulate striking hardened targets such as Iran's nuclear facilities. Finally, the president should seek additional funding in the next budget cycle to speed research and development of next-generation military hardware capable of destroying Iran's nuclear program.⁷⁴

Tehran monitors such military signaling carefully, and shows of force have an impact on its policies. The US destruction of most of Iran's navy in the Persian Gulf in April 1988 during the Iran-Iraq war, and the accidental shootdown of an Iranian commercial aircraft that July, contributed to Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini's willingness to end the conflict. Iran decided to suspend its nuclear program in the fall of 2003, just months after the United States invaded Iraq and quickly overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime, apparently afraid that the Islamic Republic would find itself next in US sights.

The US killing in January 2020 of Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who had been "coordinating attacks on our embassy and coalition targets across the region," helped to reset deterrence against Iran after months of attacks on US forces by Iranian-backed militias.⁷⁵ Iran only retaliated with a single missile barrage against US forces in Iraq, signaled in advance to minimize casualties, and militia attacks stopped for several months as Iran sought to hide its hand and avoid a direct confrontation with the United States.⁷⁶ The most recent example of US force reestablishing a measure of deterrence was the previously mentioned decision to strike some eighty-five militia and IRGC targets in Syria and Iraq in January, which prompted Iran to call for a standdown of proxy attacks on US forces in that theater.

BROADENING MULTILATERAL PRESSURE ON IRAN

The United States should organize a broad-based international effort to pressure Iran and Iranian officials in international forums over the regime's abuse of the human rights of its citizens, malign behavior in the Middle East, and flouting of international law as part of carrot-and-stick diplomacy. Iranian leaders are highly sensitive to slights on the international stage, and the United States and its allies already have undertaken a number of steps in this direction by, for instance, removing Tehran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women in December 2022 and getting the Munich Security Conference not to invite Iran in 2023 and 2024.

LEVERAGING THE UNITED NATIONS

A dedicated State Department effort, to be co-led by the Offices of the Special Envoy for Iran and Multilateral and Nuclear Affairs, should put together a small interregional tiger team to develop and execute efforts to work with international allies to oust Iran from UN institutions whose *raison d'être* Iran violates on a consistent basis. Other avenues of pressure against Iran should include bringing cases against Iran seizing dual citizens as hostages to the UN to internationalize the focus on Iran's outlaw behavior and putting a spotlight on Iran's supply of weapons to proxies by bringing evidence of weapons interdictions to the UNSC under the relevant Security Council resolution regime.⁷⁷

Engaging various UN bodies and accountability mechanisms is crucial to challenging the legitimacy of the Iranian government and promoting a "rights up front" approach to human rights in Iran. Utilizing platforms such as the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly sessions to highlight Iran's human rights record can catalyze broader international condemnation and pressure for reform. These institutions provide avenues for spotlighting abuses, advocating for the rights of Iranian citizens, and pushing for systemic changes that align with international human rights standards.⁷⁸

US collaboration with other UN member states to deepen engagement on Iranian human rights issues is essential. Organizing and facilitating meetings to discuss the impact of Iran's human rights violations on regional security can foster a unified and strategic response. By working closely with international partners, the United States can amplify collective voices, ensure coordinated actions, and garner broader support for initiatives aimed at holding Iran accountable for its actions.⁷⁹

The United States should also engage various UN special rapporteurs and mandate holders who are experts in human rights to seek accountability regarding Iran's human rights practices. These experts can provide comprehensive reports, issue urgent appeals, and facilitate constructive dialogues aimed at shedding light on Iranian violations and pushing for redress. Their involvement can significantly enhance transparency and accountability within Iran, setting a foundation for improving the human rights situation there.⁸⁰ The United States should also continue to support the efforts of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran and push for its mandate to be extended on a yearly basis.⁸¹

TARGETING REGIME OFFICIALS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The same tiger team should also lead a more concerted, multilateral effort to target regime officials and their families who engage in or benefit from corruption, which is a major source of popular anger at the regime, and ensure such corruption is widely known by the Iranian people. The United States and its allies should execute three lines of effort to achieve this goal.

First, they should enforce sanctions against these officials and their families by freezing their overseas bank accounts and blocking their travel to Western cities to spend their ill-gotten wealth. This would help to bring the consequences of Iran's rogue behavior home to Iranian elites in a personal way. Second, they should cancel student visas of children of sanctioned Iranian officials going to school in the United States, Europe, East Asia, and other allied countries. The children might not be responsible for corruption, or even hold the same views as their parents, but they also should not benefit if their parents' illegally obtained wealth or positions in the regime enables them to travel abroad and attend universities. Finally, publicizing such actions could resonate with the Iranian people and highlight the disparity between leadership behavior and the daily living situation of so many Iranians struggling in the face of domestic economic hardship.

Even while seeking to organize broad-based pressure on Iran, which might include downgrading diplomatic representation in response to specific malign policies of the regime, the United States should oppose calls to isolate Iran diplomatically by closing diplomatic missions in Tehran. Such an approach

Broadening multilateral pressure on Iran

would be counterproductive. Any long-term strategy of trying to contain and moderate Iran's malign behavior will require a dual-track approach of simultaneously exerting pressure on and talking with Iran. This will require keeping communications open to help with managing times of crisis

and seizing opportunities. It will also require the ability to conduct diplomacy at varying levels and through a number of mechanisms to ensure that the Islamic Republic, which often lives within its own self-contained information system, clearly understands US policy lines, and vice versa.⁸²

COUNTERING IRAN'S PERSONALIZED WARFARE: HOSTAGE TAKING AND ASSASSINATIONS

Iran continues to engage in personalized warfare, including seizing dual and foreign nationals as hostages and targeting dissidents and US officials in the United States, Europe, Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere for assassination.⁸³ Iranian terror squads have killed more than 446 dissidents abroad since the Islamic Republic was established in 1979, according to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran.⁸⁴ US and European efforts to counter such Iranian tactics have generally been half-hearted and inconsistent. To deter Iran from resorting to these policies, the United States needs to adopt a broader and more aggressive approach that makes clear to Tehran the high cost of continuing them.

LEARNING FROM A HISTORY OF HOSTAGE TAKING

Despite European and US anger over Iranian detention of foreign and dual nationals, the Islamic Republic is likely to continue engaging in arrests of dual-citizen visitors on trumped-up charges—essentially a form of hostage taking—for economic gain, to secure the release of Iranians arrested abroad, and probably also as protection against attack, unless it begins to pay a significant price for this tactic.

Iran has regularly resorted to this practice over the past several decades, beginning with the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. Recent examples of Iran leveraging people it had seized for economic gain include the 2016 release of five Americans detained in Iran, in some cases for years, in return for about two billion dollars in frozen Iranian funds from the Obama administration. Similarly, in 2023 Iran agreed to a deal with the Biden administration in which another five Iranian-Americans were released in return for six billion dollars in frozen Iranian funds and the freeing of Iranians imprisoned in the United States.

The United Kingdom similarly gained the release of two British-Iranian citizens in February 2022, in exchange for the resolution of \$395 million of Iranian debt. However, Tehran has since seized other European dual nationals visiting Iran, currently holds at least eight European citizens in prison,

and has developed plots to kidnap “UK-based individuals multiple times” since the 2022 deal.⁸⁵

Tehran continues to extort countries with its seizure of dual nationals. In mid-June 2024, Sweden and Iran carried out a prisoner exchange, with Sweden freeing a former Iranian official convicted of war crimes for his role in the mass execution of political prisoners in Iran in the 1980s, while Iran released two Swedes—one a European Union employee, the other a Swedish-Iranian visiting relatives in Iran—being held there. The exchange of a convicted war criminal is unprecedented.

DEVELOPING LONG-TERM STRATEGIES AND MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENT

Most states, including the United States, have thus far pursued ad hoc, bilateral strategies for dealing with Iran's imprisoning of their dual nationals and treating them as hostages. The United States currently advertises a “D” travel risk indicator for Iran, which warns of the chance of wrongful detention.^{XXI, 86} Washington has also signed onto a Canadian-initiated Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations. However, despite these warning measures, many Iranian dual nationals continue to travel to Iran for a variety of reasons, and the United States should consider steps to reduce opportunities for Iran to replenish or add to its stock of US hostages.

Currently, travel to North Korea on US passports is banned without validation from the secretary of state, but no such restrictions are placed on travel to Iran. Making US passports invalid for travel to Iran would not stop Iranian-Americans from going, because those with dual nationality need to enter the Islamic Republic on their Iranian passports. But individuals who seek validation should be warned that the US government cannot pay Iran ransom for citizens taken hostage in the country and should sign an acknowledgment of that policy. This would send a stronger message to Iranian-Americans about the dangers of visiting their home country and reduce the number traveling.⁸⁷

XXI On July 22, 2024, the deputy special envoy for Iran warned on X that, given the risk of being taken hostage, US citizens should not travel to Iran for any reason. Office of the Special Envoy for Iran (@USEnvoyIran), “Ten years ago today, the Iranian regime arrested Jason and Yeganeh Rezaian, beginning a horrific ordeal that lasted nearly two years. Jason and Yeganeh have been released, but the Iranian regime's practice of unjustly detaining other countries' citizens continues, and the risk to Americans traveling to Iran is real. U.S. citizens should not travel to Iran for any reason.^[K]”

Countering Iran's personalized warfare: Hostage taking and assassinations

The State Department's Office of the Special Envoy for Iran should also set up an outreach program on the risks of travel to Iran, given that some in the diaspora might mistakenly believe that travelers not engaged in politics won't be a target, or that those taken hostage must have done something "wrong." In addition, the State Department should consider having the Bureau of Consular Affairs implement a program that permits US citizens to pay for airline tickets of relatives living in Iran for the express purpose of meeting those relatives in a third country—such as Turkey, Oman, or Qatar—that permits visa-free or visa-on-arrival travel for Iranian nationals.^{XXII} Such a program would reduce, but not eliminate, the potential for Americans to be kidnapped by Iran.⁸⁸

European allies would likely be open to taking similar steps regarding their own Iranian dual nationals given, as noted previously, the eight European nationals Iran currently has imprisoned.⁸⁹

However, to truly signal to Iran the high cost of continuing its hostage-taking policy, the United States should work with its allies in Europe and elsewhere to develop a common set of penalties, both diplomatic and economic, that would be automatically triggered when Iran takes a new hostage. On the diplomatic side, a discrete number of Iranian diplomats, from the more than ninety Iranian embassies worldwide, could be declared *personae non gratae*, and a corresponding number of diplomats serving in Iran could be recalled in protest temporarily.^{XXIII, 90}

Second, participating governments should restrict or ban travel to their countries by current and former Iranian regime officials connected to Iran's hostage-taking enterprise—and their family members. Third, a package of sanctions prepared in advance should be imposed, including designations of officials involved in hostage taking and a ban on Iranian airliners using participating countries' airports, given that Iran has used its civilian airliners to transport Iranian drones to Russia for use against Ukraine.⁹¹

Finally, the United States should coordinate with the G7 and a broader array of international partners on a unified public condemnation of Iran's hostage taking. The United States and likeminded states should seek to inform the Iranian people at every opportunity about Tehran's nefarious policy

of holding innocent people hostage, because many Iranians consider this practice shameful and against every tenet of Iranian culture.⁹²

COUNTERING IRAN'S OVERSEAS ASSASSINATION EFFORTS

Washington should adopt a new, more aggressive policy against Iranian assassinations and terrorist attacks on US soil. Such attacks have a long history. On July 22, 1980, sixteen months after the Islamic Republic of Iran was founded, an Iranian militant killed Ali Akbar Tabatabaei, who had worked at the pre-revolutionary Iranian embassy, at the door of his home in Bethesda, Maryland.⁹³

Since then, Iran or its operatives have engaged in numerous assassination and kidnapping plots on US soil, including against the Saudi ambassador to the United States and former senior US officials—such as former President Trump, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and former National Security Advisor John Bolton—who Iran blames for US attacks against Iran, and human rights activists whose actions have been wholly peaceful. Iranian proxies like Lebanese Hezbollah have also carried out plots or attempted plots in the United States, while Iran has carried out hundreds of targeted killings in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—often, but not always, against Iranian dissidents living in exile.⁹⁴

The primary US responses to Iranian assassination plots inside the United States have been either law enforcement and homeland security officials disrupting the plots and arresting any perpetrators in the United States or seeking their extradition; or economic sanctions against Iranian officials and designation of Iranian officials and groups like the IRGC and the Quds Force as foreign terrorist organizations. Neither of these responses has meaningfully deterred Iran from continuing its assassination efforts. Repeated failures in recent decades have not stopped Iran from trying to assassinate or kidnap Americans, including as recently as 2022.⁹⁵

Moreover, these responses stand in stark contrast to the US response when the Saddam Hussein-era Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS) tried to assassinate ex-President

XXII Qatar could play a meaningful role in such an effort, just as it has been a critical partner for the US military in hosting Al Udeid Air Base and diplomatically working with the United States and Egypt to try to bring the war between Israel and Hamas to an end. However, Doha's closer diplomatic and economic ties to Iran compared to some of its GCC counterparts, historic support for hardline Islamic groups including the Muslim Brotherhood, continued hosting of Hamas officials and Al Jazeera's skewed coverage of the Israel-Hamas conflict—which is compounding Arab anger—are all factors the United States must consider if seeking to work more closely with Doha.^{[1] [m] [n]}

XXIII As part of a policy to deter Iran from engaging in this practice, the United States should work with Western governments and other allies to develop a database of overseas financial holdings of the Iranian regime and key regime leaders, especially those involved in taking dual and foreign nationals visiting Iran hostage, to facilitate freezing or seizing their assets when a new hostage is taken.

George H. W. Bush during a visit to Kuwait in April 1993.⁹⁶ On June 26, 1993, the Bill Clinton administration launched twenty-three cruise missiles against IIS headquarters in the middle of the night, killing between six and eight people and injuring about twelve.⁹⁷

Because assassination plots against current or former US officials are a direct threat to US sovereignty, the United States needs to consider a standing policy of a kinetic military response against Iran directly in retaliation for a successful, or even close to successful, plot. Such a response has a better chance of deterring such Iranian assassination attempts than a policy that relies only on law enforcement, sanctions, and designations.^{xxiv} A kinetic US response should, of course, weigh the risk of collateral damage and attempt to minimize civilian casualties. The United States should also take into account the risk of further Iranian retaliation, depending on the nature and profile of the chosen target.

By contrast, an Iranian assassination attempt or terrorist attack against a US official on US soil that is stopped well short of its goal is best handled by adding to the law-enforcement and sanctions response an effort to maximize the humiliation to Iran by exposing the perpetrators. This would probably also be the appropriate response to an assassination attempt against an Iranian dissident on US soil.

The United States would need to be prepared for Iranian retaliation for any such actions, which would include tightening protection around US officials or keeping US citizens from traveling to Iran.

WORKING WITH ALLIES

The United States needs to build a multilateral coalition—including European countries, Turkey, Iraq, and other countries where Iranian dissidents have been targets of assassination or kidnapping efforts—to shine a spotlight on Iran’s criminal activities directed against dissidents abroad and to support vigorous prosecution of those working on Iran’s behalf. Tehran’s decades-long campaign to kill or silence dissidents outside the country is probably part of an effort to prevent the emergence of an effective opposition movement.^{xxv} The United States and the international community can better hold Iran accountable and deter Iran’s brazen flouting of human rights by working in concert to push for vigorous investigation and prosecution of those doing Iran’s bidding in targeting dissidents abroad, while highlighting Iran’s role and providing remedies for victims. Doing so, according to the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, “is a key step in ending impunity and promoting and protecting human rights... [that would] send an important message to Iran’s authorities.”⁹⁸

The aggressive US efforts to investigate and prosecute those seeking to kill journalist and activist Masih Alinejad, and the Belgium judiciary’s prosecution of an Iranian diplomat involved in the Paris bomb plot, provide models that US allies can leverage.⁹⁹ To support allies, the US State Department’s special envoy for Iran and the Department of Justice’s National Security Division should work together to develop and implement a plan to provide trainings, adjusted for individual countries’ legal systems, on best investigative and prosecutorial practices regarding Iranian state-sponsored efforts to kill or kidnap dissidents. A concerted international effort to prosecute those involved in Iranian plots could help reverse a trend in which “Iran’s leaders...continue to target those in exile who give citizens a voice, unless they are shown that the political cost of doing so is prohibitive.”¹⁰⁰

XXIV A more aggressive variant of this approach would be to warn Iran that any plot that the United States uncovered against a US official could result in a direct strike on Iran itself.

XXV IRI efforts to assassinate or kidnap Iranian diaspora dissidents have been extensive in the recent past. A small sampling includes the following. In 2023, the US Justice Department indicted three Iranians for attempting to kill New York-based Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad, a prominent advocate for women’s rights in Iran. In 2021, the Justice Department indicted four individuals for trying to kidnap Alinejad. In October 2019, an Iranian journalist, who had been critical of the regime, was kidnapped in Iraq and then transferred to Iran, where he was executed in December 2020. In November 2019, Iranian agents killed an Iranian dissident in Istanbul who had publicly leveled accusations of corruption and assassinations against Iran’s judiciary and security forces. In 2018, the IRI targeted an opposition gathering in Paris in a bomb plot that was foiled by French security. In 2017, Iranian operatives killed a dissident in the Netherlands.^{[a] [p] [q] [r] [s] [t] [u]}

SUPPORTING THE IRANIAN PEOPLE

The United States also needs to reconsider its willingness to step up support for the millions of Iranians who are seeking the freedom to determine the social and political future of their country for themselves.

The Islamic Republic is facing serious challenges at home, not only because of the poor economy but due to systemic mismanagement, corruption, the stifling of any real political choice through the manipulation of elections, repression of any political dissent, and brutal enforcement of religious strictures—as well as behavior that Iranians consider shameful, such as hostage taking and selling weapons to Russia to be used against Ukraine. Iranian women have been among the most active and organized groups resisting the regime and have emerged as some of the strongest voices calling for human rights, environmental protections, and individual freedoms in Iran over the past several decades.

During the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that grew out of the protests over the killing of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 for allegedly violating mandatory veiling, Iranians clamored for the world to hear their pleas and provide support in the face of the regime’s brutal crackdown. Such support was ultimately lacking, but so were the conditions to create the type of revolutionary change the movement envisioned, especially without the support or co-opting of some portion of the police, military, IRGC, or other regime officials.

US and allied policy should publicly eschew seeking regime change through external military intervention. A perception in Tehran that the United States has adopted such a policy could strengthen hard-liners in Tehran who favor rejecting US initiatives to get Iran to moderate its behavior in the region.

There would be even less reason for Iranian leaders not to be more aggressive with Iran’s regional malign influence and advancement of its nuclear program if they assess that the United States is actively attempting to foment a revolution in the country. The most effective story against the regime is simply to tell the truth about its behavior on a range of fronts and make this known to as many Iranians as possible.

However, consistent with long-standing US support for people seeking freedom around the world—and recognizing that the opposition to the regime that gave rise to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and various economic and other protests in Iran continues to exist—the United States should enhance its efforts, without making life more difficult for the people of Iran, to provide tools and opportunities for Iranians to determine the political future of their country for themselves in the coming decades. Such a policy would form a final pillar of broader US efforts to use economic, political, and military pressure to deter Iran from engaging in destabilizing actions in the Middle East and advancing its nuclear program.^{XXVI}

SHAPING THE US ROLE

This approach would have the long-term goal of supporting the Iranian people’s ability to change their system of government if they so desire but would not seek to do so by fomenting a coup—as the United States did in 1953 when it helped orchestrate the ouster of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh—or sponsoring an armed insurgency. “Iranian history... provides that regime change cannot come from the outside. Any government imposed by a foreign power—or that even appears to be—will lack domestic legitimacy.”¹⁰¹

Indeed, the fundamental goal of this approach—one that is more nuanced than previous policies that amounted to either working with the regime in a manner that legitimized it or supporting efforts aimed at an immediate foreign-sponsored overthrow of the regime—is to allow the Iranian people the opportunity to choose their future for themselves.

Today, that opportunity does not exist, stamped out by the violence and authoritarian demands of the government in Tehran, which does not need the excuse of foreign support to Iranians who oppose the regime to justify its brutalization and killing of its own people. Instead, it does so because people dare to protest the country’s poor economic conditions

XXVI The advisory committee and working group acknowledge that the regime will crack down hard on any signs of dissent or protest and will level accusations of foreign instigation, whether or not the United States is actually providing any support to regime opponents. The Iran Freedom and Support Act, which passed on a bipartisan basis under then President George W. Bush in 2006, and was renewed under the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, provides a good model to build on in supporting and seeking a better future for Iran. The original legislation directed the president to spend ten million dollars in support of “pro-democracy groups” in Iran.^[v]

Supporting the Iranian people

or fail to properly wear a hijab. But a foreign overthrow that has no legitimacy is also unlikely to be stable in the long term.^{XXVII}

Therefore, policymakers should expect that the results of enhanced support to the Iranian people are unlikely to be immediately gratifying. Indeed, at least initially, much of the effort will be around the margins. But a slow, steady, and deliberate decades-long effort—reinforcing the need for a consistent bipartisan policy—to provide the Iranian people additional support, beginning with increased funding for educational tools and access to independent media and voices, is likely to provide the best hope for a different, stable political future for Iran.

Such a policy would be modeled on the approach the United States used to support anti-communist movements for democracy and human rights in Eastern Europe during the last stages of the Cold War—especially the Solidarity Movement in Poland—which helped those movements in their decisions to overthrow their communist governments after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. US support for the dissidents in Iran would proceed in partnership with democratic allies, including countries with no history of dominating Iran, such as Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, or Japan, to help provide “space, resources, international support and a measure of protection... [to Iranians] to organize a powerful opposition movement.”¹⁰²

DEPLOYING NEW POLICY TOOLS

In implementing this policy approach, the United States needs to deploy or enhance an array of tools aimed at fostering conditions for the political mobilization of Iranians over the long term, while recognizing that the Iranian people must take the lead in determining their future. The State Department and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as the National Endowment for Democracy should allocate more funding for online pro-democracy education tools and tutorials on the Iranian government’s mismanagement and misuse of funds, which can be linked to a State Department public information campaign directed against Iran (see below).¹⁰³

US educational outreach should also include materials that offer practical solutions and alternatives for improving the daily lives of Iranians, especially those in rural areas. For example, materials that address cultural, economic, and environmental challenges Iranians face can demonstrate tangible support for the Iranian people’s well-being,

independent of political agendas. These materials should be made available in multiple languages besides Persian, including Kurdish, Arabic, and Baluch.¹⁰⁴

Separately, the United States should seek to enhance secure internet access for Iranians through an array of circumvention tools, including virtual private networks (VPNs) to help them gain access to wider news sources and communicate with one another and supporters outside Iran. Existing US efforts to provide VPNs need to be increased and expanded to keep pace with technological advances.¹⁰⁵

LEVERAGING TRADITIONAL AND NEW INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN PERSIAN

The United States should support efforts to make more Persian-language news and information available to the Iranian people. This should include additional funding to enhance Persian-language broadcasting into Iran, a satellite TV channel that the regime can’t block, and YouTube channels that Iranians can access, similar to Radio Free Europe, to begin to undermine “the regime’s media monopoly.”¹⁰⁶ Moreover, rather than completely reinvent the wheel and, for example, start a new Persian-language network, Washington should work with European allies to provide financial support to expand the offerings of already existing and respected Persian-language media such as Radio Farda or BBC Persia.

The State Department needs to use social media, in both English and Persian, more consistently and aggressively to highlight, among other issues, the regime’s corruption, funding of proxies abroad, and abuses of its own citizens. To better accomplish this, the State Department should permanently add another Persian-language spokesperson to the Office of International Media Engagement and base the position at Foggy Bottom.¹⁰⁷

At the international level, the United States should work in conjunction with allies to publicize and consistently condemn the Iranian regime’s violations of its citizens’ human rights. US and allied efforts to “shine a harsh light” on the Islamic Republic’s repressive practices and “lies and deception” at the UN and other international forums can have an impact. Iranian leaders are sensitive to slights and humiliations on the international stage, and such global pressure has caused them to temper their behavior, at least temporarily, in the past.¹⁰⁸

XXVII Opposition to foreign influence has been a key factor in previous Iranian revolutionary movements: Iran’s 1905 revolution was driven by elites seeking to replace the sclerotic Qajar monarchy—which had turned over large parts of the country’s economy to Great Britain and Russia—with a democratic government. The 1979 overthrow of the shah was motivated in large part by Iranians’ belief that he had turned Iran into a puppet of the United States.

ENGAGING THE IRANIAN DIASPORA

The United States also needs to develop a more holistic strategy for engaging the US-based Iranian diaspora. In support of the Mahsa Amini protests, this diaspora exhibited unprecedented levels of activism and organization, including a grassroots campaign to convince Congress to pass the Mahsa Amini Human Rights and Security Accountability Act (MAHSA Act), which the House did in September 2023— days before the anniversary of Amini’s death— with the Senate later following suit.^{XXVIII}

The US government cannot, and should not, be responsible for helping the diaspora to overcome its internal divisions. But where it can work with select members and groups, it should do so. For example, the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) should engage select members of the Iranian diaspora to continue to highlight the regime’s mistreatment of its citizens and help broadcast and amplify the cause of Iranians inside the country, as it did during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. The GEC should seek to engage a broad cross-section of individuals representing various political affiliations and religious and ethnic communities who respect the human rights of all Iranians.¹⁰⁹

And the United States should tap into the diaspora financially to fund projects aimed at pushing for new legislation in countries where diaspora members reside and need additional protections from their governments. The United States should also hold to a clear and consistent policy on which émigré groups are eligible for US support and which are unacceptable. In particular, any support for groups linked to the Mujahadin e-Khalq and its political wing, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (MeK/NCRI), is likely to be counterproductive when it comes to the views of ordinary people inside Iran. The MeK is deeply unpopular in Iran largely because it sided with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

The United States could gain increased attention and credibility for its initiatives by engaging with allies such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the EU to take a firm stance against elements of the Iranian regime operating within their borders, including by enacting legislation similar to the Magnitsky Act to target human rights violators and combat money laundering. Promising to redirect seized funds back to the Iranian people would bolster this approach. US leadership in pushing for initiatives against those complicit in human rights abuses and corruption would help demonstrate US commitment to the Iranian people and holding the regime accountable.¹¹⁰

XXVIII The MAHSA Act was signed into law on April 24, 2024. Other bills pushed by the diaspora are now being introduced, including the TOOMAJ Act, named after Iran-based dissident rapper Toomaj Salehi.

DEVELOPING A NEW ROLE FOR CONGRESS

The lack of a comprehensive bipartisan Iran strategy has hobbled US effectiveness in combating the threats from Tehran. The United States has had an easier time finding bipartisanship over China strategy and can borrow from the approach it has adopted against Beijing. A good model for forging bipartisanship on Iran policy is the US House of Representatives Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, which has developed a holistic, whole-of-government framework to guide policy toward China.

An alternative approach for developing Iran policy would be a joint House-Senate select committee or a commission, similar to one proposed by members of the Senate vis-à-vis China, which would include Senate and House members and representatives from the executive branch and private sector. A select committee or commission would not produce unanimity but could help air differences in a non-confrontational setting, educate the public about the stakes involved in countering the threat Iran poses to US interests, and establish broad consensus on the ends, ways, and means that should inform a long-term strategy toward the Islamic Republic spanning administrations.¹¹¹

CONCLUSION

The events of October 7, the war in Gaza, Iran's April 2024 direct attack on Israel for the first time and Israel's response, continued malign activity by Iranian proxies in the region, challenges to global shipping, Iran's efforts to interfere with the 2024 US election, and Iran's continued nuclear weapons progress all highlight the criticality and centrality of the Middle East for US foreign policy, even as it might prefer to be able to focus on Asia.¹¹² The geographic reality, let alone the sustained and emerging conflicts in the region, requires Washington to prioritize the Middle East in its strategic calculus and will demand a continued, and potentially expanded, commitment of resources and leadership for the foreseeable future.

Iran believes that, on balance, it has emerged as a winner post-October 7 because Hamas's attack shattered Israel's sense of invincibility and caused the Israeli people to lose trust in their leaders. Iran's view is that it can capitalize on the fact that the Israeli onslaught in Gaza has increased Arab and Palestinian support for Hamas and hatred of Israel, caused Arab states to distance themselves from Israel, turned world opinion against the Jewish state, and created a rift between Israel and the United States.

Emboldened by these developments, and by its longer-term success in expanding its regional presence and influence, the regime in Tehran will continue to exploit opportunities to weaken Israel, challenge US security interests, and enhance its regional stature.

To ensure success, the United States will need to redouble its efforts to work with allies in the Middle East and in Europe. The United States must make an explicit commitment to maintaining a robust military presence in the region aimed at deterring Iranian aggression and protecting shipping, along with a pledge to consult with regional states on redeployments of equipment and forces to other regions, which will help shore up sagging confidence in a long-term US presence. Such a US posture, when backed up by a demonstrated and consistent willingness to respond forcefully to provocations against the United States by Iran and its proxies, will go a long way toward deterring Iranian aggression, given that Tehran does not want to risk a direct fight with the United States.

Washington must also work closely with Middle Eastern and European allies to shore up weak states in the region whose dysfunction Iran and its Axis of Resistance allies have exploited to build their power and influence. And it needs

to engage with East Asian allies on various challenges related to Iran, including illicit Iranian oil sales and financial activities, highlighting that these challenges are global, and not just issues restricted to the Middle East. But in the Middle East, few things will be as important in the next twenty-four months as getting things right in a post-conflict Gaza. Doing so is key to US efforts to gain Arab state cooperation in building a regional security architecture—one that ultimately includes Israel—that can help protect against the Iranian threat. Failure to do so could result in an even more hospitable environment for Iranian-backed terrorism to thrive.

Meanwhile, Tehran's growing relationship with Russia and China—seen most recently in their sixth joint naval defense exercise in the Persian Gulf—will require the United States to increasingly factor the challenge of great-power competition into its Middle East policy. Divergent Russian and Chinese interests in the Middle East, with Moscow focused on gaining Tehran's military help in Ukraine while Beijing is trying to avoid alienating either Iran or the Gulf states, create an opportunity for the United States to drive a wedge by appealing to China's interest in stability in the region and the prestige of joint leadership in seeking to enhance regional security.

As Iran advances closer to the nuclear-weapons threshold, the United States must urgently seek to refocus world attention on the threat a nuclear-armed Iran poses. This will require working with Western and regional allies to rebuild a multilateral sanctions regime and threats of further political isolation, for example, by Gulf states threatening to end their current détente with the Islamic Republic. Stepped-up pressure on Iran on the nuclear issue, however, should include the message that the United States is open to resuming a dialogue if Iran is willing to hold direct talks on restraining and rolling back its program in return for sanctions relief.

Finally, the United States must recognize that applying economic, diplomatic, and military pressure to Iran will, at best, result in tactical retreats by the hard-liners in control in Tehran, who will remain wedded to their goals of ending the US presence in the Middle East, destroying the Jewish state, and establishing Iran as the dominant player in the region. But Washington can help plant the seeds of freedom in Iran by beginning to provide the Iranian people the resources and support that will be required in the long term to decide the future that they want for themselves—one marked by freedom and liberty, instead of tyranny and brutality.

ANNEXES

ANNEX I

The gathering threat from Iran: The Islamic Republic’s goals, policies, and worldview

The overall success of Tehran’s decades-long strategy to defy the Western-led international order and to undermine the Jewish state and US presence in the region has been on display in the wake of Hamas’s October 7 attack on Israel, with Iran’s ability to leverage its regional network of militias, maintain its nascent rapprochement with Gulf states, and largely avoid international blame. Core to the Islamic Republic’s ability to expand its power and influence has been arming, funding, and training its militia allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza, developing and using its formidable arsenal of missiles and drones against regional foes, and becoming a threshold nuclear state.

These strategies have broken long-standing international norms on multiple fronts, but Iran has acted, and will probably continue to act, with greater impunity because of growing support from China and Russia, which increasingly shield Iran and prop up its economy. That said, Iran remains a fragile state, with unprecedented popular questions about the regime’s legitimacy, a moribund economy, and an impending leadership transition.

Emboldened by these successes, hard-liners consolidating power domestically, and its increased popularity among Arab publics as a “champion” of the Palestinians, Iran carried out its massive missile and drone barrage against Israel in April—in retaliation for Israel killing senior IRGC officials in Damascus—the first such attack by Iran from its own territory. The IRI’s willingness to risk a serious escalation with Israel bespeaks a growing confidence in its long-term quest to weaken Israel, push the United States out of the region, and establish Tehran as the regional hegemon.

Iran’s hostility toward Israel and the United States has its origins in the 1979 Revolution that overthrew the shah. The cleric-led Islamic Republic that emerged from

the revolution has consistently adhered to the avowed goals of driving the United States from the Middle East and bringing about the destruction of Israel.

Khomeini, the Islamic Republic’s first supreme leader, and his clerical allies called the United States the “Great Satan” for its perceived imperialist domination of the shah’s regime and its introduction into Iran of Western culture and mores, including granting personal and political freedoms to women, which threatened Islam.^{XXIX} Iran’s clerical leadership views the 1953 US- and UK-backed coup that overthrew Iran’s nationalist prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and allowed the young shah to consolidate his power as the United States’ original sin (conveniently overlooking the participation of Iranians, including some clerics, in the coup). Capitulations by the shah in the 1960s, granting Americans immunity from prosecution in Iran, became a symbol of US hegemony. Repression of all opposition and persecution of dissidents by the shah’s government were blamed on his US backers. Iran’s revolutionary leaders and their successors have also depicted Israel as a colonial outpost in the region, foisted on Muslim countries by Western imperial powers.¹¹³

Iran’s clerical regime sees US behavior in the broader Middle East region as confirmation of its perception of the United States as an imperialist power. For Tehran, the history of US support for Israel, its alliance with Saudi Arabia, former President George W. Bush’s reference to Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil,” the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the twenty-year war in Afghanistan demonstrate that the United States is bent on dominating and terrorizing the Islamic world.¹¹⁴

In many respects, the Islamic Republic’s leaders turned the shah’s pro-Western and pro-Israel policies on their head, but they share one goal with the shah—to establish Iran

XXIX Khomeini’s version of Shia Islam was new and not in keeping with how Islam was historically practiced in Iran and in Iraq, the other key center of Shia teaching. Khomeini’s doctrine of Velayat e-Faqih, or political rule by a supreme religious jurist, resulted in the imposition of the first Islamic theocracy in the modern world. Many of the grand ayatollahs—clerics who are the most revered for their learning and teaching—in Iran and Iraq continue to believe that clerics should provide guidance for political, social, and religious life from outside of government but should not participate directly in the political arena.

as the dominant power in the Gulf and, ultimately, the broader region. In 2010, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei spelled out Iran’s “core foreign policy doctrine,” asserting not only that “the shores of the Persian Gulf and much of the Gulf of Oman belong to” Iran, but that the Islamic Republic “must vigorously ‘demonstrate its power’ throughout the region, because ‘this is our historical, geographical, and regional duty.’”¹¹⁵

Iran’s expansionist impulses are driven, in part, by a desire to be seen as a serious power deserving of respect and preoccupied with regime survival above all else. But Iranian leaders are also motivated by a deep sense of insecurity given Iran’s history of invasions and manipulation by outside powers. Iraq’s invasion of Iran in 1980 to try to topple the nascent Islamic Republic, resulting in a brutal eight-year war, heightened the clerical regime’s sense that it could only counter threats by expanding the country’s power and influence beyond its borders. US support for Saddam Hussein during the conflict reinforced Tehran’s view that the United States was determined to undermine and overthrow the clerical regime.¹¹⁶

IRAN’S PARTNERS AND PROXIES: A KEY TOOL IN ENHANCING TEHRAN’S REGIONAL SWAY

Key to Iran’s expansion of its power and influence throughout the Middle East is its development of a network of proxies—its Axis of Resistance—in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories. Iran’s training, arming, and funding of these likeminded militant groups over the past several decades has allowed the Islamic Republic to spread its revolutionary values and target its adversaries while avoiding culpability, deterring potential threats, and establishing its dominance in the region.^{xxx} Iran’s success in this enterprise is due to its ability to exploit the power vacuums created by the emergence of weak and failed states in the region, beginning with the US toppling of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 that allowed Iran to expand its influence in Iraq, and accelerating with the civil wars and state collapses in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, during the Arab Spring in 2011. Iran’s aim is for its proxy groups to increasingly undermine US military presence and influence in the region while avoiding a direct military confrontation between Iran and the United States, which could threaten the regime’s hold on power.

Iran arms its Axis of Resistance allies from its inventory of sophisticated ballistic missiles, the largest in the region, and its aerial and maritime unmanned systems. With their offensive capabilities, these weapons systems enable Iran and its

proxies to target Israel, US forces in the Middle East, and the United States’ Arab allies, and to “menace the free flow of commerce throughout the region.”¹¹⁷

Iran’s provision of sophisticated weapons, technology, and training to Hamas and PIJ over the previous two decades enabled the devastating success of their attack on October 7 that shattered Israel’s sense of invincibility and deterrence, even if Tehran did not actively participate in planning the attack. Khamenei praised the Hamas invasion, saying, “God willing, this cancer [Israel] will be eradicated at the hands of the Palestinian people and the resistance forces in the entire region.”¹¹⁸ Moreover, the ability of Iran’s proxy allies to show solidarity with Hamas by responding with coordinated, yet seemingly autonomous, attacks across the region highlights how Iran’s threat network can keep its adversaries off balance and under pressure, while helping Iran avoid being directly implicated.¹¹⁹

With encouragement and support from Iran, Hezbollah—Iran’s closest and most powerful ally—has maintained daily rocket barrages into northern Israel that tie down Israeli forces and have forced the evacuation of some eighty thousand Israelis from northern border communities, increasing the risk that Israel will open a second front to end the threat.

That risk came to fruition in late September 2024, when Israel undertook dramatic escalation operations against Hezbollah, dealing significant blows to the group’s military capabilities and killing Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah among others. Despite Israel’s success in eliminating many of Hezbollah’s top commanders and targeting its weapons stocks, the group remains a dangerous foe, with substantial rocket and missile stocks still at its disposal and many thousands of forces under arms who have trained to repel an Israeli ground campaign. The situation remained volatile at press time for this report. But if Hezbollah expends much of its large rocket and missile arsenal against Israel in a war now, Tehran probably believes it would be more vulnerable to an Israeli attack against the Iranian homeland—specifically, its nuclear-weapons infrastructure—that could threaten the survival of the Islamic Republic.

Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias in eastern Syria and Iraq have conducted more than 180 attacks on US forces there in response to Israeli’s military operations in Gaza. Iran ordered the militias to stand down after the United States hit eighty-five militia sites and some IRGC targets in Syria and Iraq, and killed a key militia leader in Baghdad, in retaliation for a militia drone strike that killed three US service members in Jordan. But the pause is likely temporary, given Iran and the militias’ stated goal of forcing the United States

XXX “The axis does not function as a hierarchy with direct Iranian command and control, but as a loose network of interconnected components driven by common interests and a shared ideological vision.”^[w]

to end its military presence in Iraq and Syria. Further attacks against US forces in Iraq will reinforce the dilemma for the United States that responding too aggressively against the major militant groups there could cause the government in Baghdad to demand the immediate departure of US troops.^{xxxI}

Meanwhile, Houthi rebels with arms, training, and funding from Iran have persisted in attacking Israeli and US naval vessels and “Israeli-affiliated” ships in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait, causing major disruptions to global maritime commerce despite retaliatory strikes from the United States and United Kingdom. Iran has disavowed any connection to the Houthi attacks, but the United States has intercepted several ships carrying Iranian weapons intended for the Houthis and determined that an Iranian ship in the Gulf of Aden was providing the Houthis with targeting information. The Houthis operate with relative autonomy from Iran and are continuing attacks to demonstrate their support for Palestinians and to increase their domestic and regional stature, but Iran could probably begin to curb their attacks if it threatened to cut off weapons shipments.

The scope and scale of attacks by Iran’s proxies, without significant challenge from the countries in which they operate, illustrate the depths of Iran’s entrenchment in the region. They also demonstrate how “Iran’s empowerment of local partners” will make “efforts to unravel the [Axis of Resistance]” a major challenge.¹²⁰

IRAN’S DIRECT ATTACK ON ISRAEL: AN ATTEMPT AT NEW RULES FOR THE GAME

Iran’s decision to launch some three hundred drones and missiles at Israel on April 13 shifts their conflict from one that has been largely indirect and covert into new, more dangerous territory in which direct attacks by each side are more likely, risking all-out war between Israel and Iran. The Iranian strike was in retaliation for an Israeli strike two weeks earlier that killed a senior IRGC commander and six other officers at Iran’s consulate in Damascus. Israel has conducted an aggressive campaign against the IRGC presence in Syria since Hamas’s October 7 attack on Israel, killing a total of eighteen IRGC officers including the seven in the April 1 strike. Israel’s limited and targeted strike inside Iran in response to Tehran’s massive missile and drone barrage has allowed Iran to avoid retaliating, bringing the current round of conflict to an end.

Iran’s signaling of its attack probably helped enable Israel and its allies to be more prepared for it, even if Iran still intended more damage than was ultimately achieved.^{xxxII} Moreover, its statements that it considered the issue concluded even before the attack was over seemed designed to minimize the risk of escalation. Still, the risk that Israel would retaliate in a major way against the Iranian homeland was real, and yet the Iranian leadership deemed it a risk worth taking. As a near-term aim, Iran might have regarded the scale and boldness of its attack as necessary to deter Israel from hitting Iranian diplomatic facilities again. Iranian officials probably also hoped to demonstrate the sophistication and potential lethality of Tehran’s missile and drone force, but in this they clearly failed, given the number of missiles that failed to launch or reach their targets—the latter, in no small part, thanks to the assistance of the United States and its partners. The Israeli response was carefully calculated to demonstrate technological superiority over Iran while avoiding overreach.

At a strategic level, Iran’s decision to break the taboo of directly striking Israel from Iranian soil was a signal to Israel, the United States, and Iran’s Arab neighbors that Iran will not be intimidated. It also demonstrates that Iran can bring significant lethal capabilities to bear in a direct conflict with the Jewish state. Iran’s attack also appears to reflect a calculation by Tehran that the United States will continue to restrain Israel from large-scale retaliation. But it also signals that the old ground rules are now gone, as evidenced by Iran firing over 180 ballistic missiles at Israel in October to avenge the killing of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah.¹²¹

IRAN-GULF RAPPROCHEMENT: A MOVE THAT SERVES BOTH SIDES... FOR NOW

Even as Iran has maintained an aggressive posture toward Israel and the United States, it has—after many years of serious friction and broken relations—been improving relations with the Gulf states during the last several years to ease its political isolation, try to bolster its economy, deter threats, and exploit Arab countries’ uncertainty about the US commitment to their security. The Gulf states see improved ties with Iran as reducing the threat of an attack by Tehran against their interests and allowing them to focus on diversifying their economies as they manage a transition away from fossil fuels.¹²²

XXXI The United States and Iraq are currently in discussions about the nature and timing of a withdrawal or drawdown of US forces in the country. US officials have indicated that the talks could well extend into 2025.

XXXII According to an article in the Wall Street Journal, “Iran warned in advance that an attack was coming, informing Oman and Switzerland, two countries that are traditional intermediaries between Iran and the West, giving Israel and its Western and regional partners time to prepare, a step that likely limited damage from the strike.”^[x]

Iran began discussions with the UAE and Kuwait in 2020 about restoring diplomatic relations, and in 2021 entered into talks with Riyadh, mediated by Baghdad, about terms for resuming normal ties. The UAE and Kuwait reached agreement with Iran to return their ambassadors in 2022 and, to the surprise of many, Tehran and Riyadh restored full diplomatic ties in March 2023 in a Chinese-brokered deal signed in Beijing.^{xxxiii} Bahrain, which follows Saudi Arabia's lead on foreign policy issues, has eased tensions with Iran, which it has previously accused of supporting violent Shia opposition in Bahrain. Manama previously stopped short of restoring diplomatic relations, but the resumption of negotiations on this issue in June 2024 suggests the two sides will eventually normalize ties with Iran.

While Iran negotiated with the Gulf states on improving relations, it continued to intimidate them by acting aggressively against shipping in the region and supporting its Houthi allies' attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which served as a warning to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi about the consequences of not reaching a détente. Between 2021 and 2022, Iran regularly attacked and "seize[d] merchant vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, and northern Arabian Sea."¹²³ Over roughly the same period, the Houthis conducted 350 drone and missile strikes against targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE.¹²⁴

Iran's efforts to improve relations appear aimed at countering the perceived threat posed by the Abraham Accords—in which the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan committed to normalizing ties with Israel—because they seemed to portend much more robust security cooperation between Israel and key Gulf states. In Iran's eyes, the accords threatened to bring an overt Israeli military presence to the shores of the Persian Gulf, within easy striking distance of Iran.

Iran's pursuit of better relations with its Gulf neighbors also appears to be driven by its need to mitigate the devastating impact of the Trump administration's maximum-pressure campaign of sanctions on its economy, which the Biden administration has largely kept in place.^{xxxiv} Iran has experienced massive anti-government protests on several occasions during the past few years, some of which were prompted by deteriorating economic conditions. Improved relations are bringing some economic benefits to Iran. Trade with the Gulf states has increased by about 10 percent since

2022, with trade between Iran and the UAE—a longtime important financial and economic hub for Iran—doubling to \$24 billion in the twelve months ending in March 2023. Further, Iranian and Gulf officials have discussed ways to expand investment, trade, and transportation links.¹²⁵

For Gulf leaders such as Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (widely referred to as MBS) and UAE President Mohammad bin Zayed, détente with Iran is intended to reduce the threat of a direct attack on their countries. They have not forgotten Iran's missile and drone attack on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 or the January 2022 Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi.¹²⁶ But détente allows them to focus on the priority of continuing to diversify their economies, attract needed foreign investment, and transition away from a reliance on fossil fuels.¹²⁷ Gulf leaders' efforts to reduce tensions with Iran have also been motivated by their perception that the United States has been seeking to reduce its presence and role in the region and cannot be counted on to protect them. Gulf leaders blame successive administrations for flagging commitment: Obama's failure in 2013 to enforce his red line against Syrian use of chemical weapons, the Trump administration's decision in 2019 not to retaliate for Iran's massive attack on Saudi oil production facilities, and Biden's initial shunning of MBS, lackluster response to a 2022 Houthi attack on the UAE, efforts to engage Iran, and hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan. This decade of perceived inattention has reinforced Gulf leaders' convictions that they must take the initiative to protect themselves from the threat posed by Iran.

While Iran and Saudi Arabia remain wary of one another, they have been careful to preserve their détente despite Iran's support for its proxies' attacks on Israel, US forces, and Red Sea shipping, and despite Riyadh's continued interest in normalizing relations with Israel in return for a security guarantee from the United States. Saudi Arabia invited then Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (who died in a helicopter crash in May 2024) to the combined Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in November 2023 to discuss the Gaza crisis; MBS and Raisi have held phone conversations to discuss the crisis; the two countries held a meeting in Beijing in December 2023 to discuss relations in fulfillment of their normalization agreement; and the two countries' foreign ministers talk by phone about every two weeks.¹²⁸

xxxiii The restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia ended seven years of direct hostility between them. Riyadh broke ties in January 2016 after protestors attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran following the Saudi execution of the prominent Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr. As part of the deal to restore relations, the Saudis reportedly agreed to stop supporting Iran International, a London-based Persian language television channel that backed the opposition in Iran, and end funding for Sunni militant groups in Iran opposed to the regime. Iran agreed to press the Houthis to stop conducting missile and drone attacks into Saudi Arabia.

xxxiv The sanctions continue to hurt Iran's economy even though their impact has gradually decreased as Iran's economy has adapted and become less dependent on Western markets.

Maintaining good relations is likely to serve both countries' interests for the foreseeable future, though Iranian commitment to a *détente* will be tested if Riyadh and Jerusalem revive talks about normalizing their relations. On numerous occasions prior to October 7, Iranian leaders castigated Riyadh for pursuing normalization with Israel, accusing the kingdom of betraying Islam and legitimizing the Jewish state. Iran probably also fears that a Saudi-Israeli pact could shift the balance of power in the region decisively against the IRI.

By maintaining ties, Tehran hopes to continue gaining invitations to Arab councils, a window into the thinking of MBS and other Arab leaders, and an opportunity to counter the US narrative about Iran's role in the region. *Détente* with Saudi Arabia is also helping to weaken regional security cooperation against Iran. For example, to preserve the relationship with Iran, Riyadh has reportedly avoided participating in Operation Prosperity Guardian, organized by the United States to protect shipping in the Red Sea from Houthi attacks, and limited the United States' ability to conduct anti-Iranian operations from Saudi territory.¹²⁹

While MBS and other Gulf leaders have been working under US leadership, and in tacit cooperation with Israel, to build an integrated air and missile defense against Iranian attack, they view preserving normal relations and maintaining channels of communication with Iran as an important hedge to avoid attacks from Tehran or its proxies as the tensions escalate between Iran and Israel and the United States. Gulf leaders might also calculate that sustaining *détente* with Iran could give them opportunities to encourage both Iran and Israel to step back from the growing threat of open war. Many drew conclusions from the most recent spike of cross-Gulf tensions (2019–2021) that the United States, even while prepared to maximize economic pressure against Iran, would not militarily protect the Gulf states from attack.

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY BEYOND THE REGION: TURNING EAST

We anticipate Iran will continue to pursue a more Eastern-facing foreign policy over the coming four years, based on stronger ties with Russia and, more importantly, China, to help foster the country's resilience in the face of what it sees as efforts by the United States to undermine Iran and, ultimately, bring about regime change. Iran's goal in looking east is to retain autonomy while securing help from Russia in strengthening its military capabilities and from China

in shoring up its economy and enhancing its global economic position. Iran views a stronger relationship with these US rivals as providing "international [political] cover," given that Moscow and Beijing are likely to use their membership on the UNSC to block new sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, missile development, or support for militant and terrorist groups in the region—as they have for North Korea.¹³⁰ Iran's ultimate aim in pursuing stronger ties to Russia and China is the highly "ambitious" one of "establish[ing] a parallel international order" to the one led by the United States, reducing Washington's ability to pressure Iran "economically or militarily."¹³¹

Iran's relationships with China and Russia are both critical to Tehran but in different ways. An increasingly strategic security relationship is emerging as Iran continues to provide weapons to support Russia's war in Ukraine and as Russia remains a critical support for Iran's security, with military and intelligence support, as well as protection at the UN Security Council. Beijing, on the other hand, has become Iran's major oil purchaser, importing more than one million barrels a day despite US sanctions on Iran's oil exports. In 2021, the two countries signed a \$400-billion, twenty-five-year economic and security cooperation agreement, in which Beijing committed to "invest in areas such as nuclear energy, ports, railroads, military technology and oil and gas development." Iran has also acquired from China "sophisticated technologies... to tighten control over its... population."¹³²

Further evidence of the growing relationship between Iran and China, and how it serves both their interests, is Beijing's role in brokering the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023. Although Beijing's role appears to have been limited to presiding over the final details, the deal boosted China's image as a constructive political player in the Middle East and legitimized Iran's regional rapprochement, which Iran hopes will open the door to better ties and the possibility of substantial trade and investment with other Arab states.

Iran's growing ties to Russia appear to be driven largely by security concerns on both sides. Iran has sought to demonstrate its utility to Russia by selling Moscow thousands of suicide drones to use in its war in Ukraine and helping build a factory in Russia to manufacture the drones on Russian soil. In September 2024, Iran began delivering ballistic missiles to Russia to support its war effort.¹³³ In return, Iran is seeking to acquire advanced weaponry from Russia, including the Su-35 aircraft and Russia's top-of-the-line S-400 air-defense system. Iran is probably also getting help with technology for internal monitoring and repression.¹³⁴

Why Khamenei pivoted

Iran's shift eastward from its more traditional stance of balancing between East and West—as Khomeini and his successor Khamenei both long advocated—began to develop in the early 2000s as Iran and China signed major oil and gas deals, but picked up significant momentum when the Trump administration pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018, implemented a maximum-pressure campaign of sanctions against Iran, and issued a series of demands for sweeping change in the Iranian regime's policy toward the region and its own people.¹³⁵ After the Trump administration repudiated the deal, Khamenei “began publicly endorsing closer relations with Moscow and Beijing,” telling “a group of academics [that year] that Iran ‘should look East, not West.’”¹³⁶

The pivot to focus on stronger ties to the United States' great-power rivals was driven by Iran's desire to build alliances outside the West's sphere of influence, believing this would help address the regime's security concerns as well as its economic needs. Khamenei, who is eighty-five years old, reportedly also wants to ensure continuity in Iran's foreign policy after he passes from the scene. By putting this eastward shift into place before his death, he hopes to avoid dissension over the issue of Iran's foreign policy orientation under the next supreme leader.¹³⁷

In 2023, Iran moved to strengthen its security and economic links to China and Russia by joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July and, along with several other Middle Eastern states, the BRICS in August. Membership in these organizations will provide no immediate or direct economic or security benefits to Iran, but does send a message that Iran can emerge from isolation without bringing back the JCPOA.¹³⁸

Even as Iran appears to be casting its lot unequivocally with Beijing and Moscow, it remains determined to preserve its autonomy and avoid ceding any control over its affairs. Then Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian captured this sentiment in a July 2023 speech, in which he said that the regime would not “sell the country to Russia, China, the US, France, Britain, Germany... We act within the framework of our interests... We will never allow our independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity to be harmed.”^{xxxv} In this regard, one advantage of Iran's relations

with Moscow and Beijing is that they will not criticize Iran's human rights record or condition their economic or security ties on how Iran treats its own population.

RELATIONS WITH EUROPE: SERIOUS FRICTIONS PUSH EUROPE TOWARD A HARDER LINE

Iran's relations with Europe are likely to be marked by serious frictions during the next four years. European countries condemn Iran's nuclear advances, military support for Russia's war on Ukraine, repression of its own population, destabilizing actions in the Middle East, and detention of foreign citizens, while Iran accuses Europe of aligning itself with Washington's efforts to isolate and undermine the Islamic Republic.

Iran became disillusioned with the EU after European efforts to protect Iran from the impact of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and imposition of heavier sanctions failed. In 2019, Khamenei called the EU “irrelevant” and said that, “like the US, the EU is deceitful and fueled by animosity.”¹³⁹

The EU's inability to restore a channel for trade with Iran outside of US sanctions probably contributed to Tehran's decision to turn eastward for its economic relationships. Trade between Iran and the EU, which surged after the implementation of the JCPOA, has since fallen to a shadow of its pre-JCPOA highs, resulting in the EU having far less economic leverage over Iran than it once did. EU imports from Iran only reached about 1 billion euros in 2022, compared to a high of 17 billion euros in 2011, while EU exports to Iran in 2022 were only about 3.7 billion euros, down from a high of 11 billion in 2010.¹⁴⁰ Germany remains by far Iran's largest trading partner in the EU, accounting for around 30 percent of total trade between Iran and Europe.¹⁴¹

Iran's nuclear program will remain a major source of tension with Europe. The EU has officially condemned the continued advances Iran has made outside the bounds of the JCPOA in levels of enrichment, development and deployment of advanced centrifuges, and restrictions on access to nuclear sites for IAEA inspectors. The EU points out that there is no justification for the kinds of nuclear activities Iran is undertaking in a strictly civil nuclear program.

Relations between Iran and the EU will also be negatively affected by Tehran's brutal 2022 crackdown on protests over the killing of a young Kurdish-Iranian woman by Iran's morality

XXXV Abdollahian died in the same helicopter crash that killed Iranian President Raisi, in May 2024.^[v]

police for allegedly wearing the hijab improperly. Outraged over the Islamic regime's human rights abuses and support for Putin's efforts to undermine European security, the EU levied a variety of sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Iran's practice of imprisoning European dual nationals to exchange them for ransom or for Iranians incarcerated for espionage or terrorism in Europe is also causing mounting anger, and some EU parliamentarians are pressing for a much tougher stance toward Iran over this issue.¹⁴²

Relations between Iran and Europe have come under additional strain because of Iran's provision of drones and missiles to Russia in its war against Ukraine, Iran's mobilization of attacks by its proxies after Hamas's October 7 assault on Israel, and Iran's April launch of drones and missiles against the Jewish state. The United Kingdom joined the United States and Canada in imposing new sanctions on Iranian military leaders and drone makers responsible for the attack.¹⁴³ The EU followed with sanctions that targeted key Iranian officials responsible for transferring lethal weapons to Iranian proxies in the region, as well as companies that helped develop such systems or their components.¹⁴⁴

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM: A PRESSING CHALLENGE

Since Iran began breaching the JCPOA's limits in 2019, a year after the Trump administration withdrew from the deal, it has significantly expanded its nuclear program and invested in new, more proliferation-sensitive activities. While available evidence does not indicate that Tehran has decided to cross the nuclear-weapons threshold, these advances, combined with Tehran's decision to reduce IAEA monitoring, give Tehran the option to move quickly to nuclear weapons and increase the risk of miscalculating Iran's intentions.¹⁴⁵

When negotiations on the JCPOA started, it would have taken Iran about two to three months to produce enough fissile material for one bomb (twenty-five kilograms of uranium enriched to above 90 percent), a time frame referred to as "breakout." After the JCPOA was fully implemented, the breakout grew to about twelve months as a result of limits on enrichment levels, uranium stockpiles, and centrifuge types.¹⁴⁶

As of late 2023, Iran's breakout time for one nuclear weapon was estimated at one to two weeks and breakout for five nuclear weapons was estimated at three to four weeks. The latter timeframe will drop further if Iran continues to expand its stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent and installs and operates additional advanced centrifuges, which enrich uranium more efficiently. Iran began stockpiling

60-percent-enriched uranium in 2021 (uranium enriched to 83.7 percent was discovered more recently). It also began escalating its move away from the JCPOA in other areas. It halted implementation of the additional protocol, which allowed more intrusive inspections, produced uranium metal, and experimented with advanced centrifuges, giving it irreversible knowledge gains.¹⁴⁷

Even if JCPOA-like restrictions were placed on enrichment level and centrifuge deployment, the knowledge Iran has gained from the operation of advanced machines and near-weapons-grade enrichment would allow it to ratchet up its program much more quickly. As a result, the United States will likely need to contend with a future whereby Iran will be closer to a nuclear weapon than it was when the JCPOA was implemented.¹⁴⁸

Iran appears to calculate that the advances in its nuclear program, its burgeoning relations with Russia and China, and those countries' adversarial relations with the United States give Tehran leverage to reject returning to the JCPOA. Since the Biden administration took office in 2021, Iran has rebuffed several US offers to return to full or partial compliance with the deal in return for the United States lifting all or some nuclear-related sanctions. Iran has reportedly insisted on guarantees that future administrations would adhere to the deal and has introduced new demands, including the United States lifting non-nuclear-related sanctions, in successive rounds of indirect talks. Iran and the United States reportedly did reach an informal understanding to deescalate tensions in the summer of 2023—which included some sanctions relief in return for Iran slowing the rate and stockpiling of enriched uranium—but this was short-lived, as Iran began advancing its nuclear program and supporting attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria following the October 7 Hamas massacre in Israel.¹⁴⁹

According to the Director of National Intelligence's 2024 Annual Threat Assessment, "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities necessary to produce a testable nuclear device. Since 2020, however, Tehran has stated that it is no longer constrained by any JCPOA limits, and Iran has greatly expanded its nuclear program, reduced IAEA monitoring, and undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so."¹⁵⁰ And reporting from June 2024 indicates that there is debate among US officials as to whether Iran will stay on the cusp of having a nuclear weapon or intends to cross the threshold.¹⁵¹ Many experts believe Iran would need as much as two years to weaponize a device after accumulating enough 90-percent highly enriched uranium, a period of high vulnerability for Iran to a US or Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities. Other experts claim the timelines could be as short as twelve to eighteen months.¹⁵²

Iranian leaders may believe that, by staying below the nuclear breakout threshold, they can avoid provoking the Europeans to agree to snapback sanctions and risking a military strike from the United States, Israel, or both. According to nuclear expert Robert Litwak, “A nuclear hedge is Iran’s strategic sweet spot—maintaining the potential for a nuclear option while avoiding the regional and international repercussions of actual weaponization.”¹⁵³ Iran’s strategy of seeking to glean the benefits and leverage of being a nuclear-weapons state, or at least a threshold one, and to benefit from that position without paying a price, has been quite “transparent.”¹⁵⁴

At the same time, Tehran might calculate that by inching closer to the threshold, it can heighten nervousness in the United States and European capitals about the danger of a nuclear-armed Iran and garner offers of sanctions relief or other incentives in return for not increasing enrichment

levels or enriched stockpiles. Iran has benefited economically during the first three years of the Biden administration from the United States turning a blind eye to Iranian oil exports to China in an effort to induce Tehran to return to the JCPOA.^{xxxvi} Iran may judge that, at a minimum, continuing to creep closer to the breakout threshold can help “to build negotiating leverage” for any future talks.¹⁵⁵

Nonetheless, Tehran’s proximity to the bomb is destabilizing and may be unsustainable in the long term. The escalating tension in the region between Iran and the United States and Israel since October 7 heightens the danger that Iran’s calculus could shift, making crossing the nuclear threshold worth the risk. Moreover, even if Tehran does not pursue the bomb, its current nuclear activities risk spurring other states to match its threshold status and eroding nonproliferation norms.

XXXVI Some observers argue that the Biden administration’s lack of sanctions enforcement on Iranian oil exports might have the benefit of helping to avoid increases in US gas prices.

Iran's use of cyber operations

The government of Iran continues to use cyber espionage to suppress domestic dissent and support coup-proofing measures. These capabilities center largely around options to compromise common Android mobile devices and build upon similar tactics, techniques, and procedures observed since at least 2008. This activity has also extensively targeted expatriate communities outside of Iran, prompting warnings from multiple Western intelligence services. Often disguised as dissidents close to one group, Iran's cyber army members attack dissidents from other groups and promote undemocratic language, poisoning the atmosphere and making diaspora members suspicious of one another. Cyber army members also use social media to present a more benign image of the Islamic Republic to Iranians in the diaspora to encourage appeasement of the regime in Iran. Such espionage also supports kinetic targeting of designated enemies of the regime, according to senior Western intelligence officials, who have recently disclosed Iranian plots to kidnap or kill dissidents abroad.

These intrusion campaigns complement strategies for censorship that seeks to control public information and discourse. Tehran has increasingly sought to restrict global information communications technologies since massive protests against the regime-orchestrated fraud in the 2009 Iranian presidential election that resulted in a second term for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over a reformist challenger. The regime's attempts to create a separate national intranet have not yet come to fruition but have succeeded in shaping ordinary Iranians' awareness of key events in the country. For example, the regime disconnects the internet in Iran from global networks at critical periods, most recently in the early hours following Raisi's death in May 2024. The regime's disruption of the internet during this period demonstrated new techniques likely intended to limit international reporting on internet outages in Iran by internet-freedom monitoring organizations, among others.

Iran cyber-intrusion campaigns also support political, military, and economic espionage objectives through extensive targeting of regional foreign ministry, armed services, government organizations associated with trade, finance, and the defense industrial base, and, most recently, political organizations including US presidential campaigns.¹⁵⁶ Iran's intrusion

activity has also widely targeted government and private-sector firms in the United States and Europe. These activities appear to be directed by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security and IRGC elements, supported by a network of contractors, according to commercial cyber-intelligence providers and multiple Western governments' intelligence and law-enforcement services. Cyber espionage has likely supported Iranian efforts to attenuate the impact of sanctions, tailor responses to diplomatic pressure on nonproliferation matters, and selectively set the stage for Iranian activities in the region. Iran also has used cyber espionage to target family members of hostages held in Gaza.

Iran has employed cyber operations for disruptive and destructive objectives since at least 2010. Such operations have increasingly focused on critical-infrastructure targets, including oil and gas, transportation, water, aviation, and electrical sectors of regional and Western adversaries. Iran escalated destructive intrusions against the US water sector when the Gaza conflict began, using a front persona attributed to a hacktivist. Iranian-linked cyber operators have also leveraged commodity ransomware tactics and malware, conducted under various attribution fronts. These operations have achieved mixed results, often hampered by technical immaturity—although Iranian cyber actors appear to be improving their employment concepts and operational design. As a result, it is unclear to what extent Iranian leadership understands the strategic utility of available offensive cyber options and, therefore, when it might choose the cyber instrument as a main avenue of attack instead of a conventional kinetic option.

Notably, offensive cyber operations formed the regime's core response to 2021 counter-revolutionary cyber actions claimed by an actor calling itself Predatory Sparrow. This actor executed multiple attacks that disrupted rail networks and fuel distribution in an apparent attempt to exacerbate domestic political pressures. In 2022, this actor also executed a destructive intrusion targeting a sanctioned steel industry linked to ongoing proliferation. Iran held the government of Albania responsible—citing the alleged presence in Iran of MeK paramilitary elements based in Albania, who were supporting opponents of the regime—and retaliated with crippling operations against Albania using Iranian state-linked actors.¹⁵⁷

IRANIAN HOMEFRONT: KHAMENEI SEEKS TO CONSOLIDATE CONTROL, BUT HAS VULNERABILITIES

Since the 2020 Majles legislative elections, Khamenei has sought to engineer a takeover of all major institutions in Iran by hard-line conservatives aimed at shaping Iran’s trajectory through his succession and beyond. As a result, the current crop of Iranian leaders is not only more ideological but more loyal to the supreme leader than its predecessors, more insular in its outlook—most having been educated in Iran, rather than the West—strongly committed to the values of the revolution, and willing to act more assertively abroad and repressively at home.

Khamenei’s orchestration of the election of staunch loyalist, Raisi, as president in 2021 was aimed at completing the conservative consolidation of power and setting the stage for a transition to a likeminded replacement. The conservative-dominated Council of Guardians helped ensure Raisi’s victory by rejecting the candidacy of a number of less hard-line conservative stalwarts, moderates, and reformers who were more popular and better known than Raisi.^{XXXVII}

However, Raisi’s death in a helicopter crash in May 2024 resulted in the surprise election of little-known an Masoud Pezeshkian, a self-described reformer, as president. Pezeshkian, who served as health minister under reformist President Mohammad Khatami from 2003–2005 and since 2008 as a member of parliament, defeated Saeed Jalili, a hard-line former nuclear negotiator and Khamenei’s representative to the Supreme Council for National Security, by about ten million votes, according to official numbers, with roughly 53 percent of the vote in the presidential runoff. Jalili campaigned on the hard-line policies of not returning to a nuclear deal or improving ties with the West and maintaining strict enforcement of the rules for women wearing the hijab. Pezeshkian, by contrast, spoke in favor of reentering nuclear negotiations to get sanctions relief and loosening restrictions on the internet, and said he was against the violent enforcement of the hijab rules for women. However, Pezeshkian pledged loyalty to Khamenei during the campaign and acknowledged that he wouldn’t be on the ballot without Khamenei’s endorsement.

Khamenei may have allowed Pezeshkian to run for the presidency, in part, to boost turnout, which he has described as an important sign of the people’s trust in the system and a sign to the world of the regime’s legitimacy.¹⁵⁸ Pezeshkian’s election also provides a way for Iran’s leaders to soften their image internationally as they strengthen ties to Russia and China and continue to support allied militias in the region. According to government officials, turnout in the second round of voting rose to 49.8 percent, up from about 40 percent in the first round but far below the norm of more than 70 percent for presidential elections in Iran. Moreover, there were hundreds of thousands of spoiled ballots, with some claims of more than a million, a technique many Iranians use to signal their disaffection. Also, numerous Iranians on social media indicated their intention to boycott the election, calling it a worthless exercise.¹⁵⁹

Khamenei’s willingness to allow a Pezeshkian victory may also reflect a concern of growing popular alienation over the regime’s repressive social policies and dissatisfaction over the poor economy, which is plagued by mismanagement and corruption and has been hit hard by US sanctions. Some of the largest protests in Iran, dating back to 2017, have been driven by anger over poor economic conditions. Whether Pezeshkian will be able to pursue any of the moderate policies he campaigned on will depend on his ability to gain the support of Khamenei, who is the key decision-maker on all major domestic and foreign policy issues.

While the extent to which Pezeshkian will have any leeway to advance moderate policies is unclear, Raisi’s death renews a focus on questions about likely succession after the death of the supreme leader. Khamenei, now eighty-five and suffering from serious health problems, will likely seek to ensure his successor is equally committed to preserving the values of the Islamic Revolution and the vision of the Islamic Republic. Raisi and Mojtaba Khamenei, the supreme leader’s son, had for years been mentioned as leading candidates to succeed Khamenei. However, many experts have expressed doubts that Mojtaba could ascend to the supreme leader position because he lacks the necessary religious credentials and both Khomeini and Khamenei have condemned dynastic succession, citing it as one reason the monarchy under the shah was overthrown.^{XXXVIII}

XXXVII The elections to the Majles and Assembly of Experts in March 2024 continued the trend of using the vetting process to exclude moderates, and even centrist conservatives, in favor of more hard-line conservatives.

XXXVIII Khamenei also lacked the necessary religious credentials, but then speaker of the Majles, Hashemi Rafsanjani, orchestrated an amendment to the constitution eliminating the need for superior religious credentials and stipulating that the supreme leader must be a “just, pious, courageous, resourceful Islamic jurist knowledgeable about the affairs of the day.” Mojtaba is also not in the Assembly of Experts, which could also reduce his clout in a struggle over succession.

Raisi's death is more likely to prompt a power struggle to succeed Khamenei if the Assembly of Experts, the body responsible for selecting the next supreme leader and now firmly in conservative hands, cannot decide on a single individual—a possibility that could prompt an interim triumvirate. But whoever becomes the new supreme leader will require the support of the IRGC to gain and hold the position, reinforcing the likelihood that he will pursue policy continuity with Khamenei's vision at home and abroad.

But we also cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the IRGC would exploit its influence over a new and untested supreme leader to reduce the power and influence of clerics and shift the emphasis of Iranian foreign policy from ideology to more of a defense of Iranian national interests. Such a scenario might create opportunities for the United States, currently ruled out by Khamenei's red line on any cooperation with the "Great Satan," to reach a *modus vivendi* with Iran on key issues.

IRAN'S AILING ECONOMY: A MAJOR TROUBLE SPOT FOR THE REGIME

Even as Khamenei and the hard-liners have consolidated their control over all key institutions of the Islamic Republic, increasing numbers of Iranians have begun to turn against the regime not only over its blatant manipulation of elections, but over the poor economy, corruption, mismanagement of environmental challenges, and repressive social policies. These issues are likely to stir continued opposition to the regime over the next several years. The regime's blatant reliance on the Council of Guardians' vetting process to ensure conservative victories in parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2021 was loosened for the 2024 presidential election won by Pezeshkian. But it nevertheless reinforced for many Iranians already angered by the regime after the Mahsa Amini protests that it was not worth voting, and some called for a boycott. As a result, the first round of the 2024 presidential election saw the lowest turnout ever.^{xxxix}

Anger over the economy—which has been hit hard by US sanctions and struggles due to endemic corruption and mismanagement—is likely to grow as Iranians continue to cope with high inflation of around 40–50 percent, unemployment near 10 percent overall and close to 40 percent among educated youth, and a devalued currency, resulting in declining standards of living and more Iranians falling into poverty. The proportion of the population considered in absolute poverty jumped from 15 percent to 38 percent in the two years after the Trump administration left the JCPOA in 2018 and implemented its maximum-pressure sanctions campaign.¹⁶⁰

While increasing numbers of middle- and working-class Iranians struggle to make ends meet—many working two jobs—growing income inequality and corruption among regime elites also fuel popular resentment toward the clerical regime. Economist Nadereh Chamlou notes that "one in three Iranians is eager to emigrate" and that brain drain is a serious problem for the regime. She cites the rather stunning statistic that thousands of nurses left Iran in just one year between March 2019 and March 2020.¹⁶¹

The government blames US sanctions for most of the economy's woes, and sanctions have played a role. They have dramatically reduced national income from oil sales, placing pressure on the budget, current reserves, and financial demand for imports. The result has been a currency shortage that has led to the high inflation rates mentioned above and contributed to income disparities.

But other factors are at play as well. Hashem Pesaran, Iran's most renowned economist, faults domestic policies, principally Iran's state-dominated economy and the obstacles to economic growth created by excessive bureaucratic regulation. Significant corruption in the systems continues to strangle growth as well.¹⁶²

Public anger over economic hardship boiled over in late 2017, when rising prices for basic goods, compounded by then President Hassan Rouhani's plans to increase fuel prices and cut cash subsidies, sparked widespread rioting in major cities.¹⁶³ Dangerously for the regime, the protests

xxxix The turnout for the first round of the 2024 presidential election was 39.33 percent. While the official second-round turnout was almost ten points better at 49.68 percent, this was still only marginally better than the 48.3 percent turnout when Raisi came to office in June 2021, which at the time was the lowest turnout ever for Iranian presidential elections.^{[z] [aa] [ab]}

shifted rapidly from economic concerns to calls for regime change, with protestors shouting “Death to Khamenei” and “The clerics should get lost.”^{XL, 164}

Even worse rioting spread rapidly in cities across Iran in November 2019 in response to a sudden increase in fuel prices. Once again, the protests quickly turned to calls for regime change and protestors criticized Iran’s involvement in regional conflicts, with demonstrators chanting, “Not Gaza, not Lebanon, my life for Iran” and “Leave Syria, think about us!” The regime responded with a brutal crackdown, killing an estimated 1,500 people and wounding and imprisoning thousands under the cover of an internet shutdown.¹⁶⁵

The government’s mishandling of the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 has added to its credibility problems. As Eric Edelman and Ray Takeyh note, “the Islamic Republic not only failed to protect the health and safety of its citizens but actively impeded their ability to protect themselves by withholding information and hiding the extent of the problem—a response that will... add fuel to the outrage and anger that have been building for years.”¹⁶⁶

THE LOOMING WATER SHORTAGE: A POSSIBLE SPARK FOR ANGER AT THE REGIME

Iran also faces an environmental crisis as a result of bad governance, poor water management, and climate change that is worsening the country’s economic problems and adding to unrest. Governmental mismanagement of the country’s water resources—including overexploitation of groundwater resources and excessive dam construction—higher temperatures, and reduced rainfall have contributed to a reduction in water in many lakes and rivers, leaving citizens in many provinces facing significant water shortages. Projections suggest that by 2041, Iran’s annual per capita water resources could drop below five hundred cubic meters, marking absolute scarcity. Depleting groundwater has reduced crop production, forcing many farmers to abandon their land, contributing to the migration of ten million people

to urban areas since 2013, and causing many thousands to emigrate, worsening Iran’s already severe problems with brain drain. Anger over water-related issues has led to violent clashes with security forces during the past several years in places such as Khuzestan province, resulting in loss of life among protestors.¹⁶⁷

Already, many major rivers, lakes, wetlands, and aquifers have disappeared. If effective water management solutions are not implemented in the coming years, tens of millions of Iranians who have been forced to migrate from villages and small towns to the outskirts of major cities due to lack of water will need to emigrate abroad.¹⁶⁸

Such large-scale migration could contribute to instability and a significant crisis in the region. The dispute over shared water resources has already exacerbated tensions between Iran and Afghanistan. And, in the next several years, the disagreements between Iran and Iraq over some of the tributaries of the Tigris River, and between Iran and Turkey over the Aras River, could escalate into military conflict. The Tigris originates in Iran, which has significantly dammed and diverted the river, diminishing the amount of water available to Iraq, and Ankara seeks to reduce Iran’s share of water from the Aras River, which has headwaters in Turkey.¹⁶⁹

GROWING SOCIAL UNREST: A CHALLENGE TO THE REGIME’S LEGITIMACY

As important as these economic-driven protests were in highlighting the extent of popular disaffection with the regime, the countrywide demonstrations that erupted in September 2022 over the killing of Mahsa Amini by the morality police for alleged improper wearing of the hijab seem to represent a much more serious challenge that is likely to preoccupy the regime in the coming years. The protests, while led initially by young girls and women, were eventually joined by all segments of society, and called for an end to the Islamic Republic, as evidenced by the popular chants, “I will fight;

XL Economist Nadereh Chamlou offers a mixed view of Iran’s economic situation in a May 2024 paper drawing on World Bank and IMF data: “Iran’s economy has undoubtedly underperformed on many fronts and the welfare and satisfaction of its people have declined sharply in recent years. However, when comparing Iran with other countries based on standardized data and a consistent approach, Iran’s economy in the post-pandemic era has not performed as badly as expected, according to data from the [World Bank] and the [International Monetary Fund]. Poverty has increased, when using national poverty lines, but is far lower when using international benchmarks. This is not to say that Iran has nothing to worry about, since it has considerable unused potential. Particularly the underutilization of its young and educated population has given rise to significant dissatisfaction across the population. Some of the underlying causes of the ailing economy are sanctions, but the Islamic Republic’s own restrictions and mismanagement bear the lion share of the blame. The draconian social restrictions that are imposed by an aging theocracy have turned Iranian millennials and GenZ into a ticking time bomb for the regime.”

I will die; I will take back Iran,” “Freedom, freedom, freedom,” and “We don’t want an Islamic Republic.”^{XLI, 170}

Despite a draconian response by the regime, killing some 550 protestors—including sixty-eight children—arresting up to sixty thousand (according to the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran), and sentencing eleven to death, the protests persisted into the first months of 2023 and exhibited a level of leadership not seen in previous periods of unrest. The issuing of a manifesto in February 2023 by twenty labor unions and feminist and student groups involved in the protests—which outlined their vision for a secular, democratic Iran—highlights the growing boldness and organization of the opposition. And, as with the previous protests that began over economic conditions, these broadened into demands for regime change and featured chants of “Death to Khamenei,” “Mullahs get lost,” and “We don’t want your Islamic Republic.”¹⁷¹

The protests over Amini’s death also galvanized the Iranian diaspora to organize in an unprecedented way, making it likely that the diaspora will play a bigger role in supporting internal unrest than has been the case previously. Diaspora Iranians organized rallies in major Western cities—including Berlin, London, Paris, Toronto, and Washington—every weekend. Around one hundred thousand people gathered in Berlin in October 2022 to support the protests in Iran, the largest diaspora demonstration against the Iranian regime on record. The diaspora in Canada and Europe used mass demonstrations to call on Canada, the United Kingdom, and the EU to designate the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization, echoing what many in the opposition inside Iran had been advocating—and Canada followed through with a designation in June 2024.^{XLII} Iranians in the United States organized a grassroots campaign to get Congress to pass the previously mentioned MAHSA Act in April 2024.¹⁷²

Moreover, for the first time, a group of prominent leaders and figures in the Iranian diaspora formed an opposition coalition, known as the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran (and nicknamed the Georgetown Eight). The group produced the Mahsa Charter, calling for a free and democratic Iran,

an end to the Islamic Republic, and “relentless activism” to bring this about. While the opposition coalition was short-lived—lasting only about four months—due to infighting among its members, the fact that it was formed at all, along with the unprecedented size and activism of the diaspora overall in support of the Woman, Life, Freedom protestors, shows that Iranians living abroad are beginning to learn their “power as a community” and gain experience in mobilizing the grassroots.¹⁷³

While the regime’s willingness to use massive force has suppressed the Woman, Life, Freedom protestors for now, some observers believe that the protest’s emergence indicates the country has entered a pre-revolutionary phase in which growing popular disaffection will spell real trouble for the regime down the road. There is daily civil disobedience among the populace that includes not wearing the hijab in public (prompting a new law to crack down on the practice), youth hanging banners or spraying anti-regime slogans on buildings, and musicians and artists continuing to produce protest art. Despite the quieting of street demonstrations, defiance isn’t gone. It has only become more creative, through group activities such as rollerblading without mandatory hijab and viral videos of Iranians drinking in celebration of the president’s death. Iranian dissidents inside and outside of the country are inventing and propagating a narrative counter to that of the regime, which undermines the Islamic Republic’s ideological attacks against its critics and weakens its claims to legitimacy.¹⁷⁴

Jack Goldstone, a recognized expert on revolutions, notes that while “revolutions are unpredictable,” history and the current “balance of power” in Iran “favor the Khamenei regime because the military still seems firmly behind the regime and the opposition lacks leadership and organization.”¹⁷⁵ To date, there have been no significant defections from the regime by key elements of the broader political elite.

Goldstone highlights several indicators that he says would suggest opposition to the regime is becoming a real threat to its hold on power.

XLI Iranian women in the 1990s engaged in a “pink revolution” against mandatory veiling and organized campaigns for divorce-law reform and more representation in parliament. In 2006, women led peaceful protests to call for the repeal of laws that discriminated against women; this evolved into the One Million Signatures Campaign, which organized Iranians at the grassroots level and lobbied for women’s rights, social change, and democratic freedoms. When the 2009 Green Movement erupted, an alliance of more than forty women’s and human rights groups helped guide the protests by building on the work of the One Million Signatures Campaign. Women’s prominence in the 2022–2023 Woman, Life, Freedom protest movement stemmed from this longer history of women’s grassroots organizing and activism. Iran’s two Nobel Laureates, Shirin Ebadi (awarded in 2003) and Narges Mohammadi (awarded in 2023), were both honored for their decades of advocacy for women’s rights in Iran. Multiple women’s rights organizations were signatories to the anti-regime manifesto, “Manifesto for Minimum Demands of Independent Trade Union and Civil Organizations of Iran,” issued in February 2023, and women across Iran have refused to wear hijab in public since 2022 despite a new law increasing penalties for hijab violations.^[a]

XLII The European Parliament passed a resolution in January 2023 calling on the European Union to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization, but to date neither the EU nor the United Kingdom has done so.

One would be the emergence of a clear leadership within the opposition—an element that has been lacking in previous protest movements, including the most recent Woman, Life, Freedom demonstrations—able to articulate a consistent and compelling set of goals and use this to galvanize a broader, long-term challenge to those in power.^{XLIII}

A second indicator would be evidence of serious fractures within the elite over how to respond to protests, particularly any sign of a split between the clerical establishment and the IRGC and “Basij foot soldiers” over whether and how to use force. Thus far, the IRGC has been willing to crack down harshly, but this could change if it became convinced that the political leadership was “no longer ruling in the nation’s interests.”¹⁷⁶

Goldstone says that regime missteps on issues where ordinary Iranians already have serious grievances could serve as the initial catalyst for renewed protests, resulting in demands by the clerical leadership for a tough response that “alienates the military.” He cites as examples a popular perception that regime mishandling is responsible for a sharp downturn in the economy, which has been improving somewhat because of a major increase in oil revenues, or that elections—which, until recent years, Iranians felt could be a vehicle for reform—no longer matter. And, of course, a regime determination to enforce tougher punishments for women not wearing the hijab—as new legislation would suggest—has the potential to reignite outrage that could galvanize broad-based opposition from which emerges a “stronger organization and a more compelling leadership.”¹⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

Emboldened by its success in expanding its influence and presence in the region, growing ties to Russia and China, and advances in its nuclear program, the Islamic Republic feels empowered to defy international pressure in pursuit of its goal of regional dominance. Iran’s Axis of Resistance has enabled it to threaten Israel and challenge the US presence in the region while largely avoiding direct attack. Tehran’s relations with Moscow and Beijing have garnered economic and military support, political cover, and a larger role on the global stage, while its nuclear advances give it clout to extract economic concessions and potentially deter threats. Meanwhile, the hard-liners’ consolidation of power has resulted in a more unified and cohesive approach to domestic and foreign policy.

Iran’s confidence on the international stage masks vulnerabilities at home and abroad. Tehran’s aggressive foreign policy has generated aversion in the West (including the West’s Asian allies) and the region, and its repression of its people has drawn an international outcry, while Russia and China are hedging in their relations with Iran. At home, the regime must deal with a poor economy and widespread domestic opposition. High inflation and unemployment, poor job prospects for youth, and rampant corruption among the elites have been major sources of popular unrest. The country’s growing water shortages, caused by government mismanagement and destructive agricultural policies amid a warming climate, are exacerbating the regime’s domestic woes.

The regime’s manipulation of recent elections and its brutal crackdown on the Woman, Life, Freedom movement have convinced many Iranians that reform is impossible, and that the regime is no longer legitimate and must go. Iran is also facing the looming prospect of choosing a successor to Khamenei—who has led Iran since 1989—due to his age and poor health. Historically, such periods of transitions can be perilous ones for authoritarian regimes as elites vie for power and regime opponents seeks to stir unrest in the streets.

XLIII The domestic opposition showed that it was beginning to do this early 2023, when the coalition of civil society groups, including labor and feminist organizations, mentioned in the text published its manifesto with goals for a post-Islamic Republic Iran.

ANNEX II

Europe and Iran in a new strategic context

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reoriented Europe's strategic outlook toward Moscow's revisionist threat. But even as Russia's ongoing aggression takes up much of the continent's foreign policy bandwidth, geopolitics and hard security issues more generally have moved to the top of Europe's agenda. That geopolitical rewiring of Europe, combined with a confluence of developments in Iran and within Europe, have also kept Iran high on European leaders' security agenda. While the European powers known as the E3—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—would probably welcome a deal with Iran on its nuclear program and regional malign influence, their posture regarding Tehran has hardened.

Iran's nuclear program was paramount for years among European leaders' security concerns. The E3 together with the European Union (EU) played a central role and invested significant political capital in the negotiations to induce Iran to accept limitations on its nuclear program, including the JCPOA. The agreement at the time was heralded as a major success for joint E3-EU diplomacy, including the latter's then-novel foreign service, the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Since then, and especially since 2022, a combination of developments has hardened stances among the E3 and at times facilitated a wider EU consensus in confronting Tehran. Iran's nuclear and missile programs remain a major concern for France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, and there is close coordination among the three. Following Iranian actions to further expand the country's nuclear program, E3 efforts led to Iran's censure before the IAEA's board of governors over its nuclear activities¹⁷⁸ and further debate in the UN Security Council in June 2024.¹⁷⁹ There also appear to be growing debates in E3 capitals over a potential tipping point in relations with Iran, how to structure deterrence, where exactly red lines ought to be established, and what the options ought to be, including tougher sanctions and the triggers for the JCPOA's snap-back clause. These internal debates are far from settled, but the trend points to more robust postures. A new deal is still the preferred outcome, but not at any cost and not without constructive engagement from Tehran.

WHAT IS DRIVING THE E3 TO COALESCE ON IRAN?

Iranian military assistance for Russia's war machine in Ukraine has served to widen concern beyond the E3 countries as traditional leaders of Europe's Iran policy. Tehran's supply of drones allowing Moscow to step up its attacks on civilian targets and infrastructure in Ukraine has mobilized Central Europeans and even some among those most skeptical of pressure on Iran. That led directly to the EU sanctioning Iranian entities in October 2022.¹⁸⁰ Many more listings have followed since. The measures have been limited and hardly a sharp sword, yet they still represent a significant step forward in the union's consensus-based decision-making and help to bind and compel less hawkish EU member states.

Iran's supplying of ballistic missiles to Russia despite strong warnings to Tehran against such a move from the EU, G7, and NATO appears to cross a European red line. Such a move will allow Moscow to further expand its civilian bombing campaign and overwhelm fragile Ukrainian defenses. The E3 appear to regard this as a game changer in relations with Iran and joined the United States in imposing new sanctions on Iran.

Meanwhile, developments in Iran itself, especially Tehran's repression of the 2022 protests, further diminished European hopes that deepening engagement will generate political opening in Iran at any time in the near future. For European publics and progressives propagating value-based or feminist foreign policies, Iran's actions, including its detention of European and dual citizens in the civil unrest, brought renewed focus to its human rights record. As relations deteriorated, EU leaders expanded sanctions against individuals on the grounds of human rights violations.¹⁸¹ The election of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian in July 2024 seemed to briefly rekindle hopes for engagement in some parts of Europe, especially on the left. But since assuming office, the new government has struggled to maintain a reformist appearance, undercutting any meaningful push by those favoring less pressure and a new policy mix in Europe's approach to Iran.

Europe's response to the October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel was marked by deep divisions over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Europe's apparent strategic irrelevance in the region. But Iran's actions and that of its self-proclaimed Axis of Resistance proxies, as well as the potential for regional escalation in the Middle East, have since given further oxygen to more hawkish views of Iran among the E3 and at the EU level. Tehran's April 13, 2024 missile attacks saw UK and French military assets deployed in defense of Israel. The United Kingdom—in contrast to France, Germany, and other EU members—joined US strikes against Iran's Houthi allies in Yemen, while the EU established its own, more defensive naval mission to protect against missile attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea.

Domestic developments within the E3 partners and at the EU level have tended to mostly reinforce the above drivers of European posture toward Iran.

FRANCE

Despite President Emmanuel Macron's recent losses in the National Assembly and European Parliament, foreign and security policy remain strong prerogatives of the French president, and Paris has long been a European leader on policy toward Iran. Macron has made clear he is unwilling to work with the far-left elements of the New Popular Front, the alliance that finished first in July's snap parliamentary election, which are also most likely to oppose a tougher line on Iran. But even if Macron seeks to boost his domestic position by taking increasingly anti-American positions, he has also toughened his line on Russia's war in Ukraine and Iranian support for Moscow while calling on Tehran to avoid escalatory moves in the Middle East.

For French strategists and policymakers, the nuclear program remains very high on the agenda and combines with regional and domestic concerns. In the region, any open conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is seen as likely to escalate rapidly into a region-wide conflict. That would not only pose threats to French military bases in Jordan and the UAE, and French troops participating in the UN force in Lebanon, but also have an impact on key French interests—from Lebanon's stability and the protection of Israel to Syria and the potential for further instability in the Levant and North Africa, with ripple effects at home.

GERMANY

For Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the *Zeitenwende*, or turning point, in rethinking Berlin's foreign and defense policies in response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is giving hard security issues a more central place and provides an important backdrop. Hampered at home and abroad by a complicated three-way coalition, Germany's emergence as Ukraine's largest European supporter still puts Iran's military assistance for Moscow into much sharper focus for Berlin.

The October 7 attacks have translated successive governments' somewhat undefined commitment to Israel's security as German *Staatsräson*—or a fundamental national security interest—into a harder pro-Israel stance among political elites and tougher criticisms of Iran, its proxies, and regional role.¹⁸² Berlin lacks the means, strategic culture, and political will of its E3 partners to be a more influential actor in the Middle East. But it is increasingly sensitive to the impact of further instability in the Middle East on German domestic and European interests—hence the participation in the EU's Red Sea maritime security mission. All of this combines with party-political dynamics that influence Berlin's Iran policy.

As proponents of values-based, feminist, and human-rights focused foreign policies, the Green Party controls the foreign office and has doubled down on its traditionally hawkish stance on Iran, especially in the context of Ukraine and the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests. Meanwhile, the center-right Christian Democrats, now in opposition but polling favorites to lead the next German government, call for a hawkish revamp of Iran policy with a new position paper.¹⁸³ None of this makes for a comprehensive German Iran strategy. But little suggests a fundamental reversal of the overall trends in the short term.

UNITED KINGDOM

The new Labour government that took office in July 2024 has vowed to develop a more comprehensive and robust policy on Iran.¹⁸⁴ Foreign Secretary David Lammy is reportedly looking at a variety of measures: adapting the UK sanctions regime to allow for restrictive measures against the IRGC without an outright terrorist designation that would kill diplomatic efforts of engagement with the new Iranian government, taking action against Iran's networks in the United Kingdom, and establishing a more robust presence in the Middle East to protect Israel and confront Tehran's proxies.¹⁸⁵ Labour's focus on “reconnect[ing] and rebuild[ing]” relationships with allies, in particular the EU, will also help tighten cooperation with E3 partners.

Lammy's joint visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories with French Foreign Minister Stéphane Séjourné in August 2024—the first of its kind in over a decade—suggests that the new government is keenly aware of how much ground London and its European partners have to make up in the Middle East.¹⁸⁶ The United Kingdom is also more attuned than its E3 partners at this point to arguments of a multi-front contest with an “axis of upheaval” that links Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran.¹⁸⁷ But the UK government under Labour would still be willing to engage with Iran if there were a change of behavior in Tehran. It is willing to leave the door half-open, it seems, as the internal discussions on the IRGC designation seem to show.¹⁸⁸ But there is little confidence such a change is forthcoming anytime soon.

VIEWS FROM BRUSSELS AND THE CONTINENT

At the EU level, old and new leadership is likely to bring change. Amid deep divisions across the EU's twenty-seven members, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen repeatedly assumed tougher positions on Iran in the wake of the October 7 attacks.¹⁸⁹ Her second term—combined with weak leadership in Paris and Berlin—will coincide with a change in the EU's chief diplomat at the top of the EEAS. Outgoing EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR/VP) Josep Borrell throughout his term was a proponent of diplomatic engagement with Iran. That stance was reinforced by the EEAS's institutional interest in supporting diplomatic approaches and the JCPOA itself as a defining achievement of the EU's then-nascent foreign service.

How the new HR/VP Kaja Kallas will position herself on Iran is unclear. Given that she is a former Estonian prime minister and a Russia hawk from the EU's eastern flank, Tehran's role in Moscow's aggression is likely to heavily influence her perspective. At the same time, she will have to prove that she can represent the broader priorities of the EU's twenty-seven members and is not a single-issue foreign policy leader focused on Russia alone.

Meanwhile, the new European Parliament has shifted to the political right, and with that center of gravity it is likely to remain a vocal critic of Iran and any overly accommodating EU engagement. The reactions to HR/VP Borrell's decision to send an EEAS official to Pezeshkian's inauguration illustrate where the direction of travel is likely to go.¹⁹⁰ While there are EU member states that do consider the current pressure-only strategy a failure and might wish for more engagement, the combination of E3 leadership on the issue, political and personnel changes, and Iran's entanglement in Russia's war will likely prevent major engagement initiatives in the short term. Iran's support for Russia may also present

an opportunity for those critical of Tehran to lock more dovish member states into sanctions measures, even if these will hardly be measures of maximal pressure.

The sunset provisions of the JCPOA, under which the framework and its sanctions regime is set to expire in October 2025, are of major concern to the E3 and EU. So is the very ambitious timeline of an estimated three to four months needed to work through the various procedural stages of determining Iran's nuclear noncompliance before the IAEA and United Nations. That does not take into account the political calendar in the United States and the time needed to build unity among twenty-seven EU members, which together leave even less time for any potential negotiations with Tehran. The E3 countries are also clear-eyed about Iran emerging as a potential winner from these dynamics, putting up a friendly (enough) face for now under the Pezeshkian government while killing time and having raked in some other wins, from joining the Shanghai Cooperation Council and the BRICS to normalization in the Gulf.

Many European leaders have shifted focus to Russia and for the reasons discussed above may be less ready to incur significant costs in hope of an agreement. Following the targeted killing of Hamas's Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, any further escalation between Iran and its proxies on the one hand and Israel on the other will likely evaporate the already limited policy space for the E3 to engage in diplomatic efforts. A full-out war would probably leave the E3 with little option in the short term but to take Israel's side while the EU would be paralyzed by its members' internal divisions.

European leaders will also be more skeptical about any future US proposals for joint action due to their past experience with the JCPOA. There has also been frustration with the Biden administration, which came into office with a promise of rebuilding US alliances and global engagement. While the Biden team did so forcefully on the issue of Russia/Ukraine, Europeans view US engagement on Iran as lacking any discernible strategy and political will. Iran's nuclear program, they feel, has been largely deprioritized by the United States. There is also significant skepticism, including among the E3, of the view of the most hawkish in Washington that deterrence alone can achieve the best outcomes. This combines with European concerns about the lack of US influence over the current Israeli government. In the end, European leaders will be hesitant about potential new initiatives, even as their preference for a new deal on Iran's nuclear program remains undiminished.

European leaders might accede to US preferences for additional and tougher sanctions on Iran but would balk at providing support for increased military activity in the region. For this very reason, France and Germany,

along with a number of other European partners, were reluctant to join the US-led, UK-supported naval mission in the Red Sea that included more offensive strikes against the Houthis in Yemen. Instead, they opted for a more narrowly circumscribed, “purely defensive” maritime security mission under an EU flag.¹⁹¹

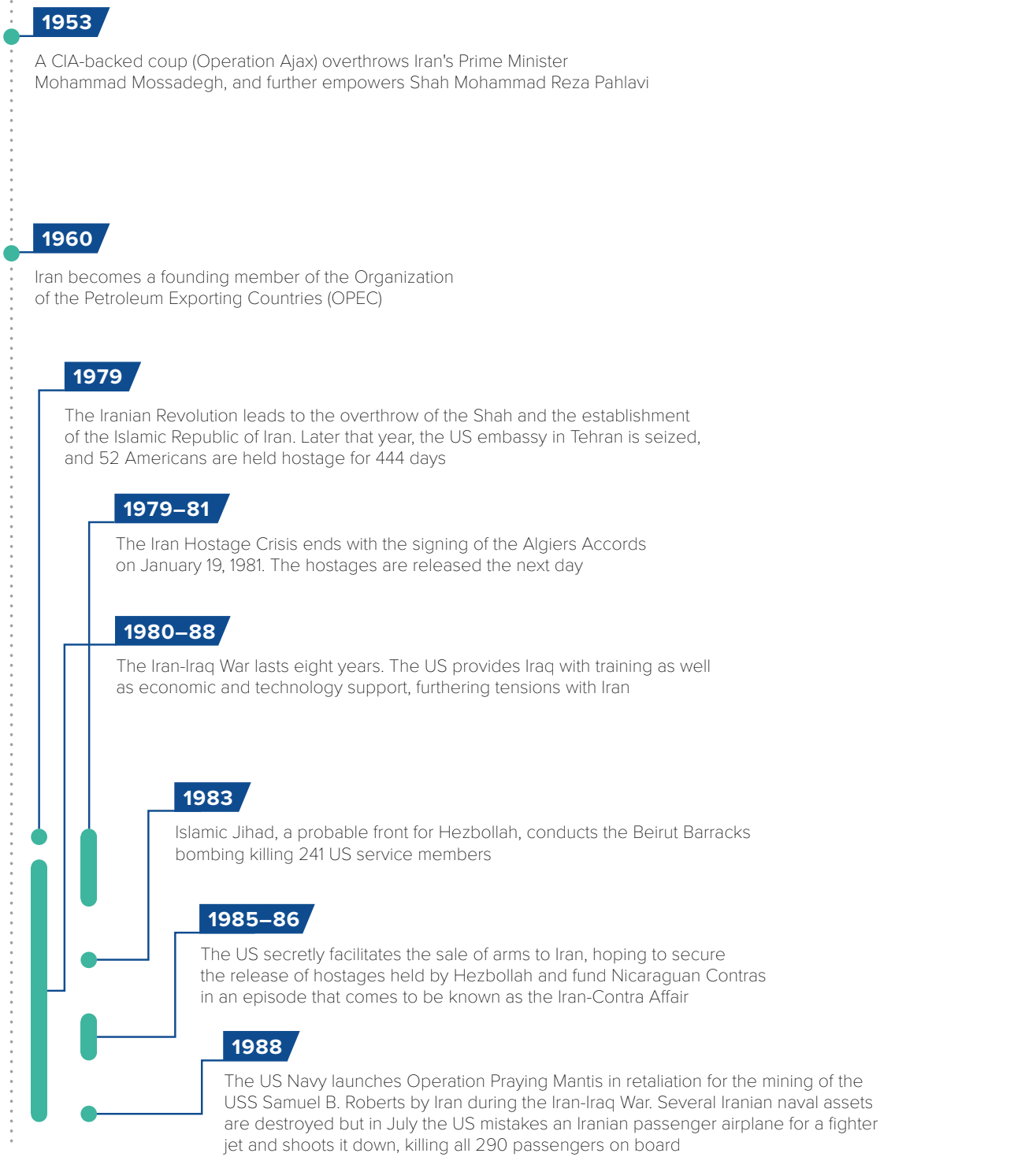
While the European business community will resist increased sanctions, Iran’s economy has been so weakened in recent years that business leaders may put up less opposition than in the past: Since 2017, trade between the European Union and Iran has declined by 77 percent.¹⁹² Moreover, if additional sanctions on Iran are viewed as a means of reducing Iran’s support to Russia, they may be more popular with key European capitals. Some past European rationales against sanctions, such as the need to reduce the strength

of the IRGC in Iranian politics, have also now been overtaken by events. European leaders might see a US call for intensified pressure on Iran as an opportunity to negotiate for a stronger US commitment to Europe and strengthened US support to Ukraine in particular.

At the same time, however, Europe’s preoccupation with the threat from Russia, and skepticism about the United States’ commitment to its security, could make European leaders suspicious of any US efforts to increase pressure on Iran. The last thing that European capitals want is an intensification of the military conflicts in the Middle East. Any US moves that Europeans suspect presage a US military campaign against Iran will be met with strong resistance in European capitals. Suspicions of this kind will run highest if a conservative government is still in power in Israel.

ANNEX III

A timeline of US-Iranian interaction since the 1979 Revolution



1992

The Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act (NPA) is passed by the US Congress, establishing a policy to oppose any transfer of goods or technology that could aid Iran or Iraq in developing chemical, biological, nuclear, or advanced conventional weapons

1996

The Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) is passed by the US Congress, imposing economic sanctions on firms investing in Iranian and Libyan energy sectors

2002

US President George W. Bush labels Iran part of the "Axis of Evil," accusing it of supporting terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction

2006

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sends a letter to President George W. Bush seeking to lower tensions over Iran's nuclear program but declines to restrict or slow uranium enrichment

2015

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is agreed to by Iran and the P5+1. In exchange for sanctions relief, Iran agrees that its nuclear program will be subject to various limits, dismantling, and an intense verification regime

2018

US President Donald Trump withdraws the US from the JCPOA and declares a "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign on Iran

2020

A US drone strike kills Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's IRGC Quds Force. Iran retaliates with missile attacks on US bases in Iraq, injuring dozens of US and Iraqi forces

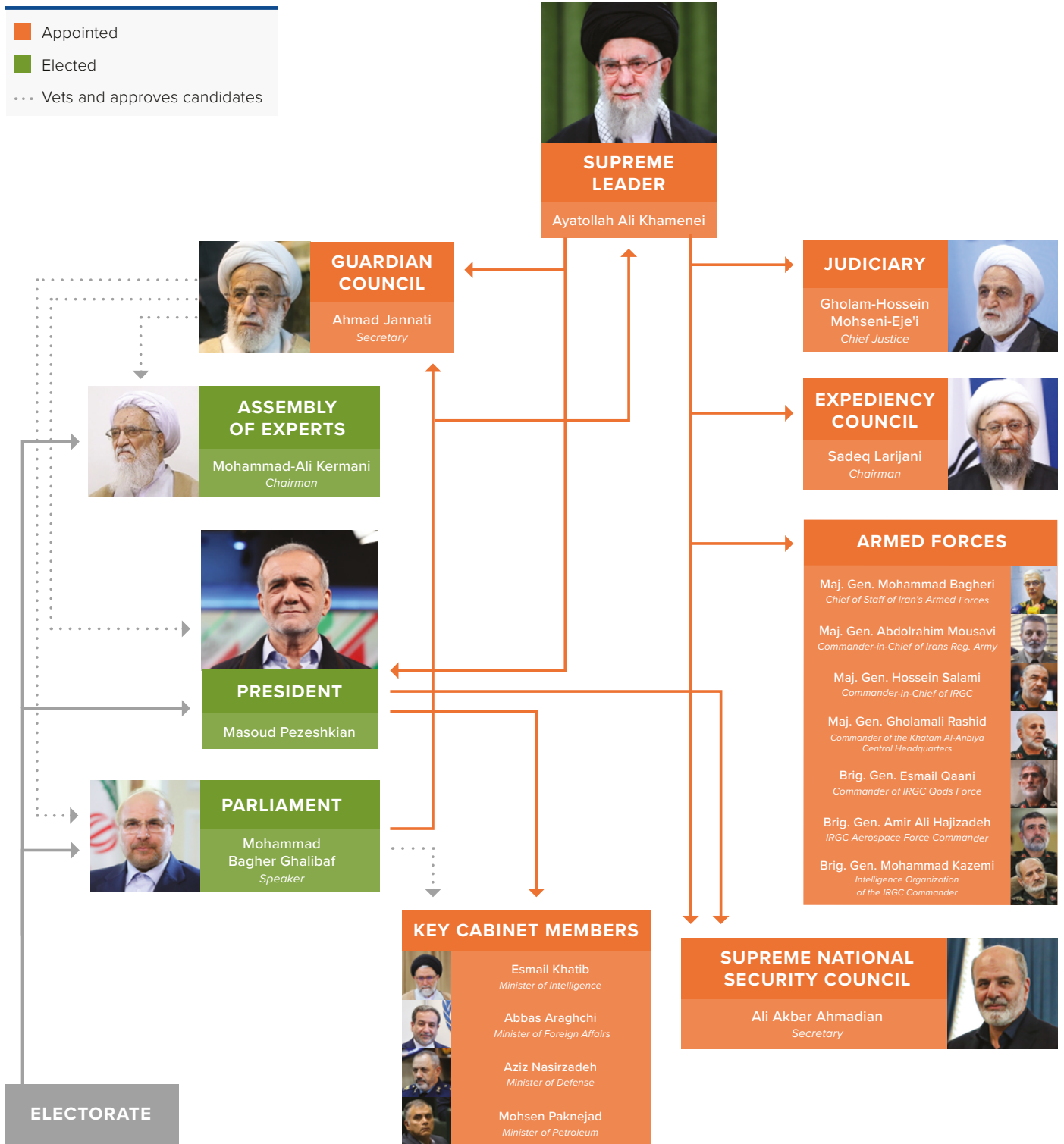
2022

The Biden administration's efforts to revive the JCPOA stall as talks deadlock. The eruption of nationwide protests in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini soon follow

2024

ANNEX IV

Leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran



ANNEX V

A history of US-Iran relations

by Kelly J. Shannon, PhD

While most Americans generally do not have a strong understanding of the history of their nation's relationship with Iran beyond the four decades of diplomatic tensions since 1979, years of research and engagement with Iranians vividly illustrate the long and enduring nature of Iranians' historical memory. History shapes the Islamic Republic's attitude and behavior toward the United States, just as it shapes the attitudes and desires of the Iranian people. However, there are dramatic differences in how the Islamic Republic and its supporters view modern Iranian history, including the history of US-Iran relations, and how the majority of the Iranian people see that same history. Diverging historical narratives are part of the ongoing and escalating struggle between the mullahs who cling to power and an Iranian public that wishes to replace the theocracy with secular democracy. The conflicting historical memories of both groups are therefore relevant to US policymaking.

THE NATIONAL TRAUMA OF FOREIGN DOMINATION

All Iranians—government officials and everyday citizens alike—share the belief that Iran is the home of once-great empires and should be taken seriously by the international community. Yet it is important to remember that most Iranians also remember a more recent history of foreign domination as a traumatic experience for their nation. Iran in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries experienced increasing, and often violent, foreign interference. In the early nineteenth century, imperial Russia conquered and seized significant territory from Iran in the Caucasus region; even today, diverse groups of Iranians refer to this history with bitterness. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, imperial Russia and Great Britain ensnared the Iranian government in debt and imposed concessions that gave them significant control over Iran's resources and industries. The most infamous of these concessions was the 1901 D'Arcy Concession, which gave control over Iran's oil—except in the northern provinces—to Britain, and this remained a major point of contention between Iranians and the British for the next half century. Further humiliation occurred in 1907, when the Anglo-Russian Convention divided Iran into spheres of influence without consulting the Iranian government.

Iran's first revolution, the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911, occurred, in large part, because the Iranian people wanted to end foreign domination of their country and build a truly sovereign nation-state grounded in parliamentary democracy. The Russians thwarted that effort by invading Iran in 1911, killing many Iranians and forcing the closure of the nascent parliament. Russian troops remained in Iran for the next several years and treated the country's north largely as an extension of Russia. The presence of Russian troops was a provocation to the Ottoman Empire once World War I broke out in 1914—a war in which Iran was neutral. Despite Iran's multiple entreaties for a Russian withdrawal, the Russians remained, provoking an Ottoman invasion, battles on Iranian soil, and the killing and displacement of thousands of Iranians in the north. Britain also sent troops to Iran's south, where they clashed with Iranian tribal groups. The war caused a widespread famine in 1917–1919 that killed millions. Of all the neutral countries in World War I, Iran's suffering was second only to Belgium's, not only in total deaths, but also in terms of disease, economic disruption, political instability, military occupation by multiple foreign armies, displacement of civilians due to the fighting, and physical destruction wrought by battles fought on Iranian soil. When Iranians sought redress at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Britain blocked the Iranian delegation from receiving a hearing and instead tried to force Iran to sign a treaty, the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919, that would have made the country into a virtual British colony. The fierce resistance of the Iranian people, and the support of the United States government at the time, prevented the treaty from going into effect. Many Iranians today see the devastation wrought by World War I as a genocide that goes unacknowledged by the global community.

Iran's interwar government led by Reza Shah Pahlavi took measures to strengthen the nation's military and reduce foreign influence, but Iran was again occupied by foreign troops during World War II. Concerned about Reza Shah's tilt toward Germany and Iran's strategic proximity to the Soviet Union, the British and Soviets invaded and occupied Iran in August 1941 and forced Reza Shah's abdication. His twenty-two-year-old son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, took the throne. Once the United States joined the war, US troops were also stationed in Iran. Although the British and US troops withdrew at the war's end, the Soviets refused to withdraw and instead backed communist separatist

movements in Iran's northern provinces and agitation by the communist Tudeh Party in Tehran, and pushed for an oil concession, provoking a crisis in 1946. The 1946 crisis was one of the precipitating events of the Cold War. The Soviets ultimately withdrew, but their violations of Iran's sovereignty had caused much damage.

After the Soviet withdrawal, Iran experienced a brief measure of freedom. Like Iran's earlier experiment with democracy during the Constitutional Revolution, this new experiment was short-lived due to foreign intervention. In 1951, Iran's parliament, led by the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, nationalized the nation's oil industry and provoked a two-year standoff with the United Kingdom. The situation ended with a CIA- and MI6-backed coup that removed Mosaddegh from power in 1953 and created the opportunity for the young shah to consolidate power in his own hands. That same year, the United States emerged as the new dominant power in Iran. Although the United States never invaded, killed Iranians, or forced the Iranian government to bow to its wishes at gunpoint like the Russians and British had done, many Iranians saw US involvement in 1953 and the subsequent decades of US support for the autocratic shah as continued imperial domination. Eliminating foreign control was a key motivation for many of the revolutionaries who overthrew the shah in 1979.

To this day, despite the diametrically opposed worldviews of the Islamic Republic and a significant majority of the Iranian public, both groups still oppose foreign domination. Both remember well the humiliation, destruction, and trauma wrought by foreign powers over the past two centuries. Yet while most Iranians, regardless of their ideological positions, viewed the United States with suspicion during the 1979 Revolution, the regime and most of the Iranian public interpret the United States' historical involvement in Iran's affairs very differently today. To the regime, the United States was the worst perpetrator of Western imperialism in Iran and is the Islamic Republic's greatest foe, while the Iranian people see the United States as a potential ally.

THE REGIME'S VIEW OF HISTORY

The Islamic Republic casts itself as a victim of US machinations and sees itself as an anti-imperialist model for other Muslim countries to follow. Before the end of the Cold War, it positioned its theocracy as a third way between the capitalist West and communist East. Today, it sees its system as leading a global resistance against the US-led international order.

To Iran's regime, the United States is the "Great Satan" because of the regime's reading of Iran's history and the core tenets of its ideology. It sees the 1953 coup as the United States' original sin and conveniently overlooks Iranians' participation in the coup, including some religious leaders. It also blames the United States for much of what came after. US support, the regime contends, allowed the shah to become a dictator who committed such sins as trying to modernize and secularize Iran (thus taking power and influence away from the mullahs) and, perhaps most egregiously, granting personal and political freedoms to women. The United States allied with the United Kingdom—the "Little Satan"—and treated Iran with the same imperial hubris as the British had in earlier eras. Capitulations by the shah's government in the 1960s, which gave the United States rather than the Iranian justice system jurisdiction over any crimes committed by Americans in Iran, was akin to earlier Iranian concessions to Britain and Russia and a symbol of US hegemony. Persecution of those who criticized the shah's government, including imprisonment and torture of political prisoners by the SAVAK, or secret police, were all ultimately the fault of the shah's US backers.

The mullahs' historical grievances against the United States have only compounded since they seized power and imposed theocracy in 1979. Immediately, they feared US plots of counterrevolution. US involvement in the 1953 coup and President Jimmy Carter allowing the ailing shah to come to the United States in late 1979 for medical treatment were evidence to the mullahs that the United States plotted to return the shah to power; this belief precipitated the Iran hostage crisis in November 1979 against the "den of spies" (that is, the US embassy) in Tehran. The hostage crisis, in turn, led to the break in formal diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran that continues today. The hostage crisis also conveniently allowed Ayatollah Khomeini and his fundamentalist followers to push aside their remaining political rivals, like the pro-democracy head of Iran's interim government, Mehdi Bazargan. The regime's suspiciousness of the United States and paranoia about US plots to overthrow their revolutionary regime persisted and grew ever since; the regime today sees evidence of US malevolence everywhere.

Iran's regime interprets subsequent US actions as further proof that the United States seeks its ouster. The United States sided with Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its bloody war against Iran from 1980–1988. In 1988, the United States shot down an Iranian passenger jet, killing 290 people, during a period of heightened tensions. US accounts insist the incident was accidental; the Islamic Republic contends it was intentional. Later, despite a post-9/11 thaw in relations and Iran's cooperation in working to oust the Taliban and al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, President George W. Bush still declared Iran part of an "Axis of Evil" in his January 2002 State of the Union address. Once again, Americans had proven their duplicity.

In the past decade, Iranian reformers in government pushed for improved relations with the United States and argued that the two countries could reach an accommodation. The successful negotiation of the JCPOA during the Obama administration appeared to prove the reformers right. Yet when the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and imposed harsh sanctions despite Iranian compliance with the agreement to that point, the hard-liners were vindicated, and the reformers lost their influence—and control of the presidency. The US killing of IRGC General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 only further reinforced the hard-liners' position.

The history of US behavior in the broader region also appears to confirm the hard-liners' stance. Beyond Cold War-era interventions in the Middle East, the history of staunch US support for Israel and its alliance with Saudi Arabia (both Iran's rivals), its invasion of Iraq in 2003, and its disastrous twenty-year war in Afghanistan all demonstrate to Iran's leaders that the United States is an imperialist power bent on dominating and terrorizing the Islamic world. When Americans speak of human rights, the regime points to human rights violations committed by US allies and the United States itself against the Muslim world to prove the emptiness of US claims. To them, human rights are simply another tool of Western imperialism.

In their view, Iran must stand in defiance of the United States. The regime sees the West, especially the United States, as decadent and weak. The weaker the United States becomes, the bolder Iran can be in challenging the international order. Yet in the regime's view, Iran can also be patient in waiting for the West's collapse. Much like the Soviet Union did during the Cold War, Iran believes the collapse of the United States and the broader West is inevitable; the regime believes that the Islamic Republic's version of Islam will prevail in the end.

The Islamic Republic today is more anti-American and paranoid than ever; it sees US interference everywhere. The United States is a convenient scapegoat for all of Iran's problems—its economic woes, climate change, water scarcity, and even domestic unrest. Blaming the United States for everything allows the regime to avoid taking accountability for its own failings and justifies even its most brutal actions as self-defense. The United States will thus always be the mullahs' bogeyman; the regime needs this enemy against which to define itself. Anti-Americanism is baked into the Islamic Republic's ideology; it is a core feature of the regime. History, according to the Islamic Republic, proves

that its interpretation of the United States is correct. Iran's current government system will always see United States as evil and interpret US actions in worst possible light. True rapprochement or peaceful coexistence with the current regime will not be possible without a radical change in Tehran's ideology.

THE DISSIDENT PUBLIC'S VIEW OF HISTORY

Most of the Iranian people see their history very differently from their government.¹⁹³ And Iranians know their own history well, despite the lack of free inquiry in Iran since 1979. It is common for an average citizen to be able to recount from memory Iran's long history stretching back to ancient times, provide detailed explanations of Iran's pre-Islamic religions, or recite poetry from hundreds of years ago. While the majority of Iranians oppose their government and are ashamed of Iran's behavior during the past four decades, they are very proud of their culture and history. They are especially proud of Iran's pre-Islamic past, in opposition to the regime's emphasis on the country's Islamic identity. To many Iranians, the Islamic Republic is a historical aberration and Iran's current hostile relationship with the United States need not be permanent.

It is true that many Iranians who participated in the 1979 Revolution shared the anti-Americanism of Khomeini and the fundamentalists, but many now regret the revolution. For many Iranians, especially for younger people born after 1979, being pro-American has become a form of resistance against their government. Many also simply find US culture deeply appealing, particularly Americans' personal freedoms and democratic government. For them, the United States remains the standard bearer of democratic ideals. Iranians are not naïve, and they often express frustration with US policy, but a large swath of the Iranian public would still welcome US support, economic exchange, and friendly diplomatic relations.

The Islamic Republic seeks to impose a historical memory that casts the United States as the villain in Iran's historical drama, but most Iranians subvert the official historical narrative by remembering the long history of US-Iranian friendship.^{XLIV, 194} They hold that history up as a symbol of what the US-Iran relationship could be again one day. Most Iranians know of and admire Howard Baskerville, a young US missionary who fought and died alongside the Iranian

XLIV While public opinion surveys from Iran are difficult to obtain, there is general agreement among Iran experts that the Iranian public in general tend to see Americans more positively than their Arab and Turkish neighbors. Few recent empirical studies of Iranian attitudes exist, however. In the author's many years of conversations and engagement with Iranians of many backgrounds, when the subject of the United States arises, they often mention—unprompted—individual American friends of Iran from the past 110 years. While not uncritical of the United States, they use these examples to demonstrate their positive feelings about the American people and hopes for renewed American-Iranian friendship.

constitutionalists in Tabriz in 1909.⁹⁵ Remarkably, a bust of Baskerville was even installed in the Constitution House in Tabriz in the early 2000s, and Iranians still leave roses on the American’s grave. Iranians also remember W. Morgan Shuster, a US financier who served as Iran’s treasurer general from 1909–1911 and who tried desperately to help constitutionalist Iran stave off Russian and British imperial pressures. Shuster was a major reason why the Russians invaded in 1911 to end Iran’s revolution. Even now, to many Iranians, Shuster remains a hero and Baskerville a martyr for Iranian democracy and sovereignty.

Iranians remember fondly many other US friends from the last century: Samuel Jordan, founder of Alborz College and major contributor to education in Iran; Jordan’s fellow Presbyterian missionaries who ran much-appreciated hospitals and schools; US humanitarian organizations that aided Iranians in the aftermath of World War I; President Woodrow Wilson and Secretary of State Robert Lansing, who supported Iranians in opposing the Anglo-Persian Agreement; the Harry Truman administration in its defense of Iran’s sovereignty during the 1946 crisis; the many Americans who helped provide Iran with technical and other aid during the modernizing Pahlavi era; and the hundreds of young Americans who came to Iran as Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s and early 1970s, among others. With this history of people-to-people friendship to draw upon, significant numbers of Iranians who oppose their regime see future cooperation and friendship with the United States as desirable. The existence of a large Iranian diaspora in the United States further cements Iranians’ desire for better relations.

Yet many Iranians are also deeply disappointed in the lackluster US support for the 2009 Green Movement and especially for the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that began in 2022. They worry that continuing US engagement with the Islamic Republic over the country’s nuclear program and its use of hostage diplomacy props up and legitimizes what they see as an illegitimate and irredeemable regime. Anti-regime Iranians instead want robust US support and would welcome US help in building a secular democracy that has friendly relations with all nations and that abides by international norms.^{XLV} They hope that the Islamic Republic’s recent escalation of bad behavior that has destabilized the Middle East will force the United States to adopt the same view of the Islamic Republic that most Iranians hold: that the regime is incapable of reform or moderation.

HOW HISTORY SHOULD INFORM US POLICYMAKING

Brief moments of détente between the United States and Islamic Republic have sometimes been possible since 1979, but the time for détente has ended with the discrediting of Iran’s reformers and the ascendancy of Iran’s ultra-hard-liners in the Raisi era. The Islamic Republic as it is now constituted will never fall in line with international norms. Its main goals are to remain in power and put Iran at the center of a new, anti-Western international order. The Islamic Republic’s reading of Iran’s history precludes ever trusting or making things easier for the “Great Satan.” That said, in the short term and while the theocracy remains in place, US policymakers must recognize Iran’s desire to be seen as a major international player and the potential carrot effect if the United States treats it as such. The regime’s sense of its own superiority and historical victimhood at the hands of an imperialist United States necessitates a deft hand when engaging it with both diplomacy and deterrence.

Like all autocratic regimes, the Islamic Republic also uses history as a weapon in its battle to control the beliefs and behavior of its own people. It recently targeted Iranian historians in its attempts to rein in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement of 2022–2023 and foreclose the possibility of future mass protests. Academics across Iran are being harassed, hauled in for questioning, and threatened with dismissal for producing accurate histories. Last year, the government stopped the publication of a book on the history of Russian-Iranian relations because it was concerned the book would stir up anti-Russian sentiment and perhaps also upset Putin’s government during a time when the Islamic Republic and Russia are building a closer alliance. This past month, the regime also targeted a historian for publishing an article about Reza Shah’s hijab ban in the 1930s that was not sufficiently critical of that law, with state media accusing the historian of being anti-hijab and calling for his dismissal from his university.

History clearly matters in Iran. It should also matter to US policymakers. Because the Islamic Republic presents a distorted, propagandized version of history to its people, a true and accurate recounting of Iran’s modern history could prove useful to US policymakers. Truth must combat lies. Americans, for example, should highlight Russia’s history of dominating Iran through violence and coercion and highlight Putin’s resurrection of Russia’s nineteenth-century imperial ambitions as a way of potentially driving a wedge between Iran and Russia; the Islamic Republic clearly does not want this history discussed.

XLV Most Iranians remain deeply suspicious of the United Kingdom and France, for historical reasons.

Annexes

The United States should also speak directly to the Iranian people and stress the long history of US-Iranian friendship. Most Iranians already know this history, but signaling that the United States also knows and values this historical relationship would help build trust with Iran's opposition movement. The United States should stress the compatibility of Iranians' desires for democracy—as well as Iran's 120-year-old pro-democracy movement—with the United States' long-held democratic values, as well as the positive aspects of the United States' historical relationship with

the world. Appeal to Iranians' sense of their own greatness and their sense of themselves as a people apart from other Middle Easterners. Treat Iranians with respect and listen to what they have to say about the future of their country; a humble approach is best. Yet this historicized message of US benevolence will only matter if the United States also takes meaningful steps to demonstrate that it is indeed Iran's friend today, by helping the Iranian people become capable of dislodging the theocracy and building a better Iran for themselves.

ANNEX VI

Iran's technical advances in its nuclear program since 2019

Since Iran began breaching the JCPOA's limits in 2019, a year after the United States withdrew from the agreement, it has significantly expanded its nuclear program and invested in new, more proliferation-sensitive activities. These advances, combined with Tehran's decision to reduce transparency, give Tehran the option to move more quickly to nuclear weapons and have irreversibly altered Iran's pathways to the bomb. In general, Iran's current nuclear activities differ from the pre-JCPOA program in three key areas.

AN IRREVERSIBLE DROP IN BREAKOUT TIME

When negotiations commenced on the JCPOA, it would have taken Iran about two to three months to produce enough fissile material for one bomb (twenty-five kilograms of uranium enriched to above 90 percent), a time frame referred to as breakout. When the JCPOA was fully implemented, the breakout grew to about twelve months as a result of limits on enrichment levels, uranium stockpiles, and centrifuge types. As of early 2024, Iran's breakout for one nuclear weapon is estimated at one to two weeks and breakout for five nuclear weapons is estimated at three to four weeks. The latter timeframe will drop further if Iran continues to expand its stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent and installs and operates additional advanced centrifuges, which enrich uranium more efficiently.

The decreasing breakout time to multiple weapons is particularly critical, as producing one bomb provides little to no security value, particularly given that Iran never tested a nuclear device. However, when Tehran can move quickly to produce enough material for multiple weapons and divert the material to several covert sites, proliferation risk increases because it would be more difficult to track and disrupt the six-to-twelve-month weaponization process.

Achieving a twelve-month breakout in a future deal to match the JCPOA's results will be difficult, if not impossible, because the knowledge Iran has gained from the operation of advanced machines and near-weapons-grade enrichment would allow it to ratchet up its program much more quickly.

NEW NUCLEAR CAPABILITIES

Iran's initial violations of the JCPOA focused on resuming activities Tehran undertook before the implementation of the accord. These activities, such as breaching the three-hundred-kilogram limit on stockpiled uranium and increasing enrichment levels from 3.67 percent to about 5 percent, were quickly reversible and did not significantly affect proliferation risk or breakout. However, Iran's subsequent violations expanded the country's capabilities and resulted in the acquisition of new knowledge that cannot be reversed. For example, Tehran is gaining significant experience in areas such as the production and operation of IR-2 and IR-6 centrifuges, which enrich uranium more efficiently than the IR-1 model Iran was limited to using for ten years under the JCPOA, and enrichment to 60 percent, a level Iran had not pursued before the JCPOA's negotiation.

Furthermore, Iran experimented with uranium metal production, a key weaponization activity, and centrifuge cascade designs that make it easier to quickly switch between enrichment levels. Iran's mastery of new enrichment capabilities and its research activities have two significant implications for proliferation risk.

First, its irreversible acquisition of knowledge allows Tehran to break out more quickly (as described above) and provides it with alternative pathways to produce weapons-grade nuclear materials. Iran's recent enrichment work, for example, would enable Tehran to move to weapons-grade enrichment using fewer steps. Iran's advances also increase the viability of the so-called sneak-out option, which would entail producing weapons-grade material at undeclared, covert sites. By using more efficient centrifuges, Tehran could set up an illicit facility with a smaller footprint, reducing the likelihood of detection. Second, Iran's new capabilities and expanded enrichment capacity provide it with more leverage if talks were to resume.

MONITORING GAPS

In February 2021, Iran suspended the more intrusive additional protocol to its safeguards agreement, which provided the IAEA with access to additional information and facilities, and JCPOA-specific monitoring measures, such as daily access to enrichment facilities and continuous surveillance at certain sites. As a result, Iran is implementing only its NPT-required safeguards agreement, which provides inspectors regular access to facilities where fissile material is present. This type of safeguards agreement is insufficient to deter and detect proliferation.

The gaps in monitoring create short- and long-term challenges for reducing Iran's proliferation risk. In the short term, less frequent access increases the risk that Iran could attempt to break out between agency inspections. Furthermore, Iran's refusal to allow inspections and surveillance at sites that support the nuclear program, such as the production of uranium ore concentrate and centrifuges, increases the risk that Tehran might divert those materials for a covert program.

In the long term, the monitoring gap raises concerns about reestablishing credible baseline inventories of certain materials. The IAEA assessed in 2023 that its continuity of knowledge regarding the program is lost, and that reconstructing an accurate history of nuclear activities during that gap will be difficult, if not impossible, even with Iranian

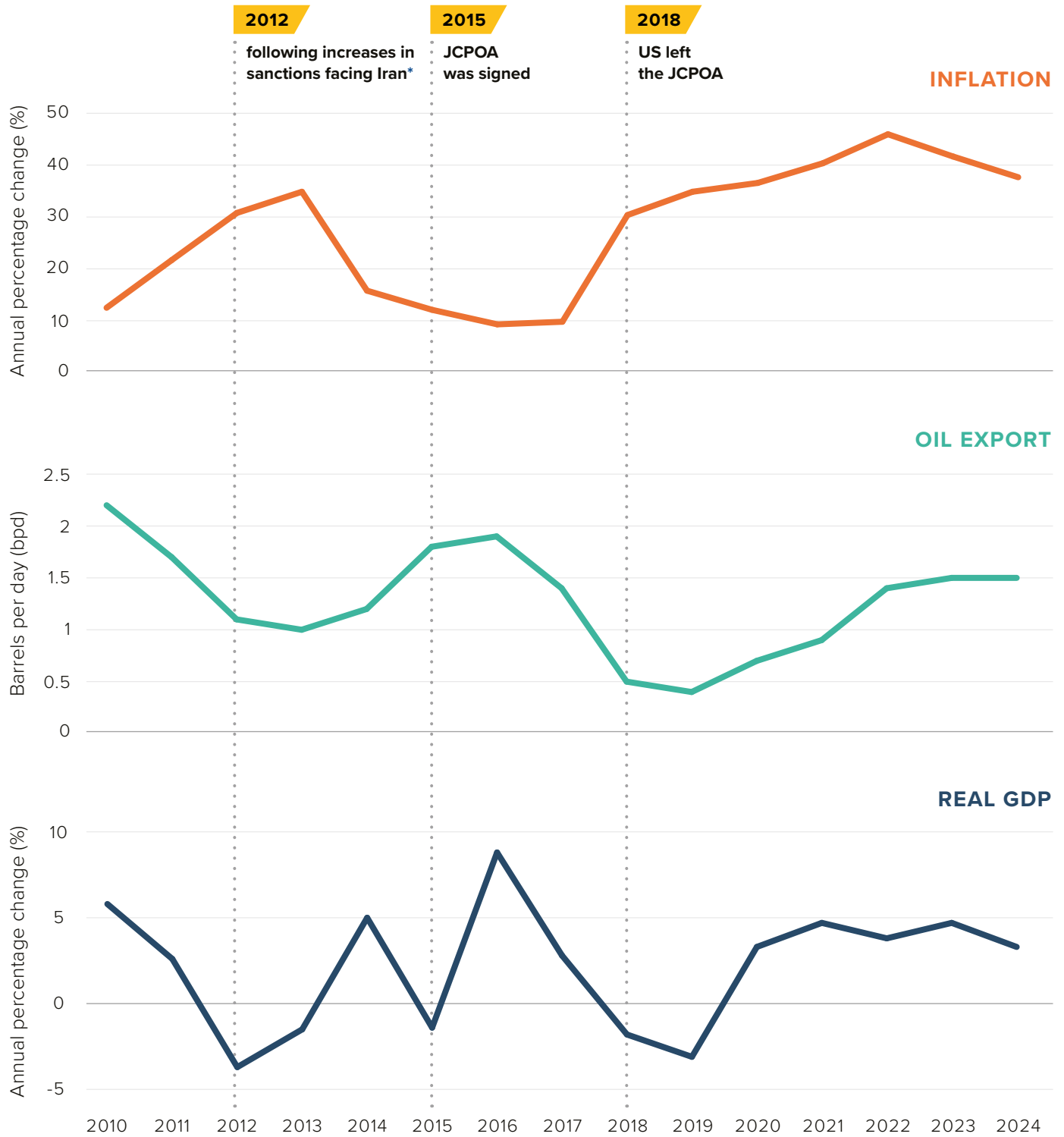
cooperation. Without credible baselines, it will be challenging to verify limits on certain stockpiles in the event of another nuclear agreement. This has implications not only for the sustainability of an agreement but also for the US domestic process for congressional review under the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. The act's requirements include a certification that any nuclear agreement can be verified by the IAEA, which could be challenging given the agency's statements about the loss of continuity of knowledge.

Moreover, Iran is also no longer implementing Modified Code 3.1 of its safeguards agreement, a measure that requires Tehran to provide the IAEA with design information for a new nuclear facility as soon as a decision is made to begin construction. Early provision of design information allows the IAEA to craft a more effective and thorough safeguards approach compared to the previous requirements, which only mandated that the agency be notified 180 days before nuclear material was introduced to a site. The IAEA maintains that Iran cannot unilaterally suspend modified Code 3.1, and it continues to insist that Tehran provide information regarding new nuclear facilities that it has publicly discussed developing.

The longer Iran goes without implementing Modified Code 3.1, the greater the challenge the agency will face in designing effective safeguards—and the greater the risk that Iran is building undeclared facilities that diversify its options to break out or sneak out.

ANNEX VII

Inflation, oil exports, and real GDP versus sanctions



* Section 1245 of the National Defense Authorization Act, the "Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Human Rights Act" (H.R. 1905), 5 Executive Orders (13599, 13606, 13608, 13622, 13628), and European Union Regulation 267)

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