RESEARCH MEMO

MAXIMUM SUPPORT: A NEW STRATEGIC DIRECTION FOR U.S. IRAN POLICY

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America's Iran policy has become increasingly ineffective, partisan, and predictable. Faced with multifaceted and enduring threats from the Islamic Republic, Washington has embraced a reactive posture that has failed to adequately deter and roll back regime-sponsored terrorism, nuclear escalation, and domestic repression. This shortcoming is contagious and emboldens other American adversaries, including Tehran's regional terror proxies, known as the Axis of Resistance, as well as authoritarian and revisionist states like Russia, China, and North Korea. Worse, U.S. policy has left Washington largely flat-footed in the face of a boom-and-bust cycle of anti-regime protests across Iran for almost a decade.

Leaders in the United States and around the world are grappling with the implications of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's unexpected death in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024. The people of Iran immediately took to the streets in celebration of the death of Raisi, who was commonly known as the 'Butcher of Tehran' for his role in the massacre of tens of thousands of Iranian dissidents. Now is the perfect time for American leaders to dispose of empty rhetoric and instead express their support for the Iranian people's democratic aspirations through words and actions.

To correct America's course and reset the chessboard against the Islamic Republic, Washington should embrace a strategy that is sustainable, cost-effective, and more in concert with American values and interests in the Middle East. Maximum Support for the Iranian people is an integral component of such a strategy.

When combined with "Maximum Pressure" against the clerical regime in Tehran — which should entail robust political and economic pressure against the Islamic Republic from abroad — Maximum Support taps into the organic and longstanding domestic resistance to the regime from within Iran. Taken together, these two pillars allow policymakers to synergize U.S. policy and better align ways, means, and ends. To ensure effectiveness, policies supporting this framework should be measured against the Hippocratic oath of first "do no harm" to the interests of either the United States or the Iranian people. In particular, Washington should respect Iran's territorial integrity and national unity; refrain from engaging with armed groups or former terrorist organizations; and avoid enriching the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism.

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and the National Union for Democracy in Iran (NUFDI) have worked over the past two years to develop specific proposals not only to hold the Islamic Republic

accountable for its foreign aggression and domestic oppression but also to support the Iranian people.[1] This joint 10-point plan represents a distillation of our views, which reflect input from elements of the American think-tank and policy community, activists and analysts from the Iranian-American community, and leading dissidents inside Iran.

1. Review efficacy of U.S. government projects supporting the people of Iran.

The U.S. government currently spends tens of millions of dollars on Iran-related funding across the Persian-language programming of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), the State Department's Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) program and Global Engagement Center (GEC), and other initiatives. Each of these programs should be subjected to an audit and impact analysis. Washington should cut low-performing projects in their entirety in favor of projects with tangible impact and measurable outcomes inside Iran. Even longstanding projects should face rigorous scrutiny. Washington should give funding priority toward grants or projects that resolve chronic issues the Iranian people have endured, such as the termination of internet access by the regime.

2. Enforce oil and petrochemical sanctions.

A vigorous sanctions regime with adequate legal, political, bureaucratic, and financial support that metes out punishment over time against Tehran will significantly reduce available resources for the regime's nuclear, missile, and drone programs. This approach will also have the secondary effect of shrinking the pie available to pro-regime elites and security forces during times of crisis such as nationwide protests.

U.S. departments and offices charged with enforcing these sanctions should include the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the State Department's Office of Economic Sanctions Policy and Implementation, and the Department of Homeland Security. All three should receive increased funding and personnel to monitor sanctions' effectiveness and enforcement. They should also build support for such penalties with America's diplomatic partners.

With respect to any confiscated assets or shipments of oil, petrochemicals, or other sanctioned products and commodities, the United States should develop an Iran Democracy Fund that would allow it to underwrite the forthcoming elements of its Iran policy without drawing on pre-appropriated taxpayer funds.

3. Offer internet and communications solutions to facilitate freedom of expression.

The Islamic Republic frequently impedes Iranians' access to the internet in order to prevent their communication with one another and the outside world. The U.S. government can help ensure Iranians' right to freedom of expression by supporting access to the internet and other communications tools. This should include expanding existing programs that provide free VPNs and engaging with private sector partners like Starlink.

The U.S. government should also hold accountable technology companies, many of which are affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, that are active in Iran or may have affiliates or subsidiaries in Iran and may be providing technologies that empower the regime's repressive cyber apparatus.

1. For example, see both "Maximum Support" documents here: Saeed Ghasseminejad, Richard Goldberg, Tzvi Kahn, and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Maximum Support for the Iranian People: A New Strategy," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 30, 2022. (https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/fdd-memo-maximum-support-for-the-iranian-people.pdf); "Maximum Support: A Third Way For Iran Policy," *National Union for Democracy in Iran*, March 2023.

4. Place restrictions and sanctions on regime officials and organs.

While allowing dissidents seeking political asylum to escape the regime, the U.S. government should ban travel for all Islamic Republic officials, their family members, and their affiliates unless it can be assessed that they are truly defecting. Furthermore, the United States and its allies should seize the assets of regime officials and their affiliates pursuant to anti-corruption authorities — which exist in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, European Union, Australia, and New Zealand. Washington should also deport regime officials or affiliates already in the United States.

Next, the United States should actively encourage its allies and partners pursuant to their unique counterterrorism authorities to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in its entirety as a terrorist organization.

Furthermore, the United States should identify and designate the leadership of the IRGC and business empires tied to or controlled by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. This includes C-level executives and board members of all companies in their portfolio. The restrictions imposed on them should include asset forfeiture and travel bans.

It is imperative that the United States continue to name, shame, and punish Iranian human rights violators through sanctions, designations, asset freezes, and visa bans. This means targeting both national and local political, military, security, religious, and legal officials in Iran engaging in the repression of dissidents and protestors. Washington should apply these penalties multilaterally in conjunction with European partners.

Official delegates from the Islamic Republic seeking to enter the United States for United Nations-related business should be strictly limited, and the physical movement of those permitted to enter should be tightly controlled. Similarly, Washington should incentivize its trans-Atlantic partners to reduce the size of Iran's diplomatic missions in each country if they are unwilling to expel Iranian diplomats.

5. Support labor strikes.

The United States should create a strike fund to provide basic economic support to Iranian workers willing to go on strike but who would face economic and other forms of retribution from the Islamic Republic. The U.S. government should allow this strike fund, with the logistical support of needed allies, to legally access frozen Iranian assets to finance it. These assets belong to the Iranian people, not to the clerical regime.

6. Develop a regime elite defection program.

The United States should develop a defection strategy and identify pathways to promote it within Iran's security and political establishment. Such a program will take advantage of existing cleavages and tensions within the regime and increase the likelihood of a non-violent and successful transition from the Islamic Republic. It will help mitigate some of the mistakes made in recent political transitions in the Middle East. These high-level defectors should be thoroughly debriefed by the U.S. intelligence community to ascertain any relevant information on the regime that can be used to weaken it and empower the Iranian people against it.

This program should be developed and maintained in coordination with America's regional allies and security partners. Successfully vetted defectors should be connected to relevant, trusted forces in the Iranian opposition.

7. Provide cyber and intelligence support.

The fight between the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic is not a fair one. Iranians are waging a peaceful, non-violent campaign against a well-armed, brutal dictatorship. The U.S. government can help level the playing field by offering intelligence support to Iranians and the opposition to help protesters outsmart and outpace the

regime's suppression forces. It can also provide cyber support to protesters by working with regional allies to disable the security forces' communications and command-and-control capabilities to give protesters a fighting chance. For example, the U.S. government should target the security camera and communication infrastructure of the regime's oppression machine.

This cyber support can also be used to target the regime's critical infrastructure, particularly its security forces, to give Iranians both psychological and tactical advantages over the regime.

8. Develop a strategy to engage with the Iranian opposition.

The United States and its allies should not limit their dialogue to the regime — this should be cut altogether — but instead engage the secular, democratic Iranian opposition. This includes organizations and activists in the Iranian-American diaspora and trusted representatives of Iranians inside the country. The U.S. government should determine with whom to engage by examining polling that indicates Iranians' preferences and by monitoring domestic protests and the chants used by demonstrators.

This engagement should include high-profile, public meetings but also behind-the-scenes coordination and support.

9. Apply diplomatic pressure.

The United States should support Iranians' efforts and lead an international diplomatic campaign against the Islamic Republic. Just as diplomatic pressure led to Iran's removal from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2022, the United States and its allies should categorically delegitimize and deplatform Iran on the international stage. For example, Iran has remained in violation of its safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency for roughly two decades yet is serving as president of the UN Conference on Disarmament in Geneva in 2024. Washington should seek Iran's ejection from this body.

This should also be done in coordination with support for a campaign of lawfare by Iranians to bring civil and criminal cases against the Islamic Republic for transnational repression or violation of fundamental human rights. Washington should even consider hosting public tribunals against regime officials with testimony from victims of Iranian terrorism or repression.

10. Bolster and broaden a communications strategy.

Iranians do not want the world to remove the Islamic Republic for them. They are willing to fight, and even risk their lives, to reclaim their country and their freedoms. But they deserve the vocal, moral support of American leaders in their fight against the Islamist regime. The U.S. government should state clearly and consistently that it supports Iranians' democratic aspirations and will support their national and popular sovereignty. This must be reinforced across all levels of the U.S. government and through all available communication platforms and tools, including relevant executive departments and Congress. This should include setting up a calendar to systematically organize and proactively prepare communication strategies aimed at Iranians. For example, the president should use his annual Nowruz message to endorse Iranians' democratic aspirations. The U.S. government should also develop a menu of options that can be strategically deployed to correspond to known events, dates, and anniversaries on the Iranian political calendar, such as the November 2019 or *Aban* protests or Cyrus the Great Day.

Conversely, poor and mixed messaging, be it from the bully pulpit or social media from official U.S. sources, clips the wings of Iranian protests and dampens the spirit of Iranians seeking change in their own country. For example, the recent use of U.S. communication to promote spin classes, publicize the work of regime officials, and tie in the Palestinian issue and war in Gaza have soured Iranians on America's public diplomacy.

Conclusion

The time has come for the United States to adopt a policy of maximum support for the Iranian people, who have made clear they reject Tehran's oppressive clerical regime. While taking care to do no harm, U.S. policy should communicate clearly that Washington supports the Iranian people's democratic aspirations, will engage with the Iranian opposition, and will use its diplomatic clout to isolate the clerical regime. The United States can also help the opposition mobilize by facilitating its access to the internet, contributing to strike funds, and employing cyber tools to limit security forces' ability to crush dissent. Finally, Washington should vigorously enforce its own sanctions, which can deprive the regime of resources, while naming and shaming human rights violators. With these measures in place, the United States will have far better options at its disposal when the next wave of mass demonstrations threatens to topple the regime.

Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)

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National Union for Democracy in Iran

National Union for Democracy in Iran (NUFDI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization representing the Iranian-American community in pursuit of a U.S. policy toward Iran based on the values of human rights and democracy. For more information, please visit www.nufdiiran.org.

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