



**CARNEGIE**  
ENDOWMENT FOR  
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

---

**Congressional Testimony**

---

**The JCPOA Negotiations and United States' Policy on Iran**  
**Moving Forward**

**Karim Sadjadpour**

Senior Fellow

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations  
Committee

May 25, 2022

## **A U.S. Strategy for Iran**

Thank you Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the committee.

Our national discussion on Iran has focused primarily on tactical considerations and speculation about the likelihood of reviving the 2015 nuclear agreement. I would like to use this opportunity to briefly articulate a broader U.S. strategy for Iran that encompasses, but is not limited to, Iran's nuclear ambitions and is premised on a sober understanding of the Iranian regime, based on a case study of the last 43 years.

Over the last four decades, no government in the world—including China or Russia—has had a more clear or consistent grand strategy to challenge the U.S.-led world order than the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the 1979 Islamist revolution transformed Iran from a U.S.-allied monarchy to an anti-American theocracy, Tehran has sought to expel the United States from the Middle East, replace Israel with Palestine, and remake the Middle East in its image. Tehran has not achieved its lofty ambitions, but it has made progress toward them—and it is feeling emboldened by its successes and perceived U.S. failures. Whether or not the nuclear deal is successfully revived, these Iranian aspirations will continue.

While Iran's military budget and GDP are dwarfed by those of the United States, its physical size (75 times larger than Israel, four times larger than Germany), geostrategic location, natural resources, ideological zeal, and cultivation of foreign militias have made it central to a wide range of U.S. national security challenges. Tehran figures prominently in any discussions about nuclear proliferation, Islamist radicalism, energy security, cyberwarfare, disinformation, hostage taking, and drone warfare. While the malaise of the modern Middle East has many fathers, as long as Iran, one of the region's largest and wealthiest nations, is ruled by a brutal theocracy that uses its energy wealth to fund and train armed militias that espouse its intolerant revolutionary ideology, a more stable, tolerant, prosperous region will remain a distant dream.

Yet a sober U.S. strategy toward Iran must distinguish between what is desirable and what is viable. The United States can constrain Iran's nuclear and missile programs; we cannot eliminate them. We should stand for civil and human rights in Iran; we cannot engineer regime change. We can limit and expose destructive Iranian policies in the Middle East; we cannot expunge Iranian influence from the region. We can attempt to

manage our differences with Iran; we cannot force a rapprochement with a regime that needs us as an adversary.

Iran presents both a challenge and an opportunity to the United States. A U.S. strategy that focuses only on the nuclear and regional ambitions of the Iranian government while overlooking the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people ignores the lessons of how the Cold War ended. U.S. policy should be designed to not only counter the destructive ambitions of the Iranian regime, but also to champion the constructive ambitions of the Iranian people.

### **The Nature of the Iranian Regime**

The Islamic Republic has proved adept at surviving but, like many [revolutionary](#) regimes, incapable of reforming. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's 83-year-old supreme leader, is one of the world's longest-serving and most dogmatic autocrats. Since becoming supreme leader in 1989—the last time he left the country—Khamenei has skillfully vanquished four Iranian presidents, brutally quelled numerous mass uprisings, expanded Iranian power throughout the Middle East, and withstood efforts by seven U.S. presidents to sideline him, engage him, or coerce him. He has never met face-to-face with a sitting U.S. official and has so far prohibited Iranian diplomats from talking to their U.S. counterparts during current JCPOA negotiations. He has carefully handpicked fellow hard-line “principlists”—so called for their loyalty to the revolution's principles—to run the regime's most powerful institutions, most importantly the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Khamenei's commitment to Iran's revolutionary principles is cloaked in ideology but driven by self-interest. Like many dictatorships, the Islamic Republic faces a reform dilemma in that it must open up to survive, but doing so could destroy it. In contrast to more pragmatic Iranian revolutionaries who favored a Chinese-style economic opening and rapprochement with the United States, Khamenei long ago concluded that abandoning the revolution's principles—including its opposition to the United States and Israel—would be like taking a sledgehammer to the pillars of a building. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which was preceded by Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost reforms, further attuned Khamenei to the wisdom of political philosophers like Alexis de Tocqueville, who warned that “the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways.”

Although ending the four-decade U.S.-Iran cold war would serve the national interests of both countries, Washington will not be able to reach a peaceful accommodation with an

Iranian regime whose identity is premised on opposing the United States and whose leader believes that softening this opposition could cost him everything. Nor are there any quick fixes—whether in the form of greater U.S. engagement or pressure—that can swiftly change the nature of the U.S.-Iranian relationship or the Iranian regime. For this reason, the United States must deal with Iran like any adversary: communicate to avoid conflict, cooperate when possible, confront when necessary, and contain with partners.

### **A Three-Part U.S. Strategy**

How should Washington deal with such an adversary? U.S. strategy toward Iran should have three broad objectives:

- 1) Contain Iran's nuclear program
- 2) Counter Iran's regional influence and
- 3) Champion Iranian democratic ambitions.

It would be unrealistic to expect nuclear non-proliferation, regional security, and Iranian civil rights to be discussed in one negotiation. Rather, these three areas should be viewed as complementary, rather than conflicting, pieces of a unified strategy.

### **Containing Iran's Nuclear Ambitions**

The U.S. intelligence community has long assessed, including [recently](#), that Iran's leadership has not yet made the decision to weaponize its nuclear program. Despite the program's clandestine history, Iran's nuclear strategy has thus far been a transparent attempt to reap the benefits of being a nuclear weapons state without incurring the costs. As non-proliferation expert Robert Litwak aptly [wrote](#), "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."

Viewed from the outside, Iran's nuclear ambitions have provided the country with global recognition and distracted from the regime's internal failings and destructive regional policies. Viewed from the inside, however, Iran's nuclear program has been an expensive failure, costing the country hundreds of billions of dollars (in sunk costs and sanctions) without providing electricity (less than two percent of Iran's energy needs) nor deterrence against U.S. or Israeli attacks on Iranian officials and nuclear infrastructure.

The 2015 Iran nuclear deal—known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—illustrated that Tehran is prepared to compromise only when faced with a

combination of significant, multilateral pressure and firm U.S. resolve, in pursuit of a concrete, limited outcome. Former Deputy Secretary of State (and current CIA Director) Bill Burns, one of the chief diplomat architects of the agreement, wrote that the JCPOA was spawned by a U.S. strategy of “tough-minded diplomacy, backed up by the economic leverage of sanctions, the political leverage of an international consensus, and the military leverage of the potential use of force.”

Such a strategy does not currently exist. Although sanctions against Iran remain significant, they have not been diligently enforced; Iranian oil sales to China have increased several-fold. The Biden administration’s patient commitment to reviving the agreement, and seeming reluctance to consider alternative strategies, has been interpreted by Tehran as an opportunity to try and extract additional concessions, without fearing a closing window of opportunity. The polarized domestic American political context and the broader geopolitical context—including the humiliating U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S.-China tension, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—has raised further questions in Iran about American credibility and resolve.

To be clear, there exists no good alternative to contain and reverse Iran’s nuclear progress other than a negotiated settlement. The Trump administration had four years to prove the alternative thesis—that an increase in American pressure and an absence of American diplomacy could force the Iranian regime into capitulation or collapse. Although the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign subjected Iran to enormous economic deprivation and humiliation—including the January 2020 assassination of its top military commander, Qassem Soleimani—its regime closed ranks, its nuclear program expanded, and its regional influence remained intact despite diminished expenditures.

As the Biden administration itself has acknowledged, a potential revival of the JCPOA must not be the finish line but rather a starting point for follow-on negotiations to “lengthen and strengthen” the agreement. Any nuclear settlement must also be embedded in a broader strategy to counter Iran’s regional influence and internal repression. While the task of reassembling a global coalition to strengthen the nuclear deal will prove challenging, Europe, Russia, and China continue to support the underlying goal of averting an Iranian bomb and conflict with Iran.

Marshaling a global response to Iran’s regional ambitions will be harder, given China’s preference for neutrality, Russia’s alliance with Iran in supporting Assad in Syria, and European fears of provoking Tehran. Nevertheless, Iran remains among the world’s most strategically isolated nations. Russia has ignored Israel’s repeated attacks on Iranian

outposts in Syria, Chinese trade with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates [exceeds](#) its trade with Iran, and European popular views on Iran—which is holding several European nationals [hostage](#)—are just as [jaundiced](#) as American popular opinion. Russia and China are particularly sensitive about respecting national sovereignty, often the gravest concern of Iran’s regional rivals.

## **Countering Iran’s Regional Ambitions**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is to many U.S. partners in the Middle East what Putin’s Russia is to Europe: An energy rich but ideologically bankrupt bully ruled by a paranoid autocrat who routinely violates the sovereignty of its neighbors and seeks security in the insecurity of others.

Just as Putin’s successful military incursions in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria led him to believe his 2022 invasion of Ukraine would be a similarly low-cost victory, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s perceived regional triumphs, coupled with U.S. regional failures, has fueled Iran’s hubris and further convinced it of America’s inexorable decline.

Over the last two decades, Iran has established outsized influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, the four failed or failing states that constitute what Iranian officials call their “axis of resistance.” It has done so by successfully cultivating regional militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, and by exploiting the power vacuums left by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab uprisings of 2010. Neither the United States nor Iran’s regional rivals have demonstrated the will or the capacity to challenge Tehran’s foothold in these countries. Arab disorder has facilitated Iranian ambitions, and Iranian ambitions have exacerbated Arab disorder.

Although Tehran and Washington have faced numerous shared threats in the region since 1979—including the Soviet Union, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State (or ISIS)—U.S. attempts at strategic cooperation with Iran have repeatedly failed. Instead of prioritizing Iran’s national interests, the Islamic Republic’s grand strategy is built on a hierarchy of enmity: any adversary of the United States and Israel is a potential partner for Tehran. As Ayatollah Khamenei put it in 2021, “We will support and assist any nation or any group anywhere who opposes and fights the Zionist regime, and we do not hesitate to say this.”

As the Middle East’s lone theocratic state, Iran has managed to harness Islamist radicalism—both Shia and, at times, [Sunni](#)—more effectively than any of its peers. Indeed, although the Iran-Saudi rivalry is commonly viewed as a sectarian war between

Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, Tehran's huge asymmetric advantage over Riyadh is that virtually all Shia radicals are willing to fight for Iran, whereas virtually all Sunni radicals, including the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, want to overthrow the Saudi government.

Iran's ideal vision is a Middle East in which there is no U.S. presence, a popular referendum has rendered Israel a Palestinian state, and Khomeinist anti-imperialism is a source of inspiration for Arab and Muslim hearts and minds. This strategic vision will not change as long as Khamenei is supreme leader, and it could well outlast him, given its perceived success. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan has emboldened Tehran to try to force Washington to abandon Iraq and its military bases in the Persian Gulf. And given the relatively low penalties Iran has paid for its regional policies—compared with the sanctions and sabotage campaigns it has endured for its nuclear ambitions—it has had little reason to reassess.

Yet, for all of Iran's success in cultivating militant groups across the Middle East, there are tangible signs that it has overreached. Mutual fears of Iran helped midwife the Abraham Accords, the 2020 normalization agreements that gave Israel a strategic foothold several dozen miles from Iran's border. Opinion [polls](#) also show that nearly two-thirds of young Arabs in the region now view Iran as an adversary, a sizable majority of Arabs of all ages want Iran to withdraw from regional conflicts, and more than half of Arab Shiites hold an "unfavorable" view of Iran. In recent years, Iraqi protesters have attacked and set fire to the Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala—two Shiite shrine cities that are longtime Iranian strongholds in Iraq—and Lebanese Shiites have protested against Hezbollah in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyah. Recent elections in both Iraq and Lebanon showed waning support for Iranian-allied politicians.

Although Iranian influence in the Middle East cannot be eliminated, it can be more effectively exposed, countered, and contained. The JCPOA proved that pressure and diplomacy can work if directed to a viable end game—in that case, restraining rather than eradicating Iran's nuclear program. A similar formula should be used to meaningfully restrain, rather than wholly eradicate, Iran's regional influence.

Given Washington's limited direct leverage over Tehran—virtually all Iranian trade is with countries other than the United States—an effective strategy to contain and counter Iran will require U.S. leadership and international consensus building. Although the United States and other major powers have divergent views on Iran, a Middle East in which the rule of law, sovereignty, and the free flow of energy are all imperiled serves no

one's interests (with the possible exception of Russia's). The same is true of a region where terrorist groups are resurgent.

U.S. policy cannot change Iran's resistance ideology to counter American influence and end Israel's existence, but it can—with the help of other countries—contain the Islamic Republic until Tehran gets a government that seeks to do what is good for Iran instead of what is bad for its ideological enemies. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic's grand strategy will be defeated not by the United States or Israel but by the people of Iran, who have paid the highest price for it.

### **Championing Iranian Democratic Aspirations**

The paradox of Iran is that of a society that aspires to be like South Korea—free, prosperous, and globally integrated—but which is hindered by a hardline revolutionary elite that more closely resembles North Korea. Iran will continue to bleed national resources to subsidize its costly nuclear and regional ambitions, deepening the Iranian public's economic, political, and social frustration and necessitating ever-greater repression.

After more than four decades in power without any meaningful reform, many Iranians understand that the character of the Islamic Republic is unlikely to change. Virtually all the conduct the regime has exhibited since its inception—hostage taking; the cultivation of regional militias; the persecution of women, religious minorities, LGBTQ people, and free thinkers—have proceeded with the same intensity. Tehran's official slogan of "Death to America" has also continued uninterrupted throughout both Republican and Democratic U.S. administrations.

While Iran's internal dynamics may appear of secondary strategic importance to the United States, as former U.S. Ambassador to Russia [Michael McFaul](#) said about the Soviet Union, "Arms controllers didn't end the Cold War with the Soviet Union; democrats inside Russia and other Soviet republics did." Similarly, the U.S.-Iran cold war will likely be concluded not by American diplomats but by Iranian democrats.

The stability of authoritarian regimes is inherently unpredictable, in part because it is premised on often unmeasurable factors such as the health and psychological stability of individual autocrats, the cohesion and morale of a regime's security forces, and the unpredictable events that can trigger humiliated societies to reach their tipping point. In August 1978, the CIA assessed with high confidence that Iran was not in a pre-revolutionary state; three months later, the Shah's monarchy crumbled. While today the



Islamic Republic's security forces appear firmly in control, there are far more signs of popular tumult in Iran today than there was in Egypt and Tunisia in December 2010, weeks before their governments were overthrown.

Until now, Washington's attempts to elicit political change in Tehran have failed. Efforts to empower reformists within the Iranian regime against hard-line rivals have shown little signs of success; reformists lack the will, and hard-liners have all the guns. U.S. attempts to incite uprisings among unarmed, unorganized, and leaderless Iranian civilians against a heavily armed and organized repressive apparatus have also achieved little. The Islamic Republic has repeatedly shown willingness to throttle the internet and murder thousands of its citizens in the dark, as it did most vividly in [November 2019](#). In authoritarian countries, change requires not only popular pressure but also divisions within the elite. When the entirety of a regime and its security apparatus believe that they must either kill or be killed—such as in Syria—they unreservedly embrace option A.

Although the United States lacks the ability to reform or remove the Islamic Republic, it does have the capacity to meaningfully champion Iranian civil rights. Just as President Ronald Reagan's administration negotiated arms-control agreements with Soviet leaders while also expressing solidarity with freedom-seeking Soviet subjects, nuclear negotiations with Iran should not deter the United States from inhibiting Tehran's control of the information and communications of its citizens by building a walled-off [national](#) internet akin to China's. The Biden administration should also work with European and Asian allies to ensure a potential resumption of commercial ties with Iran does not simply enrich Revolutionary Guard companies and cronies at the expense of Iranian civil society.

There are valid concerns, both inside Iran and in the region, that a revival of the nuclear deal will entrench the regime. Yet history has more often [proved](#) that political dissent is not usually triggered by crushing poverty, but when a society's improving economic circumstances lead to elevated expectations that go unfulfilled. For this reason, the near-term economic improvements that might result from the removal of U.S. sanctions are likelier in the medium and long term to destabilize the Islamic Republic rather than ensconce it. The more that Iranians understand that what stands between them and a better future is internal corruption and mismanagement rather than external pressure, the more the country's most potent ideology—Iranian nationalism—will be harnessed against the regime rather than in service of it.

Iran's transition from theocracy to democracy will not come easily, peacefully, or soon. But it is the single most important key to transforming the Middle East.

### **Additional Policy Recommendations**

#### **Develop a Policy to Free U.S. Hostages in Iran and Deter Iranian Hostage Taking**

My testimony cannot be complete without addressing the issue of Americans wrongfully detained in Iran, some of whom are my close friends. Regardless of one's position on the JCPOA, these innocent individuals are being held solely because they are U.S. citizens. As such, it must be the moral obligation of our government, and our President, to make every effort to bring these Americans home.

At the same time, it is critical for the United States and our allies and partners---more than a dozen of whose citizens have also been taking hostage by Iran--to deploy policies and actions to disincentivize, deter, and penalize future hostage-taking by the Iranian regime. Thanks to many of you in this room we have a bipartisan approved law that is meant for this purpose. But these deterrence policies must be independent of the efforts to bring back those already taken.

#### **Expose Iran's Financial and Military Support to Regional Allies and Proxies**

Among the slogans commonly heard at popular protests in Iran are "Forget about Syria; think about us" and "They are lying that our enemy is America; our enemy is right here." Popular disapproval of the accumulating costs—in blood and treasure—of America's conflicts in the Middle East led to meaningful policy decisions, such as the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iran has spent a much greater percentage of its GDP on its nuclear and regional ambitions and proxy wars, yet there is no open debate in Iran about the wisdom and costs of these policies, partly because there is little information in the public domain about these expenditures.

Without revealing sources and methods, the United States should seek to expose the military and financial aid that Tehran offers its regional allies in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. As Moussa Abu Marzouk, a Hamas official said in a 2021 interview, "Iran is one of the countries that helps Hamas most. The only country that ignores the limits imposed on Hamas is Iran. It helps us militarily in training, weapons, and expertise."

#### **Declassify U.S. intelligence about Iranian Malign Iranian Policies**

The declassification of intelligence which warned of Vladimir Putin's intent to attack Ukraine played a critical role in shaping Western public opinion and helping to alert and unify the West against a common threat. Whether it is Iranian attempts to kidnap Iranian dissidents in the United States or Iranian cyberwarfare or disinformation campaigns on social media, sunlight is the best disinfectant.

### **Revamp Voice of America's Persian News Network**

Voice of America's Persian News Network has the capacity to inform tens of millions of Iranian viewers who have access to satellite television, yet its production and editorial quality have woefully underperformed. The Broadcasting Board of Governors should take a renewed look to determine whether VOA Persian is capable of being revamped, or whether it should be taken outside the confines of Voice of America and transformed into a public-private partnership, like the BBC.