
Getting Serious About Iran: For Regime Change

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WHAT TO DO about Iran? The question has haunted successive administrations in Washington since the raid on the U.S. embassy in Tehran and the seizure of its diplomats in November 1979.

In that instance, the initial response of the Carter White House was to treat the newly installed Islamic Republic as a rebellious adolescent who, given sympathy and support, would eventually mend his ways. It took 444 days of captivity before the ordeal of the hostages ended, and then only in the face of a more muscular American approach signaled by the victory of Ronald Reagan in the November 1980 presidential election.

A few months later, however, the Khomeini regime ordered the capture of new American hostages, this time in Beirut, and in the following years pursued its virulently anti-American campaign by organizing suicide attacks on the U.S. embassy compound in that city and at a U.S. military base close by; a total of 300 Americans, including 241 Marines, were killed. Entering into secret talks with Tehran, the allegedly bellicose Reagan eventually agreed to supply weapons to the mullahs in exchange for the release of some of the hostages.

The mullahs saw all this as a confirmation of the

Ayatollah Khomeini's notorious dictum: "America cannot do a damn thing!" Emboldened, they next tried to disrupt the flow of Arab oil through the Persian Gulf by firing at Kuwaiti oil tankers in 1987. With that, the Reagan administration finally moved onto the offensive. Kuwaiti tankers were put under American flag, and a naval task force was dispatched to deal with the Iranian threat. At the next round of probing attacks, the American task force sank nearly half of the Islamic Republic's navy and dismantled over \$1 billion worth of Iranian offshore oil installations. Promptly ordering a halt to his offensive, Khomeini also announced his acceptance of a United Nations Security Council resolution ending Iran's eight-year war with Iraq.

Khomeini's pattern of advance and retreat suggested a dynamic for change in Iran, but one that the first Bush administration failed to understand, let alone exploit. By 1990, the Islamic Republic had revived its strategy of countering and, where possible, rolling back U.S. influence throughout the so-called "arc of crisis" spanning the region from the Indian sub-continent to North Africa. Even as it created and strengthened branches of the Hizballah ("Party of God") movement in seventeen countries, most notably in Lebanon, Tehran backed older radical Islamist groups in Central Asia, the Transcaucasus, Afghanistan, and the Arabian Peninsula.

Next came the Clinton administration, which, at first adopting a policy of benign neglect vis-à-vis the mullahs, was shocked out of its torpor by the

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attack on the U.S. base at Khobar, Saudi Arabia, in which nineteen American servicemen were killed in an operation designed by Iran and carried out by Lebanese and Saudi Shiite militants. Still, President Clinton chose to play the engagement card. After more than two years of secret diplomacy, the contours of a “grand bargain” (as the mullahs saw it) began to take shape. By 1998, President Muhammad Khatami, widely regarded in the West as a “moderate,” was even talking about a “mini-Yalta accord” that would demarcate respective “zones of influence.” In an advance payment for this putative bargain, Clinton and his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright apologized publicly to the Islamic Republic for past American misdeeds, and the administration lifted some of the sanctions imposed on Iranian imports into the United States.

The “grand bargain” was not to be, however. Scheduled to be unveiled during the millennium summit at the United Nations in New York with an “accidental” encounter and handshake between Clinton and Khatami, it was scrapped at the last minute by the Islamic Republic’s “Supreme Guide” Ali Khamenei, who had decided there was no point in striking a bargain with a U.S. President on the point of leaving office. Clinton was left pacing the corridors of the UN, waiting in vain for his “accidental” meeting.

INITIALY, THE administration of President George W. Bush was inclined to ignore the Islamic Republic—a creature that, if touched, would bring only grief. But the attacks of 9/11, followed by the U.S. campaign to liberate first Afghanistan and then Iraq, inevitably moved the Islamic Republic closer to the center of White House attention. By an accident of history, the mullahs actually shared Bush’s objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq, since both the Taliban and the Baath movement were sworn enemies of the Islamic Republic. For a few months, Tehran and Washington conducted bilateral talks and, in Afghanistan, even cooperated on the ground. Soon, however, it became clear that they held diametrically opposed visions of the future of the Middle East.

Bush had concluded that the terrorist attacks on the U.S. had flowed out of six decades of American support for a Middle East status quo dominated by reactionary and often despotic regimes. To ensure its own safety, America now had to help democratize the region. The Islamic Republic, by contrast, saw the elimination of its two principal regional enemies as a “gift from Allah,” and an opportunity to advance its own, contrary vision of the Middle

East as the emergent core of a radical Islamist superpower under Iranian leadership.

Still, throughout its first term, the Bush administration did its best to skirt the Iran issue, despite occasional rhetorical outbursts like the President’s linkage of the Islamic Republic, Iraq, and North Korea in an “axis of evil.” When asked about the administration’s Iran policy, officials would respond that there was such a policy, only it was not on paper.

By the start of the second term, however, the Bush administration had identified the Islamic Republic as a principal obstacle to the President’s policy of democratization. By now, indeed, Tehran had become actively engaged in undermining the U.S. position in both Afghanistan and Iraq, while creating radical Shiite networks to exert pressure on such American allies as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Nor was that all: the Islamic Republic was gaining influence over radical Palestinian groups, including Islamic Jihad and Hamas, by supplying them with funds and weapons. Israel’s seizure of the cargo ship *Karine A*, caught smuggling Iranian arms to a terrorist group tied to Yasir Arafat, and the discovery of seventeen terrorist cells preparing to attack Israel from Jordan in 2002, were clear signals that, where the Palestinian issue was concerned, the Islamic Republic had moved onto the offensive.

Then came the ominous revelations of a secret Iranian program to produce enriched uranium, as a first step toward manufacturing nuclear warheads. To this, the initial and by now well-practiced Western response was to blink. At the urging of the European Union, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) pointedly refrained from penalizing the Islamic Republic for violating the terms of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (of which Iran under the Shah had been an early signatory). Instead, the EU, working through Britain, France, and Germany, offered the Islamic Republic a series of economic and political “incentives” in exchange for stopping what it should not have started in the first place. After months of diplomatic wrangling, Tehran agreed to suspend its uranium-processing and -enrichment activities—without, however, agreeing to a method of effective verification.

This past May, the U.S. joined the EU initiative in an expanded framework of talks that also included Russia and China. But Tehran declined to play. To the contrary, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the recently elected president, announced that the Islamic Republic was reneging on its suspension agreement and resuming its enrichment program on an even larger scale. Describing the West’s demands

as a species of “nuclear apartheid,” Ahmadinejad vowed that Iran would now work to achieve “mastery of the full cycle of nuclear science and technology.” By September, he had ignored three deadlines for changing his mind.

To this day, Ahmadinejad has never lost an opportunity to reiterate that the Islamic Republic is as committed to fighting Western democracies as it was when it came to power almost three decades ago. Claiming that he is preparing the ground for the return of the Hidden Imam, a messiah-like figure of Shiite lore, Ahmadinejad considers a “clash of civilizations” to be both inevitable and welcome. Of course, he is ready to talk—so long as the Islamic Republic is not required to make any concessions. In a speech in Zanjan over the summer, Ahmadinejad assured his listeners that the United States would never be permitted to create “an American Middle East.” “The new Middle East,” he told the cheering crowd, “will be Islamic.”

Nor is Ahmadinejad a lone wolf. Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Meshkini, president of the Assembly of Experts and thus, after the “Supreme Guide,” the regime’s second most senior clerical figure, further clarified the extent of Tehran’s ambitions in a September speech to the assembly. The only legitimate government on earth, proclaimed the ayatollah, is the Islamic Republic, and the entire world, starting with the Muslim nations, must be put under the rule of the “Supreme Guide.”

THERE CAN BE little doubt that Ahmadinejad, Meshkini, and the others have been encouraged in their belligerence by Western statesmen and pundits who insist that no realistic alternative exists to “dialogue” with the Islamic Republic, even if this appears to play into the hands of the regime. As we have seen, however, “talking to the mullahs” is a strategy thoroughly tested over the last quarter-century and repeatedly found wanting. Every U.S. administration has maintained some level of communication, often behind the scenes, with the leadership in Tehran. None of it has succeeded in influencing its fundamental tenor or curbing its radical ambitions.

The same can be said of the Europeans. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, a long-time foreign minister of West Germany, built his career on the effort to bring the Islamic Republic into the international mainstream. Genscher’s policy of “critical dialogue” (his phrase) ended up, in practice, as an exercise in joint criticism, by the mullahs and the Europeans, of the Americans. Roland Dumas, Genscher’s French counterpart, was no less enthusias-

tic about “constructive dialogue” (his term) with Tehran, a path followed as well by Spain’s socialist prime minister, Felipe Gonzalez and, more recently, by Jack Straw, Tony Blair’s former foreign secretary. During his tenure in office, Straw visited Tehran more frequently than Washington, only to return empty-handed.

Nor do Americans and Europeans exhaust the list of those who have achieved little or nothing, or worse, by talking to the Islamic Republic. For twelve years, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan have been engaged in talks with Tehran to determine the status of the Caspian Sea; they have gotten nowhere. Turkey has tried since 1989 to persuade Iran to stop the flow of money and arms to Turkish-Kurdish rebels and the Turkish branch of Hizballah, again to no avail. Egypt has held a decade-long dialogue with the Islamic Republic without making any headway on the issue of resuming diplomatic ties. Two decades of talks between the Islamic Republic and Kuwait over the demarcation of their continental-shelf limits in the Persian Gulf have likewise led nowhere—although, under the Shah, an accord was signed by the two neighbors as long ago as 1976. In every case, the Islamic Republic has interpreted the readiness of its adversaries to talk as a signal of weakness, and has hardened its position accordingly.

Why does the Islamic Republic behave as it does? The answer is that, as the spearhead of a revolutionary cause, it can do no other. The Islamic Republic is unlike any of the regimes in its environment, or indeed anywhere in the world. Either it will become like them—i.e., a nation-state—or it will force them to become like itself. As a normal nation-state, Iran would have few major problems with its neighbors or with others. As the embodiment of the Islamic Revolution, it is genetically programmed to clash not only with those of its neighbors who do not wish to emulate its political system but also with other powers that all too reasonably regard Khomeinism as a threat to regional stability and world peace.

For as long as the Islamic Republic continues to behave as a revolutionary cause, it will be impossible for others, including the United States, to consider it a partner, let alone a friend or ally. This does not exclude talks, or even periods of relative détente, as happened with the USSR during the cold war. But just as the Soviet Union remained an enemy of the free world right up to the end, so the Islamic Republic will remain an enemy until it once more becomes a nation-state.

HOW, THEN, should one deal with Iran in its current phase? There are several options. The most obvious is to do nothing. Among the attractions of this option is that, at least theoretically, it would deny the Islamic Republic the chance to cast itself as the grand defender of Islam against the depredations of the “infidel” camp led by the United States. It would also allow internal tensions in Iran to come to the fore, helping speed the transition from cause to state.

But the risk in the do-nothing option is clear. Interpreting it as yet another sign of weakness on the part of its adversaries, the Islamic Republic may hasten its program to “export the revolution” around the Middle East and, more importantly, develop a credible arsenal of nuclear weapons. The result would be an even bigger challenge to the regional balance of power and to the world.

An alternative to the do-nothing option is the one favored, today as yesterday, by the apostles of dialogue: namely, to reach an accommodation with the Islamic Republic on *its* terms, in the hope that this will somehow, in time, help to modify its behavior. Some Europeans, including France’s President Jacques Chirac, clearly back this option. What matters, they say, is to engage the Islamic Republic as a partner in some kind of international arrangement that, over an unspecified period, will end up imposing restraints on its overall behavior.

The risk here is equally obvious. Having won an initial concession from the “infidels,” the Khomeinist leadership would instantly and reflexively demand more. The Khomeinist revolution, after all, dreams of conquering the world in the name of Islam, just as Hitler aimed to do in the name of the Aryan master race and the USSR in the name of Communism. Indeed, Khatami’s idea of a “Yalta-like” accord with President Clinton was itself inspired by the mullahs’ claim to be the legitimate successors to the USSR as the global challengers to American imperialism.

Proponents of “dialogue” like to cite the “Nixon in China” moment as a model for dealing with the Islamic Republic. But they forget two facts. The first is that, during Nixon’s presidency, the initiative for normalizing relations came not from the United States but from China, which was then trying to recast itself as a nation-state among nation-states. The Islamic Republic is not in that position, or anywhere near it. In fact, precisely because it bases its legitimacy as a revolutionary power on the teachings of Islam, something it does not fully control in doctrinal terms, it cannot abandon its revolutionary pretensions as easily as did the Maoists in Beijing, who “owned” their own ideology and could alter it at will.

THERE REMAINS another option: regime change. The very mention of this term drives some people up the wall, inspiring images of an American invasion, a native insurgency, suicide bombers, and worse. But military intervention and pre-emptive war are not the only means of achieving regime change.

What matters is to be intellectually clear about the issue at hand. The U.S. will not be safe as long as Iran, a key country in a region of vital importance to the world economy and to international stability, remains the embodiment of the Khomeinist cause. Nor can the U.S. allow the Khomeinist movement, itself a version of global Islamism, to achieve further political or diplomatic gains at the expense of the Western democracies.

For consider the consequences if that were to happen. The most immediate would be to strengthen the mullahs and demoralize all those inside Iran who have a different vision of their country’s future and an active desire to bring it about. In 1937 and 1938, many professional army officers in Germany, realizing that Hitler was leading their nation to disaster, had begun to discuss possible ways of getting rid of him. But the Munich “peace” accords negotiated by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain handed Hitler a diplomatic triumph and, with it, a degree of international legitimacy that, from then on, any would-be putschists could hardly ignore.

In the Middle East, this story has been repeated many times. The West helped Gamal Abdel Nasser transform the Suez fiasco into a political triumph, thereby encouraging an even bigger and, for Egypt, more disastrous, war in 1967. The 1991 ceasefire that allowed Saddam Hussein to remain in power in Baghdad, interpreted by him as a signal of American weakness, emboldened him quickly to eliminate his domestic opponents and to begin preparations for a bigger war against the “infidel.” After the first al-Qaeda attack on New York’s World Trade Center in 1993, President Clinton dispatched a string of envoys to Afghanistan to strike a bargain with Mullah Muhammad Omar and the Taliban. Not only, to quote the Taliban foreign minister, was this seen as “a sign of weakness by the Crusader-Zionists,” and one that immensely enhanced the prestige of al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, but it discouraged the anti-Taliban forces, many of whom concluded there was no point in fighting a foe backed by the world’s only superpower.

That is the effect that reaching an accommodation with the Khomeinist regime will have on Iran’s own democrats and reformers. And it will have the same weakening effect on the growing democratic movement elsewhere in the Middle East. Some

signs of this are already visible. For example, the fragile consensus belatedly formed around the idea of a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians is under pressure from a new “one-state” formula propagated by the “defiance front” led by Iran and including Syria, Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Libya, and the Sudan. In Lebanon, Hizballah and its allies have been encouraged by Tehran to pursue a systematic bullying of the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. In Syria, the pro-reform camp has been defeated, and the Baathist regime, a vicious menace in its own right, has entered into an unprecedented dependence on Tehran. Even major powers like Russia, China, France, and Germany calibrate their relations with the Islamic Republic with reference to how they suspect Washington will, or will not, be acting.

By contrast, in opting for regime change, the U.S. would send a strong signal to the democratic movement inside Iran, as well as throughout the Middle East, that the Bush Doctrine remains intact and that the Khomeinist movement is doomed. Such a policy would also encourage Iran’s neighbors, and other powers concerned about aggressive Khomeinism, to resist the political and diplomatic *démarches* of the Islamic Republic without fear of being caught out by a surprise deal between Tehran and Washington.

At home in the United States, a policy of regime change vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic would have the immense advantage of moral and political clarity. If backed by the requisite political will, it could open the way for a truly bipartisan approach toward dealing with a regime now identified as the United States’ most determined and potentially dangerous adversary in the region. For it is hard to imagine a democratic and pro-Western Middle East being built without Iran, the largest piece in any emerging jigsaw puzzle. Nor can U.S. victories in Afghanistan and Iraq be consolidated without change in Iran, or meaningful progress be made toward resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict as long as the Khomeinist regime is determined to pursue its “wipe-Israel-off-the-map” strategy.

Abroad, a U.S. policy of regime change would give heart to all those rightly worried by the alliance that Ahmadinejad is trying to build with thugs and lunatics like North Korea’s Kim Jong-Il, Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, and the Castro brothers in Cuba. Even today, Tehran is the ideological capital of international terrorism, with more than 60 groups from all continents gathering there each February for a global terror-fest. A triumphant Ahmadinejad, armed with

nuclear weapons, would only boost the international terrorist movement, thus further undermining the security of the United States and its allies. That alone is a powerful argument for regime change.

BUT—some might object—even granting the virtue of the idea, how realistic is regime change in Iran? Can it happen?

The short answer is yes. Without underestimating the power still held by the mullahs over the Iranian people, let alone their ability to wreak devastating havoc in places near and far, a number of factors suggest that, like other revolutionary regimes before them, their condition is more fragile than may at first appear.

One sign is the loss of regime legitimacy. The Islamic Republic owed its initial legitimacy to the revolution of 1979. Since then, successive Khomeinist administrations have systematically dismantled the vast, multiform coalition that made the revolution possible. The Khomeinists have massacred their former leftist allies, driven their nationalist partners into exile, and purged even many Islamists from positions of power, leaving their own base fractured and attenuated.

The regime’s early legitimacy also derived from referendums and elections held regularly since 1979. In the past two decades, however, each new election has been more “arranged” than the last, while the authoritarian habit of approving candidates in advance has become a routine part of the exercise. Many Iranians saw last year’s presidential election, in which Ahmadinejad was declared a surprise winner, as the last straw: credited with just 12 percent of the electorate’s vote in the first round, he ended up being named the winner in the second round with an incredible 60 percent of the vote.

Still another source of the regime’s legitimacy was its message of “social justice” and its promise to improve the life of the poor. This, too, has been subverted by reality. Today, more than 40 percent of Iran’s 70 million people live below the poverty line, compared with 27 percent before the Khomeinists seized power. In 1977, Iran’s GDP per head per annum was the same as Spain’s. Today, Spain’s GDP is four times higher than Iran’s in real dollar terms. As the gap between rich and poor has widened to an unprecedented degree, the corruption of the ruling mullahs, and their ostentatious way of life, have made a mockery of slogans like “Islamic solidarity.”

A second sign is the presence of a major split within the ruling establishment itself. The list of former Khomeinists who have distanced themselves from today’s regime reads like a who’s who of the original

revolutionary elite. It includes former “student” leaders who raided the U.S. embassy in 1979, former commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and dozens of former cabinet ministers and members of the Islamic Majlis (parliament). Most have adopted a passive stance vis-à-vis the regime, but a surprising number have clearly switched sides, becoming active dissidents and thereby risking imprisonment, exile, or even death. Any decline in the regime’s international stature could deepen this split within the establishment, helping to isolate the most hardline Khomeinists.

A third harbinger is that the regime’s coercive forces have become increasingly reluctant to defend it against the people. Since 2002, the regular army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the professional police have refused to crush workers’ strikes, student demonstrations, and other manifestations of anti-regime protest. In many instances, the mullahs have been forced to deploy other, often unofficial, means, including the so-called Ansar Hizballah (“Supporters of the Party of God”) and the Baseej Mustadafeen (“Mobilization of the Dispossessed”).

A fourth sign is the emergence of alternative sources of moral authority in Iranian society. Even in religious matters, more and more Iranians look for guidance to non-official or even anti-official mullahs, including the clergy in Iraq. (Admittedly, this is partly due to the fact that the present “Supreme Guide,” Ali Khamenei, is a mid-ranking mullah who would never be accepted by senior Shiite clergy as a first among equals.)

As for non-religious matters, there was a time when the regime enjoyed the support of the overwhelming majority of Iran’s “creators of culture.” Today, not a single prominent Iranian poet, writer, filmmaker, composer, or artist endorses the Khomeinists; most have become dissidents whose work is either censored or banned. Opposition intellectuals, clerics, trade-union leaders, feminists, and students are emerging as new sources of moral authority.

Finally, there are at least the outlines, although no more than the outlines, of a political alternative. Like nature, society abhors a vacuum. In the case of Iran, that vacuum cannot be filled by the dozen or so groups in exile, although each could have a role in shaping a broad national alternative. What is still needed is an internal political opposition that can act as the nucleus of a future government.

Unfortunately, such a nucleus cannot be created so long as the fear exists that the U.S. and its allies might reach an accommodation with the regime and leave Iranian dissidents in the lurch. And that

fear has roots in reality. In the years 1999-2000, President Khatami succeeded in splitting the opposition by boasting of the terms of his forthcoming “grand bargain” with President Clinton. His message was ingeniously twofold: the deal would help solve the nation’s economic problems and open the way for less repressive measures in social life and culture, but it would include a stipulation that America would never help opponents of the Khomeinist regime. Although, as we have seen, the “grand bargain” itself came to naught, the message and its implications have hardly been forgotten.

IF MANY of the preconditions for regime change are in place, is the time right? To this, too, the answer is yes. Again without underestimating the power in the hands of the mullahs, the truth is that Iran today, far from being the island of calm portrayed in some leading American newspapers, is more nearly like a heaving volcano, ready to explode.

In the words of Muhammad-Mahdi Pour-Fatemi, a member of the Islamic Majlis, Iran today is passing through “the deepest crisis our nation has experienced in decades.” Because of “policies that have produced nothing but grief for our nation,” Pour-Fatemi has courageously said, “the Islamic Republic today is isolated.” The fall in value of the Iranian currency—despite rising oil revenues—and the massive increase in the rate of unemployment over the past two years signal an economic crisis already heralded by double-digit inflation. In some cases, the government has been unable to pay its employees—including over 600,000 teachers—on time. In March, at the start of the new Iranian year, it was having difficulty financing over half of its projects, forcing hundreds of private contractors into bankruptcy. Meanwhile, fear of an international crisis over the nuclear issue, and the possibility of new sanctions imposed by the UN and/or the U.S., have put a damper on the economy’s only buoyant sector: real estate. According to Ayatollah Shahroudi, the regime’s chief justice, the flight of capital from the Islamic Republic, which started as a hemorrhage, has been transformed in the past two years into “a flood.”

It is not only on the economic front or in his confrontations with labor unions and women’s and student organizations that Ahmadinejad is coming under pressure. His regime also faces growing ethnic unrest that has led to bloodshed in provinces with non-Persian majorities: the Azeris in the northwest, the Kurds in the west, the Arabs in the south, and the Baluch in the southeast, among oth-

ers. Over the past eighteen months, hundreds of people have been killed in clashes with the central security forces. Dozens of ethnic leaders have been executed, thousands have been put under arrest, and many more have been driven into exile in Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan. So uncertain is the security situation in the affected areas that Ahmadinejad has been forced to cancel planned visits to eight of the nation's thirty provinces.

Ahmadinejad is now desperate to provoke a mini-conflict with the United States to divert attention from the gathering storm inside Iran. At the same time, he is raising the "wipe-Israel-off-the-map" banner, lately all but abandoned by most Arab leaders, in the hope of winning a position of leadership for his Shiite theocracy—something otherwise unthinkable to the Sunni majority in the Islamic world. Finally, he is trying to position himself as the leader of the so-called non-aligned movement, in the hope of creating an alliance of all the anti-American and anti-democratic forces in the world, including in the West itself.

His strategy is premised on the assumption that the West has no stomach for a real fight, and that the worst that could happen to his regime is a few attacks on its nuclear sites—something that would have the advantage of diverting the focus from his domestic problems and bestowing on his regime a veneer of victimhood. Most of all, he is hoping that, once President Bush is out of office, the next American President will revert to the policies pursued by all previous U.S. administrations.

IN HIS address to the UN General Assembly in September, President Bush showed unmistakably that he understands the desire of the people of Iran for freedom and self-determination. The same vision is articulated in the Iran Freedom and Support Act, passed by the U.S. Senate on September 30 after its counterpart already passed in the House. If that is the vision, the best way to proceed toward implementing it is to remain guided always by the recognition that the Islamic Republic is toxic because its nature is to be toxic—because of its ideological DNA—and that, although its behavior can intermittently be influenced, ultimately the regime itself must be defeated and replaced.

With a clear compass, the litmus test for any particular policy toward Iran will likewise be clear: does this activity, program, or initiative help or hinder regime change? Under that general guideline, any number of specific policies can be envisioned, some of them already in place. For instance, the adoption of a regime-change strategy

does not preclude American participation in diplomatic initiatives focused on particular issues, such as the current efforts to engage the Islamic Republic in the matter of its nuclear ambitions. But the crucial criterion is that process must not be allowed to become a substitute for policy. In the hope of winning concessions from the mullahs, Germany, France, and the UK, the three EU partners in the talks, have chosen to ignore the question of the sanctions already envisaged under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty for the regime's repeated violations of its provisions; the U.S., by contrast, can and should press for their application.

Flexibility is also key. No one knows for sure how long it will take the Islamic Republic to develop or deploy a serious arsenal of nuclear weapons. Just as diplomacy need not be ruled out on this and other issues, the military option should also remain on the table. Just as tactics of containment and even of détente need not be ruled out of order when and if they seem clearly designed to hasten regime change, neither should tactics aimed at rollback.

Above all, the United States should be, as the President stated in his address to the UN, resolutely on the side of the Iranian people. Programatically, two things are needed here: assuring Iranians in no uncertain terms that the U.S. will never endorse or grant legitimacy to the current despotic regime, and helping to expose the Islamic Republic's repressive policies, human-rights violations, rampant corruption, and wanton subsidization of some of the worst terror groups on the face of the earth. Funding Iranian opposition groups, if needed, is one way to accomplish this. More important and ultimately perhaps more effective is for the U.S. to use its immense bully pulpit to publicize the Iranian people's struggle for freedom.

A more robust and coordinated American posture on the economic, diplomatic, political, and moral fronts would create forceful pressure on the current leadership and inspire new courage in its opponents. There is no denying that the mechanics of regime change are a delicate and often highly chancy matter, and that the historical record offers examples of failure as well as of success. But there is also no denying that the game is worth the candle. Accelerating the collapse and replacement of this aberrant tyranny, a curse to the Iranian people and to the world, will strike a blow against anti-Western and anti-democratic forces all over the globe, safeguard America's strategic interests in the Middle East and beyond, and add another radiant page to the almanac of American support for the cause of freedom.