

VOLUME 19 ISSUE 1 | WINTER 2025

# *in*FOCUS

QUARTERLY

## Iran: Freedom or Fire



Gregg Roman on US Strategy for Iran | Andrea Stricker on Iran's Nuclear Sites | Richard Goldberg on a Comprehensive Sanctions Regime | Ilan Berman on the Potentials of Iranian Society | Ken Timmerman on the Defeating Islamist Iran | Clare M. Lopez on Tehran's 9/11 Links | Masih Alinejad on the Threat to Americans | Michael Mieses, Noelle Kerr, and Nakissa Jahanbani on AI and the Cyber Threat | Shoshana Bryen reviews *Jews and Power*

An Interview with Dan Diker and Brig. Gen. Yossi Kuperwasser, IDF (Res.)

# LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

**W**e thought 10/7 changed everything; but that was only the beginning. Israel's defense of its people set in motion currents culminating with the fall of Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, mostly at the expense of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran has figured heavily in American thinking for 45 years, as administrations alternately cajoled and constrained it. China and Russia looked for ways to co-opt it. Regional partners vacillated between dealing with Iran and looking for a new "strong horse." And Israel watched as Iran created a "Ring of Fire" that threatened it from seven different points.

Today, the Islamic Republic is seeing a major downgrade in its security and its ability to control events in the region. Are we entering a period of greater mayhem and threat, or a more peaceful and secure future? Damned if we know. This issue of *inFOCUS* Quarterly provides an understanding of the underpinnings of regional chaos and how the US can respond.

Clare Lopez traces the origins of America's terror problems with Iran, with a sidebar on current Iranian activities against Americans. Gregg Roman lays out a series of steps the incoming

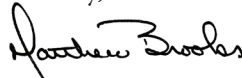


administration can take to enhance regional security. Ilan Berman and Ken Timmerman plan for a future without the mullahs. Andrea Stricker and Richard Goldberg cover Iran's "safety vest," a nuclear program with the potential for nuclear weapons. Israel, in the vortex, has a different perspective. Dan Diker and Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser lay out a variety of security issues – from Lebanon to Syria to Jordan – all influenced by Iran, and increasingly, by Turkey.

The shocking rise in antisemitism in the West is related to the other political and security currents. *inFOCUS* Quarterly editor Shoshana Bryen has chosen to re-run her review of Ruth Wisse's powerful book, *Jews and Power*, to remind us of the singular and often dangerous position of Jews in history and around the world.

If you appreciate what you've read, I encourage you to make a contribution to the JPC. You can use our secure site: [www.jewishpolicycenter.org/donate](http://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/donate).

Sincerely,



Matthew Brooks  
Publisher

## *in*FOCUS

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# A Comprehensive Strategy for Democratic Transition in Iran

by GREGG ROMAN

Iran's status as the most destabilizing force in the Middle East presents a pressing need for change. Today, the Islamic Republic is a regional hegemon that uses proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to destabilize neighboring states and challenge US interests. The October 7, 2023, Hamas-led massacre and subsequent regional escalation serve as reminders of the Islamic Republic's ambitions and its nuclear aspirations, making it the central challenge to US policy in the region.

For decades, US strategies toward Iran have failed to achieve their intended outcomes. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) emboldened Tehran by providing financial resources that it used to augment regional terrorism and its ballistic missile program. Conversely, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign created economic hardships for the regime but failed to force substantive policy changes. These shortcomings highlight the need for a new, comprehensive approach to empower Iranians to challenge their regime and enable democratic transition in Iran.

## ■ *Strategic Context*

The 2022 protests that erupted after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini underscored the Iranian regime's fragility as they spread across the country and exposed deep-seated public dissatisfaction with the government's corruption, mismanagement, and suppression of human rights. The difficulties the regime faced suppressing these protests exposed other vulnerabilities. Simultaneously, Iran's ethnic minorities—including

Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis – demonstrated organizational capacity and present opportunities to exert additional pressure on the regime.

The December 2024 fall of Assad's regime in Syria has dramatically altered Iran's regional position. While Tehran maintains proxy networks in Syria, the loss of its primary state ally and Russia's diminished regional role create new strategic opportunities to constrain Iranian influence.

With the second Trump administration crafting its foreign policy strategy, decisiveness is imperative. Half-hearted measures will not suffice. As Secretary of State-designate Marco Rubio pointed out, "Empowering the Iranian people is not just the right thing to do; it's the most sustainable path to regional stability."

The incoming US administration must seize this opportunity to exploit the regime's weaknesses and to stymie its external aggression. The approach

The incoming US administration must seize this opportunity to exploit the regime's weaknesses and to stymie its external aggression.

requires integrating economic pressure, support for internal opposition, dismantling Iran's regional proxy network, finalizing Saudi-Israel relations, and implementing an aggressive information warfare campaign.

## ■ *Amplifying Internal Pressures*

The Iranian regime's vulnerability lies in its internal fissures. Public dissent has reached unprecedented levels due to economic collapse, widespread corruption, and unpopular foreign interventions. A strategy of regime change must capitalize on these weaknesses by fostering domestic opposition and amplifying social unrest. Establishing an Iran Democracy Fund will serve as a central mechanism for this effort.

The Iran Democracy Fund would channel resources to vetted grassroots organizations, amplifying the power of labor unions, women's rights advocates, environmental activists, and students. Transparency will be critical, but so will results. Equally important is providing secure technologies like encrypted messaging platforms and satellite internet access, enabling activists to communicate and organize.

Case studies from the Cold War illustrate the transformative power of external support for dissidents. Programs including Radio Free Europe provided not just information but hope – a critical resource under oppressive regimes. A modern equivalent—using social

media and Persian-language satellite television—can play a similar role in Iran, broadcasting credible content that challenges regime narratives and highlights democratic alternatives.

## A modern equivalent for Iran could harness advances in digital technology while maintaining RFE's core principles of accuracy, credibility, and accessibility.

Radio Free Europe (RFE) provides a powerful historical precedent for how external media support can empower dissidents and undermine authoritarian regimes. Launched in 1949 during the Cold War, the CIA initially funded RFE with additional support from private donors. Its mission was to broadcast uncensored news and cultural content into the Eastern bloc, countering state propaganda and fostering pro-democratic sentiments.

RFE's reach was substantial. At its peak, it broadcast in multiple languages to millions of listeners behind the Iron Curtain.

Dissidents, including Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Lech Wałęsa, in Poland credited its broadcasts with inspiring resistance movements and offering hope. RFE also amplified the voices of exiled intellectuals, creating a bridge between dissident communities abroad and those living under Communist rule. By the 1980s, Soviet leaders acknowledged the network's role in fomenting unrest, demonstrating its effectiveness as a soft-power tool.

A modern equivalent for Iran could harness advances in digital technology while maintaining RFE's core principles of accuracy, credibility, and accessibility. Persian-language satellite television channels, complemented by social media platforms like Telegram and Instagram, could replicate RFE's ability to penetrate an authoritarian

information space. Investment in these platforms would give Iranian activists a vital resource for organizing, spreading counter-regime narratives, and fostering hope for change.

Ethnic minority regions also present specific opportunities for destabilizing the regime. In the Kurdish northwest, longstanding smuggling networks offer conduits for material support and information flows. Training programs conducted in neighboring countries' regions, such as Iraqi Kurdistan, can enhance the organizational capabilities of Kurdish groups and equip them with the tools needed for sustained resistance. Similar opportunities exist in the southeastern Baluchi regions, where traditional tribal structures and cross-border connections provide natural frameworks for challenging the regime. In Khuzestan, home to Iran's Arab minority and key oil infrastructure, civil resistance efforts can disrupt critical economic operations while gathering intelligence on regime activities. However, support for these communities must tread carefully. While their grievances are legitimate, the focus must remain on a unified, democratic Iran—not fragmented separatism that could weaken the broader movement by allowing the regime to cast itself as the defender of Iranian nationalism

Technology plays a critical role in empowering opposition groups. To ensure effective use, the United States must provide secure communication tools such as encrypted messaging platforms, satellite internet access, virtual private networks, and comprehensive training. These tools will enable activists to

coordinate protests, disseminate information, and evade regime surveillance. Simultaneously, professional development programs should focus on building sustainable leadership within opposition movements. Training in organizational management, civil resistance tactics, strategic communications, and coalition-building will prepare these groups to play a central role in a post-regime transition.

With a youthful, educated population eager to connect with the global digital economy, there are natural avenues through which influence can flow into the country. Iranian tech entrepreneurs need access to international mentorship programs, technical resources, and networking. These linkages will also play an essential role in turning Iran's young, technology-literate generation into a potent force for pro-democracy change as it builds its capabilities to evade and circumvent regime control systems.

## ■ *Intensifying Economic Pressure*

Economic pressure must not only exceed the scope of previous sanctions campaigns, it must also evolve to outpace Iran's evasion tactics. The Treasury Department should establish a specialized task force to dismantle the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) financial empire, which spans construction, telecommunications, energy, and shipping. These operations often rely on front companies and shell corporations to evade sanctions. The US can deprive the IRGC of revenue streams by targeting these entities.

The shipping sector requires particular attention, as the IRGC uses a fleet of vessels operating under flags of convenience to transport oil, weapons, and other goods. Interdiction in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean must be relentless. Targeting IRGC-linked vessels, supported by diplomatic pressure on complicit port operators and flag states, could sever critical smuggling routes. Similarly, IRGC-linked engineering





Demonstrators gather in London in 2022 to campaign for regime change in Iran. (Photo: Eleventh Hour Photography /Alamy)

firms, which secure lucrative infrastructure contracts across the region, must be denied access to materials and financing.

The energy sector remains a cornerstone of the Iranian economy and a vital source of funding for the regime. The US should expand its monitoring of oil and petrochemical transactions, working with financial institutions to block suspicious payments. Enhanced scrutiny of trade finance mechanisms, such as letters of credit and pre-export financing, will further disrupt Iran's ability to sell its resources.

Additionally, targeting the personal financial networks of regime leaders, including their assets in foreign jurisdictions, will create direct pressure on decision-makers and expose their corruption. IRGC officials and clerics have fortunes held in the names of family members or subordinates. Such assets are spread around different countries, including Turkish and Malaysian

properties, Gulf State investments, and accounts in Asian financial centers. This direct pressure on decision-makers while exposing the corruption of the regime elite is uniquely effective in targeting these personal holdings.

Iran's use of cryptocurrency to evade sanctions presents an evolving challenge. The US should collaborate with blockchain analysis firms to monitor these transactions and develop regulatory frameworks to counter this threat. Financial institutions must adopt stricter due diligence practices to sever Iran's access to international banking networks, particularly in crucial trading hubs such as the UAE, Turkey, and Malaysia.

### ■ **Dismantling Iran's Regional Proxy Network**

Iran's proxy network is its greatest strength and Achilles' heel. Groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia

militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen enable Tehran to project power far beyond its borders. However, these proxies also drain resources and expose vulnerabilities.

Iran's proxies represent both a threat to US allies and a vulnerability for Tehran. Hezbollah's prior dominance undermined Lebanese sovereignty and fueled regional instability. The US should suspend aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces until it disarms Hezbollah. Supporting Israeli operations to neutralize Hezbollah aligns with US interests and weakens Iran's influence.

In Iraq, Tehran has established a "deep state" through pro-Iran Shia militias and allied political figures. Countering this influence requires strengthening nationalist elements within Iraq's political system and security forces. The United States should maintain a military presence in both Baghdad-controlled Iraq, and the

Kurdistan Regional Government while investing in infrastructure and development projects that provide alternatives to Iranian economic penetration. Security force professionalization programs emphasizing national loyalty over sectarian allegiance will further reduce Iranian influence.

In Syria, the collapse of Assad's regime has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape. While Iran lost its primary state ally, Tehran maintains militia networks that now operate with greater autonomy. These forces seek to preserve Iranian interests amid the power vacuum, particularly around Damascus and in areas near Lebanon's border. The United States must adapt its approach given Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) control of Damascus and Turkey's expanded proxy presence. American forces should establish defensive positions east of the Euphrates, while coordinating with Kurdish allies to prevent both Iranian resupply efforts and Turkish expansion. Special operations teams must enhance training for Kurdish units while gathering intelligence on Iranian militia movements through the region.

Maritime operations require enhanced naval presence across multiple theaters. The Strait of Hormuz demands particular attention, with continuous deployment of naval assets to ensure freedom of navigation and deter Iranian provocations. These operations must be closely coordinated with regional partners, particularly the Saudi and Emirati navies, in order to establish comprehensive maritime domain awareness.

Interdiction of weapons shipments requires sophisticated intelligence collection and rapid response capabilities. This effort must focus on known trafficking routes while maintaining flexibility to respond to emerging patterns.

Protection of commercial shipping demands an approach combining military presence, intelligence collection, and industry cooperation. The administration should establish a dedicated maritime security coordination center, bringing

together military assets, commercial shipping operators, and regional partners. This center would coordinate escort operations, share threat intelligence, and establish standard operating procedures for vessels transiting high-risk areas.

### ■ **Leveraging Regional Cooperation:**

Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel presents a pivotal opportunity to alter the strategic landscape in the Middle East and strengthen US efforts to diminish Iranian power. Normalization might allow military, economic, and intelligence cooperation in practice, creating a regional front against Tehran and its destabilizing actions.

disrupt Iranian supply chains.

Air defense is another critical feature of regional cooperation. Iran has been expanding its arsenal of ballistic missiles and drones, which are a severe danger to US partners in the area. With Assad's fall creating new uncertainties about weapons proliferation in Syria, integrated air defense becomes even more crucial. THAAD – and other US systems – could be integrated with systems like the Israeli Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow III to create a standard, multi-layered air defense. The ability of the Saudis to field Israeli systems in Saudi Arabia is part of a contiguous swath of protective cover over the Gulf region. Aside from cementing opera-

In Iraq, Tehran has established a “deep state” through pro-Iran Shia militias and allied political figures. Countering this influence requires strengthening nationalist elements within Iraq's political system and security forces.

Maritime security is an area of potential cooperation. Iranian smuggling, including the delivery of weapons to militia proxies, continues through both the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, critical chokepoints for all traffic. This has become even more crucial following Assad's fall, as Iran seeks alternative supply routes to maintain its influence in Syria. With its naval forces, Saudi Arabia can operate in these regions and offer logistical support and operational resources, while Israel can use its intelligence capabilities to locate and monitor IRGC-affiliated vessels. Combined with the US Navy, these regional actors could develop a cohesive maritime security architecture that would dramatically enhance interdiction capabilities and

tional ties, this partnership would also bolster the collective security of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and other American allies.

Sharing intelligence to dismantle Iran's proxy networks is also critically important. Iran uses clandestine means to supply money and arms — over land and sea routes — for its regional proxies, especially Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shia militias in Iraq. Saudi-Israeli intelligence-gathering allows the dissemination of information well in advance of these operations so that this potential intelligence is utilized to disperse Iranian forces working with militias in Yemen, Iraq, or Syria. A regional intelligence coordination center — staffed by the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other

like-minded states — could track and eliminate Iranian proxies.

A Saudi-Israel economic partnership would further strengthen endeavors to corner Iran. Together, they could interdict Tehran's dark money flows, enforce sanctions relief, keep tabs on shipping lanes, monitor sanctions evasion, and diminish Iran's capacity to support its proxies and nuclear ambitions.

### ■ **An Aggressive Information Campaign**

An effective information campaign will target Iranian audiences across multiple platforms, emphasizing regime failures and opposition successes. Persian-language media initiatives should produce content that challenges regime narratives while promoting democratic values. Persian-language media must move beyond traditional news broadcasts. Cultural programming—dramas exposing corruption, documentaries on democratic movements, and satire—can engage younger audiences and challenge the regime's legitimacy. Social media campaigns must leverage influential Iranian voices to build credibility and engage younger demographics, while mobile messaging platforms distribute real-time updates on protests and regime activities.

Documentation of human rights abuses will reinforce the regime's illegitimacy on the international stage. A dedicated human rights documentation center should collect, verify, and publicize evidence of regime violations, focusing on both historical atrocities and ongoing abuses.

Economic mismanagement represents a compelling message theme that resonates across Iranian society. The administration should establish dedicated analytical capabilities to track and publicize the regime's financial failures, connecting high-level policy decisions to impacts on ordinary citizens. This should include regular reports on inflation rates, unemployment levels, and the deterioration of public services.

The costs of maintaining proxy forces provide another crucial messaging theme. The administration should develop tracking mechanisms to document the regime's expenditures on foreign interventions, presenting this information in formats accessible to average Iranians. This effort should highlight examples of regime spending on foreign militia groups while domestic needs go unmet.

Nuclear program expenses represent a sensitive topic that requires careful messaging. The administration should develop detailed analyses demonstrating the massive costs of nuclear development while highlighting how these resources could be better spent on domestic needs. This messaging should emphasize the program's role in perpetuating Iran's international isolation while questioning its actual benefits to national security.

### ■ **Transition Planning and Post-Regime Scenarios**

Assad's fall in Syria provides valuable lessons for Iranian transition planning. The swift collapse of a longstanding authoritarian regime, the emergence of new power centers, and the challenge of securing military assets all offer insights for preparing contingencies in Iran. The United States must anticipate similar dynamics while preparing for multiple transition scenarios in Tehran.

In the event of a managed transition, military elements willing to facilitate change must be identified and incentivized with guarantees of institutional survival. Technocratic continuity in essential government functions will ensure stability during the transition period, while rapid international recognition of a new government will provide legitimacy.

A sudden collapse of the regime would demand swift action. Securing nuclear facilities, preventing weapons proliferation, and stabilizing public order would become priorities—yet these efforts could face significant logistical and diplomatic challenges. Interim

governance structures must be established quickly to prevent power vacuums, while international partners provide technical and humanitarian assistance.

A hybrid scenario, where parts of the regime remain in power while others collapse, will require engagement to manage parallel transitions. Constitutional reform, security sector transformation, and economic restructuring will be critical to rebuilding Iran as a stable, democratic state.

No strategy is without risks. Sanctions come with risks. They could worsen suffering, alienate ordinary Iranians and fuel anti-US sentiment. Policymakers must balance these trade-offs with visible support for humanitarian aid to mitigate backlash. Similarly, support for opposition groups may provoke accusations of foreign interference, compromising their legitimacy.

Moreover, regional dynamics present additional hurdles. Saudi-Israeli normalization, while promising, requires navigation to ensure cooperation without alienating other Gulf partners. Efforts to dismantle Iran's proxies must avoid entangling the US in prolonged conflicts that divert resources from broader strategic goals.

### ■ **Conclusion**

The United States stands at a crossroads in its approach to Iran. As historian Niall Ferguson observed, "Empires often fall not from external conquest, but from internal decay." The Islamic Republic is rotting from within. Washington can accelerate that process with clarity, conviction, and care. The US can weaken the Iranian regime and pave the way for a democratic transition. Eliminating Iran as a destabilizing force will transform the Middle East, securing long-term stability and advancing US strategic goals.

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GREGG ROMAN is director of the Middle East Forum (MEF). MEF staff and fellows contributed to the research for this article.



# The Curious Case of Iran's Destroyed Nuclear Site

by **ANDREA STRICKER**

**O**n October 26 2024, the day after Israel conducted a massive counterstrike against Iranian missile and military sites, open-source sleuths noticed something strange: A building was unexpectedly missing within Iran's Parchin military complex.

The relatively small, 40-meter-long building, known as Taleghan 2, was located southwest of several destroyed Iranian missile facilities — and happened to be used for experiments during Iran's pre-2004 nuclear weapons program.

The site's demolition raised numerous questions. Did Israel violate US President Joe Biden's warning to refrain from striking Iranian nuclear sites during its counterattack, which came in response to an October 1 Iranian missile barrage?

Moreover, what was Jerusalem's motivation in destroying the facility? Had the Islamic Republic carried out new nuclear-weapons work at the site? Or was this a message to avoid such work or further attacks on Israel, lest the regime lose more meaningful nuclear sites?

A less pondered question is why the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), had never visited the site, despite investigating a nearby sister building, Taleghan 1, in 2015. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi declined to protest Israel's strike on Taleghan 2 since the facility was not subject to IAEA monitoring.

Since Israel successfully destroyed most Iranian air defenses during the October 25 strike, Iran's nuclear sites are now sitting ducks for additional

Israeli attacks, perhaps with the blessing and even assistance from an incoming President Donald Trump.

Above all, the Taleghan 2 incident clearly shows how numerous policies have failed to restrain Iran's nuclear threat, including two decades of diplomacy, periodic sanctions, IAEA investigations, and Western and Israeli assassinations and sabotage.

compress an atomic core to set off a nuclear blast.

So much is now known about the building and Iran's nuclear weapons program, then titled the Amad Plan, thanks to the Israeli Mossad's 2018 seizure of an archive of documentation from a Tehran warehouse detailing the regime's work on nuclear weapons. The Israeli spies smuggled the documents

The JCPOA did not require Iran to open its program to intrusive IAEA inspections... (and) never required the IAEA to determine whether Tehran's program was theretofore devoted to peaceful uses...

Given Tehran's galloping nuclear progress during the Biden administration's term, Jerusalem and Washington now have a narrowing window to eliminate the nuclear threat from their mutual arch-nemesis.

How the two nations proceed in the coming months could reshape Middle East security for decades to come.

## ■ **A Large Crater**

That Taleghan 2 was intact prior to the Israeli strike is certain.

But satellite imagery acquired by the Washington, DC-based Institute for Science and International Security, dated October 27, indicated that a large crater had replaced most of the building.

Prior to 2004, inside the building, Tehran had carried out tests related to initiating high explosives that would

back to Israel for analysis.

The archive materials indicated that in mid-2003, Tehran — facing exposure of its secret nuclear sites and activities, sustaining prodigious international pressure, and fearing US military action after America's invasion of Iraq — opted to temporarily discontinue its plan to build nuclear weapons. Instead, Tehran planned to continue related nuclear work at a lower level and progress it for a later date.

Iran's own photographs from inside Taleghan 2 showed that a small metal chamber was once present, along with equipment to model and take photos of the functions of a so-called multi-point initiation (MPI) system. The MPI, in Tehran's nuclear-weapon design, sets off a uniform inward explosion. It compresses a uranium-metal core and



Former US Secretary of State John Kerry poses with P5+1 leaders and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif following negotiations over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program in 2015. (Photo: US State Department)

neutron initiator, the latter comprised of material that starts a chain reaction to initiate a nuclear explosion.

What had become of the equipment at Taleghan 2? Was it still present at the site during Israel's strike?

Iran, meanwhile, remained silent on the matter.

Then an *Axios* bombshell on November 15 confirmed, according to several former and current US and Israeli officials, that Israel had struck Taleghan 2 to disrupt new Iranian weaponization work. "They conducted scientific activity that could lay the ground for the production of a nuclear weapon," a US official said. "It was a top secret thing. A small part of the Iranian government knew about this, but most of the Iranian government didn't."

*Axios* also noted that a US official said that "there was concern across the

board" about the activity at Taleghan 2 facility.

While the *Axios* report focused on Iran's renewed work on explosives, or the MPI, it remained unclear if some other, unknown effort had motivated the strike.

Israeli officials told *Axios* in a follow-up report that the destruction of the equipment inside Taleghan 2 created a "bottleneck" that Tehran would need to overcome to successfully build nuclear weapons. Moreover, the Israelis believed they could detect required foreign procurements.

All of this raised a question that had been lingering since early 2024: Had Tehran's later date to construct nuclear weapons finally come?

### ■ **No Access to Military Sites**

In 2002, non-governmental groups

and the media exposed Iranian covert nuclear sites and activities, prompting the IAEA to investigate and apply international monitoring. Likely understanding it was in a corner, Tehran complied — but only so much.

The regime kept most of its nuclear weapons work secret, revealing some efforts to the agency, but largely prolonging a wild goose chase that would span more than two decades and continue to this day.

After enacting broad sanctions on Iran starting in 2006, the P5+1 — the United States, France, United Kingdom, Germany, China, and Russia — reached a nuclear deal with Tehran in 2015 that granted temporary restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in return for massive sanctions relief. Yet the accord, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), did not require Iran

to open its program to intrusive IAEA inspections, including checks at military sites that might conduct secret, ongoing nuclear weapons work. In fact, the deal never required the IAEA to determine

Iranian efforts to stymie IAEA environmental sampling for nuclear material. The 2015 side agreement required Iran — rather than the IAEA — to take its own environmental samples from inside

nuclear weapon, the neutron initiator.

Tehran issued denials, which the IAEA reported were “not credible.” Yet the P5+1 implemented the JCPOA in early 2016, providing robust sanctions relief to Iran rather than requiring full IAEA access to any site to determine whether such activities had stopped.

Even though first-term President Trump exited the JCPOA in May 2018, Iran had again succeeded in maintaining its nuclear secrets. Under President Biden, who removed economic pressure the Trump administration had put in place, Tehran’s program expanded to alarming levels.

A side agreement between Iran and the IAEA accompanying the JCPOA required the regime to submit to a sole IAEA visit at the Taleghan 1 site. In reality, the visit appeared to check a box for Obama administration officials...

whether Tehran’s program was theretofore devoted to peaceful use.

Instead, the deal required the IAEA to issue a “final” report on Iran’s nuclear weapons activities. But Iran refused to cooperate, providing false explanations and denials of its past work.

A side agreement between Iran and the IAEA accompanying the JCPOA required the regime to submit to a sole IAEA visit at the Taleghan 1 site. In reality, the visit appeared to check a box for Obama administration officials, who had promised a deal facilitating regular IAEA access to Iranian military sites.

The IAEA had acquired evidence from IAEA member states that, starting around 2000, Tehran had worked on high-explosive “hydrodynamic” tests — compression of the nuclear core to trigger a chain reaction — at Taleghan 1. Iran’s nuclear archive later confirmed that Tehran was testing the functionality of the center of its nuclear weapon, a neutron initiator, in a larger high-explosive chamber than the one inside Taleghan 2, which is located around the corner from Taleghan 1.

Iran refused IAEA access to Taleghan 1 in 2012, with Tehran stating it “was not able to grant access to that site.” Later that year, the IAEA observed the regime undertaking sanitization activities at the site, including removing earth — a hallmark of

the Taleghan 1 chamber with IAEA inspectors nearby, an unprecedented arrangement that flew in the face of all prior standard IAEA practice. Yet samples could still reveal nuclear particles that would tell a forensic story about Tehran’s previous activities at the site.

Prior to the IAEA’s visit, Iran again carried out sanitization activities at Taleghan 1. Commercial satellite imagery showed Tehran concealing activities and carting something away.

## ■ *IAEA Never Went to Taleghan 2*

The IAEA never visited Taleghan 2, nor did it go to other Amad Plan sites in the same vicinity, among numerous related sites located elsewhere.

Former IAEA Directors General Mohamed El Baradei and Yukiya Amano — the latter in office during the JCPOA’s finalization in 2015 and facilitated the Iran-IAEA side deal for access to Taleghan 1 — likely made these calls.

The IAEA never visited Taleghan 2, nor did it go to other Amad Plan sites in the same vicinity, among numerous related sites located elsewhere.

When the IAEA finally visited Taleghan 1 in September 2015, the fabled high-explosive chamber was gone. But the agency still obtained damning evidence from Iran’s self-taken samples. Two particles of natural uranium — both man-made — indicated that Iran may have worked with this surrogate material for weapons-grade uranium to test the functions of the center of its

Tehran had drawn red lines rejecting any IAEA investigation of its past, and the agency, the Obama administration, and Europe accepted this, even if it meant accepting a level of uncertainty about the future.

Olli Heinonen, deputy director for safeguards at the IAEA from 2005 until 2010 and a current distinguished fellow at the Stimson Center, said in a private



communication that he could not understand why the IAEA in 2015 “did not see reasons at that time to visit Taleghan 2,” which “appeared to be functionally related” to Taleghan 1.

Heinonen said that “according to the usual IAEA verification practices,” the discovery of uranium particles at Taleghan 1 “warranted follow-up IAEA visits” to Taleghan 2.

Heinonen noted that when Israel provided the IAEA with a copy of Iran’s nuclear archive in 2018, “It was even harder to understand after studying the archives [...] and findings in the first building that no IAEA visit was requested.”

Grossi, who assumed the position of IAEA director general in 2019, appeared not to fully know about the activities Iran carried out at Taleghan 2 when questioned during a November 2024 press conference. Grossi said, “We do not consider this a nuclear facility. We don’t have any information that would confirm presence of nuclear material there.”

Grossi did state that Israel should follow “a body of law” that “indicates that nuclear facilities should not be attacked.” Yet he also stated that while Israel may have information that Iran was carrying out concerning work at Taleghan 2, the IAEA does not, allowing Jerusalem to dodge international scrutiny — at least for now.

Grossi may have inadvertently paved the way for more strikes.

### ■ *More Strikes to Come?*

How will the Taleghan 2 incident play out in the months ahead?

Iran, for its part, busily cleaned and removed debris from the site days after the strike. It has not yet acted on threats to retaliate against the Jewish state once more.

The regime’s air defenses remain decimated since the Israeli strike, with no likelihood that Tehran can rebuild for months to come. This renders key nuclear facilities — the uranium-producing enrichment plants at Natanz and

Fordow and the uranium conversion facility at Esfahan — particularly exposed and vulnerable.

Those plants have now churned out enough highly enriched uranium for Iran to make weapons-grade material for up to 16 nuclear bombs in five months, with additional months needed to weaponize the fuel for atomic devices.

Grossi, who assumed the position of IAEA director general in 2019, appeared not to fully know about the activities Iran carried out at Taleghan 2 when questioned during a November 2024 press conference.

The US and Israeli intelligence communities also remain concerned that Iran has taken initial steps toward weaponization. The United States reportedly warned Tehran in June to stop such activities, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence reported its concerns to Congress soon after.

The Taleghan 2 episode may provide new confirmation of Iran’s weaponization activities.

President-elect Trump said in October that Biden should have urged Israel to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities. Yet Trump has also said he seeks to avert additional regional conflicts and would negotiate with the regime. However, given Trump’s shocking order to assassinate Tehran’s Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani in 2020, Iran cannot be certain Trump would not approve or assist an Israeli strike.

Fear of detection and joint US-Israeli military strikes may cause Tehran to think twice in seeking to weaponize its nuclear capabilities.

Still, even if Iran presses ahead with weaponization, military strikes on Iran’s

program are no small feat. To be fully successful at destroying, rather than just damaging, the facilities, Israeli military capabilities may be inadequate. Rather, full success requires a joint US-Israeli bombing campaign lasting many days or weeks, and a steady effort to prevent Tehran’s nuclear reconstitution. These difficulties explain why Jerusalem and

Washington have never acted.

Yet Iran’s growing capacity to make nuclear weapons presents a threat Israel cannot tolerate for long, particularly in the wake of the Hamas’s Iran-backed massacre of Israelis on October 7, 2023.

A nuclear-armed Tehran would black-mail the West and Jerusalem into standing aside as the regime escalates its support for its terrorist proxies — including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Yemen’s Houthi rebels — throughout the region, potentially threatening Israel’s very existence.

In the end, absent other meaningful options and bolstered by opportunity, a war-weary Israel may need to make the toughest choice of all.

It may have to lead the way to eliminating Tehran’s nuclear threat — and accepting a level of uncertainty about the success of this mission.

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# How to Bring Back Maximum Pressure on Iran

by RICHARD GOLDBERG

**A**t the end of 2020, the Islamic Republic of Iran was down to just \$4 billion in accessible foreign exchange reserves. Its terrorist mastermind, Qassem Solemani, and the godfather of its nuclear weapons program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, were dead. The regime in Tehran was afraid that its nuclear and missile infrastructure might be targeted at any moment. The ayatollah had halted the climb up the escalation ladder of uranium enrichment for months.

Budgets for terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas were down. The Houthis would soon be added to America's official terrorist list, while the United States provided intelligence, logistics and defensive support to Gulf Arab partners working to degrade Iran's terror proxy in Yemen.

The United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain were fully aligned in a strategy to squeeze the source of instability in the Middle East – a coordination that gave birth to the Abraham Accords while pulling Gulf Arab partners closer to the United States and farther away from China's orbit.

In shorthand, we called this the era of Maximum Pressure on Iran, but it was much more than that – it was the recipe for peace and stability in a region that has struggled to sustain both for generations.

## ■ *The Past Four Years*

Upon taking office, President Joe Biden substituted appeasement for pressure – loosening US economic sanctions to provide Tehran with tens of billions of

dollars, pulling back diplomatic pressure over Iran's concealment of secret nuclear sites, turning a blind eye to Iranian proxy attacks on American troops, allowing a UN missile embargo to expire, removing the Houthis from the US terror list, distancing Washington from Riyadh, and chasing Iranian nuclear escalation with an offer of a sweeter deal than the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – more sanctions relief for fewer nuclear restrictions.

The results were disastrous: a seven-front Middle East war waged by a regime racing toward the nuclear weapons threshold. During the period of Biden's "maximum deference" policy, Iran's ter-

– thereby making Saudi-Israeli normalization much more challenging.

Iran became a major energy supplier for Beijing while supplying drones and missiles to Moscow. Worst of all, the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei grew more emboldened to attack the United States directly, launching a wave of assassination and kidnapping plots on US soil. This even included trying to kill Donald Trump as he ran for president – funneling money to pro-Hamas protest movements in America, and using cyber tools to meddle in the presidential election.

On the nuclear front, maximum deference encouraged Iran to produce

The entirety of Iran's stockpile of high-enriched uranium was accumulated between 2021 and present day.

ror budgets went up. Payments to Hamas alone tripled in the months leading up to October 7.

The Houthis metastasized into a Hezbollah-like missile and drone threat that has effectively shut down international maritime traffic in the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia moved closer to China and entered a truce with Iran – a strategic pivot that refocused the Middle East on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict instead of the true source of regional instability

high-enriched uranium, deploy thousands of advanced centrifuges and even begin computer modeling work for a nuclear weapon. For the first time in 17 years, the US intelligence community can no longer assess that Iran isn't working on the weapon itself. The entirety of Iran's stockpile of high-enriched uranium was accumulated between 2021 and the present day. Maximum deference led to Iran's present nuclear escalation, not maximum pressure.

But for Israeli military successes over the last four months in defiance of White House pressure – destroying Iran’s strategic air defense and severely degrading Hezbollah – Trump would be taking office facing an emboldened regime in Tehran on the march. Instead, Jerusalem has handed him an opening to revive his maximum pressure campaign and put the region back on a path to peace and stability.

\$6 billion to banks in Qatar for Iran’s use – ostensibly the ransom payment for the release of five American dual citizens held hostage by Tehran, but in truth, a down payment on an unacknowledged nuclear deal that paid the regime not to further enrich uranium to weapons-grade purity.

Another waiver, which was renewed shortly after the November election, gave Iran access to at least \$10 billion in accounts in Iraq and Oman – money

licenses, however, are messaged in a certain way for strategic communications but carry an ulterior motive. This can happen for supposedly “humanitarian trade,” access to technology or university exchanges – where something sounds good, but the details are a backdoor to provide sanctions relief to the regime. All existing licenses should be reviewed and, where necessary, revised to increase pressure.

Some licenses make sense... Some, however, are messaged in a certain way for strategic communications but carry an ulterior motive.

### ■ **Restoring Pressure; Restoring Peace**

To do that, he will need to direct his administration to make that campaign a priority, particularly on the enforcement of US sanctions to drain the regime of resources that fund its wide-ranging malign activities. And that should start with a national security presidential memorandum issued on January 20th making clear to every department and agency of the US government that maximum pressure is back.

The first step: Waivers, licenses, and comfort letters. These are technical terms in the sanctions business that describe legal tools to suspend or loosen the application of sanctions.

#### **Waivers**

Congress passed a series of Iran sanctions laws last decade that provided the president with authority to temporarily suspend or “waive” the application of sanctions if the president determines such a move is needed for national security. The Biden administration issued a waiver to allow South Korea to transfer

Baghdad owed Tehran for electricity imports but that the first Trump administration had rendered inaccessible.

Any waiver in effect that gives Iran access to cash should be canceled immediately. In the case of Iraq, the new administration should revert to its former policy: Allow Iraq to temporarily import electricity provided that any money owed be kept in an escrow account in Baghdad – but move heaven and earth to unhook Iraq from Iranian electricity dependency. Funds in Oman and Qatar should be locked down as well. And any other bank around the world still holding Iranian funds – from New Delhi to Tokyo to Beijing – should be reminded that US sanctions are back in full force.

#### **Licenses**

Licenses are different. Think of these as special exceptions to US sanctions issued by the Treasury Department to narrow their scope and thus reduce their impact. Some licenses make sense: Being allowed to smuggle secure communications into Iran to help the Iranian people rise up against their torturers. Some

#### **Comfort Letters**

Comfort letters are a sanctions version of Monopoly’s “get out of jail free card.” They are not publicly available, unlike waivers and licenses, but we get hints that they exist from references inside waivers or in “Frequently Asked Questions” guidance published by the Treasury. Such letters were likely issued by the Biden administration to banks in Europe that are converting Iraqi dinars to euros for Iran, to banks operating a sanctions relief program under cover of “humanitarian channels,” and to banks in Oman and Qatar to process transactions on Iran’s behalf. All such comfort letters should be revoked.

### ■ **Sanctions Enforcement: China & More**

Next comes sanctions enforcement. Under the Biden administration, Iran’s oil exports skyrocketed from 300,000-500,000 barrels per day to anywhere between 1.5 million and 2 million barrels per day. Most of it goes to China. Biden made a proactive decision not to confront Beijing over this illicit trade. “Experts” tell the media that there’s little the United States can do about this trade because the Chinese Communist Party has smartly delegated the activity to so-called “teapot refineries” that are disconnected from any known Chinese state-owned enterprise.

But for anyone who knows how the Chinese system works, and for those who have coordinated Iran sanctions enforcement in the past, that claim is preposterous. Nothing of this magnitude



is happening inside Xi Jinping's China without the central government's knowledge and support. And there's little doubt that if you dig deep enough, you will find a bank that is financing the imports and a state-owned enterprise that ultimately stands behind their refining and distribution.

We have seen this movie before. Once during the Obama administration when a supposedly independent bank in western China that was violating US sanctions turned out to be a subsidiary of a major Chinese energy company. And again during the Trump administration when officials discovered China's state-owned shipping conglomerate ultimately overseeing the illicit import operation.

The United States is more than capable of tracking every oil tanker that leaves an Iranian port and heads to China – and a new law, the SHIP Act, gives the president authority to impose sanctions on every Chinese port that allows that cargo to land. A new administration should make clear that vessels involved in ship-to-ship transfers – a common method to evade sanctions by offloading illicit cargo on to another ship midway through the journey – will be covered by the law.

This is one of the most fundamental decision points President-elect Trump will face, which will determine whether maximum pressure succeeds or fails: He must be willing to tell President Xi that Iran sanctions policy is in a category of its own diplomatically; the US will fully enforce its sanctions no matter where the breadcrumbs of evasion lead inside China. A major enforcement action will likely be necessary to prove to Xi that the American hall pass on Iranian oil imports has come to an end.

Importantly, China should know it's not being singled out. The US should be fully enforcing oil and petrochemical sanctions against any country, including close partners who may have been given a wink and a nod by the White House over the last few years. India may very well be



*President Donald Trump signs an Executive Order to place further sanctions on Iran in June 2019. (Photo: White House / Joyce N. Boghosian)*

on the list. Transshipment enablers in the Gulf and Indo-Pacific regions most certainly should be hit with sanctions.

To avoid negative impacts on the oil market, these moves should be tightly coordinated with Trump's new National Energy Council, which has been tasked with making America energy dominant. A green light to American energy and an end to the global war on fossil fuels will more than mitigate any market pressure from tighter oil sanctions enforcement.

There should also be zero tolerance for financing port projects with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Once upon a time, someone in the State Department had a big idea to encourage India to partner with Iran to build a port for land-locked Afghanistan. The port, however, is owned and operated by the IRGC, and the Taliban now control Afghanistan, making such a project a double-whammy of insanity.

### ■ **Other Sanctions**

While energy exports are Iran's lifeblood, they aren't the only priorities for US sanctions enforcement. As my FDD colleague Dr. Saeed Ghasseminejad has written, a new Trump administration can further drain Tehran's coffers by expanding US sanctions on Iran's metals

industry to cover zinc, nickel, and lithium, and targeting Iran's automotive sector – most particularly the Chinese car companies that are operating joint ventures in violation of US sanctions.

As the new Trump administration increases pressure on Iran itself, it should squeeze Tehran's proxies at the same time. The Houthis should return to the foreign terrorist organization list and Treasury Department licenses issued to loosen financial sanctions on the group should be rescinded. Hamas networks across the United States and Europe should be under maximum American pressure – both from Treasury and the Justice Department.

As the collapse of Bashar Assad's regime in Syria made clear, Israel has severely degraded Hezbollah – which is an opportunity for the United States to finally smash the organization's illicit operations in Latin America. Additionally, like Assad, Iran (and Russia's) anti-American partners south of our border – most notably Venezuela – may be weaker than we know and vulnerable to an unexpected uptick in sanctions enforcement.

The Trump administration will also have an opportunity to implement new sanctions laws passed by Congress, like

the SHIP Act, that the Biden administration largely ignored. Those instruct authorities to impose human rights sanctions on key Iranian officials under the MAHSA Act, crack down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad financiers and pressure their state sponsors.

The White House should keep in mind that the Commerce Department should play a meaningful role in maxi-

to terms with the death of Western appeasement.

Our European allies resisted the snapback four years ago, working with Russia and China to block a US-led effort at the UN Security Council. Trump had been undermined by his own State Department, which held on dearly to sanctions waivers allowing foreign support for Iran's nuclear program – a signal

Importantly, China should know it's not being singled out. The US should be fully enforcing oil and petrochemical sanctions against any country, including close partners.

imum pressure: Using export controls to go after suppliers of Western technology to Iran and using the department's Entity List when meeting the evidentiary threshold for sanctions presents a challenge. Another creative policy to pursue might be the pseudo-privatization of sanctions enforcement – finding ways to incentivize whistleblowers and bounty-hunters, rather than just relying on the intelligence community.

Multilateral sanctions play a role, too, both to increase Iran's diplomatic isolation and to create additional economic pressure. We should push Canada, the United Kingdom, and the European Union as hard as we can to designate the IRGC as a terrorist group. We should also push the UK, France, and Germany to join the United States in triggering the snapback of UN sanctions on Iran – restoring international conventional arms and missile embargoes and putting the final nail in the coffin of the old JCPOA. Most analysts underappreciate the narrative economic effect both moves would have on the regime as the market comes

to Europeans that the JCPOA might one day return. This time around, he should make clear all nuclear waivers are dead and buried – and push his counterparts in London, Paris, and Berlin to complete the UN snapback.

### ■ A Caution

Finally, a word of caution. Maximum pressure is not the same as maximum sanctions. Sanctions are a tool, albeit a powerful one. But other tools are needed for maximum pressure to succeed. UN Ambassador-designate Elise Stefanik will need to wage political warfare against Iran at the Security Council. Accountability will be needed at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna – declaring Iran in breach of its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations.

Maximum support will be needed for the Iranian people. Millions of Iranians hate their regime and many of them have never left the streets since 2009 calling "Death to the Dictator." Women face a renewed crackdown on hijab wearing.

The Mahsa Amini uprising of late 2022 exposed how vulnerable the regime really is, and the embers of that uprising are still burning strong – Khamenei's Achilles heel. The US and key partners are well-positioned to support the Iranian people, squeezing the regime between internal and external pressures.

And, without a doubt, a credible threat of military action must be on the table – clearly communicated to Tehran from day one, and quickly demonstrated to the regime in and around Yemen should the Houthis continue attacks in the Red Sea. The regime is closer than ever to nuclear weapons capabilities. A covert breakout attempt is a real possibility. The regime may consider retaliating either directly or via proxies over US sanctions pressure. Trump will only have a free hand to squeeze Tehran economically if the ayatollah fears him militarily, and also perceives that he has given Israel his blessing to take whatever steps it deems necessary to remove Tehran's most existential threats.

The new administration may need to hand-hold Gulf partners at the beginning, steering them back to close coordination on maximum pressure alongside increased security commitments to once again bring them away from China's orbit. Establishing a US-Saudi Vision 2030 Strategic Dialogue – a cabinet level, interagency, biannual exchange to support MbS's economic and political reforms – might be helpful, too.

But if Trump can pull this off – if he can restore maximum pressure on Iran and its proxies, reunite Washington with Riyadh and rebuild the regional architecture that integrates Israelis and Arabs – he will not only defeat one of America's greatest threats, but he would also usher in a new era of regional stability and even more historic peace accords.

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# Rethinking Iran's Future

by ILAN BERMAN

When might meaningful change come to Iran, and how? Nearly 50 years after the country's last major political transformation – the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's radical Islamist revolt against the monarchy of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi – that question continues to bedevil policymakers, both in Washington and far beyond the Capital Beltway.

There are no definitive answers. History has shown all too clearly that revolutions are notoriously hard to predict. Almost without exception, the significant political upheavals of the 20th century were not reliably anticipated, either by informed observers or by much better-resourced (and presumably more competent) intelligence agencies. Even Iran's own Islamic Revolution caught the US government by near-total surprise when it erupted in February 1979. There is therefore significant hazard in trying to predict when, how, and in what way political change might come to Iran.

Even so, it is apparent that Iran is fast approaching an inflection point of some sort. Nearly a half century after the Islamic Revolution fundamentally altered the complexion of the country, virtually every objective measure suggests that it is once again ripe for change.

Demographically, the Islamic Republic is experiencing a generational shift that will profoundly influence both its internal politics and its place in the world. Although it ranks among the older countries of the Middle East, Iran's population structure is unique – and deeply significant in political terms. During the 1980s and 1990s, the country witnessed a pronounced “youth bulge” as a result of high fertility rates

that prevailed during the Pahlavi era. The impact of this demographic surge has proven long-lasting; as of 2010, over 60 percent of Iran's population was estimated to be under age 30. Today, almost 40 percent of Iran's roughly 86 million citizens are 24 years old or younger.

These figures are deeply significant, because they serve as the basis for a widening rift between the Iranian regime and the country's captive population. Put simply, a majority of Iranians either were not yet alive or were not old enough to be politically aware when Khomeini's Islamic Revolution occurred 45 years ago. As a result, Iran's younger generations lack any formative experience with the Revolution and its underlying tenets – or the ideological bonds that might tether

wealth (Iran boasts the world's second-largest proven natural gas reserves and nearly half of OPEC's oil reserves), the financial fortunes of ordinary Iranians have steadily declined under clerical rule. When tallied by the World Bank back in 2018, Iranians were found in real terms to be 30 percent poorer than immediately prior to the 1979 Revolution.

Nor is all this attributable to Western sanctions, as Iranian officials have tried to argue. Rather, ruinous domestic practices – from widespread resource mismanagement to uncompetitive Islamic banking to pervasive graft – are cumulatively responsible for Iran's pronounced “failure to thrive.” Ordinary Iranians understand all this very well, which helps to explain the pre-

Today, almost 40 percent of Iran's roughly 86 million citizens are 24 years old or younger. . . a majority of Iranians either were not yet alive or were not old enough to be politically aware when Khomeini's Islamic Revolution occurred.

them firmly to the current regime in Tehran. Iran's population, in other words, cannot be counted on to stay committed to the Revolution in the absence of favorable internal conditions. And on that score, the news is decidedly not good for the country's ruling clerical regime.

## ■ *Economics, Social Policy & Religion*

Economic conditions provide a case in point. Despite its enormous resource

richness, there has been a precipitous decline in their support for the regime in recent years.

Socially, meanwhile, the Iranian regime has become steadily more repressive in order to maintain its hold on power. Over the past two-plus years, the Islamic Republic has been buffeted anew by widespread discontent. The immediate cause was the September 2022 death of a young Kurdish-Iranian activist at the hands of regime security forces for improperly wearing her Islamic





Schoolgirls walk beside the Karim Khan Castle in Shiraz, Iran. (Photo: Martchan / Alamy)

headscarf.

Quickly, however, what began as grassroots unrest over regime brutality transformed into a fundamental rejection of the Islamic Republic itself. In response, the regime launched a heavy-handed campaign that has included mass killings and an unprecedented severing of Internet access nationwide. The extent of this effort reflects a fundamental reality: Iran's leadership recognizes it has irrevocably lost the "hearts and minds" of a vast swath of its citizenry and is now willing to employ any means necessary to cling to power.

That, however, will prove to be increasingly difficult, because Iranians are increasingly looking beyond the clerical state.

Forty-five years on, religious identification is experiencing a precipitous decline within the country. A September 2020 survey by Netherlands-based polling institute GAMAAN found 31 percent of respondents self-identified as

atheists or stated they did not have a defined faith, while over half (51.8 percent) of those aged 20-29 and 46 percent of those aged 30-49 reported having transitioned away from religion altogether. In all, 46.8 percent of participants in the survey disclosed having abandoned their religious beliefs in recent years. This distance has real-world effects; by official estimates, some two-thirds of Iran's 75,000 mosques have been closed in recent years because of significant declines in attendance, prompting increasingly frantic official attempts to lure Iranians back to places of worship.

All of these factors have combined into a political cocktail that is potentially lethal to the country's current clerical regime.

### ■ **A Resourceful Regime**

Yet the United States needs to approach this revolutionary potential with caution. Over the years, the Islamic Republic has proven itself both

resourceful and adaptable, managing to successfully weather multiple internal crises and extensive foreign pressure. Meanwhile, supporting Iran's assorted opposition forces comes with its own set of significant challenges.

One is that diaspora groups have historically had a mixed record of influencing their country's future course after the collapse of the old regime. In instances where they were assisted in assuming power (as was the expatriate leadership of France and Germany during and after World War II), these groups played a decisive role in shaping the direction of the future state. However, in instances where there was no occupation or precipitating function that eased their rise to power – such as in Poland and Hungary after the Soviet collapse – diaspora groups, no matter how organized, only ended up playing a marginal role.

Another is the degree of connectivity between the different wings of the Iranian opposition. Today, Iranian opposition

forces are effectively bifurcated, divided between an external opposition made up of activists and organizations in the Iranian diaspora and internal protest groups within the Islamic Republic itself. To be sure, diaspora groups persistently claim to have extensive access to, and interaction with, Iran's internal forces. But this level of connection has proven hard to quantify with any degree of confidence, and that lack of clarity has helped deter Western governments from committing decisively to supporting Iranian agents of change.

Finally, there is America's own mixed track record of involvement in promoting change abroad. More of-

what principles should ideally be represented in the next Iranian polity.

Here, six priorities stand out.

The first is **national integrity**. While it has become fashionable for Western scholars to encourage a fragmentation of the Islamic Republic, such a "Balkanization" is deeply ill-advised. That's because, due to the country's long imperial history, Iranians themselves are firmly opposed to a territorial breakup, and can't be counted on to support any group or opposition force that advocates such a course. It's also due to the increasingly mature state of the Iranian nuclear program, which makes maintaining control over multiple active

have in recent decades been imposed in places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

The fourth is **nuclear development**. In their search for Western support, assorted opposition groups have pledged not to pursue an atomic program. Yet the idea remains popular among ordinary Iranians and is therefore a logical priority for a future Iranian government regardless of its political outlook. The establishment of a transparent, verifiable process for any new nuclear work is therefore a paramount priority.

Fifth, Western support should prioritize those groups that **promote greater pluralism** within Iran. That's because, though Iranian opposition elements have tended to pay lip service to the idea of Iranian democracy, a far more important metric for success (as well as moderation) is whether the country's next political system will properly safeguard religious, gender, and ethnic minority rights.

Finally, Iran's future political leaders will need to build a system for **accountability and rehabilitation**. In the current Iranian system, factions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) represent key stakeholders and power brokers – elements that, by dint of their economic and political power, will need to be reintegrated if the new system is to succeed.

Ultimately, Iran's future remains for Iranians themselves to decide. Nevertheless, the US would do well to articulate what would most securely put a post-theocratic Iran on a trajectory of security and prosperity. And it would do even better, to the extent that it is able, to empower those elements of the Iranian opposition that can best steer the country in that direction.

By official estimates, some two-thirds of Iran's 75,000 mosques have been closed in recent years because of significant declines in attendance.

ten than not, American political interventions over the past century have failed to follow Washington's plans for smooth, pro-Western transition – with post-Saddam Iraq the most recent and painful case in point. Given this difficult history, the United States needs to remain judicious in its involvement with Iranian opposition forces and temper its expectations of playing a decisive role in setting the country's future course.

### ■ **A Role for Washington**

Nevertheless, Washington has an important role to play in shaping Iran's political trajectory, by helping to identify – and then support – those opposition elements that can best steer the country in a direction compatible with American interests. To do that, however, the United States first needs to articulate

facilities and stockpiles of fissile material an overriding priority in international security terms.

The second is **civil society**. Iran's clerical regime has been at war with its captive population for nearly a half century, ruling via religious *diktat* in a manner that has disenfranchised assorted minorities and systematically undermined the country's rich pre-Islamic heritage. To be more inclusive, a new political order will need to reverse this practice and emphasize meaningful engagement across Iran's political spectrum, as well as the nurturing of civic organizations.

The third is **secular governance**. Today, religion is in profound retreat within the Islamic Republic. It would therefore be a mistake to allow future legislative frameworks or constitutions to tether Iran's new order to any particular faith or ideology, the way such constructs

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ILAN BERMAN is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, DC. This article is drawn from his recent study entitled *Navigating The Iranian Opposition*, which is available in its entirety from the AFPC website ([www.afpc.org](http://www.afpc.org)).



# Defeating Islamist Iran

by **KENNETH R. TIMMERMAN**

**B**oth Republican and Democrat administrations have consistently sought to change the behavior of the Islamic regime in Tehran.

As I recounted in the Fall 2024 issue of *inFOCUS* Quarterly, Democrat administrations have sought accommodation with the regime, while Republicans tended to apply pressure through sanctions.

Neither approach has been met with much success for one simple reason: the type of behavior we have sought to change amounts to the core values of the regime itself.

These include the system of the *Velayat-e faghih*, or absolute clerical rule, and the export of the Islamic revolution. Both concepts are enshrined in the constitution of the Islamic Republic.

I believe it's time we recognized that our problem with Iran is the regime itself.

As long as this regime exists it will continue to pursue its core objectives of destroying America and the freedoms America represents...

As long as this regime exists it will continue to pursue its core objectives of destroying America and the freedoms America represents, and destroying Israel, which the regime sees as an eschatological duty enshrined in the *Quran*.

Because Islamic Iran is an ideological regime, not one based on power or territory or national identity, it will not respond to the levers of power politics. This is what differentiates it from the challenges President Trump will face

from Russia, Communist China, and North Korea.

The leaders of those countries will respond to some blend of negotiation, coercion, and enticement to set aside - at least temporarily - their hostile intent toward America. In other words, they are ripe for the Art of the Deal.

Islamic Iran is not.

Any notion that the mullahs in Tehran are ready to make a deal with President Trump is profoundly mistaken. They do not chant "Death to America" at every public meeting just for the cameras. They believe that their regime will utterly destroy the United States, and they are planning each day how they can accomplish that end. And the deals they do make - such as the 2015 nuclear agreement - all contribute to that end.

During the 2024 campaign, President Trump promised to reimpose the maximum pressure sanctions

on the Iranian regime. The goal was to dramatically reduce the amount of hard currency available to the regime to build missiles and drones, expand its nuclear weapons infrastructure, and support murderous groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

In response to a congressional mandate passed in April 2024, the US Energy Information Agency in November issued its first public estimate of Iran's oil revenue. It found that Iran earned \$144

billion from oil exports during the first three years of the Biden-Harris administration, and \$34 billion during the first nine months of 2024. This compares to just \$16 billion in 2020 under Trump, when the maximum pressure sanctions were being enforced.

Iran's oil exports rose from 400,000 barrels/day in 2020, to well over 2.5 million b/d in 2024, because the Biden-Harris White House ordered the federal government to stop enforcing US sanctions laws.

But cutting off Iran's oil revenues is not enough. As I argue in a much longer paper for the America First Policy Institute, we should couple maximum pressure on the regime with Maximum Support for the Iranian people.

It is in America's national security interest to help the people of Iran to replace the Islamic regime - not through a replay of old Neocon fantasies of imposing "regime change" from the outside through groups like the MEK - but by enabling the Iranian people to take those steps themselves.

## ■ **What the US Can Do**

First, we can delegitimize the Iranian regime and its representatives by banning them from overseas travel, including to the UN in New York. We should expel them from international organizations and block their ability to cash in on their stolen wealth in Western banks.

Second, we can promote pro-freedom Iranian voices on US government-sponsored international media, including the Voice of America's Persian language service. Today, VOA is considered the "voice of the mullahs" by many inside Iran.

Third, President Trump should



appoint a Special Ambassador to the People of Iran to help the pro-freedom movement in its decades-long effort to coalesce into a force capable of taking on the regime through non violent struggle. The Special Ambassador should meet with Iranian opposition leaders in Washington and elsewhere and promote their efforts on the world stage.

The US can also provide secure chat apps and other technology to allow opposition protesters to communicate securely amongst themselves without fear of government eavesdropping, and with the outside world when the regime shuts down the Internet.

### ■ *Lessons from the Past*

The Iranian regime has suffered only two major military defeats in its 45-year history, defeats big enough that they destroyed - at least for a time - the regime's will to fight.

One was in Lebanon, where Israel devastated Hezbollah's military infrastructure and command structure.

Hezbollah remains an Iranian proxy, and several other factors beyond Israeli military pressure caused the Iranian regime to throw in the towel and agree to a ceasefire in November 2024. First, was fear of the incoming Trump administration. Second, was the wrath of the Lebanese people, fed up with the destruction of their national infrastructure because of Hezbollah's war against Israel.

The last thing Iranian regime leaders wanted was to directly suffer the consequences of a proxy's defeat. They had fought Israel to the blood of the last Lebanese until the Lebanese themselves revolted.

Iran's other major military defeat, at the hands of Saddam Hussein in 1988, offers lessons for today.

It began with the devastating chemical weapons attack on the Iraqi Kurdish city of Halabja on March 17-18, 1988, to punish the city for having temporarily fallen into Iranian hands. Chemical weapons had been used off and on by both sides during the 1980-1988 war,

but never with the intensity of the Iraqi assault on Halabja. The Iranians sent a Revolutionary Guards video crew to film the aftermath, and those images lived on to haunt not just the Iraqi Kurdish survivors but Iranian television viewers and regime leaders.

One month later, the United States Navy conducted a 24-hour campaign that knocked out one-third of Iran's surface warships and several oil export platforms. Operation Praying Mantis came in retaliation for Iran's mining of the Strait of Hormuz, and it convinced Ayatollah Khomeini that the United States had joined Saddam Hussein in his eight-year-long war effort.

While that battle was taking place at sea, Saddam Hussein's forces, under the command of Lieutenant General Maher Rashid, loaded the 200 tanks of an entire armored division onto West German

want great power guardians to shield them from the United States and Israel, just as Saddam Hussein shielded himself with the United States.

Once President Joe Biden took office, the Iranian regime signed massive partnership agreements with China and Russia, agreements so vast in scope they changed the strategic equation in the region in short order.

### ■ *China*

For China, the deals were all about securing future oil supplies. For Russia, they were the culmination of a three-century pursuit of reaching the warm seas through the Persian Gulf. The Biden Administration's lack of response to these moves and its hostility toward key US ally (and Iran rival) Saudi Arabia emboldened Russia, China, and Iran to create what I have called an Axis of

Iran earned \$144 billion from oil exports during the first three years of the Biden-Harris administration, and \$34 billion during the first nine months of 2024.

tank transporters and shifted them from al Amarah, where the Iranians were expecting an attack, to the Fao Peninsula, some 170 miles to the south, all in a single night.

Ayatollah Khomeini had been prepared to fight a long hard slog against Saddam Hussein, but he wasn't prepared to fight the United States alongside an Iraqi army aided by US technology and satellite intelligence. Two months later, he threw in the towel.

### ■ *The Axis of Opportunism*

Iran's leaders have worked hard in recent years to prevent a similar situation from developing by forging new alliances with two powerful protectors: Russia and Communist China. They

Opportunism.

The Chinese were the first to formalize the new arrangements, which they called a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," on March 27, 2021. The agreement committed Iran as a partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative, a multi trillion-dollar scheme to expand Chinese influence from Asia to Europe.

Under the agreement, China pledged to invest in transportation and agriculture projects in Iran and to build a new military port just outside the Strait of Hormuz at Chahbahar that could host a permanent Chinese military contingent. This is the first time since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution that Iran has allowed a foreign power to establish a permanent military base on its territory.

In exchange, Iran guaranteed long-term oil supplies at preferential prices to China. The deal, as announced, spanned 25 years and was worth an estimated \$400 billion.

## ■ *Russia*

In October 2021, it was Russia's turn to announce a new strategic partnership with Iran, which they called the Global Agreement for Cooperation. The deal included formal membership for Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and a free-trade zone linking China, Russia, former Soviet Central Asian republics, and others in the region.

## ■ *Military, Diplomatic and Trade Alignment*

In January 2022, the three countries held joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman and the northern Indian Ocean, which Tehran called "Maritime Security Belt 2022." The three navies conducted another set of joint drills in the region in March 2023, just as Putin was expanding ties with China and Iran, and yet another in March 2024. They also conducted naval exercises off the coast of South Africa with the South African Navy.

Putin visited Iran in July 2022 on his first trip outside Russia since the invasion of Ukraine. While he was there, Iran's national oil company signed a \$40 billion agreement with Russia's state-run Gazprom that included Russian investment to develop Iranian gas fields and the construction of new gas export pipelines.

In May 2023, Russia and Iran signed a \$1.7 billion railway agreement that the two countries boasted would rival the Suez Canal as a global trade route. The deal included financing of a long-planned, 162 kilometer-long Rasht-Astara rail line along the Caspian Sea linking Russian Black Sea ports to Iranian ports on the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. It was the last link in the chain that would accomplish Russia's centuries-long struggle to establish a secure transportation corridor to the warm seas.

The agreements also had a

diplomatic component, which took many by surprise. Following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, Russia and China repeatedly supported Iran and Hamas at the UN Security Council, introducing multiple ceasefire resolutions aimed at curtailing Israel's efforts to dismantle the Hamas terror infrastructure, and on April 19, 2024, to recognize a Palestinian state. In March 2024, Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen agreed to exempt Russian and Chinese ships from drone and missile attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea.

Also, in March 2024, Iran and Russia signed 19 separate agreements aimed at cementing their efforts to build a massive natural gas cartel along with Qatar. Iran, Russia and Qatar now control 60 percent of the world's natural gas reserves.

Taken together, Russia, China, and Iran are in the process of building an energy/transportation powerhouse that will dominate the Persian Gulf region for decades to come, and all of it without a single countering move by the Biden Administration.

## ■ *Decouple Iran from Russia and China*

The United States can increase pressure on the Islamic regime by bolstering its Maximum Pressure-Maximum Support campaign with efforts to decouple Iran from its new allies in Russia and China.

Just as the first Trump Administration shut down supplies to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in 2019, Trump 47 should sanction suppliers to the proposed Russian and Chinese oil and gas projects with Iran, including equipment needed to build new LNG terminals.

Natural gas injection is another key chokepoint, as many of Iran's onshore oil fields are nearing depletion. According to Iran's own figures and reports from the US Energy Information Administration, roughly 80 percent of Iran's oil production "comes from aging fields facing pressure drops." Without

natural gas injection, Iran could face an "annual production decline of 8 to 10 percent." That makes this sector ripe for external pressure.

The US Treasury Department, with support from groups such as United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI), has been successful across Democrat and Republican administrations in identifying and placing sanctions on Iran's "shadow fleet" of oil tankers—that is, tankers whose ownership and flag registration change often to evade sanctions. These efforts should be expanded.

Others have suggested creating a price cap for Iranian oil, sanctions on European sellers of ships to Iran's shadow fleet, and sanctions on oil field service companies.

## ■ *Conclusion*

The core values of the Islamic regime in Iran are inimical to America, America's security, and the security of our allies in the region. Neither sanctions nor appeasement has ever won concessions from the regime on those values, since to abandon them would mean abandoning their core supporters and showing weakness to their domestic enemies. If the United States wants to inhibit the Iranian regime's bad behavior, we must do more than impose sanctions. We must hit them at the core.

The Iranian regime declared war on America on April 18, 1983, when they destroyed our embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. They declared war on Israel in 1985. It's time to recognize that we are at war with this regime and to defeat it. America's best—but, as of yet, unacknowledged—allies in this war are the freedom-loving people of Iran. Investing in their freedom is an investment in America's freedom and security.

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# The View From Israel

## An *in*FOCUS interview with DAN DIKER and B.G. YOSSI KUPERWASSER

Dr. Dan Diker is President of the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs (JCFA) and Director of its Counter-Political Warfare Project. He is former Secretary-General of the World Jewish Congress and a Research Fellow of the International Institute for Counter Terrorism at Reichman University (formerly IDC, Herzliya). Brigadier General Yossi Kuperwasser, IDF (Res.) is Director of the Project on Regional Middle East Developments at JCFA. He was formerly Director General of the Israel Ministry of Strategic Affairs and head of the Research Division of IDF Military Intelligence. *in*FOCUS Quarterly editor Shoshana Bryen spoke with in early December.

***in*FOCUS: THIS ISSUE ASSESSES IRANIAN POLICY AND THE FUTURE OF THE TEHRAN REGIME, MOSTLY FROM THE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE. GIVE US AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE, PLEASE.**

**Dr. Dan Diker:** The chessboard is being reset in the Middle East and it is important to connect everything.

**BG Yossi Kuperwasser:** The situation is becoming more complicated; the Iranian regime faces challenges it has never faced before. First of all, the regime's perception of itself and also the perception of the Iranian people of their regime is in shambles because it was proven that it cannot cause the kind of damage to Israel it proclaimed it could. It cannot defend itself and cannot defend its most strategic assets, including the nuclear program.

It was further proven that the Ring of Fire [*Ed. Iranian proxy forces*] that it has built around Israel is falling apart. It was not built well enough to withstand the Israeli reaction to an attack by one of the members – Hamas. And its economic situation is terrible, and Donald Trump is coming, and “maximum pressure” is going to be imposed again. And the people of Iran can't stand the regime any more anyhow, regardless of anything else, because of the economic difficulties – which are, to some extent, the result of sanctions, but mostly have to do with the corruption and the ineffectiveness of the regime.

Its treatment of its own people is despicable; we have learned recently of the growing number of executions, including of women. So, from the point of view of the regime, the situation is extremely dangerous.

What is happening in Syria exacerbates the situation. It's almost a doomsday scenario for Iran. And everybody understood. Everybody saw how weak the regime was. That's why the opposition in Syria decided to go on the move.

So, if the question is whether the Iranian regime can fall, yes, the regime can fall.

***i*F: BUT THERE ARE TWO POSSIBILITIES. ONE IS IMMEDIATE LARGE-SCALE MILITARY OFFENSIVE ACTIVITY TO TRY TO SHAKE OFF THEIR ENEMIES. THE OTHER IS TO COLLAPSE. DO YOU THINK THERE'S ANY POSSIBILITY THAT IRAN WILL SAY, “LOOK, IF I'M GOING TO GO DOWN, I'M GOING TO GO DOWN AND TAKE ISRAEL WITH ME”?**

**Kuperwasser:** There is such a possibility, but I think what they have to worry about more is the million people in the square in Tehran. Because if the people of Iran understand this is an opportunity that might never come again and if they decide to go on the move, then what can the regime do? With all the Basiji Guard and the Pasdaran and whatever they have, if the people go to the streets, it's going to be very difficult.

And that's exactly what's happened in Syria. The Iranians were helpless. And it's not that they don't have forces over there. They had a lot of forces on the ground, but everybody was running away from confrontation. They lost their commanders and it was a very difficult situation.

But in the end, the possibility of people rising up at home is more dangerous than a military attack.

***i*F: DOES ISRAEL HAVE GOOD CONNECTIONS WITH THE IRANIAN OPPOSITION? IS IT ABLE TO BE HELPFUL TO THEM?**

**Diker:** Israel has had good relationships with the “oppositions” plural, because one of the major challenges in the Iranian opposition is the Iranian opposition itself. And there are so many oppositions within the opposition that it has become very difficult to help them coalesce around a centralized command structure, a centralized sort of government-in-waiting.

Israel has always maintained very strong relations with various leaders within the 88 or so million Iranians, 90 percent of whom reject the regime and have rejected the regime since the early to mid-1980s, when what had been known as a left-wing progressive and Islamic coalition became a massively extremist right-wing Islamist authoritarian regime – torturing everyone from political opponents to gays to women.





Dan Diker

What we've seen recently with the Mahsa Amini hijab protest has been a massive re-energizing of the Iranian people in the streets. What we have noticed – the Jerusalem Center having strong relations with a number of senior opposition members – is this notion of coming together, which a former American intelligence analyst called “as difficult as herding cats.” This helps to create a sense of confidence in the people.

There are many regime members in Europe whom we've met in London. There are many opposition members in the United States. There is Reza Pahlavi. There are monarchists; far-left progressives; people that want a Federal Republic and for that republic to break up into its component parts of tribes, families, and clans within Iran – there are many, many, many minority communities within Iran. And then, I believe the majority of the Iranian people want to have a federal republic, but a united republic.

All of these issues have to be worked out. But as General Kuperwasser says, now is an ideal time because we know the expression, “The emperor has no clothes,” and now we can say, “The ayatollah is naked.” And that is true because many of the tentacles of the Iranian

octopus have been cut off. The Hamas tentacle, cut off. The Hezbollah tentacle, cut off. The Houthis as we speak, are under attack by the Americans in the Red Sea area. Syria is gone.

It really leaves a great opportunity for the Iranian people, and they know the Israeli people are aligned in support of the need to change the regime. The challenge is to get the Americans on board. The major frustration of the Iranian opposition, whether in Europe or in Iran itself, is that American governments all have done more to stabilize the regime than they have to destabilize the regime. And now the regime by itself is destabilized and may provide an excellent opportunity to begin the process of regime change.

### ■ Ring of Fire

**iF:** IRAN HAS SPENT ALL THESE YEARS AND A LOT OF MONEY AND A LOT OF WEAPONS BUILDING ITS RING OF FIRE, INCLUDING SOMETHING I WANT YOU BOTH TO ADDRESS: FOR DECADES, ISRAEL HAS WATCHED IN GAZA AND LEBANON WHILE THESE GUYS WERE BUILDING TUNNELS AND MISSILE FACTORIES, AND MORE. ISRAEL'S RESPONSE TO THIS OVER THE YEARS HAS BEEN WHAT YOU ALL CALL “MOWING THE GRASS.” YOU TAKE OUT THINGS AND YOU TAKE OUT PEOPLE. I THINK OCTOBER 7 TELLS YOU THAT “MOWING THE GRASS” WAS NOT THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION. FIRST OF ALL, WHY WASN'T IT? AND SECONDLY, NOW WHAT COMES AFTER THIS?

**Diker:** One of the very painful lessons that Israel as a body politic learned and I think it assimilated, is that the October 7 moment proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that the conflict we face is religiously and ideologically driven by the Iranian-backed Hamas and its Hezbollah proxies. It even includes elements within the PLO as well as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and others.

This is not a territorial conflict. We



Yossi Kuperwasser

are not witnessing a Palestinian-Israeli conflict over borders and territory. We are really facing jihad; we are facing Holy War, as Iran has reminded us time and time again since 1979, with the return of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini from Paris.

Israel, in its desperation for peace, thought that the PLO's main faction, Fatah – which had been considered a more secular and even more “moderate” faction of the PLO – would be a partner for some sort of historic border compromise between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Of course, the PA is really just an artificial subset of the PLO.

Those assumptions were incorrect. In fact, there's really very little difference strategically between the commitment of the PLO and its Hamas opponents to rid the Middle East of Israel – and Iran's determination to destroy Israel. “Death to Israel,” “Death to America,” is all being driven by the Iranian regime. That was one of the major lessons of October 7.

The second lesson is that the October 7 assault was as much an Iranian assault on the US and the West as it was on Israel. This is because it sees Israel as an expression of, or a branch office of, the United States in the Islamic Middle East. This war that we are facing is a war on

the United States-led Western alliance. And Israel is part of that alliance.

**iF: KUPER, IF YOU WOULD TALK ABOUT THE TWO THINGS THAT PEOPLE HERE, MY READERS, MY PEOPLE DON'T KNOW, AND THAT IS IRAN'S INROADS INTO JORDAN AND THE WEST BANK. PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT SYRIA, THEY KNOW ABOUT HEZBOLLAH, BUT IRAN HAS BEEN FINANCING AND ARMING PEOPLE IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA, AND THE JORDANIAN KING MUST SLEEP WITH BOTH EYES OPEN EVERY NIGHT.**

**Kuperwasser:** Yes, he does. Let me start with what you asked in the previous question, and I'll come back to that.

This is not a territorial conflict. We are not witnessing a Palestinian-Israeli conflict over borders and territory. We are really facing jihad...

What happened to us? As a matter of fact, it's an issue of numbers and demography. We don't have enough people. We are a small country, and because of that we were in a state where you know something, but you prefer to ignore it because you don't know what to do about it. It is a psychological issue.

**iF: THERE ARE THINGS YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW, SO, YOUR HEAD SAYS, "I DON'T WANT TO KNOW THAT."**

**Kuperwasser:** Yes. We knew that we were going to sleep every night along the border with Gaza, and on the other side there was a big division of people that could launch an offensive against

us. Nevertheless, we told ourselves it was enough to have just one or two battalions deployed along the border and say everything was all right.

It was worse than we thought. Now that we've taken over the southern part of Lebanon, we know that while we had a couple of battalions on our side, there were several divisions of the very dangerous Radwan Force on the other side that could have launched an offensive any night.

We preferred not to think about it because if you really think about it, you have to have a full division deployed along the border of Lebanon all the time, a full division deployed along the border with Gaza all the time. And we don't have enough people, and we don't

have enough money, and we don't have enough resources to do that.

The lessons learned from October 7 is that we have to end this dangerous habit of ignoring reality. And reality is not only weapons. If you look at the kind of brainwashing that these people, in Lebanon and in Syria and in Gaza, were undergoing day in, day out, it's unbelievable. In every house there were weapons. In every house there was *Mein Kampf* translated into Arabic.

They learn about hating Israel every day. These are people highly motivated to execute terrible attacks against the Jews and kill the Jews. Look at this famous phone call that the guy from Hamas made to his parents on October 7, how he boasts about killing the Jews.

He thinks he did an excellent, very admirable deed.

These are the people we live next to. These are the people that we have to deal with and in order to make it possible for us to live, we decided to ignore all of that. And when The Jerusalem Center first put out the story of the payments by the PA of salaries to terrorists, Palestinian terrorists, the United States, Europeans, even the government of Israel didn't want to hear about it.

It's too difficult to digest. Reality is so difficult in this area that people prefer not to think about it.

**iF: HAVE WE LEARNED ANYTHING?**

**Kuperwasser:** We Israelis learned the lesson. We are not going to go back – we are going to change the situation in Gaza. We're going to change the situation in Lebanon, and we are going to change our security doctrine. We are going to have many more people, soldiers deployed along the border in order to face any eventuality.

The West learning the lesson? In my mind, not yet.

But just a word about Iran and Gaza, Lebanon, Judea and Samaria, and Jordan. We have to understand that Iran's plan is still is to rebuild this Ring of Fire around us. They're focused on cutting their losses and re-emerging with a new plan. A major target in this context is Jordan. And we've seen them spending a lot of effort and money building a base inside Jordan that can be used also for delivering arms to Palestinians in Judea and Samaria.

You can rest assured that the Iranians will never get tired.

It doesn't matter how many times they fail, or you foil their plans, they keep coming. This is what they did with Hezbollah in sending arms through Syria. And this is what they do with sending arms through Jordan to the Palestinians of Judea and Samaria. We may be successful in foiling 80 percent of the attempts, let's say just for the sake





Israeli tanks take position on the border with Syria in the Golan Heights on December 8, 2024 (Photo: Eddie Gerald / Alamy)

of argument, but 20 percent managed to get through. And that's quite enough to feed the effort of terrorism by the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria.

**iF: SO THAT'S WHY YOU SEE THE IDF IN JENIN BECAUSE IT SEEMS JENIN IS THE CENTER.**

**Kuperwasser:** Jenin and Nablus are the center because there are a lot of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) people in these areas. and the PIJ is closest to Iran. The Iranians feel most comfortable working with them. Of course they work with everybody, but PIJ has a special place in the hearts of the Iranians, being fully subordinate to them.

Hamas is more complicated. Iran supports Hamas, but Hamas is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood axis, not only of the Iranian axis, creating all kinds of issues. Iran doesn't like [Hamas leader] Khaled Mashal, who is more aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. And with what's happening now in Syria, this is potential for tension between Hamas and Iran. Hamas was not very fond of Bashar Assad, while the

Iranians were committed to his survival. It is complicated, but fighting against us, they cooperate.

**iF: MAYBE IT'S NOT COMPLICATED. MAYBE YOU JUST KILL ALL OF HAMAS AND THEN IT'S NOT COMPLICATED.**

**Kuperwasser:** This is going to take some time.

**iF: IS ISRAEL PREPARED TO CONTINUE THE WAR UNTIL IT IS SATISFIED WITH THE SECURITY SITUATION?**

**Kuperwasser:** We are prepared to continue the war because we understand that we have to win. But using the term "we" is not easy because in Israel, as you know, there's more than just one "we." We have all kinds of different opinions. The government is committed to continuing the war until Hamas' demise.

### ■ **What is Victory?**

**Diker:** We are witness today to a phenomenon called iPhone warfare, which is really the eighth front. And therefore, when you ask the question, "Are

you willing to fight until total victory?" "Total victory" is a term taken out of the Churchillian World War II era, as in total victory over the Nazis.

But what does total victory mean? What does victory mean?

If there is a 12-years-old Gazan child with an iPhone who raises his hand in victory on a burnt-out truck, the perception of that could actually rob Israel of victory. There is actually victory in a kinetic sense on the ground, but there's the perception of victory or the perception of defeat and they interplay in a very complex way.

There are those that are asking, especially in the outgoing US administration, "What does the day after look like? Haven't you already decimated Hamas? You've decimated most of Gaza." And the answer is, "Well, no, we haven't, not yet." Because Hamas still controls the aid distribution or steals the aid distribution. They are still the political power in Gaza. They still have more than 15,000 fighters fighting, even though their command structure has been seriously compromised. And therefore, the concept of the perception of victory plays a very strong role in the concept in the traditional, classic military concept of victory over your adversary.

Israel has to be in this for both types of victory, the perceptual victory as well as the military counterterrorism victory on the ground. And unless Hamas is completely eliminated as a governmental political and terror-military power, we will not have scored either form of victory in Gaza. It is possible. And the rest of the Middle East is watching Israel in Gaza to see whether we have the staying power to win this terror war against Hamas and its Iranian paymasters.

### ■ **Syria**

**iF: THIS IS A GOOD TIME, THEN, TO GO BACK TO THE QUESTION OF SYRIA. TURKEY AND ITS SUNNI JIHADIST ALLIES IN NORTHERN SYRIA UNDERSTOOD THAT IRAN WAS DEGRADED, RUSSIA WAS HARASSED BY**



## OTHER PROBLEMS, AND MAYBE THIS WAS A GOOD TIME TO SEE WHAT THEY COULD DO IN SYRIA.

**Diker:** There is an expression in the Middle East. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” But the enemy of my enemy can also be my enemy. And that is a situation that we’re witnessing now in Syria because this is an outgrowth of al-Qaeda – of what al-Qaeda was in the post-Iraq invasion Middle East. And then what has been known in the West as the Arab civil war beginning in 2011.

These are bad guys, if you will, that sensed and smelled the opportunity to kick the Assad regime. These are Salafists, Sunni extremists, looking for their opportunity to take over Syria. I’m not sure that they have a concept of a centralized government, but they sense that Israel had weakened the Iranian octopus, has decimated much of Hezbollah.

There is a reset going on in the Middle East which is actually triggered by Israel because it has been the Strong Horse against the Iranian regime and its proxies. We’re in the midst of this chaos – this *Fauda*, as it is known in Arabic – and a realignment will emerge from that.

**Kuperwasser:** Yes. What happened to the Iranians and Hezbollah in the war against Israel weakened them very much. Everybody smelled it. The rebels, or the opposition, are made of many, many small groups – the most important one amongst them is the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an offspring of al-Qaeda. It went through all kinds of changes and tried to make everybody understand that it is not that extreme and is more focused on Syria than on changing the world or carrying out terror attacks in the West. There’s reduced hostility and reduced danger in them compared with others.

But among the other groups, there are some elements that are more acceptable to Israeli ears and Western ears as well. But they are less organized, less vocal than HTS. And the clips you get are

mainly from the HTS propaganda machine, which is very efficient.

Israel is – for good reason – cautious about this. And whereas we are definitely very happy to see Iran losing power and Assad out, we are not sure that we want to see Syria ruled by al-Qaeda. I think in this respect, the Americans are on the same page as Israel.

We definitely are very fond of the Kurds in Northern Syria; they did a very good job fighting ISIS in the past.

The future of Syria is extremely important because Syria stands between Iran and Lebanon. What’s going to happen in Syria is going to affect the final outcome of this war to a large extent. We need to see that the more moderate elements within the Syrian opposition gain more power. This is not the case at this point. They have to gain more power in the opposition.

## ■ *Russia*

**iF:** ISRAEL AND RUSSIA HAD WHAT APPEARS TO BE A WORKING ARRANGEMENT – ISRAEL BOMBED HEZBOLLAH THINGS AND IRANIAN THINGS IN SYRIA, AND THE RUSSIANS DIDN’T SAY ANYTHING. AND THEY HAD NAVAL BASES, AND AN AIR BASE, AND THEY COULD MAKE LIFE DIFFICULT FOR ISRAEL, BUT THEY DIDN’T. AND RUSSIA HATES SUNNI ISLAMISTS; RUSSIANS WERE WAR CRIMINALS IN CHECHNYA. RUSSIA HAD EVERY REASON TO WANT TO SUPPRESS THE SUNNI JIHADISTS. IT HAD EVERY REASON TO WANT IRAN TO BE DEGRADED IN SYRIA AND IT HAS EVERY REASON TO WANT ITS RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL TO REMAIN NOT SO BAD.

**Diker:** The Russians are thinking about all three observations that you just made under the umbrella of recovering the glory of the former Soviet Union. And it’s clear that Putin does have a strong feeling for Israel for several reasons.

First, the largest expat community of Russians lives in Israel.

Second, Putin has had historically special relationships with Jews out in his own neighborhood, even close to his own family.

Third, Prime Minister Netanyahu has done an excellent job of balancing interest in making sure that Israel is able to defend itself over Lebanon and Syria with the fact that Russia has Latakia and Tartus as their bases. Each power would not interfere with the other.

But at the same time, Russia’s interest is also to oppose the United States, which it sees as a sharp adversary of an emergent Russia in the Middle East.

**Kuperwasser:** One has to remember that Russia is now busy somewhere else, which made it very difficult for them to spend resources in Syria. And they are not performing very well in Ukraine – which doesn’t add to their ability to deter the opposition. From the Russian-Israeli point of view, the most important thing is to make sure that the Israelis don’t help the rebels. As long as they can get that, they’re not going to bother us. In my mind, that is the secret of continued cooperation between us and the Russians.

At the same time, the Russians never worked against the Iranians. We came to them hundreds of times asking them not to let the Iranians use Syrian territory to deliver arms to Lebanon or Hezbollah. They ignored our requests. We cannot complain because they allowed us to do what we want, but they didn’t do anything on their own initiative.

## ■ *Conclusion*

**iF:** I LIKE TO END AN INTERVIEW, ANY PROGRAM, WITH SOMETHING THAT SOUNDS OPTIMISTIC, EVEN IF IT’S A BIG REACH BECAUSE IN THIS CASE BECAUSE THERE’S NOT A WHOLE LOT OF OPTIMISM OUT THERE. BUT LET ME ASK, BROADLY SPEAKING, HOW DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE? WILL THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS SURVIVE? WILL SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL BE ABLE TO TALK TO EACH OTHER? IS THERE A POSSIBILITY

**THAT IRAN WILL BECOME A NORMAL MEMBER OF SOCIETY? THE REGION RIGHT NOW HAS MORE VIOLENCE, MORE WAR THAN IT HAS HAD FOR A LONG TIME. IS THIS THE FUTURE OF THE REGION OR IS IT GOING TO END IN SOMETHING?**

**AND IF YOU CAN BE OPTIMISTIC, THAT WOULD BE NICE.**

**Diker:** There is good news in that the Middle East sees Israel today in a very different light than they saw it starting on October 7. Israel is viewed as the “Strong Horse,” which is a Muslim Arab view of history first articulated by the Arab Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century: History is a reflection of violent cycles in which strong horses replace weaker horses.

Today, the 350 million Arabs of the Middle East largely see Israel as a Strong Horse, certainly after a mysterious “beeper offensive” against the Hezbollah succeeded in taking out their mid-level and upper-level command, and Israel killing Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah and an employee of the Iranian regime and Israel’s military initiative in Syria.

This is important because Israel, as one of the smallest countries in the region, is viewed really as a superpower willing to put itself on the line and take any offensive measure it needs to protect itself in the Arab-Muslim majority Middle East, which is currently under the hostile chokehold of the Iranian regime. Israel has successfully cut off some of the tentacles of the Iranian octopus and almost mortally injured the head of the octopus by destroying its air defense capability and taking command of Iranian airspace for 20 hours.

Israel as a Strong Horse is very important because peace can only come through the mobilization of power for the purpose of achieving safety, security, peace, and perhaps prosperity. And that’s where we are in the Middle East, in the middle of this sort of domino effect that

Israel has triggered by taking the offensive against the arch enemies of its Gulf neighbors as well as itself in trying to forge a new, more stable, more secure, and perhaps more moderate Middle East.

There’s a lot more fighting that needs to happen and there’s a lot more support that Israel needs from its greatest friend and ally, the United States. How that happens, we don’t know. We do know that President Trump has been phenomenally successful at bringing the region the most consequential peace agreement in the history of the modern Middle East – the Abraham Accords.

Israel as a Strong Horse is very important because peace can only come through the mobilization of power for the purpose of achieving safety, security, peace, and perhaps prosperity. And that’s where we are in the Middle East...

And he did that simultaneously punishing the Iranian regime with very, very punishing sanctions.

**Kuperwasser:** The tables have been turned. Remember where we were a year and two months ago. On the days after October 7 the question was whether we were going to be able to survive. The fact of the matter is that one of the main reasons we were successful was that Hamas is part of the Iranian Axis and part of the Muslim Brotherhood Axis and part of the Palestinian Axis at the same time. They were trained, equipped, financed, and guided by the Iranian Axis, and financed mainly by the Muslim Brotherhood Axis/Qatar, and helped by Turkey as well.

But they actually acted along the logic of the Palestinian Axis and that’s why they acted alone.

So luckily, we had the opportunity to take out one enemy after the other, and that allowed us to turn the tables in a very successful manner. And if the trend continues, then there is a chance that Saudi Arabia is going to join us as well, and we might be moving toward a much better Middle East, a much more stable Middle East. If Syria goes out of the axis, something I don’t see as yet, but if it happens, then it’s a better Middle East. And coming back to what

we started with, if there’s going to be a regime change. In Iran, that’s the icing on the cake.

**iF: IT’S ALL A CIRCLE, AND IT COULD BE A POSITIVE CIRCLE.**

**Kuperwasser:** Yes. We have to make sure that we keep fighting until we reach complete victory, because without a complete victory, all of that is not going to happen.

**iF: THAT’S AN EXCELLENT PLACE TO STOP. ON BEHALF OF THE JEWISH POLICY CENTER AND THE READERS OF inFOCUS QUARTERLY, I WANT TO THANK YOU BOTH FOR AN ENLIGHTENING TRIP THROUGH THE REGION.**

# The Attacks of 9/11: Why They Still Matter

by CLARE M. LOPEZ

The attacks of 9/11 may seem now to be in the far-distant past. But in large part because the ideology, intent, and key role of the Islamic Republic of Iran were never addressed in full or confronted, that regime continues to foment chaos and terror across the Middle East and beyond. This essay will therefore address that missing account and suggest policy for the incoming administration of Donald J. Trump that can begin to hold Tehran's regime responsible for its involvement in that fateful day.

## ■ Before 9/11

A brief review of some important developments pre-9/11 will help us set the scene.

As laid out in extensive detail in the *Havlish vs Usama Bin Laden et al.* legal case that concluded in December 2011, Judge George Daniels of the Southern District of New York Federal District Court ruled that Iran and Hezbollah were co-responsible with al-Qaeda for the 9/11 attacks. I co-authored one of the affidavits for the case together with Dr. Bruce Tefft. That affidavit traced the history of the Iran-Hezbollah-al-Qaeda *jihād* relationship. Multiple other affidavits added further context and information to the case, which was brought initially shortly after 9/11 by a group of widows of those lost on 9/11.

The Iranian constitution states clearly in its introduction that the regime is an Islamic one, ideologically dedicated to expanding the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution outward. The role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards

Corps (IRGC) likewise is dedicated not just to defense of Iran's own borders, but to "fulfilling the ideological mission of *jihād* in God's path; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world." This ideological mission is what drives the Iranian regime to sponsorship of Islamic terror. That both Shi'ite and Sunni doctrine hold *jihād* – that is, warfare against the non-Muslim – to be the highest obligation of Islam is what allows the Iranian regime and its Hezbollah proxies to collaborate in *jihād* warfare with Sunni terrorists including al-Qaeda.

## ■ The Birth of al-Qaeda

This may bring us to the *jihād* alliance forged among Iran, Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda, as described in our affidavit. As the decade-long war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Red Army drew to a close in late 1988-early 1989, Usama bin Laden (UBL) and Saudi fighters who'd participated in the war sought to return home to Saudi Arabia. Remember, there was yet no al-Qaeda, but Saudi fighters were coalescing around bin Laden, as he had provided substantial financial support for them and others during the war. King Fahd, then on the throne in Riyadh, however, was having none of it. Despite the looming threat from Saddam Hussein's Iraq at the time, Fahd denied UBL's offer of his Afghanistan fighters to help in the defense of Saudi Arabia.

Looking elsewhere, then, bin Laden and his men found a welcome mat in Sudan. Omar al-Bashir and his Muslim Brotherhood ally, Hassan al-Turabi, offered safe haven to bin Laden and his fighters. By late 1990, al-Bashir and bin

Laden's men had organized a kind of *Jihād Jamboree*, inviting *jihadis* from all over the Islamic world to Khartoum for a strategy planning session that would unite Sunnis and Shi'ites in an alliance against the West.

## ■ At the Party

In addition to UBL and Ayman al-Zawahiri, among those who attended were representatives of Hezbollah, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and many of the top leaders of the Iranian regime. These latter included Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, and IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai. While there, UBL asked Rafsanjani if his Hezbollah cadres could train bin Laden's fighters on how to conduct big building vehicle-borne suicide bombings, such as Hezbollah had carried out against the US and French Embassies and the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983. Rafsanjani agreed and assigned Hezbollah terror chieftain Imad Mughniyeh to the job. Iran has provided substantial material assistance to Hezbollah in the form of arming, funding and training from the time of its formation in the early 1980s through to the current time, and did so as well for the establishment of training camps in Iran, Lebanon, Sudan, and elsewhere.

## ■ The 1990s

The results were not long in coming. While al-Qaeda operatives carried



out suicide bombings at Khobar Towers in 1996, the US Embassies in Dar Es-Salaam and Nairobi in 1998, and against the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen in 2000, it was Hezbollah that had trained them and the Iranian regime that facilitated the attacks. Imad Mughniyeh was at the time the senior terror chieftain for Hezbollah and operated under direct command-and-control of the Iranian regime by way of the IRGC and its subordinate unit, the Quds Force. Major General Qassem Suleimani commanded the Quds Force from 1997 until his assassination on orders of then-President Trump in January 2020, meaning that he was Iran's Quds Force commander at the time of the 9/11 attacks.

The early 1990s were formative years for both al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which coalesced into organized groups at this time. By 1995, UBL and later Ayman al-Zawahiri had returned to Afghanistan and pledged *bay'ah* (allegiance) to the Taliban commander, Mullah Omar. Then, in 1996, bin Laden issued the first of two Declarations of *ji-had* against America and the West. *Jihad* was not well-understood by US national security agencies (then or now); neither was bin Laden understood as the emerging leader of al-Qaeda. As a result, the warnings went unheeded. The second declaration of *ji-had* was issued in 1998, but still the US and the West did not understand what it was up against. But the Iranian regime, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and the Taliban were already deep into planning for what would become the 9/11 plot.

### ■ The 9/11 Plot

As noted in the “9/11 Commission Report” (but without naming him specifically), Hezbollah's terror chief, Imad Mughniyeh, traveled to Saudi Arabia in October 2000 to recruit the 9/11 muscle hijackers. He then accompanied them on flights to and from Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. These hijackers went to Iran in particular for 9/11 planning and training. That



Supporters of Quds Force leader Qassem Suleimani at his funeral in 2020. (Photo: Mohammad Saeediex / Shutterstock)

training included their first introduction to flight instruction on simulators acquired by the Iranian intelligence service (Ministry of Intelligence and Security, MOIS) in east Asia. Eight to 14 of these Saudi hijackers were facilitated in this way by the Iranian regime prior to 9/11.

According to another of the affidavits in our Havlish legal case, written by Janice Kephart, by agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a mark (whose exact description remains classified) was placed in their Saudi passports that would be recognized by Iranian border personnel, who would then not stamp those passports with entry stamps into Iran. This ensured on this and subsequent trips that those Saudi hijackers' passports would remain “clean,” so that eventually they would be able to obtain US visas in Saudi Arabia before flying to the US later in 2001.

### ■ Ahmad Shah Massoud

Another important aspect of the Iran-AQ collaboration prior to 9/11 is the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud,

the legendary military commander of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, who'd led the fight against the Taliban and was a key ally of the US. He was assassinated just days before 9/11 by two Tunisian al-Qaeda operatives who'd been assisted by the Iranian Embassy in Brussels, Belgium to obtain counterfeit Belgian passports which they used to enter Afghanistan under the guise of journalists to interview Massoud. His loss, as intended, removed a key ally of the US who would have joined forces with the US post-9/11 to confront AQ and the Taliban.

### ■ Post-9/11

Iranian regime material support to terrorism did not end with 9/11. After the US/NATO responded to the 9/11 attacks by taking down Taliban control in Afghanistan and sending al-Qaeda fleeing from Tora Bora, UBL, Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQ fighters and families, found safe-haven in Iran from late 2001 until mid-2010, when they moved to Abbottabad, Pakistan. Their flight across the border from Herat Province, Afghanistan

into Iran was facilitated by the former Governor of Herat Province, Khirullah Said Wali Khairhwa, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his group, Hizbi-I Islami. Al-Qaeda leadership's Shura Council subsequently operated from inside Iran under the full protection of the Iranian regime. In collaboration with the Iranian regime, AQ continued post-2001 to coordinate and carry out terror attacks against the US and other Western countries' interests across the world. This again underscores the significance of the personal relationships forged by AQ leaders (especially Ayman al-Zawahiri) with senior Iranian intelligence officers.

### ■ **The Lessons**

Why does this review of the 9/11 story matter now?

The first lesson is that US and Western leadership, especially in the national security arena, still to this day have not studied or learned the fundamentals of Islamic doctrine, history, law, or scripture. As it is these fundamentals that drive the behavior of the Iranian regime to this day – its sponsorship of Islamic terror proxies including Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, and the Houthis, as well as its pursuit of deliverable nuclear weapons specifically targeted against Israel and the US - it would seem of critical importance to understand the motivation and intent of that regime. That neither Iran nor Hezbollah has ever been held to account for their central role in the 9/11 attacks certainly must feed a sense of invulnerability that fuels continuing attacks against us.

Next, we need to look at Afghanistan...again. Some of the very same elements that collaborated in the 9/11 attacks are once again gathering strength in Afghanistan, now again under Taliban control. AQ, the Taliban, and warlord allies such as the Haqqanis once more are consolidating control and threatening *jihād*. The more recent foothold within Afghanistan by the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) adds yet another *jihadi* element to the mix, although the Taliban treats IS-K as a rival for power.

Iranian regime involvement in Afghanistan currently is not evident, although neither was it pre-9/11. AQ has not officially named a successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri, killed in Kabul in 2022, but Seif al-Adl, formerly AQ's military commander, effectively now acts as the overall leader of al-Qaeda and

Security Council (NSC), Defense and State Departments, and the White House itself understand the driving motivations of the Iranian regime leadership.

It must be recognized that those motivations are driven by ideological beliefs that may not conform to Western ideas about rational behavior. If we define "ra-

Incoming senior US leadership... must understand the driving motivations of the Iranian regime leadership... motivations are driven by ideological beliefs that may not conform to Western ideas about rational behavior.

continues to operate from inside Iran. Afghan resistance forces, one of them led by Ahmad Shah Massoud's son, Ahmad Massoud, battle against the Taliban, but with little to no recognition or support from the US or others in the West.

### ■ **Conclusion**

Israel and the US are focused on chaos across the Middle East, in Gaza, Lebanon, and Judea/Samaria with a fast-moving Turkish-backed military offensive that has taken down the rule of Bashar al-Assad in Syria as of this writing. Afghanistan is not at the forefront of attention right now, but Israeli operations against Iranian proxies Hamas and Hezbollah have seriously degraded the capabilities of both of those. The January 2025 return of Donald Trump to the White House presages likely changes in US policy, particularly in the Middle East, vis-à-vis Israel and most particularly with regard to Iran. Challenges there will remain, no matter the course of events in Lebanon and Syria, making it more important than ever that incoming senior US leadership, especially at the National

tional" as placing the survival of the nation and people above all other values, it is not at all clear that the Iranian regime leadership, from the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on down the ranks of the IRGC and Quds Force, actually do value the nation and the people of Iran more than they do the Islamic ideological drivers so specifically defined in their constitution. We'll recall that the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in his time said:

*We do not worship Iran, we worship Allah. For patriotism is another name for paganism. I say let this land burn. I say let this land go up in smoke, provided Islam emerges triumphant in the rest of the world.*

And for a regime driving to a deliverable nuclear weapons status, that is indeed a sobering consideration.

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# Authoritarian Regimes Abroad Threaten Americans at Home

by **MASIH ALINEJAD**

Iran has repeatedly tried to do me harm in the United States. Congress must strengthen the government's ability to fight such transnational repression.

In March 2025, I will confront the man who came to my Brooklyn home armed with an AK-47 to kill me. I will be testifying as a witness not just against the trigger man but also his handlers who orchestrated the assassination plot from an office at the headquarters of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. My story, while deeply personal, is also part of a broader, sinister pattern of transnational repression in which authoritarian regimes like those in Iran, Russia, China, and Venezuela extend their oppressive reach beyond their borders to target political dissidents. Even American citizens on US soil are not safe when the world's leading sponsors of terror act with impunity.

Plots like the one recently uncovered involving a man with ties to the Iranian regime who came to the United States to coordinate the assassination of US government officials are in the news for good reason. But there is a quieter aggression against people who do not have the resources to defend themselves or the ability to draw media attention to their dire situations.

In 2021, the FBI foiled an audacious plot by the Islamic Republic to kidnap me from my home in Brooklyn, NY, and forcibly take me back to Iran. The kidnapping plot sounds like something out of a Hollywood thriller, but there is a pattern of the Islamic Republic seizing dissidents abroad and

forcibly removing them to Iran. The story of Ruhollah Zam, a fellow Iranian journalist kidnapped by the Islamic Republic from France to Iran and executed, is a grim reminder of what can happen. On the day Zam was executed, Islamic Republic officials vowed that my abduction was imminent as the Iranian state media broadcast my image, hung in effigy.

and his handlers, all members of an Eastern European criminal mob, were arrested and will face trial. But without deterrence, other assassins may be dispatched. This is the reality I face every day.

These threats are not just personal; they are assaults on the fundamental freedoms that democratic societies cherish. They are intended not only

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I am a tiny woman, weighing only 90 pounds, but the threats against me are enormous.

After the kidnapping plot was exposed, I thought I was safe. Then a year later, in 2022, a man brazenly came to my home with the intention of killing me and even offering my head as a birthday gift to his boss. He had been monitoring my movements for more than a week, lurking outside my house, and even ordering food to be delivered to his car as he maintained his surveillance. Thanks to the efforts of multiple US agencies, the assassin

to silence the individuals they target but also to send a chilling message to anyone who dares to speak out against tyranny.

My friend, the journalist Pooriya Zeraati, was also targeted by the Iranian regime. He was stabbed in front of his house in London, another victim of the regime's relentless campaign against its critics.

The Iranian government is not alone in its repressive tactics. Authoritarian regimes worldwide are increasingly united in their efforts to suppress dissent. From the surveillance state of China





*Masih Alinejad speaking at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2023 in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland. (Photo: World Economic Forum / Benedikt von Loebell)*

to Russia's extrajudicial assassinations, these regimes are learning from one another, enhancing their capabilities to monitor, intimidate, and eliminate critics wherever they may be. This cooperation among dictatorships poses a grave threat not only to individual freedom but also to the global democratic order.

The United States and its allies must recognize the urgency of this threat and take concrete steps to protect those who speak out against these regimes. Three bills that represent a crucial step forward have been introduced and passed through the House Committee on Homeland Security. They aim to provide support for those who have been targeted by transnational repression, ensuring that they can live without fear and continue their vital work. These legislative measures, piloted by Representatives August Pfluger (R-TX), Anthony D'Esposito (R-NY), and Seth

Magaziner (D-RI), will strengthen the tools available to the US Department of Homeland Security, as well as state and local law enforcement, to combat transnational repression and increase awareness of this growing threat.

For me, the fight against such repression is a fight for the soul of our democracy. It is a fight to ensure that the values we hold dear — freedom, justice, and human rights — are upheld not just within our borders but across the globe.

It is important for Congress to bring these measures forward for a vote and pass them swiftly — marking not the end of our efforts, but the beginning. We must also foster a global culture of solidarity and resistance against authoritarianism, because this fight is not confined to the borders of any single country; it requires a united response from all who value freedom and democracy, not just Americans.

I am not alone in this struggle. Countless others have faced similar threats and continue to stand up against tyranny despite the dangers. My voice, and their voices, will not be silenced. Together, we will continue to expose the truth and demand accountability, no matter the cost.

The time is now for the United States and its allies to act decisively to protect the freedom of expression and human rights that are under threat from transnational repression. The legislation mentioned above initiates that work. By standing together, we can ensure that the values of democracy and human dignity prevail over tyranny and oppression.

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MASIH ALINEJAD is an Iranian-American journalist and activist. Reprinted with permission from National Review.

# AI is Accelerating Iranian Cyber Operations

by MICHAEL MIESES, NOELLE KERR, and NAKISSA JAHANBANI

In late June and early July, Iranian hackers stole information from Donald Trump's presidential campaign and sent it to Biden campaign officials, according to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the FBI, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). This was far from a one-off. Recently, Tehran has increased its asymmetrical advantage by harnessing cyber capabilities through the internet and social media, a trend that extends back even further. Over the past few decades, Iran has been quietly building its cyber capability in the shadow of great powers.

These recent activities took place after sustained Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea and attacks on US-backed installations in Iraq and Syria. Iran's cyber activities are part of a broader hybrid strategy combining conventional military power, economic leverage, and

proxies are nonetheless a powerful asymmetric tool.

Iran's multifaceted approach in the cyber domain allows Iran to project power and influence in the Middle East while avoiding direct conventional military confrontations with stronger adversaries. Iran uses cyber operations to complement its broader geopolitical strategies, often employing cyber espionage and sabotage to gain strategic advantages or to retaliate against sanctions and military threats. As Iran increasingly incorporates AI technologies into its cyber operations, the likelihood of more disruptive and damaging activities escalates, presenting a substantial challenge not only to regional stability but also to global security.

Tehran is capitalizing on the strategic competition between the US and Russia by aligning with and learning cyber capabilities from Moscow and,

for maintaining a stable regional and international security.

To fully grasp Iran's complex hybrid strategy, it is essential to examine its cyber infrastructure and the role cyber proxies play within the context of Iranian foreign policy. Our analysis first explores known Iranian cyber tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) before delving into current Iranian cyber operations. Finally, we examine how Iran is using artificial intelligence (AI) in its cyber activities, operations, and threats.

## ■ *Iran's Cyber Infrastructure, Proxies, and Operations in Context*

Iran follows a foreign policy strategy of "forward defense," seeking self-preservation by addressing threats before they infiltrate its borders. In recent years, this strategy has expanded to conducting both offensive and defensive cyber operations for the regime. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) established a "flexible, layered" hybrid-warfare national security strategy called "Mosaic Defense," which capitalizes on decades of Iranian mistrust of foreign powers and utilizes asymmetrical warfare tactics to slow an invading force. The Iranian government's cyber task organization is not well defined and operates across multiple government entities. This fragmented approach to cyber operations is likely due to the relative newness of cyber operations in the Iranian government. Due to the closed nature of the Iranian regime, the specific cyber entities within the government

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the strategic use of proxies. While there is considerable information about Iranian offline proxies, its cyber proxies largely fly under the radar. Though they are less visible than their offline counterparts, cyber

to a different extent, China. Integrating AI increases the sophistication of Iran's asymmetric cyber tactics, heightening the stakes in international power dynamics and intensifying the challenges

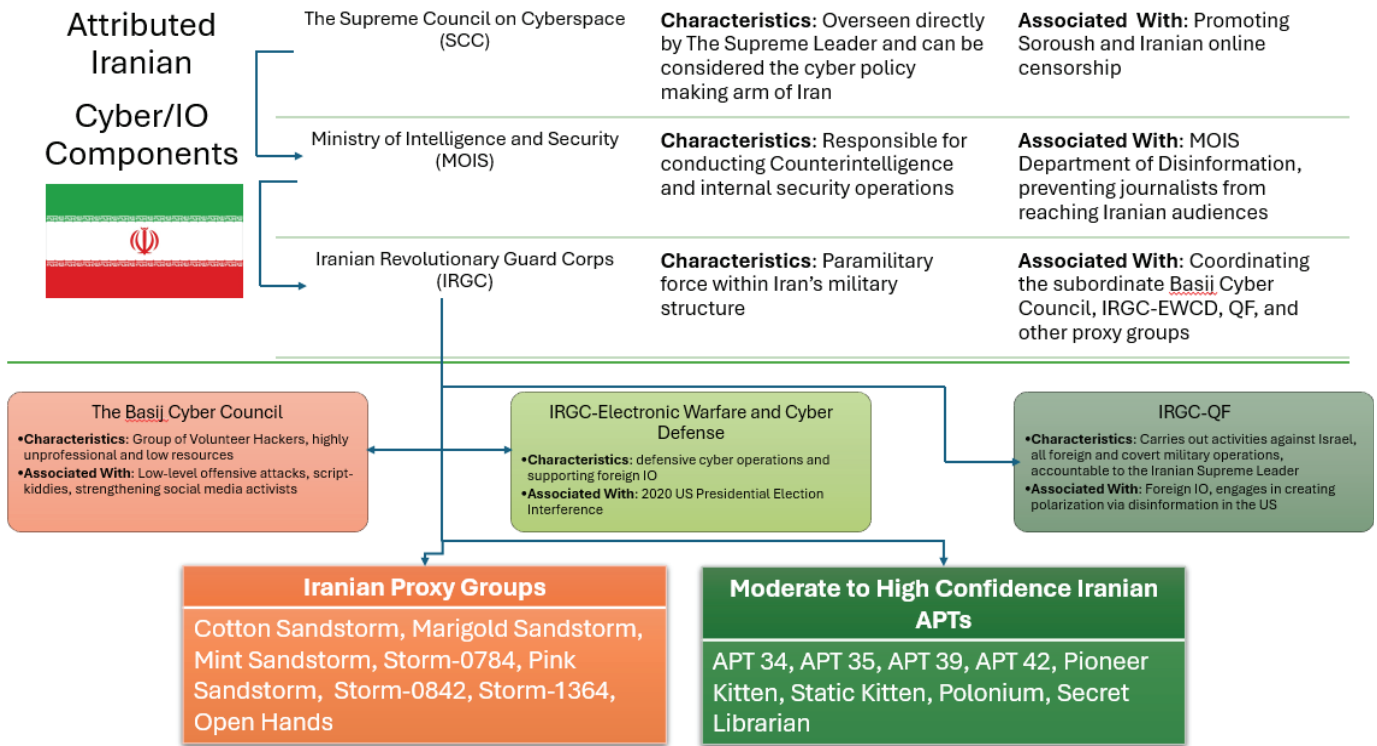


Figure 1. Attributed Iranian cyber/information operations components. (Sources: Council on Foreign Relations, Insikt Group (Recorded Future), Iran International, Microsoft Threat Intelligence, Microsoft Security, Ostovar’s “Vanguard of the Imam,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, SecureWorks, Sentinel Labs, United Against Nuclear Iran, the US Department of Justice, the US Institute of Peace, and the Washington Institute.)

are not well defined or easily identifiable. However, some entities within the Iranian government focus specifically on propaganda and cyber-enabled information operations (IO) for the regime (Figure 1).

Cyber proxies affiliated with Iran either are under the direction of the Iranian national security apparatus or are loosely connected with seemingly unclear ties. The Iranian government’s cyber posture has evolved significantly, as evidenced by the leading US government authority on cybersecurity, CISA. The government has continued to enhance its cyber capabilities, leveraging both state-sponsored groups and proxies to conduct sophisticated cyber operations. Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani’s death marked a significant turning point in Iran’s cyber strategy, pushing Tehran to assert its power and influence through increased cyber activities aimed at the US and its allies. These operations seek not only to disrupt but also to demonstrate Iran’s technological prowess and

strategic capability in cyberspace to establish deterrence against its main adversaries, the United States and its allies. The proxies’ ambiguity further offers Iran plausible deniability in leveraging them to achieve its foreign policy goals. The utilization of AI and customized malware and exploits in these operations suggests a trend toward more sophisticated and potentially more dangerous cyber capabilities.

### Known Iranian Cyber Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)

Iran’s cyber proxies consist of both state-sponsored groups and non-state-sponsored groups. Open-source research can have limitations due to over- and under-reporting as well as mis- and disinformation efforts, such as espionage operations and obfuscation. Cyber advanced persistent threats (APTs)—as they are referred to in the cyber industry reporting and research—are highly resourced and capable groups commonly associated

with nation-states. Due to a nation-state cyber threat actors to enable their anonymity, they can often take on multiple names over time to avoid attribution and identification. Groups will often commit attacks under multiple group names, and there is ambiguity as to whether or not these groups are directly state sponsored, but they are assumed to be aligned, because attack vectors, priorities, and victim overlap align with nation-state priorities. Threat actors will often commit attacks under different names to leverage anonymity. The implementation of AI would align with an asymmetric strategy and would be in line with proxies’ Mosaic Defense. Utilizing AI in their known cyber apparatuses and their respective capabilities would effectively create a more robust persistent threat. In June 2024, Iran and the IRGC used AI to create news sites that pull content from legitimate news sites to target US voters on different sides of the political spectrum. Additionally, in December 2023, Iranian-sponsored hackers used AI-generated deepfakes to



disrupt news broadcasts with the purpose of swaying public opinion in their favor.

The primary goals of Iranian cyber proxies are strategic espionage and reconnaissance to support nation-state priorities and to conduct cyber-enabled influence operations. Iranian cyber threats also target individuals in journalism who directly oppose them. Iranian

Iranian cyber operations include cyber-enabled influence operations. Iranian-backed cyber groups conduct these low-cost, high-yield operations to elicit a psychological effect on target audiences in Israel, the US, and their allies. A Microsoft report details one case in 2023 in which several Iranian proxies conducted a multi-phase,

## ■ **Current Iranian Cyber Operations Activity**

The Israel-Hamas war has intensified Israel-Iran cyber conflict. For example, Iranian hackers have compromised Israeli-made components used in US water systems. Iranian cyber groups have developed software and systems that regulate water systems in Israel and the United States. There is evidence that Iranian hackers have been waging an intelligence gathering campaign that has targeted adversaries in the Middle East, Israel, and the United States. Their targets have included government staff, telecommunications, financial organizations, and military entities. These priorities are in line with previously mentioned Iranian state-sponsored groups and their associated TTPs. A CISA report described how Iranian state cyber actors inject malware and ransomware into target systems to exfiltrate email content. The continuous tension between Israel and Iran has escalated cyberattacks on both sides of the conflict. Since June 2010, there has been a history of Iran blaming both Israel and the United States. Recently, Iran's banking systems were targeted by Israel. The initial reactions to the attack indicated

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hackers executed a social engineering campaign impersonating journalists and human rights activists to send phishing emails to targets. Additionally, Iranian cyber threats commit acts of cyber crime to support their geopolitical activities. Iranian nation-state actor MuddyWater has committed cybercrimes by deploying the BugSleep malware to maintain persistent access to target systems. Groups are also known to prioritize creating disruption and the transfer of tech and information. From a technical perspective, the tactics and procedures these groups use are a combination of different phishing techniques and social engineering. A recent example of Iran's social engineering tactics involves Iran-linked hackers targeting US presidential campaigns through phishing attacks, aiming not only to exfiltrate but also to leak sensitive data. If these tactics are successful, the target environment will then ingest malware/ransomware for the purposes of data exfiltration, command and control, reconnaissance and, espionage. (For more information consult sources about OilRig, APT33, Magic Hound, APT39, and APT42.)

cyber-enabled influence operation against Israel. The operation occurred in three phases. The first phase focused on spreading disinformation using "sock puppets," which are fake social media personas to spread false successes about their exploits. In the second phase, Iranian APTs increased

Iran also uses "faketivists," which are groups that commit cyberattacks for a specific cause, like hacktivists, but are borne from a specific geopolitical event and are created by a nation-state to perpetuate narratives that support their cause.

cyberattack activity against strategic targets. Finally, in the third phase, Iranian APTs attacked targets across borders and created deepfakes to spread their ideologies.

that it was the largest-scale attack Iran has faced.

Cyber proxy groups use various tactics to create negative psychological effects among adversaries. APTs such as Mint Sandstorm use precise targeting

to create unease among a specific group of people. Iran also uses “faketivists,” which are groups that commit cyberattacks for a specific cause, like hacktivists, but are borne from a specific geopolitical event and are created by a nation-state to perpetuate narratives that support their cause. Faketivists can be nation-

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state actors and/or proxy groups associated with the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). The cyberattacks in Israel that have deployed faketivists have had mixed success, but they have garnered both local and global support. The purpose of these groups is to spread their “success” and to create disruption and attention, regardless of actual operational success.

Cyber threat actors associated with the Iranian MOIS collaborate with offensive cyber proxies to launch more targeted attacks. Subsidiaries of the threat actor group Pink Sandstorm hacked into Israeli hospital networks and LGBTQ dating apps to leak sensitive information regarding personal medical records and to publish details on individuals’ sexual orientation. Unlike the IRGC’s approach of launching an offensive attack and then amplifying it with sock puppets, MOIS threat groups execute more intrusive and destructive maneuvers within servers. This difference sets MOIS apart from the IRGC and indicates that MOIS leverages its intelligence collection operations experience to power its cyber-enabled influence operations and to conceal its actors more intentionally.

Artificial intelligence is also used within Iranian cyber-enabled information operations. Since the Oct. 7 attacks, various Iranian-backed cyber groups have employed AI to generate online propaganda. In one instance, the Storm-1364 persona Tears of War used AI to generate images meant to coerce

Israeli citizens to rally against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. More recently, after the massive Iranian drone attack, Iranian cyber actors used AI-generated footage to fabricate the effects of the drones and disseminated the content via X. The use of AI, especially generative AI, continues to evolve amid the information war and will certainly elicit more potent psychological effects for the regime.

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The US and its allies such as Israel have responded to Iran’s growing cyber and cyber-enabled influence capabilities by strengthening their cybersecurity posture and collaborating with the private sector to develop preventive solutions. By employing both state-sponsored groups and cyber proxies, Iran has developed a complex and hybrid strategy that aligns with its foreign policy goals. Both the US and Iran are enhancing cyber policies to build stronger relationships between public and private entities while educating their societies on the nature of cyber warfare. Iran’s use of AI to bolster its cyber operations, including deepfakes and AI-generated content, enhances its influence operations and

creates a more efficient threat landscape. These operations include Iran’s proxy groups using open-source AI tools. The US counters Iran’s cyber-enabled influence operations through a whole-of-government approach, incorporating diplomatic, military, economic, and informational measures.

Looking ahead, we can expect Iran to further integrate AI into its cyber strategy, escalating the frequency and sophistication of attacks, particularly on critical infrastructure and democratic processes. Additionally, the growing alignment between Iran and other global cyber powers, such as Russia and China, further increases the sophistication and reach of its cyber capabilities, presenting significant challenges for those attempting to counter these evolving threats.

Governments and private entities must remain vigilant, as the evolving cyber domain will continue to shape geopolitical conflicts in the coming years. As both sectors face similar threats from Iranian cyber actors, continued collaboration to counter these efforts is not just ideal but essential. Public-private partnerships play a crucial role in countering these threats by pooling resources, expertise, and intelligence. Such partnerships enable more comprehensive defenses against Iranian cyber operations, from protecting critical infrastructure to countering disinformation campaigns. Strengthening this collaboration will be vital to staying ahead of increasingly sophisticated attacks and ensuring resilience in the face of evolving cyber threats.

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# Za a Mentsch (Be What a Person Ought to Be)

*Jews and Power* (Second Edition, 2020, Nextbook/Schocken)

by RUTH R. WISSE

review by SHOSHANA BRYEN

[Note: This review ran in the Spring 2020 issue of inFOCUS Quarterly. The horrific events of October 7, 2023 were, in some ways, not surprising given the open threats by Hamas, Hezbollah, and their patron Iran about killing Jews, erasing the State of Israel, and in the case of some Islamists, reconquering Europe. But the re-emergence of anti-semitism in Europe, the US, and especially virulently in Canada, and oddly in Australia, caught a lot of people by surprise. That makes a re-read necessary.]

Jews live in a world of code – words that say one thing and mean something entirely different to the initiated. Religion, nationality, ethnicity, Zionism, anti-Zionism and antisemitism, intersectionality, racism, *tikkun olam*, peace – alone or next to “process” – Holocaust and holocaust all mean to the speaker what they mean to the speaker. What the listener, Jewish or not, hears is often something else.

What is clear to the magnificent Ruth R. Wisse in *Jews and Power* is that the evolution of Jews, as practitioners of a religion and as nationalists and as people of widely varying ethnicity, has no parallel. Jews worked to adapt to political conditions in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and elsewhere over centuries and under wildly disparate conditions. At all times, in all places, she notes in the Introduction to the Second Edition, “Jews needed accommodation; anti-Jews needed an object of blame.”

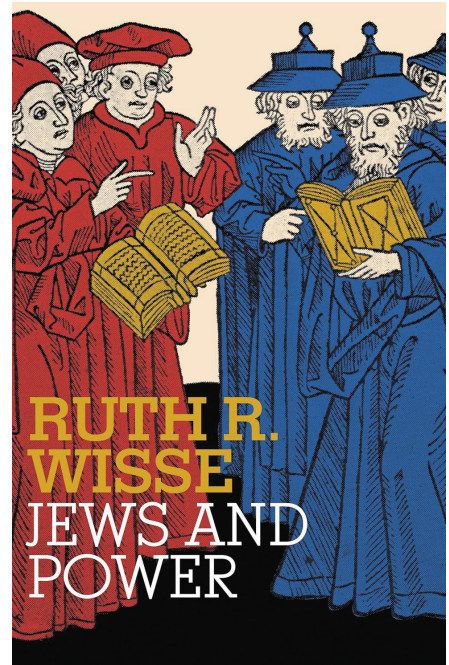
Code, and understanding code, was essential to survival.

Wisse, a Fellow of the Jewish Policy Center, is a former professor of Yiddish and Comparative Literature at Harvard University. Born in Czernowitz, part of modern-day Ukraine, she spent most of her childhood in Montreal and earned a Ph.D. from McGill University. To say she often writes and speaks about the politics of antisemitism, why Israel is under attack in our universities, as well as the study of Yiddish literature, is to understate her importance in helping Jews understand themselves and understand the inevitable Jew-haters.

In explaining her motivation for writing and updating *Jews and Power*, Wisse says, “I want to see how the politics of Jews occasions the politics of anti-Jews... in tandem because that is the way they coexist.” Not to blame the Jews, but as an attempt to understand “how and why...antisemitism became arguably the most protean force in international politics.”

All of that before Chapter One.

The three “staples of nationhood” are land, a central government, and a means of self-defense. The Jewish people’s first experiment in retaining nationhood without them was the Babylonian exile. There, two intellectual threads kept them separate when other tribes simply disappeared. First was the attachment to the land they had left – “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my





palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.” This is the origin of breaking a glass at a Jewish wedding – at the “happiest hour” the memory of lost Jerusalem appears.

Second was the Jews’ relationship with God. His job is to avenge His peo-

only answers questions about *Jews and Power*, but also about how we Jews became the people we are. Over years, decades, and centuries, even unreligious Jews assimilated the peoplehood and the ethic. “Za a mentsch” was an admonition familiar even to Jews who didn’t speak Yiddish.

Wisse’s historical description of Jewish courts, teachers, and texts not only answers questions about Jews and power, but also about how we Jews became the people we are.

ple, destroy their enemies, and restore them to Zion. For other people, this is the role of the state and the army, but Jews had no state or army – thus, Jews took the role of supplicant or, sometimes, as the cause of God’s unwillingness to rescue His people. Even negative “agency” was better than being the object of the whims of the universe. Often, they asked God to provide vengeance: “Fair Babylon, you predator, a blessing on him who repays you in kind what you have inflicted on us; a blessing on him who seizes your babies and dashes them against the rocks!”

But if nationhood requires three staples that the Jews didn’t have, Jews had three other staples – “Torah, worship, and deeds of lovingkindness.” (Torah, Avodah v’Gmilut Chasadim) These staples, especially the Torah, which was translated into the vernacular and studied and shared by the community, were portable. Study was mandatory, and time for study was much to be desired in poor and working communities. Israel’s present and growing issues with perpetual Torah students who do not serve in the armed forces of the state stem from this mandate.

Wisse’s historical description of Jewish courts, teachers, and texts not

**Side note 1:** The translation and study of the laws of the Torah stands in contrast to the “Arabic only” Quran, and the rote memorization of the Hadiths by generations of Muslim youth. An Egyptian Muslim friend had seriously read and studied the Hebrew Bible.

Wisse’s description of the inability or unwillingness of the Jews to accept the need for self-defense is extraordinary.

Discussing Joseph, I mentioned that he had made “ill reports” to his father about his brothers, engendering the aggravation that got him sold off to Egypt.

“Oh, no,” said my friend. “Joseph was a Prophet – he never did anything wrong. He couldn’t.” My example of Moses defying God and not reaching the Promised Land was met with the same objection. “Moses was a Prophet and Prophets are perfect.” At some point, we stopped discussing the Bible.

**Side note 2:** A best-selling book in South Korea (and close to the top in

Japan and China) is a translation of the Talmud. Koreans read it to learn the secret of Jewish success – not “secrets” in the European antisemitic sense, but in the sense of knowing Jews to be an ancient people, like Koreans, and wanting to understand. What they miss is that the secret is not in the book, but rather in the *pilpul* – the mechanism for asking and answering questions that has no educational parallel in Asia.

These, throughout the first two sections of *Jews and Power*, are keys to Jews, Philo-Semites, and antisemites.

### ■ Powers of Protection

Across countries and eras, Jewish communities made accommodation with local rulers, offering benefits and services in exchange for security. However, Part One makes it clear that the arrangement was throughout history entirely one-sided. As long as the governing powers valued the Jews over other things, they were relatively safe. But “other things” could and did include populist mobs, riots, and better

offers, at which point, the Jews would be jettisoned.

In later cases, this could be ascribed to the fraught relationship between Jews and Christians and Muslims – but Wisse starts at Elephantine in 411 BCE. It could also be ascribed, as Thomas Sowell did, to the position of “middleman minorities” including Jews, Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and Ibos in Nigeria:

*It is not just what these minorities have achieved, but how they have*

achieved it, that evokes suspicion and resentments,” wrote Sowell. Wisse explains, “the very functions of lending and charging interest, of bartering rather than producing necessities, trigger distrust. Envy and resentment are provided not by wealth alone, but by the intermediary role and social habits that set and keep these groups apart.

And religion.

For Christians and Muslims, it was Jews as “the other” and the infidel. And for Jews, it was the covenantal relationship with God and the belief that God would, at some point, avenge the enemies of the Jews and lead them home. “The Eternal shall grant his people strength; the Eternal shall bless his people with peace.” This relationship gave the Jews an expectation of unfailing divine protection, along with temporary protection from earthly rulers.

The concept of protection and the rise of self-protection is most interesting in Part Three, Return to Zion.

The return to the historic Jewish homeland was a “push-me-pull-you” phenomenon. On the “push me” side, Moses Leib Lilienblum noted that not a single Western European country had taken appreciable numbers of Jews fleeing Russian pogroms. It was time for Jews, who were “hated, hounded, beaten, murdered, and incarcerated” to return to the Land of Israel. On the “pull you” side was the rise of European nationalism – if they could do it, why couldn’t the Jews?

Here is one of the most intriguing parts of the book. For all the skills the Jews developed in the Diaspora, one they never had and could never have had, was military skill. The protection of the Jews had been outsourced to local political and religious leaders in Part One. By Part Three, the returning Jews were still seeking outside protection – from the British, from local Ottoman officials, from local Arabs. The thought that an army might be necessary was not mainstream.

Wisse’s description of the inability or unwillingness of the Jews to accept the need for self-defense is extraordinary.

Jewish memory lingered on the last military hero, Bar Kochba, whose defeat by the Romans at the last mountain stronghold of Betar in 135 CE seemed to eliminate the option of Jewish armed might... The aberrant nature of Jewish political life became horribly manifest during World War I when an estimated half million Jews fought in the uniforms of the vying armies of Europe with no one to prevent the violence directed at them.

In his book *Jerusalem: The Biography*, Simon Sebag Montefiore explains the leaders of the Zionist move-

a socialist Jewish state would be created without violence and without dominating or displacing the Palestinian Arabs; rather it would exist alongside them. He was sure the Jewish and Arab working classes would cooperate... it did not occur to the Zionists that most of these Arabs had no wish for the benefits of their settlement.”

Clearly, looking back on the chalutzim from here, the creation and evolution of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is an even greater feat than we normally credit. Wisse gives Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor their due. The Holocaust

For all the skills the Jews developed in the Diaspora, one they never had and could never have had, was military skill. The protection of the Jews had been outsourced to local political and religious leaders...

ment were committed to winning the Arabs to their vision of the Jewish return making the land better for everyone:

*Herzl dreamed, “If Jerusalem is ever ours, I’d clear up everything not sacred, tear down the filthy ratholes,” preserving the Old City as a heritage site like Lourdes or Mecca. “I’d build an airy comfortable properly sewerred, brand new city around the Holy Places.” Herzl later decided that Jerusalem should be shared: “We shall extra-territorialize Jerusalem so that it will belong to nobody and everybody, its Holy Places the joint possession of all Believers.”*

*Ben Gurion believed, like most of his fellow Zionists at this time, that*

and repeated (failed) Arab invasions are also credited.

The Conclusion returns us to the beginning – the modern relationship between Jews and power, both political and military, and between Jews and antisemites. *Jews and Power* is not prescriptive, it will not tell you how to deal with the haters or protect the Jews. But for Jews and non-Jews alike, it offers a cogent description of the development of the Jewish people and their unique institutions across time and space.

It is an education well worth the investment of time and intellectual energy.

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### ■ *The Last Word ...*

## Where We've Been and Why It Matters

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria sent me back to the Jewish Policy Center archive.

Incoming President Donald Trump is correct – who governs Damascus and its environs is not a choice that the United States can or will make. However, the US has interests that include working with our allies and ensuring that our adversaries don't take advantage of them – or us. While we all cheer the ouster of a war criminal and the shaking of the Islamic Republic, an appropriate future-looking policy requires an understanding of American culpability in the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 and never ended.

Russia and Iran, of course, played large roles in this. But so did the Obama administration.

What mattered to the administration in those years was the determination to achieve a nuclear deal – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – between the United States and Iran. That policy lived through the Obama and Biden administrations, with President Joe Biden appeasing Iran from the first month in office.

Between two appeasing administrations was President Trump, who set clear parameters and limits for American foreign policy. As well as ending CIA support for Sunni

rebel groups – some of which were clearly jihadist – and keeping an American force in place to help defeat ISIS and protect our Kurdish allies, he addressed the ongoing use of chemicals by the Syrian regime.

He ordered air strikes on the Him Shimshar base's chemical weapons bunker and storage depot, and the Barzeh "scientific research center." Not designed for "regime change" or to end the Syrian civil war, the raid was intended to punish the use of chemical weapons by Assad, his protector Russia and his banker Iran. It was to make it harder to do it again and to uphold one of the few areas of international consensus in warfare.

The lesson was clear:

*The primary goals of American foreign policy are to make our citizens, friends and allies secure and to make our adversaries think twice.*

It is a good mantra for the second Trump administration.

– Shoshana Bryen  
Editor, *inFOCUS Quarterly*