

THE EMBASSY

Questioning Assumptions On Iran: Five Ways Team Biden Can Deal From Strength



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President Joe Biden, joined by Johnson and Johnson CEO Alex Gorsky and Merck CEO Ken Frazier, delivers remarks on COVID-19 vaccine production Wednesday, March 10, 2021, in the South Court Auditorium in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building at the White House. (Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz).

With the US and Iran now engaged in a diplomatic process, strong constituencies in Washington are advocating for or against restoring mutual adherence to the 2015 nuclear accord between the P5+1 and Iran. Nuclear non-proliferation experts naturally want to codify reliable limits on Iran's nuclear activities, and US diplomats continue to seek a path that could lead to restored relations with a country of more than 80 million people and a rich civilizational heritage. No one, in the Middle East or elsewhere, would be immune to the risks from escalating US hostilities with Iran.

At the same time, a substantial contingent opposes relieving sanctions pressure absent new and extended restraints on Iran's threatening activities, nuclear and non-nuclear. Their concerns are shared by Israel and many Arab states living day-to-day with the revolutionary misbehavior of their troublesome neighbor. The President and his senior lieutenants have acknowledged the need for a "longer and stronger" nuclear agreement as well as further initiatives to address Iran's non-nuclear provocations. There is no obvious or easy option for the Biden Administration in dealing with Iran.

Despite commentaries warning against delay, the Administration's cautious early approach, acknowledging each constituency's valid concerns without becoming captive to either's prescription, has strengthened Biden's hand with Iran. That is because Iran's many and varied acts of aggression since 2016, when the JCPOA came into force, have crystallized western recognition that there is much more to the Iran threat than the shrinking breakout time to field a nuclear weapon. The atmospherics of negotiations have also changed. No longer can US officials and politicians look at a nuclear arrangement as a potential springboard to détente, rapprochement, and a more normal bilateral relationship. Iran has, through its hostile acts, dashed such hopes and forfeited the ability to market a new agreement as anything more than a transaction, wholly based on verification rather than trust.

Behind the Curtain

One of Tehran's advantages in recent years has been the ability to exploit partisan disagreement in Washington over the nuclear accord. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif has skillfully portrayed Iran as the innocent victim of Washington's misguided thinking, a posture designed to inflame the nuclear debate, the better to ensure that a consensus US policy on the overall Iran threat remains out of reach. In so doing, Zarif and others have deflected western attention from a deep reservoir of damning realities behind the regime's righteous veneer.

The tenuous political and religious footing on which Iran's clerical dictatorship rests has been obscured by airbrushed narratives of its history, relentlessly amplified at home and abroad. Western policy veterans are well-versed in part of the Iran story – the 1953 CIA coup; the 1979 revolution and hostage crisis; the regime's ties to foreign terrorist attacks including some targeting the US; the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the elite Qods Force; Iran's sponsorship of Hezbollah in Lebanon and their seizure of western hostages; the initially secret nuclear enrichment program; and more recently, Tehran's shadowy network of Shia militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, following the example of Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Each of these facets of revolutionary Iran's self-serving image has a less flattering back story that it has taken pains to hide. The US can gain leverage at a critical moment, and begin to inoculate itself against Tehran's robust information operations, by looking behind the curtain of a regime hoping against hope to outrun its own historic misdeeds. The list of episodes to re-examine is not short.

It requires looking more closely at the clerics' stance at the time of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq's overthrow, and the fate of the nationalist pro-democratic movements he inspired; the political significance within Iran of the US Embassy seizure; the backdrop to Iraq's September 1980 invasion of Iran and why the war lasted eight years; the foundational issue that turned the young Muslim intellectual movement known as the People's Mujahedin – loose allies of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini against the Shah during his Paris exile – into what he deemed an existential threat to his rule, to be crushed at any cost; the fateful events of June 20, 1981; the reason Ali Khamenei, and not Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Iran's most eminent cleric, became the Supreme Leader after Khomeini's death; why the regime pursued a nuclear weapons program; why it came to the P5+1 negotiating table and was content to drag out the process for two years; why it invested so much blood and treasure in the Syria conflict; and why it feels the need to stage hostile, criminal acts of aggression and terrorism to the present day, even at the risk of being exposed.

Only now are details beginning to emerge in the West about the foreign

activities conducted by Section 312 of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the extent of the Central Bank of Iran's covert bankrolling of front organizations and agents of influence, the 80:20 rule, the extent of the regime's control over every presidential election since mid-1981, the long-concealed 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners, and the role of still-powerful regime figures in carrying out that historic crime against humanity. Iran has succeeded for years in keeping its most devastating secrets from being exposed by western governments or media. That corrupt advantage must end now, and the Biden Administration can lead in this effort. When it does, new opportunities for multilateral policy leverage over this resilient but vulnerable adversary will be evident.

A Consensus Approach is Possible

As far-fetched as the idea may seem amid historic political division in America, a sustainable, bipartisan Iran policy may not be out of reach. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's admonition, in his inaugural press conference, that policy officials should be "constantly questioning our own assumptions and premises", is particularly apposite with Iran, a country of great possibility that for over four decades now has projected a misleading posture of normality while imposing an encyclopedic array of burdens on the rules-based international order.

The Biden team and Republicans in Congress are not irreconcilably divided on what US interests now require. CIA Director William Burns, a preeminent Middle East policy expert, was candid in his confirmation hearing, calling for "a comprehensive strategy" addressing a range of threatening Iranian actions, "whether it's developing ballistic missiles and destabilizing the region and subverting other governments, or its human rights abuses against its own people". Such a strategy is needed, said Burns, even if Iran returns to full compliance with the JCPOA. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence voted unanimously to endorse his nomination.

His message was not incompatible with that of five Republican Senators, writing to the President on February 26, insisting that Iran policy "must

encompass more than a nuclear negotiation.” President Biden’s March 21 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance directed that the US “will work with our regional partners to deter Iranian aggression and threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity”. Even Wendy Sherman, the lead US negotiator on the JCPOA, made clear in her confirmation hearing to become Deputy Secretary of State that the world of 2021 has changed since 2015, and policy must adapt accordingly.

Continuous debate over policy premises during the Cold War helped US officials sustain pressure on the Soviet Union and avoid miscalculation. It can do so today with Iran. The US and allies have struggled to understand, much less interact effectively with, a significant regional actor whose empowered offices relentlessly pursue the illusory dream of a borderless sectarian caliphate across the Islamic world, even as its disempowered bureaucracy delivers ineffectual, often failing governance within the borders of the country itself. Policy choices to be made as the diplomatic process unfolds can only benefit from testing prevailing assumptions about the other party.

Hard Questions and Credible Answers

What assumptions? A good start would be to consider why Tehran’s clerical leadership has relied so heavily on coercion, repression, and lethal force in managing its domestic and international affairs. Are its external aggression and internal brutality a culturally-unchallengeable expression of fervent religious belief and practice, or manifestations of a raw determination to stave off threats to the regime? Khomeini’s audacious project required the sustained appearance of dynamic revolutionary change; the use of terror as a foreign policy tactic has not only delivered that optic, but kept the world from measuring, and grading, the Islamic Republic according to the metrics of governance and human development customarily applied to other countries.

Neither Iran’s neighbors nor large segments of its own citizenry would mourn the end of fundamentalist rule. Does the regime genuinely think it is playing a winning hand today, and making progress toward realizing an idyllic religious vision? Or are its day-to-day acts of violence and

provocation more reflective of a paranoid cabal, bereft of better options and risking reprisals to ward off forces for change?

An assessment of the imperatives that drive the regime's actions, and of the relative strength or weakness of its political and religious legitimacy, might conclude that the ruling circle's formula for retaining power for four decades has consisted principally of three lines of effort: conceding resources and prestige to purchase the loyalty of the country's able-bodied but less-educated men, keeping them employed and their families supported via the Bassij, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Qods Force, and the Justice Ministry; suppressing domestic and foreign-based political dissent among Iranians through brutal repression, intimidation, remuneration, surveillance and propaganda; and dissuading the international community – through terrorism, the threat of war, nuclear provocation, deception, and public diplomacy – from adopting policies in response that would capitalize on its systemic weaknesses.

The extent of official Iran's institutionalized deception begs the question of what was so necessary to conceal. The answer can be stated simply: from the early days of Khomeini's return from exile and ever since, the revolutionary regime has been trapped in an unending contest with many of its own citizens, struggling to maintain the pretense of legitimacy embedded in its constitutional religious mandate, its sole excuse for denying political rights to the people.

Scholars have correctly noted that Khomeini enjoyed broad popular support upon his arrival in Iran after 14 years of exile. Yet the more enduring truth is this: whatever revolutionary credentials the ruling mullahs might claim today, credit for answering the aspirations of the masses whose protests brought down the Pahlavi dynasty is not among them. Those aspirations for participatory self-government, with roots dating back to 1905, live on in 2021, lurking beneath the surface and periodically roiling the political stability of the Iranian nation. It is time US policy drew lessons from this ruthless regime's troubled quest to suppress the forces of history.

Revolutionary Iran's Original Sin

Discussions of US-Iran relations have ritually assigned to America a lingering burden of historic guilt for having violated Iran's sovereignty and robbed the country of its post-colonial moment of emancipation from great power exploitation. The CIA's Operation Ajax, which staged protests leading to the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953, was America's "original sin", for which US leaders years later have seen fit to express regret to the Iranian people. The clerics running Iran, however, are owed no apology whatsoever, for the leading Ayatollahs in 1953 openly supported the coup and welcomed the Shah's return to his throne.

Years later, they coopted the Shah's dreaded security service, SAVAK, to continue operating on their behalf, and a Belgian court in 2021 found that the mullahs' notorious Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), formed in 1983, had its 'roots' in SAVAK. As protesters across Iran in recent years have made clear, any residual anti-American sentiment pales in comparison to their animus toward their own rulers.

The seizure of the American Embassy and the extended hostage crisis beginning in November 1979 constituted an historic violation of international diplomatic norms – despite which Iran under the clerics has continued to enjoy, and repeatedly abuse, sovereign privileges and immunities. Lost in the obsession over the hostages' fate that gripped America was the political significance within Iran of this spectacular act of defiance against the US, for the crisis provided Khomeini the means to achieve primacy inside Iran at the expense of his potential rivals. It did not have to turn out this way.

For over two years after Khomeini's return, a wide swath of the population, including women, youth, ethnic minorities, and particularly students and more educated Iranians, engaged in a vibrant season of long-denied political campaigning, rallies, published commentaries, and elections. Mossadeq's democratic vision lived on in the politics of leading national figures including Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, soon-to-be President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, and Massoud Rajavi, leader of the People's Mojahedin or MEK, the Islamic left-leaning nationalist movement,

most of whose original student organizers along with many followers had been executed by the Shah's tribunals in the early 1970s.

Bazargan resigned in protest when Khomeini's followers overran the American Embassy. Bani-Sadr won post-revolutionary Iran's first and last free election for president (only Rajavi, out of 124 candidates, was banned from the ballot). Seventeen months later, as he and Rajavi mobilized nation-wide protests against the rise of autocracy, the President was stripped of military authority and impeached, his residence seized, close friends executed, a supportive newspaper closed, and its writers imprisoned. The two men went into hiding to avoid certain execution, and escaped together to Paris. This violent rupture between fundamentalists and nationalists set in motion a deadly conflict between ruling clerics and resisting citizens, inside and outside the country. Mossadeq remains a source of political inspiration to many Iranians today.

The rift started earlier, in 1979, when Khomeini invited Rajavi to meet and sought his endorsement for the Islamic Republic's new constitution, as Rajavi was a prominent intellectual, popular among Muslim students. Rajavi told Khomeini to his face that he could not support the new proposed constitution, on either political or religious grounds. His belief that Islam is fully compatible with freedom and democratic rights stood as a potent rebuke, hence an intolerable threat, to Khomeini's plan for exercising dictatorial power via the foundational concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the Islamic jurist. This was the doctrine by which Iran sought to reverse centuries of political development, re-combining religious authority and political power.

Through this one constitutional clause, Khomeini anointed himself as a divinely-mandated Supreme Leader, the embodiment of the Mahdi, the 12th Imam of the Prophet, until such time as he emerges from occultation and reappears on earth to deliver justice. After Rajavi disputed Khomeini's religious as well as political legitimacy, the Ayatollah reportedly issued a hand-written *fatwa* calling for his death. For forty-two years, regime operatives have targeted Rajavi and sustained an international manhunt, while his followers in the MEK and the Paris-based National Council of Resistance of Iran have been a prime target of regime propagandists,

assassins, proxy militias – and, for a time until repudiated by their own courts, foreign ministries acceding to Tehran’s demands.

For years, western governments uncritically accepted false or distorted regime allegations about the MEK’s nature and activities, including belatedly misplaced responsibility for the murders of Americans in Iran during the 1970s and a terrorist bombing that killed many clerical leaders in 1981. Then, a decade ago, major court challenges in France, the EU, the UK, and the US, all clarified, as the French magistrate explained in summarizing an 8-year investigation, that the ‘Rajavi’ MEK’s past acts of violence against the fundamentalist regime, which ended in 2001, were more properly classified as legitimate resistance to tyranny, and did not meet definitions of terrorism. Indeed, no member of the group has ever been prosecuted and convicted of terrorism.

In the spring and summer of 1981, with the revolution hijacked by fundamentalists, and hundreds of thousands in several cities protesting the clerical takeover, Khomeini’s theocratic project faced the prospect of being swept aside, not unlike the Shah two years earlier. The clerics’ response, beginning on June 20, was a resort to massive force against their own people, initiating what Ervand Abrahamian termed a “reign of terror” inside Iran. Marvin Zonis called it a “campaign of mass slaughter”. Like Syria three decades later, as a faltering dictator turned deadly force against his own population, Khomeini’s war against citizens seeking freedom and modernity set the clerical regime in a mode of perpetual crisis, its power sustained by force in lieu of a political mandate, with recurring bouts of mass protest. It is this wounded condition that has shaped the course of its four-decade history.

More Dark Truths, Concealed

Historians will have much to revisit when Iran is no longer under the grip of the Tehran regime. Credible sources will record that before Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September 1980, Khomeini and his fellow clerics were calling for the overthrow of Saddam, whom they mocked as the “son of Satan”, and over 100 attacks took place inside Iraq as Khomeini

proclaimed religious sovereignty over Shia holy sites from “Karbala to Qods”. Former Saudi Intelligence Director and diplomat Prince Turki al-Faisal has said that in his first year, Khomeini also denounced the Muslim monarchies as “un-Islamic” while supporting sectarian separatists in the Kingdom’s Eastern Province. After Iraq invaded, Khomeini knew he was obtaining weapons from Israel, and pressed for the transactions to go forward even while publicly demonizing Israel. Despite his pious demeanor, Khomeini’s actions were those of a man consumed with the cultivation of temporal power.

When MEK supporters went to the front lines in September 1980 to defend Iran against the Iraqi attack, the clerics pulled them back to avoid their gaining public credit, and thereafter promoted the toxic allegation that the MEK had fought on Iraq’s side in the war – a falsehood that some in the US continue to repeat today. Some MEK members defending Iran were captured by Iraq as prisoners of war (POWs), and held until the war’s end, like all Iranian POWs. These prisoners were the only MEK in Iraq for years, until France expelled MEK residents in 1986 as Tehran’s price for releasing French hostages in Lebanon. Iraq was an acceptable destination, being one country where MOIS assassins could not easily operate. Whether or not, as the MEK says, it paid the Iraqi government for the weapons it obtained the following year, the resistance group had its own agenda. By the time the MEK’s “national liberation army” crossed into Iran and maneuvered toward Tehran, believing the regime was vulnerable to collapse, a UN-mediated cease-fire was in effect between the two countries, and Iraqi forces did not engage.

Iran had driven out Iraqi forces and recovered all of its territory by mid-1982, and Khomeini received repeated appeals to cooperate with mediation that would have ended the war, exchanged POWs, and reconfirmed international borders. He refused them all. Instead, he bled his country’s manpower and wealth for several years thereafter, using the state of emergency to enforce regime loyalty at home, purging universities, and systematically arresting and imprisoning suspected political dissidents, male and female, including children. The total number of Iranians executed for suspected political sympathies in the early years of the Islamic Republic is almost certainly in the many tens of thousands. Combined with Iran’s

war dead in the years after Khomeini could have ended the conflict honorably, the gratuitous toll of his stewardship as Iran's leader will turn out to be very high.

Khomeini was in decline in 1988 when he ordered the mass execution of 30,000 political prisoners in jails throughout the country. Most were MEK, and others were secular leftists. Some had completed their sentences; none faced a death sentence. Regime officials sat on three-judge panels in several cities, querying each prisoner as to his or her political loyalties, and sending most to their immediate deaths. A UN envoy pursued rumors of the killings at the time, but Iran denied the allegation. Evidentiary proof has since come to light, and the UN in 2021 is examining this barbaric crime against humanity.

This, too, was a pivotal event in Iran's modern history. Even if mass-murdering thousands of dissidents extended the tenure of the regime, which one assumes was Khomeini's calculation, it led Khomeini to make a fateful tradeoff, prioritizing security over religious legitimacy. Iran's most eminent cleric, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, was the designated successor to Khomeini as the Supreme Leader. But Montazeri's repeated appeals to Khomeini to stop the massacre, documented in writings and audio recordings that have since come to light, infuriated the ailing Khomeini, and led him to bypass the Grand Marja and designate instead the regime stalwart Ali Khamenei as the next Supreme Leader. Khamenei, at the time a Hojatoleslam who was quickly elevated in religious rank, had in October 1981 been "elected" to the Presidency after the reign of terror was underway, one of only four candidates deemed sufficiently loyal; 42 others were disqualified from appearing on the ballot.

When Terrorism and Nuclear Proliferation Spell Weakness

After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the new Imam lacked the religious stature – the charisma – of his famous predecessor. It was the perceived need to compensate for this sudden deficit in revolutionary Iran's influence across the Shia world, and not traditional national security calculations, that some scholars believe led the regime to commence Iran's

secret nuclear program in the 1990s. The new Supreme Leader also evidently found it expedient to signal to the world that he, too, was capable of dispensing aggression and ruling by intimidation.

On his authority, Iran in the early-to-mid 1990s staged the two largest terror bombings in Argentina's history, the machine-gun killing of four Iranian Kurdish separatist leaders in Berlin's Mykonos restaurant, the assassination of Ambassador Kazem Rajavi in Geneva, the killing of former Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar and his secretary in a Paris suburb, attacks on translators of Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses in Norway, Turkey, Italy, and Japan (killing the Japanese translator), a missile attack against the MEK's main residential camp in Iraq in violation of the UN-backed cease-fire, the terror bombing of Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, that killed 19 US airmen, and similar assaults on international peace and security. None had any connection to a national security threat against Iran's population or territory.

The international community welcomed the election as President in 1997 of Mohammed Khatami, even though 98.4 percent of registered candidates – 234 of 238 – had been excluded from the ballot. The Clinton Administration State Department, without consulting with the FBI, designated the MEK as a foreign terrorist organization in what it acknowledged was a political gesture to the new Iranian President. Even if Khatami was a reform-minded cleric, seeking to pursue a "dialogue of civilizations", this did not stop "rogue" intelligence operatives from carrying out the gruesome killing of dissident writers in Iran, continuing a decade-long spree of so-called "chain murders" to suppress free expression at home.

In July 1999, student protests against the closure of a pro-Khatami newspaper escalated after police raided Tehran University and violently attacked students, throwing some off of the upper balconies of their dormitories and arresting over 1,000. As several tens of thousands protested in Tehran, *The Economist* speculated that this could be Iran's second revolution. While Khatami was awarded a second term in 2001, with 817 – 98.8 percent – of registered candidates kept off the ballot, Iran was pursuing covert nuclear enrichment activities; two secret nuclear sites

were exposed in 2002 by the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the political umbrella group affiliated with the MEK. Neither multilateral diplomacy with Tehran nor International Atomic Energy Agency inspections satisfied international concern about Iran's nuclear intentions.

When, in 2011, Tehran signaled its potential readiness to enter a multinational negotiation to consider curbs on its nuclear program, the prevailing assumption was that economic sanctions had become unbearable and the regime was yielding to western pressure. While undoubtedly the economic burden of sanctions, and the limitations imposed by UN Security Council resolutions, were restraints from which Tehran badly wanted to be freed, the regime's more recent defiance of President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign suggests that other equities are more important to the clerics than the health of Iran's economy. Assets held by religious foundations controlled by the Supreme Leader, in any case, have been estimated in the many tens of billions of dollars, wholly apart from the government's finances. What could have been more important than the nuclear weapons program?

Syria – the Strategic Achilles Heel

Observers of Iran's heavy investment of funds and manpower in Syria, including many Qods Force and Revolutionary Guards commanders killed or wounded since 2011, have pointed to Iran's ambition to establish an overland bridge from its western border to the Mediterranean, better enabling the regime to sustain Hezbollah and its capacity to threaten Israel. While true, that is neither the complete, nor even primary, explanation for Iran's extraordinary sacrifice in Syria which, for the Tehran regime, was profoundly defensive in nature. Policy discussions about the desirability of removing Iran's presence from Syria as part of any formula to defuse that country's civil war require a deeper understanding of why it leapt to the defense of the secular Alawite autocrat in the first place.

As with so much of Iran's external behavior, no answer is adequate without considering its internal situation. Writing in the spring of 2005, Bernard Lewis noted that the Tehran regime was becoming "increasingly

unpopular”, stating, “There are many indications in Iran of a rising tide of discontent. Some seek radical change in the form of a return to the past; others, by far the larger number, place their hopes in the coming of true democracy”. Soon afterward, in 2009, the outpouring of Iranians into the streets of Tehran to protest electoral fraud benefiting President Ahmadinejad shook the regime, which responded with mass arrests and incarceration of suspected agitators.

As the Arab Spring spread eastward from Tunisia and Egypt to Syria in 2011, the specter of an internationally-mediated transition to legitimate constitutional governance in Syria, at a time when Iraq was pursuing its own representative constitutional process, posed an existential risk to the Islamic Republic, with its own youthful population increasingly alienated from fundamentalism, and many rallying behind the Green Movement until it – like the MEK – was suppressed.

Early in the Syrian civil war, Iran’s clerics were reported to have warned internally that should Damascus fall, they could not hold Tehran. In a House of Representatives subcommittee hearing on April 15, 2021, one Member of Congress, a 12-year US Army veteran, said he had personally tracked Iranian Revolutionary Guards in 130 bases across Syria. Tehran’s exorbitant commitment to rescue the embattled Assad regime was a ‘war of necessity’ for Ayatollah Khamenei and his Qods Force. What too few in Washington appear to have grasped was that the regime whose end the Tehran clerics were so desperate to prevent was not that of Bashar al Assad, but their own. Iran has arguably been the main beneficiary of American hesitancy to acknowledge the geopolitical impacts of Syria’s decade-long crisis. Syria policy is inseparable from Iran policy.

When Charm Becomes Offensive

As Iranian and P5+1 officials convened, starting in early 2013, the spirit was collegial. President Obama told the UN General Assembly in September, “[I]f we can resolve the issue of Iran’s nuclear program, that can serve as a major step down a long road towards a different relationship, one based on mutual interests and mutual respect”. To undo

UN sanctions restricting its freedom of action around the world, Iran was willing to accept restraints on its nuclear program. Newly-elected President Hassan Rouhani was widely touted as a reformer, embodying the hopes and carrying the popular mandate of Iran's long-suffering population. Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif became a familiar presence on western media, his excellent command of English used to good effect in media interviews in foreign capitals, and in disarmingly appealing YouTube videos and posts on Twitter and other social media platforms.

With diplomats and their governments focused on steps that eventually produced the JCPOA, President Assad created a diversion in Syria to halt the momentum of the UN-mandated Geneva II process, which called for a transition to a new, legitimate Syrian government to be formed under a "new constitutional order". Assad released prisoners and let foreign fighters into the country, turning ISIS into a major new Sunni terrorist threat, against which he then appealed for help. As New Zealand academic William Harris noted, "few arsonists have ever paraded so impudently as firemen".

The virtual US Embassy reported that Assad's government was purchasing oil from ISIS, and security analysts speculated that the Syrian Army, in abandoning positions overrun by ISIS fighters, might be deliberately resupplying them. Meanwhile, Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and other regime-funded Shia militias waged war on the Syrian population, their ground operations coordinated with Syrian and later Russian air forces targeting civilian populations and humanitarian sites, in what many now regard as war crimes.

In Iraq, Qods Force commander General Qasem Soleimani found a ready ally in Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had lived in Iran for eight years after the 1979 revolution and led the Dawa party's armed wing, overseeing units that became part of the Qods Force when it was created in 1990. Starting in 2009, elite elements of the Prime Minister's security services staged repeated lethal attacks on MEK members resident in Iraq, at times using US-supplied defense equipment. These defenseless men and women had been individually vetted in 2003 by US intelligence and law enforcement teams, and each had been granted Protected Persons status

by the US under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

While Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's influence was decisive in the MEK's agreement in 2011 to relocate to a cramped trailer park at Baghdad Airport controlled by Maliki's forces, a leading UN representative in Iraq revealed that five meetings with UNAMI and Iraqi officials to coordinate the numbers and timing of the MEK's move had been held in Iran's embassy in Baghdad. A total of 140 MEK were killed, with seven abducted and over 1000 wounded, in seven attacks by Maliki's special units or Iran-backed Shia militias, until the residents were relocated by the UN to Albania in 2016.

Inside Iran, President Rouhani broke his campaign promise to release Green Movement leader Mir Hossein Mousavi from house arrest within one year; he remains under house arrest in 2021. Human rights organizations repeatedly condemned the epidemic of arbitrary executions in Rouhani's Iran, the highest per-capita rate in the world. With his departure from office drawing near, the State Department's 2020 human rights report, released on March 30, 2021, featured a litany of horrific abuses by the government, from "forced disappearance and torture by government agents" to "harsh and life-threatening prison conditions", to "the worst forms of child labor", and much more. That uprisings erupted in over 140 cities and towns across Iran, beginning in December 2017 with the JCPOA still in effect, should have surprised no one.

Western media took no notice that Rouhani's cabinet included as Ministers Mustafa Pourmohammadi and later Alireza Avayi, both of whom had served on "death panels" conducting the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners. Current Justice Minister and recent presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi played a leading role in the 1988 massacre. Rouhani's first Defense Minister, Hossein Daghani, had been in 1982 the IRGC point man who initiated training of Hezbollah recruits in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and oversaw the bombings of the US Embassy, the Marine Barracks, the building housing French peacekeepers, and the US Embassy Annex in Beirut. At least two of these men are possible choices to be Iran's next President. With the Supreme Leader, they and others share a common history of personal complicity in the regime's most brutal acts, dating to its

earliest days in 1979, when Hassan Rouhani handled enforcement within the Army of Khomeini's new mandatory hijab requirement for women.

From the moment the JCPOA entered into force in January 2016, Iran made clear that it had higher priorities than accommodating President Obama's hopeful vision of improved relations. Secretary of State John Kerry seemed confident that the Iranians would accept a new arrangement to dial back the sudden series of ballistic missile tests by the IRGC, until the Foreign and Defense Ministers, respectively, termed his objection "baseless" and "nonsense".

Well before President Trump announced the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo listed 12 demands as the conditions for a normal relationship, the regime had escalated military pressures throughout the region. Hundreds of missile attacks were launched against populated areas in Saudi Arabia by the Houthi militia in Yemen; 150 have been confirmed already in 2021. Iran never stopped shipping weapons and fighters into Syria, despite Israeli attacks. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, in a televised speech on March 31, 2021 amid Lebanon's deepening crisis, confirmed his principal role as Tehran's agent, announcing that Iran "will not give (Biden) what it did not give to Trump during the peak of pressure".

Iranian attacks on international shipping in the Gulf, its seizure of ship crews, its sanctions-defying arms and oil shipments, its missile attacks – directly or through Shia militia – against Saudi targets and US personnel at bases in Iraq, and like provocations, continued an exhausting stream of lawless acts threatening international peace and security, many carried out in a manner meant to conceal Tehran's controlling hand.

Minister Zarif and Tehran's agents of influence in the West earned their keep by repeatedly questioning who could possibly have done these things, and denying Iran's involvement. The revelation by Israel in 2018 that Iran had preserved all of its nuclear weapons documentation, and the 2019 televised admission by Ali Akbar Salehi that Iran had used deceptive measures to preserve the capability of the heavy water reactor at Arak, illustrated – if any reminder was needed – the limits of trust in any dealings

with Iran, including on nuclear matters.

As with all of post-1979 Iranian history, when one asks why the regime acted this way, the better insight is likely to be found in reference to its declining political fortunes. These outward displays of revolutionary vigor took place as the regime was beset at home with protests, mishaps including shooting down – and then misleading the world about – a Ukrainian passenger airline with 167 on board including 63 Canadian victims, a looming environmental crisis, a negligent national pandemic response, and an economy that experts say would be weak even without the Trump “maximum pressure” campaign. The sight of Pope Francis humbly walking through Najaf’s narrow alleyways to visit Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Al-Husayni Al-Sistani at his residence during his March 2021 visit to Iraq vividly underscored the comparatively anemic aura among Shia Muslims of Iran’s Supreme Leader.

The author does not fault past US leaders for testing Iranian intentions and probing possibilities for changed behavior. However, after several such tests, the most recent being President Obama’s generous overture, the conclusion is inescapable: notwithstanding the camaraderie forged among diplomats at the JCPOA negotiating table, the 2015 accord did not signal any departure from Iran’s hostility to US and allied interests, and its malignant influence on the international order.

The Leading State Sponsor of Terrorism, Unmasked

To the contrary, it is now confirmed that in March of 2018, with the US still complying with the JCPOA, Iranian government agents were arrested in Albania before they could stage an attack on Ashraf 3, the MEK residential campus outside of Tirana. Albania expelled the Iranian Ambassador and a second ‘diplomat’. It was but one of many recent episodes in Europe that saw authorities in Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Germany, and Austria as well as Albania take enforcement actions against Iranian terrorist activities on their soil, even as Foreign Minister Zarif generated a headline-grabbing smokescreen of ministerial bonhomie in Europe’s capitals.

TATP, or tri-acetone tri-peroxide – the chemistry used in two small bombs that had destroyed a Brussels Airport departure area in March 2016 – was used to create a “very professional” bomb that could be detonated from a distance of hundreds of meters, according to the verdict issued by a 3-judge court in Antwerp, Belgium on February 4, 2021. Remotely detonated by a police robot designed for this purpose, the bomb destroyed the robot and the blast damaged a special police vehicle parked at a distance along the safety perimeter.

Asadollah Assadi, an Iranian intelligence officer, was handed a 20-year sentence, and three accomplices received lengthy jail terms as well, for their foiled attempt to bomb the annual Iranian resistance rally, held north of Paris on June 30, 2018. Had the operation not been intercepted, Iran would have staged a mass-casualty event on French soil, potentially harming not only leading resistance figures but former Prime Ministers, cabinet ministers, and senior military leaders from several countries including the US.

The court said that Assadi, although accredited as a diplomat at Iran’s embassy in Vienna, was in fact an agent working for Department 312 of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, the “directorate dealing with the Iranian opposition abroad”. “MOIS and specifically its department 312”, said the court, “are responsible for several assassination attempts...in Europe against leaders or prominent figures of the Iranian opposition”. Two defendants testified that “in order to secure their cooperation, the Iranian intelligence service MOIS used threats to their Iranian families...and also paid the defendants for the information they provided” over a period of years. Assadi “abused the diplomatic status to commit terrorist crimes”. The bomb, said the court, was made in Iran. “It was fine-tuned there and tested several times” before being “transported in a diplomatic suitcase on a regularly scheduled flight between Tehran and Vienna”.

Americans of a certain age are not unaccustomed to Iran’s unique attitude toward diplomatic privileges and immunities. Its abuse of sovereign rights continues unabated, including using the diplomatic pouch, embassy facilities, and diplomatic status in capitals around the world, so that

intelligence operatives can extort and compromise exiles while threatening their relatives inside Iran, and stage attacks against political opponents living abroad. Mr. Zarif's ministry may well be the prime enabler of Tehran's global terrorism. The Foreign Minister of any other country, given the same revelations, would face an avalanche of official and media demands for an explanation.

Instead, readers of *Foreign Affairs* in January of this year found themselves being lectured by Minister Zarif, who warned the US not to "continue down the path of disdain for international cooperation and international law...." A week later, on January 29, a bomb exploded outside Israel's embassy in New Delhi; Indian counter-terrorism officials reportedly concluded that despite its effort to plant "false flag" indicators pointing to ISIS, the Iranian Qods Force had staged the attack, working with a local Indian Shia cell.

Standing for Shared Values and Interests: Five Ways to Reverse the Pressure

Can observers, at long last, agree that the Iranian regime's forty-two-year pattern of activity at home and abroad is different from that of other countries, including hostile and "rogue" states? And that President Trump was mistaken when, during a May 2019 visit to Japan, he claimed that Iran "has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership"? So inured to the immorality and unacceptability of Iranian behavior have many become that its nonstop assault on international norms – including holding four American hostages today – is wearily dismissed as an effort to build negotiating leverage for any new nuclear transaction with the US and others.

Writing in 2005, Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh asserted that Iran's leaders needed to recognize that they face "a stark choice – they can have nuclear weapons or a healthy economy, but not both...." Sixteen years later, the Biden Administration must contend with a regime that gives every appearance of believing it can have both. Despite Iran's artful geopolitical gaslighting, backed by a veritable choir of commentators advising that the US is to blame for poor relations and should concede its leverage in the face of nuclear blackmail, it is the regime in Tehran, not the US, that lacks

options. Accelerating a nuclear weapons proliferation threat and offering it as trade bait in the hope that all sanctions will be lifted is their plan. They have no Plan B.

While Iran's apologists abound, there can be no apology for the indefensible. As the US is recommitting to upholding a rules-based international order, Iran daily expresses its revolutionary *raison d'être* by destabilizing actions that serially target American interests. With or without the JCPOA, President Biden needs a strategy to address these non-nuclear concerns, one that will find favor on both sides of the political aisle and unite rather than divide our allies. However the current talks turn out, there are ways that the US and allies can stand for shared values and exert leverage against the various dangers emanating from Iran. Here are five such initiatives.

First, end the West's silence about the fraudulent and cynical façade of democracy promoted in Iran's presidential elections. No presidential election since January 1980 has seen more than 8.7 percent of legally registered candidates survive loyalty vetting by the Supreme Leader's offices and appear on the ballot. Hassan Rouhani and his fellow competitors on the 2013 ballot represented 1.2 percent of the registered candidates, 678 aspirants having been disqualified. In 2017, voters were offered 0.4 percent of the 1,636 filers who sought to run for President. The US and other governments should warn Ali Khamenei against hand-picking as the next President a veteran loyalist with the copious blood of Iranian citizens, and perhaps American and allied nationals, on his hands.

The Biden Administration has spoken out about democratic rights being curtailed in Hong Kong, electoral irregularities in Belarus, and the military's usurping of the people's will in Burma. Washington should pay attention to Iran's managed elections, speak out about those candidates selected to run, question the validity of claimed voter turnout, and let the Iranian people know how their process measures up against democratic principles. Iranians watched the 2020 US election, and saw Americans and their empowered institutions painstakingly revalidate their electoral choice despite heavy pressure from the highest office-holder to alter it. By shining a spotlight on Iran's effort to placate its restive population with a

manipulated ritual of political participation, the US and fellow democracies would show regard for the countless Iranian citizens whose wishes the June election is profoundly unlikely to reflect.

Second, announce a comprehensive counter-intelligence investigation to identify unregistered foreign agents of Iran and other agents of influence in the US, some of whom may be facing threats to themselves or their relatives within Iran, or receiving monetary compensation through front organizations, or both. Recent events have shown that Tehran's influence operations in the US, Canada and Europe have been sophisticated and effective. The US Government should be able to confirm the suspicion that outspoken Iranian critics of the regime living in the US, whose views, being more negative, are deemed more credible, may have received assurances that the MOIS will leave them and their relatives alone so long as they direct 20 percent of their criticism at the MEK and NCRI – the so-called '80:20 rule'.

On January 19, 2021, US Department of Justice attorneys announced the arrest of Kaveh Afrisiabi, a "secret employee" of the government of Iran who, "for over a decade...pitched himself to Congress, journalists, and the American public as a neutral and objective expert on Iran", according to the DOJ announcement. In February 2019, Canadian authorities arrested a money-laundering network including seven Iranians whose operations ran through Iran and involved the use of several Iranian-owned foreign exchange bureaus. After decades during which the Alavi Foundation posed as an independent entity promoting cultural understanding in the US, funding study programs in top American universities among other activities, the Southern District of New York confiscated a building it owned in Manhattan after a major 2017 court case confirmed that it is a front for Iran's Central Bank. Freedom of speech allows for all views to be heard in the US, but Americans deserve to know when a speaker's independence has been compromised by a hostile foreign power.

Third, initiate with allies a comprehensive human rights investigation of Iranian officials believed to be implicated in previous major acts of terror abroad and crimes against humanity at home. Such an initiative will unite allied governments on an Iran policy issue, reflecting as it does core

principles shared by the advanced democracies. At a time when western leaders have embraced the case of imprisoned Russian dissident Alexei Navalny, sanctions have been levied against Bashar al Assad for his torture and murder of protesting Syrian citizens, and intelligence findings have been released regarding the assessed role of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, surely Iran merits no less scrutiny.

For decades now, the Tehran regime's jails have been filled with Persian "Alexei Navalnys", male and female, and unmarked graves have been dug to hold the remains of tens of thousands of dissident Persian "Jamal Khashoggis", the only distinction being their obscurity. Survivors of Iran's torture chambers, including witnesses to the 1988 massacre, can offer personal testimony at the MEK campus outside of Tirana, Albania, with detailed exhibits to illustrate the chilling abuses inflicted on them. Non-governmental human rights experts could be deputized by the US and allies to document and assess the evidence.

Regime figures who authorized, planned, and directed major atrocities are still in power. They deserve no less justice than, for example, leaders in the former Yugoslavia who faced accountability for their crimes against humanity. Proceeding with prosecutions, even in absentia, would signal that the US and other advanced democracies stand for universal principles in Iran as elsewhere. The Iranian people could only benefit from the resulting stigma and isolation of top regime figures who have survived in power by criminally suppressing them.

Fourth, as the Biden Administration has stepped up diplomatic horsepower to defuse ongoing or potential conflicts in several geographies, it should proceed with the recognition that resolving the conflicts in Syria and Yemen would confer strategic leverage on the Iran threat. It is laudable that President Biden assigned a top diplomat, Special Envoy Tim Lenderking, to press for a political solution to the conflict in Yemen, facing an urgent humanitarian crisis. In Syria, many regional concerns inform US calculations. But none may be more consequential than the impact on Iran should UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the June 2012 Geneva II Final Communique, mandating a transition to legitimate, "genuinely democratic" government in Syria, be fulfilled.

Not only would a legitimate constitutional government in Damascus be the most likely path to durable stability, encouraging foreign pledges for reconstruction and the willing return of millions of Syrians forced to flee Assad's barrel bombs and chemical attacks; and not only would it represent a triumph for international norms and institutions, and a decisive defeat for the Syrian, Iranian and Russian actors who advanced their narrow self-interest by deliberately targeting urban populations and hospitals. More even than these accomplishments, it would be a nail in the coffin for Khomeini's dystopian dream of a transnational Shia empire submitting to the authority of the Supreme Leader of Iran.

It would deny the operational blueprint pursued throughout the Levant by the late Qasem Soleimani and his successor, give Lebanon the political breathing room to enact needed reforms, relieve Israel of the growing threat to the north, and reduce Iraq's vulnerability to regional forces of instability. An empowered diplomatic effort in Syria, as with Yemen, would thus carry the potential to rob the Tehran clerics of their principal claim of authority over the Iranian state.

Fifth, as Members of Congress in both parties criticize continued reliance on the outdated 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF), Iran presents President Biden with an opportunity to establish his command presence at home and abroad, and enhance deterrence, by proposing an updated AUMF. He should make explicit what American politicians across the ideological spectrum have been pledging for years, namely that Iran will not be allowed to have the bomb. Such a commitment, formalized as the centerpiece of a new AUMF, would be difficult for legislators in either party to oppose.

Moreover, having announced plans to withdraw US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, the President needs to confirm his authority to defend US and allied interests against threats from the Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and similar terrorist groups from "over the horizon". Self-defensive strikes against Iranian-backed Shia militias should be authorized; since Iran's pattern is to deny responsibility for proxy attacks on US forces, in line with its 'gray zone' tactics, Tehran should have no grounds to complain.

In sum, President Biden should ask Congress to approve a new AUMF whose most notable feature is a doctrinal vow that the United States will use all necessary means, including military force, to ensure that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon, should diplomacy fail. Critics would be hard-pressed to explain why the goal of nuclear diplomacy with Iran should not be formalized in a national commitment. Israel would see that potentially escalatory unilateral steps are not its only defense against the Iran nuclear threat. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would feel less impetus to hedge against Iran's proliferation with destabilizing nuclear moves of their own. Within Iranian leadership circles, a Biden Doctrine would dispel any notion that they can, again, persuade the US to lift sanctions without having to give up the option of becoming a nuclear weapons state in the future.

Conclusion: Whither the JCPOA?

And what of the JCPOA itself? On May 8, 2018, at the invitation of then-Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Republican Ed Royce, the author testified that "I share the President's concerns about Iran but respectfully submit that withdrawal from the JCPOA is neither the only nor the best way to address them". Within a few hours, this advice had been overtaken by President Trump's announced withdrawal. All of the foregoing initiatives could have served as an alternative to the unilateral path pursued by the Trump administration, which left the US so isolated on Iran issues that the UN Security Council, on August 14, 2020, was willing to let the UN's conventional arms embargo on Iran lapse rather than vote with Washington. The US resolution gained only 2 yes votes out of 15.

The Biden team is right to place a priority on repairing frayed relations with allies, the better to address shared challenges with their combined weight. Pandemics and climate change are not the only issues beyond the effective control of any one country. Fundamentalist Iran's blight on the world is now into its fifth decade. Even if mutual compliance with the JCPOA is restored, and even if discussions explore potential follow-on agreements to extend nuclear restraints and consider non-nuclear issues,

the “Khomeinist cancer”, to borrow Prince Turki’s term, remains.

With Washington’s sometimes skewed perspective on Iran, a critical historical view and call to action such as the foregoing might be seen as an exercise in pessimism, as giving up on the hope for a better US-Iran future. The beginning of wisdom will be to recognize that it is the very opposite.

Lincoln Bloomfield Jr. served as a US Special Envoy, Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs among other policy positions in five previous administrations.

Note on Sources: In this essay, the author has drawn on personal experience, including from his time in government beginning in 1981, as well as extensive research and review of open-source materials. His writings and testimony include the following:

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