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## **Iran Could Collapse. Here's What America Should Do**

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Iran in Full Crack Down Mode: What Can Americans Do to Help?: The Iranian regime daily displays its brutal cruelty. Last year the clerical regime eliminated all but the last vestiges of choice from its always tightly constricted electoral system, effectively selecting Ebrahim Raisi, a legal officer and jurist most noted for his role years ago in the mass execution of political prisoners.

Iran: A Regime in Trouble?

Today his regime is waging war on its own people. It believes it has no choice but to do so, since an increasing number of Iranians, and especially the young, want to end the oppressive dictatorship.

In July, the authorities launched a campaign against unveiled women. Resistance was strong and two months later 22-year-old Mahsa Amini was killed while in police custody. The streets exploded, as protests spread across the country. Universities erupted, shops closed, and athletes resisted. The demonstrations have morphed into a broader movement to overthrow the political tyranny erected 44 years ago after the ouster the US-backed dictator, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Power is held by clerical and militarized elites. The former is led by so-called "Supreme Leader" Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, in power for more than three decades. The regime's mailed fist is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, more important than any unit in the regular armed forces. Power rather than faith appears to be the regime's strongest motivation.

There have been largescale protests before, most notably after the 2009 presidential election, which was widely seen as stolen. Although the current movement so far lacks the breadth of support

likely necessary to topple the regime, the demonstrations nevertheless pose a significant challenge to the reigning autocracy. Noted the International Crisis Group:

“One would be hard-pressed to recall a period in recent years when the Islamic Republic was concurrently facing such a durable anti-regime movement internally, and such concerted diplomatic pressure from abroad. The protests that erupted following the death of Mahsa Amini in September remain a potent and determined series of events that the state’s heavy-handed response has failed to quell, while prompting an international response that, along with nuclear intransigence and military cooperation with Russia, now constitute three strikes increasingly placing Tehran out in the international cold. The Iranian government’s response appears inclined to double down on suppressing the protests, but coercion may well instead end up fanning further unrest.”

As of mid-November, there had been nearly 1300 protests, concentrated in Tehran but spanning much of the country. More than 400 demonstrators, some 50 children, have been killed. Perhaps out of desperation at having lost the rising generation, “the Islamic Republic is unleashing its wrath on its youth in ways and on a scale not seen during other protests that have rocked the country over the past two decades, the rights groups say.” Some three score members of the security forces also have died. Many protestors have been injured, often seriously, such as being blinded from rubber bullets or metal pellets. Nearly 18,000 protestors have been detained.

The regime also has turned to judicial murder to intimidate the Iranian people. According to Amnesty International: “The Iranian authorities are seeking the death penalty for at least 21 people in sham trials by Revolutionary Courts designed to further repress the popular uprising ... and to instill fear among the public. The 21 individuals have been referred to trial on capital charges in connection with protests, amid disturbing calls by Iranian officials to rush proceedings and execute them in public.”

#### How Should America Help Iran?

The Iranian protestors, often led by young women, have garnered global sympathy. President Joe Biden even promised to “free Iran.” But how? What should the US and similarly-minded nations do to help?

The Biden administration has turned to Washington’s standby, sanctions. After security forces launched a concerted attack in Kurdish regions (Amini was Kurdish) in late November, the Treasury Department penalized three local officials.

Explained the agency: “As a result of today’s action, all property and interests in property of these persons that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons must be blocked and reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked. OFAC regulations generally prohibit all dealings by U.S. persons or within the United States (including transactions transiting the United States) that involve any property or interests in property of blocked or designated persons.”

Seemingly pleased with its effort, Treasury cited the “power” of its sanctions, the objective of which “is not to punish, but to bring about a positive change in behavior.” The problem, of course, is that these measures are unlikely to do either.

The three Iranians targeted were a governor, IRGC commander, and Law Enforcement Forces leader. Discreditable thugs no doubt, but not likely holding assets in America. Or doing business

with Americans. Or carrying out financial transactions with banks dealing with American financial institutions. Which means the sanctions will have no practical impact.

Imposing them might seem harmless, but overuse of sanctions has drained them of much of their value. Over the years Washington has hit Tehran with multiple rounds of economic penalties. The US targeted Iran's nuclear program, regional interventions, and domestic oppression. Biden had already added his own. Yet after decades of economic war little has changed.

Along the way the Islamic Republic grew resilient. Iranians developed illicit foreign business relationships, adapted the economy to US restrictions, and turned political influence into financial enrichment. The regime actively intervened in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, and moved closer to achieving nuclear threshold status. Hardline elements solidified their control over the political system. All this has been done while under increasingly tough sanctions. The Trump administration ostentatiously launched a full-scale economic offensive while seeking the previous government's de facto surrender but lost disastrously. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ended up threatening to close the US embassy since the administration could not protect US facilities from attacks by local Iran-backed militias. Intimidated by Washington Tehran was not.

If not sanctions, then what? War would be horrendous: Iran is an ancient country, not a recent amalgam, has thrice the population of Iraq, and possesses the ability to strike back asymmetrically, destabilizing its neighbors and the Gulf. The Iranian people would be the primary victims of any US attack, and many would likely rally around their government. Most important, Americans are rightly tired of foolish and unnecessary conflicts wasting their lives and money.

There might be practical aid that could be extended to protestors, such as providing communications equipment, but actively backing what is seen as an attempt to overthrow the regime would raise the stakes dramatically. Such activities would remind all Iranians of past US interventions—which were mounted for the benefit of the US government, not the Iranian people. Moreover, the regime might use its local allies to retaliate against American and allied forces in the region. Far better for private groups and companies, such as technology firms, to do what they can without Washington's involvement.

Uncle Sam can use—and has been using—the bully pulpit, and in cooperation with friendly states should continue to press international bodies to investigate and criticize. In fact, under allied pressure the UN Human Rights Council in special session agreed to launch an investigation. Such support might strengthen protestors' resolve. NGOs and other civil society institutions also should continue organizing their own protests to increase pressure on and scrutiny of the Iran authorities. Such efforts are useful—though it is important not to mislead the Iranian people into expecting outside aid.

Unfortunately, talking alone is unlikely to change the system, especially since the Iranian regime knows that its existence may be at stake. Indeed, the Islamic Republic will attempt to use any involvement of the US government, which spent seven decades interfering in Iranian affairs, to bolster its charge that protestors are being manipulated by foreigners. Even if the claim is risible to Americans, appeals to nationalism help bolster regime support.

Washington is likely to be most successful if it exercises humility for a change, difficult though that may be. America's attempts to engage in social engineering around the world, even after going

to war, ousting governments, and occupying nations, have recently proved disastrous. Ultimately, only the Iranian people can sort out their political future.

American officials should adopt the Hippocratic Oath as their lead: first do no harm. It was the US which backed the overthrow of Iranian democracy in the 1953 coup, the Shah's tyrannical rule for a quarter century, and Saddam Hussein's murderous aggression against Iran. (Who can forget Donald Rumsfeld's infamous handshake with Hussein in Baghdad!) A US ship shot down an Iranian airliner and to this day Washington backs Tehran's regional rivals, especially the equally dictatorial Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini regimes, no matter how criminal their activities.

And America's democratic reputation remains poor in the Middle East. The Persian Gulf monarchies along with Egypt are highly repressive. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are actually rated worse than Iran; the other two score marginally better. US human rights claims are seen as political ploys rather than principled beliefs. A genuine mea culpa might give future US efforts greater credibility.

However, recognition of the limits of Washington's influence should not yield indifference. The Iranian people are suffering from terrible attacks by their own government. Americans and others of good will should do what they can to help. The Iranian people deserve to be free.

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