



The Preeminent Challenge

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The biggest foreign-policy challenge before Donald Trump isn't North Korea, where the usual pattern of diplomacy and deception persists. Nor is it Russia; it doesn't have the muscle to take on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which isn't dead yet. Nor is the most imminent problem China, which doesn't have the navy and air force to tempt fate in the South and East China Seas. It will one day *really* challenge the United States and East Asia's democratic and anti-Chinese authoritarian states—the type of fascist confrontation that could lead to carnage—but Washington probably has years to check Beijing's ambitions.

The most troublesome, immediate challenge comes from Iran. Trump's decision to walk away from his predecessor's deeply flawed arms-control agreement will likely soon consume the administration's attention since, depending on what the mullahs do, war may once more be on the horizon. If the president fails to corral the clerics and the Revolutionary Guards through sanctions and the threat of force, the reverberations will surely weaken, if not gut, the administration's capacity to play hardball elsewhere. Barack Obama punted the Iranian nuclear problem down the road slightly (and didn't really pivot to Asia). Trump has probably eliminated the possibility of punting. He now may have to deal with Iran more decisively than his predecessors.

So far, the administration has developed a somewhat contradictory yet potentially successful Iran policy. The White House has all the elements of a regime-change strategy despite its denials; yet Donald Trump aspires to new nuclear negotiations, even suggesting a meeting could take place with Iranian president Hassan Rouhani without prerequisites. Some have called this Reaganesque. After all, Ronald Reagan sought the end of the Soviet empire. "While we must be cautious about forcing the pace of change [inside the Soviet bloc], we must not hesitate to declare our ultimate objectives and to take concrete actions to move toward them," he declared at Westminster in 1982. "It is time that we committed ourselves as a nation—in both the public and private sectors—to assisting democratic development." Putting "Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history" clearly meant regime change in Mother Russia. Yet Reagan welcomed nuclear talks with an array of Soviet leaders, from Leonid Brezhnev to Mikhail Gorbachev.

Can Donald Trump tailor-make an approach to an Iran that is suffering from many of the same kind of authoritarian afflictions that the Soviet Union did in the 1980s? Can he, his senior staff, and the essential worker bees understand enough Iranian history—its peoples' long quest for representative government—to realize that what Reagan envisioned for the Soviet empire is applicable to the Islamic Republic? Reagan's vision—"The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means"—is within reach in Persia if the clerical regime starts cracking. Iran is an empire that has, at least at its core, become a coherent nation-state. It carries many of the Middle East's cultural liabilities, but it manifestly isn't a land of tribes and oil wells. That it had the Muslim world's only Islamic revolution 39 years ago is actually an enormous asset in its continuing religious and political evolution. Unlike most Muslims, Iranian Shiites and Sunnis know what it's like to live in a theocracy. Most have found it wanting.

Post-Iraq, post-Afghanistan, the primary American question is whether Washington's political elite is capable of imagining interventionism. A successful regime-change approach isn't likely if one doesn't really believe, as Reagan did, that American aid to those seeking freedom is both good and strategic. The loss of faith in this idea within the United States is profound and dovetails with an analysis that depicts the Middle East as no longer a compelling strategic theater (killer drones and American military bases in Bahrain and Qatar can handle the post-9/11 threat and the oil of the Persian Gulf). Even the Iranian nuclear quest doesn't disturb this mindset. The Iraq syndrome has convinced the foreign-policy establishment and a not inconsiderable segment of the American public that the Muslim Middle East is a hopeless mess.

Can Trump carve out a democratic exception for Iran, where religious dictatorship appears to be secularizing the society it rules? Trump seems to have a serious animus against the Islamic Republic—he isn't in the revisionist right-wing and libertarian camps (see Tucker Carlson, Patrick Buchanan, the *American Conservative*, and the Cato Institute) that veer toward Obama in their reassessment of, or disinterest in, the mullahs' ambitions. Can Trump energetically try to collapse the clerical regime and advance democracy there while forging a détente with the repressive Sunni states? Such a contradiction isn't difficult to handle operationally. The issue is whether the White House can overcome those within the bureaucracies who resist anything too forward-leaning. It's a good bet that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Emirati ruler Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who don't want to see democracy bloom in their kingdoms, would be fine with American efforts to foster representative government in Persia.

Much of the Washington bureaucracy wants new nuclear negotiations with Tehran. Trump and secretary of state Michael Pompeo have said they do, too. But the odds are poor that North Korean-style summitry will elicit flexibility from Tehran. It is possible to imagine the circles around Rouhani encouraging Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to authorize new talks with Washington. Given the way Rouhani sold the nuclear deal (that the agreement would allow the clerical regime to keep and then expand its atomic program, significantly increase the country's wealth, and prevent Americans from using sanctions in the future), he is on the precipice of

political oblivion. The nationwide protests that started last December and continue despite arduous efforts to squelch them have further wounded the mullah, trashing what was left of his dwindling support among the Iranian middle class and the young. It will be challenging, however, for Khamenei to grovel before Trump since any American-Iranian meeting would produce a volcano of discontent inside the ruling elite. The Islamic Republic's overlords are capable of considerable hypocrisy and duplicity and have been willing, long before Obama, to communicate and meet with U.S. officials they loathe. Backtracking now, however, would be *very* tough given what the supreme leader has said since Washington withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The administration has its own dilemmas: It relishes harsh rhetoric and sanctions against the Islamic Republic but is restrained by an Iraq syndrome that argues against confronting Iranian imperialism with boots on the ground. Containment is not in the cards. A Soviet parallel to the Islamic Republic, in which the United States wears its enemy down through wars on the empire's periphery, isn't going to happen. The clerical regime's ambitions in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq may get checked, but that task will fall to the natives sans U.S. support or, in the Levant, to the Israelis, who are already de facto at war with the mullahs. Imperial overstretch may still doom Tehran's attempt to craft its own Co-Prosperity Zone in the region.

America will either lose or win its struggle with the clerics at the center: by collapsing Iran's economy, thereby paralyzing the atomic advance, or by meeting Tehran's nuclear challenge head on, which may happen soon if Khamenei gives the green light to increase significantly uranium enrichment. The clerical regime could reinstall the primitive IR-1 centrifuges in large numbers, put the more advanced IR-2ms back in the under-the-mountain plant at Fordow to complete their development, or put the stress on the development (clandestine or open) of the more advanced IR-6s and IR-8s, which when perfected could operate with small, easily concealable cascades. The clever approach would be to opt for slow, clandestine progress, which would test the West's intelligence services, while publicly playing the aggrieved victim of Trump's unilateralism. The regime would wait for the next U.S. presidential election, hoping the Democrats win and restore what was lost. But such an approach may not be emotionally satisfying to the supreme leader and senior Revolutionary Guard commanders.

The telling question, then, is what Khamenei and his praetorians, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, think Washington will do if they start reconnecting centrifuges or obstructing International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors. The ruling elite, especially Rouhani's circle, is still waiting to see whether Europe can stand against the United States. Foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has spoken of a European banking and oil package, insulated from U.S. sanctions, being delivered to Tehran. Iranian commentary on the Europeans has, however, become increasingly despairing—despite the best efforts of Federica Mogherini, the European Union External Action boss, to keep the Iranians hopeful. The Europeans have, so far, failed to meet the demands that Khamenei issued in May. Those demands—that they keep investing in Iran while blocking U.S. sanctions—appear beyond the capacity of even the Western European governments most angered by the president's decision. Adventurous and, for the Iranians, vital European companies, like the energy giant Total and the German engineering behemoth

Siemens, have shown they have no intention of risking their access to the American market or the U.S. dollar for the JCPOA.

European resistance is, of course, fortified by the administration's "national-security" tariffs. And many former Obama officials are advising Europeans to hang tight to the JCPOA. They want Berlin to use the German central bank, the Bundesbank, as a tool to increase German-Iranian trade, especially for midsize and small German firms without a significant presence in the American market. An E.U. plan to use the European Investment Bank in a similar commercial fashion is also taking shape. Such actions, if they actually happen on a certain scale, would oblige the White House to sanction a European central bank, the lending institution of the E.U., or European VIPs associated with these banks. Such U.S. designations would likely work (the power of the dollar and the political predilections of America-centric European business would probably win out), but they would be a convulsive first for transatlantic relations.

No matter what happens, it ought to be clear to Trump and his administration that regime change is the *only* pragmatic course open to them *unless* they are prepared to accept a nuclear-armed Iran. And if they are prepared for military action, they obviously should work seriously on advancing Iran's internal rebellion. Sooner, not later. The option to punt, to repeat, is gone. The Europeans, most of whom have punting in their DNA, keep coming back to administration officials, hoping to discover that Trump is somehow willing to accept some equivalent of the JCPOA, differently named. The administration would have to eat a skyscraper's worth of crow to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian atomic conundrum that essentially reestablishes Obama's nuclear concessions.

We need first to better understand the past to see clearly why an American strategy to collapse Iran's theocracy makes sense. Misreading Persian history has almost become de rigueur in Washington, on both the left and the right. Too often Westerners have looked at Iran as an island of autocratic stability. This is even true today: Most American and European officials see the mullahs' tools of repression as indomitable—just as they were for Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The true story of Iran for much of the past century is, however, of a convulsive struggle between rulers wanting to maintain their prerogatives and the ruled seeking freedom. It is this volatile tug-of-war that will define not just the future of Iran but the Middle East.

Regime change isn't an abstract and mad idea: It's what the Iranian people have sought through massive protests in 2009 and again beginning last December, when popular protest hit cities and towns across the country. The continuing unrest, which has helped to produce a tidal wave of vitriol and dissension in the ruling elite, may have convulsed the regime's internal nuclear deliberations. The only sensible approach towards the mullahs is to focus on this caldera of popular anger. Secretary Pompeo's speeches on May 21 in Washington and July 22 at the Reagan Library highlighted the plight of Iranians under theocracy—as well as any speech by any American official since the Islamic revolution has done—and set the stage for a coherent plan.

Philosophically and operationally, such a policy shift would be recognizing a basic truth: The Islamic Republic isn't going to evolve peacefully into a nonthreatening Middle Eastern state. Or as Khamenei pithily put it: "*Ma doshmani ba Amrika ra lazem dareem*" ("We require hostility

towards the United States”). Obviously uncomfortable with the religious dimension of this clash, American officials have had a hard time accepting this irreconcilable conflict. Both Democrats and Republicans have *really* wanted to believe that Thermidor isn’t far off. (Thermidor briefly arrived with the presidential election of the cleric Mohammad Khatami in 1997; he and the reformist movement behind him got stuffed by both Khamenei and the “pragmatic” revolutionaries around Rouhani and his patron, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who helped Khatami rise to power and then turned on him.)

The Iranian struggle against religious dictatorship ought to ring our inner chimes since Westerners, above all others, ought to appreciate how religious overreach produces a secularizing, liberalizing backlash. Though often too timid or politically correct to say so, most Westerners surely would want to see Iranians freed from theocrats. It has become an article of faith for many, however, that Washington shouldn’t try to aid the Iranian people, that American actions are inevitably baleful. Often lurking in the background is the guilt-ridden *tiers-mondiste* view that the type of overt and covert support that Republicans and Democrats once gave to the peoples of Communist Eastern Europe is somehow morally wrong when applied to Iranians. (On the left, there are, of course, doubts about the wisdom, let alone the efficacy, of our support for the Eastern Europeans.)

First-worlders, the argument goes, just shouldn’t politically interfere in Muslim societies. But a serious glance at Iranian history ought to tell us the opposite: that we shouldn’t treat Iranians any differently than we treated Poles under communism. The intellectual, social, and political common ground between Eastern Europeans and Iranians ought to incline President Trump to let his national security adviser, John Bolton, start planning the containment, contraction, and collapse of the Islamic Republic.

Modern Persian rulers’ absolutism was always tentative and incomplete. It was the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 that first injected ideas of popular representation into Iran’s bloodstream. During the first half of the 20th century, feisty parliaments had little compunction about flexing their muscles. The local gentry would marshal the peasants, laborers, and tribesmen into polls that would choose each parliament. This wasn’t Jeffersonian democracy, but the system was not without legitimacy. Local leaders conveyed the concerns of the peasants and labor force to the ruling class. The center and periphery knew each other. Bound to each other by land, family, tradition, and the vote, the governing class and the people created mechanisms for addressing grievances. Despite massive illiteracy, considerable ethnic division, and judicial corruption, a functioning sociopolitical network evolved. The diffusion of power meant bargaining among stakeholders, elections that mattered, and a parliament sensitive to local concerns.

The first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah, challenged and increasingly overruled this consultative system, imposing his will in the name of modernity. When the Allies forced his abdication in 1941 because of his flirtations with the Third Reich, constitutional rule again gained strength as his son was too weak to resist. This was the golden age of Iranian statesmen. Such men persuaded invading Russian and British armies to preserve the Pahlavi dynasty even as they dispatched the elder shah into exile. In 1946, when Joseph Stalin sought to claim the northern

province of Azerbaijan, it was the wily premier Ahmad Qavam who convinced him that the only way he could have an oil contract was to uphold his wartime agreement to withdraw his troops. (Harry Truman also helped.) Stalin left but he never obtained his oil. The 1953 coup ended this epoch, but not in the way that Americans have come to understand.

The two men who unwittingly conspired to halt Iran's democratic interlude were Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his antagonist, prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, who fell in the '53 "coup." It may be difficult for Americans, raised on a Hollywood diet of nefarious Central Intelligence Agency intrigue, to appreciate, but one of the most fabled tales of the Cold War was actually an Iranian initiative, not a CIA-run plot. We need to better understand what happened in '53 if we are to understand a fundamental rule about American interventionism today: It takes two to tango. What happened then—the key to Mosaddeq's fall (he lost both elite and popular support)—would be truer today for any regime-change policy, because Iranian society is bigger and more modern. American policy supporting internal change can only succeed if it parallels and complements what would likely happen in a free vote.

There was a "coup" in 1953 because Iranians willed it. If the clerical regime collapses tomorrow, no matter the American effort, it will be because Iranians will it. The American left, and perhaps more than a few on the right, has a "coup allergy" that springs from '53. It inhibits creativity. It prevents us from seeing the Islamic Republic's internal contradictions. We need to go backward to go forward.

In the 1950s, an age of postcolonial nationalism, the notion of British control of Iranian petroleum was anachronistic. The aristocracy that was the custodian of Iran's nascent democracy offered up one of its own to reclaim its oil. Mosaddeq had long been a champion of the rule of law, parliamentary power, and national sovereignty. He was also a stubborn and vain man who feared that any compromise agreement with Britain would tarnish his reputation. As Truman and secretary of state Dean Acheson mediated the oil dispute, Mosaddeq turned down successive offers. Iran could not produce or sell its oil. In trying to navigate his financially ruinous policies, Mosaddeq started to eviscerate the country's institutions: He rigged elections, sought to disband parliament, and usurped the powers of the monarchy.

It was Iran's politicians, military men, and mullahs who came together to down the premier. The shah was just a figurehead around whom diverse forces gathered. The public mostly rallied to the monarch. The CIA was involved in the coup planning, but once the initial operation failed, Washington threw in the towel. Iranians, however, took control and removed Mosaddeq. In doing so, they sought to revive their economy and protect their political institutions. What they had not counted on was that the diffident monarch whom they returned from exile would soon transform himself into a despot.

Given the recklessness of the clerical regime, it is hard to recall just how nutty the shah became. He crowned himself the *Shahanshah*, the king of kings, recalling the Achaemenid Empire, in a lavish celebration and declared himself the policeman of the Gulf. He wasted much of Iran's oil wealth on arms that his country didn't need and his military couldn't use. He reduced Iran's venerable parliament to a rubber stamp. He created a secret police that was as incompetent in

practice as it was notorious in reputation. He alienated the clergy, an ally of the monarchy. But his greatest crime was to eviscerate the old elite that had served Iran well and replace it with a coterie of sycophants. Iran was reduced to a country of venal rich, a beleaguered middle class, and alienated youth.

But the Islamic revolution was bound to disappoint a public clamoring for democracy. The mullahs proved vicious street fighters as they showed little mercy toward the liberals and secularists who had fought the shah. During the first two years after the revolution, Iran was rocked by a civil war that pitted different revolutionary factions against one another. The mullahs eventually won: Saddam Hussein came to their rescue with an invasion that helped focus domestic energies on Arab invaders.

The postwar years, however, proved uneasy for the Islamic Republic as successive waves of protests continuously chipped away at the regime's legitimacy. The first constituency to give up on theocracy were the students, whose protest in 1999 ended the attempt by the regime to reform itself. Mohammad Khatami, an intellectually curious cleric fascinated by Western power and ethics, came to the presidency in 1997 with a pledge to empower civil society and harmonize faith and freedom. The conservative backlash was swift as the regime's enforcers murdered intellectuals and liberal politicians, negated parliamentary legislation, brutalized dissenting clerics, and shuttered reformist newspapers. It was that last act that sparked the riots of 1999 on university campuses. In this showdown, the "moderate" Rouhani, then secretary of the national security council, threatened the students with death. The regime imposed order and lost the young.

Then came the titanic Green Revolt of 2009. A fraudulent presidential election returning Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power sparked a massive protest, millions strong, that further discredited the regime among the middle classes and college-educated. This was a much closer thing than the West understood. Khamenei later admitted that the regime had come to "the edge of the cliff." Once more the Islamic Republic survived using brute force. The revolt caused many of the regime's own stalwarts to give up on its ideological claims. The reformers, always the theocracy's most palatable face, were excised from power.

Today Iranians are the most secular people in the Middle East, with the mosques empty even on religious commemoration days. Young men don't wish to join the clergy and women don't want to marry mullahs. Even senior ayatollahs appreciate that forcing religion into everything has caused their faith to suffer. The government of God is drowning in corruption while cloaking itself in an ideology that convinces few.

And then came last December. More than 100 Iranian cities and towns erupted in protest. This was in part a revolt of the dispossessed. The poor were thought to be the regime's last bastion of power, tied to theocracy by a sense of piety and the provisions of the welfare state. But shanty towns have grown enormously in the Islamic Republic. Demonstrators hurled damning chants against Khamenei, Rouhani, the entire regime, and its imperialism. Most Iranians today have multiple jobs and rely on retirement benefits devoured by mismanagement and inflation. The average Iranian is 15 percent poorer than he was a decade ago, while double-digit unemployment

plagues the country. The real inflation rate may now be over 200 percent. All this is taking place at a time of provocative class cleavages resembling the last days of the shah, when the elite flaunted their wealth while the middle class and the poor nursed their grievances.

Rouhani, a lackluster apparatchik of the security state, once thought that his arms-control agreement would generate sufficient foreign investments to revive the economy and placate the discontented. That aspiration failed even before the advent of the Trump presidency. The Islamic Republic is too politically turbulent, too divided against itself, too lacking in a reliable banking system or anything resembling the rule of law to be an attractive place for sufficient international commerce to compensate for the regime's systemic problems.

The clerical regime today stands strangely naked, without a convincing ideology or a reliable constituency. In every decade since assuming power, it has lost a segment of society. Its overlapping security organs create the impression of power, but this could well prove a façade should a nationwide protest movement once more engulf the country. The only remaining questions are whether America has the insight, will, and a strategy for aiding the Iranian people against their overlords. The Islamic Republic is seriously ill, as was the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. But the theocracy may be healthy enough to continue its imperialism for years. Precisely because of the Islamic Republic's internal problems, the regime will probably double down on its aggression. Legitimacy denied at home will be sought abroad. The Iranian ruling elite's sense of foreign mission—it sees itself as the Islamic paladin—has combined with Shiite chauvinism and large, deployable non-Iranian Shiite militias. We should want to see, as we did with the Soviet Union, the mounting crisis at home sap the will and resources of the state, sooner not later.

And it's not that hard to devise a sensible, uncomplicated, patient approach to cracking this theocracy. We shouldn't be developing a regime-change policy according to some atomic clock: The clerical regime may build a nuclear weapon before its contradictions cripple it. And if the Revolutionary Guards get the bomb, we undoubtedly will want to see the Iranian people dispatch the mullahs and their praetorians.

Obviously we need to keep starving Tehran of hard currency. Before Obama came to the rescue with the JCPOA, the mullahs stared at a liquidity crisis—insufficient hard currency to pay the bills. And although Washington will be operating without the assistance of a European Union oil embargo and (for now) the de-listing of Iran on SWIFT, the international financial transaction cooperative, the most effective fiscal weapons remain American-made. They are being brought to bear. The Trump administration's Treasury undersecretary of terrorism and financial intelligence, Sigal Mandelker, may be the most dogged and clever financial warrior the clerical regime has ever confronted. Major European businesses have already signaled that they have no intention of crossing Washington regardless of E.U. or national measures to protect European investments in Iran. The value of the rial has plummeted.

Washington can certainly do better in the battle for Iranian hearts and minds. A lot is known about the Iranian ruling elite's corruption, inside the country and abroad. Secretary Pompeo is right to highlight malversation among the regime's many sins; it is a volcanic issue inside the

country. Much more research can be done. We should see a steady stream of reporting on corruption, via the Internet and the Persian services of Voice of America and Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty. Washington has *never* let loose the bully pulpit—the White House, Congress, and the foreign-affairs and intelligence agencies together—in favor of democracy in Iran. From the president down, the administration should speak often and clearly on America's intention to support Iranians fighting for free elections. The president, secretary of state, and national security adviser—and these three have to carry the weight—face the challenge of doing this while so much of the American right is so hostile to the idea of democracy-promotion.

Personnel always matters in Washington. The National Security Council, the State Department, and Treasury should have more officials tracking Iran's finances and human-rights abuses with the intention of devising new sanctions and moving information collected into the public domain. The White House would be well-served to appoint one individual, who has clout with both Pompeo and Bolton, as an Iran czar who can oversee the portfolio and do the enormous legwork that is required in Washington and overseas.

The CIA has a role. Langley should aim unrelentingly at the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the nuclear establishment, and the clergy by formulating plans to encourage defections and clandestine-reporting relationships. So far as we know, Washington has never seriously attempted to get Revolutionary Guards to defect. America's capacity to target Iranian VIPs—the information publicly available to do this has grown enormously in the last 20 years—is substantial and in all probability woefully underdeveloped at Langley.

The CIA also has a place in supporting those inside the country who risk their lives to oppose the regime. There are a wide variety of ways for Langley to do this; the operational details of how one does this are less challenging than locking into existing Iranian networks that need financial assistance. (America has long been on the receiving end of the informal *hawala* system, used by millions, including Islamic radicals, to transfer untraceably moneys across borders; the Iranian version, *havala*, is an open door for Langley to play hardball in reverse.) The opportunities for the CIA to help—in labor unions, among students, professors, and writers, in the clergy, or at the National Iranian Oil Company, to name just a few—could be tremendous. As always in covert action, it takes time to reach out. If the Trump administration started now, Langley would be lucky to have functioning covert-action networks by 2020. There will always be reverses—Langley doesn't have a brilliant track record in the Islamic Republic—and even under the best of circumstances mistakes happen and people die. If there isn't an appetite inside Iran for the CIA's assistance, then none of these programs will get off the ground. But if we don't try, we won't know. We absolutely shouldn't believe the left-wing mantra that Iranians, because of 1953, don't want or need the agency. The odds are excellent that's not true. We should find out.

Ideally, Washington should try to shrink the Islamic Republic's imperial frontiers, especially in Syria. That is obviously going to be difficult, if not impossible, for post-Iraq America. Containing and rolling back the theocracy's Co-Prosperity Zone is important for undermining its power at home—in the same way that reversals for the Soviets abroad spiritually and materially weakened Moscow. The regime sees its *mission civilisatrice* as much abroad as it does at home. Denying the regime foreign accomplishments can't help but thin its esprit and make the regime's

frontline forces—the Revolutionary Guards and the Shiite foreign legion—question their leadership if not the cause. This ought to be elemental power politics for the United States.

The Islamic Republic today is a weak, wobbly regime barely surviving successive domestic headwinds. The regime is still adhering to the JCPOA because it cannot afford another shock to the system; it is most certainly not a gesture of pragmatism purchased by a lingering hope that Europe, Russia, and China will come to the rescue. If the mullahs cannot muster a response to President Trump’s affront to the regime’s dignity, it’s because the ruling clergy and the Revolutionary Guards don’t know what they should do. They appear deeply uncertain about how aggressive actions against the United States will reverberate inside a society that has grown more openly hostile to its rulers. It is striking that the clerics and the security establishment have so far dared not do what they have so often done with their lower-class supporters: orchestrate large demonstrations in Tehran denouncing America and its president. The Islamic Republic appears to be so unpopular with its own people that the regime cannot even demonize Trump.

Contrary to what is written so often and so erroneously by academics, the United States has *never* deployed a regime-change strategy against the Islamic Republic. Contrary to what has been said by so many so often, the Trump administration actually has a tolerably coherent “Plan B” for a post-JCPOA foreign policy *if* subverting the theocracy is its ultimate, guiding goal. Khamenei, like his predecessor, firmly believes that the United States has always sought to topple the Islamic Republic in favor of Westernized Iranian democrats who would usher in a decadent, ungodly age. He knows—even if much of Washington does not—that the clash between the United States and the Islamic Republic is the defining battle of the Middle East. The cleric’s nightmares should be our battle plan.