



**ADVANCING AMERICAN  
FREEDOM** *FOUNDATION*

# REINSTATING MAXIMUM PRESSURE:

NO FUTURE FOR IRAN'S  
NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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*July 31, 2025*

## Executive Summary

President Trump delivered a critical blow to Iran's attempt to achieve nuclear breakout status, sending Iran's uranium enrichment program back years. Even still, as the Trump administration begins to re-engage with Iran, it would be wise to return to its Maximum Pressure posture from the first administration and take heed of the charged situation inside the country.

In order to succeed, negotiations must:

- **Categorically prohibit all uranium enrichment**—weapons-grade or otherwise.
- **Maintain maximum pressure by imposing severe sanctions on the regime.** This approach, used to powerful effect during the first Trump administration, involves targeting Iran's economy, particularly its energy, petrochemical, and banking industries, to limit the regime's revenue and influence.
- **Engage with the Iranian opposition** and its Ten-point Plan for the Future of Iran, recognizing the right of the Iranian people to resist the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and determine their own destiny by establishing a truly democratic republic, as bipartisan majorities of the House of Representatives have resolved.

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### The Regime's Malign Activities Threaten U.S. Interests

For over four decades, U.S.–Iran relations have been poisoned by regime animosity, miscalculations, and recurring crises. Some within the U.S. policy apparatus cling to a mistaken optimism that moderation could emerge from within the regime, leading to more constructive engagement. This optimism is dangerously flawed.

Iran's malign activities in the region, particularly through its proxies, pose a serious threat to U.S. interests. Iranian-backed groups using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and Tehran-supplied explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) killed hundreds of American personnel in Iraq. Iranian-made and supplied drones provided to Russia continue to spread death and destruction across Ukraine.

For most of the past half-century, Iran's executive branch has been led by the so-called moderates. Under these 'moderates,' the regime committed major atrocities: Mir Hossein Mousavi oversaw the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners; Rafsanjani presided over the assassination of dissidents abroad; Khatami's era saw the brutal murder of dissidents inside Iran by the Intelligence Ministry; Rouhani advanced the nuclear weapons program while deceiving the West. During Pezeshkian's 11 months in office, some 1,400 executions of prisoners, including women, underage, and political prisoners, have occurred (about one every six hours).

These disturbing legacies underscore the reality that the regime's moderate facade is a mask for its ruthless ambitions and systemic violence. Today, the regime is

increasingly vulnerable as it faces economic collapse, widespread social unrest, and growing international isolation. In 2024, Iran suffered regional setbacks: the fall of the Syrian dictatorship (its strategic ally) and the weakening of key proxies like Hezbollah at the hands of Israel. Iran's vulnerabilities continue to deepen in 2025.

## **I. Historical Overview of U.S. – Iran Relations (1979–2025)**

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, U.S.–Iran relations have been marked by conflict, terrorism, and betrayal at the hands of the regime. The 1979 hostage crisis severed diplomatic ties, and Iran's backing of Hezbollah—including the loss of 241 American servicemembers' lives in the 1983 Beirut terror attack—cemented Iran's status as a top anti-American actor. In the 1990s, the U.S. first imposed sanctions and adopted a dual containment strategy, but then began making concessions, hoping the regime would change its behavior, even while Iran expanded its regional influence after the United States toppled the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) offered Iran sanctions relief while allowing the regime to keep its entire nuclear structure intact, albeit with limits on uranium enrichment and international oversight. As expected, Tehran violated even these recklessly naive terms, expanding its nuclear infrastructure and exploiting the deal for strategic gain. President Trump withdrew from JCPOA in 2018, citing flaws like sunset clauses and missile exclusions. President Biden's efforts to resurrect the deal in 2021–22 failed as Iran ramped up uranium enrichment to 60% and blocked International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to nuclear sites.

For over four decades, every attempt by Washington, D.C. to placate Iran through engagement has backfired. Clinton-era overtures, the Obama JCPOA, and Biden's diplomacy only yielded regime crackdowns on internal dissent and an expansion of Iran's proxy-driven regional aggression.

## **II. U.S. Should Not Seek Rapprochement with the Regime**

Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, supporting proxies like Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, which target U.S. personnel and our allies.

In 1979, Iranians stormed the U.S. Embassy, taking American diplomats hostage for 444 days and humiliating our nation. In 2019, the Trump Administration correctly designated Iran's IRGC and its Quds Force, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). This marked the first time the U.S. classified a part of another government as an FTO, in recognition of the IRGC's active role promoting terrorism.

## **III. Core Threats Posed by the Regime to U.S. National Security**

### **A. Nuclear Program**

Iran's assurances about the peaceful nature of its nuclear program cannot be trusted. More than two decades of deception and obfuscation belie its claims of purely civilian intentions. Since the early 2000s, Iran has violated its obligations under the Nuclear

Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and agreements with the IAEA. The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) first exposed Iran's clandestine nuclear sites in 2002, revealing undeclared facilities at Natanz for uranium enrichment and Arak for heavy water production.

This revelation, brought to light by the NCRI, forced Iran to admit to activities it had concealed for years, including uranium enrichment and plutonium-related work, both of which have potential military applications. Iran's pattern of lying about its nuclear activities, coupled with its refusal to fully cooperate with IAEA investigations into undeclared nuclear material, exposes its program as an effort to develop nuclear weapons capabilities as a strategic guarantee for regime survival rather than a peaceful civilian endeavor.

The regime's history of covert operations and non-compliance strips all credibility from the notion that Iran's nuclear program is for civilian purposes, such as energy production. The Natanz facility was designed to produce highly enriched uranium, far beyond the 3.67% level needed for civilian nuclear reactors. Iran's heavy water production at Arak could yield plutonium, another material usable in nuclear weapons. The regime's insistence that a civilian program requires maintaining a full nuclear fuel cycle, including enrichment, is disingenuous. For instance, both Canada and Sweden import fuel to operate their nuclear reactors without the need for domestic enrichment. Iran's refusal to halt enrichment, despite international sanctions and pressure, demonstrates that this is a program aimed at achieving nuclear weapons capability under the guise of civilian energy needs.

Enrichment technology is inherently dual-use, and Iran's history of secrecy and concealment shows it cannot be trusted to maintain a purely civilian program. Blocking Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon requires a no-enrichment policy.

## **B. Iran's Export of Terrorism: A Persistent Threat to Global Stability**

Iran's status as the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism is well-documented, with the IRGC and its elite Quds Force serving as the primary instruments for exporting violence and destabilizing its neighbors. Through these entities, Iran sustains a network of proxies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, and various Shiite militias in Iraq, all of which target U.S. personnel, allies, and undermine regional stability. The U.S. Department of State's 2023 Country Reports on Terrorism notes that Iran provided over \$1 billion annually to these groups, supplying weapons, training, and logistical support to advance its geopolitical objectives. For instance, Hezbollah, a key Iranian proxy, has been implicated in attacks on Israeli and Western targets, while the Houthis' 2024 missile and drone assaults on Red Sea shipping disrupted global trade, prompting U.S. and allied military responses. These actions highlight Iran's strategic reliance on proxies to project power and challenge adversaries.

Iran does not confine its terrorism to the Middle East. The regime clearly is willing to target its organized opposition abroad. A particularly brazen illustration of the regime's lethal reach inside Europe is the attempted bombing of the main Iranian opposition

rally in Villepinte, France, on June 30, 2018, a plot that the U.S. State Department labeled as a "clear example of state-sponsored terrorism."

Assadollah Assadi, a senior Iranian diplomat based in Vienna, orchestrated the plot to detonate explosives at an event attended tens of thousands of people and international dignitaries, including current and former U.S. and European officials and the NCRI President-elect, Maryam Rajavi. Following a thorough investigation, a Belgian court convicted Assadi in February 2021 and sentenced him to 20 years in prison, marking a rare instance in which a recognized Iranian diplomat has faced justice for terrorism.

### **C. Regional Destabilization**

Iran's interference in the Middle East has fueled significant instability through a network of proxy forces. The regime aims to expand its influence across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—often at the expense of U.S. allies and interests.

Iran armed Hezbollah with over 150,000 rockets, threatening Israel and heightening regional tensions. In Syria, Iran spent over \$50 billion to prop up the Assad regime, contributing to 500,000 civilian deaths and a refugee crisis that still burdens U.S. allies like Jordan and Turkey.

In Yemen, Iran backed the Houthis, who attacked Saudi Arabia and disrupted Red Sea shipping with missiles and drones—including a 2019 strike on Saudi Aramco that temporarily disrupted global oil supplies. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias have targeted U.S. forces and weakened the Iraqi government, fueling sectarian violence and instability.

Through these proxy wars, Iran expands its influence while undermining American interests and Middle East security.

### **IV. Policy Failure: Misplaced Hope in Regime Moderation**

Since the very first day of the Islamic Republic, Western policymakers and analysts have sought to differentiate regime factions as moderates, pragmatists, populists, or hardliners. This policy of empowering the supposedly more moderate and sensible factions against those perceived as hardliners served to rationalize these analysts' reluctance and failure to confront the regime's nefarious activities head-on. In fact, the regime itself plays into this narrative, fostering opinion abroad that there are substantive policy differences between these factions.

Yet, on core strategic issues—such as nuclear proliferation, regional meddling, support for proxy terrorist groups, and egregious human rights abuses—all these factions share common ground. Their tactics may differ, but the ultimate aim remains the same: preserving the regime. The Islamic Republic's theocratic structure ensures that every faction serves the Supreme Leader. The myth of moderation emboldens the hardliners, enabling them to intensify repression at home and fuel aggression abroad.

The Iranian regime has demonstrated time and time again its incapacity to reform. The regime has unceremoniously rejected every olive branch extended by Western nations over the past 46 years. Only a renewed commitment to maximum pressure will alter the future of Iran. This commitment must include recognition and support for organized resistance to the regime.

## **V. A Regime Under Pressure**

### **A. Economic Collapse: Dismantled or Destroyed**

Beyond sanctions, Iran's economic collapse stems from the regime's mismanagement, corruption, and ideological priorities. The regime diverts massive resources to the nuclear program, proxy wars, and a repressive security state, while neglecting healthcare and education. The IRGC dominates the economy through monopolistic control of major industries—including construction, transportation, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, energy, and telecommunications—stifling competition and enabling embezzlement. IRGC-linked firms often win state contracts without fair bidding.

Corruption runs deep, with top officials tied to major scandals. Iran ranked 144 of 180 in Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index. Loyalty over competence guides state appointments, resulting in mismanaged enterprises and a bloated public sector. Inflation exceeded 40%, youth unemployment is around 20%, and Iran's national currency, the rial, has dropped 90% in value since 2018.

These conditions have triggered thousands of student and worker protests in 2024 and 2025 against an increasingly repressive state and growing economic misery. Poor working conditions and unpaid wages have ignited protests in cities like Tehran and Isfahan. The regime's crackdown, led by the IRGC and Basij, has only deepened public anger. Social media, despite censorship, has amplified dissent.

This unrest signals a deeper legitimacy crisis. The IRGC's economic grip, paired with rising poverty, has further alienated the regime from the public. While its leaders blame sanctions, most Iranians attribute these troubles to domestic policy failures and rampant corruption. Growing discontent could spur a more organized push against the regime for systemic change.

### **B. A Nation Demanding Change**

The Iranian regime is at its most vulnerable point in history. Domestically, it faces mounting discontent across all segments of society, marking a profound societal shift since late 2017.

In December 2017 and January 2018, Iranians took to the streets, chanting, "Reformists, hardliners, the game is now over." This pivotal moment revealed the Iranian people have moved beyond the regime's internal factions. It also shattered the illusion of a moderate faction within the regime, a notion that had long underpinned Western policy toward Iran.

In November 2019, another uprising swept the nation, driven primarily by low-income communities. This dispelled the Western misconception that these groups were steadfast supporters of the Supreme Leader. In response to the IRGC's brutal crackdown, which claimed at least 1,500 lives, protesters boldly confronted the IRGC, setting ablaze approximately 900 centers of repression. This marked a significant transformation, reflecting a nation's revolt against a ruthless dictatorship.

The 2022 uprising, which lasted several months, united Iranians from all walks of life in their call for political change. Slogans such as "Death to Khamenei" and "Down with the oppressor" echoed nationwide, underscoring a collective demand for transformation to a democratic future without despotic rule or theocratic tyranny.

In 2021, former Vice President Mike Pence expressed hope of American support for imminent change:

*"The Islamic Republic of Iran has long relied on repression, deception, and distraction to maintain power. But... inside Iran, millions demand freedom, dignity, and a future unshackled from theocratic tyranny. ... The Iranian regime has never been weaker than it is today. Four out of five Iranians now live below the poverty line. Corruption is at an all-time high. The Iranian people are fed up. They're ready for change. They're more united than ever before. ... Resistance units in Iran are the wellspring of hope for the Iranian people. They are an engine for change from within during uprisings and continued protests. And every day they gain strength while the regime withers. ... Supporting the resistance is a prerequisite for peace."*

### C. Regional Setbacks and the Erosion of Iran's Strategic Influence

In 2024, Iran's regional strategy suffered major blows, starting with the fall of the Assad regime on December 8. Syria, once a key corridor for arming Hezbollah, severed ties, expelled Iranian forces, and denounced Tehran's role in its destruction. This setback crippled Iran's ability to project regional power. Hezbollah lost its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and 3,000 terrorists to Israeli strikes, leading to a ceasefire that sidelined the group. Israel decimated Hamas after the terrorist organization launched its murderous October 7, 2023, terrorist attack. U.S.-Israeli strikes have finally disrupted Houthi operations in the Red Sea. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" is now fractured, with diminished proxy capabilities and severed supply routes.

The loss of Syria and Hezbollah's decline exposes Tehran's forward defense strategy. Iranian citizens increasingly question the regime's costly foreign interventions. In response, Iran may now pivot eastward, boosting Iraqi and Yemeni proxies, or accelerate its nuclear program as a deterrent. Either path highlights the fragility of Iran's regional model and its uncertain future.

## **VI. Overlooked Potential of Iranian Opposition**

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, successive U.S. administrations offered concessions to Iran to facilitate moderation of the goals and behavior of the regime. The Trump-Pence administration broke this cycle and wisely imposed a maximum-pressure policy, including sanctions on trade and finance, while abandoning the irreparably misguided JCPOA. These strong steps reduced the regime's oil sales to as few as 300,000 barrels a day.

Due to the success of the first Trump-Pence administration, the regime has weakened. Unfortunately, many Western governments ignore this important development by continuing their futile attempts to spur reform within the regime, all the while ignoring the Iranian people and organized resistance.

Given Iran's critical geopolitical role and the far-reaching implications of its current assertive policies, the West urgently needs to enhance the maximum pressure campaign with a new understanding of the Iranian people's resistance to the regime and desire to bring about change. Dismissal of the organized Iranian opposition is often based on assumptions that don't hold up to critical examination. Perpetuating these narratives without scrutiny only prolongs the misery of innocent Iranian citizens and exposes the United States and our allies to further risk and regional volatility.

A prudent strategy would prioritize a systematic and objective evaluation of Iranian opposition movements and their capacity to replace the existing regime. This assessment will equip us to identify strategic assets that align with American national security interests.

### **A. Requisite Elements for Democratic Transformation in Iran**

Achieving meaningful change in Iran requires an opposition capable of challenging the theocratic regime and facilitating a transition to democratic governance. A viable alternative must fit Iran's unique historical, political, and social context to mobilize resistance effectively. These attributes include a robust organizational framework, widespread domestic and international support, competent leadership with a clear and actionable agenda, a commitment to pluralism, and an unequivocal rejection of all forms of authoritarianism. Historical examples, such as Khomeini's appropriation of the 1979 revolution, highlight the critical need for a cohesive democratic force to avert the re-emergence of authoritarian rule and to align revolutionary outcomes with the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people for peace and security at home.

Such an alternative must be capable of uniting diverse societal groups within Iran and its diaspora, bolstered by a strong domestic foundation and international legitimacy.

Leadership must articulate a comprehensive plan addressing governance, human rights, and economic development, while embracing pluralism to reflect Iran's ethnic and political diversity. Furthermore, the alternative must explicitly reject the current theocratic regime and all forms of authoritarianism to align with the Iranian people's vision for a secular, representative government.

## B. The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)

Through its actions, preoccupations, and consistent patterns of behavior, the Iranian regime has treated the NCRI and its principal component, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (PMOI/MEK), as an alternative to its rule.

This movement has demonstrated the capacity to counter the regime's censorship: exposing its critical nuclear sites, its missile and drone program, and its apparatus of terrorism in the region. It has played a significant role in confronting the IRGC in Iran for decades and has become the biggest target of Tehran's killings since the 1980s inside Iran.

In recent months, the Iranian regime has sharply intensified its crackdown on members of this movement. In just the past few weeks, fifteen political prisoners have been sentenced to death on charges of membership in the MEK and now await execution, while many others face trial on the same charge. Notably, regime officials and state-run media have openly called for a repeat of the 1988 massacre of political prisoners, during which 30,000 dissidents, most of them affiliated with the MEK, were secretly executed in the span of just a few months.

The NCRI and its Ten-Point Platform has garnered international support among thousands of parliamentarians around the globe, including a House majority and In bipartisan coalition in the U.S. Senate. NCRI's President-elect has consistently emphasized that effecting genuine change in Iran must fundamentally remain the responsibility of Iran: in essence, change from within, without foreign intervention, driven by the Iranian people and their organized resistance.

NCRI has both a roadmap to bring about democratic change to Iran and a plan for a peaceful transition of power to the people of Iran after ending the current dictatorship. As former Vice President Mike Pence has said:

*"The Ten-Point Plan for the future of Iran will ensure freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the freedom of every Iranian to choose their elected leaders ... The plan ensures gender equality, calls for the separation of religion and state, while ensuring religious freedom, and strives for a non-nuclear, peaceful republic of Iran."*