



ISSUE BRIEF | Center for American Security

AFTER AMINI: ENGAGEMENT WITH AN IRAN IN TRANSITION

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TOPLINE POINTS

- Unlike with recent waves of protests, the current wave following the death of Mahsa Amini comes at a transitional time for the Iranian regime and for the Middle East.
- Not only are the Biden Administration's negotiations with Iran dangerous and futile, they are also irrelevant in light of tectonic shifts in the country and the region.
- The United States needs to be able to respond to today's new Iran, with not only statements of support to the Iranian people but also a return to "maximum pressure," and greater reassurance for our allies and the Iranian people during this this decisive moment.

Introduction

The current wave of protests in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini—a 22-year old woman who was imprisoned for violating the regime's strict regulations on women's hair covering—have just entered their second month. In fact, protests have been ongoing throughout the country since the Green Revolution in 2009, with notable increases in intensity in 2018-2019 and this past month. The protests come at a decisive time, not only with an aging and reportedly ailing Supreme Leader Khamenei, but also given who is participating in them and the scale of the popular response. One example is Iran's oil workers, who have gone on strike and joined the protests, chanting "we will destroy everything we built" ([Joffre, 2022](#)).

To be sure, as mentioned, the Iranian government has tragically honed its ability to forcefully respond to protests over the decades with unbridled brutality. Moreover, the regime has likely been preparing for a post-Khamenei Iran and its president, Ebrahim Raisi, does not suggest a change in course. However, it is important to observe that the Iranian people have demonstrated bravery and resilience in standing up to those



responses by the regime and are not giving in despite them. These protests, notably, are much larger in scale and more diverse geographically, demographically, and ethnically than earlier protests, and do not appear to be letting up. It is also noteworthy that the Iranian regime could have responded more harshly. While the reasons for why it has not are unclear—whether for fear of backlash or lack of capacity—the response is different from how the regime has acted in response to previous waves of demonstrations and point to its vulnerability.

This brings serious policy questions before the Biden Administration, on whose watch these protests are taking place. How does the United States respond to these developments? Does the United States need to do more to support the Iranian people and, as a corollary, how does the United States prepare for a regime that is on the defensive and perhaps in demise? The ongoing nuclear deal talks are flawed and dangerous and may be a distraction for this administration in addressing the proverbial elephant in the room: an Iran in transition.

Notably, the current administration’s much delayed National Security Strategy released earlier this month made no mention of what is taking place in Iran’s streets. Nor, for that matter, does the Strategy use the term “terrorism” with reference to Iran, the world’s lead state sponsor of terrorism. It fails to portray the Iranian regime for the adversary it is, and even to accurately portray its record.

Their Iran policy, pursued by the same Obama-Biden team, ignores the changing realities over the past several years. One need only watch a recent interview that the U.S. Envoy to Iran, Rob Malley, gave to France24 in which he refused to say that the United States will halt its negotiations with Iran, merely punting by saying that negotiations “are not on the agenda.”

The sanctions on Iran’s “morality policy” and other individuals that the Biden Administration announced are mere face-saving gestures so it can say it has responded. In fact, the correct response would be a policy change—an expression Malley was careful to avoid in the aforementioned interview—by restoring the Trump Administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign of the strictest sanctions on all activities and entities of the Iranian regime. It was a policy that was not only effective, but was popular among the Iranian people and our allies in the Middle East ([Zamaneh, 2020](#); [Pollock, Cleveland, 2019](#)).

Restoring “maximum pressure” is a step the Biden Administration is unwilling to take as it would jeopardize a nuclear deal with Iran that it so eagerly seeks. Not only does the Biden team narrowly seek a nuclear deal with Iran, but based on what is known about a recent draft of the deal their deal would include greater concessions than the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) orchestrated by the Obama team ([Fleitz, 2022](#)).



The flaws of the draft nuclear deal extend beyond its actual text to the very context of its negotiation. That the Obama Administration was willing to view the entire Middle East through the narrow prism of the success of its nuclear deal with Iran was a key flaw of its administration, and one that the Biden Administration repeats. Iran remains a powerful, if nefarious, force in the region, with formidable and loyal proxies throughout the region and the world. It has already either directed or inspired threats against Americans, and affiliated groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) have increased violent attacks against Israel. Leaving aside the question of whether the protests will lead to change at the top, there is the more immediate and urgent issue of the current Iranian regime lashing out at allies and even at Americans across the region to demonstrate its lasting power and influence, and to distract from what is happening within its borders.

As of this writing, the likelihood of the current protests resulting in the ouster of the current regime is unclear and, moreover, that subject is well beyond the scope of this discussion. In the meantime, there remains a pressing question of how the United States should change its approach to Iran, and perhaps beyond, in recognition of the changes and adjustments that both Iran's leadership and its people have been experiencing – both in light of the current protests, and those over the last two years since the ouster of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qasem Soleimani.

The Iran of Yesterday and Today

Iran is a fundamentally different country, and its regime in a fundamentally different place, from what it was during its founding. As a number of analysts have observed, much of the regime's legitimacy is tied to the charisma and personality of the Supreme Leader ([Nader, Thaler, Bohandy, 2011](#); [Khalaji, 2012](#); [Rezaei, 2022](#)). Khamenei assumed the title of Supreme Leader in 1989 after the passing of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini. Khamenei is a key link to the regime's founding, having been a student and direct successor of Khomeini. Arguably the only leader to match his charisma, even if he did not have the religious credentials to assume the title of Supreme Leader, was Qasem Soleimani, whom the Trump Administration took out in 2020, thereby setting in motion a new chapter in the Iranian succession question ([Khalaji, 2020](#)).

The Biden Administration is therefore negotiating with a regime on autopilot – no less brutal or ideologically committed, but certainly still going through a transition following the death of Soleimani, the key architect of its foreign policy. It is no overstatement to say today's regime is missing a compelling intellectual messenger or message to take it beyond its founding.



The region, for its part, is home to fundamentally different dynamics in which, arguably, ideology is much less compelling than opportunities for prosperity and security. This is due mainly to the achievement of the Abraham Accords. Notably, America’s allies who are not signatory nations of the Accords—namely nations that have made previous peace agreements with Israel and other allies—are all coordinating with both Israel and the United States in building on the Accords and opening up new opportunities for peace and collaboration.

As for Iran’s proxies and other connections, although they remain formidable threats, they too are in a different place in a new region. Russia, a key backer, is stretched thin as it continues to escalate its invasion of Ukraine. Hezbollah remains perhaps the most prominent and best organized political and military force in Lebanon and a top threat to Israel and the United States. Bashar al-Assad in Syria continues to face threats from al-Qaeda and a potentially resurgent ISIS. The Houthis in Yemen continue to pose threats to Saudi Arabia. Hamas and PIJ benefit from Iran’s largesse, but this increasing dependence on Iran poses a notable credibility problem to them, as they are both Sunni groups. Both groups are not only in competition but may have their own leadership challenges as well, especially with Hamas’s divided leadership in Gaza and in Qatar. In Iraq, there is further transition with the resignation of Muqtada al-Sadr and new competition between groups for power.

Iran, in other words, is both politically and geographically on tenuous ground in a way that it has not been at any point in its recent history. For Russia and China, Iran remains critical as a reliable foothold in the region, and Iran has demonstrated its appreciation of their largesse, manifested recently with Russia’s use of Iranian drones in its campaign in Ukraine. As far as how the regime interacts with its proxies, while all are dependent on Iran in some ways, all also have their local priorities and challenges as well, and it remains to be seen how well Iran can dictate their every move in the absence of Soleimani’s vision and direction.

The American Interest and the Need for New Engagement

America’s actions in the region and beyond—the way it engages with allies and adversaries alike—has consequences for how Iran acts. This has been demonstrated with great effect in the radical shifts in Iran policy, from the Obama, Trump, and now Biden Administrations. The formula has been relatively simple; concessions to the Iranian regime (mainly in the form of sanctions relief) motivates Iran to unleash its proxies, sow greater violence and discord around the region, and threaten America and its allies ([Kellogg, Olidort, 2021](#)). The reverse is also true, as demonstrated in the Trump Administration—“maximum pressure,” and a willingness to use force when a threshold is met, deters the Iranian regime and puts them on their heels, effectively halting its destructive activities.



Iran's transitional moment today requires a radical and bold approach by the United States. No doubt, as is the position of the America First Policy Institute regarding Iran, restoring "maximum pressure" on the Iranian regime and halting JCPOA negotiations is an absolutely necessary first step.

With an Iranian regime on the defensive and in demise, there is a distinct new change in the range of actions Iran can take and the risks to regional and even world security. These risks—not unlike those posed by Putin's escalatory actions with his own military failures in Ukraine—require careful consideration by the United States. What tools is the United States ready to deploy, beyond the necessary steps of providing meaningful support to the Iranian protesters, to manage and respond to Iran's escalatory behaviors?

Navigating An Iran in Transition

A number of tools the United States has either previously used or is currently using can be considered as part of a policy shift towards Iran. First and foremost, today's events require that the Biden Administration restore the "maximum pressure" approach of sanctions on the Iranian regime and press our allies to do the same.

Indeed, it is encouraging that the European Union has announced sanctions on Iran for its human rights abuses, though more must be done. Just as during the Trump Administration, the "maximum pressure" campaign would end only after Iran is prepared to agree to a comprehensive agreement on its nuclear and missile program, sponsorship of terrorism, and the gamut of the "twelve demands" former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlined in announcing the policy.

Part of an effective imposition of "maximum pressure" means marshalling America's entire national security and diplomatic community to carry a single message of opposition to the regime and solidarity with the Iranian people, much as the Trump Administration demonstrated. This includes deploying key senior administration officials, including perhaps even the First Lady, to vocally and consistently champion the plight of the Iranian people, in particular Iranian women. The message, and the messengers, matter greatly.

Another important consideration, one that can be learned from the actions of the Trump Administration, is establishing a clear threshold for direct American military engagement that avoids nation building or unnecessary intervention while ensuring the United States is prepared to respond with strength as necessary to keep America safe. When the Iranian regime escalated throughout 2019, former President Trump resisted responding with military force unless and until Iran's behavior resulted in the death of an American citizen. That happened when an American military contractor was killed as a result of



Iran-backed militia violence in Iraq. The response was the aforementioned killing of Soleimani.

Similarly, President Biden and his team must consider identifying and articulating publicly what their threshold for U.S. military action is and must, in the meantime, consider what kinds of military options would send a particular message. And then prepare for any escalation by the Iranian regime.

The Biden Administration, staffed with the same Obama-Biden Iran team, is unlikely to take similar actions because of its narrow and exclusive focus on a nuclear deal with Iran. But Congress and perhaps even European nations—with, for example, Germany announcing steps, including downgrading its relations with Iran—might be in a different place and have a more grounded perspective of what is at stake when it comes to dealing with Iran.

BIOGRAPHIES

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