



August 8, 2024

RESEARCH REPORT | Center for American Security

EMPOWERING THE IRANIAN PEOPLE TO ADVANCE AMERICA'S SECURITY

Kenneth R. Timmerman

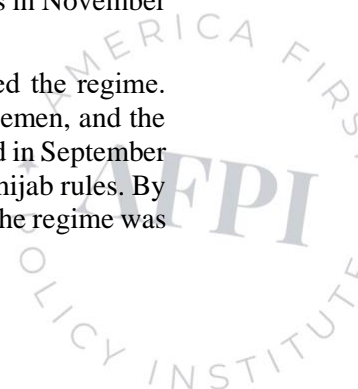
TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ The Biden Administration's concessions toward Iran, which have emboldened the regime's support to proxies in the region and enabled its nuclear weapons program, follow a long history of U.S. relations with Iran in which the solution to deterring the regime has been unclear.
- ★ The relaxation of sanctions by the Biden Administration has brought Tehran a windfall of at least \$100 billion since 2021, which it has used to support terrorist proxies, expand its missile and nuclear weapons capabilities, and rebuild its military.
- ★ Iran, Russia, and China have created an Axis of Opportunism that includes strategic military cooperation and a robust parallel financial system to evade Western sanctions.
- ★ With Russian financing, Iran is completing the final link of a transportation corridor that will link Russia to the Persian Gulf, realizing Moscow's centuries-long quest to reach the warm seas.
- ★ The next administration should adopt a "Maximum Pressure, Maximum Support" approach, reimposing sanctions on the Iranian regime while enacting policies to enable the Iranian pro-freedom movement.

Introduction

The Islamic regime in Iran is on a roll. Since President Biden came to office, the United States has stopped enforcing Trump-era sanctions on Iranian oil exports, paid \$6 billion in exchange for the release of five dual-citizen hostages, and sought to revive the failed 2015 nuclear deal. The administration allowed United Nations sanctions on Iran's missile programs to expire in October 2023 and waived sanctions in November 2023, allowing Iran to access \$10 billion in frozen assets in Iraq.

Far from moderating the regime's behavior, these U.S. concessions have only emboldened the regime. Since 2021, Tehran has expanded its support for terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian Territories. At home, the regime cracked down on nationwide protests that erupted in September 2022 after the murder of a young Iranian Kurdish woman for failing to comply with Islamic hijab rules. By the time the Biden Administration gave up its efforts to revive the nuclear deal in late 2023, the regime was



flush with cash, impervious to outside pressures, and emboldened to attack U.S. assets and U.S. allies in the region with impunity.

Further enhancing the Iranian regime's position was the expansion of its alliances with Russia and China. Not only did Tehran sign massive, long-term oil and investment deals with both powers, but they also solidified military and strategic ties to the point where it is no exaggeration to speak of a Russia-China-Iran Axis of Opportunism. In just three short years, the Iranian regime has gone from being virtually broke and fearful of the U.S. "Maximum Pressure" campaign of President Trump to becoming the region's power broker. And now, the International Atomic Energy Agency is warning that Iran has accelerated the production of highly enriched uranium to the point where it could produce enough weapons-grade uranium (WGU) for a nuclear warhead "in as little as seven days" and enough for thirteen weapons "in five months."¹

How did we get here? And, more importantly, what policies should the next administration adopt to curb Iran's expanding regional ambitions and the likelihood that it will become a nuclear power? The best first step is to resume the Maximum Pressure policy of robust sanctions against the Iranian regime while reasserting a credible U.S. military deterrent to Tehran and its proxies. Meanwhile, the U.S. should develop an "all of government" approach to provide maximum support for the Iranian people in their quest for freedom.

Previous Policies Toward the Iranian Regime Have Failed to Achieve their Declared Goals

The United States has pursued dramatically different approaches toward the Islamic regime in Iran since the 1990s, depending on which political party held the White House.

Under the Clinton Administration, the U.S. announced a "dual containment" strategy meant to keep both Islamic Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq from becoming threats to the international order. But President Clinton only agreed to impose a trade embargo on the Iranian regime because Congress threatened to do it for him with the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), championed by New York Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato. Clinton hoped to strike a historic deal with Tehran that would have resolved decades of hostilities by encouraging Boeing to sell civilian airliners to Iran and U.S. oil giant CONOCO to bid on a gigantic oil and gas development project. Congress killed both deals and any immediate hope of reconciliation with Tehran.

During the final years of his presidency, Clinton said the U.S. had become "sanction-happy"² and again sought to negotiate a sweeping deal with Tehran, appointing State Department legal advisor David R. Andrews as his "special negotiator for U.S.-Iran claims" on September 19, 2000.³ Once again, as during the Iran-Contra fiasco, U.S. policymakers were seeking a "moderate mullah" in Tehran, a species former CIA Director and Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned did not exist. "[T]here was no such faction when it came to the United States. Toward the United States, they were all radicals," he wrote in his 1996 memoir.⁴

President George W. Bush came to office in January 2001, fully intending to focus his presidency on domestic issues until the September 11, 2001, attacks on America. White House advisor Zalmay Khalilzad met on multiple occasions with Iranian regime emissaries after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the hope of enlisting Iran's help against al Qaeda in Afghanistan. However, he told reporters at a press conference in Kabul on January 18, 2002, that Iran was instead "allowing al Qaeda fighters to escape Afghanistan and enter Iran."⁵ President Bush then designated Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil" along with Iraq and North Korea in his 2002 State of the Union speech. In fact, as Khalilzad told a pro-Tehran lobbying group shortly after that speech, Iran's relationship with al Qaeda went much deeper than the United States had previously believed, and the regime was "facilitating the movement of al Qaeda terrorists."^{6 7}

Even after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Khalilzad continued to meet with Iranian envoys in Geneva, giving the lie to subsequent claims by pro-Tehran lobbyists that the Axis of Evil speech put an end to a promising dialogue between the two countries. When asked about those meetings in May 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters, “We do have channels that we are using with the Iranians, and communicating to them that they ought to review their policies in light of the changed strategic situation, and with a particular emphasis on their nuclear weapons development program...”⁸

Powell was referring to the latest revelations at the International Atomic Energy Agency, whose director general, Mohammad ElBaradei, had finally visited uranium enrichment facilities Iran had tried to keep secret from the IAEA. The Bush Administration, while often termed “isolationist” or “unilateralist” by political opponents at home and abroad, spent much of the next five years getting the IAEA governing board to issue a series of declarations condemning Iran for its non-compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, to which it was a signatory, and with the bilateral engagements it had made to the IAEA. Bush Administration diplomats turned these governing board resolutions into binding United Nations Security Council resolutions that imposed increasingly onerous, multilateral sanctions on Iran’s economy, in particular its oil and gas industry. The six resolutions imposing UN sanctions on Iran remained in place until President Obama negotiated the Iran nuclear deal in 2015.⁹

President Obama came to office vowing to reverse the Bush sanctions policy, sending a letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei offering greater cooperation between the two countries.¹⁰ But because Secretary of State Colin Powell and his successor, Condoleezza Rice, had succeeded in getting those sanctions enshrined by UN Security Council resolutions, he could not unilaterally remove them. Instead, Obama took steps designed to indicate to the regime in Tehran that his administration did not see it as an enemy and had no intention of overthrowing the regime or even providing lip-service support to pro-freedom demonstrators.

This became scandalously obvious during the June 2009 massive protests in Tehran, when millions of Iranians took to the streets after the contested re-election of hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, waving signs in English that read, “Obama are you with us?” For several weeks after the protests erupted, Obama and the entire administration remained silent. And when Obama did finally make a public statement, it was to apologize to the Iranian regime for previous U.S. efforts to “meddle” in domestic Iranian politics. This prompted former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar to pen a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed titled “Silence has consequences for Iran.” He called Obama’s refusal to meddle “a poor excuse for passivity” and noted, “the less we protest, the more people will die.”¹¹

The negotiations leading up to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, led by Secretary of State John Kerry and his special envoy, Rob Malley, were contentious, as was the agreement itself. In June 2015, as a UN-imposed deadline neared, Kerry vented his frustration with the failure of the talks in public.¹² He then proceeded to make a series of last-minute concessions to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Three times, they publicly announced that they had reached a deal, but each time, Zarif returned to Tehran, where the Supreme Leader made additional demands. On July 14, 2015, the day the UN deadline for making the deal expired, Kerry agreed to all the Iranian demands.¹³ These included ending restrictions on installing advanced enrichment centrifuges, no intrusive IAEA inspections, no U.S. nationals as nuclear inspectors, a sunset on a UN conventional arms embargo, lifting UN restrictions on Iran’s ballistic missile programs, and the removal of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Quds Force, and top international terrorists, including Qassem Soleimani, from U.S. Treasury Department’s terrorist lists.

The concessions were so breathtaking that prominent Senate Democrats Chuck Schumer (NY), Bob Menendez (NJ), Ben Cardin (MD), and Joe Manchin (WV) broke ranks with their caucus to join a bipartisan resolution of disapproval of the deal, 58–42, just shy of the 60-vote threshold required for passage under the terms of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015. This was the only legislative means available to opponents of the deal to express their objections since the Obama Administration had not submitted the

agreement as a treaty requiring a two-thirds vote of approval.¹⁴ That decision meant that the nuclear deal was an unratified presidential executive agreement, not a treaty. President Trump took advantage of this status to exercise his presidential authority to withdraw U.S. participation from what he called “the worst deal ever negotiated” on May 8, 2018.

President Obama, like other Democrats before him, was hoping that by making concessions, he could entice the Iranian regime to stop its rogue and malevolent behavior. However, there is no evidence to suggest this occurred. The Iranian regime did not cut off its support for Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and other terror groups around the world. It did not slow its development of long-range ballistic missiles, even though these programs remained temporarily under UN restrictions. It continued to crack down on pro-freedom demonstrators at home and upped its support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, turning that back-burner conflict into a burning proxy war with Saudi Arabia. Just six months after the deal, the IRGC captured two U.S. naval patrol boats sailing in international waters between Kuwait and Bahrain, taking the sailors hostage and publicly humiliating them.¹⁵

Even on the nuclear file, which Obama claimed the deal had resolved, Iran continued its pursuit of weapons technology and capabilities and was specifically allowed to develop and produce next-generation centrifuges, dramatically shortening its pathway to nuclear weapons. Media support for the deal remained strong, and as White House advisor Ben Rhodes later admitted, it was elaborately orchestrated by the White House to the point that the national media became an “echo chamber” of administration positions.¹⁶

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump excoriated the Iran nuclear deal, and expectations were that he would pull out of it. When Trump annulled U.S. participation in the agreement in May 2018, none of the disasters that the deal’s supporters had predicted occurred. Trump reimposed the UN sanctions—unilaterally, this time because the JCPOA remained in force. Soon, he and his administration were talking about a “Maximum Pressure” campaign, whose goal, according to the president, was to bring Iran back to the negotiating table where he, President Trump, would hammer out a deal that would eliminate the threat of Iranian nuclear weapons for generations.

There is no doubt that the Maximum Pressure sanctions had a significant impact on the Iranian economy. Iran’s oil exports dropped from more than two million barrels per day to 400,000 barrels per day by the time Trump left office. Foreign currency reserves fell to just \$4 billion, their lowest level in decades.¹⁷ Economically, the regime was on the ropes. “Iran’s petrochemical and petroleum sectors are primary sources of funding for the Iranian regime’s global terrorist activities and enable its persistent use of violence against its own people,” Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said when announcing new sanctions on Iran’s oil industry in January 2020.¹⁸ Reducing those resources translated into less material support for international terrorist groups. “In the past, Tehran has spent as much as \$700 million per year to support terrorist groups, including Hizballah and Hamas, though its ability to provide financial support in 2019 was constrained by crippling U.S. sanctions,” according to the U.S. Department of State.¹⁹

Just like presidents before him, however, it appeared that President Trump was not seeking regime change but only to change the regime’s behavior. He repeatedly offered to negotiate with Iranian regime leaders, and they refused.

Biden Reverses Course, Iran Advances

President Biden took office vowing to undo the actions of his predecessor, with seemingly no regard for the negative impact on the U.S. economy or on our national security interests. From imposing new limits on oil and gas resources in the United States to abandoning talks underway to bring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords, Biden prided himself on being the anti-Trump,

Nowhere was this more apparent than in his determination to revive the JCPOA. After an initial claim by incoming Secretary of State Anthony Blinken that U.S. sanctions on Iran would remain in place until Iran came into compliance with the restrictions on its nuclear program contained in the 2015 deal, the Biden Administration reversed course, formally notifying the United Nations Security Council on February 18, 2021, that the United States “hereby withdraws” three letters from the Trump Administration that reimposed U.N. sanctions on Iran lifted by the JCPOA.^{20 21}

For more than two and a half years, White House Iran envoy Rob Malley conducted backchannel negotiations, offering enormous financial incentives if the Iranian regime would just return to official talks. Sanctions relief alone was evaluated to have earned Iran about \$25 billion per year in additional oil revenue. In June 2023, the U.S. allowed Iran to access \$10 billion in hard currency held by Iraq for its purchases of Iranian electricity, and last September, the administration agreed to pay \$6 billion in exchange for the release of five dual-citizen hostages, all without a vote by Congress—a windfall for Iran of more than \$90 billion, by conservative estimates.²²

The additional oil revenues predictably fed Iran’s terror proxies. According to an Israeli security source quoted by Reuters, Iranian regime aid to Hamas went from \$100 million in 2022 to \$350 million in 2023, the year of the October 7 attacks on Israel.²³ The Atlantic Council—normally sympathetic to Tehran—estimated that the IRGC provided weapons to its terror proxies in 2022 worth \$6 billion, thanks to sanctions relief under Biden.²⁴

These U.S. concessions failed to moderate Iran’s nuclear development. Former Iranian nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi said in February 2024 that Iran has crossed “all the scientific and technological nuclear thresholds” needed to produce nuclear weapons.²⁵ And he is just one of many senior officials, including IRGC commanders and Supreme Leader Khamenei himself, who have become increasingly bold in brandishing Iran’s nuclear capabilities.²⁶ The International Atomic Energy Agency is now warning that Iran has accelerated the production of highly enriched uranium to the point where it could produce enough WGU for a nuclear warhead “in as little as seven days” and enough for thirteen weapons “in five months.”²⁷ Iran’s nuclear program has expanded by leaps and bounds during the Biden presidency to the point where one must acknowledge the Iranian regime as a nuclear weapons state in all but name.

Both approaches—unilateral U.S. concessions versus economic and diplomatic pressure—failed to achieve their stated objectives. These approaches were predicated on the idea that the United States could change the behavior of the regime. The Democrats believed that inducements were key. Republicans thought sanctions and diplomatic pressure would work. Both approaches were fundamentally flawed because they were based on a Western cost-benefit analysis of the Iranian leadership and its motivations. The regime showed repeatedly, over decades, that it was willing to pay a very high price for its bad behavior—for example, losing hundreds of billions of dollars in oil revenues during the George W. Bush and Trump Administrations in order to maintain its nuclear weapons program. And when it was rewarded, as under Clinton, Obama, and Biden, it saw no reason to reciprocate. I will explain the reasons for this behavior below.

Military Pressure Works—To a Degree

The one type of pressure that has had a restraining effect on the regime is kinetic military action. In 1988, after the Iranian regime was caught mining the Strait of Hormuz, President Reagan ordered U.S. forces in the region to conduct an intensive campaign of air and naval strikes called Operation Praying Mantis. During a 24-hour period, the U.S. sank one-third of the Iranian navy, disabled two oil export platforms, and downed two fighter jets. Iran has not mined the Persian Gulf since then, although it periodically threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz.

When the Trump White House learned over New Year's Eve 2020 that Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani was coming to Baghdad to oversee a full-scale invasion of the U.S. Embassy, the president ordered a drone strike that killed Soleimani at 2 a.m. on January 3, 2020, along with a top Iraqi militia leader (the strike also came after Iranian proxies in Iraq killed three U.S. contractors). While Iranian leaders fumed and vowed retaliation, their response was to launch a salvo of rockets against al Asad air base in Iraq—after warning the Iraqis ahead of time that they were about to launch. The Iranian warning allowed all U.S. and Iraqi troops on base to take shelter before the missiles struck. While some military personnel suffered traumatic brain injuries, no one was killed. After President Trump reportedly warned Iran's Supreme Leader that he would be targeted personally if more Americans were killed, Iran launched no further attacks.

Similarly, on April 1, 2024, a precision strike attributed to Israel demolished the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, where the Quds Force chief of operations for Syria and Lebanon, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, was hosting military planning sessions with his subordinates. The consular building was sandwiched by other structures in the Iranian embassy complex, but not a window on those other buildings was broken. The funeral announcement, issued three days later by a top advisor to Ayatollah Khamenei, revealed that the “martyr Zahedi” had played a “strategic role ... in the planning and execution of Al-Aqsa Flood,” the name Iran and Hamas used to designate the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel. If Israel was indeed behind the strike, which the entire world assumed to be the case, it demonstrated the astonishing reach of Israeli intelligence and the precision of Israeli military technology.²⁸

Iran's supreme leader vowed that Iran would retaliate for the violation of its diplomatic sovereignty by launching direct strikes against Israel from Iranian territory. A former CIA officer told the *New York Times* that Israel had been “reckless” in the Damascus raid. Another anonymous CIA official said that Israel would be hit by Iran “within 48 hours.”²⁹ More than a week went by with no Iranian action. Why? As Israeli government minister Benny Gantz told reporters, if Iran were to strike Israel directly, Israel would then strike targets inside Iran itself. And that is the one thing the Iranian leadership cannot allow to happen since it will reveal their weakness to the Iranian people.

When Iran eventually did strike Israel on April 14, 2024, once again, it provided hours of warning.³⁰ None of the 170 drones the regime launched succeeded in penetrating Israeli airspace. Most were taken down by U.S., British, French, Saudi, and Jordanian aircraft, which also shot down some 30 slow-flying cruise missiles. Of the approximately 130 ballistic missiles Iran launched, half reportedly exploded at launch or veered off course. Israeli officials said they succeeded in destroying “99%” of the remaining missiles using the Arrow missile defense system, with no Israeli fatalities. A few missiles reached the vicinity of Nevatim air base in southern Israel, where Israel's fleet of F-35 fighters was based but did no damage. In much of the U.S. media, Israel was widely seen as the winner and Iran the loser after the failed attacks.

Many speculated that Israel would respond forcefully to the Iranian attacks, perhaps even by striking Iranian nuclear facilities, but public pressures from the United States appear to have convinced the Israelis to limit their response. Israeli aircraft hit Iranian proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, while either a drone or a stand-off missile fired from outside Iranian airspace took out the Russian-supplied S-300 missile defense system protecting the Natanz uranium enrichment site. Iranian officials denied that Israel had hit any targets inside Iran, claiming that the explosions heard by residents had been caused by local terrorists. Iran launched no further direct strikes on Israel in response.

These three incidents show that military deterrence can work, especially if it is coupled with a forceful, declaratory policy that makes clear to the Iranian leadership the U.S. (or Israeli) red lines and what we will do if Iran crosses them. Such a declaratory policy must be convincing and backed by a credible threat of military force, not the mealy-mouthed pronouncements politicians regularly make that Iran “will not be allowed” to get nuclear weapons. Iran's response to direct military pressure has been cautious, aimed primarily at saving face but not inviting further escalation that would result in direct strikes against Iran.

This would seem to be what the regime fears most since a successful military strike against significant infrastructure in Iran would reveal the regime's weakness and embolden the Iranian people. Speaking to CNN as the initial attacks on Israel were unfolding, former National Intelligence Manager for Iran at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Norman Roule, opined that Iran wanted to avoid provoking a conventional war because it could "perhaps end" the regime.³¹

Core Values of the Regime

As mentioned above, the Iranian regime does not make decisions based on a Western-style cost-benefit analysis. They do not care what we in the West think of them. They mock our obsession with human rights; they don't even care about losing the ability to sell their oil on the open market or to use the international banking system. Decades of pariah status and a regime structure that rewards black marketeers have led them to develop extensive parallel networks, from ship-to-ship transfers for oil exports to a parallel banking system with Russia and China.

And the U.S. has consistently failed in its efforts to exploit imagined rifts inside the ruling elite, such as an effort across many administrations to find the "mythical moderate mullah," to paraphrase former Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Five goals unite the ruling clerical elite in Iran and its enforcement arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps:

- Maintaining the Islamic Republic at all costs, which means the system of *Velayat-e-faghih*, or absolute clerical rule. The many attempts at "reforming" the regime from the inside have all run aground on this core value. To end the *Velayat-e-faghih* (for example, by abolishing the position of Supreme Leader) means ending the regime.
- An aggressive expansion of Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf and beyond, to become the region's predominant power.
- Ending the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf.
- Active subversion of all efforts by Israel or the United States to find a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians.
- Developing a robust nuclear weapons capability.³²

The only one of these goals even remotely challenged by a sanctions-only policy has been Iran's efforts to drive the United States military from the Persian Gulf since it requires extensive military and financial resources.

Appeasement Versus Subversion

Biden has shown, like Obama and Clinton before him, that he believes the Islamic regime in Tehran is a rational player in the Middle East. He has vocally opposed treating the regime as a rogue actor since at least 2002, when he told a conference sponsored by a pro-Tehran lobbying group that it was in America's "naked self-interest" to have better ties to Iran.³³ His recent efforts to restrain Israel from massive retaliation for the Iranian military strike on Israel—rather than vigorously condemning Iran—demonstrates how far beyond the mainstream his appeasement of Iran has gone.

But Biden is not alone in promoting better U.S. ties with the Islamic regime in Tehran. Groups such as the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), the Quincy Institute, J Street, and the Council on American Islamic Relations have made common cause with Tehran.³⁴

Members of these groups, as well as individuals with direct ties to Iranian regime decision-makers or intelligence officials, have burrowed inside successive U.S. administrations as appointed officials or policy-making senior bureaucrats. NIAC regularly places its members in congressional offices, while a former NIAC official, Sahar Nowrouzadeh, played an instrumental role in crafting the 2015 Iran nuclear deal while at the State Department and the NSC.³⁵

In September 2023, Iran International TV and investigative reporter Jay Solomon exposed a network of senior U.S. government officials who were part of the Iranian regime’s “Iran Experts Initiative,” groomed by Tehran to influence U.S. government policy toward Iran.³⁶ Chief among them was Rob Malley, the lead negotiator for the JCPOA, who returned to the White House as Biden’s “Iran envoy” in an effort to revive the deal. Also identified as part of the initiative were top Malley protégés Ali Vaez, Dina Esfandiary, and Ariane Tabatabai. According to emails revealed by Iran International TV and Jay Solomon, Ms. Tabatabai checked in with Iran’s foreign ministry before attending international events and has held top jobs at the White House, the State Department, and most recently as chief of staff to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, a position that oversees highly classified U.S. intelligence and paramilitary programs, some of them involving Israel.³⁷

Malley was informed by the State Department in April 2023 that his security clearance was under review, and he has not returned to government work since then. In a letter to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken on May 6, 2024, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Sen. Jim Risch of Idaho, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, sought additional information on what they asserted was an ongoing FBI investigation of Malley for having “allegedly transferred classified documents to his personal email account.”³⁸

On the other side of the political spectrum, members of Congress and prominent figures in previous Republican administrations have given public support to the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Islamic Marxist group that paints itself as the “Iranian Resistance.” The regime regularly accuses the MEK of carrying out sabotage actions, including the assassination of officials involved in the nuclear and missile programs. The group served as the armed vanguard of the Islamic revolutionaries who toppled the Shah in 1979, rounding up and assassinating some 3,500 Iranian army officers and pro-Shah loyalists in the first days of the Revolution. Most Iranian opposition groups reject the MEK, not only because of its fierce opposition to the shah and its role in establishing the Islamic Republic but because it promotes an Islamic identity for Iran, symbolized by its headscarf-clothed “president-elect,” Maryam Rajavi. The U.S. government long maintained the MEK on its list of foreign terrorist organizations because the group conducted a series of public assassinations of U.S. military officers serving in Iran in the 1970s but removed the group after a lawsuit in 2012.³⁹

The Russia-China-Iran Axis of Opportunism

The Iranian regime has signed massive partnership agreements with China and Russia since Joe Biden took office, agreements so vast in scope they could change the strategic equation in the region in short order. For China, the deals are all about securing future oil supplies, as well as giving the People’s Liberation Army a foothold in the Persian Gulf for the first time. For Russia, they are the culmination of a three-century pursuit of reaching the warm seas through the Persian Gulf. The Biden Administration’s lack of response to these moves and its hostility toward key U.S. ally (and Iran rival) Saudi Arabia emboldened Russia, China, and Iran to create this Axis of Opportunism.

The Chinese were the first to formalize the new arrangements, which they called a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” on March 27, 2021, committing Iran as a partner in China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a multi-trillion-dollar scheme to expand Chinese influence from Asia to Europe. Under the new agreement, China pledged to invest in transportation and agriculture projects in Iran and to build a new military port

just outside the Strait of Hormuz at Chahbahar that could host a permanent Chinese military contingent, the first time since the 1906 Constitutional Revolution that Iran has allowed a foreign power to establish a permanent military base on its territory. In exchange, Iran guaranteed long-term oil supplies at preferential prices to China. The deal, as announced, spanned twenty-five years and was worth an estimated \$400 billion.⁴⁰

In October 2021, it was Russia's turn to announce a new strategic partnership with Iran, which they called the Global Agreement for Cooperation between Iran and Russia. The deal with Russia included formal membership for Iran in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and a free-trade zone linking China, Russia, former Soviet Central Asian Republics, and others in the region. An Iranian foreign ministry spokesman, Saeed Khatibzadeh, commented that with Iran, China, and Russia, "the eastern axis is emerging."⁴¹

In January 2022, the three countries held joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman and the northern Indian Ocean, which Tehran called "Maritime Security Belt 2022." The exercises, first launched in December 2019, were canceled in 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three navies conducted their third joint drills in the region in March 2023, just as Putin was expanding ties with China and Iran,⁴² and a fourth set in March 2024.⁴³ They also conducted naval exercises off the coast of South Africa with the South African navy.⁴⁴

Putin visited Iran in July 2022 on his first trip outside Russia since his invasion of Ukraine five months earlier. While he was there, Iran's national oil company signed a \$40 billion agreement with Russia's state-run Gazprom that included Russian investment to develop Iranian gas fields and the construction of new gas export pipelines.⁴⁵

In May 2023, Russia and Iran signed a \$1.7 billion railway agreement that the two countries boasted would rival the Suez Canal as a global trade route. The deal included financing of a long-planned, 162-kilometer-long Rasht-Astara rail line along the Caspian Sea coast that would link Russian ports on the Baltic Sea to Iranian ports on the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman. It was the last link in the chain that would accomplish Russia's centuries-long struggle to establish a secure transportation corridor to the warm seas.⁴⁶

Thanks to the relaxation of U.S. sanctions on Iran ordered by President Biden in January 2021 and the expansion of Iran's economic ties to Russia and China, Iran's oil revenue soared to \$95 billion in just over two years, more than \$32 billion of that in "excess funds that Iran was able to generate because of relaxed or unenforced "Maximum Pressure" sanctions that legally remain on the books but de facto are not enforced," according to Benham Ben Taleblu, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies.⁴⁷ Most of that excess oil was sold to China.

Following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, Russia and China repeatedly supported Iran and Hamas at the UN Security Council, introducing multiple ceasefire resolutions aimed at curtailing Israel's efforts to dismantle the Hamas terror infrastructure, and on April 19, 2024, to support UN recognition of a Palestinian state. In March 2024, Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen agreed to exempt Russian and Chinese ships from drone and missile attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea.⁴⁸

Also, in March 2024, Iran and Russia signed nineteen separate agreements aimed at cementing their efforts to build a massive natural gas cartel along with Qatar. Together, the three countries control sixty percent of the world's natural gas reserves. They were instrumental in founding the Gulf Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), "a Gas OPEC," whose eleven members "control over 71 percent of global gas reserves, 44 percent of its marketed production, 52 percent of its gas pipelines, and 57 percent of its LNG exports," according to industry analyst Simon Watkins.⁴⁹

Taken together, Russia, China, and Iran are in the process of building an energy/transportation powerhouse that will dominate the Persian Gulf region for decades to come, and all of it without a single countering move by the Biden Administration.

Iran's Pro-Freedom Movement

In an interview with Charlie Rose at the World Economic Forum in 2005, former President Bill Clinton demonstrated the extraordinary misconceptions that appear to underlie the thinking of key Democrats toward the Iranian regime. After the election of the “moderate” cleric Mohammad Khatami as president in 1997, Clinton said, Iran has been the only country “with elections, including the United States, including Israel, including you name it, where the liberals, or the progressives, have won two-thirds to seventy percent of the vote in six elections: two for president, two for the parliament, the Majlis, two for the mayoralties. In every single election, the guys I identify with got two-thirds to 70% of the vote. There is no other country in the world I can say that about, certainly not my own.”⁵⁰

While President Khatami certainly began his presidency with the intention of making “liberal” reforms, including loosening restrictions on the press and on women, when faced with a choice between those policies and his own political survival, he chose the latter. On July 8, 1999, hardline regime supporters stormed a student dormitory at Tehran University, tossing rebellious students from the rooftops to their deaths. The next day, students rallied to protest the attacks, shutting down the university. Led by a young journalist named Roozbeh Farahanipour, students broke through the gates of the university on July 12, where they were joined by an estimated 10,000 protestors on the streets of Tehran. Similar student-led protests erupted in other cities around the country, but a nationwide communications black-out prevented the news from circulating.⁵¹

A group of twenty-four senior Revolutionary Guards commanders wrote President Khatami, imploring him to intervene to shut down the protests: “Mr. President, if you don’t take a revolutionary decision today, if you fail to abide by your Islamic and nationalistic duty, tomorrow will be too late... Our patience has reached its limits.” Khatami broke his silence the next day. “I am sure these people have evil aims,” he said of the protest organizers. His defense minister, Ali Shamkhani, added that the regime intended to “enforce security at any price,” which they did. In the ensuing crackdown, several thousand students were arrested and tried for sedition, while at least seventy were known to have disappeared.⁵²

The 1999 student uprising began with protests over the closure by the regime of *Salam*, a reformist daily newspaper. But it quickly morphed into a broader anti-regime movement. Similar anti-regime uprisings erupted in 2003 and 2005. In June 2009, following the disputed re-election of hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, more than three million people took to the streets of Tehran in what became known as the Green Movement, the color adopted by reformist presidential candidate and former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Moussavi. Many of them held up signs in English: “Obama, are you with us?” By his silence, President Obama clearly answered that he was not.

The notion that reformers could change the Iranian regime from within died with the Green Movement. The regime placed Moussavi and his wife, the activist Zahra Rahnava, under strict house arrest in 2011, sending a clear message to any successor what fate awaited them if they dared challenge the ruling orthodoxy. The irony in Moussavi’s case was that he was calling for greater freedoms for the Iranian people, not the end of the *Velayat-e faghih*. Even that was a bridge too far for the regime.⁵³

The most recent wave of anti-regime protests began on September 16, 2022, following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish-Iranian woman arrested three days earlier for “improperly” wearing the Islamic Hijab or headscarf. Protestors across Iran, from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, rallied to the historic Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jivan, Azadi* (Woman, Life, Freedom). Unlike earlier rounds of protests, including those in 2019, Woman, Life, Freedom was truly a nationwide movement that bridged Iran’s socio-economic and ethnic divides.

It has become commonplace in the West to bemoan the lack of a coordinated Iranian opposition movement. This is one reason why many frustrated American politicians have supported the MEK, which exhibits

Marxist discipline and cohesion. But the diffuse leadership of the pro-freedom movement in Iran has its advantages. For one, when the regime cracks down and arrests prominent activists, there are always others to take their place. Second, the protest movement itself has become a breeding ground for the next generation of Iranian leaders. Finally, the heterogeneity of the movement has required tolerance and openness to opposing viewpoints, not a strong suit of traditional Iranian politics.

Policy Recommendations

1. Maximum support for the pro-freedom movement⁵⁴

Previous U.S. policies have failed to change the behavior of the Islamic regime or even, through enticements, to find an accommodation with it to prevent Iranian attacks on U.S. bases in the region or on Iranian dual-nationals living overseas. To promote stability in the region, the only solution short of total war on Iran is to empower the Iranian people to change the regime.

Some may call this a radical notion, especially from an America First perspective. But if the goal is to enhance U.S. security in the region and to reduce the threats to America's friends and to the American homeland, there is no alternative. The Islamic regime in Tehran has a track record since 1979 as a disrupter. As it has gained self-assurance, wealth, influence, and international allies, it has become increasingly aggressive, bold, and expansionist. The April 14, 2024, attack on Israel, which came after extensive appeasement by the Biden Administration, demonstrated this.

Here are just a few policy options to provide maximum support to the Iranian opposition:

- The U.S. should revamp our international broadcasting activities to support the Iranian opposition, for those both inside Iran and in exile. We need new leadership at Radio Farda, the “freedom radio” within the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty orbit, and to change the way the Voice of America Persian Service operates.
- The U.S. should support independent broadcasting networks, such as Iran International TV in London, that have a solid track record of responsible and innovative reporting that has challenged the regime.
- The U.S. should fund the distribution of Starlink terminals inside Iran, or some equivalent satellite, WIMAX, or other Internet service that cannot be jammed by the regime, to prevent the regime from taking the country dark during times of protest and regime crackdown.
- U.S. government spokesmen should regularly address the repression of women, gays, children, and ethnic minorities inside Iran in the U.S. media to increase public awareness of the regime's repressive nature.
- The U.S. should facilitate the movements of Iranian opposition activists and provide, where possible, financial assistance to them.
- The U.S. should participate in and/or sponsor public conferences that bring Iranian opposition activists together and revive Department of State and National Endowment for Democracy funding for civil society.
- A “U.S. ambassador to the People of Iran” could be named to assist in coordinating opposition activities and promoting them on the world stage.
- This new ambassador and other U.S. government officials could regularly meet with members of the Iranian American community and the Iranian diaspora, both in public and in private.
- Some experts have called for the U.S. to grant Iranians a private right of action to recover assets stolen by the Islamic regime since 1979, similar to that granted Cuban-Americans through the Helms-Burton Act.

2. Maximum pressure on the regime

Empowering the opposition must go hand-in-hand with delegitimizing the regime in Tehran. This must be done at the United Nations, within international organizations, and in the media.

- The U.S. should work with the International Atomic Energy Agency to resume vigorous inspections of the regime’s illegal nuclear sites and demand accounting for previous weapons-related activity.
- Despite expected opposition from Russia and China, the U.S. should encourage the IAEA to refer Iran’s non-compliance to the United Nations Security Council for multilateral sanctions, as happened from 2005 to 2007.
- The U.S. should reimpose crippling sanctions on the regime’s oil exports and ban its access to the U.S. dollar and Euro financial markets. Sanctions on individual bad actors are not enough.
- Since the IRGC always gets called by Tehran to repress pro-freedom demonstrations, it has become the most hated institution in Iran. As matters escalate between the Islamic regime and the U.S. and its allies in the region, the U.S. should make clear that Iranian attacks against Americans will result in U.S. military strikes against Iran, in particular the IRGC.

3. Targeted Sanctions to Counter the Russia-China-Iran Axis

The United States cannot sit back and watch as Russia, China, and Iran put a stranglehold on the world’s oil and gas supplies. Just as the Reagan Administration imposed a ban on the sale of pipeline equipment for the Soviet natural gas pipeline to Europe on December 29, 1981, and the Trump Administration shut down supplies to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline through legislation on December 21, 2019, the next administration should sanction supplies to the proposed Russian and Chinese oil and gas projects with Iran, including equipment needed to build new LNG terminals.

Natural gas injection is another key choke point, as many of Iran’s onshore oil fields are nearing depletion. According to Iran’s own figures and reports from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, roughly 80 percent of Iran’s oil production “comes from aging fields facing pressure drops.” Without natural gas injection, Iran could face an “annual production decline of 8 to 10 percent.”⁵⁵ That makes this sector ripe for external pressure.

The U.S. Treasury Department, with support from groups such as United Against a Nuclear Iran, has been successful across Democrat and Republican administrations in identifying and placing sanctions on Iran’s “shadow fleet” of oil tankers—that is, tankers whose ownership and flag registration change often to evade sanctions. These efforts should be expanded.

Others have suggested creating a price cap for Iranian oil, sanctions on European sellers of ships to Iran’s shadow fleet, and sanctions on oil field service companies.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The core values of the Islamic regime in Iran are inimical to America, America’s security, and the security of our allies in the region. Neither sanctions nor appeasement has ever won concessions from the regime on those values since to abandon them would mean abandoning their core supporters and showing weakness to their domestic enemies. If the United States wants to inhibit the Iranian regime’s bad behavior, we must do more than impose sanctions. We must hit them at the core.

The Iranian regime declared war on America on April 18, 1983, when they destroyed our embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. They declared war on Israel on April 14, 2024. It’s time to recognize that we are at war with this regime and to defeat it. America’s best—but, as of yet, unacknowledged—allies in this war are the freedom-loving people of Iran. Investing in their freedom is an investment in America’s freedom and security.

Author Biography

Kenneth Timmerman currently serves as a Senior Fellow in the Center for American Security at the America First Policy Institute. Kenneth has reported from and on the Middle East for the past 40 years for major news organizations around the world. His latest book, *[And the Rest is History: Tales of Hostages, Arms Dealers, Dirty Tricks, and Spies](#)*, was published by Post Hill Press in August 2022. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by former Swedish deputy premier Per Ahlmark in 2006.

Endnotes

- ¹ David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, Spencer Faragasso, and Andrea Stricker, "Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report - February 2024," Institute for Science and International Security, March 4, 2024. <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-february-2024/>. "Iran is able to produce more weapon-grade uranium (WGU) and at a faster rate since the IAEA's last report in November 2023 due to increased stocks of enriched uranium and increased uranium enrichment capacity. Iran's stocks of enriched uranium and its centrifuge capacity combined are sufficient to make enough WGU... for seven nuclear weapons in one month, nine in two months, eleven in three months, 12-13 in four months, and 13 in five months."
- ² "Clinton says U.S. has become 'sanction-happy,'" Reuters, CBS News interview, June 20, 1998.
- ³ Kenneth R. Timmerman, "October Surprise, Part 8: Iran deal collapses," World Net Daily, Oct. 16, 2000. https://kentimmerman.com/news/2000_10_16-Clintons-October-Surprise-Part8.htm
- ⁴ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The ultimate insider's story of five presidents and how they won the Cold War*, Touchstone, New York (1996); p398.
- ⁵ Safa Haeri, "Khalilzad says al Qaeda fighters go to Iran," Iran Press Service, January 18, 2002.
- ⁶ Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Biden Buddies up to the Pro-Iran Lobby," *Insight magazine*, March 4, 2002.
- ⁷ In 2012, a U.S. District Court judge found that Iran had provided "material assistance" to some of the al Qaeda hijackers before the 9/11 attacks, and issued a default judgment against the Islamic regime, ordering it to pay \$7 billion to 9/11 families. The case is *Havlish v. Osama bin Laden et al.* The author provided expert testimony in this case and has been a consultant to the attorneys.
- ⁸ "Secretary of State Colin L. Powell on Board Plane en Route Tel Aviv/Jerusalem," transcript of exchange with reporters, Department of State, May 10, 2003.
- ⁹ "UN Security Council Resolutions on Iran," Fact sheet, Arms Control Association, undated. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Security-Council-Resolutions-on-Iran>
- ¹⁰ "Obama sent letter to Khamenei before the election, report says," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/24/khamenei-obama-letter>
- ¹¹ Jose Maria Aznar, "Silence has consequences for Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124605649582063489.html#mod=djemEditorialPage>
- ¹² Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei Hardens Stance On Nuclear Talks As Deadline Approaches," Associated Press, June 25, 2015.
- ¹³ Nic Robertson et al, "Iran nuclear talks hit snag over arms embargo," CNN.com, July 13, 2015; Fred Fleitz, "Iran Nuclear Surrender Watch; Thoughts for Congress," *National Review*, July 10, 2015, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/07/iran-nuclear-talks-obama-2/>
- ¹⁴ Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, a proponent of the deal, explained the arcane legislative mechanism as well as his reasons for supporting the deal, in a speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on the morning before the vote. Nuclear Agreement with Iran; Congressional Record Vol. 161, No. 128 (Senate - September 8, 2015). <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-161/issue-128/senate-section/article/S6438-3>
- ¹⁵ "Iran captures sailors, US patrol boats," BBC, Jan. 13, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35300019>
- ¹⁶ Paul Farhni, "Obama official says he pushed a 'narrative' to media to sell nuclear deal," *Washington Post*, May 6, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/obama-official-says-he-pushed-a-narrative-to-media-to-sell-the-iran-nuclear-deal/2016/05/06/5b90d984-13a1-11e6-8967-7ac733c56f12_story.html
- ¹⁷ Elliott Abrams, "Did the 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign Against Iran Fail?" Council on Foreign Relations blogpost, July 12, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/did-maximum-pressure-campaign-against-iran-fail>. See also: "U.S. 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign on Iran," The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, April 2, 2019. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/apr/02/us-maximum-pressure-campaign-iran>
- ¹⁸ "Treasury Targets International Network Supporting Iran's Petrochemical and Petroleum Industries," U.S. Department of the Treasury, Jan. 23, 2020. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm885>

-
- ¹⁹ Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*. Forward by Ambassador Nathan A. Sales. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019>
- ²⁰ “US Sanctions on Iran to Remain, Blinken Says,” *Voice of America*, January 27, 2021. https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_voa-news-iran_us-sanctions-iran-remain-blinken-says/6201312.html
- ²¹ “Biden withdraws Trump’s restoration of sanctions on Iran,” AP, February 18, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-iran-united-states-united-nations-aa8f38fa3bf7de3c09a469ec91664a3c>
- ²² Richard Goldberg, “Biden has a secret, illegal deal with Iran that gives mullahs everything they want,” *New York Post*, Sept. 12, 2024. <https://nypost.com/2023/09/12/biden-has-a-secret-illegal-deal-with-iran-that-gives-mullahs-everything-they-want/>
- ²³ Samia Nakhoul, “How Hamas secretly built a ‘mini-army’ to fight Israel,” *Reuters*, Oct. 16, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-hamas-secretly-built-mini-army-fight-israel-2023-10-13/>
- ²⁴ Kimberly Donovan, Maia Nikoladze, Ryan Murphy, and Yulia Bychkovska, “Global Sanctions Dashboard: How Iran evades sanctions and finances terrorist organizations like Hamas,” *Atlantic Council*, Oct. 26, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/global-sanctions-dashboard-how-iran-evades-sanctions-and-finances-terrorist-organizations-like-hamas/>
- ²⁵ “Former Iranian Nuclear Chief Ali-Akbar Salehi: Iran Has Crossed All Scientific And Technological Thresholds Necessary For Producing A Nuclear Bomb,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, Feb. 14, 2024. <https://www.memri.org/reports/former-iranian-nuclear-chief-ali-akbar-salehi-iran-has-crossed-all-scientific-and>
- ²⁶ See inter alia: <https://www.foxnews.com/world/iran-boasts-capability-attack-israeli-base-nuclear-official-indicates-ability-create-bomb>, and a compendium of comments here: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-nuclear-weapons-fatwa-khamenei/>
- ²⁷ David Albright, et al, “Analysis of IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report - February 2024,” *Institute for Science and International Security*, March 4, 2024. <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/analysis-of-iaea-iran-verification-and-monitoring-report-february-2024/>. “Iran is able to produce more weapon-grade uranium (WGU) and at a faster rate since the IAEA’s last report in November 2023 due to increased stocks of enriched uranium and increased uranium enrichment capacity. Iran’s stocks of enriched uranium and its centrifuge capacity combined are sufficient to make enough WGU... for seven nuclear weapons in one month, nine in two months, eleven in three months, 12-13 in four months, and 13 in five months.”
- ²⁸ “Close Associate of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei: The IRGC Qods Force Commander for Syria and Lebanon Who was Killed in Damascus was Involved in Planning and Execution of October 7 Hamas Attack,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, April 9, 2024. <https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-organization-close-supreme-leader-khamenei-mohammad-reza-zahedi-irgc-qods-force>
- ²⁹ “Fears Grow that Syria Strike Could Spur Retaliatory Attacks on Israel and U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 2, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/02/world/middleeast/syria-strikes-iran-israel-us.html>
- ³⁰ “Iran told Turkey in advance of its operation against Israel, Turkish sources say,” *Reuters*, April 14, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-informed-turkey-advance-its-operation-against-israel-turkish-source-2024-04-14/>
- ³¹ “Israel says its war cabinet is meeting now in Tel Aviv,” live coverage of the Iranian strike on Israel, *CNN*, April 14, 2024.
- ³² These goals have been the cement binding various elements of the regime for many decades. See, Kenneth R. Timmerman, “Fighting Proliferation Through Democracy: A Competitive Strategies Approach Toward Iran,” in Henry D. Sokolski (editor), *Prevailing in a Well-Armed World: Devising Competitive Strategies Against Weapons Proliferation*, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, March 2000.
- ³³ Kenneth R. Timmerman, “The Truth About Iran,” *Insight magazine*, March 12, 2002. https://kentimmerman.com/news/zal_iran_2002_03_12. This was the same conference, hosted by the American-Iranian Council, where White House advisor Zalmay Khalilzad revealed that Iran was sheltering al Qaeda terrorists, despite U.S. requests that it turn them over to the U.S.

³⁴ See, for example, the NIAC resources page of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran. <https://iran.org/NIAC-resources.html>

³⁵ Nahal Toosi, "State Dept. official reassigned amid conservative media attacks," Politico, April 21, 2017. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/21/sahar-nowrouzadeh-reassigned-state-department-237466>

³⁶ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Inside Tehran's Soft War," Iran International TV, September 2023. <https://content.iranintl.com/en/investigates/inside-tehran-softwar/index.html>. And Jay Solomon, "Inside Iran's influence operation," Semafor, Sept. 29, 2023. <https://www.semafor.com/article/09/25/2023/inside-irans-influence-operation>

³⁷ Ryan Lovelace, "Suspected Iranian Agent Working for Pentagon While U.S. Coordinated Defense of Israel," *Washington Times*, April 15, 2024. <https://jinsa.org/suspected-agent-working-for-pentagon-while-u-s-coordinated-defense-of-israel/>

³⁸ Nahal Toosi and Joe Gould, "FBI probes whether Iran envoy Malley committed crimes in handling classified info," Politico, May 10, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/10/fbi-probes-iran-envoy-malley-classified-info-00157321>

³⁹ Ali Harb, "How Iranian MEK went from US terror list to halls of Congress," Middle East Eye, July 17, 2019. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/Iranian-MEK-US-terror-list-halls-congress-PMOI-Iran>. For original MEK documents on its assassination of U.S. military officers in the 1970s, its role in the revolution, and MEK leader Massood Rajavi's support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, see the Foundation for Democracy in Iran's MEK Resources page. <http://iran.org/news/mek-resources.htm>

⁴⁰ "Iran and China sign 25-year cooperation agreement," Reuters, March 29, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-china-idUSKBN2BJ0AD/>. See also: Soroush Aliasgari and Marin Ekstrom, "Chabahar Port and Iran's Strategic Balancing with China and India," *The Diplomat*, Oct. 21, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/chabahar-port-and-irans-strategic-balancing-with-china-and-india/>

⁴¹ "Iran says ready to sign Russia strategic partnership, similar to one with China," Al Arabiya News (AFP), Oct. 11, 2021. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/10/11/Iran-says-ready-to-sign-Russia-strategic-partnership-similar-to-one-with-China>

⁴² Zane Zovak, Bradley Bowman, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Ryan Brobst, "China, Russia, and Iran hold trilateral naval drill," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Feb. 8, 2022. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/02/08/china-russia-iran-hold-trilateral-naval-drill/>.

⁴³ "Iran, Russia and China show off their ships in a joint naval drill in the Gulf of Oman," AP, March 15, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/iran-russia-china-joint-naval-drill-53a1b3a6f9fd2c4199d2ad7d8cd5a49e>

⁴⁴ "Russia in joint naval exercises with China and Iran in the Gulf of Oman," Euronews, March 16, 2023. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/16/russia-in-joint-naval-exercises-with-china-and-iran-in-the-gulf-of-oman>

⁴⁵ Rob Picheta et al, "Putin arrives in Iran for first trip outside former Soviet Union since his invasion of Ukraine," CNN, July 20, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/19/middleeast/putin-iran-visit-russia-ukraine-intl/index.html>

⁴⁶ "Russia and Iran are upgrading their transport links," *The Economist*, May 4, 2023. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/05/04/russia-and-iran-are-upgrading-their-transport-links>. See also:

Caitlin McFall, "Sanction busting new Iran-Russia intercontinental railroad agreement seeks to take on Suez Canal," Fox News, May 17, 2023. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/sanction-busting-new-iran-russia-intercontinental-railroad-agreement-seeks-take-on-suez-canal>

⁴⁷ Tyler O'Neil, "\$6B Prisoner Swap Was 'Just a Drop in the Bucket' for Iran," Daily Signal, Oct. 18, 2023. <https://www.dailysignal.com/2023/10/18/not-just-6b-heres-how-much-money-biden-admin-freed-iran-amas-terror-attack-israel/>

⁴⁸ "Russia and China Allegedly Broker Safe Passage Deal with Houthis," Tyler Durden, Zerohedge, March 23, 2024. <https://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/Russia-and-China-Allegedly-Broker-Safe-Passage-Deal-with-Houthis.html>

⁴⁹ Simon Watkins, "Russia and Iran Build Out Gas Alliance String of New Cooperation Agreements," Oil Price, March 27, 2024. <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Natural-Gas/Russia-and-Iran-Build-Out-Gas-Alliance-String-of-New-Cooperation-Agreements.html>

⁵⁰ Clinton's Remarks to Charlie Rose about Iran at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Jan. 27, 2005, unofficial transcript: http://www.zombietime.com/clinton_on_iran_at_davos/. Clinton's remarks about Iran begin at approximately 24'40" in the official video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLqEQyyVNzI>

⁵¹ See Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Countdown to Crisis: the Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran," Crown Forum, New York (2005); pp 218-224.

⁵² Ibid, p 221.

⁵³ While still under house arrest in February 2023, Moussavi issued a plan on social media to "save" Iran that included a referendum on the necessity of changing or drafting a new constitution, putting an end to his own "reformist views." "Iran: A detained ex-PM issues a plan to 'save' the country and gains new prominence," Middle East Eye, Feb. 26, 2023. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-detained-ex-pm-plan-save-new-prominence>

⁵⁴ The "Maximum Pressure, Maximum Support" doctrine was first elaborated by Ellie Cohanin in "America First, Israel, and the Middle East," the Middle East chapter of *An America First Approach to U.S. National Security*, Fred Fleitz, editor, America First Policy Institute, May 2024.

⁵⁵ Dalga Khatinoglu, "Iran Wastes Huge Oil Reserves Due to Gas Shortage," Iran International, Nov. 11, 2023. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202311110863>. See also, "Iran's Booming Oil Exports Threatened by Looming Gas Shortages," Iran International, Nov. 14, 2023. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202311133462>

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Sonnenfeld and Steven Tian, "Why Middle East Peace Requires Turning off Iran's Oil and Increasing Saudi's," *Time*, Oct. 23, 2023. <https://time.com/6327378/israel-iran-oil-sanctions/>