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COMMENTARY

A Road Map to Regime Change in Tehran

Critics of the Iran nuclear deal can at least make sure America puts the 10-year horizon to good use.



A file picture taken on April ۲۲, ۲۰۰۷ shows Iranian police officers stopping a car during a crackdown to enforce the Islamic dress code in the north of Tehran. According to Tehran's traffic police on September ۲, ۲۰۱۵, women drivers in Iran's capital could have their cars impounded by police if they are caught driving with a poorly fixed veil or without their heads covered. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

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By

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President Barack Obama's nuclear deal with Iran remains deeply unpopular in America. Roughly two-thirds of Americans oppose the deal, and most of the Republican presidential candidates have vowed to renegotiate it the moment they enter office. But given that China, France, Germany, Russia and the U.K. have all signed on to the pact, many international sanctions can no longer be easily "snapped back." Some elements of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, in other words, will continue to shape U.S. Iran policy for years to come.

At the heart of Mr. Obama's diplomacy with the mullahs is the notion that freezing their nuclear ambitions, if only for a limited time of ۱۰ years, would lead to a transformation of the regime. Give it access to international commerce, the thinking goes, and it will gradually moderate its behavior.

The trouble is that this vision depends solely upon Iran. Yet nothing in the Islamic Republic's ۳۶-year history suggests a transformation will happen automatically.

Achieving such a transformation therefore requires more than just hope. It calls for a plan. What would a serious strategy against the Iranian threat look like?

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Start with America's public diplomacy. Washington spends more than \$۷۰۰ million a year on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the Voice of America and other U.S. government broadcasters, including some \$۱۰ million on the Persian-language service of VOA. Yet these Cold War-era broadcasters are bloated and wasteful. At best, VOA Persian programming is boring. At worst, it promotes Iranian-regime talking points.

There's no reason U.S. taxpayers should subsidize such a platform for the likes of Hossein Mousavian, a former regime diplomat whose appearances on VOA infuriate and demoralize Iranian dissidents. The U.S. Congress should introduce better oversight and clarify VOA's mission: to bolster U.S. public-diplomacy efforts.

Next, the U.S. should hone in on the inequality in Iran between men and women. Activists on the ground already challenge the second-class status of Iranian women in creative and provocative ways. "My Stealthy Freedom," for example, is a [Facebook](#) campaign that encourages Iranian women to protest forced veiling by posting pictures and videos of themselves while uncovered in public.

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The U.S. government should denounce the oppression of Iranian women, and American civil-society organizations should amplify the voices of Iranian women whenever possible. Sports federations, such as the International Olympic Committee, should punish the regime's discrimination against Iranian women, who are often barred from stadiums as spectators.

Spotlighting the Iranian regime's misogynistic policies embarrasses the mullahs, who have shown themselves to be allergic to scrutiny of their domestic record. Publicly shaming Iran's rulers also undermines their perverse claim to be the Middle East's beacon of progress.

Another strategy: Give Iranians the opportunity to exercise meaningful free choice and experience the responsibility and self-confidence that come with democracy. One of the most cynical aspects of the Iranian regime is its appropriation of democratic elements—ballot boxes, newspapers, unions, etc. Instead of allowing them to thrive, the regime turns them into a charade. Every time Iranians feel compelled to participate in these sham institutions, they grow more cynical.

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Washington can help break this cycle and prepare a transition to true democracy. One idea might be to create an online parliament, in which Iranians can hold political debates—rigorously moderated, fair and secure. This would allow Iranians the opportunity to be heard by their compatriots for the first time in decades. The International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute could be bipartisan partners in this project.

Finally, the U.S. should promote religious liberty in Iran. Iran's theocracy has made many Iranians distrustful of religion, but many more still hunger for authentic faith. Dissident clerics, such as the Ayatollah Boroujerdi, have risked jail and torture to call for the separation of mosque and state. Washington ought to publicly support such figures.

America's evangelical Christians, too, can play an important role in helping Christians trapped in Iran. The explosive growth of evangelical Christianity in Iran is one of the world's most important and underreported stories today. Conversion estimates range from ۳۰۰,۰۰۰ to one million. At this rate, within a decade there will be officials in the bureaucracy and security apparatus who secretly consider Christ to be their personal savior. Genuine faith, not one imposed by a totalitarian state, is one antidote to theocratic dictatorship.

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President Obama has imagined that legitimizing the Iranian regime and flooding its coffers with cash will change Tehran's behavior. Through their continued repression at home, their chilling rhetoric against the U.S. and Israel, and their support for terrorism, the mullahs have shown that they have no intention to change. Transformation will only come if Washington tips the balance against the regime and toward the opposition. The nuclear clock is ticking.

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