



For progress on Iran, focus on the people

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Another week, another round of failed diplomacy toward Iran. More than three months into its tenure, the Biden administration has made Iran the focal point of its Mideast policy, and seems intent on reviving the Obama administration's nuclear deal with Iran, despite that agreement's numerous flaws.

The renewed push for engagement with Iran seems to be driven by a conviction on the part of the Biden White House that there is no non-violent alternative to diplomacy with Iran. That's an idea that has been perpetuated in no small part by pundits who incorrectly define U.S. Iran policy as a binary choice between war and a sweeping settlement involving massive economic inducements to the Iranian regime. Those, however, are hardly America's only options. In fact, a clear alternative can be found in an approach that seeks to engage the Iranian people, rather than the brutal theocratic regime that rules over them. Such an approach starts with three key elements.

First, America needs an effective sanctions policy targeting key elements of the regime in ways similar to those that helped change apartheid South Africa. Beginning in 1948 and for decades thereafter, the South African government practiced institutionalized racial discrimination (known as apartheid) that permeated every level of society. During the 1980s, it also launched a pursuit of nuclear weapons, successfully developing half-a-dozen warheads by the end of that decade. In response to both, Congress in the early 1990s leveled bipartisan sanctions that progressively forced Cape Town to end apartheid and prompted South African policymakers — eager to reengage with the world — to voluntarily give up their regime's nuclear pursuit.

In much the same way, Iranian society today suffers under clear religious and gender apartheid, with the clerical regime in Tehran imposing and enforcing unequal treatment on those who don't conform to its extreme interpretation of Shi'a Islam. Christians, Jews, non-Shi'a Muslims, agnostics and especially groups like Iran's Baha'i population have been hard hit. Additionally, women and members of the LGBTQ+ community are also treated as second class citizens. These inequalities provide another basis for U.S. pressure, above and beyond the regime's runaway pursuit of nuclear weapons. It is a strategic and moral necessity that needs to be focused on — rather than ignored by — Washington.

Second, the United States needs to openly and substantively support any call of the Iranian people for a referendum, similar to the "No" campaign that coalesced in the 1980s in opposition to — and helped bring an end to — the oppressive reign of Chile's General Augusto Pinochet. That campaign created the conditions for a UN-sponsored referendum which resulted in the end of Pinochet's military rule.

The episode has clear lessons for contemporary Iran. As the Iranian people signal their rejection of the current regime and appeal for international assistance in support of an end to the Islamic Republic, the United States, the world's leading democracy, should take the lead in responding to the call, by urging a UN-sponsored and -monitored referendum that would allow the will of the Iranian people to determine their future.

Finally, Washington needs to provide support, both in word and in deed, for human rights within Iran — including identifying and elevating prominent activists the same way it supported South Africa's Nelson Mandela, Poland's Lech Walesa, and many others in the past. Rather than whitewashing the sins of the Iranian regime, the United States should hold the regime accountable for the endless and systemic human rights abuses it inflicts both at home and abroad. To its credit, the Trump administration put this at the forefront of its Iran policy, openly and consistently voicing its support for activists fighting for freedom inside Iran. This included shining a light on brave activists like the so-called "Council of 14," condemning the Iranian regime for its brutal murder of activists like Pouya Bakhtiari, and even recognizing a day of friendship between the Iranian people and America at the request of Gohar Eshgi, after the loss of her son Sattar Beheshti. The Biden administration needs to do the same sort of outreach today, both because the U.S. has a moral responsibility to highlight their plight and because engaging with these elements (rather than the clerical regime in Tehran) is the surest way for America to remain relevant to the future of the country.

Some 12 years ago, when Iranians rallied en masse against the Iranian regime, the fledgling Obama administration chose to remain silent because of its eagerness for some sort of accommodation with the Iranian regime. The eventual result was the 2015 nuclear deal, which empowered the Iranian regime's malign behavior and gave it an even freer hand to suppress dissent at home. Now, the Biden administration appears to be on the same trajectory, propelled by the misbelief that another deal is the only reasonable path forward. Yet there are clear historical lessons that suggest a different approach is available to the United States, one that better serves both U.S. national security and the interests of the Iranian people themselves.

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