



America's Iran policy needs a reset

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A massive foreign policy scandal recently shook official Washington when two news outlets, *Semafor* and *Iran International*, revealed the sordid details of a long-running—and extensive—Iranian influence operation. The simultaneous exposés, relying on a trove of leaked emails, outline how the Iranian regime worked through a network of sympathetic scholars, analysts, and influencers for nearly a decade to skew U.S. policy.

Members of Congress are now raising the alarm over the potential impact of this penetration on U.S. national security. They're right to be concerned. As the investigations make clear, among numerous other things, experts cultivated by Tehran played a big hand in the so-called echo chamber, which worked to convince the American people that the 2015 nuclear deal was actually a good bargain.

But perhaps the biggest takeaway from the revelations is that U.S. Iran policy is deeply broken, and has been for some time now. On virtually every topic, from Iran's nuclear drive to the state of its society, American policy appears to have been actively manipulated by the regime and its ideological fellow travelers.

In the wake of that realization, it's clear that the United States desperately needs to rethink the fundamentals of its approach to Iran on at least three fronts.

—The nature of the threat. Ever since its nuclear program broke out into the open in the early 2000s, successive administrations in Washington have focused on trying to impede the Iranian regime's path to the bomb. Some (like the Bush and Trump administrations) did so through economic pressure, while others (Obama, and now Biden) have attempted inducements. But the objective has been the same: to make it harder for Tehran to cross the nuclear threshold.

Yet, throughout that time, the one thing that hasn't received nearly enough explanation is the real reason why an Iranian bomb represents a problem in the first place. In truth, the dangers associated with a nuclear Iran have little to do with nuclear technology—which, in today's proliferated world, is increasingly ubiquitous. Rather, Iran's nuclear program is menacing not because of its sophistication, but due to the nature of the regime that would end up wielding it.

—The prospects for regime moderation. In Washington, as elsewhere, the fact that Iran's clerical regime is a bad actor isn't really in question. Rather, what has differed widely across various administrations is confidence that the Islamic Republic could be made to behave better. The Obama White House, for instance, bet heavily on the notion that, with the proper incentives, Iran's religious leaders would moderate their behavior and invest in the welfare of their people. The outcome was the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Iran's regime, however, has other priorities. The ayatollahs in Tehran have consistently preferred guns over butter, and military prowess over domestic prosperity. Thus, the period that followed the 2015 nuclear deal saw a major expansion of Iran's military budget—and of its influence throughout the greater Middle East. The message was clear: Iran's clerical regime is thoroughly dedicated to its will to power, and has no interest in internal reform.

That's a reality ordinary Iranians understand very well. A consistent theme of the Iranian protests for over a year now is the belief that the Islamic Republic is unreformable and in need of fundamental change. All of which makes the current round of domestic turmoil profoundly different from the "Green Movement" that swept the country in mid-2009, following the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency. Back then, the focus of the protestors was still on changing the behavior of the current regime in Tehran. Today, Iranian activists are seeking an end to the clerical system itself.

—Potential for internal change. But is such a thing possible? So far, the United States and its allies in the West haven't bothered to find out. For years, neither the United States nor its Western allies have done much to support the urge for democracy evident on Iranian streets. Rather, Western policy has long oscillated between engagement of the current regime and its isolation. Throughout, Iran's assorted opposition elements have received short political shrift, and even less serious engagement or support. As a result, Iran's opposition sphere has remained fractured, under-developed, and riven by internal divisions.

All of this has been a boon for Tehran. It has allowed the current Iranian regime to depict itself as durable, consolidated, and in control—and to empower sympathetic experts in the West to spread that same message. Now that this influence campaign has been exposed, it should lead us to question whether that is the case.

Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy in Washington, D.C.

