



Optimizing America's Outreach Toward Iran

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America's Iran policy is at a crossroads. In the wake of President Trump's recent decision to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal, his administration has unveiled a new, more muscular approach toward the Islamic Republic. That plan, announced publicly by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on May 21, has garnered extensive scrutiny for its pledge to reimpose economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic for its nuclear and ballistic missile work, and its vow to roll back Iran's extensive influence in Syria.

By contrast, another element of the administration's strategy has received far less attention: Its reinvigorated commitment to engage with the Iranian people. Yet such a focus is needed now more than ever, because Iran's clerical regime is currently facing unprecedented challenges to its stability.

The first of these is socio-political. Since the last days of 2017, the country has weathered the most significant sustained unrest since the Islamic Revolution brought Iran's ayatollahs to power nearly 40 years ago.

While more modest in size than those of 2009, the current protests are more significant. They have proven more resilient than their predecessors, continuing despite extensive regime repression. They are also more broad-based, cutting across multiple social and economic strata within Iran and involving a broad spectrum of citizenry (from union workers to female activists to teachers).

Their complaints run the gamut, from opposition to the Iranian government's misplaced economic priorities (which have elevated foreign adventurism over domestic prosperity) to repressive social strictures, like the mandatory wearing of head scarves for women. Yet they all share one thing in common: a fundamental discontent with the country's unaccountable clerical elite.

Iran's regime, meanwhile, has lurched into full-blown financial crisis. Beset by widespread inefficiency and corruption, the Iranian economy was never vibrant. But conditions have gone from bad to worse over the past year, despite the expected dividends of the Iran nuclear deal, for two reasons.

First, Iran's leaders have consistently prioritized guns over butter, and therefore used the revenue generated by post-sanctions trade to swell the country's defense budget and bankroll military interventions in places like Syria and Bahrain, rather than make much-needed investments at home.

Second, the advent of the Trump administration, and its far more skeptical approach to detente with Iran, has generated massive capital flight from the Islamic Republic, totaling some \$30 million to date.

The aggregate result of this confluence of factors is that, for perhaps the first time in its 39 year history, the Islamic Republic can truly be said to be in a pre-revolutionary state.

This ferment affords the Trump administration an opportunity to engage the Iranian people in support of freedom and democracy. But is America's outreach up to the task?

In the past, the U.S. government's Persian-language broadcasting has come in for well-deserved criticism for a range of shortcomings, including perceived biases in coverage and a failure to provide proper context for American policy. But this state of affairs is beginning to change.

Over the past half-year, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the government agency responsible for U.S. international media, has embarked upon a serious effort to improve and expand its outreach to the Iranian people. This includes a recently unveiled plan to launch a new, 24/7 Farsi channel dedicated to more deeply engaging with Iranians across broadcast, digital and social media platforms by early next year.

These changes are most welcome, and — if properly overseen and nurtured — could amplify America's already potent voice within Iran. According to official estimates, nearly one in four adult Iranians (some 14 million people) tune in to American radio and television broadcasts every week, while its digital platforms receive hundreds of thousands of hits daily from Iranians seeking to connect with the United States. Through its dedicated Office of Internet Freedom, the BBG has also become a leader in "circumvention," helping millions of Iranians break through the increasingly formidable digital barriers being erected by the Iranian government.

The Trump administration has already begun to use this megaphone to significant effect. In the early days of the current protests, senior administration officials — including Vice President Mike Pence and then-National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster — appeared on U.S. Persian-language media to communicate their support for Iran's opposition.

More recently, Secretary Pompeo sat for an in-depth interview with the Voice of America in which he outlined the White House's new approach to Iran, and its aspirations for the Iranian people. This early outreach can be further strengthened by the reforms now underway to U.S. government broadcasting toward Iran, which are designed to give greater voice and clarity to American policy.

Such messaging is sorely needed. While it remains up to the Iranian people themselves to determine the ultimate direction of their country, the United States can and should promote fundamental freedoms within the Islamic Republic, and draw attention to the deformities of its ruling regime, as a way of empowering the country's nascent democratic forces.

Today, Washington is upgrading its ability to do so. And that may just turn out to be the most decisive element of the Trump administration's new approach to Iran.

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