



PROCEEDINGS

ENDING THE THREAT FROM IRAN

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Ending the Threat from Iran” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on October 22, 2025. The symposium highlighted a National Institute *Information Series* article co-authored by Robert Joseph, David Shedd, Joseph DeTrani, Keith Payne, and Robert Torricelli. The article discussed the nature of the Iranian threat, the failed history of negotiations to prevent Iran from seeking nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, and constraints on the use of force, proposing a new U.S. strategy of support for the internal Iranian opposition.

David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)

David J. Trachtenberg is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy and previously served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

The issue of how to deal with Iran has bedeviled multiple administrations of both parties since the Iranian revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979. Concerns over Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs top the list of American worries, coupled with the Islamic regime’s support for terrorism worldwide. The United States still considers Iran the world’s number one state sponsor of terrorism.

For more than 45 years, the Iranian regime has sought to counter American interests at every turn. Tehran has aligned with Russia, China, and North Korea in what has been termed an “Axis of Authoritarians” to overturn the U.S.-led world order and undermine American global dominance. The chants of “Death to America” are more than just rhetorical propaganda for the masses—they reflect a deeply held belief that the United States, as the “Great Satan,” must be defeated.

Various U.S. administrations have attempted to use multiple levers of state power to constrain or roll back Tehran’s dangerous activities. The United States has imposed numerous economic sanctions on Iran and Iranian entities in an effort to choke off financing for Iran’s malicious activities and to penalize and deter the clerical regime from additional transgressions. Unfortunately, economic sanctions have often been circumvented.

Diplomatically, the United States has sought to negotiate an end to Tehran’s nuclear programs and to moderate Iran’s malign behavior through the provision of multiple carrots, including sanctions relief and the unfreezing of Iranian financial assets. The Obama Administration’s JCPOA is perhaps the poster child for such diplomatic outreach, which—despite its much-ballyhooed advantages—failed to constrain Iran’s quest for nuclear capabilities that could ultimately threaten the United States, Israel, and U.S. allies. Indeed, notwithstanding the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement during the first Trump



Administration, it officially ended four days ago, with Iran's Foreign Ministry declaring all restrictions on Iran's nuclear program and related activities "terminated."¹

And militarily, despite Israel's military actions to stop Tehran's nuclear program in its tracks, and the Trump Administration's support in "Operation Midnight Hammer," Iran's nuclear ambitions do not appear to have been dampened, and the regime may be doubling down on its desire to proceed with its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The IAEA estimates that most of Iran's enriched uranium at the Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan sites is likely to have survived the military strikes.²

The apparent failure to date of Western economic, diplomatic, and military actions to deter Iranian mischief making and growing threats to the West suggest an alternative strategy is necessary for dealing with the Islamic regime's intractable hostility toward the United States, Israel, and the civilized world. The need for an alternative strategy is what prompted the writing of this *Information Series* article.³

In addition, it appears that despite the economic hardships, public protests, and growing disillusionment by the Iranian people, the Iranian regime has successfully prevented any significant uprising against their oppressive control, and the Iranian opposition movement is still struggling to present an effective alternative in the face of the regime's brutal crackdowns on dissent.⁴

So, while the regime continues its domestic reign of terror and its rejection of efforts to moderate its destabilizing international behavior, the time is right to consider a different approach.

If anything, the Trump Administration has demonstrated a willingness to overturn conventional thinking on a multitude of issues and to adopt unconventional approaches to seemingly intractable problems. Perhaps now is the right time for the injection of new thinking on the issue of how to end the Iranian threat.

¹ "Iran says restrictions on nuclear programme 'terminated' as deal expires," *Al Jazeera*, October 18, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/18/iran-says-restrictions-on-nuclear-programme-terminated-as-deal-expires>.

² TOI Staff, "UN nuclear watchdog believes most of Iran's enriched uranium unharmed by war with Israel," *The Times of Israel*, October 20, 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-nuclear-watchdog-believes-most-of-irans-enriched-uranium-unharmed-by-war-with-israel/>.

³ Robert Joseph, Joseph DeTrani, Keith Payne, David Shedd, and Robert Torriceli, "Ending the Threat from Iran," *Information Series* No. 638 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 1, 2025), https://nipp.org/information_series/robert-joseph-joseph-detrani-keith-payne-david-shedd-and-robert-torriceli-ending-the-threat-from-iran-issue-no-638-october-1-2025/.

⁴ "Who makes up Iran's fragmented opposition?," *Reuters*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/who-makes-up-irans-fragmented-opposition-2025-06-18/>.

Robert G. Joseph

Robert G. Joseph is Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy, former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, and Special Assistant to the President from 2001-2007.

Thank you, David. Let me start with a little background. This past August, I asked my long-time colleagues—Joe DeTrani, David Shedd, Keith Payne and Bob Torricelli—if they would participate in a strategy group taking a fundamentally different approach from past U.S. policy toward ending the threat from Iran.

All agreed, as it was clear we shared a similar set of views based on decades of experiences and a shared set of conclusions and concerns, specifically that all administrations since George W. Bush had failed to counter the threat from Iran, not just its nuclear weapons program but the full spectrum of threats—its support of terrorist proxies with funding and weapons, its state-sponsored terrorism which has killed hundreds of Americans, its destabilizing actions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and its threats to U.S. regional friends and allies.

We settled on a division of labor with David taking the lead on the nature of the threat, Joe focusing on the failure of negotiations, Keith on the use of force, and Bob and I providing the initial draft of the overview section, the section on the nature of the regime, and the action recommendations. David and Joe will speak to the threat and negotiations but will also—I hope—share their views on all aspects of our report.

So, with that as background, let me begin with a few general observations. The premise of our argument is that for over 20 years—at least since 2002 when the nuclear program was outed publicly by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)—every successive administration has failed to convince Iran's leaders to moderate and end their pursuit of nuclear weapons. Each one has used different combinations of tools—diplomacy and negotiations, economic sanctions and most recently military force—to persuade or coerce Tehran to change its behavior. Of course, there have been different approaches—from appeasement under Obama and Biden to maximum pressure during the first Trump administration and, in Trump II, bombing the nuclear sites.

While the attacks were both fully justified and tactically effective in causing substantial damage sufficient to disrupt further enrichment for months if not years, at the strategic level, the pattern has not changed. President Trump remains committed to negotiating an agreement to end Iran's nuclear program and the Ayatollah remains committed to rebuilding the program, including enrichment, as well as providing more arms and funding to his terrorist proxies that have been decimated by Israel in the past two years.

Yes, we can and should continue to apply economic sanctions on the regime and, when needed, conduct more military strikes to disrupt the nuclear program. But that won't alter the fundamental dynamics of the past. And we need to contend with the likelihood that Iran's leaders may have concluded that the military strikes on their principal nuclear sites—and the actions taken by Israel in the 12-day war—mean they must move forward with even more determination and urgency to acquire a nuclear weapon to deter further attacks.

For over 40 years, the regime has demonstrated that it is unwilling to change in any meaningful way its behavior, whether internally or externally. There is no reason to conclude that it is now going to change. So, what explains this 20-plus years of failed policies? Why do we continue to pursue the same outcome with the same means? At one level, I think it can be attributed to the failure of imagination, but that often and over-used explanation doesn't provide much insight or a vision for effective change.

The conclusion we draw in our paper is that U.S. policy has failed and will continue to fail as long as we retain the false hope mentioned earlier: that we can convince or coerce the mullahs to change course—a hope we characterize as consistently disappointed but never abandoned. And here is where our analysis differs from that which has guided every administration and has been pervasive across almost all think tanks and academia.

Our assessment rejects the flawed dichotomy underlying U.S. policy that there are only two choices—negotiation or war. As we say in the paper, given that stark choice, every president has understandably opted for negotiation. As war—especially full-scale war and occupation as done in Iraq—is rightly ruled out as an option. And even though it is clear that Iran has used negotiations to buy time to advance its nuclear program and gain concessions that have provided resources for the regime to build its nuclear and missile programs, to supply its proxies, and to oppress its own people.

Put simply, we need to break this cycle of failed policy. The alternative that we advocate—one that has been largely ignored—is to support the Iranian people in their determination to end the religious dictatorship—a regime that is more vulnerable today than ever before given the collapse of its ring of fire strategy, its demonstration of military weakness, and the regime's internal loss of legitimacy resulting from pervasive corruption and brutal domestic repression.

So, as Lenin famously asked, what is to be done? Here the paper is clear as to what support to the Iranian people excludes and includes.

We must begin by abandoning the failed policies of the past. We must reject the false belief that the mullahs will change and become more moderate. We need to stop throwing lifelines to the regime by making concessions that provide billions of dollars that are then used to supply terrorist proxies, build the nuclear and missile programs, and acquire the tools of repression to brutalize their own citizens. And we must abandon the illusion that negotiations, economic sanctions, and even the use of force can lead to an effective agreement to end Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

We must chart a new course for ending the threat from Iran. This requires new policies that support the Iranian people in their struggle to throw off the yoke of the religious dictatorship. This includes the recognition of the self-determination of the Iranian people to create a government that protects their basic rights of life, liberty and pursuit of economic advancement. Support also includes the endorsement of the opposition in their determination to establish a democratic, secular, and non-nuclear Iran. The Iranian people are the foremost victims of the regime and represent the greatest threat to its existence. Supporting their freedom is a moral imperative and the most effective means to achieve U.S. security goals.

More specifically, and here I am quoting directly from our paper, U.S. policy should:

- Bring pressure on the regime through public statements transmitted inside Iran about the nature of the regime—its pervasive corruption, brutal repression and crimes against its own people.
- Tailor different messages and delivery means to influence different sectors of Iran's population, placing particular emphasis on tech savvy youth without connections to the regime.
- Support all components of the democratic opposition. Give official support to the NCRI 10-point plan calling for a democratic, secular and non-nuclear Iran.
- Create relationships with the global Iranian diaspora to undertake actions that increase pressure on the regime.
- Impose maximum pressure to isolate and weaken the regime. Implement a comprehensive approach that builds pressure on the regime using diplomacy, sanctions and other economic means, and intelligence tools.
- Cut off the regime's access to hard currency by enforcing sanctions on Iran's oil and gas.
- Deter Iranian provocative behavior through military presence and other means and, as needed, defend against Iranian use of terror and military force. Deterrence, and if needed, defense, will be strengthened by fielding an effective missile defense of the United States and by continuing to contribute to the missile defenses of U.S. allies.

As President Reagan did with those living under Soviet rule, the United States should provide moral support to the Iranian people by recognizing their right to have a government that provides for their fundamental rights and freedom. Reagan spoke eloquently about the Soviet leadership's disregard for human rights and their efforts to prevent the Soviet people from hearing the truth about their own country and the world. He also engineered ways to get information, denied by their own government, to Soviet citizens about global events and even their own literature and culture. Reagan was as patient and determined as he was confident of the final outcome. We must do the same with Iran.

David R. Shedd

David R. Shedd is former Acting Director and Deputy Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Intelligence Programs and Reform on the National Security Council under President George W. Bush.

The adversarial challenges between the United States and Iran extend well beyond Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The threats emanating from terror abroad

and against its own people by the Iranian regime date back to the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution, when the Iranian radicals seized hostages in the U.S. Embassy. While Iran's nuclear file came into sharper relief some 25 years ago, terrorism as an instrument of national power under the sponsorship of the regime has been the norm for nearly 46 years. In parallel, albeit relatively more recently, we could now see a regime fully committed to the acquisition of nuclear weapons enabled by a covert centrifuge program alongside efforts being undertaken by Tehran to develop a nuclear weapon in parallel to the nuclear enrichment program. That intent has not abated nor has its use of asymmetric warfare.

It is accurate to state that since 1979, Iran has been in perpetual hostility toward the United States, Israel and other friends and allies of the United States. As the top designated state sponsor of international terrorism, for the past nearly 46 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has committed numerous acts of terrorism. Some of those acts have been committed by Iranians under Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) while other acts of terrorism have been undertaken by Iranian proxies in the region—in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen for example—financed and planned by the IRGC. Iran has used Lebanese Hezbollah, myriad Iraqi militias, Hamas in the case of attacking Israel, and the Houthis in Yemen to carry out their kinetic hostilities against the United States and America's friends and allies.

The radical regime in Tehran does not use terrorism by exception but rather as a prominent element of the regime's instrument of national power. Apart from the weakened state of Iran's proxies in the region over the past one to two years due to U.S. and Israeli actions against the proxies, there is no indication that the regime is prepared to alter its commitment to using asymmetric warfare against the United States and its national interests around the globe. In other words, the regime's threat profile has only diminished because of the degradation of its own capacity to use terrorism vice any indication that the regime has recanted from using terror in their near abroad and beyond.

Nothing has been effective in the past nor is there any indication that anything will work in the future to change the nature of the regime's commitment to terrorism. The litany of actions ranging from the attacks on the U.S. marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983 under the direction and control from Tehran, to attacking Khobar Towers in 1996, to the disruption of assassination plots including inside the United States, point to the Mullah's perpetual and profound hostility toward the United States.

Meantime, Iran's despotic rulers apply terror against their own people in a nation of some 90 million long-suffering citizens under a highly unpopular regime. Time and time again, the ruthless security apparatus of the Ministry of State Security, alongside elements of the IRGC, have viciously cracked down against all dissent. Brutal repression is the norm. Human rights are routinely violated in the regime's application of systematic suppression of any form of dissent.

Where is the regime headed in the context of the security threats that are unrelenting from Mullahs? Tehran is committed to continuing both its internal and external mechanisms to foment chaos and use terror tactics if and where possible. In addition, as part of their disruptive tactics, the use of increasingly sophisticated cyber-attacks against the United

States and its friends and allies are likely to increase. We need to remain vigilant for all forms of asymmetric attacks as we continue to face an unrepentant regime for its past actions and the Mullahs of this radical regime remaining committed to fomenting chaos when and where they consider it in their own best interest to do so.

Joseph DeTrani

Joseph DeTrani is the former Special Envoy for Negotiations with North Korea and former Director of the National Counterproliferation Center.

In the early 2000s, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Iran was not in compliance with safeguard requirements dealing with uranium enrichment and allowing IAEA monitors access to determine safeguard compliance, thus a series of sanctions were imposed on Iran by the United Nations Security Council.

In 2007, the Intelligence Community published a National Intelligence Estimate stating that in 2003, Iran's leadership had decided to end Iran's nuclear weapons program.

In July 2015, the P-5 plus one (U.S., UK, France, Russia, China, Germany and the European Union) and the government of Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—The Iran Nuclear Agreement.

The JCPOA limited uranium enrichment to 3.67% purity; reduced the number and sophistication of centrifuges (19,000 to 6,104 IR-1 centrifuges); capped the enriched uranium stockpile (300kg for 15 years) and provided comprehensive access to IAEA inspectors.

In return, United Nations sanctions (UNSC Resolution 2231) were lifted: arms embargo (5 years), ballistic missile activities (8 years), asset freeze, and ban on nuclear materials and technology. The European Union lifted sanctions on oil and gas, removed banking restrictions and provided access to SWIFT, and unfroze Iranian assets. The United States also lifted sanctions and ended its embargo of oil and gas, shipbuilding cooperation, banking, and removed the National Iranian Oil Corporation and Iranian banks—and other entities—from the sanctions lists.

In short, sanctions were lifted and tens of billions of dollars of frozen assets were now available to Iran, with Iran's right to have access to peaceful nuclear energy per the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The JCPOA did not address Iran's missile programs, their regional activities or human rights issues.

Over the past few years, Iran was enriching uranium at 20% purity and lately, at 60% purity, literally weeks away from enrichment at the 90% purity level needed for nuclear weapons. Moreover, the IAEA most recently complained—as they routinely did in the past—that Iran was not providing IAEA inspectors access to undeclared suspect nuclear sites.

In May 2018, President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA.

In mid-June 2025, concerned with Iran's status as a threshold nuclear weapons state and IAEA concerns about Iran's nuclear program, the United States and Israel conducted airstrikes on Iran's principal nuclear sites: Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan. Current efforts to reengage with Iran on their nuclear program are now dependent on Iran's stated conditions: compensation for the airstrikes conducted by the United States and Israel; no further attacks on Iran; and Iran should be allowed to pursue a peaceful civilian nuclear program, with the right to enrich uranium for said program.

Ilan Berman

Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council.

For decades, policymakers in Washington have struggled to formulate a response to the enduring challenge posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet the strategies adopted by successive Administrations—from the engagement of the Clinton and Obama eras to the sanctions and “maximum pressure” tried under Presidents Bush and Trump—have fallen short of comprehensively addressing the threat to U.S. interests and American allies presented by Iran's radical regime.

These shortcomings stem from a central deficiency. U.S. policy, whether engagement or pressure, has focused overwhelmingly on the behavior of Iran's regime, including its persistent pursuit of nuclear status and its ongoing support for radical substate proxies. But none have tackled the core driver of the Iranian threat: the radical, expansionist and revisionist ideology of the regime itself. In turn, the inability of U.S. efforts to meaningfully reshape Iranian behavior suggests that nothing short of a fundamental change in the nature of the regime in Tehran will produce meaningful results.

Is such a transformation possible? Empirical data suggests that forty-six years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran is indeed ripe for change, for several reasons.

There is now broad disaffection with the regime on the part of the Iranian people. A recent survey by the Netherlands-based polling institute GAMAAN, for instance, found that an overwhelming majority of Iranians (some 80 percent) now rejects the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic as a form of government.

Rampant mismanagement, corruption and inefficiency have further discredited the Iranian regime in the eyes of the Iranian people. Instances of such shortcomings are glaring, and include a deepening resource crisis so profound that Iranian officials have begun to openly discuss the need to move the national capital from Tehran to another part of the country.

Widespread perceptions of inequality and inauthenticity have additionally dented the credibility of Iran's clerical regime. The recent furor over leaked footage of the immodest wedding attire of the daughter of Ali Shamkhani, a senior advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is just the latest example of official regime hypocrisy and its selective application of religious fiat.

All this has led to a large—and growing—field of Iranian opposition actors. Whether these forces can affect real change, however, remains an open question. This summer’s “twelve-day war” between Israel and Iran provided a clear opening for Iran’s opposition forces to mobilize against the regime. However, they did not do so, in the process creating serious doubts in the West about their potential and capabilities.

If revolution is off the table, at least for the time being, then U.S. policy needs to anticipate the ways in which the Iranian regime might evolve. Here, three scenarios stand out.

- A **TECHNOCRATIC TRANSITION**, in which Iran follows the trajectory of China after the death of Mao Zedong in the late 1970s, when Communist Party leaders, in an effort to rebuild domestic and international confidence after the excesses of the Mao era, focused on economic performance, technological competence and good governance.
- A **PARTIAL COLLAPSE** of the Iranian regime, akin to what has taken place in recent years in Venezuela, entailing a scenario in which the regime remains cohesive enough to maintain its hold on power but loses control of key functions (such as border security) and becomes increasingly reliant on foreign sponsors.
- A **TAKEOVER OF POWER** by the country’s most capable and cohesive political force, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, in a manner similar to how the Soviet era intelligence state rebuilt and reconstituted itself in Russia following the collapse of the USSR.

In truth, there are indicators of each of these scenarios already present in Iranian politics. As such, they are worth examining in depth by U.S. policymakers as a means of crafting a more robust and responsive American approach.

Ultimately, however, any such policy would, by its nature, involve managing the Iranian threat rather than definitively addressing it. The United States therefore will need to create the necessary political space for regime alternatives to truly flourish, because they represent the only lasting answer to the threat posed by the current regime in Tehran.