

# [***The U.S. Needs to Rethink Its Whole Approach to Iran | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTW-5VB1-JBR6-900F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Iran's attack on Israel was not a surprise, nor did it inflict significant damage. It was nonetheless a paradigm shift.

**Body**

Iran's attack on Israel was not a surprise, nor did it inflict significant damage. It was nonetheless a paradigm shift. This was the first long-distance, large-scale drone strike in history and the first time Iran attacked Israel directly rather than through proxies. The attack was a reminder of Tehran's longstanding enmity and a call to reexamine our approach to the Islamic Republic.

Iran's hostility is not new. Some may have forgotten that in 1979, Iran's revolutionary government seized the American Embassy in Tehran and held 53 diplomats hostage for more than a year. Since then, the United States and Iran have been engaged in a proxy war that we are not winning. While there have been periods of calm, Tehran has never given up on three long-term goals: expanding its regional influence, driving the U.S. out of the Middle East and destroying Israel. To achieve these objectives, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG), assembled a collection of militias, including Hezbollah in Lebanon; [*Hamas*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/hamas?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in Palestine; the Houthis in Yemen; and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Force or Hashd al-Shaabi. Some of these groups have been attacking American interests and allies for more than 40 years.

Recall that in 1983 Hezbollah bombed the American Embassy in Beirut killing 63. Six months later, Hezbollah attacked the Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 in the largest single-day loss of life for the Marine Corps since the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. In 1996 the IRCG and a collection of Saudi Shia terrorist groups, including Hezbollah in the Hejaz, destroyed the U.S. Air Force barracks in Al Khobar, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 airmen. Between 2003 and 2011, hundreds of Americans died in Iraq because of improvised explosive devices provided by Iran. In 2015 Saudi Arabia and the UAE went to war, not to conquer Yemen, but to keep Iran from establishing a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula. They failed in part because the U.S. withdrew the munitions, logistics and intelligence support it had initially provided. In 2020, the United States killed IRCG Commander Qasem Soleimani in a drone strike that shocked Iran's leadership.

In more recent months, Iranian proxies have launched dozens of attacks on American troops in Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, killing several while the Houthis continue to launch missiles at American warships in the Red Sea. National Security Advisor [*Jake Sullivan*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/jake-sullivan?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has warned state governors of potential Iranian cyber-attacks on their critical infrastructure systems. Thus, the threat posed by Iran's current government did not materialize over the weekend, but it is becoming ever more dangerous as Tehran advances towards acquiring nuclear weapons.

Regrettably, Western non-proliferation policy has failed to deter Iran's nuclear ambitions, just as it failed with India, Pakistan, and North Korea. Nor have covert activities such as assassinating scientists or cyber-attacks on nuclear enrichment facilities succeeded. Iran now possesses significant quantities of near-weapons-grade uranium and the capacity to quickly complete the process, if it has not already done so. Iran has also made significant advances in ballistic missile technology. What it still appears to lack is the actual mechanism for placing a bomb in a missile.

As was the case with the Indian and Pakistani nuclear programs, our intelligence on Iran's progress is far from complete, but it now appears to be a matter of when, not if, Iran will become a nuclear power. A nuclear-armed Iran will pose an existential threat to Israel. It will extend a strategic umbrella over Iranian proxies in southern Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen, and Iraq. It will give Iran much greater leverage over the pro-Western Gulf states and traditional Western allies Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. The likelihood of a regional arms race will increase dramatically. Saudi Arabia has already declared that it will develop its own nuclear weapons if Iran does.

There is little point in debating what we should have done in the past. The relevant question is how we should deal with Iran now. Launching another Middle East war is not a good option. After humiliating fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American people have no appetite for invading Iran. As we have seen with the Houthis, short, sharp blows have lost their deterrent effect. Even a massive blow is unlikely to change the policy of a regime that endured eight devastating years of war with Iraq.

Destroying Iran's oil fields will raise global oil prices. Moreover, the Iranians are not the Houthis. They have a much more robust capability to strike back at American interests and our oil-producing Gulf allies. The reaction of Russia to an attack on its newest ally is uncertain. Yet perhaps the worst outcome of direct military action against Iran would be its immediate effect of uniting the Iranian people behind a government many of them have long opposed.

Negotiating with the ayatollahs is no more likely to change their behavior than bombing them.

The Iranian regime remains a revolutionary power intent on disrupting the status quo and using Shia Islam to expand its influence across the Middle East. Conciliatory gestures will not pacify a regime that has made hostility towards the U.S. its hallmark since 1979. The IRCG's foreign legion is named the Jerusalem Force (Al Quds), which makes its intended destination rather obvious.

Thus, it remains a dangerous fallacy to believe that Iran has legitimate grievances and would gladly join the liberal world order if only treated with respect. The same argument was made about Germany in the 1930s and China when it sought to join the World Trade Organization. Ayatollahs who will imprison women for not properly covering their hair and regularly execute LGBTQ people very clearly do not want to join the liberal world order. Iran's aging theocrats are driven not by traditional national interests, but by the dynamics of regime survival and their radical religious ideology. They have consistently pursued a foreign policy which produces harsh economic sanctions rather than economic development for their people.

This misguided assumption that if only given a chance everyone wants to be just like us was at the heart of the badly flawed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran Nuclear Deal. The agreement was hardly comprehensive. Its goal was merely to delay, rather than prevent, Iran from enriching enough uranium to build a nuclear bomb. No restrictions were placed on Iran developing long range ballistic missiles. No effort was made to limit hostile behavior by Iranian proxies. Above all, the inspection mechanisms were weak, far weaker than those accepted by the Soviet Union in earlier arms control agreements. There were to be no surprise inspections and many military sites could not be inspected at all. Great faith was to be placed in the word of a regime that has a record of lying about its nuclear program; a regime that accepted the Shia doctrine of taqiyya, which encourages deceiving one's enemy on security-related matters.

While neither military action nor negotiations are likely to alter Iran's behavior, the regime does have significant strategic vulnerabilities that can be used as leverage. The Iranian economy is fragile and could be made more so. Inflation and unemployment levels remain high while the value of the rial continues to fall. Yet instead of increasing economic pressure on Iran, the United States has released billions of dollars in frozen funds and eased its enforcement of the sanctions on Iranian oil exports.

The firebrand clerics who led Iran's revolution are now old men. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is 87 and a succession struggle has already begun. As happened in Egypt when President Hosni Mubarak maneuvered to have his son succeed him, Ayatollah Khamenei's effort to sideline Ayatollah Khomeini's son Hassan and advance his own son Mojtaba's rise to power is causing resentment and division among the regime elite.

Above all there is growing disillusionment among the Iranian people with a government that continues to mismanage the economy, limit social freedom, and crush any political opposition.

An underground opinion poll conducted inside Iran by the Dutch Gamaan Institute in February 2023 found that 81 percent of the population opposed Iran's current regime. This opposition was found not only among the ethnic and religious minorities which comprise nearly half of the population, but even amongst some of the revolution's most prominent initial backers, such as students and bazar merchants.

In the wake of Iran's attack on Israel, we should be considering not how to negotiate with the ayatollahs, but how to help the Iranian people get rid of them. That approach rests on four pillars. The first is to intensify economic pressure on the regime. The Department of State has the authority to imposes sanctions on those engaged in the "purchase, acquisition, sale, transport, or marketing" of Iranian petroleum. Such sanctions have been used effectively in the past against individuals, banks, shipping lines and insurance companies. Nevertheless, since 2020 Iranian oil exports have increased more than threefold, providing the regime with billions of dollars to fund its proxy militias and nuclear ambitions.

In part, this is a result of increased demand from China's small and midsize independent refineries, which often buy discounted Iranian oil with yuan. According to Reuters, Iranian crude traded at an average discount of $13 per barrel to Brent crude last year. Tankers departing from Iran often seek to avoid sanctions by making ship-to-ship transfers at sea or falsifying location data.

However, domestic ***politics*** are also involved. The Biden administration does not want rising gasoline prices in an election year. So, it has chosen to deplete America's strategic petroleum reserve and relax sanctions enforcement on both Iran and Venezuela. In November 2023, the Republican-controlled House passed H.R. 3774—the Stop Harboring Iranian Petroleum (SHIP) Act—which would mandate sanctions on entities involved in Iranian-petroleum related transactions, including refineries. The Democratic-controlled [*Senate*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/senate?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) has yet to take up the bill.

There are two obvious ways to clamp down on Iran's oil exports without raising gasoline prices. First, stop discouraging the expansion of America's own domestic oil production. Second, restore good relations with Saudi Arabia. Iran exports some 1.5 million barrels of oil a day. Saudi Arabia currently has 3 million barrels a day of reserve production capacity shut-in. When Washington and Riyadh had better relations, the Saudis frequently used their excess capacity to to offset U.S economic sanctions or calm markets when there was a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico or a war in the Middle East. They are much less inclined to do so after being labeled a "pariah."

Second, we must bear in mind that any victory for Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Houthis is a victory for Iran. Without these proxy militias, much of Tehran's regional influence would collapse. We should make it clear to all concerned that serving as an Iranian proxy comes with a high cost. The United States should adopt a much more aggressive approach to these malign actors, starting with coordinated, multinational initiatives to isolate them politically. Many of our current economic policies towards Yemen, Lebanon, and Gaza actually support Iran's allies and should be revisited. Our pin-prick responses to direct attacks by Iranian proxies in Yemen and Syria have achieved little and need to be made more robust.

Third, we should encourage efforts to isolate Iran diplomatically. Iran has some very hostile neighbors who oppose Tehran's efforts to spread its influence across Southwest Asia. Pakistan and Iran have traded blows in recent months. Afghanistan is now controlled by the vehemently anti-Shia [*Taliban*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/taliban?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships). The Afghan-based Islamic State of Khorasan has claimed credit for terrorist attacks inside Iran. Even in Iraq, there is opposition to Iranian influence and the Iranian-backed militias. Letting these tensions grow will complicate Tehran's diplomacy and strain its military resources.

It is also time to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine. If Hezbollah is a proxy army for Iran, Iran is something of a proxy army for Russia. Tension in the Middle East creates a second front for Washington which complicates American diplomacy and places additional strain on its military resources. Yet Moscow and Tehran are not natural allies. They have been brought together only by a shared hostility to the West.

It was very clear three years ago that Russia would never allow Sevastopol to become a [*NATO*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/nato?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) (read American) naval base or accept the stationing of NATO troops 300 miles from Moscow. It was equally clear that if war broke out, Ukraine had as much chance of defeating Russia as Mexico does of defeating the United States. All of this has been proven true, but at a terrible cost to Ukraine. Ending this unnecessary tragedy by accepting Ukrainian neutrality would quickly deflate the Moscow-Tehran Axis.

Finally, the Obama administration made a conscious decision not to support the Iranian opposition movement in favor of negotiating the JCPOA. We did not believe this would succeed and said so at the time, but we do not fault the former president for trying to give peace a chance. It might have worked. After all, if Adolf Hitler had kept his word after Munich, no one would have ever heard of Winston Churchill. However, Iran's ayatollahs have proven as duplicitous as the Nazi leader. The Biden administration's efforts to pursue a policy of appeasement in the face of continued Iranian aggression across the region is difficult to understand. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

Iran is now a youthful, increasingly secular country ruled by an aging, religious regime whose economic incompetence has reduced much of the population to poverty. Most Iranians cannot remember the Shah but are fed up with decades of endemic corruption and authoritarian rule. We should align ourselves with those forces already trying to bring about democratic change in Tehran. We should initiate a coordinated Western campaign of overt and covert, political and economic measures aimed at discrediting and undermining the Islamic Republic to hasten its replacement by a new political order chosen by the Iranian people.

In practical terms this means supporting the human rights, worker's rights, women's rights, and religious freedom movements now active across Iran. We should reach out to underground trade unions, university students, and opposition activists. We should speak out boldly and often about human rights violations in Iran and call for the release of all political prisoners. We should support greater freedom for religious minorities such as Christians, Jews, Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians who have been systematically persecuted by the Islamic revolutionary government. We should support greater political and cultural autonomy for Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, and Arabs who together make up nearly half of Iran's population and have long resented Persian dominance.

In other words, we should stop trying to placate the ayatollahs. Instead, we should do everything in our power to bring about the next Iranian revolution, not with an invasion, but through increased economic pressure on Iran, political, economic, and military pressure on Iranian proxies, efforts to isolate Iran internationally, and support for organic political change from within the country.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writers' own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2379686/celebrating-attack-israel.jpg)

**Graphic**

Celebrating an Attack on Israel

Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Unidentified men are carrying a model of Iran's first-ever hypersonic missile, Fattah, past a mosque during a gathering to celebrate the IRGC UAV and missile attack against Israel, in Tehran, Iran, on April 15.

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