



Mevlânâ ("our master") statue of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (popularly known simply as Rumi), and promenade in Buca, İzmir, 3 April 2014. Rumi was a thirteenth century Persian scholar, Islamic theologian, Sufi mystic, and poet. His poetry and other works are written mostly in Persian but have been translated into many languages. Rumi's recurring philosophical themes asserting the need for universal love and the unity of mankind as conveyed in his poetry have transcended national borders and ethnic divisions, and have made him among the world's most popular literary figures. Though a devout Sunni Muslim, many scholars assert that his writings also reflect the deeply embedded cultural influence of Iran's pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religious concepts of justice, personal accountability to both God and to fellow citizens for one's actions, and primacy of social obligations to other people in the community, concepts especially incumbent upon those who lead the state. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Brothers and Strangers

A Strategy to Promote and Prepare for Normalized Relations with Iran

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In the thirteenth century, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (known today as simply Rumi), one of Persia's most influential poets and Islamic scholars, infused his works with a sense of cultural and religious pluralism that he believed to be an essential element of Islamic faith. Indeed, in a famous *rubaiyat* (quatrain), Rumi declares that in God's love, "brothers and strangers are one."¹ While the concept of pluralism in the Islamic Republic of Iran today may (unfortunately and erroneously) seem implausible (a product of the rise of Islamic extremism), Rumi had reason to be optimistic about its prospects. Iran during Rumi's time, already subdued by Islamic conquest centuries earlier and yet to be conquered again by the Mongols, seemed destined to be a cultural nexus where Rumi's Islamic-based values of pluralism would perhaps flourish amidst the comings and goings, and rising and falling, of various people groups over time. In modern Iran however, the pluralism that Rumi passionately endorsed has proven quite elusive. Isolated from the international community like never before in its history, virtually the entire world appears as strangers to Iran. Even internally, pluralism in political and religious thought remains tenuous at best under a theocratic regime that seems to consider only those hardliners who share rigid allegiance to a specific strand of Islam as "brothers" while everyone else remains a "stranger" with little room for coexistence.

Despite the current political dynamics in Iran that are the anathema to Rumi's idea of pluralism, more and more Iranians seem willing to protest and advocate for reforms that give them access to greater political and cultural power within their own country. Starting with the massive Green Movement protesting election fraud in 2009 and continuing early this year with protests in over eighty Iranian cities, the internal political and cultural landscapes seem ripe for reform.² Likewise, as scholar Kenneth Walz reminds us, power begs to be balanced and instability on the global stage (with respect to Iran-U.S. relations) serves no purpose other than to increase the likelihood of irrational decisions and actions.³ Indeed, a fundamental assumption undergirding U.S. diplomacy states that U.S. interests are best served in a stable international environment.⁴ So if significant segments of the Iranian population seem to desire changes that enhance democratic values, and if U.S. policy aims to create a stable international

One Song

Every war and every conflict between human beings has happened because of some disagreement about names.

It is such an unnecessary foolishness, because just beyond the arguing there is a long table of companionship set and waiting for us to sit down.

What is praised is one, so the praise is one too, many jugs being poured into a huge basin.
All religions, all this singing, one song.
The differences are just illusion and vanity.
Sunlight looks a little different on this wall than it does on that wall and a lot different on this other one, but it is still one light.

We have borrowed these clothes, these time-and-space personalities, from a light, and when we praise, we are pouring them back in.

—Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī

Translator: Coleman Barks

<http://razarumi.com/>

rumis-poetry-all-religions-all-this-singing-one-song/

community based on democratic principles, why have relations between Iran and the United States failed to normalize? Or, as Rumi himself might ask, why can't "brothers and strangers be one"?

Given the above discussion, the intent of this article is to identify the prominent political and cultural factors in Iran today that have resisted democratic reforms. Next, these factors will be discussed and analyzed in terms of their implications and impacts on U.S. policy actions and objectives for Iran. Finally, based on the analysis of how current U.S. policy interacts with the predominant political and cultural elements in Iran, a framework for a revised strategy is offered that aims to promote and prepare for normalized relations with Iran while reasserting the efficacy and sanctity of American values. A strategy

that fully accounts for the political and cultural dynamics in Iran and understands their impacts on U.S. actions while trusting in the virtues of American principles stands a better chance of furthering national objectives aimed at thawing U.S.-Iranian relations.

National Politics and Culture: the Twin Rally Killers in Iran

Since the Islamic Revolution that ousted the Western-supported Shah in 1979 and set U.S.-Iranian relations on a course for perpetual and increasing hostility, an internal war for the political soul of Iran has raged that pits the “hardline” supporters of Iran’s

different strategies. The hardliners believe in both a domestic and foreign policy of resistance as the “way” to safeguard the Islamic Republic from ideological degradation at the hands of Western influence.⁷ By insulating the population from outside interference and relying on populist political support and government subsidies for economic support (the “means”), hardliners believe the Iranian state will ultimately flourish while exposing the corrupt values of the West.

Conversely, the reformists, in trying to achieve the same end, believe that economic engagement (the “way”) with foreign entities will attract the investments (the “means”) needed to economically sustain the coun-

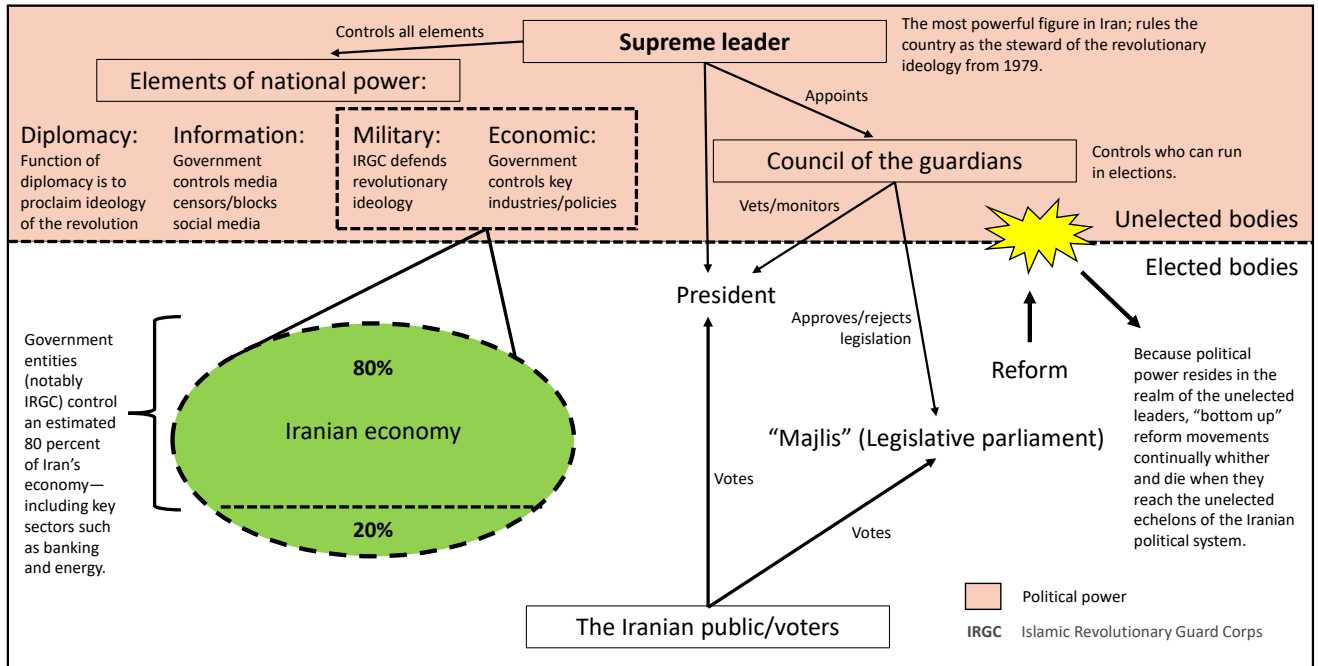
Political cohort	Ways	Means	End
Hardliner conservatives	“Resistance economy,” revolutionary ideology	Populist support, government subsidies	Preservation and protection of the Islamic Republic
Reformist/moderates	International engagement, open economy	Foreign investment, expanded private control of economy	

(Figure by author)

Figure 1. Broad Frameworks for National Strategy in Iran

Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, against a more reform-minded cluster of Islamic leaders. As noted by scholar Ray Takeyh, the essential point of contention between the two camps centers on how to maintain a strictly Islamic face on the image and implementation of politics while also (for the reformists) balancing the introduction of democratic principles that less-strict interpretations of Islam allow.⁵ Here, a discussion of ends, ways, and means in the derivation of political strategy for each side is useful. As academic Sanam Vakil points out, the supreme political end for both the hardliners and the reformists in Iran is the preservation and protection of the Islamic state.⁶ However, sharp differences in the ways and means to achieve that end account for vastly

try and reduce regional and international tensions that have, in ways most visible and important to Iranian citizens, hampered progress (see figure 1).⁸ To the reformists, economic prosperity is a better (and decidedly more practical) way to demonstrate Islamic superiority than the culture of struggle and resistance espoused by the hardliners. Thus far, the results (in terms of *real* reform) of the political struggle between Iran’s hardliners and reformists have been decidedly one-sided as the ayatollah, his hardline supporters, and the security apparatus of his regime—the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—have been able to ward off periods of protest from reformers while maintaining almost total political control of the country.



(Figure by author)

Figure 2. Political Power Structure in Iran

In maintaining control of Iran, the hardliners enjoy several distinct advantages over the reformists. First, all meaningful political power still flows from the “supreme leader” himself as the nation’s most powerful positions remain appointed (rather than elected) billets. While elections have materialized in Iran in the four decades since the revolution, restrictive mechanisms exist to ensure real political power remains in the hands of the ayatollah and the revolutionary institutions controlled by his Islamic apparatus. For example, all candidates seeking to run for election must be vetted by a judiciary-in-name but regulatory-in-practice body called the Council of the Guardians.⁹ The ayatollah appoints the members of the council, which in turn ensures the preservation of the strict Islamic principles and ideology of the revolution. To illustrate the reform-stifling effects of the council, during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), which has been viewed as the height of reformist prospects in Iran since the revolution, the council vetoed almost 50 percent of Khatami’s reform-oriented initiatives and supported the incarceration of several of his key reform-minded staffers.¹⁰ And during Iran’s most recent elections, the council culled the list of prospective

election candidates to ensure reform-seeking moderates represented just 1 percent of the candidate field exhibiting the degree of control hardline leaders maintain over the ideological direction of the state.¹¹

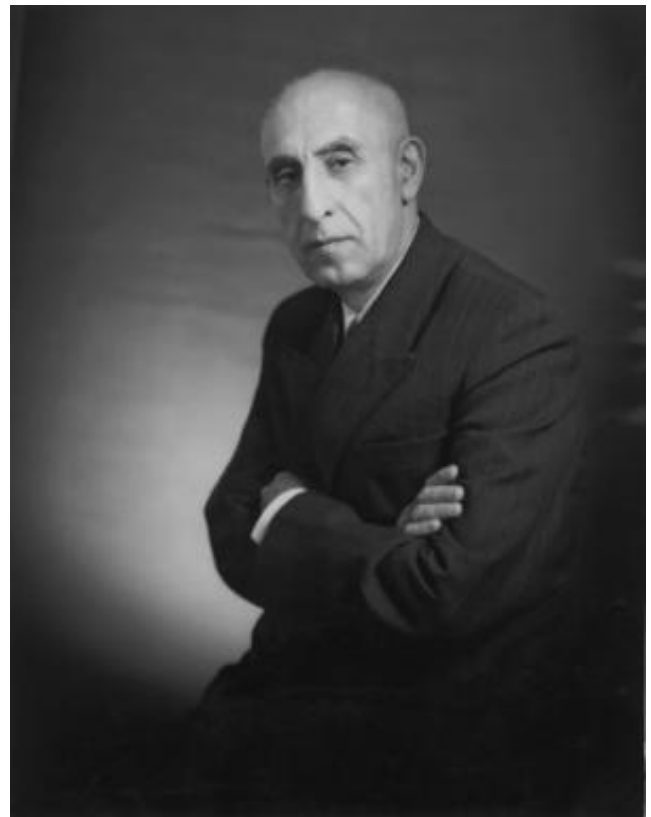
In addition to tight control over the nature and scope of so-called democratic processes in Iran, the ayatollah has also expanded control of key economic and industrial centers to loyal figures from the security forces of the revolution. According to analyst Ramin Jahanbegloo, an influx of senior IRGC leaders have migrated from their high-level government positions in the regime to controlling stakes in Iran’s critical economic businesses (see figure 2).¹² The convergence of political power and economic control makes the regime remarkably durable even in the face of protests. This is presumably the point of such a system, and the ideological stakeholders are understandably not incentivized to reform the system that provides for and ensures their power and influence.

To be sure, just because the Islamist leaders have been able to control political and economic power in Iran since the revolution does not mean that the political currents, trends, and developments within Iran have themselves stagnated. As the emergence of

elections suggests, the political constituency in Iran has undoubtedly evolved and diversified since the revolution as competition for political influence develops. However, the ability of the hardliners to maintain the concentration of political power in the theocratic leaders ensures that instead of measuring Iran's political progress in terms of real reform and meaningful change, it is instead measured in terms of "momentum" and "prospects for reform"—with only negligible and symbolic gains thus far.¹³

While the (lack of) distribution of political power may be the dominant factor preventing the diffusion of democratic values in Iran, elements of Iran's national culture—especially after almost forty years of sustained hostility with the United States—also likely plays a restrictive role in the spread and appeal of democratic principles. The idea of a national culture is itself a slippery subject, especially in a contemporary environment that seems loathe to make generalizations of any kind. Nevertheless, plenty of modern research exists to suggest that there are broad aspects and attributes of culture that distinguish the values between different people groups. One of the foremost researchers on this topic is the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede. Introduced in the 1980s, Hofstede developed a theory that compared national cultural values along six (originally four) different dimensions. According to Hofstede's research, cross-cultural gaps between national entities can be bridged by drawing inferences from the comparison of cultural scores along his six dimensions.¹⁴

While Hofstede's research is far from universally accepted, his cultural dimensions model may provide a useful framework to examine elements of Iran's culture that have perhaps contributed to its reticence in inculcating democratic principles into its society and politics. For example, one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, "uncertainty avoidance," describes "the extent to which members of a culture or society feel threatened by unknown situations."¹⁵ According to research based on Hofstede's model, Iran scores high in this dimension which indicates a high degree of "uncertainty avoidance" at the national level. Cultures with this trait "maintain rigid codes of belief" and are more resistant to "unorthodox ideas."¹⁶ While recognizing that Hofstede's dimensions describe general trends/preferences and not individual behavior, Iran's



Mohammad Mossadegh was an Iranian nationalist politician, who served as Prime Minister from 1951 to 1953. Upon taking office, emulating the example of Turkey, he attempted to cleanse the government of corruption while also introducing many initiatives to modernize the Iranian government and society. These actions caused significant domestic resentment among entrenched interests. However, when he ran afoul of British economic and national interests as he attempted to nationalize Iranian oil production, his elected government was overthrown by a coup d'état conducted by royalist elements of the Iranian military, key members of the Iranian Shiite clergy, with encouragement and covert support from Great Britain and the United States. The national humiliation resulting from the overthrow of Mossadegh is viewed by many as one root cause of Iran's bitter resentment toward the United States today. (Photo courtesy of Wikipedia)

score on this dimension may help explain the surprising durability of the theocratic regime (as a "rigid" power structure), as Iranians in the post-revolution generation (in general) prefer the known quantity of an established regime over the uncertainty of trying to install something new.

Similarly, Iran scores low on Hofstede's "long-term orientation" dimension, which aims to measure the extent to which societies and cultures balance the past when dealing with the future.¹⁷ This score suggests a national culture that views societal change with suspicion



In this photo by an Iranian citizen journalist and verified by Voice of America (VOA), a crowd of antigovernment protesters marches in the city of Karaj, adjacent to Tehran, Iran, 2 August 2018. These antigovernment protests by Iranians fed up with their nation's economic woes spread to at least ten major cities, posing the biggest challenge to Iran's Islamist rulers since nationwide demonstrations in January 2018. The Iranian rial's slump to record lows against the dollar in unofficial trading earlier in the month exacerbated popular frustration with economic problems such as inflation and joblessness. In a sign of Iranians' frustrations intensifying, some protesters reportedly chanted slogans explicitly calling for an end to the rule of Iran's Islamist clerics, who took power in a 1979 revolution. (Photo courtesy of VOA)

and prefers to maintain established norms. Indeed, portraying the changes associated with Western values as ideas that should be viewed with the upmost disdain and suspicion is a common and oft-used narrative from the Iranian regime to explain away popular discontent and cast doubt on the viability of Western values.

Even if Hofstede's model is too subjective to strike a chord explaining Iranian resistance to democratic principles, forty years of sustained (and in some cases learned) hostility between the West and Iran have almost certainly created aggregate adverse perceptions amongst Iranians toward the United States (and vice versa). From the CIA and Kermit Roosevelt's role in ousting a democratically elected government in 1953, to the United States siding with Iraq during Iran's brutal war with its neighbor in the 1980s, to George W. Bush's dubious inclusion of Iran in his "Axis of Evil," generations of Iranians have grown up with a deep mistrust of the West in general and the United States in particular.¹⁸ Modern studies aiming to pinpoint Iranian perceptions of

Americans note that learned hostility often begins in education, where Iranian textbooks tend to paint America as the ultimate antagonist against Iran.¹⁹ And while polling in Iran is difficult (because of restrictive government practices), some of the most reliable polls conducted in this century suggest that almost half of Iranians have an unfavorable opinion of the United States.²⁰ It is important to note that "unfavorable" does not necessarily mean unfavorable toward the American people but rather the government. Yet while the theocratic system in Iran may allow for such distinctions between the government and population, the democratically elected leaders in the United States (in theory) reflect the desires of the population and so, on some level, the conflict between societies is perhaps deeper than just political ideology and policy. In fact, this reality gets at the heart of why relations between the United States and Iran have failed to normalize and perhaps suggests ways to craft better policy and, as a centerpiece, military strategy to promote and prepare for normalization.

The Self-Melting Ice-Cream Cone of American Policy for Iran

Discussions on effective U.S. strategies relating to Iran are often dominated by concerns over Iran's nuclear weapons program. Indeed, given the strategic emphasis that U.S. defense and civilian leaders place on countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and considering the destructive potential of those weapons to alter the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and threaten (existentially) the United States, it is easy to understand why, and therefore, it is worth addressing. However, choosing to narrowly view strategic options for Iran solely through the lens of the nuclear weapons issue, or worse, elevating that issue above the political and cultural aspects of Iran described above, myopically mischaracterizes the true issue that needs to be resolved for normalized relations. Accordingly, strategies derived from this line of thinking will likely have significant flaws. Put simply, despite the centrality and criticality of the nuclear weapons issue for Iran, it is not the main problem with respect to normalizing relations between the United States and Iran. This fact, perhaps counterintuitive on its surface, is easily discernible when considering that the United States enjoys cordial (or better) relations with the majority of the world's nuclear powers. So, if normalized relations are largely the norm for the United States with respect to nuclear armed states, the weapons themselves are not the issue. The issue is that *Iran* (i.e., a country with deeply political and cultural hostilities toward the United States) wants to obtain them. Resolving the political and cultural hostilities between Iran and the United States should be the primary goal of strategies aimed at normalizing relations, and Iran's desires for nuclear weapons should be treated as a product (not a cause) of these hostilities.

Many of us are familiar with the proverbial "self-licking ice-cream cone," referring to an individual or organization that only exists to feed itself while contributing no real value to anything outside itself. With respect to Iran, American policy may be compared to a self-melting ice-cream cone—that is, a self-defeating policy. As noted above, analyses of U.S. policy with Iran often seem subsumed by the nuclear weapons issue. This article will focus on the main enforcement mechanism used by the United States to contain Iran and degrade its ability to obtain WMD:

sanctions. Robust sanctions on Iranian military, telecommunications, coal, steel, currency, and other key economic fields and apparatus have contributed to economic stagnation in Iran. The implicit assumption behind U.S. sanctions is that they will eventually force the Iranian regime to choose between impoverishment for its citizens or maintaining foreign policies that are hostile to U.S. interests. Yet, given the analysis above on both the political and cultural dynamics in Iran, this key assumption is unviable and virtually ensures that the sanctions have negative and altogether self-defeating effects for U.S. policy.

As demonstrated above and depicted in figure 2 (on page 4), real political power in Iran remains almost exclusively with the hardliner ideologues from the revolution. Those who control the political power in Iran will not be coerced by policy (sanctions) from a country whose values represent the antithesis of their revolution. Rather, the hardliners can (and do) play on the cultural misgivings Iranians have of the West in explaining the economic problems in Iran. The most recent protests in Iran illustrate the counterproductive nature of U.S. sanctions. In early 2018, protests touched off in over eighty Iranian cities. While many analysts noted that causes of the protests were diverse and certainly the disparate groups of protesters did not articulate a clear objective, two main streams of dissatisfaction seemed to emerge. One was general frustration over economic conditions that had worsened with the looming reintroduction of U.S. sanctions. The other, related to the first, was a stark shift in opinion on Iran's foreign policy in

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the Middle East as protesters railed against a regime that continues to commit so many resources to fighting Arab wars while local Iranians suffer drastic economic hardship at home.²¹ The hardline regime blamed the West for the protests and the sanctions for the poor

hardline regime and lingering cultural scar tissue) to persist. Rather (as articulated in figure 3, page 9), good policy should let American ideals prove their worth on the international stage and so entice (not coerce) other countries to emulate American values.



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economic conditions faced by Iranian citizens making moderate President Hassan Rouhani a target for blame.

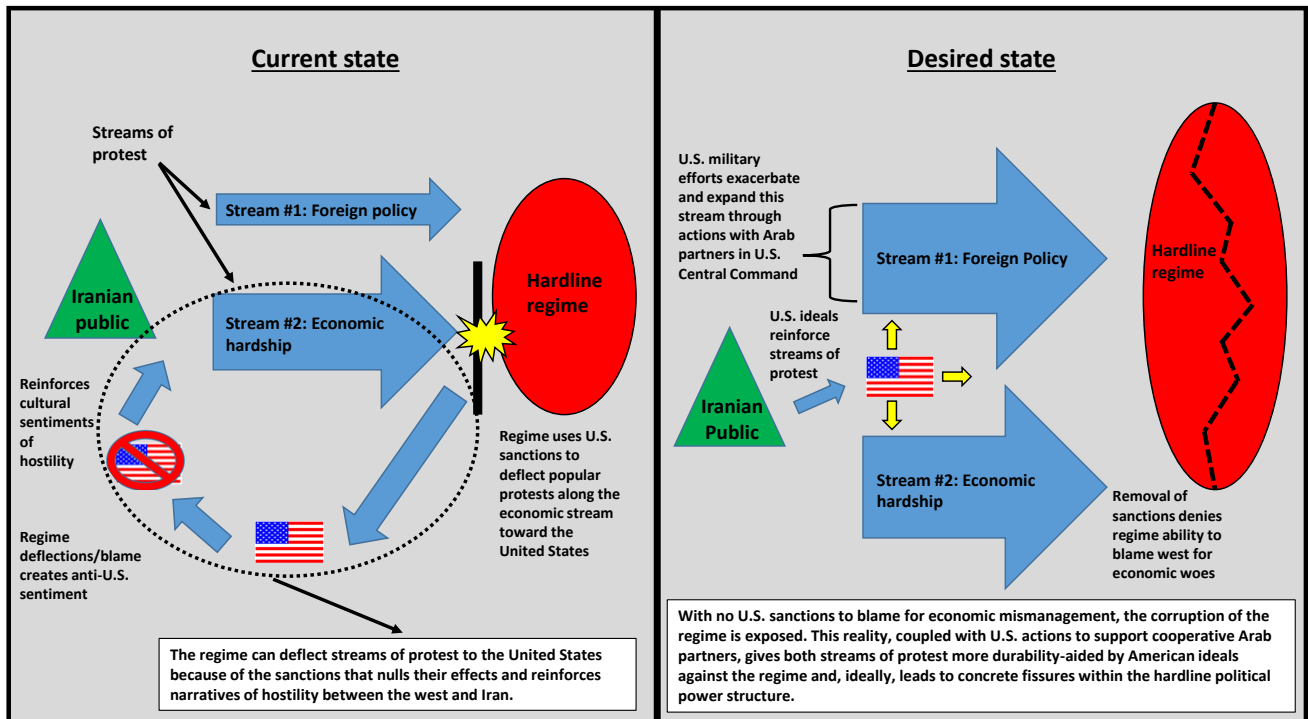
In the fray, Rouhani now faces widespread criticism. That the regime can insulate itself from the protests using U.S. sanctions reveals an inconvenient truth about the policy: when the regime says that the economic malaise in Iran is the West's fault, the use of sanctions gives that accusation some truth. This creates space for the regime to preserve some of its credibility with a population that already culturally prefers the known quantities of established governments (see Hofstede) and has grown up with plenty of hostile cultural scar tissue from the West. The irony (and self-defeating nature) of the U.S. sanctions should not be lost in the most recent wave of Iranian protests; the regime has turned the bulk of Iranian wrath against a *moderate* leader whose policies have shown a willingness to engage with the international community. If public backlash against Rouhani leads to his ouster, his replacement will likely not be someone more moderate or reformist minded. Put simply, U.S. sanctions are contributing to Iranian protests against a moderate president that, as the regime portrays the West as the villain to good effect, will likely swing the country more toward a hardline leader—someone more opposed to U.S. interests.

Letting American Ideals Fight for American Interests

As the chief instrument used in a policy of containment against Iran, sanctions only serve to further entrench the political status quo while also creating narratives that inflame cultural tensions between Iran and the United States, allowing both (the political

As part of a strategy to promote and prepare for normalized relations with Iran, the first step the United States should consider is the removal of all sanctions against Iran to deprive the hardline regime the use of its favorite card to play during economic crises: “It’s the West’s fault.” The systemic economic problems in Iran are a symptom of the widespread mismanagement of its economy by the hardline regime and go well beyond the effects of U.S. sanctions. As mentioned earlier, Iran’s leaders have centralized control of its key economic infrastructure in the hands of loyal followers—many from the IRGC and other revolutionary apparatus. This type of cronyism will not allow wealth and prosperity to flourish in Iran and will more likely contribute to huge inequality gaps between those “friends” of the revolution and everyone else.

Many who fear the removal of sanctions often relay two main concerns with this action. First, they fear removing the sanctions will rejuvenate the Iranian economy with foreign investment and thus give Iran the solid economic footing to truly control the Middle East. However, as noted above, as long as the regime employs inefficient economic policies that do not rely on free-market principles, Iran’s problems will likely persist even with increased investment. There is recent evidence of this dynamic since the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Rouhani campaigned on promises of sweeping economic change and relief with the removal of sanctions after the signing of the JCPOA. However, the scope and scale of the expected recovery never materialized, which in part spawned the recent protests. Indeed, scholar Farhad Rezaei reports that even with the removal of sanctions, Iranian



(Figure by author)

Figure 3. Current and Proposed Policy Changes with Desired Effects

banks remained underdeveloped and ill-prepared to attract the type of foreign direct investment that Rouhani promised.²² Consequently, economic figures suggest that average budgets of Iranian households have fallen 15 percent between 2007 and 2017, which notably includes the period after the signing of the JCPOA.²³

Sanctions are not at the heart of Iran's economic problems, and cronies of the regime getting richer (the likely result of removing sanctions) will do little to quell the popular protests of everyday Iranians demanding economic relief. Removing American sanctions will not fix the massive problems incurred by the regime's mismanagement of their economy. On the contrary, it will expose them. How much stronger will the U.S. position be (in terms of credibility with the Iranian public) when the next time Iran's leaders blame the West for its economic problems, the United States can honestly proclaim, "We are not responsible for your problems," and point to free-market principles as the solution? Or, perhaps a better question, how much more reformist momentum will Iranian protests be able to generate and sustain when the

mismanagement of their economy is laid bare with none but the regime to blame?

Second, some fear that removing sanctions will enable Iran to increase its military might by giving it greater access to advanced technology and arms and allowing it to operationalize its nuclear weapons program. Dealing first with the concerns relating to Iran's development of WMD, it is useful to point out that sanctions, as a preventative measure for WMD, seem destined to fail. The JCPOA itself, the centerpiece of recent American policy efforts with Iran, aims to *delay* (not deny) Iran's development of WMD, thereby implying the inevitability of Iran eventually developing WMDs.²⁴ This attribute of the JCPOA was the predominant source of criticism from those opposing the action. Initiatives (sanctions) designed to *prevent* actions (WMD development) that have all but been conceded by other policy tools (JCPOA) are the definition of "self-defeating." Furthermore, sanctions have an abysmal track record of ending WMD programs in rogue regimes. Libya, for example, lived for years under international sanctions over its nuclear weapons

program. While there was undoubtedly positive diplomatic efforts that contributed to Mu'ammarr Gaddhafi abandoning his program in 2003, it wasn't until the U.S. invasion of Iraq (for the explicit purpose of ridding a nation of WMD) and sharp threats of force against the Libyan regime that ultimately tipped the scales and forced Gaddhafi to capitulate and surrender his

Tyler Cullis, Iran's neighbors (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) quantitatively outspent it by over \$88 billion in military upgrades in 2014 alone.²⁷ This overmatch in military spending from Arab Gulf states has continued each year. Additionally, the Gulf states' informal alliance with the United States, coupled with international arms restrictions on Iran,

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nuclear ambitions.²⁵ Sanctions were decidedly not the main contributor. Likewise, it wasn't until President Donald Trump broadcasted pointed threats of force while comparing nuclear arsenal sizes in dramatic saber-rattling spats with North Korea that the hermit regime of North Korea agreed to come to the table to discuss denuclearization.²⁶ While the effects of Trump's rhetoric should not be overstated as a contributor to the denuclearization progress of Korea, neither should it be ignored. That sanctions played little (or at best a supporting) role in these vignettes should give pause to those who think removing sanctions in Iran will quickly usher in a WMD “free for all” period in Iran.

It's worth noting here that the point of the above is not to suggest that the United States should passively treat Iran's development of nuclear weapons as an unavoidable inevitability and therefore remove all obstacles towards Tehran's ambitions. In fact, quite the opposite. Given the importance and criticality of this issue, it is imperative that nuanced analysis be conducted to ensure the *correct and most effective action* is taken against the root cause of the problem. Sanctions that force average Iranians into the streets in protest over the prices of basic goods while at the same time further entrenching a deeply resentful political regime represent ineffective and counterproductive actions that should be removed.

Regarding regional military capability, Iran's neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula enjoy a qualitative and quantitative advantage over the Persian state with respect to military spending and conventional capabilities. As noted by scholars Trita Parsi and

give the Arabs in the region a qualitative advantage, as they have been able to modernize their forces with the latest weapon systems while Iranian equipment, with less prospects for upgrades, grows obsolete.²⁸ Iranian military capability is often overstated because of Iran's robust asymmetric forces. However, in terms of being able to conventionally threaten or dictate terms in the region, Iran is being outpaced by its wealthy Arab neighbors—in no small part thanks to American investment.

As the first step in promoting and preparing for normalized relations with Iran, the removal of sanctions will address the main deflection tactic used by the regime to silence economic protests. Next, the American military, as the key executor of policy, can exacerbate and strain the second popular stream of protest in Iran; namely, Iran's robust investments in foreign policy at the expense of Iranians at home. Confronting Iran's “malign” influence in the Middle East is already a key cornerstone of military strategy in the region as articulated by the U.S. Central Command commander in 2015.²⁹ However, military investment in Iran's Arab neighbors should be couched in terms of rewarding cooperation and promoting security. By funding, training with, and otherwise showing military support of Arab countries in the Middle East, the American military indirectly makes Iran's foreign policy activities harder and, critically, more costly to achieve, thereby playing up a popular (and increasingly volatile) complaint Iranians have with their regime (i.e., that the regime's investment in foreign policy comes at the expense of



A public pro-government demonstration in Iran's southwestern city of Ahvaz 3 January 2018 advocates for renewed public allegiance to the Islamic establishment and condemns the wave of deadly antigovernment violence in a number of cities that swept the country. (Photo by Morteza Jaberian; courtesy of Tasnim News Agency)

poverty at home). The indirect approach gives the United States the ability to frame its actions as cooperation and support with willing partners and not as direct confrontation with Iran. Terming military investment in Iran's Arab neighbors as efforts aimed at "promoting cooperation" instead of "countering" Iran's "malign activities" may seem like a subtle game of semantics but the messages and optics surrounding such a change could pay disproportionate benefits as it offers Iran the proverbial "carrot" instead of relying solely on the "stick." These efforts, executed appropriately, should promote normalization by demonstrating the futility of Iranian hardline foreign policy in securing longevity for the regime (see figure 3, page 9).

Finally, because Iran and the United States share a potent common enemy in the region, efforts at military-to-military engagement between the two countries on common threats should be offered as an initial step toward undoing four decades of escalating hostility. The Islamic State and other Sunni extremist

groups pose threats to both Iran (which is Shia) and the United States. Against the backdrop of this regional and international issue, U.S. military leaders should invite Iranian military leaders to discuss converging strategies and capabilities that can be brought to bear against this common enemy. While obstacles to direct engagement abound, as recently as late July, President Trump himself signaled a willingness to meet with Iran's president.³⁰ Images of high-ranking American military leaders shaking hands with their Iranian counterparts and discussing common enemies would represent a tectonic shift in relations and signal to new generations of Iranians and Americans—those who grew up chanting "Death to America!" or reading about the "Axis of Evil"—that cooperation and normalized relations are possible. Such new perceptions of the countries could, in tandem with the impacts of the above recommendations, reinvigorate popular support for democratic principles and reform in Iran, perhaps finally giving those movements the inertia

to not just create momentum but to actually inspire meaningful changes in the Iranian political system.

Conclusion

Creating a stable international community should be the foreign policy goal of every U.S. action abroad. After decades and generations of prolonged hostility between entities, it is easy to characterize nations as threats while forgetting that instability is the truest and most deadly threat, as it often creates the conditions for irrational actions. On a philosophical and theological plane, Rumi once thought this way, believing that cultural and religious differences added value to society instead of creating tension.

Next, continue indirect military support to Arab neighbors who show a willingness to cooperate on shared threats and issues. This will reinforce the noble

preconditions for American support (cooperation) and create space for fresh narratives and messages incentivizing Iranian cooperation with the United States while also exacerbating a popular stream of discontent in Iran with its foreign policy actions.

Finally, make sincere overtures to Iranian high-level leaders to directly collaborate on shared regional security issues such as the Islamic State. Such engagement, and propagation of it in both the United States and Iran, will go a long way in undoing some of the learned cultural mistrust that has accumulated since 1979. These actions directly address the political and cultural issues preventing normalization and, with follow-through and commitment, could begin the process of bringing the United States and Iran, currently “strangers,” more toward brotherhood in the international community. ■

Notes

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