

THE U.S. AND IRAN: A NEW STRATEGY FOR MIDDLE EAST DIPLOMACY

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The international order is entering a new era of conflict, characterized by rising authoritarianism, populism, and isolationism. It is imperative that the U.S. reevaluate the efficacy of its strategies for the Middle East, specifically its strategy for the Islamic Republic of Iran. The 2003 invasion of Iraq disrupted the existing order, and has since created a vacuum filled by greedy autocrats and terrorist cells. The U.S. cannot let itself succumb to naive idealism—peace in the Middle East is not an attainable goal.<sup>1</sup> A new strategy must give all nations a stake in preserving regional order. This order should *not* be equal, as order is best ensured if it is led by one or two powerful nations.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the U.S. must pursue a relationship with the self-proclaimed regional powerhouse—Iran—to mitigate its proxies, balance Saudi power, and combat anti-American rhetoric.

U.S. engagement must bring Iran back into the fold of the international economy. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a step towards Iranian economic cooperation, but former president Trump put a stop to the warming of relations when he withdrew U.S. participation in 2018. The U.S. must resume nuclear talks with Iran, as it is the only way to lift the long imposed sanctions on Iran's economy. While the U.S. has a vested interest in nuclear nonproliferation, a nuclear deal is only the stepping stone to leveraging the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. should be the most influential actor in the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Indyk. "Order Before Peace: Kissinger's Middle East Diplomacy and Its Lessons for Today." *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (2021).  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-10-13/henry-kissinger-middle-east-peace>.

<sup>2</sup> Indyk,  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-10-13/henry-kissinger-middle-east-peace>

Middle East but not the dominant actor, and Arab states should have closer relationships with the U.S. than with each other.<sup>3</sup>

This brief seeks to analyze the evolution of U.S.-Iran relations since 1953, and to argue for a new strategy in the Middle East from a soft realist perspective. This paper will also provide a brief account of Iranian history from the 1953 coup up to the present day. Policy considerations will take into account Iran's political structure, Iran's power capabilities, U.S. security interests, and U.S. economic interests. Security interests for the U.S. include a stable Middle East, a Western-friendly government in Tehran, and a reorientation of Western and non-Western blocs. The U.S. also has various economic interests in Iran. Economic relations could provide access to Iranian oil, a market for U.S. goods, and an opportunity to redirect Iran's economy away from China and towards the West. In order to promote these aforementioned interests, the U.S. must revisit the nuclear talks with Iran, remove sanctions on non-military goods, and include provisions for mutually beneficial trade.

In order to understand contemporary Iranian politics, one must first understand its unique political system. Iran is a theocratic republic; therefore it is composed of both elected and unelected officials, and both religious reformist and fundamentalist components.<sup>4</sup> This is a unique system in which the power of leaders and governing bodies overlap, and even conflict with one another. Iran's 1979 Constitution outlines this structure, and it lacks definitions about

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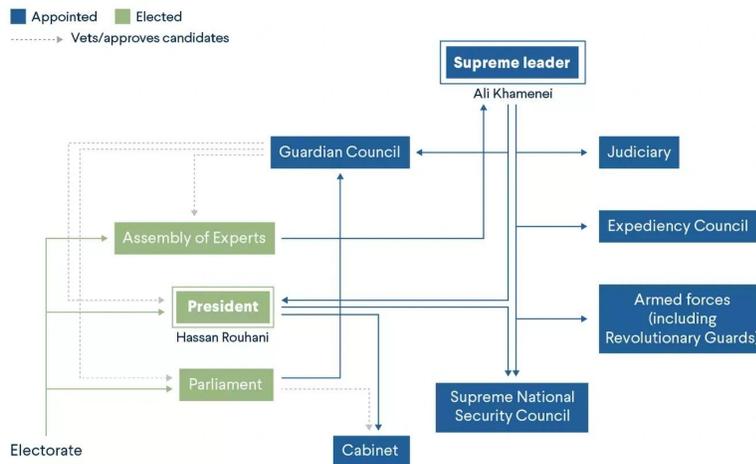
<sup>3</sup> Indyk, <https://foreignaffairs.com>.

<sup>4</sup> CFR.org Editors. "The Islamic Republic's Power Centers." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, February 25, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

term and power limits.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, these shortfalls left an opening for Ayatollah Khamenei to consolidate the power of the Supreme Leader and silence his opposition.<sup>6</sup>

The political structure can be categorized into four primary categories: the executive, legislature, judiciary, and clerical oversight. The Supreme leader is the head of state, commander of all military forces, and is the most powerful position in the government.<sup>7</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei was appointed Supreme Leader in 1989 upon the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution. Khamenei consolidated his power in recent years by further isolating the Iranian economy in an effort to protect his position from

Iran's Regime Structure



Sources: Fatemeh Aman; Alex Vatanka.

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<sup>5</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran § (1979). <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir001en.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran § (1979). <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir001en.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

<sup>8</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

Western influence.<sup>9</sup> The Supreme leader is supported by the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Guardian Council. The IRGC is a military force loyal to the Supreme leader, and is used to incite fear and violence as a means to control the Iranian public.<sup>10</sup> The Guardian Council is composed of clergymen and determines if civic laws are permissible according to Iran's Islamic constitution and Islamic values.<sup>11</sup> It also vets potential candidates for the Majles and the presidency, giving it extensive power to choose which platforms are permissible and which are not.<sup>12</sup>

The elected president operates within the executive, and he is responsible for creating and executing laws within the guidelines set by the Supreme leader, nominating Cabinet members, and proposing a yearly budget.<sup>13</sup> The presidency is the second most powerful position in the government; however, recent allegations of election fraud and corruption have damaged the integrity of the presidency.<sup>14</sup> Ayatollah Khamenei and his Guardian Council have repeatedly interfered in the last three election cycles to ensure the presidency was held by one of Iran's

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<sup>9</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

<sup>10</sup> Anchal Vohra. "It's Time to Give the Revolutionary Guards a Concession." Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy, April 5, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/05/iran-nuclear-deal-revolutionary-guards-irgc-terrorist-list/>.

<sup>11</sup> CFR.org Editors. "The Islamic Republic's Power Centers." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, February 25, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

<sup>12</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

<sup>13</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

<sup>14</sup> Borzou Daragahi. "A Decade After Iran's Green Movement, Some Lessons." Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council, June 12, 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/a-decade-after-iran-s-green-movement-some-lessons/>.

more conservative politicians.<sup>15</sup> This has affected Ayatollah Khamenei's public credibility as well, as evident in the 2009 Green Movement.<sup>16</sup> The current president of Iran is Ebrahim Raisi, a neoconservative cleric who is a staunch ally of Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>17</sup>

The legislative branch is an elected unicameral parliament called the Majles, which is composed of 290 seats with representatives from different geographic districts.<sup>18</sup> The Majles is responsible for creating laws, confirming the president's Cabinet nominees, approving the president's proposed budget, and is supervised by the Guardian Council. Similar to the presidency, Ayatollah Khamenei has exercised the Guardian Council to filter out any progressive candidates for the Majles.<sup>19</sup>

The U.S. must comprehend the distribution of power within Iran's political structure if it is to implement an Iran-centric strategy for the Middle East. By exploiting these fractures in Ayatollah Khamenei's government, the U.S. could enhance the efficacy of its foreign policy with Iran.

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<sup>15</sup> Anonymous. "Supreme Leader Directly Intervenes in Iran's June Vote." Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council, May 6, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/supreme-leader-directly-intervenes-in-irans-june-vote/>.

<sup>16</sup> Vivian Yee. "Iranian Hard-Liner Ebrahim Raisi Wins Presidential Vote." The New York Times. The New York Times, June 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/19/world/middleeast/iran-election-president-raisi.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Nasser Mohajer and Kaveh Yazdani. "Iran's New President Has Blood on His Hands." Atlantic Council, September 8, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-new-president-has-blood-on-his-hands/>.

<sup>18</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

<sup>19</sup> CFR.org Editors, <https://www.cfr.org/article/islamic-republics-power-centers>.

Iran's political system is based on an Islamic theory called *welayat-e-faqih* or governance of the jurists.<sup>20</sup> This concept is derived from the Twelver Shi'i tradition, and argues that only Islamic jurists possess the divine right to rule until the return of the Twelfth Imam, who is believed to have entered occultation and will return on the Day of Judgment.<sup>21</sup> According to Twelver Shi'ism, only the Imam has the right to rule the people; therefore, there has been much debate as to which system of governance is permissible under Islam. While many *ulema* (religious scholars) argue for democratic rule in the absence of the Imam, Ayatollah Khomeini argued that only those versed in Islamic law had the right to govern the people.<sup>22</sup> He gave the jurists the "divine right" to interpret law, which is problematic in Islam, as it attributes godly powers to human agency.<sup>23</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini successfully used the jurisprudence of Twelver Shi'ism to argue for *welayat-e-faqih*, and facilitate his control over the state.

Iran's refusal to engage with the West can be attributed to the long history of interventionism and imperialism by the U.S., Soviet Union, and Britain; however, this history is merely a justification for Iran's populist politics. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, was able to harness the negative emotions about the U.S. relationship with the Pahlavi regime and its support of Israel in order to instigate the masses.<sup>24</sup> Khomeini targeted lower classes in the villages, bazaar merchants, and the clerical establishment—all groups who were neglected during the brutal Pahlavi regime. Furthermore, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 was

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<sup>20</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran § (1979). <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir001en.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Abbas Amanat. *Iran: A Modern History*. Yale University Press, 2019, 744.

<sup>22</sup> Amanat, 746.

<sup>23</sup> Amanat, 744.

<sup>24</sup> Amanat, 735.

inspired by the contemporary liberation movements in Palestine, Vietnam, Cuba, and Latin America. Khomeini and his regime have controlled the Iranian population through selective history/education, social credit system, and fear of torture and imprisonment. They sought to remove secular and democratic discourse from public life, under the premise of an Islamic republic; however, the regime only used Islam as a rhetorical tool.<sup>25</sup> The regime fails to embody any true Islamic values, and is a true dictatorship.

While the Iranian government maintains many grievances against the West, the most relevant for this brief are: the U.S. relationship with the Shah post-1953, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, it is worth noting that prior to U.S. interventionism, Iran was the subject of British and Soviet exploitation, which resulted in weak government institutions and mismanaged finances throughout the 20th century.<sup>26</sup> In 1906, Iran was one of the first nations in the Middle East to attempt a constitutional republic; however, it was constantly undermined by foreign intervention.<sup>27</sup> Resentment of foreign powers, specifically those in the West, is a common theme throughout 20th and 21st century Iran.

The major turning point for the U.S.-Iran relations was the 1953 coup of the Mosaddeq government in Tehran. Elected prime minister in 1951, Mohammad Mosaddeq was a champion for oil nationalization, and argued that the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was a continuation of British imperialism on both financial and labor grounds. The Iranian government was only entitled to 16% of AIOC profits under the D'Arcy oil concession of 1901, and the company was

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<sup>25</sup> Karim Sadjadpour. "Iran's Hollow Victory." *Foreign Affairs*. Council on Foreign Affairs, March 2022.  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2022-02-16/irans-hollow-victory>.

<sup>26</sup> Amanat, Abbas. *Iran: A Modern History*. Yale University Press, 2019, 348 .

<sup>27</sup> Amanat, 522.

accused of unfair labor practices and discrimination.<sup>28</sup> Mosaddeq and his party, the National Front, argued for a more equal deal; however the British refused as it threatened its access to cheap oil, which they needed in post-WWII reconstruction. Furthermore, Mosaddeq's increasing power posed a serious threat to the shah, and Mosaddeq made many enemies in his government in his crusade for nationalization. The communist Tudeh party was one of his most vocal critics, and it became clear that he would not be able to hold onto power for much longer. The U.S was concerned with Mossadeq's socialist rhetoric; however, it was more worried about who would take his place—the U.S. reasoned that the victor would likely be the communist Tudeh party.<sup>29</sup>

In response, the U.S. collaborated with the Iranian shah to overthrow Mosaddeq, and install a new prime minister who would be friendly to the Western nations.<sup>30</sup> The details of the coup are not relevant for this brief, only its consequences. As a result of foreign intervention, the shah was free to assume total control of the country, and engaged in a brutal crackdown on dissent. Despite his disrespect for civil liberties, the shah pursued a massive state reform plan known as the White Revolution. His education and land reforms quelled the masses for some time; however, the shah unintentionally created powerful enemies within the bazaar and clergy.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, the U.S. gained a valuable ally in the shah, and sought to prop up his regime in order to maintain its strategy in the Gulf. In a 1973 airgram from the U.S. Embassy in Iran to the U.S. State Department, officials wrote that “the Shah and Iran remain by all odds our

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<sup>28</sup> Amanat, 531.

<sup>29</sup> Abbas Amanat. *Iran: A Modern History*. Yale University Press, 2019, 548.

<sup>30</sup> Amanat, 587.

<sup>31</sup> Amanat, 587.

best hope among the countries of the area to play a responsible role in the Gulf of helping to assure peace and stability in an area of already great and growing strategic interest to the US.”<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, information regarding CIA involvement in the 1953 coup was released to the Iranian public, which damaged the legitimacy of the shah. This further convinced the shah’s opponents that he was nothing more than an American puppet, and fueled the anti-Western rhetoric that would bring about the Islamic Revolution of 1979.<sup>33</sup>

The Iran-Iraq war is another important period in Iran’s history, as it allowed Ayatollah Khomeini to consolidate his rule and repress his opposition, not unlike the shah following the 1953 coup. The war began in 1980, the year after the Islamic Revolution, with an Iraqi invasion on Iran’s northern border in the Zagros mountains.<sup>34</sup> The conflict between Iran and Iraq goes beyond the conventional military battle, as it was also a conflict of ideology and politicized religion. With the Islamic Revolution still fresh, Ayatollah Khomeini sought to export this version of Islam to surrounding countries, and targeted Iraq. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s ruthless persecution of his nation’s Shi’i Muslims resulted in an immigration crisis, where Iraqi Shi’is began pouring into Iran. Khomeini approached the conflict in black and white: the righteous Islamic Republic of Iran vs. the Satanist nation of Iraq.<sup>35</sup> It did not help that the U.S. was supplying arms to the Iraqis, including the illegal chemical agents used against Iranian troops and Iraqi Kurdish civilians in 1984.<sup>36</sup> Khomeini ultimately used the foreign conflict to unite his

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Taylor Killgore and Henry Precht. Letter to U.S. Department of State. “Airgram from the Embassy in Iran to the Department of State.” *U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian*, January 9, 1973. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v27/d1>.

<sup>33</sup> Abbas Amanat. *Iran: A Modern History*. Yale University Press, 2019, 560.

<sup>34</sup> Amanat, 824.

<sup>35</sup> Amanat, 832.

<sup>36</sup> Amanat, 841.

supporters, distract from the regime's shortcomings, and assume total control of the Islamic Republic.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq had significant consequences for the regional hierarchy in the Middle East. Prior to 2003, Saddam Hussein's Iraq kept Iranian power in check, especially after the 8 year Iran-Iraq war. Not only did the U.S. create a massive power vacuum in Iraq, but it also played right into the hands of Iran's anti-American/anti-imperialist rhetoric, and discredited U.S. foreign policy in the region.<sup>37</sup> Iran was able to capitalize on its weak neighbor, and support Iranian interests within Iraq.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. failed to effectively check its expansionary policies, so Iran was free to intercede in both Syria and Yemen on behalf of its proxies. Between failed efforts to rebuild after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. must find a new strategy for a stable Middle East.

As previously stated, in order to promote U.S. interests in the Middle East, president Biden must revisit the nuclear talks with Iran, remove sanctions on non-military goods, and include provisions for mutually beneficial trade.

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the U.S. has imposed extensive sanctions on Iran for a variety of reasons. This section will briefly analyze the aforementioned sanctions, including justifications and economic effects. Executive Order 12170 (1979) was the first U.S. sanction on Iran, and it was enacted in response to the Iran hostage crisis.<sup>39</sup> This order was revoked 2 years

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<sup>37</sup> Vali Nasr. "All Against All." *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 1 (2022). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-12-02/iran-middle-east-all-against-all>.

<sup>38</sup> Suzanne Maloney. "How the Iraq War Has Empowered Iran." Brookings. Brookings Institute, March 21, 2008. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/how-the-iraq-war-has-empowered-iran/>.

<sup>39</sup> Congressional Research Service and Kenneth Katzman, Iran Sanctions: Updated February 2, 2022 § (2022). <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>, 8.

later upon the resolution of the hostage crisis; however, the U.S. imposed sanctions again in 1983 on the grounds the Iran was a state sponsor of terrorism. These sanctions were a response to the 1983 Beirut bombing in which the Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, attacked joint U.S. and French military barracks.<sup>40</sup> Succeeding sanctions in the 1980s and 90s were implemented with hopes that it would deter Iranian financial support of terrorists groups; however, they proved to be ineffective.<sup>41</sup> One such sanction is now known as the Iran Sanctions Act or ISA (1996), and it is a significant barrier to establishing economic relations with Iran. It includes primary and secondary sanctions, of which prohibit direct trade with the Islamic Republic, and punish foreign companies and countries who trade with Iran. ISA can only be lifted if the U.S. presidential administration “certifies that Iran has: 1) ceased its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction 2) has been removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism; and 3) no longer ‘poses a significant threat’ to U.S. national security and U.S. allies.”<sup>42</sup>

In order to meet these requirements, Iran must forge a nuclear deal with the U.S. and its allies and eliminate its ability to produce weapons-grade uranium. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015), or JCPOA, was the first step in this nuclear deal as it sought to “ensure the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme... [and] produce comprehensive lifting of all UN Security Council sanctions as well as multilateral and national sanctions related to Iran's nuclear

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<sup>40</sup> Congressional Research Service and Kenneth Katzman, 8.

<sup>41</sup> William Clinton. “Remarks on Signing the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 and an Exchange with Reporters.” Remarks on Signing the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 and an Exchange With Reporters | The American Presidency Project. The American Presidency Project, August 5, 1996. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-the-iran-and-libya-sanctions-act-1996-and-exchange-with-reporters>.

<sup>42</sup> An Act to Authorize the Iran Sanctions Act of 1996. Resolution, U.S. Department of the Treasury: Iran Sanctions § (2016). [https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/isa\\_1996.pdf](https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/isa_1996.pdf).

programme, including steps on access in areas of trade, technology, finance, and energy.”<sup>43</sup> The JCPOA was an essential first step of the removal of sanctions; however, former U.S. president Donald Trump pulled out of the accord in an effort to strike a more aggressive deal. While the JCPOA did not include every U.S. interest with Iran, these interests must be pursued gradually and strategically in order to produce a sustainable regional order.

In order to maximize the efficacy of a nuclear deal, the U.S. must summon multilateral, and some domestic bipartisan support. The U.S. already had multilateral support for the 2015 JCPOA from the EU, China, and Russia; however the lack of domestic bipartisan support was the primary reason for JCPOA’s failure. If the U.S. is to attempt the nuclear deal again, it is imperative that both Democrats and Republicans support it, or else Iran will not trust that the U.S. will follow through.

There are potential costs to a nuclear deal with Iran, the primary concern regarding Iran’s failure to comply with Article iii in JCPOA which “affirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop, or acquire any nuclear weapons.”<sup>44</sup> If the U.S. were to lift the sanctions on Iran while it was still attempting to produce weapons of mass destruction, then the results could be catastrophic. However, without lifting sanctions, Iran could still obtain the bomb, so at least with a nuclear deal Iran has an incentive not to produce it. The potential benefits outweigh the costs as a successful Iran nuclear deal would have lasting implications, including a more stable Middle East, and the potential for an economic relationship between the U.S. and Iran.

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<sup>43</sup> European Union, Islamic Republic of Iran, China, Russian Federation, and United States, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action: Vienna 14 July, 2015 § (2015). <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/245317.pdf>. 3.

<sup>44</sup> European Union, Islamic Republic of Iran, China, Russian Federation, and United States, 3.

The U.S. maintains significant economic interests in Iran such as oil and a market for U.S. energy and technology. By removing sanctions on non-military goods, the U.S. could slowly establish trade with Iran, and export its soft power. Iran provides a vast market for the U.S. entertainment industry and other capitalist consumer products. If the U.S. is able to hook Iranian consumers on Western products, then the U.S. could gain leverage over the Ayatollah and his supporters. There is no correlation between sanctions and domestic unrest, so they serve little purpose in terms of regime change.<sup>45</sup> Changing “hearts and minds” through exposure to the U.S. economy is the most effective way for the U.S. to export its soft power. This policy would be more effective if other Western nations lifted some sanctions as well, because a barrage of Western culture from all fronts would have a stronger impact than if the U.S. was the sole trading partner. Furthermore, it would signal legitimacy to an economic relationship with Iran, which is essential for attracting more foreign investment. Potential costs to this policy include further consolidation of the Ayatollah’s power and the rise of a technocratic authoritarian government, similar to China. If the U.S. began trade with Iran, it is possible that Ayatollah Khamenei might use the technologies and funds to further oppress his people. This is precisely why a trade agreement with Iran must not include technological software, and provide strict guidelines for conduct. While there is no effective enforcement mechanism if Iran breaks the aforementioned guidelines, perhaps the threat of the return to global isolation would be sufficient leverage.

A new U.S. strategy in Iran hinges on the assumption that Ayatollah Khamenei is a rational actor in the international system, and that he would be motivated to further Iran’s economic might by engaging with the West. Admittedly, this assumption is somewhat problematic as Khamenei might possess more self-interest rather than national-interest. In the

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<sup>45</sup> Congressional Research Service and Kenneth Katzman, Iran Sanctions: Updated February 2, 2022 § (2022). <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>.

last decade, autocratic leaders have become increasingly irrational in an effort to maintain their individual control on power, despite the risk of total state failure.<sup>46</sup> These leaders display little regard for the power of their own country and are willing to risk a failed state, such as president Bashar al-Assad in Syria or Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. Furthermore, Khamenei has stated that the Iranian economy is an embodiment of the Islamic Revolution; therefore, it must be protected from Westernization.<sup>47</sup> He argues for a resistance economy “that weans itself off oil exports, seeks to safeguard domestic industries from foreign competition, eschews trade in favor of local markets, and keeps its money out of international banks.”<sup>48</sup> Khamenei and other hardliners believe it more advantageous to establish economic relationships with neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and diversify the Iranian economy beyond oil. In other words, they want to balance alleged Islamic economic purity and a strong economy. Unfortunately, this economic model is insufficient for Iranian consumers, who prefer Western-made products and entertainment. The ultimate question is whether or not Khamenei believes integration into the global economy will damage Iran’s Islamic legacy, or if it will ensure its prosperity.

In order to adapt to the changing geopolitical terrain in the Middle East, the U.S. must understand how Iran’s unique history has led it to the present day. U.S.-Iran relations post-1953, the Iran-Iraq war, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq all prove to be key events in Iranian national

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<sup>46</sup> Anne Applebaum. “The Bad Guys Are Winning.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, November 18, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/the-autocrats-are-winning/620526/>.

<sup>47</sup> Ray Takeyh. “Iran's 'Resistance Economy' Debate.” Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, April 7, 2016. <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/irans-resistance-economy-debate>.

<sup>48</sup> Takeyh, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/irans-resistance-economy-debate>.

identity. Ayatollah Khamenei has employed identity politics as a means to control his supporters; however, Iran's weakening economy and international isolation have begun to fracture his base, as evident in the 2009 Green Movement and Bloody November in 2019. Now is the time for the U.S. to act and attempt a new nuclear deal with Iran. The current status of U.S.-Iran relations are unstable, so steps must slowly be taken to change its trajectory. By starting early, the U.S. can craft a long-term and sustainable strategy for the Middle East, one that includes the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is time to give all nations in the Middle East a stake in preserving the regional order, and finally bring Iran to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy.

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