



Michael Makovsky, PhD
President and CEO

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

Ari Cicurel
Associate Director of Foreign Policy

Yoni Tobin
Senior Policy Analyst

Credibility and Collapse: U.S. Policy Options Toward Iranian Protests

As brave Iranians continue to rise up against the Islamic Republic—and the regime hopes to cling to power by [beating, murdering, and imprisoning protesters](#) by the thousands—the United States must act. There are now two main issues at stake that directly impact U.S. interests that each demand a response.

First, ensuring that President Donald Trump maintains his credibility. The president deserves a great deal of praise for [supporting](#) the protesters, particularly compared to his predecessors, who [ignored](#) previous mass anti-regime movements. But in promising to come to the protesters' assistance should any be killed he drew a redline, one that the regime in Tehran has now [violently and repeatedly crossed](#). Failure to act now would embolden the regime, deprive Iranians of hope, and suggest American weakness and wavering. This might even encourage Tehran, which always [responds](#) to weakness with aggression, to attack American targets.

Second, the United States has an interest in shaping what happens on the ground in Iran. It is the Iranian people who will have to bring down the regime, but the United States should do what it can to help the people. The Islamic Republic has shown that it will murder thousands to stay in power. If it puts down the uprising, it will surely kill thousands more to stamp out any dissent. And, then, it will return to pursuing its ambition to build nuclear weapons and amass an arsenal of ballistic missiles to use to eradicate Israel and evict the United States from the region. The collapse of this vile, anti-American regime would be a strategic boon for the United States, and the moment to facilitate that is now.

JINSA recommends the following response options for President Trump, some of which could have immediate impact and some of which might take time to implement.

Articulate a Clear Policy of Regime Collapse

As JINSA has [long argued](#), President Trump should clarify that U.S. policy is the collapse of the regime in Tehran, and not just the replacement of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Removing the supreme leader from power while leaving intact the regime as a whole would see Iran continue its barbaric crackdown internally and accelerate its external aggression. Indeed, it is possible that the leadership that follows the supreme leader could be even more fanatical.

It is up to the Iranian people, not the United States, to depose the Islamic Republic. But a regime collapse strategy would seek to hasten the organic process already underway in Iran by pressuring the regime and supporting the protesters, much as U.S. Cold War strategy included weakening and, ultimately, causing the demise of the Soviet Union by its own oppressed people.

In addition to clearly making regime collapse the objective of the United States, the president should foreswear any action that would strengthen or legitimize the regime. No talks, secret or otherwise, no negotiations, no deals.

Enforce Redlines by Striking Iranian Regime Targets

After making several threats against the Iranian regime that it will face [serious consequences](#) if it kills protesters, the president must fulfill his pledge by ordering military strikes on regime targets. This is necessary to maintain his and American credibility, even if those strikes do not end up altering internal Iranian dynamics.

Specifically, the United States should conduct airstrikes against the Islamic Republic's major organs of oppression: the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and paramilitary Basij militias. While recognizing it will be impossible to destroy all of them, by targeting the facilities and senior personnel of these security forces, which are chiefly responsible for perpetrating violence against the protesters, the United States could undermine the regime's repressive capability as well as send a clear message that it stands with Iranians and is willing to impose severe costs for the regime's violence. Possible targets for U.S. strikes could include:

- Major Basij facilities in East Azerbaijan Province and Tehran;
- The IRGC's main Tharallah facility in Tehran;
- The IRGC's four regional sub-headquarters within Tehran; and
- Senior IRGC and Basij officials, including:
 - » IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Pakpour;
 - » IRGC Deputy Commander Ahmad Vahidi; and
 - » Basij Forces Commander Gholamreza Soleimani.

The United States should also consider expanding its targeting to include key ballistic missile production, storage, and launch facilities, and any remaining working nuclear sites.

Certainly, there were risks to such American actions. The regime has already threatened to retaliate against U.S. forces if it is attacked. However, given its acute vulnerability now, the last thing the regime wants is a war with the United States. A show of U.S. resolve, coupled with clear signals that it will respond even more forcefully to any Iranian attack, could deter the regime from acting on its threats.

Stage U.S. Forces in Israel

Since the United States has already drawn down its presence at al-Udeid, has no aircraft carrier in the vicinity of the Middle East, and may have limited access to its regional bases due to constraints from [Qatar](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and [Turkey](#), the Pentagon should surge U.S. forces to the Ovda Air Base in Israel to ensure freedom of action and ability to access Iran.

As JINSA's report, [Base for Success](#), highlights, Ovda offers more reliable access and better protection, with proven air defenses and existing infrastructure that can support U.S. forces, compared to existing U.S. regional bases.

Support Anti-Regime Iranians

Washington should provide robust support to anti-regime forces to shift the internal balance of power inside Iran. This could involve the United States taking action to thwart regime efforts at repression and enable Iranians' ability to protect themselves against vicious attacks, including:

- Doing everything in U.S. power to enable the free flow of information into Iran. It is crucial that Iranians know that the world stands with them, even as the regime tries to cut them off from any means of communication.
- Providing communications equipment, ensuring Iranians have access to satellite communications for phone and internet access, and helping Iranians access [Virtual Private Networks](#) (VPNs) to allow opposition networks to organize, coordinate, and sustain momentum despite censorship and surveillance.
- Conducting targeted cyber operations to disrupt regime communications, degrade command and control, and interfere with Tehran's ability to direct internal repression.
- Since Iranians are already using whatever they have at hand—knives and hunting rifles—to [protect themselves](#) against the regime, enabling their defense by supplying them with weapons, which could be airdropped into areas with major protester activity.

Together, these actions would weaken the regime while materially emboldening and empowering forces seeking its removal.

Implement a Quarantine

Beyond direct military strikes, the United States can also intensify economic pressure on the Tehran regime through a [quarantine of Iranian oil exports](#), as it has sought to do in Venezuela. The [failure](#) of key Iranian banks that enable payments to IRGC, Basij, and other Iranian state officials shows the regime's corrupt financial system is already unraveling. A quarantine that cuts remaining funding channels would compound its economic breakdown while depleting the regime's ability to pay its security forces, further eroding its grip on power. This could be done by a combination of U.S. air and naval assets from outside the Gulf, keeping U.S. forces out of direct confrontation with Iranian fast boats and outside the range of many of its rockets and missiles. To enable strikes on Iran and enforce the quarantine, the Pentagon should surge [naval assets](#) to the region, including an aircraft carrier strike group, guided-missile submarines, additional Aegis-capable destroyers, and other air-defense assets in case of Iranian retaliation.

Encourage Defections

Enabling the collapse of the Islamic Republic should take the form not only of strengthening the protesters but equally of undermining the regime's means of oppression. If officials stop giving the order to attack protesters or security forces stop obeying those orders, the regime will soon topple. The United States can speed up that process by using carrots and sticks to encourage officials to abandon the regime, as JINSA has [previously called for](#).

Already, the United States is [asking its European partners](#) for intelligence on Iranian officials. We assume that the U.S. is also leaning heavily on Israel's incredible knowledge of the regime to identify, and find ways to contact, principally mid-level security officials. It should be willing to offer them payouts and safe haven if they agree to defect. Regime stalwarts, on the other hand, should fully understand that the United States and its partners know who they are, where they live, and

how to reach them, which might make them less willing to perpetrate the regime's campaign of bloodshed.