



Focus on Regime Collapse

Michael Makovsky, PhD
President and CEO

Blaise Misztal
Vice President for Policy

It's regime collapse, and all the rest is commentary. That precept should guide President Donald Trump in navigating his administration's seeming uncertainty about how best to respond to the Iranian regime's vicious suppression of the mass Iranian uprising.

For two weeks, President Trump, in contrast to his predecessors, has admirably expressed support for anti-regime Iranian protesters, and [committed](#) on January 3 to "come to their rescue." And the nature of that rescue was clear, as he [warned](#) six days later: "I tell the Iranian leaders: You better not start shooting, because we'll start shooting, too."

However, after the regime crossed Trump's redline by shooting, killing, wounding, and imprisoning tens of thousands, he has held off on striking Iran. This severely risks his credibility, emboldening the Tehran regime and undermining the uprising. The U.S. is moving military assets to the region, raising the possibility that the president still might order military action after America is better postured.

Now, it seems also possible that the Trump administration will seek a deal with the regime. President Trump and Vice President JD Vance have raised it. Special envoy Steve Witkoff just [spelled out](#) Thursday four areas that should be the focus of negotiations.

President Trump is a born negotiator and naturally seeks a deal. That would be in line with his predecessors Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, who also sought deals with Iran. Obama and Biden accommodated themselves to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and sought to shape its nuclear behavior through diplomacy, containment, or deterrence. Obama ignored the 2009 anti-regime uprising triggered by election fraud so he could pursue a nuclear deal, which was concluded in 2015 (from which Trump withdrew in 2018). Biden ignored the 2022-23 "Women, Life, Freedom" uprising that followed the killing of Mahsa Amini and sought unsuccessfully a revised nuclear deal.

Trump now has a chance to abandon for good the delusions that guided his predecessors about a fanatical regime whose guiding slogan is "Death to America." He should clearly and explicitly announce that henceforth the U.S. strategic objective is the collapse of the Islamic Republic, and American policy will be aimed at hastening that collapse. Everything then will flow from this.

It would immediately hearten and encourage the Iranian people and instill fear in the regime's leadership and its armed supporters.

Putting regime collapse into practice could have several near- and long-term components. Immediately, Trump should declare that the U.S. government will not do anything to legitimize, enrich, or prolong the existence of the Islamic Republic. No more negotiations or talks with the regime.

Second, once adequate U.S. military forces are in place, Trump should strike senior leaders and facilities that uphold the regime's power, especially that of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Basij militia. He might also destroy Iranian air defense, ballistic missile and nuclear sites to minimize the chance and potency of an Iranian retaliation, and weaken its strategic threat. Even if this doesn't alter the internal dynamics, it is important to do to maintain the president's credibility.

Third, Trump should arm anti-regime forces in Iran, so they can defend themselves against the regime thugs and weaken regime forces.

Fourth, to exacerbate the already crushing economic troubles plaguing the regime, Trump should impose a quarantine of Iranian oil exports. This would be an extension of the maximum pressure policy he had instituted in his first term, and still on the books, and an adaptation of the tactics the administration is already using against Venezuela. Without access to the revenues of the roughly 2 million barrels a day Tehran is selling, almost entirely to China, it will struggle to pay its security forces or buy off its populace.

Fifth, the United States should do what it can to counter the regime's efforts to limit opposition communication, including distributing communication tools to the opposition.

These steps certainly entail risks of Iranian retaliation, but the vulnerable Tehran regime is in no position to engage in a war with the United States.

Over the last two weeks, any conception that the United States can engage the Islamic Republic should have collapsed. Now, Trump should declare it is time for the regime to collapse.