

The Iranian People: America's Most Powerful Weapon

Michael Makovsky, PhD
JINSA President and CEO

Blaise Misztal
JINSA Vice President for Policy

President Donald Trump still retains a powerful weapon against Iran that he has not yet deployed: the Iranian people. They will determine how successful the U.S-Israeli military campaign is, since they alone can topple the Tehran regime. Trump should only end the war with conditions that facilitate such a revolution.

Until now, Israel was America's most critical ally against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since it was invaded on October 7, 2023, Israel has taken apart the Iranian axis. It has decimated, though not destroyed, Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, leading to the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Only the Houthis remain strong. Israel weakened Iran's missile forces and cleared its airspace last June, enabling American B-2s to smash Iran's nuclear facilities. In this war, Israel has conducted nearly half of the almost 25,000 total strikes against Iranian leaders, ballistic missiles and launchers, defense industry, navy, and nuclear sites.

While Iran still retains the ability to attack its neighbors and impede shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, the ultimate threat is not Iranian capabilities—the centrifuges in their deeply buried sites, or the enriched uranium they were producing, or the thousands of remaining missiles and drones. The threat is the Islamic Republic's intent to use those capabilities to kill Americans and even eventually threaten the American homeland. To remove the threat, the regime must be removed.

Hence why the Iranian people are such a crucial ally in the war. Their fierce willingness to brave brutal violence to overthrow the Islamic Republic, which has persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered tens of thousands in just the last few months, creates a unique opportunity not just to degrade the Islamic Republic's power but to collapse it once and for all.

Doing so would be an era-defining geopolitical achievement, no less symbolic, celebrated, and enduring than President Ronald Reagan's contribution to tearing down the Iron Curtain. It would remove America's primary foe in the Mideast and crack the China-Russia-Iran-North Korea axis that is working to undermine America and the West.

But to secure this victory, the United States must keep faith with the Iranian people. That means doing nothing that would allow the Islamic Republic to regain strength and everything to weaken it; nothing to discourage Iranians from rising up again, and everything to facilitate and encourage it.

The United States should reject any deal that provides the regime with sanctions relief or an economic lifeline. This would only allow it to pay its forces, restart its weapons factories, and maintain its power, while demoralizing the Iranian people. The only deal Trump should agree to is one in which Iran fully capitulates and permits the extraction of all enriched uranium, access to all nuclear sites, and cessation of all ballistic missile development.

Even then, he should enter any deal warily. Iranian leadership cannot be trusted to adhere to any agreement, having even violated the current ceasefire within 24 hours.

Assuming Iran doesn't agree to such capitulation, the United States and Israel should take six steps to further weaken and undermine the regime before ceasing the military campaign.

First, remove the enriched uranium and make inoperable all remaining nuclear facilities—if the risks are reasonable.

Second, maintain the current blockade until the regime collapses. If Trump lacks the patience for this, then the United States should take over or destroy Kharg Island's oil export terminals, which generate the majority of Iran's revenue. Without oil export revenue, the economy would crater.

Third, drop leaflets encouraging regime officials to defect or else. Better yet, contact them directly.

Fourth, revive plans to support Kurdish opposition groups.

Fifth, smuggle arms into Iran so that the next time Iranians take to the streets, they will not face the regime's oppression empty-handed.

Sixth, enabled by intelligence provided by Iranians themselves, strike low-level IRGC and Basij enforcers wherever they are found.

These steps will leave the regime even more ripe for collapse. And if/when the Iranian people do rise up, the United States and Israel should provide close air support, using drones, to protect them and enable their success.

In January, President Trump admirably became the first U.S. president to support openly an uprising by the Iranian people against the Islamic Republic, setting the stage for this war. On its first day, he correctly stated that the Iranian people have a generational opportunity to rid the country of this vile regime. He must now do everything he can to help the Iranian people seize that moment and make this war an historic success for themselves.