

Freedom for Iran:

Learning From U.S. Support for
Polish Anti-Communists in the 1980s

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INTRODUCTION

President Donald Trump does not shy away from breaking taboos that limit his policy choices. “It’s not politically correct to use the term, ‘Regime Change,’” he observed on Truth Social, “but if the current Iranian Regime is unable to MAKE IRAN GREAT AGAIN, why wouldn’t there be a Regime change???”¹

It remains to be seen whether the Trump administration will adopt a policy of actively promoting regime change in Iran, where mass demonstrations have repeatedly called for an end to the clerical dictatorship that emerged from the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the painful insurgency that followed, Americans have associated regime change with long-term military intervention. But history shows there is more than one way to change a repressive regime.

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan pursued a clear and consistent policy of support for Polish organizations opposed to the Soviet-backed military junta in Warsaw. This effort entailed activities ranging from Radio Free Europe broadcasts to clandestine support for Solidarity, the independent Polish labor union led by Lech Walesa. Reagan also made ample use of his bully pulpit to challenge Communist rule of Poland and other satellite states in the Soviet bloc. American assistance was certainly not the only factor that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Polish regime, but there is evidence that it helped the anti-Communist movement survive and eventually triumph.

This paper discerns lessons from Reagan’s policy to inform decisions today regarding the clerical regime in Tehran. The imperative to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon will complicate any effort to weaken the regime. For national security reasons, dismantling Iran’s nuclear weapons infrastructure must be the priority. Trump took an unprecedented step toward that goal by bombing key nuclear sites, yet the next steps may entail diplomacy that requires a measure of engagement with the regime.

Reagan faced a similar challenge. He sought peace through strength. But he also pursued strategic arms reductions and ultimately wanted to abolish nuclear weapons, which required him to negotiate with the Soviets. Would it be possible to negotiate with Moscow while challenging Communist domination in Poland? Reagan resolved this dilemma by showing that one could both negotiate and challenge the Communists simultaneously. To that end, he sought to negotiate from a position of strength by ratcheting up pressure on Moscow and Warsaw from both without and within. A buildup of American military power and a strategy of checking Soviet external expansion were coupled with prudent support for those struggling for basic human rights behind the Iron Curtain. In time, this strategy would help bring down the Soviet Union and bring freedom to millions, including the people of Poland.

Reagan understood that the nature of the Soviet regime made it inherently dangerous. The same is true of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Chants of “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” are not for show. They express the regime’s ideological commitment to exporting revolutionary violence across the Middle East and beyond. To paraphrase Leon Trotsky’s famous line about war, “You may not be interested in the regime, but the regime is interested in you.”

In 1981, Reagan described the emergence of the Solidarity movement as a “watershed moment in the history of mankind — a challenge to tyranny from within.”² We are witnessing another watershed moment in Iran today.

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1. Pete Schroeder and Susan Heavey, “Trump asks why there would not be ‘regime change’ in Iran,” *Reuters*, June 22, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-asks-why-there-would-not-be-regime-change-iran-2025-06-22>)

2. Gregory F. Domber, *Empowering Revolution: America, Poland and the End of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014) page 38.

“The Islamic Republic resembles a late-stage Soviet Union,” Iran analyst Karim Sadjadpour wrote, “economically and ideologically bankrupt and reliant on repression for its survival.”³ Tehran has also suffered humiliating military setbacks and faces a looming succession crisis with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei now 86 years old. American action can take advantage of these favorable trends. The existence of the Islamic Republic “runs against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens,” just as Reagan said of the Soviet Union and its Communist satellites in his famous address to the British Parliament in 1982.⁴

REAGAN AND POLAND: ‘THE LIGHT OF FREEDOM IS NOT GOING TO BE EXTINGUISHED’⁵

During the late 1970s, Poland sank into a deep economic crisis, spurring widespread unrest and further undermining the legitimacy of its repressive, Soviet-backed government. Consequently, workers at Poland’s Gdansk shipyard went on strike in August 1980 and won the right to form the independent trade union known as Solidarity, led by Walesa. By 1981, Solidarity’s membership had surged to 10 million unionists. Fearing for the stability of the Communist regime, senior army officers, led by the president, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, replaced Poland’s civilian government with a military junta on the night of December 12. They declared martial law and threw Walesa and many other union leaders into prison.

Reagan was appalled by the crackdown. Yet he also recognized it offered a unique opportunity. At a time when most experts considered the Soviet bloc to be remarkably stable, Reagan had long thought otherwise. In 1975, he argued that communism was “a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.”⁶ A year before taking office as president, Reagan observed, “something [is] going on behind the Iron Curtain that we’ve been ignoring and [that offers] hope for all mankind.” A “little less détente,” he said, “and more encouragement to the dissidents might be worth a lot of armored divisions.”⁷ He brought these convictions to the White House and appointed key figures to his national security team who felt similarly.

At the outset of the Polish crisis, Reagan told the Vatican secretary of state during a visit to the White House, “In our emphasis on the impressive buildup of Soviet military power ... we had failed to appreciate how tenuous was the Soviet hold on the people in its empire.”⁸ Four days after the imposition of martial law, Reagan delivered a televised address from the White House. The president made clear he would stand with the Polish people against the military junta, asking, “How can they possibly justify using naked force to crush a people who ask for nothing more than the

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3. Karim Sadjadpour, “Global Institute Dialogues: Karim Sadjadpour on the Middle East in 2025,” *Goldman Sachs Global Institute*, April 2025. (<https://www.goldmansachs.com/what-we-do/global-institute/articles/karim-sadjadpour-on-the-middle-east-in-2025/global-institute-dialogue-karim-sadjadpour-middle-east.pdf>)

4. Ronald Reagan, “Text of Reagan’s Address to Parliament on Promoting Democracy,” June 1982. (<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/09/world/text-of-reagan-s-address-to-parliament-on-promoting-democracy.html>)

5. Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation About Christmas and the Situation in Poland,” December 23, 1981. (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-about-christmas-and-the-situation-poland>)

6. Ronald Reagan, “Communism, The Disease,” May 1975, *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America*, Eds. Annelise Anderson, Kiron K. Skinner, Martin Anderson (New York: Free Press, 2001), page 12; It should be noted that another prominent official who recognized the vulnerability of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and who worked effectively to support Solidarity after its birth in August 1980, was Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter.

7. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), page 352.

8. William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, The Cold War and the World on the Brink* (New York: Penguin, 2022), page 114.

right to lead their own lives in freedom and dignity?”⁹ In his address to the nation, Reagan announced a range of economic sanctions, but soon he would pursue a policy of direct support to the Polish people, including Solidarity.

During Reagan’s first term, his view of the situation behind the Iron Curtain informed key policy documents.¹⁰ National Security Decision Directive 54 (NSDD-54), which set policy toward Eastern Europe in September 1982, called for “reinforcing the pro-Western orientation” of its peoples. The “primary U.S. objective,” it stated, was to “loosen Moscow’s hold on the region while promoting the cause of human rights.”¹¹ The following year, NSDD-75 applied this logic to the entire Soviet bloc. The United States, it said, should work “within the narrow limits available to us” to undermine the stranglehold of the USSR’s “privileged ruling elite” and help advance “toward a more pluralistic political and economic system” within the Soviet Union. Alongside the military, economic, and diplomatic tools at America’s disposal, NSDD-75 emphasized the strategic importance of American ideals: “U.S. policy must have an ideological thrust which clearly affirms the superiority of U.S. and Western values of individual dignity and freedom, a free press, free trade unions, free enterprise, and political democracy over the repressive features of Soviet Communism.”¹²

National Security Advisor William Clark, who oversaw the drafting of these directives, succinctly summed up the new approach. It made “little sense to stop [Soviet] imperialism externally while helping to strengthen the regime internally.”¹³ Rather than simply containing Soviet expansion, the United States would now target the domestic sources of its aggression: its illegitimate ideology and repressive regime.

The views of Richard Pipes, a historian of Russia who served on the National Security Council (NSC) staff during Reagan’s first term, informed U.S. policy. He recognized that Soviet external behavior was a product of its internal system. Therefore, changing its behavior required modifying that system.¹⁴ While others believed that Moscow mainly reacted to American initiatives, often motivated by fear, Pipes argued that expansion and aggression were integral to Soviet Communism.¹⁵ By resisting the regime’s belligerence, denying it aid, and calling out its illegitimacy, Washington could promote opposition within the Eastern bloc, where already “the forces making for change are becoming well-nigh irresistible.”¹⁶ Above all, Pipes argued, “Solidarity was the most important development in the Soviet camp because it directly threatened the Soviet system and ideology ... We could not let Solidarity disappear.”¹⁷

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9. Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation About Christmas and the Situation in Poland,” December 23, 1981. (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-about-christmas-and-the-situation-poland>)

10. There remains a debate among historians as to whether Reagan had a consistent, coherent strategy, as evidenced in: Evan D. McCormick, Aaron Donaghy, Andrew Hunt, Gail E.S. Yoshitani, John Sbardellati, and William Inboden, “The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan in the White House and the World,” *Passport*, September 2023, page 69. (<https://www.shafr.org/assets/docs/Passport/2023/passport-09-2023-inboden.pdf>); As Inboden’s work clearly demonstrates, however, grand strategy by “its very nature blends clear strategic principles and goals with adaptation and recalibration of means and ends.” Reagan always wanted to negotiate with the Soviets, “he just wanted to do so from a position of strength,” and this was spelled out clearly in NSDD-75.

11. National Security Decision Directive 54 — United States Policy Toward Eastern Europe, September 2, 1982. (<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd54.pdf>)

12. National Security Decision Directive 75 — U.S. Relations with the USSR, January 17, 1983. (<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd75.pdf>)

13. Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), page 81.

14. William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, The Cold War and the World on the Brink* (New York: Penguin, 2022), pages 133-141.

15. Richard Pipes, “Soviet Global Strategy,” *Commentary*, April 1980. (<https://www.commentary.org/articles/richard-pipes-2/soviet-global-strategy>)

16. Richard Pipes, *Survival Is Not Enough* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), page 280.

17. Charlie English, *The CIA Book Club: The Secret Mission to Win the Cold War with Forbidden Literature* (New York: Random House, 2025), page 183.

Despite the depth of his concern for Poland, Reagan was conscious that he would have to strike a delicate balance. On the one hand, Reagan had told the National Security Council only days after the imposition of martial law that a similar opportunity might not arise again in “our lifetime” and that he was determined for the United States to “go all out” in supporting the Polish struggle for liberty.¹⁸ At the same time, the United States should not give false hope to the Polish opposition, as had occurred with Hungary in 1956, when Washington encouraged an uprising that Soviet troops then violently crushed.¹⁹

Reagan employed sanctions in an attempt to limit the options available to Warsaw and Moscow. Washington prevented Poland from joining the International Monetary Fund and deprived it of foreign lending. The U.S. government also suspended export licenses for the sale of oil and gas equipment that the Soviets needed to build their Siberian gas pipeline. As Pipes put it in one NSC memo, “The less hard cash the USSR has, the less mischief it can cause us and our friends.”²⁰ Economic warfare did not achieve the knockout blow that the most optimistic U.S. officials hoped for.²¹ Yet it further squeezed the already fragile Polish economy.

Reagan also pressed the offensive rhetorically. In an address to the British Parliament in June 1982, he forecast that the march of freedom would ultimately “leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history.”²² In March 1983, he branded the Soviet Union an “evil empire.”²³ Moscow felt besieged. Soviet Defense Minister Dmitry Ustinov complained that Reagan had “launched a limitless psychological offensive against the USSR and the countries of the socialist community.” There was thus considerable truth in the comment by Herbert Meyer, vice chairman of the CIA’s National Intelligence Council, that “by drawing attention to the fact that in all the world there is not a single communist success story, we have at long last launched an offensive for which the Soviets have no defense at all.”²⁴

To disrupt Warsaw’s control of information, Washington stepped up funding for the U.S. government-sponsored media outlet Radio Free Europe (RFE). By 1981, surveys suggested that, on average, the service had 11 million listeners in Poland, comprising 42 percent of the population. This jumped to around two-thirds of Poles during periods of turmoil, even as the Communist authorities struggled to jam the radio broadcasts.²⁵ In addition to bringing outside news into the country, RFE enabled Poles to hear the words of fellow citizens that might not have reached them otherwise. In that vein, RFE broadcast the sermons of the charismatic priest Father Jerzy Popieluszko, who drew thousands of worshippers to Warsaw’s Church of St. Stanislaw Kosko. The unofficial chaplain of Solidarity, Popieluszko denounced the injustices of Communist rule and appealed for spiritual resistance. In October 1984, the Polish Secret Police, almost certainly with KGB support, tortured and murdered Popieluszko

18. Minutes of NSC meeting on Poland, December 21, 1981: Jason Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files: Inside the National Security Council* (Santa Barbara, CA: Seabec Books, 2014), pages 114-122.

19. Jeffrey L. Chidester, “From Containment to Liberation: U.S. Strategy toward Eastern Europe,” *Reagan’s Legacy in a World Transformed*, Eds. Chidester and Paul Kengor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), page 63.

20. William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, The Cold War and the World on the Brink* (New York: Penguin, 2022), page 98; Many of America’s friends in Europe initially opposed these sanctions — “those chicken littles in Europe,” as Reagan termed them — because they were concerned about the effect on their own economies.

21. Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), pages 90-91.

22. Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” June 8, 1982. (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-members-the-british-parliament>)

23. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida,” March 8, 1983. (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-annual-convention-the-national-association-evangelicals-orlando-florida>)

24. Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), page 91.

25. Jeffrey L. Chidester, “From Containment to Liberation: U.S. Strategy toward Eastern Europe,” *Reagan’s Legacy in a World Transformed*, Eds. Chidester and Paul Kengor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), page 65.

before dumping his body in the Vistula River. Hundreds of thousands attended his funeral mass, and Poles flocked to join Solidarity. The CIA aided by disseminating his sermons throughout Poland along with 40,000 postcards emblazoned with Popieluszko's image.²⁶

Beyond supporting RFE, Reagan directed the CIA to begin providing money and nonlethal equipment to moderate Polish opposition groups, transferred via third parties to ensure the authorities could not prove they were receiving American aid. All this, as one official wrote, was for “waging underground political warfare.”²⁷ This was decidedly nonviolent warfare, however. As Pipes put it, “Solidarity didn’t need or want arms.”²⁸ This operation — codenamed QRHELPFUL — was relatively modest in its objectives and budget. Unlike the \$5 billion spent contemporaneously on mainly military aid to the mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, the \$20 million spent on QRHELPFUL was confined to supporting the organizational capability and communications capacity of the Polish opposition.²⁹ The purpose of the operation was to pressure the Communist authorities to rein in their repression. There was little expectation of bringing down the regime or transforming the region. Yet it succeeded far beyond its limited expectations.

It was thanks to the covert aid provided by the CIA, particularly during the most precarious moments after the imposition of martial law, that Solidarity continued to function. The smuggling into Poland of clandestine radio broadcasting equipment — cutting-edge at the time — helped ensure the group could maintain its communications.³⁰ The CIA also worked with other groups, including one sponsored by the AFL-CIO and some tied to Polish diaspora communities. Washington’s new National Endowment for Democracy (NED) — a bipartisan initiative launched by Reagan with ample Democratic support — also entered the fray. NED provided \$9 million in aid to the Poles between 1984 and 1989.³¹ Congressional funds were first allocated to NED and then passed through a chain of private organizations to Polish emigres based in Western Europe. These activists were empowered to covertly smuggle cash and contraband material into their homeland as they saw fit.³²

Reagan and his aides also liaised with Pope John Paul II, himself of Polish descent. The Reagan team and the pontiff were not fully in alignment, disagreeing vehemently on whether U.S. economic sanctions were more helpful or harmful to the Polish people. Nevertheless, what Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger later termed “a quite holy alliance” emerged informally as the White House and the Vatican pursued parallel programs to sustain Solidarity.³³

26. William Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, The Cold War and the World on the Brink* (New York: Penguin, 2022), pages 302-303.

27. Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), page 82.

28. Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2018), page 113.

29. *Ibid.*, page 15.

30. Benjamin B. Fischer, former chief historian of the CIA, has argued that “evidently, had the Reagan administration not stepped up at a critical juncture Solidarity might well have disappeared forever” and “QRHELPFUL bought time for changes in Poland, as well as the Soviet Union, that altered the postwar world order.” See: Fischer, “Repudiating Yalta,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 2019; the eminent historian of Polish-American relations, Donald Pienkos, has suggested that “President Reagan’s significant support of Solidarity at a critical time for the movement and his wholehearted initiative in backing the CIA’s substantial covert efforts for Poland ... helped patriotic Poles to bring about the non-violent end of four decades of autocratic, and failed, communist party rule in their country.” Pienkos, “Review of ‘A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland by Seth G. Jones,’” *The Polish Review*, 2021.

31. Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2018), page 258.

32. Gregory F. Domber, *Empowering Revolution: America, Poland and the End of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), pages 220-221.

33. Stephen Knott, “Caspar Weinberger Oral History,” *University of Virginia Miller Center*, November 19, 2002. (<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/caspar-weinberger-oral-history>). For a slightly different take that illustrates the disagreements, see: Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2018), chapter 16.

U.S. support for Solidarity and other dissidents did not prevent the Reagan administration from conducting nuclear negotiations with the Soviets. Those negotiations yielded historic disarmament treaties once Reagan had a counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, who shared his sincere interest in eliminating nuclear weapons.³⁴ Still, leverage mattered. External pressure and support for dissident movements created a stronger U.S. position at the negotiating table. As Reagan put it in 1988, shortly before his final summit with Gorbachev, “The Soviets get down to serious negotiations only after they are convinced that their counterparts are determined to stand firm,” and, Reagan said, the West made clear “the lack of illusions on our part about them or their system.”³⁵

In 1989, only months after Reagan left the White House, Solidarity was at the forefront of a mass movement that brought down Poland’s Communist government and replaced it with one based on democracy and human rights. In April 1989, the Communist authorities agreed to semi-free elections that resulted in a Solidarity landslide and led to the first noncommunist government in Eastern Europe of the Cold War era. Solidarity’s success was part of a broader wave of pro-democracy movements across the Soviet bloc as the Iron Curtain fell and the Cold War ended peacefully.

The 1980s were the era of floppy discs, television, and video cassettes, whereas 40 years later, we have smartphones, AI, and social media. Yet the greatest threats to both U.S. national security and the cause of freedom are still ideologically driven dictatorships whose legitimacy evaporates over time, leaving them to depend on the threat of massive force to remain in power.

WHY AMERICA HESITATES TO SUPPORT THE IRANIAN PEOPLE

Recent American policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran has focused more on containing Tehran and influencing its external behavior. There has been minimal targeting of the source of its aggression, its internal system. As protests raged against the Tehran regime after it attempted to rig the 2009 presidential election, President Barack Obama hesitated even to lend clear rhetorical support to the demonstrators.³⁶ He came to office that year determined to pursue détente between the United States and the leaders of the Islamic Republic. Frustrated, many protesters chanted, “Obama, Obama, either you’re with them or you’re with us.”³⁷ During his eight years in office, Obama’s focus remained on dialogue, culminating in the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Trump’s first term began in 2017. He spent a year weighing his options, then pulled out of the JCPOA and pivoted to a policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran, with the goal of forcing the regime to abandon its pursuit of uranium enrichment and nuclear weapons. The Trump administration made clear, however, that it was not seeking regime change. Nor did it undertake substantial efforts to support the mass of Iranians calling for an end to theocratic rule. The alternation between dovish and hawkish policies continued with President Joe Biden and

34. As Abraham Sofaer, legal adviser to the State Department under George Schultz, put it, the president distinguished between regime engagement and regime acceptance. “Abraham Sofaer on Lessons from Reagan’s Cold War Strategy,” *Hoover Institution*, March 23, 2016. (<https://www.hoover.org/research/abraham-d-sofaer-lessons-reagans-cold-war-strategy>)

35. Ronald Reagan, *Remarks to the World Affairs Council of Western Massachusetts in Springfield*, April 21, 1988. (<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-world-affairs-council-western-massachusetts-springfield>)

36. Jay Solomon, the former chief foreign affairs correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, reported that the Obama administration severed any contacts previously established with members of the anti-regime Green Movement and made clear the movement would receive neither financial assistance nor communications support. Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), pages 181-183.

37. Robert F. Worth, “Dissidents Mass in Tehran to Subvert an Anti-U.S. Rally,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2009. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/05/world/middleeast/05iran.html>)

the second Trump administration. Maximum pressure is back but it arrived without maximum support for the Iranian people.

For students of the Reagan playbook, Iran would seem to present a clear opportunity to gain leverage at the negotiating table and advance the cause of freedom by amplifying domestic challenges to a hostile regime. Yet since Obama took office, U.S. policy has treated support for the Iranian opposition as either separate from or contrary to resolving the nuclear problem, whose importance has been paramount. For both Republicans and Democrats, any talk of regime change arouses fears of another bloody and protracted commitment like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, even if there were no thought of military aid to the opposition. There has also been a strong current in both parties that seeks to diminish U.S. responsibilities in the Middle East so that it can pivot to focus on China, America's most powerful adversary.

Democrats like Obama and Biden had additional concerns. One was the perception that the U.S. lacked any credibility to support opposition movements in Iran. This stemmed from narratives surrounding American complicity in the 1953 coup that ousted nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh while turning power over to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who previously served as a constitutional monarch. Viewing relations with Iran through the prism of the misidentified lessons of 1953 has been conducive to an approach laden with timidity and apologetics. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who served in the Clinton administration, publicly expressed contrition for America's "significant role" in the coup.³⁸ The immense irony of this approach is that the Iranian clergy, including many who would foment 1979's Islamic Revolution, were avid supporters of the coup, asserting that only monarchy was religiously acceptable. In Iran today, the regime has little use for Mossadegh beyond using him as a stick with which to bludgeon the West.³⁹

Nevertheless, by beginning from the premise that the clerical regime has legitimate grievances regarding the 1953 coup, U.S. leaders have reasoned that supporting opposition groups could tarnish them as tools of the "Great Satan." Obama was adamant about the need to allay the fears of the supreme leader. As he intimated to then Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, the CIA's role in the coup meant the United States needed to do everything in its power to demonstrate that it was not violating Iranian sovereignty in any way.⁴⁰ As a result, Obama even curtailed U.S. programs documenting Iranian human rights abuses.⁴¹ Obama also wrote directly to Khamenei to reassure him that Washington had no plans to depose him or push for the dismantlement of his regime.⁴²

Another illusion that has proven seductive is the hope that the Islamic Republic is capable of moderation, especially if the West allays its concerns about foreign support for dissidents and demonstrators. Under pressure to secure the release of U.S. hostages, even Reagan chose to believe this mirage. What began as outreach to supposed moderates in

38. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, "American-Iranian Relations," *Remarks before the American-Iranian Council*, March 17, 2000. (<https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/2000/000317.html>)

39. Ali Ansari, "L'état, c'est moi: the paradox of sultanism and the question of 'regime change' in modern Iran," *International Affairs*, March 2013, pages 288-89.

40. Gil Hoffman, "Michael Oren: Obama Rejected Iran Green Revolution for Nuclear Deal," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), January 1, 2018. (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/michael-oren-obama-rejected-iran-green-revolution-for-nuclear-deal-522585>)

41. Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), pages 178-179; James Taranto, "Guess Whose Funding Obama Cut?" *The Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2009. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703298004574457292139419658>); Elliott Abrams, "Obama and Human Rights Violations: See No Evil?" *CFR Blog*, November 10, 2014. (<https://www.cfr.org/blog/obama-and-human-rights-violations-see-no-evil>)

42. Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), pages 168-171.

Tehran culminated in the Iran-Contra scandal, the low point of Reagan's presidency. What Reagan and his successors have so often failed to understand is that the revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic precludes any form of lasting peace with the West. The best that one can hope for is a truce since a durable peace would require the Islamic Republic to recognize and work within an international order it rejects. It would involve de facto, if not de jure, recognition of the State of Israel. In short, these changes would require the regime to stop being revolutionary.

In part, the pursuit of a nuclear deal in 2015 reflected the Obama administration's belief that Tehran could learn to trust Washington and begin to act more responsibly at home and abroad if there were a period of diminished tensions. Yet the sponsorship of terrorism and the assassination of dissidents in exile continued. Later, administration officials would deny that hopes for moderation served as a rationale for the 2015 agreement. But the sunset clauses, by which key restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, arms access, and ballistic missiles would lapse over time, seemingly relied on optimistic assumptions that political reform would make future restrictions unnecessary or that the clerical regime would willingly submit to extending them.⁴³

Trump has not been encumbered by concerns about the history of U.S.-Iran relations or hopes of moderating the clerical regime, yet he has rarely shown any interest in any struggle against dictatorship. During his first trip abroad in his second term, Trump made a point of denouncing Westerners who come to the Middle East to deliver "lectures on how to live and how to govern your own affairs." He also cited the precedents of Iraq and Afghanistan, deriding "the so-called nation-builders, neocons or liberal nonprofits like those who spent trillions and trillions of dollars failing to develop Kabul, Baghdad, so many other cities."⁴⁴ Thus, it proved especially surprising when he turned to social media just a month later to observe, "It's not politically correct to use the term, 'Regime Change,' but if the current Iranian Regime is unable to MAKE IRAN GREAT AGAIN, why wouldn't there be a Regime change???"⁴⁵

It is difficult to say if Trump's post reflects a change in his thinking or just a sharp taunt in the aftermath of the U.S. bombing of Iran's most valuable nuclear facilities. The president may sense that if the regime has to invest heavily in preventing its collapse, there will likely be fewer resources available to rebuild its nuclear program. Likewise, his post might indicate a recognition that the greater the regime's financial distress, the harder it will be for Iran's leaders to resist a deal that dismantles their nuclear program. Either way, if Trump is prepared to learn from Reagan's example, there is much more his administration can do to provide maximum support to the Iranian people.

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43. FDD, "Key Sunsets Under the JCPOA and UNSC Resolution 2231," *YouTube*, April 5, 2022. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJxm3sHgQU0>); Ali Ansari, "The Price of Iran's Nuclear Prestige," *Engelsberg Ideas*, June 10, 2025. (<https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/the-price-of-irans-nuclear-prestige>)

44. Donald Trump, "Full text of Trump's speech in Riyadh: 'Dawn of the bright new day for the great people of the Middle East,'" May 13, 2025. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-trumps-speech-in-riyadh-dawn-of-the-bright-new-day-for-the-great-people-of-the-middle-east/>)

45. Pete Schroeder and Susan Heavey, "Trump asks why there would not be 'regime change' in Iran," *Reuters*, June 22, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/trump-asks-why-there-would-not-be-regime-change-iran-2025-06-22>)

HOW THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC RESEMBLES THE SOVIET UNION

The 1979 Islamic Revolution and the republic it created do not represent a course correction in Iranian history but rather an aberration. The correction is happening now, led by the Iranian people. The Islamic Republic portrayed its rise as a reaction to Western imperialism, and many in the West have accepted this reading of history. Rather, the first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, seized control of a broad-based uprising against the monarchy and imposed a clerical dictatorship that never had widespread support. The regime then launched its own imperial project, which it pursues to this day, seeking to control regional states via proxies such as Hezbollah or clients such as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (until his downfall in December 2024). By invoking revisionist historical grievances to fuel its revanchist aggression, both regionally and globally, the regime resembles its counterparts in Moscow and Beijing much more than typical post-colonial governments.⁴⁶ It also resembles the late Soviet Union.

The Soviets regarded American power and influence as anathema to their deeply ideological revolutionary project. They engaged in proxy wars, covert propaganda, and subversion while seeking to build an alliance of revanchist states. The Soviet debacle in Afghanistan also shows how defeat in imperial wars abroad can rebound with major consequences at home. So far, one cannot say to what extent the crushing defeat of Hezbollah, the collapse of the Assad regime, and Israel's domination of the skies over Iran have punctured the clerical regime's aura of power and emboldened its opponents. Yet it was already clear in years past that costly imperial adventures were a source of deep resentment within Iran. As far back as 2009, protesters chanted, "No to Gaza, no to Lebanon, my life for Iran."⁴⁷ Ideology could not obscure that the Islamic Republic, like the Soviet Union, is a kleptocracy with a sclerotic economy that is heavily reliant on energy exports.

Both the USSR and the Islamic Republic have exposed the limits of trying to impose an alien transnational ideology on peoples with a strong national culture. As Richard Pipes noted regarding Soviet communism, an ideology might adapt itself to the society and absorb some of its tenets, but it will always be vulnerable to nationalist backlash. In the long run, he wrote, culture is more important than ideology.⁴⁸ Both regimes have also sought to bolster their legitimacy by trafficking in conspiratorial antisemitism.⁴⁹ Yet blaming the Jews did not ultimately prove enduringly effective, even in Russia, where antisemitic traditions ran deep.

Just as in Eastern bloc nations, modern Iran has an assortment of purportedly democratic institutions — trade unions, law courts, a consultative assembly, and a press. Yet in both cases, these act as a front for a repressive, revolutionary regime. In the communist case, for too long, too many in the West regarded this facade as an indication that the Soviet Union and its satellites were representative of, and responsive to, their societies. They thus felt they could be treated as any traditional power rather than as an ideologically infused antagonist. It took

46. Bruno Tertrais, "The Revenge of History," *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2016, pages 7-18; Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2014, pages 69-79.

47. Janatan Sayeh, "'They strike, we dance' — Iranians damn the regime amid Israeli barrage," *New York Post*, June 17, 2025. (<https://nypost.com/2025/06/17/opinion/we-dance-iranians-damn-the-regime-amid-israeli-strikes>)

48. Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), page 118.

49. Intelligence services behind the Iron Curtain painted Solidarity as a "Zionist plot." Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2018), page 14; Likewise, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini invoked the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in his revolutionary manifesto, claiming, "Jews and their foreign backers are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the world." His successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, has claimed that Western powers are controlled by "Zionist merchants." See: Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, "The Return of the 'Longest Hatred,'" *New Statesman*, November 22, 2023. (<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2023/11/return-longest-hatred-anti-semitism>)

dissidents, such as the Solidarity movement, to puncture that illusion. Those brave dissidents in contemporary Iran — from those who protested the 2009 election to the Women, Life, Freedom movement today — have similarly exposed the illegitimacy of the Islamic Republic.

Just as RFE helped counteract the misinformation peddled by Communist authorities behind the Iron Curtain, so too diaspora-led Persian language media remain a critical source of independent information in Iran, where state media is tightly controlled and internet access is frequently disrupted.⁵⁰ Viewership matters most during times of unrest, when these outlets can shape public perception.⁵¹ Few things alarm the Islamic Republic more than a narrative it cannot control, which is why Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib accused Iran International, a UK-based outlet with international funding, of “inciting riots” and designated it a “terrorist organization.”⁵²

Only 14 percent of Iranians watch the Islamic Republic’s official news broadcasts daily, while 60 percent say they never do. This growing reliance on alternative media has prompted security forces to detain and threaten the family members inside Iran of journalists working for Iran International, Manoto, BBC Persian, and Radio Farda to suppress their reporting.⁵³

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know when a tottering regime is approaching the point of collapse. Solidarity emerged in 1980, but the regime lasted another nine years. Multiple rounds of mass demonstrations, including the Women, Life, Freedom movement of 2022, attest to the Islamic Republic’s vulnerability. The protesters’ courage in 2022 even led Obama to reconsider his aversion to supporting the opposition in 2009. “In retrospect, I think that was a mistake. Every time we see a flash, a glimmer of hope, of people longing for freedom,” he said, “we have to express some solidarity.”⁵⁴ Yet Washington does not have to wait for the next uprising to act.⁵⁵ Rather, the most prudent approach is to continually build up the means of supporting the Iranian people, so they are in place when the decisive moment arrives.

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50. A 2021 survey found Iran International and Manoto to be the most watched channels, with 33 percent and 30 percent daily viewership. BBC Persian followed at 17 percent, VOA Persian at 11 percent, and Radio Farda at 10 percent. Ammar Maleki, “Iranians’ Attitudes Toward Media: A 2021 Survey Report,” *The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN)*, March 2021. (<https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/GAMAAN-Iran-Media-Survey-2021-English-Final.pdf>)

51. A 2023 GAMAAN poll showed that 57 percent of Iranians followed protest coverage through Iran International, compared with 30 percent for Manoto, 26 percent for BBC Persian, and 20 percent for VOA Persian. Ammar Maleki, “Iranians’ Attitudes Toward Media 2023,” *The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN)*, September 2023. (<https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GAMAAN-Media-Survey-2023-English.pdf>); VOA Persian and Radio Farda have fallen behind due to fragmented management, overlapping responsibilities, and failure to invest in digital platforms. For more on how to revive them, see: Janatan Sayeh and Navid Mohebbi, “Time to Reform VOA and its Iran Programming: Trim the Fat, Keep the Mission,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 17, 2025. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/04/17/time-to-reform-voa-and-its-iran-programming-trim-the-fat-keep-the-mission>)

52. Ardeshtir Tayebi, “Tehran Designates London-Based Iran International News A ‘Terrorist’ Organization,” *Radio Farda*, November 9, 2022. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-international-terrorist-organization/32122561.html>)

53. “Iranian Journalists in Europe Face Threats from Home,” *Deutsche Welle* (Germany), December 5, 2019. (<https://www.dw.com/en/iranian-journalists-in-europe-face-threats-and-harassment-from-regime-in-tehran/a-51547687>)

54. Stephen Collinson, “A rare moment of public self-criticism by a former president,” *CNN*, October 18, 2022. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/18/politics/barack-obama-iran-self-reflection-analysis>)

55. Nor can it continue to get caught flat-footed. Behnam Ben Taleblu and Saeed Ghasseminejad, “Towards A Bipartisan Iran Protest Policy Playbook,” *Radio Farda*, November 21, 2019. (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/towards-a-bipartisan-iran-protest-policy-playbook/30284555.html>)

HOW IRAN'S OPPOSITION IS DIFFERENT FROM ITS POLISH COUNTERPART

Historical analogies are imperfect tools for navigating contemporary questions. In their classic work, *Thinking in Time*, Ernest May and Richard Neustadt urged policymakers to keep differences in mind as well as similarities when applying historical insights to current policy.⁵⁶ Three important points of difference stand out: First, Iran today has no institution comparable to Solidarity that serves as an organizing force while amplifying the voice of charismatic leaders. Second, the regime dominates religious institutions, so there is no body like the Catholic Church that served as both a source of inspiration and organization for the Polish opposition. Third, the Polish regime was heavily dependent on Moscow, whereas Tehran receives support from Russia and China but is not a satellite.

LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONS

Even in the absence of an institutional force like Solidarity, or a single individual whom divergent social groups are willing to rally behind like Ayatollah Khomeini in 1978-79, wave after wave of protests have organically erupted and threatened the regime. First came the 1999 Tehran University student protests, then the Green Movement in 2009, then the recurrent demonstrations of 2017-2020,⁵⁷ and finally the Women, Life, Freedom protests starting in 2022. Over the past 25 years, the chasm between the Islamic Republic and Iranian society has only grown. More and more Iranians have become disillusioned, angry and open to regime change, even if a preeminent, alternative leader has yet to emerge.

But not all uprisings are so dependent on singular leaders, as Iran's own history demonstrates. There were multiple figures who played key roles during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. In 2009, both Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi were part of the reformist electoral bid for the presidency that was termed "The Green Movement" and produced massive anti-regime demonstrations in Tehran by Iranians who sensed the election was stolen from them.⁵⁸ And more recently, with the 2022-2023 Women, Life, Freedom movement, Iranians instinctively began to pour into the streets across all of Iran's 31 provinces in response to the news and images surrounding the murder of a young Iranian-Kurdish woman.

Then there are external opposition figures and activists. While the Iranian diaspora and opposition are famous for being fractious,⁵⁹ their importance is likely to grow given that the Islamic Republic's repressive apparatus continues

56. Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 2011), page 7.

57. For a better understanding of the trends and trajectories behind the evolution in street protests, see: Saeed Ghasseminejad, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Eliora Katz, "Evolution Toward Revolution: The Development of Street Protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Journal of International Affairs*, Spring/Summer 2020. (<https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/evolution-toward-revolution-development-street-protests-islamic-republic-iran>)

58. Roger Cohen, "Iran Awakens Yet Again," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2009. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/11/opinion/11iht-edcohen.html>); Cohen, "Life and Death in Tehran," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2009. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/opinion/23cohenweb.html>)

59. Ilan Berman, "Navigating the Iranian Opposition," *American Foreign Policy Council*, October 2024. (https://www.afpc.org/uploads/documents/Navigating_the_Iranian_Opposition_*_FINAL.pdf); Karim Sadjadpour in conversation with Mehrad Vaezinezhad, نشست «جورجتاون» و ائتلاف مخالفان جمهوری اسلامی چرا فرو ریخت؟ [Why Did the Georgetown Meeting and the Coalition of Opponents of the Islamic Republic Collapse?], *Asoo*, May 13, 2024. (<https://www.aasoo.org/fa/articles/4773>); Charlotte Lawson, "Iran's Heir Apparent and a Divided Diaspora," *The Dispatch*, January 31, 2022. (<https://thedispatch.com/article/irans-heir-apparent-and-a-divided>); "Amid Attacks, Iran's Exiled Opposition Remained Divided. Who Are They?" *The New York Times*, June 26, 2025. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/26/world/middleeast/iran-opposition-groups.html>)

to have the capability and intent to crack down — even following the 12-Day War — against dissenting Iranians.⁶⁰ This situation, therefore, contrasts not only with the Polish case but also somewhat with the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran itself. Despite Khomeini's return to Iran from exile abroad, one key distinguishing factor between the late shah's regime and the Islamic Republic today is the zealotry with which the state security apparatus now uses force against protests.

The fact that mass social unrest led to the ousting of the Pahlavi dynasty may lead some Iran watchers to infer that, 46 years later, the Pahlavi name is still unpopular. Closer inspection, per internal polling⁶¹ and slogans chanted in Iran,⁶² reveal a much different and more nuanced picture. Since anti-regime protests erupted in 2017, there has been a rising tide of popularity in Iran for both the Pahlavi name and Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi. This should not be mistaken for a preference for monarchy over a republic, nor a measure of support for absolutism rather than the rule of law. But it is a reflection of how a growing number of Iranians nostalgically recall a period where the country, as a whole, experienced less oppression, enjoyed a greater measure of prosperity, and was not at the epicenter of the region's wars.

The second major difference between Poland and Iran is the absence in the latter of a religious institution that can provide both spiritual and logistical support to dissidents. Yet one outlet for opposition that exists today in Iran and played a similar role in Poland is the football (soccer) stadium. The Catholic Church inspired a much deeper and more serious devotion than any football match could, yet one should not discount the role of sports. Behind the Iron Curtain, football stadiums and sports grounds provided fertile spaces for opposition protests. As the Armenian anthropologist and football fan Levon Abramian put it soon after the end of the Cold War, going to a football stadium in a Communist country might have represented one's single opportunity to choose a community and to act with liberty. "To be a fan," Abramian declared, "is to be gathered with others and to be free."⁶³ The Polish authors Karol Nawrocki and Mariusz Kordek observed that in Gdansk, there were only three places where one could express anti-system views with a modicum of freedom. The first two were the shipyard, where Solidarity began, and the Church of St. Bridget. The third was the Lechia Gdansk stadium.⁶⁴ Recognizing the power of football as a nationalist rallying cry, CIA assets helped arrange for pro-Solidarity demonstrations during the Polish national team's matches, particularly when they were broadcast live.⁶⁵

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60. Stephen J. Rapp, "The next Iranian massacre is unfolding in plain sight," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2025. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/07/24/iran-mass-executions-global-response/>)

61. Ammar Maleki, "Iranians' Attitudes Toward Political Systems: A 2022 Survey Report," *The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN)*, March 2022. (<https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GAMAAN-Political-Systems-Survey-2022-English-Final.pdf>)

62. Footage of protests taken from inside Iran. MyPist01, "ای شاه ایران، برگرد به ایران" [Protest Demonstration by the People of Qom on January 29: 'O Shah of Iran, return to Iran'], *YouTube*, December 29, 2017. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N29DG02vCFc>); RADIS, "فریادها و شعارهای جاویدشاه و حمایت از شاهزاده رضاپهلوی مردم در چهار گوشه ایران همزمان با نوروز" [Screams and Slogans of Javid Shah and Support for Prince Reza Pahlavi From People in All Corners of Iran on Nowruz], *YouTube*, March 20, 2025. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUrz6uoRXc>)

63. Simon Kuper, *Football Against the Enemy* (London: Orion, 1994), page 46.

64. Karol Nawrocki and Mariusz Kordek, *Lechia — Juventus: Więcej niż mecz* [Juventus: More Than a Match] (Gdansk, 2013); Radosław Kossakowski, Przemysław Nosal, and Wojciech Wozniak, *Politics, Ideology and Football Fandom: The Transformation of Modern Poland* (London: Routledge, 2020); That stadium was the site of a remarkable demonstration of support for Solidarity in one of its bleakest moments. In 1983, during halftime in a game between Gdansk and the Italian team Juventus, a Solidarity member convinced cameramen from NBC and CBS to train their camera on Lech Walesa, who had sneaked into the stadium incognito. Beginning quietly, the whole crowd began chanting "Solidarnosc!" It reached such a crescendo that the players could hear it in the changing rooms, and the manager later remarked, "We heard it and it sent shivers down our spines." State television was forced to show the rest of the game without sound for fear of a repeat. The impact was profound on those who witnessed it though. As one Solidarity leader later put it, "What happened during the Juventus game kept us going for the next five years."

65. Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2018), page 199.

A similar phenomenon has been evident in contemporary Iran. One day after the October 7, 2023, Hamas massacre of Israelis, supporters attempted to raise a Palestinian flag in the stands at Tehran's landmark Azadi stadium. Despite the regime's relentless anti-Zionist and antisemitic propaganda, raising the Palestinian flag produced a massive backlash featuring loud chants of, "Take that Palestinian flag and shove it up your ..." ⁶⁶ Months later, when the Tehran regime mandated a minute of silence for IRGC commanders killed in an Israeli airstrike, fans responded by blowing horns and booing. ⁶⁷ While opposing the regime, the fans have continued to use football matches ⁶⁸ to express dissent by chanting, "Reza Shah Bless Your Soul" ⁶⁹ as well as invoking the name of dissident soccer player Ali Karimi. ⁷⁰

The situation is far more precarious for Iranian women. In 2019, Sahar Khodayari, otherwise known as the Blue Girl, set herself on fire to protest the ban on women's attendance. Three years later, security forces battered to death 16-year-old Sarina Esmailzadeh for attempting to attend a match. ⁷¹ Iran's continuing refusal to allow women to attend matches should result in FIFA banning Iran's national team from international competitions, which could, in turn, spur greater opposition to the regime. Given Trump's close relationship with FIFA President Gianni Infantino, and with the playing of the next World Cup in North America, the White House may have leverage on this issue.

POWER POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

The third major point of divergence between Poland and Iran is the regional landscapes they inhabit. Europe in 1981 was more outwardly stable than the fractious, war-torn Middle East of today. Warsaw was a satellite of Moscow. Soviet domination kept an uneasy peace in Eastern Europe, while Moscow could provide economic support to its satellites. On the other hand, once the Soviets lost the determination to preserve their domination with bayonets, the region's regimes began to fall like dominoes. By contrast, Iran is no superpower and has no superpower patron, but this also means the clerical regime is not dependent on foreigners to preserve its rule. Committed to relaxing repression at home and reconciliation with the West, Mikhail Gorbachev did not seem ready to send the Red Army into Warsaw the way his predecessors sent it to crush uprisings in Prague and Budapest. Conversely, the Tehran

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66. @ManotoNews, X, October 8, 2023. (<https://x.com/ManotoNews/status/1711088490950344792>); The same chant was repeated again the following year at Vahani Stadium, in Qaem Shahr in Mazandaran province; @KayhanLondonOnline, "پرچم فلسطین رو بکن تو...«؛»» [Put the Palestinian Flag in ...; Chant of the Spectators at the 'Vahani' Stadium], YouTube, May 6, 2024. (<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/CSaHaXgMGHk>)

67. "Iranian Football Fans Defy Minute Silence For Slain Commanders," *Iran International* (UK), April 8, 2024. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202404082649>)

68. No doubt, football has always been political in the Islamic Republic. For a better understanding of how, and recent debates over football, see: Houchang E. Chehabi, "The Politics of Football in Iran," *Soccer and Society*, January 25, 2007. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14660970600615328>) (via Taylor & Francis Online); Jafar Panahi and Maryam Maruf, "Offside rules: an interview with Jafar Panahi," *openDemocracy*, June 6, 2006. (https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/offside_3620jsp); Ehsan Kashfi, "Football as a Platform for Ethnic Identity Assertion in Iran," *Elliott School of International Affairs*, June 2023. (<https://pomeps.org/football-as-a-platform-for-ethnic-identity-assertion-in-iran>); Sam Kiley, "Iran threatened families of national soccer team, according to security source," CNN, November 29, 2022. (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/28/football/iran-soccer-family-threats-intl-spt>); Majid Mohammadi, "Debate: Iran's Football Team - National Pride Or Regime's Pawn?" *Iran International* (UK), February 7, 2024. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202402071899>); Colin Millar, "Iran, women and the ongoing struggle for football 'freedom,'" *The Athletic*, July 29, 2024. (<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5646953/2024/07/29/iran-women-and-the-ongoing-struggle-for-football-freedom>); Maryam Sinaiee, "Why are Iranians turning away from their national football team?" *Iran International* (UK), March 29, 2025. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202503271021>)

69. @KayhanLondonOnline, "رضاشاه، روح شاد» در استادیوم آریامهر» [Reza Shah, May Your Soul Be Happy' at Ariyamehr Stadium], YouTube, March 4, 2025. (<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/pekG4IvcFj8>)

70. تلویزیون منو. [Manoto Television], Facebook, accessed July 30, 2025. (<https://www.facebook.com/reel/1829854114516339>)

71. Samantha Lewis, "Death of Blue Girl Shines Light on Women's Rights in Iran," *The Guardian* (UK), September 20, 2019. (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/2019/sep/21/death-of-blue-girl-shines-light-on-womens-rights-in-iran>)

regime has no compunction about spilling blood to preserve its rule. There have been over 1,000 executions in 2024, with almost 70 percent occurring after the supposedly reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian took office, up 20 percent from the previous year.⁷²

While the Soviet Union had extensive resources compared with Iran, there were limits on what it would or could provide to any satellite. In response to the imposition of martial law in Poland, the United States was able to deny credit and short-term loans to Warsaw. When Moscow felt unable to step in to provide credit itself, it undermined the credit rating of the whole Eastern bloc. As Soviet central banker Vladimir Kutinov later put it, when Washington “forced our hand in Poland,” it showed that the “emperor had no clothes.”⁷³ Iran has attempted to build a “resistance economy” that would be immune to sanctions and other forms of economic pressure, but its success has been limited. The maximum pressure campaign of Trump’s first term inflicted heavy macroeconomic and fiscal damage that contributed directly to unrest. Washington eased up pressure under Biden, and Tehran’s oil exports recovered, with China absorbing over 90 percent of the total. Yet if the renewal of the maximum pressure campaign restricts or blocks China from buying this oil, Tehran will have no other options.⁷⁴

Above all, while the most direct threat to the Soviet system, Solidarity’s rise in Poland, was occurring on the outskirts of that empire, overt opposition is growing within Iran itself today. With the Islamic Republic’s own regional empire rolled back in recent months, it has only further exposed to Iranians the bankruptcy of the regime and its ideology.

HOW TO EMPOWER THE IRANIAN PEOPLE

In addition to striking targets associated with Iran’s nuclear program, Israeli warplanes struck the regime’s apparatus of repression, including the headquarters of internal security forces, the regime’s chief propaganda broadcaster, and a prison notorious for torture.⁷⁵ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested that regime change in Iran “could certainly be the result,” yet “the decision to act, to rise up this time, is the decision of the Iranian people.”⁷⁶ Select U.S. officials have echoed a similar sentiment.⁷⁷ Learning from U.S. policy toward Poland in the 1980s, there are several lines of effort the Trump administration should pursue to empower the Iranian people so that if they rise up, they prevail.

The first and easiest step is for Trump to hammer away rhetorically at the regime’s legitimacy, just as Reagan challenged the foundations of Soviet rule. Few in the regime will listen, but a president’s words can provide inspiration and comfort to those who will risk their lives by challenging the regime. This was done to great effect

72. Melanie Swan, “Iran’s ‘reformist’ president oversees 700 executions,” *Daily Telegraph* (UK), January 6, 2025. (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/01/06/irans-reformist-president-oversees-700-executions>)

73. Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration’s Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), page 74.

74. Carol Ryan, “If Iran’s Oil Is Cut Off, China Will Pay the Price,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 17, 2025. (<https://www.wsj.com/business/energy-oil/if-irans-oil-is-cut-off-china-will-pay-the-price-95b9c7e1>)

75. Janatan Sayeh, “5 Oppressive Iranian Institutions Israel has Targeted,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 19, 2025. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/06/19/5-oppressive-iranian-institutions-israel-has-targeted>); Janatan Sayeh, “5 More Pillars of Iran’s Repressive Regime Targeted by Israel,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, June 27, 2025. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/06/27/5-more-pillars-of-irans-repressive-regime-targeted-by-israel>)

76. Michael Martina and Katharine Jackson, “Netanyahu says regime change in Iran could be result of Israel’s attacks,” *Reuters*, June 15, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-says-regime-change-iran-could-be-result-israels-attacks-2025-06-15>); “Netanyahu: We struck Iran to prevent nuclear Holocaust,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), June 15, 2023. (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-857838>)

77. “US wants Iranians to ‘liberate themselves,’ Trump aide says,” *Iran International* (UK), July 24, 2025. (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202507241832>)

using social media in Trump's first term⁷⁸ and has seemingly been ignored in his second. Full implementation of the maximum pressure policy, especially when it comes to oil sanctions enforcement, is also essential.⁷⁹ The main purpose of the policy is to exert pressure on the regime to give up its nuclear program and also deprive the regime of the resources it needs to fund the means of repression.

Just as communications support provided a lifeline for Solidarity in the years of martial law, the right technology can aid the Iranian opposition and dissenters more broadly. To counter the regime's efforts to control or cut off internet access, Washington can build on its programs that provide virtual private networks and explore working with private sector partners like Starlink. Making sure these programs are properly funded so Iranians do not experience internet cuts due to beltway politics⁸⁰ should be a bipartisan priority, especially given the regime's throttling of the internet during protests and times of crisis.⁸¹ The regime will seek to counter whatever steps America takes, so a readiness to adapt and develop new techniques will be essential.

The United States should also improve the quality of its own Persian-language broadcasts,⁸² which the Trump administration significantly cut in early 2025. The eruption of open hostilities between Iran and Israel in June led many of VOA Persian's staff to be recalled, at least temporarily.⁸³ Amidst the tumult, however, its broadcasts to Iran were minimal during the conflict.⁸⁴ The principal challenge to the Islamic Republic's propaganda came from Farda, Radio Free Europe's Persian language service, which reached millions of Iranians, with traffic to its Instagram channel surging by 344 percent in the first days of the conflict.⁸⁵ VOA Persian and Farda have previously been handicapped by fragmented management, overlapping responsibilities, and failure to invest in digital platforms. Nevertheless, the most recent conflict demonstrated the vital role that U.S. government outlets play in preventing the Islamic Republic from dominating the airwaves unchallenged.

Just as the U.S. government worked with the American labor movement during the 1980s to aid Solidarity, there is now an opportunity to support workers and unions in Iran today. One key measure is providing strike pay, with

78. Carlin Becker, "Trump sends 'the most liked Persian tweet' in history of Twitter," *Washington Examiner*, January 12, 2020. (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/1995283/trump-sends-the-most-liked-persian-tweet-in-history-of-twitter>)

79. Despite the resurrection of Maximum Pressure under National Security Presidential Memorandum-2 by Trump, the first six months of the Trump administration barely appear to have made a dent in the Islamic Republic's oil exports, which contrasts strongly with the administration in its first term; Saeed Ghasseminejad and Behnam Taleblu, "Despite war and sanctions, Iran's oil exports surge," *The Hill*, July 30, 2025. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/5425710-despite-war-and-sanctions-irans-oil-exports-surge>)

80. Kylie Atwood, Jennifer Hansler, and Sean Lyngaas, "Activists sound alarm over US cuts to programs providing internet access and promoting democracy in Iran," *CNN*, July 3, 2025. (<https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/03/politics/activists-sound-alarm-cuts-iran-internet-democracy>)

81. Kian Sharifi, "A Day Later, Watchdog Says Iranians Still Largely Cut Off From Internet By Authorities," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 19, 2025. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/netblocks-iranians-outage-internet/33448841.html>); Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Iranian government meets growing protests with harsher crackdown," *Axios*, December 2, 2019. (<https://www.axios.com/2019/12/02/iran-government-growing-protests-harsher-crackdown>)

82. This is despite the attempts at broadening reach over the years to improve coverage of Iran: "Voice of America Launches VOA 365, a 24/7 Persian Language Network," *Voice of America*, March 5, 2019. (<https://www.insidevoa.com/a/voice-of-america-launches-voa-365-a-24-7-persian-language-network/4814792.html>)

83. Minh Kim and Chris Cameron, "Voice of America Recalls Staff for Iranian Language News Service From Leave," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2025. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/13/us/politics/voice-of-america-farsi-iran-news.html>)

84. Sara Fischer, "VOA's Iran Mess," *Axios*, June 24, 2025. (<https://www.axios.com/2025/06/24/voa-s-iran-mess-media-trends>)

85. The Editorial Board, "A Bad Time to Stifle Radio Free Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 20, 2025. (<https://www.wsj.com/opinion/radio-free-europe-iran-kari-lake-usagm-cuts-donald-trump-media-a6f86232>); "Audiences in Iran and Across Middle East Surge to U.S.-Funded Farda and Alhurra amid Israel-Iran Conflict," *Radio Free Europe*, June 17, 2025. (<https://about.rferl.org/article/audiences-in-iran-and-across-middle-east-surge-to-u-s-funded-farda-and-alhurra-amid-israel-iran-conflict>)

funds potentially coming from frozen Iranian assets. The AFL-CIO can help garner global attention for labor actions, such as the recent nationwide trucker strikes in Iran.⁸⁶

The United States should also engage with the country's secular democratic opposition. This could include high-profile public meetings, likely outside Iran, but also quiet coordination. The U.S. government can even provide intelligence to help the opposition outpace and outsmart regime surveillance and its agents of oppression. Likewise, Washington can take cyber actions that disrupt regime surveillance.

The nature of the Islamic Republic's regime means that it will remain a strategic threat as long as it exists. It will retain its commitment to exporting revolutionary violence and to acquiring the most destructive weapons.

For too long, a reductive notion of regime change, shaped by recent instances of unsuccessful military interventions, has hamstrung policy. It has cautioned policymakers against offering anything but the most token support for those brave Iranians resisting a repressive state. America's own history can inspire a different approach. The story of Solidarity demonstrates that even relatively modest means can have an explosive effect in transforming a tyrannical regime.

86. With the position of Iranian workers more precarious than in Communist countries, or, indeed, in Iran itself in 1979, outside economic support is even more crucial. Most workers exist paycheck to paycheck and are fearful of being fired, particularly when unemployment is rife. In addition to strike pay funds, external assistance is required to enable diaspora communities to make remittance payments to family and friends, as suggested by Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj and Zep Kalb, "Why Won't the Workers of Iran Unite?" *Foreign Policy*, November 3, 2022. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/03/iran-workers-general-strike-oil-protests>); Legislation to enable this type of support will need to be crafted to ensure that it does not undermine the essential effectiveness of the existing sanctions regime when it comes to remittances and waivers. For more on this, see: U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, "Frequently Asked Questions," October 22, 2012. (<https://ofac.treasury.gov/faqs/243>); "Sanctions Booklet," *Iranian American Bar Association (IABA)*, accessed July 30, 2025. (<https://iaba.us/wp-content/uploads/IABASanctionsBooklet.pdf>)

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