

Policy Briefing

Human Rights in Iran and U.S. National Security Interests

A Path Forward for U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Islamic Republic



Human Rights in Iran and U.S. National Security Interests

A Path Forward for U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Islamic Republic

Copyright © 2022 by the Center for Human Rights in Iran

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including mechanical, electric, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Center for Human Rights in Iran
New York
Tel: +1 -347-689-7782

www.iranhumanrights.org

Human Rights in Iran and U.S. National Security Interests

A Path Forward for U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Islamic Republic

June 2022



www.iranhumanrights.org



About us

Founded in 2008, the **Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI)** is an independent, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that works to protect and promote human rights in Iran. Headquartered in New York City and with staff in Washington, D.C., the Center researches and documents human rights violations throughout Iran, and provides governments, the U.N., think tanks, global media, and research centers around the world with detailed information, analysis and policy recommendations. The Center's approach is nonpartisan; we operate within the framework of international human rights law.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing by the Center for Human Rights in Iran argues that the U.S. government can most effectively promote its national security interests by prioritizing human rights as a central component of its foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic. While the Center has long advocated for the prioritization of human rights based on international law and ethical concerns, and we will continue to do so, in this policy briefing, we focus on U.S. national security concerns, because we believe they are intimately linked to the state of human rights in Iran. Many of the Islamic Republic's destabilizing regional policies and adversarial behaviors are not a product of national consensus, but rather of a repressive state that does not allow its citizens to challenge state policies.

Locking up dissidents and activists is a human rights violation—but it also facilitates state policies inimical to U.S. interests by silencing voices that, as this briefing will detail, oppose many of the Islamic Republic's policies. With military options widely rejected and economic coercion of demonstrably limited effect outside the Islamic Republic's nuclear activities, defending the rights and amplifying the voices of civil society in Iran represents the most effective way to bring about change, even if incrementally, in many of Iran's more adversarial policies.

To date, U.S. support for human rights in Iran has been intermittent, reactive and peripheral to other concerns. In order to more effectively promote U.S. national security, policymakers should treat human rights as equal in importance to other policy streams, including those regarding nuclear activities, weapons proliferation, regional security, and other political, financial and strategic concerns.

Accordingly, this briefing outlines a series of measures that would significantly increase U.S. efforts to galvanize and lead a stronger and more coordinated international response to the Islamic Republic's suppression of civil society, and which would more effectively recognize and amplify the voices of civil society inside Iran and the concerns they raise, including the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. These measures are grouped into five main policy areas:

- > **Significantly increased recognition of dissidents in Iran and their issues of concern**
- > **Increased global pressure on Iran to release political prisoners**
- > **More rigorous defense of peaceful protest in Iran**
- > **Strengthened international human rights mechanisms**
- > **More effectively employed human rights sanctions**

Locking up dissidents and activists is a human rights violation—but it also facilitates state policies inimical to U.S. interests by silencing voices that oppose many of the Islamic Republic's destabilizing policies.

To date, U.S. support for human rights in Iran has been intermittent, reactive and peripheral to other concerns.

This is a long-term strategy likely to yield few immediate results, and one that must be consistently maintained. U.S. foreign policymakers should incorporate human rights concerns into all Iran-focused policy discussions and involve human rights officials in decision-making. Human rights should also be integrated into the larger policy framework across the government—coordinated closely with the Departments of State and Treasury, with development agencies, and in close concert with Congress, so that all facets of U.S. policy and arms of government are reinforcing this focus.

While Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has so far shown little inclination to lessen repression, we argue that he has in fact demonstrated notable pragmatism when under pressure in the past. Given that the Islamic Republic's own intelligence agencies have expressed concern over rising domestic discontent in Iran with government policies, U.S. policies that would strengthen the ability of Iranian civil society to express opposition to state policies carry the potential to influence state behaviors in Iran in ways that external coercion has not demonstrated. Moreover, Khamenei is now 83 years old and leadership of the Islamic Republic will pass to another individual in the near to medium term. It is not unlikely that a government dominated by the Revolutionary Guards—who are not monolithic ideologically and who have expressed concern over the maintenance of domestic security—will assume political dominance.

A few cautionary remarks. The amplification of dissidents' and other human rights defenders' voices must be handled with care; where public recognition could endanger them, their security must take precedence and bilateral or multilateral advocacy for them must be private. Where explicit consent has been given for public advocacy, it should be robust and relentless.

We also recognize that some of the coercive economic measures discussed here would undermine prospects for an eventual resumption of the JCPOA (or some version of it), since strengthened human rights sanctions would subvert the central bargain of sanctions relief for limitations on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. Yet the failure so far to reach an agreement to restore the nuclear accord with Iran necessitates the formulation of strategies for either outcome—a restoration of the deal or the failure to reach any agreement with the Islamic Republic on its nuclear activities. Both possibilities are reflected in this briefing's recommendations on human rights sanctions. Regardless of whether or not the deal is eventually restored, we believe all existing human rights sanctions on Islamic Republic officials and entities should be maintained, and we have included recommendations for significantly strengthened human rights sanctions to be applied should it become clear that the JCPOA will not be restored. We also urge the U.S. government to focus robust economic coercion on human rights violations in the future, as a consistently maintained pillar of U.S. foreign policy that prioritizes human rights across geographies, even if this ultimately might not be fully achievable in the current Iranian context.

In sum, the central argument is that rounding up dissidents is not just a human rights violation; it facilitates the continuation of state policies that increase the risks to U.S. national security. As such, support and protection of these individuals—and the rights their dissent reflects—should be paramount to U.S. policy.

THE ISSUE

The Islamic Republic of Iran engages in numerous activities that directly contravene U.S. national security interests. Its nuclear program, weapons proliferation, and destabilizing regional activities have all continued despite a broad range of U.S. responses aimed at dissuading Iran from these activities. These behaviors increase the potential for military conflict between Iran and other regional actors and between Iran and the U.S.

In light of increased risk, which will continue regardless of whether or not the JCPOA, or some version of it, is ultimately restored, the U.S. needs to formulate a foreign policy towards Tehran that more effectively counters the Islamic Republic's destabilizing behaviors, while eschewing counter-productive military intervention.

The status quo is unstable, with increasing potential for escalation and military conflict within the region and with the U.S.

THE CONTEXT

Destabilizing activities. The Islamic Republic engages in many activities that undermine central U.S. foreign policy goals of nonproliferation, regional stability and counterterrorism. These include the government's nuclear activities, its development of ballistic missiles and long-range armed drones, support for substate groups in the region that include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen, support for terrorist activities, and support for governments such as Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

Inadequacy of pressure campaigns. Successive U.S. administrations since 1979 have attempted to elicit more responsible behavior from Tehran.¹ Yet despite the imposition of wide-ranging economic sanctions, intensive diplomacy focused on the nuclear file, targeted forceful actions by the U.S., and a "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at increasing the economic costs of Iran's policies, there has been little meaningful change in the country's behavior beyond its nuclear program.

Potential for escalation and conflict. As a result, Iranian policies that have destabilized the region and adversely affected U.S. interests and allies have continued. The status quo is unstable, with increasing potential for escalation and military conflict within the region and with the U.S.

There exists in Iran a well-developed (even if battered) civil society that has consistently registered its disapproval of the Islamic Republic's regional activities and behavior toward the West.

Civil society in Iran disapproves—but is suppressed.

There exists in Iran a well-developed (even if battered) civil society that has consistently registered its disapproval of the Islamic Republic's regional activities and behavior toward the West. This disapproval is evident from credible public opinion sampling in Iran, in which, for example, 73% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Our enemy is right here, they lie that it's the USA," only 11% explicitly agreed with the development of nuclear weapons, two-thirds disagreed with Iran's ballistic missile development, and 70% opposed the Islamic Republic's policies vis-à-vis Hezbollah, Hamas, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Syria.² It is also reflected in a chant consistently heard at mass protests around the country:

"Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran."³ Statements by influential members of civil society, Iranian social media activity, and CHRI's own research and discussions with numerous leading members of civil society in Iran all confirm civil society's broad rejection of many of the Islamic Republic's foreign policies.⁴ Yet this civil society is suppressed. Individuals are jailed for criticizing state policy, lawyers are imprisoned for defending freedom of expression, and public protest is quickly and violently crushed.⁵ Peaceful activists and dissidents are thus unable to mobilize, galvanize broader support and exert pressure on the government, while the public is fed a false narrative that facilitates the continuation of the state's activities.

Dissent nevertheless growing. Dissent in Iran has increased significantly since 2017; public protests have grown in number and in geographic spread, as well as in the depth of discontent expressed by protesters.⁶ Moreover, Iranian intelligence officers have voiced growing concern over this discontent, warning in internal meetings that society is "in a state of explosion under its skin" and that "all that is needed is a spark to lose the ability to manage things."⁷ This is in notable contrast to the indifference the government has displayed toward a continuation of the economic pressure campaign.⁸ The government has also repeatedly demonstrated in the past that when it feels threatened, it is willing to forego ideological purity for practical compromise.⁹

Limited options. The principal source of pressure used against the Islamic Republic so far has been economic, but the authorities have demonstrated they are willing and able to take the pain, and to silence citizens objecting to that pain. The other coercive option, military action, is widely considered problematic. Alongside the humanitarian and human rights concerns arising from war or even limited military actions, such actions would be costly, of questionable impact given their limited long-term efficacy, and with potentially harmful consequences for U.S. regional allies and interests.¹⁰ The Center for Human Rights in Iran unequivocally rejects military force or interventionist policies as legitimate or viable policy options vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic, maintaining that it is up to the Iranian people to chart their own course.

As a result, this briefing argues that the most effective means to elicit positive change in the Islamic Republic's behavior is to recognize and amplify the voices of Iranian civil society.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

With economic pressure delivering disappointing returns and military options considered undesirable, creating space for civil society to express its dissenting views represents the most effective means to influence Iranian state behavior.

How could the U.S. help to create this space for civil society?

The Islamic Republic is resistant to pressure and in particular to change on the human rights front, seeing repression of dissent as critical to its survival. Yet it has also demonstrated notable pragmatism.¹¹

Significantly raising the cost to the state of its suppression of civil society could elicit a calculation that curtailing repression is necessary for domestic stability, thus prompting it to change course—even if incrementally or marginally—in response to its own population.

How could the U.S. raise the cost of repression?

- 1) Galvanizing and leading more effective, coordinated and sustained international pressure on Iran to curb its rights abuses—and meaningful consequences for their continuation;
- 2) Recognizing and amplifying the voices of civil society inside Iran, vigorously and persistently, especially those of dissidents, activists and other human rights defenders, so that these voices are heard, shared, and able to garner support and increase pressure on the government for change.

It is not a certainty that the Iranian government would respond to increased pressure by lessening repression. Yet given the deepening discontent in Iran and the Islamic Republic's record of enacting changes to reduce threats, a calculation that further repression will only increase societal discontent, and that a loosening could be controlled, is a credible possibility. Indeed, the new administration of president Ebrahim Raisi has demonstrated on multiple occasions that it is anxious to improve its public image and standing amongst the Iranian public.¹²

If deadly force is working to silence dissent, the Iranian authorities have demonstrated they will not hesitate to use it; if it ceases to work, they may well change course, calculating that easing up on

The absence of other viable policy alternatives at present calls for a rethink—especially given the existence of a domestic population in Iran that has consistently voiced views compatible with many U.S. national security interests.

repression will help ensure their own political survival. Raising both the international costs of squashing dissent and protest, and facilitating Iranian society's ability to push back, make societal voices heard, pursue protest and build support, increases the possibility of alternative state responses.

Why could this result in meaningful changes to Iran's regional policies?

Amplifying the voices of civil society would increase dissent in Iran and with it, pressure on the authorities to change—or at least mitigate—many of its more adversarial policies in the region and toward the West.¹³ Such a policy, if consistently maintained, offers significant potential for eliciting positive change.

To be sure, the strategy is a long-term one; little meaningful change should be expected immediately. Yet this approach lays the groundwork for shifts in Islamic Republic policies. There are strategies and actions, detailed in this briefing, whereby the U.S. could increase the international costs to the government of its continuing repression, and increase pressure domestically by drawing attention to and amplifying the voices of civil society in Iran, especially those of dissidents and human rights defenders.

One can argue that U.S. human rights promotion has had little effect to date, but the prioritization of human rights has never characterized U.S. policy toward Iran.¹⁴ Despite longstanding lip service to the importance of human rights, an intermittent and reactive focus on human rights, inconsistently applied, has been the rule.

U.S. promotion of human rights was a key aspect of its successful strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and also played an important role in the democratic transitions in South Korea and Taiwan during the 1980s and 1990s.

The absence of other viable policy alternatives at present calls for a rethink—especially given the existence of a domestic population in Iran that has consistently voiced views compatible with many U.S. national security interests. This is a regional rarity that should inform policy.

In addition, history has demonstrated the cumulative power of the U.S.'s consistent promotion of human rights and support for internal voices of dissent with other repressive governments that were highly resistant to change. Indeed, U.S. promotion of human rights was a key aspect of its ultimately successful strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and also played an important role in the transition from authoritarian to democratic governments in South Korea and Taiwan during the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁵

A human rights focus would:

1) Help to amplify influential voices in Iran

Civil society in Iran is comprised of many individuals from all sectors—lawyers, journalists, writers, scientists, teachers, workers, doctors, nurses, businessmen, academics, students, artists, musicians, filmmakers and many others—who are influential in Iranian society and critical of Iran's foreign policies.¹⁶

If given voice, this community's ability to articulate dissent, galvanize support for its views, and exert pressure on the government should not be underestimated. Nor should the government's potential responsiveness to such pressure be discounted; when civil society in Iran came together to reject the country's capital punishment policies, the government eventually responded in 2018 after years of pressure by changing draconian laws that applied death sentences for low-level drug offenses, removing thousands of individuals from pending executions.¹⁷

This success was achieved not only because civil society was able to circulate its views, but also because the international community strongly weighed in with support, thus bringing external and internal pressure simultaneously on the government.

2) Increase the potential for multilateral support

A focus on human rights also carries the most potential for buy-in by U.S. allies, especially among the EU countries, which are still significant players vis-à-vis Iran, irrespective of the Islamic Republic's growing ties with China and Russia. For example, Iran still conducts substantial trade with the bloc; in 2020, the EU was Iran's second largest trading partner, and it remains Iran's preferred source of foreign direct investment.¹⁸

Multilateral efforts that are coordinated will always be more effective than unilateral ones; they carry more legitimacy, impose greater costs, have greater potential for further governments to join, and increase the potential for impact. U.S. leadership in this area would also serve to enhance the U.S.'s soft power and global position.

If given voice, [civil society's] ability to articulate dissent, galvanize support for its views, and exert pressure on the government should not be underestimated.

WHY HUMAN RIGHTS?

- > Supporting civil society in Iran represents the most effective long-term strategy for addressing Iran's destabilizing activities because civil society does not support these activities, and the Iranian government has shown both growing concern over societal discontent and a willingness to change policies that it believes threaten the stability of the Islamic Republic.
- > Dissidents articulate and spearhead dissent, formulating a powerful counterargument to a repressive government's narratives. Recognizing and amplifying their voices is central to effective pushback against such governments, as these voices carry great authority within their own societies.¹⁹
- > Amplifying the voices of political prisoners by raising their profiles both inside Iran and globally undercuts the legitimacy of repressive governments; these individuals are feared by autocrats because they speak truth to power.²⁰
- > State censorship denies citizens knowledge of (and thus a say in) state activities. Defending the free flow of information exposes the state's false narrative, makes the state's activities more open to societal critique, and raises the cost to the government of its regional activities.
- > Rigorously defending the right to dissent and public protest enables society to mobilize and push back against state policies with which it disagrees.

The Iranian government has shown both growing concern over societal discontent and a willingness to change policies that it believes threaten the stability of the Islamic Republic.

- > Leading multilateral calls for accountability for rights abuses and strengthening international human rights mechanisms not only make Iran's activities costlier, they advance the U.S.'s global leadership.
- > The struggle for opening the socio-political space in order to mount challenges to the Islamic Republic's behaviors is ongoing in Iran; its success is dependent on its recognition by the international community and support of the fundamental right of civil society to engage in charting the course of the country. **Accordingly, a U.S. government focus on human rights in Iran is the most beneficial enabler of forces of positive change in the country.**

Human rights priorities

While there are multiple aspects of this proposed focus for U.S. policy toward Iran, this briefing will focus on five key policy areas:

- 1. Significantly increased recognition of dissidents in Iran and their issues of concern**
- 2. Increased global pressure on Iran to release political prisoners**
- 3. More rigorously defended peaceful protest in Iran**
- 4. Strengthened international human rights mechanisms**
- 5. More effectively employed human rights sanctions**

Rigorously defending the right to dissent and public protest enables society to mobilize against state policies with which it disagrees.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

1. Significantly increase recognition of dissidents in Iran and their issues of concern

- > Persistently and strenuously raise the issue of persecuted dissidents, including naming specific individuals, as well as their primary issues of concern, such as their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, in bilateral meeting with other governments and in multilateral forums, both privately and, if the individuals have given consent, in public, signaling U.S. prioritization of these issues.²¹
- > Forge a coherent and unified approach with other governments, whereby allies and other countries commit to: 1) publicly condemn the Islamic Republic's persecution of dissidents; 2) persistently raise the issue of the criminalization of dissent with their Iranian counterparts; and 3) impose calibrated costs, both symbolic and substantive, for their continued persecution.
- > Advance public recognition of individual Iranian dissidents, when consent is explicitly given, through formal statements, the marking of significant anniversaries, the bestowing of prestigious international awards, and references at press conferences, thus increasing awareness and name recognition and raising their profiles globally and inside Iran.²²
- > Facilitate and strongly support the amplification of the voices and work of dissidents and other human rights defenders in Iran, including through expanded Farsi-language broadcasts and through specific measures outlined in the sanctions section below that would help Iranians communicate online with one another more effectively and safely.

2. Increase the pressure to release political prisoners and imprisoned dual nationals

- > Persistently raise the plight of political prisoners and imprisoned dual nationals—including naming specific individuals—in bilateral meetings with other governments and in multilateral forums, both privately and, if the individuals' representatives have given consent, publicly.
- > Forge multilateral coalitions, including for example, European countries, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, that would forcefully call for the release of political prisoners and dual nationals, both publicly and in private meetings with the Iranian authorities, and coordinate with allies calibrated costs for their continued imprisonment.
- > Call on those states whose nationals or residents have been abducted, such as Canada, the U.K., Sweden, France and Germany, to investigate, in accordance with criminal law standards, allegations of abduction, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and/or arbitrary or extrajudicial execution of their residents or nationals, or threats thereof, for the purpose of determining individual liability, including criminal liability of high-level officials, and pursue criminal prosecutions when appropriate.²³

3. More rigorously and effectively defend public protest in Iran

- > Seek forceful public statements by all relevant U.N. bodies and by governments around the world regarding the right to peaceful protest and the unacceptability of violent state force to suppress public protest.
- > If the Iranian government suppresses public protest, and especially if such suppression is accompanied by state violence, immediately engage with U.N. bodies and with other governments to issue forceful condemnations, garner support for calibrated responses that exact meaningful costs, and impose judicial and diplomatic tools of accountability.
- > Proactively plan for strategies to effectively counter any Iranian government efforts to suppress information regarding protests, working with internet freedom and Iranian digital rights experts to facilitate and maintain open channels of communication with Iranian civil society.
- > Increase and expedite Iranian citizens' access to online communication and censorship circumvention tools through more effective U.S. sanctions exemptions for technology tools and services (outlined below), so that they can quickly share information regarding any violent state suppression of protest.

4. Strengthen international human rights mechanisms

- > Call on the U.N. Human Rights Council—and persuade other governments to join in this call—to establish an independent commission of inquiry into the Islamic Republic’s most serious human rights violations (for example, the 1988 mass prison executions and the November 2019 massacre of protesters).
- > Build support for and lead global calls for the Islamic Republic to allow entry into the country by the U.N. special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.
- > Advance international resolutions and statements condemning the Islamic Republic’s rights violations, for example at the U.N. by the high commissioner for human rights, the secretary-general, the Human Rights Council, and the special procedures and experts, as well as at other multilateral forums, such as relevant G7 and OECD meetings.
- > Work more closely with the U.N. special procedures relevant to Iran, including the special rapporteurs on human rights, freedom of expression, arbitrary detentions, enforced or involuntary disappearances, arbitrary and extrajudicial executions, and human rights defenders, sharing information to identify more fully the nature and extent of rights violations in Iran and inform international calls for accountability.

5. Employ human rights sanctions more effectively

Regardless of whether or not the JCPOA, or some version of a deal to limit the Islamic Republic’s nuclear activities, is ultimately restored, we recommend the following measures:

- > Maintain all individual and institutional human rights sanctions.²⁴
- > Strengthen OFAC sanctions exemptions that facilitate Iranian civil society’s ability to access and share online information, such as updating and clarifying General License D1 (which exempts the sale of online communications products from sanctions), so that activists and protesters in Iran can access the latest tools and services that allow them to communicate safely with the Iranian people and with the outside world.²⁵
- > Encourage private companies to make permissible sales of communications products and services to Iranians, providing reassurances regarding sanctions compliance through public statements and private letters of comfort.

- > Address the difficulties experienced by Iranians in paying for such products and services, due both to U.S. secondary sanctions and to banks' reluctance to allow even permitted financial transactions with Iranians.
- > Impose human rights sanctions on any company that sells AI and/or digital surveillance technology to the Islamic Republic, or facilitates the transfer of technology for such purposes, as these technologies significantly strengthen the government's repressive capabilities.
- > Strengthen humanitarian sanctions exemptions for medicines and essential foodstuffs and expand the financial channels for such trade.
- > Encourage full adherence to business and human rights standards for any foreign direct investment (FDI) in Iran, which require rigorous human rights due diligence across business operations and throughout supply chains, value chains and subcontractors.²⁶

In the event that it becomes clear that the JCPOA, or some version of it, will not be restored, or if a restored deal is subsequently not maintained, we would urge significantly strengthened human rights sanctions, including the following measures:

- > Consult closely with Iran-focused human rights organizations and experts in business and finance to further identify individuals, companies and organizations associated with human rights violations, so they may be sanctioned accordingly.²⁷
- > Scrutinize the human rights abuses and business activities of elite figures, especially in the security forces, in the judiciary, and those in the inner circle of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, including the companies they control, the placement of their funds, and the individuals they use as asset-owning proxies.
- > Examine more closely the business activities and holdings of Iran's religious foundations and their subsidiaries, which are owned wholly or partially by state officials who are serious human rights violators, and which have become major business conglomerates with opaque holdings throughout the economy, including in hydrocarbons, telecoms, finance, construction and agriculture.²⁸
- > Coordinate an invigorated sanctions policy across the administration, including the State Department with respect to foreign policy considerations and the Treasury with respect to financial logistics such as payment channels for permissible goods, and cooperate closely on sanctions policy across the government through regular and close consultations with Congress to ensure that policies are reinforcing one another.
- > Work more closely with European and other allies, consulting closely and regularly and sharing relevant information, so that other governments are brought on board regarding strengthened U.S. human rights sanctions and their enforcement.

CONCLUSION

While scholars have long noted countries that refuse to follow the rule of law and respect human rights internally are more likely to engage in aggression externally, the connection between human rights in Iran and U.S. national security interests is more direct.²⁹ Civil society in Iran has consistently voiced disapproval of many Iranian activities that are inimical to U.S. interests. The suppression of those voices has facilitated the state's ability to continue activities that are destabilizing to the region.

Recognizing and amplifying voices of dissent so that they can push back against the government and call for changes in policies will require more than intermittent proclamations of generalized U.S. support for human rights and State Department reports that passively list the Iranian government's rights abuses. It will require the U.S. to signal to the international community its prioritization of the issue, galvanizing and leading that global community to similarly focus on the Islamic Republic's rights violations, and it will require significantly strengthened support for the dissidents and human rights defenders in Iran.

In order to more effectively promote human rights in Iran, the U.S. must also seek to apply the same principles and policies to other countries in the Middle East, including our allies. When the U.S. ignores human rights abuses by other autocratic and repressive governments in the Middle East, it damages its credibility, provides the Iranian authorities with the opportunity to deflect criticism of its record, and undermines U.S. efforts to promote human rights in Iran.

Human rights are not a magic bullet. This is a strategy that is likely to deliver only incremental progress over time and must be maintained over the long term. Yet we have seen in other country contexts that a strong and consistent focus on human rights can have significant impact, even if such changes can take years or even decades. To deliver that impact, the U.S. must seek every opportunity to support the voices of the Iranian dissident and activist community, both globally and inside Iran. If Iran's government is to be compelled to open space for civil society, it must come under sustained pressure, inside and out.

Recognizing and amplifying voices of dissent so that they can push back against the government and call for changes in policies will require more than intermittent proclamations of generalized U.S. support for human rights.

The U.S.'s hard power is unparalleled, but it can be ill-suited to some of today's complex security issues. Indeed, the Center for Human Rights in Iran unequivocally rejects military force or any interventionist policies as viable policy options vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. It is up to the Iranian people to chart their own course. Yet allowing the voices of dissidents and human rights defenders in Iran to be heard and supporting their rights to freedom of expression, association, assembly and dissent is not only in line with American principles, it is also in line with U.S. interests. And the U.S.'s soft power, its ability to provide global leadership, and to champion rights and ideas that are greatly feared by the autocrats of the world, remain powerful tools to advance U.S. goals and interests. This soft power would only be enhanced by a more vigorous and principled U.S. stance on human rights.

The Iranian citizenry has largely and consistently opposed violence, extremism, the government's regional "adventures" (as it typically refers to Tehran's activities in neighboring countries) and its adversarial relations with the West. All of the U.S.'s key strategic interests—nonproliferation, regional conflict resolution, stability and counterterrorism—can be advanced by supporting the voices and fundamental rights of that citizenry. This makes the prioritization of human rights well within the U.S.'s strategic interest. For too long, human rights in Iran have been sidelined. The international community must recognize the linkages between the Islamic Republic's activities and the suppression of its people, and how the lack of accountability for its human rights violations has only facilitated the continuation of these activities. In the words of one senior U.S. policymaker, "People tend to worry about nuclear weapons more than they do dissidents being rounded up. But one leads to the other."³⁰

"People tend to worry about nuclear weapons more than they do dissidents being rounded up. But one leads to the other."

—Senior U.S. policymaker

ENDNOTES

¹ Since 1979, the U.S. has adopted a range of policies designed to end or dissuade the Islamic Republic's more adversarial policies. These have included initial diplomatic overtures under President Carter in 1979 before the seizure of the U.S. embassy, overt support for Iraq in its 1980-1988 war against Iran, more conciliatory approaches during the Clinton years followed by the "dual containment" strategy, the imposition of wide-ranging economic sanctions, highly specific engagements focused on the nuclear file under President Obama, and the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. Yet to date, the U.S. has been unable to significantly change Iranian state behavior, beyond its nuclear activities.

² See the findings of this survey of over 20,000 respondents living inside Iran, conducted September 21-30, 2021 by GAMAAN (the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN), which is an independent, nonprofit research foundation registered in the Netherlands: 60.4% of respondents either viewed the U.S. favorably or had "no opinion," while 39.5% viewed the U.S. "very or somewhat" unfavorably. 86% of the Iranian population stated "domestic inefficiency and corruption" have had the worst impact on the Iranian economy, while only about 10% stated "foreign sanctions and pressures" were the main cause of the country's current economic difficulties. 73% agreed with the statement, "Our enemy is right here, they lie that it's the USA," while 15% opposed it. 73% expressed opposition to the public chanting of "Death to America," only 18% favored it. 52.4% of respondents either viewed Israel favorably or had "no opinion," while 47.7% viewed Israel "very or somewhat" unfavorably. 65% opposed the "Death to Israel" slogan, while 23% favored it. Over half of the respondents agreed that disputed matters, including the country's nuclear program, should be negotiated with the West. 56% stated Iran's nuclear program should be for exclusively peaceful purposes, while 27% opposed any nuclear program at all, meaning that at least 83% opposed the development of nuclear weapons. Only 11% explicitly agreed with developing nuclear weapons. Roughly two-thirds of respondents were not supportive of Iran's ballistic missile development; 37% support the program only if it does not lead to sanctions, with about 28% entirely opposing such development; only 26% agreed with it irrespective of sanctions. Regarding regional policies, 57% evaluated Iran's current role in Syria negatively and 26% evaluated it positively. 34% felt the IRGC's regional activities had increased Iran's security, 32% thought they reduced it, and 21% felt they had no effect. 64% agreed with the chant "*Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life for Iran*" (frequently heard in street protests in Iran for many years through to the present), while 24% opposed it. Roughly 70% opposed the Islamic Republic's policies vis-à-vis Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Al-Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, while only about 21% agreed with Iran's approach to these groups. See "Iranian Attitudes toward International Relations: A 2021 Survey Report," GAMAAN (the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN) <https://gamaan.org/2021/10/27/iraniansattitudes-toward-international-relations-a-2021-survey-report/>

³ Chants regularly heard at street protests and circulated via Iranian social media consistently show opposition amongst the Iranian citizenry to many policies that are inimical to U.S. interests, especially its regional activities. For example: Hundreds of farmers and residents of Isfahan chant "No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran," November 20, 2021 <https://t.me/iraniansattitudes-toward-international-relations-a-2021-survey-report>

[me/FreedomMessenger/85097](https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/85097); In response to power outages, protesters in Tehran chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” July 26, 2021 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/81693>; In response to water and power shortages, protesters in Behbahan, southern Iran, chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” July 16, 2020 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/65060>; Large numbers of students at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” January 11, 2020 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/55299>; University of Tehran medical students chanting “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” January 11, 2020 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/65060>; People who lost their money in an investment scheme in Rasht, northern Iran, chanting “Let go of Syria, think about us,” on January 29, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo3qhRnZtCk>; Protesters in Karaj, west of Tehran, chanting “We have no money, no gasoline, the hell with Palestine,” November 17, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWrbJwX21E4>; Protesters in Yasouj, capital of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province, chanting “We have no money, no gasoline, the hell with Palestine,” November 17, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSRrEr7LmcM>; Large numbers of protesters in Kermanshah, western Iran, chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” November 16, 2019 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/50574>; Large numbers of protesting steelworkers in Ahvaz, capital of Khuzestan province, chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” December 2, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8Js43WYfKs>; Protesters in Qom, the Shia seminary center of Iran, chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” August 4, 2018 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/31939>; Protesters in the Gohardasht district of Karaj, west of Tehran, chanting “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran,” August 2, 2018 <https://t.me/FreedomMessenger/31723>; Protesters in Teheran, the Shia seminary center of Iran, chanting “Death to Palestine,” June 25, 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSQBVx_9nUI; People in Neyshabur, northeast Iran, protesting against high inflation, chanting “Let go of Syria, think about us” on December 28, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5WKJ7YYzGw>; Retired steelworkers in Isfahan chant “Let go of Syria, think about us,” on October 28, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjsPpTKxJf4>; Large numbers of demonstrators gather around the tomb of Cyrus the Great near Shiraz, Fars province, on October 28, 2016 and chant “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQaoHuhWxIk> and “Let go of Syria, think about us” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBQI-_FS_0o; Thousands of Iranian spectators in Azadi Stadium in Tehran chanting “No Gaza, no Lebanon, sacrifice my life for Iran” during a soccer match between Iran’s and Lebanon’s national teams on June 11, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaqye-ybdjY>; There have also been multiple reports of the burning of Qassem Soleimani’s statues. See for example, Ben Cohen, “Statue of Assassinated ‘Quds Force’ Commander Qassem Soleimani Burned by Protestors in Iranian City Hours After Unveiling,” *The Algemeiner*, January 6, 2022 https://www.algemeiner.com/2022/01/06/statue-of-assassinated-quds-force-commander-qassem-soleimani-burned-by-protestors-in-iranian-city-hours-after-unveiling/?mc_cid=46909542c0&mc_eid=4e6c4149bc.

4 CHRI’s own research (which includes detailed review of writings and statements by leading members of civil society and civil society organizations, as well as discussions with influential members of civil society over the years from 2008 up to the present and which include prominent attorneys; influential activists in many different areas such as political and civil rights, labor rights, religious and ethnic minority rights, and women’s rights; independent and citizen journalists; student leaders in universities across Iran; teachers; prominent academics and scholars; leaders of major NGOs; leading dissidents and intellectuals, including writers, poets, artists, filmmakers and musicians; former Iranian parliamentarians; doctors; and businessmen), has consistently shown civil society to support good relations with the U.S., the West and the world, the peaceful resolution of conflicts—including the dispute over Iran’s nuclear activities, and to oppose Iran’s regional engagements, especially regarding Lebanon and Syria. For example, in January 2022, a prominent international relations expert and academic inside Iran who spoke with CHRI (name not disclosed due to fears for his security) mirrored many comments we have heard from civil society in Iran with the following statement: “[The Islamic Republic’s]...regional policies are not in accordance or for the benefit of the Iranian nation’s national interests. These regional policies have not had any tangible material or moral [benefit] for the people of Iran. None of these policies have served the national interest and indeed it has created many self-inflicting crises, such as the enmity towards Israel. Maybe in the case of the U.S., one could argue its policies towards Iran before and after the revolution fanned the flames of the ongoing enmity. But Israel at the onset of the revolutionary regime was not against [the Islamic Republic] but the new leaders [in Tehran] defined and fanned the flames of this ongoing enmity. They created taboos and situations that we are now mired in. Regarding the chants on Gaza, Lebanon, etc. during popular

protests, in my opinion they represent genuine grievances and express disapproval and challenges to the government's regional policies in a serious way. Because these policies and their resulting costs are not justified for the people. The government claims if they did not interfere in countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, then 'the enemy' would be at our borders. But these 'enemies' are their own creation and the people do not see why these enmities should arise in the first place if it wasn't for the Iranian government's own policies and actions. It was the Iranian government's policies from the first days of the revolution that made overthrowing 'reactionary' governments in the region a linchpin of its policies and led to ever-growing enmities and conflicts." Another prominent civil and political activist inside Iran (name not disclosed for security reasons) similarly expressed views to CHRI (also in January 2022) that have echoed many we have heard over recent years: "I do not believe the Iranian government's regional policies serve the country's national interests. ...The Islamic Republic has spent huge amounts of our national wealth to create and support militia forces in the region by relying on sectarian divisions and even employing criminal and Mafia-like elements to further its footholds in the region. Regarding the chants by people on the streets on Gaza and Lebanon, I agree with their essence. These chants announce to our rulers that we oppose their ideological policies, their interference and meddling in other countries, and their constant 'enemy-creating' actions. If we are truly concerned about the rights of the Palestinian people or other repressed people in the region, we could raise their plights in existing international institutions and under existing international norms without such regional adventurisms and military engagements." Even family members of the Islamic Republic's founding fathers have expressed similar sentiments. In a January 10, 2022 interview, Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, daughter of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (former president of Iran from 1989-1997, head of the Islamic Republic's powerful Assembly of Experts and Chairman of the Expediency Council), told Didban Iran (Iran Watch), "Look at the number of people killed in Syria. Just that number, never mind the refugees and the destruction. It's 500,000 people. In any case, we played a role in that. Or in Yemen, there has been a civil war for seven years and we've played a role in it. We have been engaged in Muslim-killing. If you count all the Palestinians killed by Israel, I doubt it would add up to 100,000 or 200,000. Yet we have surpassed Israel in Muslim-killings. We have been pursuing wrong policies, knowingly or unknowingly, with our own hands or not, but in any case, they're happening in our name. So, we can't claim to be good and endure all this hardship. Why do we have to endure all this hardship? To commit more killings and tyranny? This is wrong and we need a change in policy." <https://tinyurl.com/t4362dw7>

⁵ For example, see "Iran: Relentless Repression of Dissent," Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2021 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/iran-relentless-repression-dissent>; "Iran 2020," Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>; and "Freedom in the World 2021: Iran," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2021>. So many human rights lawyers have been imprisoned in Iran that few are willing to undertake cases any longer. See "Walking in a Minefield without a Map: The Life of an Iranian Human Rights Lawyer," Center for Human Rights in Iran, April 15, 2021 <https://iranhumanrights.org/2021/04/the-life-of-an-iranian-human-rights-lawyer/>. Activists, dissidents and independent journalists are prosecuted and sent to prison on manufactured "national security" charges (see "Iran's New Government Moves to Silence Dissent by Muzzling Leading Activists," Center for Human Rights in Iran, September 28, 2021 <https://iranhumanrights.org/2021/09/irans-new-government-moves-to-silence-dissent-by-muzzling-leading-activists/>) and public protest is violently crushed (in November 2019, hundreds of protesters and bystanders were killed by state security forces indiscriminately shooting to kill at the crowds, see "Gunning Them Down: State Violence against Protesters in Iran," Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 2020 <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/05/they-aimed-at-my-sons-head-report-reveals-carnage-in-crushed-iran-protests/>).

⁶ Public protest in Iran has changed—and grown—since December 2017, when demonstrations broke out across the country. Up until then, despite the risk of arrest and imprisonment, protest had persisted—by students at universities across the country in 1999 and 2003; by large numbers of citizens who demonstrated against the disputed presidential election results in 2009; and by laborers, teachers, drivers, nurses, farmers and others in frequent labor protests over the preceding decades. Yet the unrest that broke out in December 2017 was diffuse, unorganized, leaderless and less focused on specific grievances. It grew quickly to encompass hundreds of cities and towns across the country, with participants voicing rejection of the country's entire political and economic system. Protests were prevalent in the working class areas of provinces

that had previously been strongholds of support for the Islamic Republic, and included large numbers of young men who had left drought-stricken smaller towns for provincial cities where they were typically unemployed. The unrest continued into January 2018, until a violent state crackdown suppressed them. Protests continued sporadically throughout 2018, for example by farmers over water shortages, by workers protesting unpaid wages and the imprisonment of their labor leaders, and by bazaar merchants. In November 2019, even larger mass protests broke out across the country, triggered by a gas price increase. These street protests again went well beyond the dissident and middle class communities to encompass large swaths of the population in the provinces and in rural towns, encompassing workers in industries and sectors across the country, the unemployed, farmers, and others who again voiced rejection of the political and economic order in Iran. It was only suppressed after state security forces engaged in unprecedented violence, killing hundreds of civilians in a week (other credible estimates indicate those killed exceeded a thousand) and arresting thousands. A brief flare-up occurred again in January 2020, especially in the universities, which also was quickly extinguished by state violence. Since then, protests have continued to occur sporadically, especially in provinces most hard hit by water shortages like Khuzestan. In many of these protests, fundamental rejection of the political and economic system, the ruling elite, and the repression sustaining the system has been voiced. See “Gunning Them Down: State Violence against Protesters in Iran,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 2020 <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/05/they-aimed-at-my-sons-head-report-reveals-carnage-in-crushed-iran-protests/> and “Silencing the Streets, Deaths in Prison: The December 2017 Crackdown in Iran,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, February 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/02/irans-suppression-of-december-2017-unrest-marked-by-brutal-violations-of-law/>

7 The government is increasingly concerned by the growing discontent and widening public protests in the country, as evidenced by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) own assessment of the domestic situation in the country. The following remarks were made and recorded in a meeting of senior intelligence and military officials at the Sarallah Headquarters of the IRGC’s Intelligence Organization on November 24, 2022, according to a document classified “Top Secret,” [https://www.instagram.com/p/CZeSATnKu--/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=b779f97f-a43b-4f16-9e27-bf7749006e5c] that was given to Radio Farda by the anonymous hacking groups Ali’s Justice. IRGC officer Mohammadi (first name not given), deputy for social affairs, IRGC Intelligence Organization, said, “There has been a development in society that indicates it is in a state of explosion under its skin.” IRGC officer Ahadi (first name not given) in charge of the IRGC Intelligence Organization’s economic affairs, said, “The government is gradually losing focus and all that is needed is a spark to lose the ability to manage things.” IRGC officer Mehrab (first name not given), from the IRGC Intelligence Organization’s economic section, said, “If these [worsening economic conditions] are ignored, there is a 100% chance we will face a crisis.” In the discussion on the impact of raising the official dollar exchange rate, IRGC General Beigi (first name not given), deputy in charge of intelligence at the Sarallah Headquarters, said, “Because of the special circumstances, it would be best if this plan [to raise the official dollar exchange rate] is not implemented this year, even though the government is insisting on it. ... The possibility of a security situation occurring during implementation should be anticipated. We will see a considerable spike in prices in the market and during implementation we should take precautions and be sure the market will be flooded with goods. ... The enemy will carry out psychological operations, which will be followed by social protests. In terms of security, we should not be left off guard. We must look into how to implement security considerations.” Colonel Kaviani, representing the police security division, said: “[Protest] gatherings in [Iranian year] 1400 [began March 21, 2022] compared to last year [March 20, 2021-March 21, 2022] have increased 48% and crowd numbers rose 98%, meaning that there were 5,373 people at the rallies last year and this year there were 10,656. Economic [protest] gatherings have increased 56% compared to last year while protests at labor units have increased 136%. Most protests have taken place in front of parliament or the Ministry of Labor, with the latter currently experiencing most of the protests. ... In the last four months of the year [ending March 20, 2022], we predict there will be 55 economic protests. This year there will be a 22% increase in economic protests compared to last year.” Separately, Deputy Interior Minister in charge of Social Services Organization Taghi Rostamvandi, speaking at a conference focusing on tackling social ills on January 16, 2022, said: “People’s tolerance level has dropped in recent years ... if we get a sense that, due to our inabilities, the people are tilting toward thinking that the religious government can’t solve the challenges facing the country and that perhaps another kind of government, such as a secular one, a non-religious state, can deal with the problems, then alarm bells will be

ringing for us.” <https://www.irna.ir/news/84615026/%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%BA%DB%8C%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B2%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>

The government’s growing concern over domestic discontent is also evidenced by the state’s swift and harsh reactions to recent street protests. Not even in 2009, during the mass public demonstrations over the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, did the state kill hundreds of civilians in the space of a week. See for example, “Gunning Them Down, State Violence against Protesters in Iran,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 2020, <https://iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Iran-Human-Rights-November-2019-January-2020-Protests.pdf> Its similarly harsh and violent crackdown on water protests in Khuzestan in July 2021, and again in Isfahan in November 2021—even as the government was expressing ostensible support for the protesters’ plight and demands—attests to a growing fear and intolerance of public protest. (See Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Forcefully Clamps Down on Protests Against Growing Water Shortages,” The New York Times, November 26, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/middleeast/iran-protests-water-shortages.html>)

The state’s concern is also evident in: the increasing use of the death penalty in political cases and against protesters as a tool of intimidation and repression, (see “Iran: Death Penalty used as a Political Tool – UN Expert,” Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations, October 25, 2021 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27705&LangID=E>); the increasingly harsh sentences issued against dissidents and human rights activists and lawyers (see “Iran: No End to Mounting Repression,” Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2022 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/13/iran-no-end-mounting-repression>); and the use of quickly initiated new charges and convictions in order to keep political prisoners nearing release behind bars (see “Rights Activist Narges Mohammadi Sentenced to Another Eight Years in Prison,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, January 24, 2020 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2022/01/rights-activist-narges-mohammadi-sentenced-to-another-eight-years-in-prison/>).

The government’s assiduous attempts to shape the public narrative—by censoring the internet (see “Freedom on the Net 2021 - Iran,” Freedom House <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2021>), controlling the media (see “Iran: Press Freedom Violations in Real Time January 2020,” Reporters without Borders, November 9, 2021 <https://rsf.org/en/iran-press-freedom-violations-recounted-real-time-january-2022>), broadcasting false forced “confessions” of detainees (see “Iran: New Report Demands End to the Use of Rampant Forced Confessions,” International Federation for Human Rights, June 25, 2020 <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/iran/iran-new-report-demands-end-to-the-rampant-use-of-forced-confessions>) and intimidating the families of journalists and dissidents into silence (see “Special Report- A Wrenching Choice for Families: Go Public or Stay Quiet?” Reuters, August 1, 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-iran-balance-specialreport/special-report-a-wrenching-choice-for-families-go-public-or-stay-quiet-idINKBN1KM4PZ>)—also attest to its concern for public opinion.

⁸ See Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “The Dilemma of Iran’s Resistance Economy,” Foreign Affairs, March 17, 2021 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2021-03-17/dilemma-irans-resistance-economy>

⁹ The Islamic Republic has demonstrated on multiple occasions that when it feels truly threatened, it will accommodate, compromise, and even change course. This was demonstrated, for example, by its (bitter) acceptance of the ceasefire with Iraqi president Sadaam Hussein in 1988; its initial cooperation with the U.S. after the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan; and its overtures to the U.S. in 2003 after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

¹⁰ Prominent Middle East diplomat Dennis Ross, put it succinctly: “The Iranians are clearly not afraid of us any longer. That in itself means we really don’t have the level of deterrence we need, whether on the nuclear issue or in the region.” (See Michael Hirsh, “Iran Seeks to Fill a Middle East Power Vacuum,” Foreign Policy, September 28, 2021 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/28/iran-power-vacuum-middle-east-nuclear-power/>) This only strengthens the argument that efforts to empower civil society in Iran now remains the most effective means of impacting Iranian state behavior.

11 Ibid.

12 The Raisi administration has demonstrated concern over its public image and standing with the public, especially after President Raisi's election saw the lowest voter turnout (48.8%) in the Islamic Republic's history. Among those who did vote, an unprecedented 12.9% submitted blank ballots as a protest. (See "Raisi: Election Results Explainer," The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, June 23, 2021 <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/jun/23/raisi-election-results-explainer>). For example, after the widespread protests over water shortages in Khuzestan Province in July 2021, the administration's swift public reaction was to express enthusiastic support for the protesters and pledge that their grievances would be addressed, even as security forces moved to violently crush the protests. Raisi emphasized his government "will not waste a single day" in seeking solutions, in sharp contrast to the highly critical public reactions by hardliners (labeling protesters thugs, for example) that previously followed public protests. <https://www.irna.ir/news/84413030/> Similarly, in response to farmers' protests in Isfahan in November 2021, Raisi again expressed government support, stating he had ordered the Presidential Center for Strategic Studies to launch a "scientific investigation" into how to revive Zayandeh Rud, the river which is the source of the water disputes in Isfahan province—even as security forces then again descended on the crowds to violently suppress the protests. <https://www.imna.ir/news/535095/> And in response to nationwide teachers' protests demanding higher pay, Raisi on January 12, 2022 ordered an "immediate overhaul" in the salary structure of government workers "on the basis of fairness." (See <https://www.irna.ir/news/84610741/> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/middleeast/iran-protests-water-shortages.html>)

13 See endnote #4

14 Human rights have never been prioritized in U.S. policy toward Iran. Multiple U.S. administrations largely ignored the poor human rights record of the Shah, who ruled Iran prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the creation of the Islamic Republic. Iran's role as a key U.S. client state during the Cold War meant that human rights issues were largely ignored, even in the face of growing domestic anger in Iran at the Shah's widespread rights abuses. The Shah was seen as a critical bulwark against Soviet designs in the region and a guarantor of oil supplies. President Reagan, despite his focus on human rights and dissidents in the Soviet Union, largely ignored rights abuses in Iran, and under Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush there was also little substantial engagement on the rights front in Iran. The Obama administration's expressed support for human rights in Iran came to be eclipsed by its desire to reach an agreement to limit Iran's nuclear activities. As such, U.S. policy was focused on nuclear negotiations, which culminated in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The administration did expand human rights sanctions on Iran, initiated sanction exemptions for online communication products aimed at supporting civil society, and negotiated the release of dual nationals imprisoned in Iran. Yet human rights were secondary to the nuclear file. The Trump administration, despite vocal condemnations of Iran's human rights situation and the expansion of human rights sanctions on Iran in the wake of its 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA, did not integrate human rights in a meaningful way into U.S. policy and condemnations were not accompanied by substantive or consistent policies of support for civil society and rights promotion in the country.

15 As demonstrated during the U.S.'s relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, a sustained and prioritized focus on human rights represents a successful—albeit long term—strategy for dealing with adversarial states. During the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1980-1988), human rights was integrated as a central component of U.S. Cold War foreign policy. Secretary of State George Shultz placed human rights on equal footing with other areas of concern in the U.S.'s relationship with the Soviet Union, pursuing rights-based issues simultaneously alongside military, political and economic issues. He understood the synergies between human rights and U.S. national security, and that supporting human rights would strengthen the U.S.'s position in its global conflict with the Soviets. Shultz persistently raised human rights in meetings with his Soviet counterparts, and numerous Soviet dissidents were released from prison due to Shultz's efforts. This focus on human rights helped to erode the Soviet's legitimacy and is viewed by many historians as contributing to the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the soft power of human rights promotion should not be underestimated; the U.S. won the Cold war not only due to its economic and military might, but also because it won the battle of ideas—especially throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet bloc states—and this was in large part due to its support for basic rights and

liberties. The 1975 Helsinki Accords also illustrate the sometimes unforeseen multiplier effect of human rights promotion. While initially criticized for legitimizing Soviet boundaries in Eastern Europe, the Accords incorporated human rights as one of the main areas of concern between East and West. The Helsinki Process's four "baskets" to govern negotiations included: 1) issues of European security and conflict resolution—which, critically, included in its Principles "respect for human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief;" 2) cooperation in economics, science and technology; 3) humanitarian and cultural cooperation; and 4) follow-up procedures for implementation. The human rights elements were dismissed by Henry Kissinger at the time, but as described by the Helsinki Commission staff in a report prepared for the U.S. Commission On Security And Cooperation In Europe, "Human rights violations would [now] be recognized as legitimate international concerns rather than simply domestic matters" and "human rights advocates among the dissident communities of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe soon saw it as a new opportunity. ...[They] found they could play an important role in monitoring and reporting on their government's compliance with Helsinki provisions" and that the Helsinki Process "played a pivotal role in bringing the Cold War to an end by encouraging peaceful, internal changes that reunited rather than accepted a divided European continent." "The Helsinki Process: An Overview," prepared by the Helsinki Commission staff, June 2019 <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/The%20Helsinki%20Process%20Four%20Decade%20Overview.pdf>

Regarding South Korea, see Im, H. B. (2006). The US role in Korean democracy and security since cold war era. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 6(2), 157–187. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26156543>.

Regarding Taiwan, see Russell Hsiao, "Taiwan and Remaking the Case for a League of Democracies," *The National Interest*, September 27, 2017 <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/taiwan-remaking-the-case-league-democracies-22497>

Human rights can be equally important in advancing U.S. national security interests in the Iranian context. Even though visible impact can be years in the making, the groundwork for that impact is laid.

16 "Iranian Attitudes toward International Relations: A 2021 Survey Report," GAMAAN (the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN) <https://gamaan.org/2021/10/27/iraniansattitudes-toward-international-relations-a-2021-survey-report/>

17 See for example, "Iran Suspends Thousands of Drug-Related Death Sentences After Years of Domestic and International Campaigning," Center for Human Rights in Iran, January 10, 2018 <https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/01/iran-suspends-thousands-of-drug-related-death-sentences-after-years-of-domestic-and-international-campaigning/>

In another example of the potential power of civil society, three young men, Amirhossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi and Mohammad Rajabi, were issued death sentences for their participation in the November 2019 protests that swept through Iran (see <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/07/death-sentences-for-three-protesters-confirmed-by-supreme-court-in-iran/>). They were denied access to lawyers during the investigation phase, tortured [<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1888/2020/en/>], and Amirhossein Moradi stated he was forced under torture into giving a false "confession" that was broadcast on state television and used as evidence to convict them. Their trial was grossly unfair, and their death sentences were upheld by Iran's Supreme Court on July 10, 2020. However, a societal outcry in Iran against the death sentences ensued, epitomized by a "Don't Execute" social media campaign on Twitter. During the Twitter storm in support of the three protesters between July 14-16, 2020, tweets with the Persian hashtag **دینکن_مادعا** ("Don't_Execute") [https://twitter.com/hashtag/%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85_%D9%86%DA%A9%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AF?src=hashtag_click] received some six billion impressions and were retweeted more than four million times [<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/contradiction-story-protesters-iranian-judiciary-twitter/30727717.html>]. On December 5, 2020, the Supreme Court [ordered](https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-55197960) a new trial but so far it has not been held [<https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-55197960>]. On January 18, 2022, the lawyer for the three protesters said [<https://www.ilna.news/fa/tiny/news-1184773>] Amirhossein Moradi had been released "a couple of months ago" to receive medical treatment. He added that promises had been made about granting pardons to all three but that could not happen until a final sentence has been issued. With their sentences currently under judicial review, at this point they seem to have escaped the death sentence. https://gdb.rferl.org/6334BC4E-51C0-4123-9998-37A4E2677264_w1597_n_r0_st.jpg

In another more recent example, when the elderly and ailing veteran journalist, Keyvan Sa-

mimi was imprisoned and then exiled to the remote and harsh Central Prison in Semnan for his peaceful dissent, a societal outcry resulted in his release <https://twitter.com/MostafaNili58/status/1488537384023171079> (For example, there are more than 1,100 posts in the Instagram page for Keyvan Samimi's Persian hashtag; see [Persian hashtag posts on Instagram](#); [Persian hashtag posts on Twitter](#); see also this [letter from the reformist National Trust Party](#) on January 23 addressed to Judiciary Chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei which had 2.3k views; this [Post from leading labor rights advocate](#) Jafar Azimzadeh on January 20 condemning Samimi's banishment which had 358 views; and this statement by the Iranian Writers Association on January 14 https://t.me/kanoon_nevisandegane_iran/770 which had 3.9k views.)

Many cases are intentionally hidden by the authorities from the public eye to prevent exactly this kind of societal outcry, and the authorities routinely try to extract forced false "confessions" (typically under torture or ill-treatment) in order to impugn the reputation of the defendants, lay the groundwork for their convictions, and legitimize their persecution of dissidents and activists. But the existence of an educated public and engaged civil society renders the state's efforts more difficult—and underscores the argument for focusing on the empowerment of civil society to counter many of Iran's activities and facilitating in every manner possible the free flow of information.

18 According to the European Commission, "The EU is Iran's 2nd biggest trade partner, representing 12.3% of the country's total trade in goods with the world in 2020. Before the current sanctions regime, the EU used to be the most important partner of Iran. Total trade in goods between the EU and Iran in 2020 amounted to €4.5 billion. The EU's imports were worth €0.7 billion and were dominated by agriculture and raw materials (€0.4 billion, 57.1%), followed by chemicals (€0.1 billion, 14.2%) The EU's exports amounted to €3.8 billion and were led by machinery and transport equipment (€1.3 billion, 34.2%), chemicals (€1.0 billion, 26.3%) and agriculture and raw materials (€0.7 billion, 18.4%). Two-way trade in services totaled €1.5 billion in 2019, with EU imports of services representing €0.7 billion and exports €0.8 billion." See "Countries and Regions – Iran," European Commission; Trade; Policy <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/iran/>

19 In Iran, the voices of imprisoned human rights lawyers, activists, dissidents, labor leaders and journalists continue to carry significant authority amongst society. See these images from Imamzadeh Abdollah Cemetery in Shahr-e-Rey, south of Tehran, where the poet Baktash Abtin was laid to rest on January 9, 2022, after dying from Covid-19 which he contracted after being arbitrarily detained in the overcrowded and unhygienic Evin Prison for his dissident writings. (Posted by the Free Workers Union of Iran (FWUI) channel on Telegram: [Video](#): Chanting "This free-spirited poet is the tyrants' nightmare!" (<https://t.me/ettehad/96438>); [Video](#): Chanting "Bravo Abtin, down with tyrants!" (<https://t.me/ettehad/96434>) [Video](#): Chanting "Abtin is alive, his path everlasting!" (<https://t.me/ettehad/96437>)

The Islamic Republic has an impressive array of articulate, committed and prominent human rights defenders who have not been silenced by prison bars, such as the defense attorneys [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/12/human-rights-lawyer-nasrin-sotoudeh-being-returned-to-gharchak-prison/>] and [Mohammad Najafi](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2021/08/three-more-iranian-human-rights-attorneys-slapped-with-unjust-prison-sentences/>]; the activists [Narges Mohammadi](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2022/01/five-minute-trial-resulted-in-narges-mohammadis-eight-year-prison-sentence-iran/>], [Atena Daemi](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/07/atena-daemi-begins-new-prison-sentence-on-day-she-was-to-be-freed/>], and [Bahareh Hedayat](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/07/prominent-activist-sentenced-to-four-years-in-prison-for-protesting-downing-of-ukrainian-passenger-plane/>]; the citizen journalist [Sepideh Qoliyani](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/06/sepideh-qoliyani-refuses-to-beg-for-pardon-goes-back-to-prison/>]; the labor leader [Jafar Azimzadeh](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/08/new-conviction-against-imprisoned-labor-leader-upheld-to-keep-him-behind-bars/>] and teacher activist [Esmail Abdi](#) [<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2020/06/prominent-teachers-rights-activist-facing-additional-years-in-prison/>]; and many other lesser-known activists, and their statements and letters (often even from prison) are circulated widely on Iranian social media. U.S. recognition (and amplification) of these peaceful activists and dissidents and their issues of concern would help them in their efforts to shape the national conversation in Iran regarding both domestic and foreign policies. Support for them and the rights they advocate should be central pillars of U.S. policy.

20 For example, the new sentence recently issued for the already imprisoned prominent

rights activist Narges Mohammadi for her peaceful activism, is not only a new 8-year, 2-month prison sentence (and 74 lashes), but also a two-year ban on all social media communications. The authorities fear her continued advocacy and her reach via Iranian social media. See <https://twitter.com/rahmani-taghi/status/1486307338353061888?s=12>

21 The administration should consult closely with Iranian human rights organizations and experts to stay fully informed on the individual dissidents, activists, human rights defenders and others who have been persecuted by the Iranian authorities, and the state of their cases.

22 Ibid.

23 See the joint statement released on July 19, 2021 by 10 major human rights organizations, "Rights Groups: Iranian Dissidents Remain at Risk Worldwide Without International Action," <https://iranhumanrights.org/2021/07/rights-groups-iranian-dissidents-remain-at-risk-worldwide-without-international-action/>

24 To be sure, the record on the efficacy of sanctions has been mixed, particularly regarding countries that are relatively insulated from the global economy. Yet there are country contexts that have shown the potential impact of human rights sanctions when carefully targeted and rigorously enforced. For example, U.S. sanctions imposed in December 2021 against government and security force members in Bangladesh who have committed serious human rights abuses have reportedly resulted in an abrupt cessation of extrajudicial killings because "many among the elites send their children to Western universities, funnel ill-gotten cash to Western bank accounts and hope to retire to properties in America, Australia, Britain or Canada." See "How sanctions really can improve respect for human rights," The Economist, January 29 2022 edition, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/01/29/how-sanctions-really-can-improve-respect-for-human-rights> Human rights sanctions also have greater potential for buy-in by allies and other countries. Every effort should be made to avoid wide-scale suffering, and should the Iranian authorities improve their human rights record, meaningful sanctions relief should be forthcoming. Indeed, human rights sanctions should not be fronts for more pressure, but rather carefully tied to specific goals regarding Iranian behavior, and eased (or lifted) according to explicit criteria and conditions. In other words, the goal should be to change behavior, not to punish. As discussed by Daniel W. Drezner, any lack of clarity on the goal of sanctions or the actions necessary for their lifting "undermines coercive bargaining, because the targeted actor believes that sanctions will stay in place no matter what they do.... [and] all this behavior is just an exercise in maximizing the economic pain...." Daniel W. Drezner, "What is the plan behind sanctioning Russia? Tell me what makes the Russia sanctions end," Washington Post, March 1, 2022 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/01/what-is-plan-behind-sanctioning-russia/>

25 See "Supporting Internet Access and Security for Civil Society in Iran," Center for Human Rights in Iran, April 2021, <https://iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Iran-tech-policy.pdf>

26 See the Iran Business Responsibility project [<https://ibrproject.org/>] briefings [<https://ibrproject.org/c/our-work/online-resources/briefings/>], for example, "Doing Responsible Business in Iran," [<https://ibrproject.org/our-work/online-resources/briefings/briefing-1-doing-responsible-business-in-iran/>], "Due Diligence for Responsible Business in Iran: Challenges and Recommendations," [<https://ibrproject.org/our-work/online-resources/briefings/briefing-2-due-diligence-for-responsible-business-in-iran-challenges-and-recommendations/>], and other IBR briefings on occupational health and safety issues [<https://ibrproject.org/our-work/online-resources/briefings/briefing-3-occupational-health-safety-in-iran/>], environmental and social impact assessments [<https://ibrproject.org/our-work/online-resources/briefings/briefing-5-environmental-and-social-impact-assessments-and-responsible-business-in-iran/>], migrant workers [<https://ibrproject.org/our-work/online-resources/briefings/briefing-4-migrant-workers-and-responsible-business-in-iran/>], and other responsible business issues.

27 The impact of human rights sanctions in Iran is affected by the fact that many state officials have relatively little financial involvement with the West; as such they may not be significantly hindered by the imposition of sanctions. Yet it would be a mistake to say there are few financial links and dependencies between high-ranking Islamic Republic rights abusers and the West that have not already been targeted. The U.S. government should consult closely in this capacity with human rights

organizations to identify additional actors who are human rights violators in the security and intelligence apparatus, in the judiciary (including in the prisons and detention centers), the police, and so forth, who should be targeted with sanctions. Extensive work should be done to ascertain financial holdings they may have outside the country and any companies in which they may have even partial ownership. Full information regarding company ownership, effective control of a firm, or individuals in a company acting on behalf of others can be hard to obtain. Publicly listed companies provide some information, but, as in many geographies, information can easily be obscured and individuals can act as representatives for others. Less information is available for privately held companies. An entity's ownership or stake may not be clear because it may sit behind other company structures. (See "Due Diligence for Responsible Business in Iran: Challenges and Recommendations," Iran Business Responsibility project, January 2017 <https://ibrproject.org/our-work/online-resources/briefings/briefing-2-due-diligence-for-responsible-business-in-iran-challenges-and-recommendations/>)

²⁸ These religious foundations/business conglomerates have significant holdings and are dominant players throughout the economy. See for example, "Assets of the Ayatollah," Reuters, November 12, 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part2>; and "How Private is Iran's 'Private' Sector: Doublethink research shows overwhelming government and bonyad ties with Iran's 'private' sector," DoubleThink, August 15, 2019 <https://doublethink.institute/how-private-is-irans-private-sector/>; and "Iran's Commanding Heights: Privatization and Conglomerate Ownership in the Islamic Republic," Pp. 363-399 in *Crony Capitalism in the Middle East: Business and Politics from Liberalization to the Arab Spring*, edited by Ishaq Diwan, Adeel Malik, and Izak Atiyas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

²⁹ Burke-White, William W., "Human Rights and National Security: The Strategic Correlation" (2004). Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law. 960. https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/960

³⁰ Private conversation the Center for Human Rights in Iran held off the record with a senior U.S. policymaker on February 24, 2022.

