

In Discussing Middle East Policy, US Should Acknowledge the Goal of Regime Change

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6/19/2017 1:00:00 PM - Ivan Sheehan

The election of Donald Trump last year set the stage for major changes in U.S. foreign policy and particularly American policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was clear on the campaign trail that Trump's views on Iran could hardly be more different than those of his predecessor, Barack Obama. Almost six months into his first term the administration is now well positioned to lay the foundation for a lasting Middle East legacy by boldly embracing the goal of regime change in Tehran.

Whereas the Obama administration took great pride in the Iran nuclear deal it helped to negotiate, then GOP candidate Trump repeatedly referred to the agreement as one of the worst deals ever negotiated and promised to overturn it upon assuming office. Although the Trump White House is technically upholding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it has also imposed tough new sanctions on the regime that are unrelated to the Iranian nuclear program. Iran policies now under development suggest that an explicit endorsement of regime change may well be on the horizon.

Given the nature of the Iranian regime and the lack of meaningful reform following the JCPOA's implementation, the Trump administration and its allies in Congress should make their intentions clear and outline a concrete plan that will further weaken the world's only modern theocracy and the worst state sponsor of terrorism in the world.

This is not to say that I – or anyone with a sensible handle on Middle East affairs – believe the U.S. should facilitate regime change directly. And fortunately this does not appear to be an agenda of the Trump administration, which has repeatedly pledged to put “America First” – rhetoric that suggests the avoidance of direct overseas entanglements but not at the expense of defending American interests and democratic values throughout the world.

Toward that end, the U.S. needs to focus its efforts on building useful partnerships abroad. This is a strategy that Trump initiated with his first official overseas trip wherein he visited Saudi Arabia and Israel – a sign to many Middle East hands that he hoped to encourage and even foster cooperation between onetime adversaries who now face a mutual threat from the Islamic Republic. Whereas Obama's conciliatory approach led to a cooling of U.S. relations with these historic allies, Trump's

willingness to push back on the Iranian regime has made them eager to re-embrace the U.S. at a critical moment in Middle East affairs.

Trump's foreign tour also took the president to the Vatican, a sign of the potential for bolstered cooperation among the world's three Abrahamic faiths. Contrary to the Obama administration's illusory hopes for Iranian moderation following the JCPOA, the Islamic Republic is necessarily excluded from interfaith cooperation. The Iranian regime is notorious for religious persecution, routinely denying minorities like the Baha'is access to education or jobs and frequently imprisoning people for many years or even sentencing them to death on the basis of religious crimes.

Tehran is also responsible for a great deal of the sectarian violence in the broader Middle East, especially against the backdrop of the Syrian Civil War – which Iran has prolonged through its support of murderous dictator Bashar al-Assad. Countless Iran-backed militant groups are fighting in that war, and many of them have been accused of massacring Sunni populations in much the same way that ISIS massacred Shiites.

The Iranian people are among the most progressive and well-educated peoples in the Middle East and they are overwhelmingly opposed to the regime that has barred them from expressing their secular democratic preferences for nearly four decades. This opposition is a crucial reason why it is realistic for the U.S. to embrace and expect regime change, and more specifically, regime change from within driven by local populations as opposed to being imposed by Western authorities. Both within Iran and amongst the Iranian expatriate community there are millions of people who are either actively pushing for the establishment of a truly democratic system in place of the existing theocracy or silently advocating for that goal when outside of the nearly omnipresent gaze of the Iranian security state.

This sentiment will be on display in Paris on July 1 when the leading coalition of Iranian opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), holds its annual Iran Freedom rally. Previously, such events have attracted upwards of 100,000 people, including hundreds of political dignitaries and foreign policy experts from the U.S., Europe, and throughout the world. The event will also be broadcast to millions of residents of the Islamic Republic who maintain household satellite dishes in defiance of the regime's strict censorship laws.

The stage is now set for a much more comprehensive change of policy toward Iran, and one that includes a dramatic expansion in potential American partnerships. The Iranian people never should have been neglected in Middle East policymaking. The only reason they have been is because acknowledging the popular will of the people would have necessitated endorsing a goal of regime change long ago.

President Trump could become the first American leader since the Iranian Revolution to give the people of Iran a voice on the world stage. But doing so presupposes that the U.S. will support their message. And that message will be made clear on the banner celebrating the NCRI's Paris rally: "regime change is in reach."

