THE KILLING
How to start a revolution and take Iran

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As the rhetoric with Israel steps up, Michael Ledeen tells how to create a democratic Iran, why it’s so hard and why U.S. involvement is inevitable.
The nuclear question is at the center of most countries’ Iran policies. China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have all engaged in negotiations to convince Tehran to give up its presumed quest for the bomb. Now, with talks sputtering, Western powers have implemented increasingly tough sanctions, including the European Union’s recent embargo on Iranian oil, in the hope of compelling the regime to reverse course.

Yet history suggests, and even many sanctions advocates agree, that sanctions will not compel Iran’s leaders to scrap their nuclear program. In fact, from Fidel Castro’s Cuba to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, hostile countries have rarely changed policy in response to Western embargoes. Some sanctions advocates counter that sanctions did work to get Chile to abandon communism, South Africa to end apartheid, and Libya to give up its nuclear program. But the Chilean and South African governments were not hostile -- they were pro-Western, and thus more amenable to the West’s demands. And Libya’s Muammar al-Qaddafi ended his nuclear pursuit only after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, fearing that he would suffer the same fate as Saddam Hussein.

Iran, which is clearly hostile and which watched what just happened to a disarmed Libya, will not back down. Some therefore see sanctions as only a prelude to military action -- by Israel, the United States, or both. In other words, current Iran strategy boils down to an eventual choice between appeasement and attack. Neither outcome is attractive. However, if the United States and its allies broadened their perspective and paid attention not merely to Iran’s nuclear program but also to the Islamic Republic’s larger assault on the West, they would see that a third and better option exists: supporting a democratic revolution in Iran.
terrorist organization created by Iran, kidnapped and murdered Americans in Lebanon. In addition to supporting Hezbollah, Iran started funding other terrorist groups, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In the last decade, Iranian agents have attacked U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Late last year, the Obama administration revealed that Iranian agents had attempted to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States and to blow up the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington, D.C.

In short, the nuclear program is not the central issue in Iran policymaking -- defending the United States and its allies from Iranian terrorists and their proxies is. To meet that goal, Washington must replace the Islamic Republic’s regime. The theocrats in Tehran call the United States “the great Satan,” and waging war against it is one of the Iranian leadership’s core missions. The Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that as his goal very soon after the shah was overthrown in 1979. Calls of “Death to America” have been a constant refrain ever since. Regime change cannot be achieved by sanctions and diplomacy alone. And, although war might bring down the regime, it is neither necessary nor desirable. Supporting a domestic revolution is a wiser strategy.

The Iranian regime is not only at war with the U.S. and its allies; it is also at war with its own people. The Iranian regime represses its citizens, restricting their civil liberties and imprisoning, torturing, and killing political opponents. Popular discontent boiled over into open protest after a rigged election in June 2009, as what came to be known as the Green Movement launched an open challenge to the political status quo. The regime brutally suppressed the protests and is keeping the movement’s two leaders, presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, along with Mousavi’s wife, under house arrest.

Foreign Affairs managing editor Jonathan Tepperman interviews author Hoonan Majd on the public diplomacy challenges posed by a nuclear Iran and the ineffectiveness of current sanctions. Video courtesy Foreign Affairs.
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Obsession with the nuclear question has obscured the fact that, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has waged a low-level war on the United States. That war began in earnest in 1983, when, evidence suggests, Iranian-backed operatives bombed the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Such violence continued throughout the 1980s, as Hezbollah, a terrorist organization created by Iran, kidnapped and murdered Americans in Lebanon. In addition to supporting Hezbollah, Iran started funding other terrorist groups, such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In the last decade, Iranian agents have attacked U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.
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Video courtesy Foreign Affairs.

2001
Allies of President Khatami win 189 of 290 parliament seats, securing a reformist legislature for the first time since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

2002
George W. Bush includes Iran in his now infamous “axis of evil” comments, prompting anger and charges of arrogance from Iranian defense ministers.

2003
The International Atomic Energy Agency offers to monitor Iran's nuclear program, but Iran declines.