

How Tehran Views Washington

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Brief Analysis

Researchers discuss Iran's mindset toward the Biden administration and the country's prospects for internal change as nuclear talks resume in Vienna.

On November 29, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Amir Toumaj and Sanam Vakil. Toumaj is an independent Iran researcher, cofounder of Resistance Axis Monitor, and author of the new Institute Policy Note "[Iranian Perceptions of the U.S. Soft Power Threat \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-perceptions-us-soft-power-threat\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-perceptions-us-soft-power-threat)." Vakil is deputy director

of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House and author of Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction (Bloomsbury, 2013). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Amir Toumaj

Iran's centers of power—primarily Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—believe they are fighting against a U.S.-led soft war designed to erode popular support for the regime and ultimately overthrow it. From their perspective, the United States is using sanctions and Western cultural products such as music, movies, and social media to turn the public's values away from Iranian traditions and Islam. They hold similar views about any U.S. attempts to strengthen Iranian moderates who are not as adherent to the regime's Islamist ideology.

Tehran's hostility is partly due to U.S. policy in the Middle East, but the animosity goes beyond that. After all, Iran is nowhere near as hostile toward other states whose foreign policies it finds objectionable. Take Russia, which has intervened in Iran's politics, annexed parts of the country, and invaded neighboring Afghanistan. Despite these transgressions, Iran's leaders do not feel threatened by the prospect of cultural invasion from Russia, but they have spent decades attempting to thwart American cultural influence through state intervention in media, education, and public morality laws.

The Russian example is instructive in another way—Iran's leaders view the Soviet collapse as a historical example they must not repeat. In their view, the United States convinced moderate figures such as Mikhail Gorbachev to essentially dissolve the Soviet regime rather than put down growing public protests. Khamenei's view of Iranian moderates and reformists was influenced by this lesson early on, and his soft-war suspicions only increased after the 2009 Green Movement, when some believed the regime was vulnerable. More recently, protests have been breaking out in small working-class towns that previously supported the hardline leadership. In response, Tehran has used the perceived U.S. soft war as an excuse to crack down heavily. Although this strict control makes regime change unlikely, protests will continue given the leadership's unwillingness to meet the people's needs.

For their part, many U.S. policymakers believe they must address the historical roots of aggression with Iran before any agreements are possible. These outreach efforts can only go so far because Washington is unable to alter Tehran's perceptions of American cultural invasion. Even so, the two governments have shown they can still reach deals—for instance, Iran agreed to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 despite Khamenei's claims that Washington was attempting to undermine the regime's ideology in the long run. Today, the Supreme Leader seeks the removal of oil and banking sanctions, so there may be room for limited cooperation on rolling back the nuclear program.

In general, however, Washington should assume that a hostile Iranian regime is here to stay. Tehran's malign influence is evident throughout the region: in Bashar al-Assad's Syria, in this year's Gaza crisis, in Lebanon's corruption and instability, and so on. Additionally, Iranian proxy aggression toward Israel cannot be ignored—though it must be decoupled from JCPOA talks. Despite these troubling Iranian actions, the United States is reluctant to use force in the region. This makes it all the more important for Washington to cut limited, useful deals with the regime when the opportunity arises.

Sanam Vakil

The longstanding conservative fear that America seeks the “Westoxification” of Iranian society is rooted in numerous historical developments, including U.S. influence during the Pahlavi era, the Soviet collapse, and the color revolutions in Eastern Europe. Conspiracy-laden rhetoric aside, Khamenei may be right to fear Western influence because Iran's middle class and youths do in fact want greater access to outside culture.

The Iranian system is best understood by focusing on the deep state—the intricate network of economic, political, and intelligence officials that extends beyond the Supreme Leader and the IRGC. The main objective of those in power is to protect the vision of the Islamic Republic, which entails resistance to outside influences such as the U.S. soft war. The deep state maintains power and thwarts opposition through control over Iran's political institutions and economic resources.

Hence, when Washington uses phrases like “all options remain on the table,” the Iranian deep state sees them as proof that the United States wants to undermine the regime, whether through military power, JCPOA negotiations, or other means. Such suspicions increased when President Obama pitched the JCPOA as transformational rather than transactional.

It therefore came as little surprise when Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani recently emphasized that the new round of talks in Vienna will be solely transactional. The regime has watched Washington pursue a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran, support domestic opposition groups, and surround the country with various military deployments. These actions have added to Tehran's paranoia that the soft war is real and made Iranian leaders wary of engagement and negotiations.

Yet this does not mean transactional agreements between the two countries are off the table. Any such agreements must be narrow, in part because establishing trust is a difficult hurdle for both parties. In the short term, a transactional relationship would mean focusing on the nuclear issue alone. Yet while an agreement would be useful for Khamenei to gain sanctions relief, he is highly skeptical of Washington after a

long string of perceived U.S. infractions, from grouping Iran in the “axis of evil” in 2002 to leaving the JCPOA in 2018.

Pursuing transactional policies does not require pandering to the Iranian regime’s worldview, but it does require acknowledging the limits of what the United States can do to reform the regime. For a transactional relationship to develop, Western policymakers must abandon any expectation that they can transform the Islamic Republic from the outside. The only pathway to such change is from within, and outside pressure can have the unintended effect of obstructing this path. Giving space to the Iranian people allows them to push for change from a domestic standpoint rather than an international one.

This summary was prepared by Bennett Neuhoff. ❖

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