

Trump Shouldn't Forget the Iranian People

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Articles & Testimony

As nuclear talks proceed, the president should recall his past acknowledgement that respect for human rights and democracy is “an integral component of U.S. national security.”

When the Islamic Republic of Iran marked its 46th anniversary in February, protests erupted in the remote southwestern city of Dehdasht. Iranians chanted anti-regime [slogans](https://iranwire.com/en/news/139021-several-protesters-missing-after-arrests-in-dehdasht-demonstrations/) and held signs [reading](https://iranwire.com/en/features/139057-security-forces-intensify-crackdown-on-protests-in-dehdasht/), “From Dehdasht to Tehran, unity, unity.” The demonstrations were part of a national [movement](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-mahsa-amini-protests-youth/) that has been simmering since 2022, after the killing of a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman, [Mahsa Amini](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/opinion/iran-protests-women.html), prompted tens of thousands of Iranians to take to the streets to seek justice and demand freedom. The Woman, Life, Freedom uprising has continued through [rooftop](https://x.com/hdagres/status/1888657842548191391) chants, [daily](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/opinion/iran-protests-women.html)

<https://x.com/hdagres/status/1909244805202264440/video/1> defiance of the regime's [hijab law](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0kg15jkpdeo) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0kg15jkpdeo> and sporadic, smaller protests across the country.

President Trump should not forget the Iranian people's resolve when his Middle East special envoy, Steve Witkoff, sits down for talks with Iran's foreign minister over its nuclear program on Saturday in Oman. The Trump administration has [reinstated](https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-restores-maximum-pressure-on-iran/) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-restores-maximum-pressure-on-iran/> a maximum pressure policy designed to stop Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon and counter its influence abroad. But so far, the administration has conspicuously omitted a critical issue for Iranians: human rights. It's a stark departure from Trump's first-term agenda, which [condemned](https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/947588263103139841) <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/947588263103139841> violations https://x.com/statedeptspox_a/status/1284216751941652484 in Iran and [framed](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/promoting-human-rights-essential-america-first-vision-2/) <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/promoting-human-rights-essential-america-first-vision-2/> human rights as a fundamental component of its foreign policy vision.

More important, it's a grave miscalculation. Decades of U.S. precedent show that upholding human rights has been integral to helping keep America secure. The Carter and Reagan administrations, in particular, used human rights diplomacy as a critical tool to negotiate with the Soviet Union, using public and private pressure to secure arms control agreements, advocating for oppressed populations behind the Iron Curtain and bringing to a close one of the most dangerous eras of the 20th century.

Mr. Trump still has an opportunity—arguably, an obligation—to push for human rights as a central element of talks with Tehran. Doing so would place him on the right side of history, bolster U.S. credibility among many Iranians and strengthen his negotiating position. Without it, many Iranians who oppose the Islamic Republic will see any potential agreement as merely throwing a lifeline to an [increasingly unpopular](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/10/opinion/iran-gen-z-politics.html) <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/10/opinion/iran-gen-z-politics.html> regime. Uprisings are bound to persist amid heavy repression. Without accountability, justice and improvement in the human-rights situation, these waves will almost certainly cause instability in Iran and the region.

[Protests](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/03/tens-of-thousands-of-people-protested-in-iran-this-week-heres-why/) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/03/tens-of-thousands-of-people-protested-in-iran-this-week-heres-why/> that erupted in December 2017—at the time, the most widespread geographically since the 1979 revolution—sparked waves of uprisings against the regime's mismanagement, corruption and repression. According to the U.N. Human Rights Council's Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, human-rights violations during the 2022 uprising amounted to [crimes against humanity](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-iran/index) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-iran/index>: Security forces [killed](https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/03/crimes-against-humanity-state-atrocities-in-iran-revealed-in-first-report-of-un-fact-finding-mission/) <https://iranhumanrights.org/2024/03/crimes-against-humanity-state-atrocities-in-iran-revealed-in-first-report-of-un-fact-finding-mission/> at least 551 protesters and bystanders, including 68 children, and arrested as many as 60,000.

Since then, the clerical establishment has continued to [discriminate](https://countryeconomy.com/demography/global-gender-gap-index/iran?year=2024) <https://countryeconomy.com/demography/global-gender-gap-index/iran?year=2024> against women and girls, in what Iranian activists and human-rights defenders—including the Nobel Peace Prize laureate [Narges Mohammadi](https://endgenderapartheid.today/narges-mohammadi-letter.php) <https://endgenderapartheid.today/narges-mohammadi-letter.php>), who is on furlough from a more than 13-year prison sentence—call [gender apartheid](https://endgenderapartheid.today/) <https://endgenderapartheid.today/>). A draconian hijab and chastity bill passed in December imposes still harsher restrictions on women; penalties now include [death](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/11/iranian-women-death-penalty-jail-fine-defy-new-morality-hijab-improper-dressing-islamic-penal-code) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/11/iranian-women-death-penalty-jail-fine-defy-new-morality-hijab-improper-dressing-islamic-penal-code>). While the law has been [paused](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/iran-new-compulsory-veiling-law-intensifies-oppression-of-women-and-girls/) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/iran-new-compulsory-veiling-law-intensifies-oppression-of-women-and-girls/>), parts are being [enforced](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0kg15jkpdeo) <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0kg15jkpdeo>.

The Islamic Republic also continues its longstanding use of executions to instill fear, particularly among minority

groups such as the Kurds and Baluchis, as exemplified by the [risk \(https://x.com/RoyaBoroumand/status/1910082981617684788\)](https://x.com/RoyaBoroumand/status/1910082981617684788) of execution of Pakhshan Azizi, Sharifeh Mohammadi and Verisheh Moradi. At least 901 people were [executed \(https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/iran-rise-executions-deeply-troubling-un-human-rights-chief\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/01/iran-rise-executions-deeply-troubling-un-human-rights-chief) last year—the [most in a decade \(https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/global-recorded-executions-hit-their-highest-figure-since-2015/\)](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/global-recorded-executions-hit-their-highest-figure-since-2015/) in Iran and the most per capita globally. In an environment where authorities act with impunity, [families \(https://iranwire.com/en/women/139178-when-grief-becomes-crime-irans-war-on-mothers/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/women/139178-when-grief-becomes-crime-irans-war-on-mothers/) of the victims of protest crackdowns, prisoners and dissidents don't have the right to seek justice. If they demand it, they face reprisals through state harassment and prison sentences, such as with Manouchehr Bakhtiari and Nahid Shirbisheh, the parents of the slain protester [Pouya Bakhtiari \(https://www.rferl.org/a/killed-in-karaj-peace-loving-vegetarian-engineer-a-face-for-those-slain-in-iranian-protests/30309928.html\)](https://www.rferl.org/a/killed-in-karaj-peace-loving-vegetarian-engineer-a-face-for-those-slain-in-iranian-protests/30309928.html).

Nearly every American president in the past half-century has recognized that human rights and national security are inextricable—even if merely through statements. The Carter administration attempted to [center human rights \(https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-commencement-exercises-the-university-notre-dame\)](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-commencement-exercises-the-university-notre-dame) in its foreign policy, ultimately with uneven application and mixed results, including in Iran. The Reagan administration advocated an aggressive policy grounded in military and moral strength against the Soviet Union, with human rights forming the [heart \(https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-human-rights-revolution-9780195333145?cc=us&lang=en&\)](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-human-rights-revolution-9780195333145?cc=us&lang=en&) of that moral stance. The Reagan administration continued Carter-era support of Poland's anti-Communist [Solidarity movement \(https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/polands-solidarity-movement-1980-1989/\)](https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/polands-solidarity-movement-1980-1989/), which emerged in 1980, and monitored Soviet compliance with human-rights provisions of [international agreements \(https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki\)](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki), including the 1975 [Helsinki Final Act \(https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki\)](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki).

Unlike Jimmy Carter, who saw human rights as a goal in its own right, Ronald Reagan took a conservative approach, wielding human rights as a [Cold War weapon \(https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-human-rights-revolution-9780195333145?cc=us&lang=en&\)](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-human-rights-revolution-9780195333145?cc=us&lang=en&) against Communism. As a result, while the administration attacked Communist governments' human-rights records, it supported anti-Communist authoritarian regimes that violated human rights in regions like Latin America. Mr. Reagan also embraced a more narrow [definition \(https://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/05/world/excerpts-from-state-department-memo-on-human-rights.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/05/world/excerpts-from-state-department-memo-on-human-rights.html) of human rights, focusing primarily on religious freedom and civil and political rights violated by the U.S.S.R. Still, his efforts increased global pressure on the Soviet Union and emboldened dissidents in the Eastern bloc.

Although U.S. support for authoritarian governments elsewhere was highly problematic, the Reagan administration's human-rights diplomacy proved successful in the Eastern bloc. When Mikhail Gorbachev took power in 1985, he and his advisers [recognized \(https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-human-rights-revolution-9780195333145?cc=us&lang=en&\)](https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-human-rights-revolution-9780195333145?cc=us&lang=en&) that improving their human-rights record was necessary for advancing negotiations with the United States and the West. Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev went on to hold [talks \(https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations\)](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/u.s.-soviet-relations) on nuclear weapons limitations that culminated in the signing of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—a diplomatic win for Mr. Reagan. Just two years later, the Solidarity movement toppled Poland's Communist government, triggering a wave of mostly peaceful revolutions across Eastern Europe that rolled back Communism and contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Though the end of the Cold War had multiple causes, U.S. pressure on human rights was indisputably a critical factor.

Of course, Iran and the Soviet Union differ ideologically and in the types and scale of their human-rights violations, especially regarding the oppression of women. But Cold War policy precedent nevertheless offers useful lessons for

the Trump administration. U.S. negotiators have a range of issues they can use as leverage, as outlined by the recommendations in the March 2025 [report](#)

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session58/advance-version/a-hrc-58-62-aev-1.pdf>) of the special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, such as demanding the release of political prisoners, ending abusive and punitive hijab-related practices and imposing a death penalty moratorium.

Human rights, of course, are not simply bargaining chips. They are the bedrock of any meaningful and lasting diplomatic effort. When the United States firmly stands with the Iranian people in their pursuit of accountability and positive change, it builds good will and credibility—not only among Iranians but also among America’s allies in the region, which have common concerns over security and stability. As the first Trump administration itself [acknowledged \(https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/promoting-human-rights-essential-america-first-vision-2/\)](https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/promoting-human-rights-essential-america-first-vision-2/), “Respect for human rights and democracy also produces peace, stability and prosperity—making it an integral component of U.S. national security.”

In the negotiations, the Trump administration must demonstrate it stands with the Iranian people by addressing Iran’s atrocious human-rights abuses. Failing to do so risks alienating Iranians and—when they ultimately prevail in their decades-long struggle against the Islamic Republic—being remembered in history as the administration that abandoned them.

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