

COMMENTARY

How to Defeat the Islamic Republic

Iran's regime resembles the Soviet Union in its dying days. Trump can follow Reagan's example.

By Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

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Iran's modern history is replete with examples of the citizenry seeking to reclaim power from despots. The Pahlavi dynasty, which ruled between 1925 and 1979, regularly faced popular rebellions, including the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Once the country's current clerical rulers made clear their disdain for democracy, they too were beset by protest movements. The Islamic Republic's Western enablers present it as strong and steady, but the theocracy now resembles the Soviet Union in its dying days.

Once in power, Iran's Islamists faced open rebellion from the revolutionary factions that objected to their republic of virtue. This was a battle waged in the streets as well as in Parliament and the press. The mullahs proved more ruthless than their liberal and Marxist detractors.

The Iran-Iraq war tranquilized Iran's domestic politics in the 1980s, as national energies were focused on a savage foreign invader. In the 1990s the power struggle resumed. The reform movement, led by disgruntled members of the intellectual and clerical elite, challenged the regime's orthodoxies and even called for making the office of the supreme leader accountable to the electorate. The reformist interlude ended with the student rebellion of 1999, when government enforcers bloodied the universities.

Then came the Green Movement in June 2009. A rigged election to restore Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency brought millions to the streets. In a matter of days, the slogans went from "Where is my vote?" to "Down with dictatorship!" Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei initially seemed flat-footed, the clerical elite unsure if it could trust the

security services.

Eventually the theocracy restored order, but it had already lost whatever tattered legitimacy it had left. The regime shed the facade of republicanism, purged itself of unreliable elements, imprisoned its most popular politicians, and abandoned even the pretense of harmonizing faith and freedom. The notion of political reform was dead and all talk of human rights was only that—talk. The Islamic Republic proved it could not reform itself.



Green Movement protesters in Tehran, June 9, 2009. PHOTO: ATTA KENARE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Meantime, government reports, the controlled press and even senior Revolutionary

Guard commanders reluctantly confess the truth: Islam is growing weaker within Iran. Mosques, thinning out for 30 years, are now mostly empty even on religious holidays. Seminaries have few recruits, and the government of God has trouble supplying mosques with prayer leaders. Secularism is on the rise, particularly among the youth, among whom religious observance has declined precipitously. The regime conducts its ritualistic elections, and apparatchiks like Hassan Rouhani lead a bloated state drowning in corruption. The specter of the Green Movement haunts tightly controlled elections, as chants for the overthrow of the regime often erupt.

The ideologically exhausted theocracy tries to revitalize itself by imperialism and patronage, much as the Soviet Union did in the 1970s. Mr. Khamenei stands today as modern Persia's most successful imperialist, as he has planted Iran's flag from the Gulf to the Mediterranean. But imperialism carries costs, as the Shiite militias Iran arms and local allies it subsidizes burden its treasury.

The regime depicts its adventures as quests to save Arab Shiites from Sunni domination and Western machination. Foreign wars have become an advanced guard of the revolution, according to the late Revolutionary Guard general Hossein Hamedani, who squelched the Green Movement in Tehran and then organized the Shiite militias fighting in Syria. "To protect the accomplishments of the Islamic revolution," Hamedani proudly asserted, "we had to intervene" in Syria and Iraq.

At home, the clerical regime established an array of welfare agencies to dispense benefits to its lower-class constituents. This was not just about fulfilling a religious obligation. The regime sought to tether the working poor to the new order. Large foundations expropriated the wealth of the Pahlavis and tens of thousands of affluent Iranians to provide the poor with housing and health care. But temptations of power proved too much as the mullahs and their praetorian guard indulged their taste for luxury. Corruption overtook charity. Class cleavages today are sharper than under the shah. But this vast revolutionary patronage offers the regime a lifeline from its economic incompetence and tyranny. It is this lifeline that aggressive sanctions must choke off.

There are no inevitabilities in history. Nobody knew when the Soviet Union's contradictions would overwhelm the system, and there is no time stamp on the Islamic Republic's demise. Jimmy Carter and the vast majority of the Democratic Party wanted

to coexist with the Soviet Union. But Ronald Reagan helped crack the Soviet Communist Party by waging economic warfare, empowering dissidents, and shrinking its imperial frontiers.

President Trump should follow Reagan's example, not Mr. Carter's. The U.S. should once more establish contact with and financially assist dissident organizations in Iran. There is no substitute for presidential declaration, and Mr. Trump should embrace Reagan's model of speaking directly to the Iranian people while castigating their illegitimate regime. Washington should again impose crippling sanctions to deny the mullahs their patronage networks, the key to their power. A formula that led to the collapse of the mighty Soviet empire can surely down Mr. Khamenei's and the Revolutionary Guard's kleptocracy.

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