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United States Policy on Regime Change in Iran

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There is an impression in recent weeks that the Trump administration supports measures that would result in regime change in Iran. This impression is based in part on remarks made by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson before the House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee in June 2017. In his testimony, Tillerson announced that the administration's policy on Iran is still being formulated, but would be geared toward restraining Iranian aspirations to regional hegemony, curbing its efforts to achieve nuclear capability, and supporting circles within the country that seek to bring about regime change through peaceful means. As a Congressman in July 2016, current CIA Director Michael Pompeo said that Congress needed to bring about regime change in Iran. In addition, reports in the American media claimed that senior Trump administration officials were demanding that action be taken to topple the Iranian regime. Support for measures toward regime change in Iran is likewise evident in Congress, as reflected in Republican Senator Tom Cotton's explicit statement to the effect that US policy needs to bring about regime change in Iran: "I don't see how anyone can say America can be safe as long as you have in power a theocratic despotism." Cotton supports a combination of economic, diplomatic, and clandestine measures to pressure Tehran and has proposed supporting circles within Iran that oppose the regime, including ethnic minorities who are less than enthusiastic about the tyrannical Iranian a.

Senior officials within the Iranian regime, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have long been convinced that over the years American administrations have striven to infiltrate Iran's internal system and topple the Islamic regime. In turn, the recent statements were seen by the Iranian regime as an indication that the Trump administration has adopted an illegal policy built on illusions. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif responded harshly, and Iran submitted a complaint to the UN regarding American intervention in its internal affairs.

Tillerson's words mark a deviation from the policy of President Obama, who told the UN General Assembly in 2013 that the United States was not striving to bring about regime change in Iran. Based on contacts with the Iranians in the framework of the nuclear talks, an expectation evolved within the Obama administration that even if the Iranian regime would not be replaced anytime soon, it might nonetheless modify its radical behavior. Developments in this direction have yet to occur, as the radical wing of the Iranian regime has blocked attempts at moderation. It is too early to assess how the Trump administration officials relate to the possibility of change in Iran and whether they would be satisfied with change that is partial and gradual. Tillerson's words are thus of even greater importance, as he is regarded as a moderate and measured senior official in the administration. Nonetheless, and although some individuals within the administration and Congress support measures toward regime change in Iran, this is not yet the policy of the administration. Indeed, the official statement regarding Tillerson's testimony before the committee contained no mention of support for regime change. Moreover, the spokesperson of the US National Security Council issued a twisted statement whereby intervention in the political life of Iran was not an American aim at this point. Trump himself has not addressed the issue of activity toward regime change in Iran.

Yet even if the Trump administration has not presented a defined position on regime change in Iran, it undoubtedly has a clear interest in this regard. The US administration regards the Iranian regime as a strategic threat of the first tier – in its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons; its infiltration of other countries in the Middle East and its mounting influence in the region; its aspiration to minimize the US presence and influence in the region; its buildup of a large missile array; the threat it poses to US allies; its radical approach; and its use of terrorism. It is abundantly clear to the administration that as long as the Iranian regime remains in power, these threats will linger and even intensify in the event that Iran acquires nuclear weapons. The toppling of the Iranian regime and its replacement with a moderate one, on the other hand, would eliminate many of the threats before the United States and its allies and would perhaps allow the US to build proper relations with Iran.

However, there is no easy and safe way to topple the Iranian regime. In theory, there are two primary means of changing an undesired regime. The first is military intervention to topple the regime by force. The United States resorted to this method to topple the ruling regimes of Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, but the experience of these two countries has proven the limitations of force. Though toppled by force, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein regimes were not succeeded by regimes that are moderate or friendly toward the United States. Rather, military intervention resulted in weak regimes, civil war, a hotbed for terrorism, ongoing severe violence, and new problems that required US forces to remain in the countries in question for years to come. Ultimately, the American

interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are not viewed as success stories – not even by the United States. Iran is a more complicated case in which military intervention would clearly involve much more serious dangers and is therefore not an option, especially following America's entanglement in Iran's two neighbors.

The second means of striving for regime change is by assisting and perhaps also operating local forces to encourage them to do the work themselves. This approach comprises various efforts, such as supporting and strengthening local opposition elements, including minorities that are hostile to the regime; assuring support to the opposition if it takes action toward the achievement of regime change; and using economic pressure and propaganda to foment unrest. It was this approach to which Tillerson referred in his remarks regarding the possibility of US activity to help bring about regime change in Iran. However, this approach is likewise not promising. There is undoubtedly a large population in Iran that desires liberal changes – in the form of opening up the Iranian political system, reducing the regime's interference in personal lives, expanding individual rights, improving the economic situation, and reducing corruption. It was this population that was responsible, by an impressive majority, for the reelection of Hassan Rouhani as president in the May 2017 elections. Also relevant, in addition to this population, are various groups from among the country's ethnic and religious minorities who are dissatisfied with the nature of the regime, although their influence is difficult to assess.

The Iranian regime is aware of these sentiments and over the past 38 years has developed tools and countermeasures for ensuring its survival and stability. These include the establishment of the Revolutionary Guards and the volunteer units of the Basij, whose principal priority is to defend the regime, and if necessary, to use force to do so. Force was used, for example, during the wave of demonstrations that swept through the country following the presidential elections of June 2009, when hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets to chants of "death to the dictator." Dozens, if not more, were killed in the unrest, and thousands were arrested. The regime's aggressive policy in this context continues to have a deterring effect. Since the suppression of the 2009 protests, the reformist camp in Iran has lowered its profile and refrained from openly challenging the regime out of fear of another forceful reaction. This caution is an element in the fact that the shockwaves that swept through the Arab world beginning in late 2010 have not spread into Iran – to a great extent, because members of the reformist camp are scared of the forceful reaction of the regime. Presumably preventive measures by the regime are likely to deter the Iranian opposition from taking part in an American attempt to destabilize it.

There are two other possible reasons for the caution that the Iranian reformist camp can be expected to display vis-à-vis any American attempt to encourage protests in Iran. First, it is doubtful whether opposition elements will want to provide the US administration with substantial assistance against the regime, as doing so would mean tainting themselves as American collaborators. They are interested in regime change, but apparently not by means of foreign intervention. The second reason, which the regime uses for propaganda and deterrence purposes, is that the Iranian people, like other populations in the region, have seen the upheaval underway in Syria. Consequently, even the Iranian opposition is not in favor of regime change by means of the extreme violence, destruction, and suffering that have plagued Syria. Furthermore, should the US administration need the assistance of Iran's neighbors in the course of any intervention, it is doubtful that these countries would dare become entangled with the Iranian regime in this manner.

All this means that under the current circumstances, the US administration has no concrete ability to bring about regime change in the desired direction – not by supporting internal opposition forces, and certainly not through military intervention. If the Iranian regime does change in the future, it will presumably result from internal processes and not external intervention. The administration would most likely provide assistance to opposition forces in Iran only in the event that the foundations of the regime are destabilized as a result of internal processes. Thus the administration would probably prefer to wait and see whether the Iranian opposition demonstrates sufficient internal power before it decides whether to support it, and if so, in what manner.

Statements by figures in the administration and Congress regarding the need to assist regime change in Iran are consistent with other parallel negative trends regarding US-Iranian relations. These include declarations by US officials regarding the need to annul or reopen the nuclear agreement; the imposition of additional sanctions on Iran; the tension surrounding the Iranian missile array; the US effort to isolate Iran and curb its military involvement in Syria and Iraq; and the sporadic collisions between American and Iranian maritime vessels. These developments could exacerbate the tensions between the two countries, even if neither of the countries desires it.