

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 29-03-2023		2. REPORT TYPE FINAL		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) N/A	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Protests, Politics, and Proliferation: What is the New Red Line for the United States with the Islamic Republic of Iran?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Chelsea R. Scott, USMC				5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A	
				5e. TASK NUMBER N/A	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Writing & Teaching Excellence Center Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) N/A	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release; Distribution is unlimited.					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES A paper submitted to the faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the curriculum. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
14. ABSTRACT The scope of this paper examines how the United States must reevaluate the future of United States-Iranian relations and that publicly advocating for regime change is not the answer. Moreover, I argue that the United States must redefine what our "red lines" are toward Iran and understand what Iran's red lines are toward the West to achieve progress and increase stability in the Middle East. In the last four decades, the term "red line" has been defined and redefined regarding Iranian relations and to what extent the United States will react to Iranian aggression due to a budding nuclear program and Iran's emboldened acts of aggression, which affect Middle East regional stability. Today, in a dynamic global environment and with the rise of peer competitors, the United States must consider United States-Iranian relations through the employment of different instruments of national power and recognize that Iran may not be prioritized as high as it once was when it comes to deterrence, selective intervention, and the use of military force as the primary deterrent. Nevertheless, Iran remains a critical actor from a national security perspective. Therefore, the future United States-Iran foreign policy must address short and long-term objectives when it comes to the state of Iran as well as Iran's place within the Middle East and as a potential nuclear threat. In the following sections, I will examine opportunities and foreign policy challenges through the diplomatic, information, military, and economic frameworks. Each of these frameworks offers different approaches to a complex problem. With an administration focused on maintaining a liberal international order, the employment of soft power and leveraging a variety of national power tools is fundamental to a successful near and midterm foreign policy outcome in the next 5 to 15 years with Iran.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS (Key words) Iran, United States, Diplomacy, Nuclear Proliferation, Protests, Human Rights, Military, Economic, Information, Regime Change, Great Power Competition					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT N/A	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 14	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Director, Writing Center
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 401-841-6499

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE



Protests, Politics, and Proliferation: What is the New Red Line for the United States with the Islamic Republic of Iran?



Word Count: 3500

27 January 2023

Introduction

In September 2022, a 22-year-old Iranian woman failed to wear her hijab correctly on the streets of Tehran; this seemingly minor infraction would ultimately cost her life at the hands of Iran's morality police. Within days, the streets of Iranian cities filled with protestors, shouting the name of the deceased, "Mahsa Amini."¹ These protests, comprised primarily of youth and women, stepped out against the Iranian government's harsh theocratic practices that are bound to a hardline interpretation of Islamic "Sharia" law. Mahsa Amini's death served as a zeitgeist, awakening Iran's domestic movement calling for freedom, justice, and reform. Moreover, the ongoing protests have exploited seams in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's regime; this may be the most significant challenge his regime has faced to date.² The Iranian people have been fighting for democracy and personal freedoms since the 1979 Islamic revolution, which ushered in four decades of internal strife over the hyper-conservative political and legal systems, as well as the lack of modernization and economic growth within Iran.³

Protests aren't new, the Obama administration witnessed Iran's 2009 Green Movement following corrupt presidential election practices, and there were also protests in Tehran as recent as 2019 which caused "Bloody November."⁴ This time, it seems that the demonstrations are lasting and gaining the attention of the international community. The protests surrounding Mahsa Amini have evoked domestic and international calls for regime change and opportunities for nations, like the United States, to reevaluate foreign policy decisions towards the Islamic

¹Farnaz Fassihi and Cora Engelbrecht, "Tens of Thousands in Iran Mourn Mahsa Amini, Whose Death Set Off Protests," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/26/world/middleeast/iran-protests-40-days.html>.

²"Khamenei Insists Protests Are Conspiracy To Weaken Regime," Iran International, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301094352>.

³"Iran Has a Long History of Protest. Here's What To Know," Time, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://time.com/6234429/iran-protests-revolution-history/>.

⁴"The Green Movement," The Iran Primer, October 6, 2010, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement>.

Republic of Iran. Ultimately, these protests serve as an inflection point for global powers on how to shape the future of international security within the Middle East and across the globe.

The question of what to do becomes far more complex when considering the United States and Iran's unstable and largely caustic diplomatic history. As advocates for human rights and democratic freedom, many activists and non-governmental organizations expect the United States to intervene publicly and advocate for regime change.⁵ The options for selective intervention remain plentiful, but the question becomes how, to what extent, and what is the desired outcome. Former National Security Council Official to President George W. Bush, Michael Singh, succinctly captured the Biden administration's dilemma when it comes to future relations with Iran:

It's a dilemma: How do you square your short-term national security imperatives, like preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, with the longer-term goal of encouraging positive political change in Iran?... "These things are not mutually exclusive. Your policy success will come down to advancing both goals in parallel."⁶

The scope of this paper examines how the United States must reevaluate the future of United States-Iranian relations and that publicly advocating for regime change is not the answer. Moreover, I argue that the United States must redefine what our "red lines" are toward Iran and understand what Iran's red lines are toward the West to achieve progress and increase stability in the Middle East. In the last four decades, the term "red line" has been defined and redefined regarding Iranian relations and to what extent the United States will react to Iranian aggression due to a budding nuclear program and Iran's emboldened acts of aggression which affect Middle

⁵ Nahal Toosi, "'Everyone Thinks We Have Magic Powers': Biden Seeks a Balance on Iran," POLITICO, October 25, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/25/biden-iran-regime-change-protests-nuclear-weapons-00063312>.

⁶ Nahal Toosi, "'Everyone Thinks We Have Magic Powers': Biden Seeks a Balance on Iran," POLITICO, October 25, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/10/25/biden-iran-regime-change-protests-nuclear-weapons-00063312>.

East regional stability.⁷ Today, in a dynamic global environment and with the rise of peer competitors, the United States must consider United States-Iranian relations through the employment of different instruments of national power and recognize that Iran may not be prioritized as high as it once was when it comes to deterrence, selective intervention, and the use of military force as the primary deterrent. Nevertheless, Iran remains a critical actor from a national security perspective. Therefore, the future United States-Iran foreign policy must address short and long-term objectives when it comes to the state of Iran as well as Iran's place within the Middle East and as a potential nuclear threat. In the following sections, I will examine opportunities and foreign policy challenges through the diplomatic, information, military, and economic frameworks. Each of these frameworks offers different approaches to a complex problem. With an administration focused on maintaining a liberal international order, the employment of soft power and leveraging a variety of national power tools is fundamental to a successful near and midterm foreign policy outcome in the next 5 to 15 years with Iran.

Diplomacy: The Art of Deterring Conflict and Collective Compromise

When considering the best possible employment of tools of national power, the focus is always on active and engaged diplomacy. This is the appropriate stance that, if done well, can ensure peace and stability between nation-states. However, this requires effort, compromise, and known concessions from all stakeholders involved. The difficulty of diplomacy is that you will not satisfy everyone in the process, and undoubtedly there will be those who prefer a more aggressive posture toward adversaries and direct intervention. That difficulty is palatable regarding the history and the present-day relationship between the United States and Iran.

⁷ “‘Red Lines’ On Iran: Not So Black and White,” accessed January 24, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2013/05/red-lines-on-iran-not-so-black-and-white/>.

Diplomacy has met a sine wave of progress dating as far back as the early 20th century over oil exports to more recently following the 1979 Islamic revolution.⁸ After the Shah was ousted and received political asylum in the United States, an Islamic revolutionary group took over the United States embassy in Iran holding 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days.⁹ This blatant act of aggression towards the United States would become known as the Iranian Hostage Crisis.¹⁰ Between the hostage crisis, the ousting of the Shah in 1979, and a transition to an anti-West sentiment, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Iran as of April 1980. Currently, the United States leverages Switzerland as its protecting power for U.S. citizens in Iran, and Iran utilizes Pakistan as a protecting power for Iranian citizens in the United States.¹¹

While there are no formal diplomatic acknowledgments between these two nation-states, the national security of both remains at the forefront of each state's security strategies; in particular, the last three United States presidential administrations have actively taken on different strategies to dissuade Iran from developing nuclear capabilities and to deter further hostilities within the Middle East between Iran and Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the violent proxy wars taking place in Yemen and Syria.¹²

During the Obama administration, there was a multilateral diplomatic approach to achieve a "landmark accord" through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in which Iran would have "agreed to dismantle much of its nuclear program and open its facilities

⁸ "Timeline: U.S. Relations With Iran," accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-iran-1953-2022>.

⁹ "The Iranian Hostage Crisis - Short History - Department History - Office of the Historian," accessed January 27, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/iraniancrises>.

¹⁰ "The Iranian Hostage Crisis - Short History - Department History - Office of the Historian," accessed January 27, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/iraniancrises>.

¹¹ "U.S. Relations With Iran - United States Department of State," accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-iran/>.

¹² "Statement by the President on Iran," whitehouse.gov, January 17, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/17/statement-president-iran>.

to more extensive international inspections in exchange for billions of dollars' worth of sanctions relief."¹³ President Obama emphasized a big "D", "I", "E" and little "m" when it comes to the DIME framework. Leveraging multinational diplomacy, this looked like a favorable future for the United States and Iran. President Obama noted in his 2016 State of the Union address that the JCPOA would pave the way to further committing to regional stability and opening Iran to modernization and an improved economy. In a note speaking directly to the Iranian people, President Obama highlighted:

For decades, your government's threats and actions to destabilize your region have isolated Iran from much of the world. And now our governments are talking with one another. Following the nuclear deal, you -- especially young Iranians -- have the opportunity to begin building new ties with the world. We have a rare chance to pursue a new path -- a different, better future that delivers progress for both our people and the wider world. That's the opportunity before the Iranian people. We need to take advantage of that.

Fast-forward to a new administration, President Trump followed through on a campaign promise to remove the United States from the JCPOA in 2018.¹⁴ Admonishing multinational diplomacy, and Iran's inability to fully commit to the deal, President Trump engaged in two-level games to address both international allies and his base of supporters. Consequently, the administration further cracked down on economic sanctions and a tit-for-tat with Iran. Iran considered this renege a breach of contract that would ultimately make Iran double down on their nuclear program. Moreover, with the rising hostilities the administration focused on threatening military escalation over the employment of other tools of national power. Throughout the Trump administration, these decisions led to several military escalations between the United States and

¹³“What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?,” Council on Foreign Relations, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

¹⁴ The Editors, “What Comes Next in the Standoff Between the U.S. and Iran?,” *World Politics Review* (blog), January 18, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/tense-u-s-iran-relations-have-put-the-middle-east-on-the-brink/>.

Iran, culminating in the 2020 drone strike that killed General Qassem Soleimani, Iran's top military leader.¹⁵ Since then, the hostilities have left the Biden administration with an uphill battle to reinvigorate the JCPOA and further quell the impacts of Iran's nuclear program in the international arena. While the Trump administration focused on "maximizing pressure" on Iran; Iran is not without fault in the decision to escalate and further support instability within the Middle East with acts of aggression toward Israel and Saudi Arabia.¹⁶

President Biden is focused on executing one of his campaign promises, to rehabilitate the JCPOA with Iran, if and only if Iran complies with the reduction of nuclear materials. Given the present protests, known human rights violations, and the call for regime change inside Iran, President Biden and the administration are placed in a difficult position: standing with the Iranian people while negotiating with a theocratic and staunch Iranian government under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This will be especially difficult should the protests create more government repression of the population and extinguish the current civil rights movement. In addition, Iran's decision to sell drones to Russia in the War on Ukraine further challenges the administration to come away with a meaningful and attainable foreign policy strategy. In the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS), there is a significant focus on China; however, the administration ensured that there was also a public acknowledgment and heavy emphasis on the Middle East and that while America is reassessing priorities, the threats in the Middle East remain significant. The strategy remains focused on de-escalation and integration in the Middle East, highlighting pseudo-redlines for the administration should Iran engage in further hostilities:

¹⁵ The Editors, "What Comes Next in the Standoff Between the U.S. and Iran?," *World Politics Review* (blog), January 18, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/tense-u-s-iran-relations-have-put-the-middle-east-on-the-brink/>.

¹⁶ The Editors, "What Comes Next in the Standoff Between the U.S. and Iran?," *World Politics Review* (blog), January 18, 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/tense-u-s-iran-relations-have-put-the-middle-east-on-the-brink/>.

“Enhance deterrence toward Iran, deescalate regional conflicts, and deepen integration among a diverse set of partners in the region, and bolster energy stability... This new framework builds on the recent progress regional states have made to bridge their enduring divides. We will continue to work with allies and partners to enhance their capabilities to deter and counter Iran’s destabilizing activities. We will pursue diplomacy to ensure that Iran can never acquire a nuclear weapon, while remaining postured and prepared to use other means should diplomacy fail. Iran’s threats against U.S. personnel as well as current and former U.S. officials will not be tolerated. As we have demonstrated, we will respond when our people and interests are attacked. As we do so, we will always stand with the Iranian people striving for the basic rights and dignity long denied them by the regime in Tehran. More broadly we will combine diplomacy, economic aid, and security assistance to local partners to alleviate suffering, reduce instability, and prevent the export of terrorism or mass migration from Yemen, Syria, and Libya, while working with regional governments to manage the broader impact of these challenges.”¹⁷

The NSS provides a quality framework for future diplomatic actions; however, the detailed negotiations and willingness to redefine red lines with Iran must be something the administration is willing to do and resource adequately. Furthermore, the administration must recognize that it will take flak from many within the U.S. population as well as abroad for choosing to work with Iran on a future foreign policy strategy. Iran’s recent support to Russia and the ongoing humanitarian crisis has heightened emotions and left the Biden administration between a rock and a hard place. One of the benefits of the NSS framework is that the entire administration seemingly agrees with the stance on Iran and working towards de-escalation rather than any intervention or a public push for regime change. If the US were to publicly push for regime change, it would trigger one of Iran’s red lines, embolden them to commit to a nuclear program, and increase military hostilities towards Americans or our allies.

In a world that is seemingly partisan on everything, the desire to remain neutral on regime change and to work with Iran in coordination with the European Union demonstrates that the current administration is dedicated to diplomatic avenues to stabilize a region that is getting

¹⁷ The White House, “FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

increasingly hostile amongst key players including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. However, it also demonstrates that in a world of rising peer competitors and a global power competition with China, doing anything more with Iran other than diplomatic, information, or economic actions has the potential to impact not only relations in the Middle East but create vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific as China and Russia watch closely from afar.

In the context of diplomatic actions, one resource that the United States can and should improve upon is the employment of information and an information campaign for Iran through the media and official communications. The ability to synchronize diplomatic actions and rhetoric with an information campaign that speaks to the activities and execution of the 2022 NSS will create credibility for the United States as it pursues diplomatic resolve.

Information: Capitalizing on Technology and Beating Iran at Its Own Game

When considering Information, “I”, in the DIME framework is often focused on military information and public diplomacy. In a world where information and technology can shape foreign relations rapidly, this is an area where the United States must employ its resources to the greatest extent possible. This is also a space where Iran is operating and gaining momentum with their employment of offensive cyber warfare.¹⁸ As a juggernaut of technology and cyber resources, the United States can trump Iran’s anti-US rhetoric with its information campaign over official sites, diplomatic venues, and through social media and covert operations. The information domain is quickly becoming the most powerful tool available to policymakers. Iran consistently uses the information domain to spew anti-West rhetoric and to blame the United States for the ongoing protests. The comments by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a January 2023

¹⁸ “Iran Cyber Threat Overview and Advisories | CISA,” accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.cisa.gov/uscert/iran>.

speech allude to his growing concern over the protests and the ability of the information domain to invigorate growing discontent within the regime. He stated, ““In the recent riots, the hand of foreigners was visible, although some have denied it. As soon as we say foreign enemy, some deny it...Actions by America, by Europeans...each somehow intervened in this issue [protests] in an obvious manner, not hidden from view,’ Khamenei said, referring to domestic pundits and politicians that say the protesters have genuine grievances.”¹⁹ Khamenei’s comments allude to a growing concern over the stability of his regime and this should and must be exploited to the max extent possible. While Khamenei can point fingers, the elusiveness of the information domain benefits the United States.

Given our abundance of resources, this is an area where the United States can reinforce the passion for self-determination amongst the Iranian people without overtly pushing for regime change and maintaining plausible deniability. The information domain is the most creative use of national power for the United States moving forward and has untapped potential to complimenting the United States NSS diplomatic framework. Undoubtedly the United States would benefit from Iran’s government collapsing; however, it would benefit more if the collapse was executed seemingly autonomously by and large by the people of Iran without outside influence.

The information domain also balances the reshaping of the United States employment of its military and defense forces in the Indo-Pacific.²⁰ This is an area where the United States can leverage expertise, multiple state and non-state agencies, and individuals to maneuver foreign

¹⁹ “Khamenei Insists Protests Are Conspiracy To Weaken Regime,” Iran International, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301094352>.

²⁰The White House, “FACT SHEET: The Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/>.

policy decisions and advocacy with Iran with a relatively low financial burden attached. Moreover, this is an area where no one in the international theater has truly defined red lines. Thus, it allows the United States to develop those red lines for the future and create an environment of invisible deterrence.

Furthermore, the information domain and cyber presence can combat, to some degree, the United States' decision to remove a physical presence by increasing the cyber presence within the region. Suppose Iran becomes further concerned over the United States' ability to impact them remotely. In that case, this could be considered a new deterrent that may force Iran to the negotiating table and offer the United States some strategic ambiguity regarding developing and maintaining strategic interests within the Middle East.

Economics: Sanctions and More Sanctions

Since the end of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran in 1980, thousands of Iranian entities and individuals have endured U.S. economic sanctions.²¹ While economic sanctions serve a purpose and often are the first action the United States will take toward an aggressor, it may be time to reevaluate how it sanctions Iran and the true impact of those sanctions as a deterrent for Iranian aggression. Under the Trump administration and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran felt the pain of economic sanctions and a healthcare system that “buckled” under pressure leading to a record high 42% inflation in 2020.²² However, in the last two years, Iran’s economy has begun to rebound slowly, and their stance on a nuclear

²¹ Maziar Motamedi, “Iran’s Economy Reveals Power and Limits of US Sanctions,” accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/2/2/irans-economy-reveals-power-and-limits-of-us-sanctions>.

²² Maziar Motamedi, “Iran’s Economy Reveals Power and Limits of US Sanctions,” accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/2/2/irans-economy-reveals-power-and-limits-of-us-sanctions>.

program has not been dissuaded by the United States' economic strangulation. This is mainly due to Russia and China's continued support of Iranian exports for oil.

While the sanctions may not achieve the desired strategic effects in totality, there is still room for negotiation between the United States and Iran. Iran's economy still has a significant opportunity for improvement. Moreover, suppose the Iranian government can improve the economic situation by working on foreign relations with the United States. In that case, it may quell some protests against the regime and preserve Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's seat of power in the near term; this may be enough to force Iran into mutually beneficial negotiations.

The Counterargument: Redefining the "M" in DIME and America as the World's Police

The United States has always answered foreign policy issues with the potential threat of military force and escalation. The 2020 drone strike on General Qassem Soleimani highlighted one of the many options for the United States within its arsenal of foreign policy tools. A quick demonstration of military power and a hardline approach to adversaries with insight into hostilities within a region of strategic importance could cut the head from the beast and leave the region in a better position. While some may see this as a viable option, over the last three administrations, even those aligned with the "maximize pressure" policy on Iran did not want to advocate for the United States' direct intervention and regime change.²³ For the United States and Iran, the continued escalation of hostilities and threats keeps military intervention as an option. However, does this option or means provide a suitable end? Is selective intervention worth it in this case? Some might argue that swift military action and public support of regime change may enable actual change within Iran, which could then propagate unprecedented

²³ "The Failure of U.S. 'Maximum Pressure' against Iran," March 8, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/failure-us-maximum-pressure-against-iran>.

progress in the region. Additionally, the United States may see allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia as willing participants in using military force to pursue regime change. However, there is a risk here, and for a region that the United States has openly stated it is willing to realign resources away from, the potential for military intervention or selective intervention to force regime change seems not only untenable but miscalculated. In a resource-constrained environment and with far more concerning threats to national security, the United States has to look at other instruments of national power to achieve a stable relationship with Iran.

Recommendation and Conclusion

The United States must be willing to commit to negotiations with Iran while also acknowledging the risk of upsetting those advocating for regime change and those who believe that the United States shouldn't interfere at all. The only way to reinforce liberal internationalism and preserve democratic principles is to operate within a multinational diplomatic space, where the United States will listen to and support allies within the European Union, the Middle East, and the people of Iran. The adage of keeping your friends close and enemies closer rings true for Iran. This dynamic relationship requires a diligent review of Iran's nuclear program and how to shut it down while keeping Iran open to economic and political progress. The United States must commit to stability in the Middle East and support a de-escalation initiative if it desires to be competitive and resourced to combat China's growing global influence that is estimated to supersede the United States by 2040. The United States can do so by redefining red lines for Iran's nuclear program, deciding to provide economic relief to Iran, and initiating a consistent information campaign that touts progress while also demonstrating an allegiance to the people of Iran as they struggle for democratization. This is an inflection point not only for the Iranian

people on the future of their government but also for the United States as we look to the future and where our strategic interests reside.