

The Sources of ~~Soviet~~ Iranian Conduct

George Kennan's Fifteen Lessons for
Understanding and Dealing With Tehran

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Summary

In an attempt to understand the Islamic Republic of Iran—a regime that has bedeviled the United States since the 1979 revolution—U.S. analysts often invoke three historical analogies, comparing Iran to Red China, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. While the Iranian government—an increasingly militarized theocracy—is *sui generis*, former U.S. diplomat George Kennan's 1947 essay, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," reveals instructive behavioral parallels between the Iranian and Soviet regimes. A close reading of Kennan's analysis suggests some key lessons current U.S. policy makers should consider in dealing with Iran, including:

- Iran's revolutionaries are defined by what they are against, not what they are for, and rely on foreign threats to maintain their legitimacy. The Islamic Republic may make tactical offers of compromise, but its hostility toward the United States is strategic.
- Given that Iran's regional strength derives from its political influence more than its military prowess, U.S. strategy should focus less on containing Tehran militarily and more on political measures to diminish the regional appeal of Iran and its client militias including Hamas and Hizbollah.
- While the ability of the United States to expedite positive political reform in Iran is limited, Washington can help constrain the Islamic Republic's ability to repress and censor its population.

Kennan's wisdom does not call on the United States to shun dialogue with Tehran, but merely to temper its expectations. Talking to Iran will not resolve the real, serious differences the United States has with the Islamic Republic, but given Iran's influence on major U.S. foreign policy challenges—namely Iraq, Afghanistan, Arab-Israeli peace, terrorism, energy security, and nuclear proliferation—it can help mitigate the risk of escalation and misunderstanding.

In the process, Kennan would caution, the United States should remain "at all times cool and collected" until the Iranian regime is forced to change under the weight of its contradictions and economic malaise. "For no mystical, Messianic movement," Kennan wrote in 1947, "can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs."

Let it be stressed again that subjectively these men probably did not seek absolutism for its own sake. They doubtless believed—and found it easy to believe—that they alone knew what was good for society and that they would accomplish that good once their power was secure and unchallengeable. But in seeking that security of their own rule they were prepared to recognize no restrictions, either of God or man, on the character of their methods. And until such time as that security might be achieved, they placed far down on their scale of operational priorities the comforts and happiness of the peoples entrusted to their care.

—George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 1947

Ever since the 1979 revolution that led to its birth, the Islamic Republic of Iran has bedeviled the United States, resisting both conciliation and coercion and working all the while to foil American ambitions in the Middle East. If twentieth-century Russia was to Winston Churchill a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, for observers of contemporary Iran, the Islamic Republic often resembles a villain inside a victim behind a veil. Is Iran the “villain” motivated by an immutable ideological opposition to the United States, or is it the “victim” reacting to punitive U.S. policies? To paraphrase Henry Kissinger, is Iran a nation or a cause?

Seeking to understand their mysterious foe, American analysts most commonly invoke three historical analogies to explain its character and future trajectory: Red China, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. The chosen metaphor usually dictates the proposed response, and most prescriptions for U.S. policy have come down to one of these three variations: attempt to moderate the Iranian regime via engagement; forget the diplomatic niceties and “preemptively” attack it to prevent or delay its acquisition of nuclear weapons; or contain it in hopes it will change or collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions.

While the Islamic Republic—a theocracy that increasingly resembles a military dictatorship—is no doubt *sui generis*, in order to draw the right policy lessons from the past it is useful to discern which historical analogies are most, and least, appropriate.

For proponents of the China comparison—often foreign policy realists—the Iranian regime is fundamentally pragmatic, not ideological, and yearns for a rapprochement with the United States. Viewed through this relatively benign prism, Tehran’s support for militant groups like Hizbollah and Hamas; its alliances with radical leaders like Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Iraq’s Moqtada al-Sadr, and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad; its Holocaust denial; and its weekly jeers of “death to America” are seen as defensive reactions to a hostile United States. The analogy implies

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that a bold U.S. gesture, à la President Richard Nixon’s famous 1972 trip to Beijing, could bring about a rapprochement with Tehran.

Many observers have noted that the propitious geopolitical circumstances fueling Nixon’s rapprochement with Chinese leader Mao Zedong—mutual concern about the looming Soviet threat—do not exist when it comes to today’s Iran. The China paradigm also underestimates the centrality of anti-Americanism to the identity of the Islamic Republic’s current leadership, particularly Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In three decades worth of writings and speeches, Khamenei’s contempt for the United States has been remarkably consistent and enduring. Whether the topic of discussion is foreign policy, agriculture, or educational policy, he seamlessly relates the subject matter to the cruelty, greed, and sinister plots of what he calls American “global arrogance.” Former senior Iranian officials, including even a former president, confide that in private discussions Khamenei has stated, “*ma doshmani ba Akmrrika ra lazem dareem*” [Iran needs enmity with the United States]. A month before the June 2009 presidential election, Khamenei declared Iran would face a national “disaster” if a candidate who attempted to make nice with America came to power.

While prospects for a swift reconciliation or “grand bargain” with Iran garnered special attention during the George W. Bush administration—when Washington shunned dialogue with Tehran—Obama’s unprecedented and unreciprocated overtures to Tehran—including two personal letters from the U.S. president to Khamenei—have undercut the narrative that Iran’s hard-liners, who, despite their own rhetoric, secretly aspire to cordial relations with the United States.

Indeed, underneath the ideological veneer, the anti-Americanism of Iran’s hard-liners derives in no small part from self-preservation. They are aware, as many Iran analysts have argued over the years, that a rapprochement with the United States could spur unpredictable political, economic, and social changes that would significantly dilute their current hold on power. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the powerful Guardian Council, put it plainly in a 2009 interview with *Etemad* newspaper: “If pro-American tendencies come to power in Iran we have to say goodbye to everything. After all, anti-Americanism is among the main features of our Islamic state.”

But if Iran is not ripe for accommodation like 1970s-era China, the opposite view—that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a latter-day Adolf Hitler and Iran is Nazi Germany—hits no closer to the mark. For some neoconservative thinkers, the Islamic Republic is incorrigibly fundamentalist, messianic, and hence, undeterrable. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bluntly told a Los Angeles audience in 2006 that “it’s 1938, and Iran is Germany.” Continued engagement, then, is tantamount to appeasement, and the use of military force might well be inevitable. Former British prime minister Tony Blair recently

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added his name to the small but strident list of people who have endorsed this surprisingly persistent line of thinking.

Though the Iranian regime is often homicidal toward its own population and espouses a hateful ideology, there is little evidence to suggest it is also revanchist and genocidal. A recent report by the U.S. Defense Department described Iran's military power—underwritten by a budget less than 2 percent the size of America's—as largely deterrent in nature. What's more, despite Ahmadinejad's repugnant rhetoric and delusions of grandeur, his control over the Iranian state falls far short of the absolute power Hitler wielded in Germany.

As with China and Nazi Germany, the distinctions between Iran and the Soviet Union are myriad. Among other things, the Soviet Union was an irreligious empire with nuclear weapons and global reach, while the Islamic Republic is an aspiring nuclear power whose influence outside the Middle East is limited. In broad terms, however, the characters of the two regimes have some intriguing similarities.

Similar to the USSR, the Islamic Republic is a corrupt, inefficient, and authoritarian regime whose bankrupt ideology resonates far more abroad than it does at home. And like the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic has a victimization complex and derives its internal legitimacy from its opposition to (and potential subjugation by) the United States.

The parallels between the natures of the Iranian and Soviet regimes become evident when reading George Kennan's incisive and unapologetic 1947 essay, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." The essay, published in *Foreign Affairs* under the name "X" because the author was a serving U.S. diplomat, set the tenor of U.S. foreign policy toward the USSR until its collapse in 1991. Reading Kennan's essay with the Islamic Republic in mind, and replacing "Soviet Union," "Stalin," and "communism" with their Iranian equivalents, the parallels are quite striking. As the Obama administration rethinks U.S. strategy toward Iran, the following fifteen of Kennan's time-tested insights are well worth considering.

1. Iran's revolutionaries are defined by what they are against, not what they are for

"The political personality of Soviet **the Islamic Republic's** power as we know it today is the product of ideology and circumstances: ideology inherited by the present Soviet **Iranian** leaders from the movement in which they had their political origin, and circumstances of the power which they now have exercised for three decades in **Russia Iran**. There can be few tasks of psychological analysis more difficult than to try to trace the interaction of these two forces and the relative role of each in the determination of official Soviet **Iranian** conduct. Yet

the attempt must be made if that conduct is to be understood and effectively countered.”

“Now it must be noted that through all the years of preparation for revolution, the attention of these men had been centered less on the future form which **socialism Islamism** would take than on the necessary overthrow of rival power which, in their view, had to precede the introduction of **socialism Khomeinism**. . . . Their views, therefore, on the positive program to be put into effect, once power was attained, were for the most part nebulous, visionary and impractical.”

2. Revolutionary ideology has not evolved

“Of the original ideology, nothing has been officially junked. Belief is maintained in the basic badness of **capitalism liberalism**, in the inevitability of its destruction, in the obligation of the **proletariat downtrodden** believers to assist in that destruction and to take power into **its their** own hands. But stress has come to be laid primarily on those concepts which relate most specifically to the **Soviet Iranian** regime itself: to its position as the sole truly **Socialist Islamic** regime in a dark and misguided world, and to the relationships of power within it.”

3. Khamenei’s lack of legitimacy breeds insecurity, which in turn breeds despotism

“**Stalin Khamenei**, and those whom he led in the struggle for succession to **Lenin’s Khomeini’s** position of leadership, were not the men to tolerate rival political forces in the sphere of power which they coveted. Their sense of insecurity was too great. Their particular brand of fanaticism, unmodified by any of the **Anglo-Saxon Persian** traditions of compromise, was too fierce and too jealous to envisage any permanent sharing of power. From the **Russian-Asiatic Middle Eastern** world out of which they had emerged they carried with them a skepticism as to the possibilities of permanent and peaceful coexistence of rival forces. Easily persuaded of their own doctrinaire ‘rightness,’ they insisted on the submission or destruction of all competing power.”

“Now the outstanding circumstance concerning the **Soviet Iranian** regime is that down to the present day this process of political consolidation has never been completed and the men in the **Kremlin Tehran** have continued to be predominantly absorbed with the struggle to secure and make absolute the power which they seized in **November 1917 January 1979**. They have endeavored to secure it primarily against forces at home, within **Soviet Iranian** society itself.”

4. The Islamic Republic’s enmity toward liberalism is inherent and unavoidable

“By the same token, tremendous emphasis has been placed on the original **Communist Khomeinist** thesis of a basic antagonism between the liberal and

Socialist **Islamic** worlds. It is clear, from many indications, that this emphasis is not founded in reality. The real facts concerning it have been confused by the existence abroad of genuine resentment provoked by Soviet **the Islamic Republic's** philosophy and tactics and occasionally by the existence of great centers of military power, notably the Nazi **Baathist** regime in **Germany Iraq** which indeed **have had** aggressive designs against the Soviet Union **Iran**. But there is ample evidence that the stress laid in **Moscow Tehran** on the menace confronting Soviet **Iranian** society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home.”

5. The security apparatus designed to protect the state has subsumed it

“Now the maintenance of this pattern of Soviet **the Islamic Republic's** power, namely, the pursuit of unlimited authority domestically, accompanied by the cultivation of the semi-myth of implacable foreign hostility, has gone far to shape the actual machinery of Soviet **Iranian** power as we know it today. Internal organs of administration which did not serve this purpose withered on the vine. Organs which did serve this purpose became vastly swollen. The security of Soviet **the Islamic Republic's** power came to rest on the iron discipline of the Party **Supreme Leader**, on the severity and ubiquity of the secret police **bassij** and Revolutionary Guards, and on the uncompromising economic monopolism of the state. The ‘organs of suppression,’ in which the Soviet **Iranian** leaders had sought security from rival forces, became in large measures the masters of those whom they were designed to serve.”

6. The looming foreign enemy is needed to justify domestic suppression

“Today the major part of the structure of Soviet **Iranian** power is committed to the perfection of the dictatorship and to the maintenance of the concept of **Russia Iran** as in a state of siege, with the enemy lowering beyond the walls. And the **millions tens of thousands** of human beings who form that part of the structure of power must defend at all costs this concept of **Russia's Iran's** position, for without it they are themselves superfluous.”

“As things stand today, the rulers can no longer dream of parting with these organs of suppression. The quest for absolute power ... has again produced internally, as it did externally, its own reaction. The excesses of the police apparatus have fanned the potential opposition to the regime into something far greater and more dangerous than it could have been before those excesses began.

“But least of all can the rulers dispense with the fiction by which the maintenance of dictatorial power has been defended. For this fiction has been canonized in Soviet **the Islamic Republic's** philosophy by the excesses already committed in its name; and it is now anchored in the Soviet **Islamic Republic's** structure of thought by bonds far greater than those of mere ideology.”

7. The Islamic Republic's sense of siege is a self-fulfilling prophecy

“Ideology, as we have seen, taught them [~~the Soviet Union~~ **the Islamic Republic**] that the outside world was hostile and that it was their duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders. Then powerful hands of ~~Russian~~ **Iranian** history and tradition reached up to sustain them in this feeling. Finally, their own aggressive intransigence with respect to the outside world began to find its own reaction. . . . It is an undeniable privilege of every man to prove himself right in the thesis that the world is his enemy; for if he reiterates it frequently enough and makes it the background of his conduct he is bound eventually to be right.”

8. The Islamic Republic may make tactical offers of compromise, but its hostility toward the West is strategic

“There can never be on ~~Moscow's~~ **Tehran's** side a sincere assumption of a community of aims between the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Islamic Republic** and powers which are regarded as ~~capitalist~~ **liberal**. It must inevitably be assumed in ~~Moscow~~ **Tehran** that the aims of the ~~capitalist~~ **Western** world are antagonistic to the ~~Soviet regime~~ **Islamic Republic**, and therefore to the interests of the peoples it controls.

“If the ~~Soviet~~ **Iranian** government occasionally sets its signature to documents which would indicate the contrary, this is to be regarded as a tactical maneuver permissible in dealing with the enemy (who is without honor) and should be taken in the spirit of caveat emptor. Basically, the antagonism remains. It is postulated. And from it flow many of the phenomena which we find disturbing in the ~~Kremlin's~~ **Tehran's** conduct of foreign policy: the secretiveness, the lack of frankness, the duplicity, the wary suspiciousness, and the basic unfriendliness of purpose.

“These phenomena are there to stay, for the foreseeable future. There can be variations of degree and of emphasis. When there is something the ~~Russians~~ **Iranians** want from us, one or the other of these features of their policy may be thrust temporarily into the background; and when that happens there will always be Americans who will leap forward with gleeful announcements that ‘the ~~Russians~~ **Iranians** have changed,’ and some who will even try to take credit for having brought about such ‘changes.’ But we should not be misled by tactical maneuvers. These characteristics of ~~Soviet~~ **Iranian** policy, like the postulate from which they flow, are basic to the internal nature of ~~Soviet~~ **the Islamic Republic's** power, and will be with us, whether in the foreground or the background, until the internal nature of ~~Soviet~~ **Iranian** power is changed.”

9. The United States cannot reach an accommodation with a regime that needs it as an adversary

“It is clear that the United States cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the Soviet **Iranian** regime. It must continue to regard ~~the Soviet Union~~ **Iran** as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena. It must continue to expect that Soviet **Iranian** policies will reflect no abstract love of peace and stability, no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist **Islamist** and **capitalist** liberal worlds, but rather a cautious, persistent pressure toward the disruption and weakening of all rival influence and rival power.

“Balanced against this are the facts that **Russia Iran**, as opposed to the western world in general, is still by far the weaker party, that Soviet **Iranian** policy is highly flexible, and that Soviet **Iranian** society may well contain deficiencies which will eventually weaken its own total potential. This would of itself warrant the United States entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the **Russians Iranians** with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.”

10. The United States must focus on a long-term strategy, rather than short-term tactics

“Soviet **Iranian** diplomacy is at once easier and more difficult to deal with than the diplomacy of individual aggressive leaders like Napoleon and Hitler. On the one hand it is more sensitive to contrary force, more ready to yield on individual sectors of the diplomatic front when that force is felt to be too strong, and thus more rational in the logic and rhetoric of power. On the other hand it cannot be easily defeated or discouraged by a single victory on the part of its opponents. And the patient persistence by which it is animated means that it can be effectively countered not by sporadic acts which represent the momentary whims of democratic opinion but only by intelligent long-range policies on the part of **Russia’s the Islamic Republic’s** adversaries—policies no less steady in their purpose, and no less variegated and resourceful in their application, than those of the Soviet Union **Islamic Republic** itself.”

11. The United States should keep cool and project the poise and dignity of a superpower

“In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union **Islamic Republic** must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment. . . . It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward ‘toughness.’ While ~~the Kremlin~~

Tehran is basically flexible in its reaction to political realities, it is by no means unamenable to considerations of prestige. Like almost any other government, it can be placed by tactless and threatening gestures in a position where it cannot afford to yield even though this might be dictated by its sense of realism. The **Russian Iranian** leaders are keen judges of human psychology, and as such they are highly conscious that loss of temper and of self-control is never a source of strength in political affairs. They are quick to exploit such evidences of weakness. For these reasons it is a sine qua non of successful dealing with **Russia Iran** that the foreign government in question should remain at all times cool and collected and that its demands on **Russian Iran** policy should be put forward in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to **Russian Iranian** prestige.”

12. Ideological fatigue has set in

“To all that, the [~~Second World~~ **Iran-Iraq**] war has added its tremendous toll of destruction, death and human exhaustion. In consequence of this, we have in **Russia Iran** today a population which is physically and spiritually tired. The mass of the people are disillusioned, skeptical and no longer as accessible as they once were to the magical attraction which **Soviet Iranian** power still radiates to its followers abroad.”

“Here only the younger generations can help. The younger generation, despite all vicissitudes and sufferings, is numerous and vigorous; and the **Russians Iranians** are a talented people. But it still remains to be seen what will be the effects on mature performance of the abnormal emotional strains of childhood which **Soviet Islamist** dictatorship created and which were enormously increased by the war. Such things as normal security and placidity of home environment have practically ceased to exist in the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Iran** outside of the most remote farms and villages. And observers are not yet sure whether that is not going to leave its mark on the over-all capacity of the generation now coming into maturity. . . .

“It is difficult to see how these deficiencies can be corrected at an early date by a tired and dispirited population working largely under the shadow of fear and compulsion. And as long as they are not overcome, **Russia Iran** will remain economically as vulnerable, and in a certain sense an impotent, nation, capable of exporting its enthusiasms and of radiating the strange charm of its primitive political vitality but unable to back up those articles of export by the real evidences of material power and prosperity. . . .”

13. The Islamic Republic’s greatest supporters don’t live in Iran

“It is curious to note that the ideological power of **Soviet Iranian** authority is strongest today in areas beyond the frontiers of **Russia Iran**, beyond the reach of its police power. This phenomenon brings to mind a comparison used by

Thomas Mann in his great novel *Buddenbrooks*. Observing that human institutions often show the greatest outward brilliance at a moment when inner decay is in reality farthest advanced, he compared one of those stars whose light shines most brightly on this world when in reality it has long since ceased to exist. And who can say with assurance that the strong light still cast by the ~~Kremlin~~ **Islamic Republic** on the dissatisfied peoples of the ~~western world~~ **Middle East** is not the powerful afterglow of a constellation which is in actuality on the wane? This cannot be proved. And it cannot be disproved. But the possibility remains (and in the opinion of this writer it is a strong one) that ~~Soviet~~ **the Islamic Republic's** power, like the capitalist world of its conception, bears within it the seeds of its own decay, and that the sprouting of these seeds is well advanced."

14. The succession of power in the Islamic Republic is uncertain

"A great uncertainty hangs over the political life of the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Islamic Republic**. That is the uncertainty involved in the transfer of power from one individual or group of individuals to others.

"This is, of course, outstandingly the problem of the personal position of ~~Stalin~~ **Khamenei**. We must remember that his succession to ~~Lenin's~~ Khomeini's pinnacle of pre-eminence . . . was the only such transfer of individual authority which the ~~Soviet Union~~ **Islamic Republic** has experienced . . . Thus the future of ~~Soviet~~ **Iranian** power may not be by any means as secure as ~~Russian~~ **Iranian** capacity for self-delusion would make it appear to the men of the ~~Kremlin~~ **Islamic Republic**. That they can quietly and easily turn it over to others remains to be proved."

15. U.S. policies can expedite, but not engineer, political change in Iran

"It would be an exaggeration to say that American behavior unassisted and alone could exercise a power of life and death over the ~~Communist~~ **Islamist** movement and bring about the early fall of ~~Soviet power~~ **the Islamic Republic** in ~~Russia~~ **Iran**. But the United States has it in its power to increase enormously the strains under which ~~Soviet~~ **Iranian** policy must operate, to force upon the ~~Kremlin~~ **Islamic Republic** a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection than it has had to observe in recent years, and in this way to promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of ~~Soviet~~ **Iranian** power. For no mystical, Messianic movement—and particularly not that of the ~~Kremlin~~ **Islamic Republic**—can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs."

In the more than six decades since the publication of “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” Kennan’s serious concerns about the discussion and conduct of U.S. foreign policy remain just as timely. After Mr. X’s article gained widespread attention, he was continually frustrated at the simplistic connection commentators drew between his writings and the Truman Doctrine, and the persistent association of his advocacy of containment with military solutions. He rejected the implication that the Soviet Union’s desire to maintain the United States as an enemy meant that war was inevitable.

For Kennan, the Cold War was essentially a political battle. Containment meant the United States needed to improve its understanding of the Soviet Union and its ability to combat Soviet propaganda through savvy diplomacy and political operations, not force of arms.

Today, the United States is once again in danger of turning too quickly to military containment. The Obama administration’s recent \$60 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia—along with multi-billion dollar deals with the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Kuwait—point to an escalating arms race in the Persian Gulf. Yet, even more so than the Soviet Union, Iran’s strength lies primarily in its political influence, not its military prowess. Iran’s military budget is one-quarter that of Saudi Arabia’s and even less impressive than that of the much smaller UAE, but its soft power and support for militias can undermine governments with vastly superior armies, as has been evidenced by the United States in Iraq.

In this situation, what’s lacking in the Middle East and Persian Gulf is not high-tech weaponry, but measures to diminish Iran’s regional appeal. At the beginning of the Cold War, Kennan believed the greatest danger facing Europe was not the Red Army but rather the postwar economic and social deterioration that created fertile ground for domestic communists. In response, he helped engineer the Marshall Plan.

A somewhat analogous situation can be found in the Middle East, where economic marginalization, political alienation, and social discontent help fuel Islamic radicalism and increase the appeal of both the Islamic Republic and its client militias. In this context, the United States would be better off selling Arab nations billions of dollars worth of educational and economic infrastructure, rather than superfluous arms.

Similar to Kennan’s assessment of the Soviet paradox, the Iranian regime’s international profile is rising just as its internal decay appears to be accelerating. The contested 2009 presidential elections and subsequent popular unrest revealed the country’s deep internal divisions as well as the regime’s increasing reliance on coercion and intimidation in order to maintain power. While the ability of the United States to facilitate political reform in Iran is highly limited,

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Washington can help constrain the Islamic Republic's ability to repress and censor its population. This includes increasing the quality and capabilities of the Voice of America's Persian News Network (which, according to some estimates, reaches more than 15 million Iranian households), combating the regime's ability to control and block communications, and implementing further travel bans and asset freezes on individual human rights abusers.

Kennan's wisdom does not suggest that the United States should shun engagement with Iran while it attempts to contain its influence. On the contrary, he would advise that smart diplomacy is more important than ever. Talking to the Islamic Republic will not resolve the real, serious differences or convert Tehran into an American ally. But given Iran's influence on major U.S. foreign policy challenges—namely Iraq, Afghanistan, Arab-Israeli peace, terrorism, energy security, and nuclear proliferation—it can help mitigate the risk of escalation and misunderstanding. In the process, Kennan would caution, the United States should remain “at all times cool and collected” and allow the march of history to run its course.

Is such a policy possible in today's political environment? Containment brings no quick political payoffs. Hawks may accuse the Obama administration of being soft on Tehran just as liberals worry that sanctions inhibit dialogue. Kennan worried deeply about the fundamental difficulty of shaping long-term strategic policy in a democracy. He believed that fickle public opinion and a lack of understanding of foreign affairs in the legislature hindered the nation's ability to deal with complex foreign policy challenges. A public that ignored a problem one day would believe war inevitable the next.

Arguably, this problem is worse today than in 1947. At a time of intense political polarization and 24-hour news cycles, domestic political imperatives to appear “tough on Iran” may overwhelm the kind of careful diplomacy needed to effectively deal with the Islamic Republic. Yet if the diplomats of Kennan's generation were able to avoid dangerous confrontation in the era of McCarthyism, hope still exists for a mature foreign policy toward Tehran now.

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