

Strategic Autonomy, Secular Democracy, and Regional Peace:

Why the Iranian Opposition Should Distinguish Its National Narrative from U.S. and Israeli Foreign Policy

A policy paper on Iranian democratic transition under the political leadership framework associated with Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi

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Abstract

This paper argues that an Iranian democratic opposition seeking to remove the Islamic Republic and build a secular democratic state must maintain strategic autonomy from the foreign-policy agendas of even its closest external allies. The interests of Iranian democrats, the United States, Israel, Europe, and Gulf Arab states can overlap in opposing the Islamic Republic's coercive regional order, nuclear escalation, hostage diplomacy, and proxy networks. Yet overlap is not identity. Iranian national strategy should be framed as liberation from theocratic authoritarianism and the construction of a lawful, pluralist, secular democracy, rather than as participation in wider ideological or civilisational conflict against Muslims or Islam as a religion. The paper proposes a disciplined narrative: oppose political Islam as a doctrine of state power; defend Muslims as citizens and neighbours; separate Iranian transition from the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and present a future free Iran as a partner in a regional security and economic framework that could be described as a 'Cyrus Accords' model: mutual recognition, sovereignty, non-interference, religious liberty, and shared prosperity.

Keywords

Iranian opposition; Reza Pahlavi; secular democracy; political Islam; strategic autonomy; Israel; United States; Europe; Persian Gulf; Abraham Accords; Cyrus Accords; laïcité; diaspora politics

1. Introduction: Alignment Is Not Subordination

Iranian democratic opposition forces currently operate in an international environment where the Islamic Republic is widely perceived by its adversaries as a source of regional destabilisation, repression, terrorism sponsorship, nuclear escalation, and proxy warfare. Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi's public position has emphasised democratic transition, territorial integrity, individual freedoms, equality of citizens, and separation of religion and state; Reuters reported in June 2025 that he described these as cornerstones of a transition and argued that destroying nuclear facilities alone would not produce lasting peace without democratic transition in Iran [1].

The central strategic problem is that external alignment can easily become narrative capture. Iran's democratic forces may benefit from diplomatic, technological, informational, or security support

from the United States, Israel, Europe, and Gulf Arab states. However, the Iranian national objective is not identical to any ally's foreign policy. The Iranian objective is the replacement of the Islamic Republic by a secular, democratic, rights-based state. The Israeli objective is primarily national security against Iranian missiles, nuclear threats, and proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas. The American objective fluctuates with administrations and often prioritises non-proliferation, counterterrorism, energy security, and domestic electoral considerations. European objectives include stability, human rights, migration management, energy security, and avoidance of regional war. Gulf Arab states seek protection from Iranian coercion while avoiding sectarian regional escalation.

A mature opposition must therefore distinguish cooperation from dependence. The necessary formula is strategic autonomy: work with every state whose practical actions help Iranian liberation, but preserve an Iranian vocabulary, Iranian constitutional aims, and Iranian moral discipline.

2. Research Question and Thesis

This paper asks: how should an Iranian opposition movement under a Reza Pahlavi-centred transitional leadership framework cooperate with the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic while avoiding entanglement in anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, or externally driven narratives that would damage Iranian national interests?

The thesis is that Iranian opposition strategy should be based on four principles. First, it should define the enemy as the Islamic Republic and political Islam as state ideology, not Muslims as a population. Second, it should maintain a separate position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: support regional peace, mutual recognition, and civilian protection without importing Israeli or Palestinian maximalism into the Iranian liberation agenda. Third, it should use European secular-democratic models and constitutional experience as a major source of institutional learning. Fourth, it should present a free Iran as a stabilising regional partner that can reduce forced migration, improve energy security, and create a non-sectarian balance in the Middle East.

3. Conceptual Framework: Political Islam, Secularism, and Law

The term political Islam should be used with precision. It does not mean Muslim identity, Islamic culture, or private religious practice. It refers to movements or state doctrines that seek to organise political sovereignty, legislation, education, coercion, and social hierarchy through religious authority. The Islamic Republic is an extreme example because it constitutionalised clerical guardianship, turned religion into state power, and exported ideological coercion through regional networks.

A secular democratic alternative is not anti-religious. It is a legal order in which the state neither enforces nor privileges a religious doctrine; citizens may believe, disbelieve, reform, convert, or practise faith without fear; and the law applies equally to believer and non-believer. In the French language of *laïcité*, this means the state is religiously neutral. In the British constitutional tradition, it means pragmatic pluralism, equal citizenship, and the containment of sectarian power through law. In the American constitutional tradition, it means non-establishment and free exercise. Iranian democrats can draw from all three traditions while adapting them to Iranian history.

The strategic communication point is simple: the opposition should say, 'We oppose theocratic coercion, not faith; we oppose armed ideological networks, not communities; we oppose state-imposed religion, not personal spirituality.' This protects the Iranian movement from sectarian framing and makes it more persuasive to Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, atheists, agnostics, and secular citizens alike.

4. Demographic Reality: Muslim Citizens in Western Societies

The narrative discipline is not only ethical; it is also sociological. In England and Wales, the 2021 Census recorded 3.9 million Muslims, equal to 6.5% of the population [2]. In the United States, PRRI's 2023 religious landscape estimated Muslims at approximately 1% of the population, while all non-Christian religions together comprised about 6% [3]. Pew's demographic research also shows that American Muslims are internally diverse, with large first-generation and second-generation components and origins spanning South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, Asia-Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and the Americas [4].

These figures matter because Iranian democratic activists operate in societies where Muslim citizens are neighbours, colleagues, patients, voters, and potential allies. A rhetoric that blames Islam or Muslims collectively may produce short-term applause among hard-right networks, but it damages coalition-building with mainstream Europeans, social democrats, liberals, conservatives, churches, trade unions, universities, human-rights organisations, and Muslim reformists who also oppose the Islamic Republic's authoritarianism.

The Iranian opposition should therefore avoid the communicative trap of letting the Islamic Republic pose as the defender of Muslims. The regime's victims include many Muslims in Iran, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan. The opposition's message should be: political Islam is a system of domination; Muslims are among its victims; secular democracy is the legal protection of all citizens.

5. The Israeli-Palestinian Question: A Separate Conflict That Must Not Capture the Iranian Agenda

Israel's security concerns regarding the Islamic Republic and its proxies are real and strategically relevant. Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis, and some Iraqi militias have been part of a regional ecosystem in which Iran has supplied ideological, financial, military, and diplomatic support. However, Israel's internal conflict with Palestinians predates the Islamic Republic and cannot be reduced to Iranian interference alone. United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, adopted after the 1967 war, framed a durable peace around withdrawal from occupied territories, termination of belligerency, respect for sovereignty, secure and recognised boundaries, freedom of navigation, a just settlement of the refugee problem, and security arrangements [5]. The 1993 Oslo Declaration of Principles then established interim self-government arrangements and a process intended to lead to further negotiations [6].

For Iranian democrats, the implication is not to take ownership of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The implication is to recognise complexity and avoid inflammatory absolutism. A future free Iran can recognise Israel, oppose terrorism, defend civilian life, support Palestinian rights within a

negotiated peace framework, and reject antisemitism and Islamophobia simultaneously. These positions are not contradictory; they are the minimum conditions of a mature regional policy.

If Iranian opposition rhetoric becomes aggressively anti-Islamic, it risks alienating Gulf Arab societies, European publics, Muslim reformers, and even many Iranian citizens whose opposition to the regime does not imply hostility to Islam as faith. If, conversely, Iranian democrats surrender to the Islamic Republic's anti-Israel narrative, they abandon a potential regional peace framework and validate the regime's proxy logic. The correct position is independent: no theocratic regime in Tehran; no proxy war; no collective demonisation; no importation of other conflicts into Iran's constitutional future.

6. Strategic Interest Matrix

Table 1. Interest alignment and divergence among Iranian democratic forces and external stakeholders.

Actor	Core interest	Overlap with Iranian opposition	Potential divergence	Recommended Iranian stance
Iranian democratic opposition	End the Islamic Republic; build secular democracy; protect territorial integrity; secure national reconciliation.	Needs external pressure on the regime and international legitimacy for transition.	Risk of being perceived as an instrument of foreign states if it adopts allied slogans uncritically.	Maintain strategic autonomy and a civic, Iranian, rights-based narrative.
Israel	Prevent Iranian nuclear threat; defeat Iran-backed proxies; secure citizens; normalise regional relations.	Weakening the Islamic Republic and ending proxy warfare serves both Israeli and Iranian democratic interests.	Israeli rhetoric may become anti-Islamic or tied to Palestinian conflict dynamics that are not Iran's national agenda.	Cooperate against the regime and proxies; avoid importing maximalist Israeli-Palestinian rhetoric.
United States	Non-proliferation; counterterrorism; energy security; regional balance; domestic political goals.	Pressure on the Islamic Republic can create strategic openings for Iranian people.	U.S. policy changes between administrations and may prioritise deals over democratic transition.	Accept useful support but do not outsource Iranian constitutional objectives.
Europe	Human rights; stability; migration management; energy security; prevention of regional war.	Europe benefits from a secular, stable, democratic Iran and reduced forced migration.	European governments may fear chaos after regime collapse or prefer containment diplomacy.	Emphasise managed transition, rule of law, refugee return potential, energy stability, and pluralism.
Gulf Arab states	Security from Iranian coercion; trade; sovereignty; energy and maritime stability.	A non-expansionist Iran would reduce threat perceptions and enable regional integration.	Sectarian rhetoric can alarm Muslim-majority neighbours and weaken trust.	Frame the future as sovereignty, non-interference, trade, and a Cyrus Accords-type regional peace.

7. Why Iranian Democrats Should Not Interfere in U.S. or Israeli Foreign Policy

The Iranian opposition should not position itself as an auxiliary actor in American or Israeli domestic politics. It should not campaign for particular military doctrines beyond the minimum necessary for Iranian liberation, nor should it endorse every rhetorical, ideological, or electoral position taken by external allies. This is especially important in the diaspora, where visual association with far-right, anti-immigration, or anti-Muslim movements can rapidly redefine the Iranian freedom movement in the eyes of mainstream media and policymakers.

There are three reasons for this boundary. First, legitimacy: a transition must be seen as Iranian, not imported. Second, coalition breadth: a successful democratic transition needs monarchists, republicans, liberals, conservatives, social democrats, labour activists, religious minorities, secular Muslims, women's rights activists, ethnic minorities, professionals, students, and former regime personnel willing to defect. Sectarian or foreign-coded rhetoric narrows this coalition. Third, diplomatic credibility: Europe and Gulf states are more likely to support a movement that presents a credible state-building programme than a movement that appears to amplify another country's information war.

The Iranian opposition can say: 'We welcome any practical support from the United States, Israel, Europe, and regional states that helps the Iranian people end the Islamic Republic. But our political programme, constitution, reconciliation process, minority protections, religious freedom, and foreign policy will be determined by the Iranian nation.'

8. The European Model and the Lessons of Older States

The user's narrative rightly emphasises that Iran is an old civilisation and should learn from other old political societies. Europe offers several lessons. Britain demonstrates gradual institutionalism, common-law restraint, parliamentary accountability, and plural civic identity. France demonstrates laïcité, republican citizenship, and the separation of religion from state education. Germany demonstrates post-authoritarian constitutional safeguards, militant democracy against anti-democratic extremism, and federal discipline. Spain demonstrates a negotiated transition after dictatorship, including the symbolic use of monarchy as a bridge to democracy. Italy demonstrates the risks of ideological polarisation and the importance of constitutional pluralism after authoritarian collapse.

These models should not be copied mechanically. Iran has its own history, languages, legal memory, ethnic composition, religious minorities, and geopolitical environment. But Europe provides a richer transition laboratory than the binary models of American exceptionalism or Israeli security doctrine. Iranian democrats should engage European governments by speaking the language of institutions: constitutional assembly, transitional justice, security-sector reform, judicial independence, minority protection, decentralisation where appropriate, anti-corruption design, and economic stabilisation.

9. From Abraham Accords to a Cyrus Accords Framework

The Abraham Accords normalised relations between Israel and several Arab states and were framed around diplomacy, recognition, and regional cooperation. A Reza Pahlavi-associated formulation has proposed broadening such a framework into 'Cyrus Accords' linking a free Iran with Israel and

Arab states on mutual recognition, sovereignty, and national interest [7]. The term is symbolically powerful because Cyrus is associated in Iranian political memory with imperial tolerance, coexistence, and the protection of communities under law. Used carefully, it can express a non-sectarian Iranian alternative to both Islamist revolutionary export and narrow ethnic nationalism.

A Cyrus Accords framework should include five principles: mutual sovereignty; no proxy warfare; protection of religious and ethnic communities; trade and energy cooperation; and joint regional development. It should avoid triumphalist anti-Islamic language. Its message should be that Jews, Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, Kurds, Persians, Arabs, Azeris, Baluch, Armenians, Assyrians, and others can live under law without being turned into instruments of state ideology.

10. Communication Doctrine for the Iranian Opposition

A disciplined movement requires a communication doctrine. The following rules are proposed:

1. Name the adversary precisely: the Islamic Republic, the IRGC, the clerical-security oligarchy, political Islam as state power, and proxy militias. Do not name Muslims collectively as the enemy.
2. Separate moral categories: terrorism is a crime; religious identity is not. Antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Bahá'í persecution, anti-Christian persecution, and anti-Zoroastrian discrimination should all be rejected.
3. Keep the Iranian goal visible: secular democracy, rule of law, territorial integrity, equal citizenship, and a referendum or constitutional process for the future system of government.
4. Speak to Europe in terms of stability: a free Iran can reduce refugee pressure, open economic opportunity, stabilise energy flows, and weaken extremist networks without demonising Muslim citizens.
5. Speak to the Gulf in terms of respect: Iran seeks friendship, maritime security, non-interference, trade, and cultural respect with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Iraq.
6. Speak to Israel in terms of peace and security: a free Iran will not fund proxies, will oppose antisemitism, and will pursue normal relations, but it will not become an extension of Israeli domestic politics.
7. Speak to the United States in terms of partnership: support the Iranian people, weaken the regime's coercive apparatus, but understand that Iranian legitimacy must remain domestic.

11. Policy Recommendations

First, create a written code of external alignment: the Iranian opposition should accept external support only within a framework that preserves Iranian decision-making autonomy, rejects sectarian hatred, and commits to civilian protection.

Second, establish a European diplomatic track. This track should brief British, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Nordic, and EU institutions on a practical transition plan: public-order continuity, economic stabilisation, minority guarantees, energy policy, and mechanisms to prevent revenge violence.

Third, establish a Gulf reassurance track. The opposition should directly reassure Gulf Arab states that a free Iran will respect sovereignty, end proxy warfare, and seek energy and trade integration rather than revolutionary expansion.

Fourth, establish a Jewish-Muslim-Iranian civic dialogue. Iranian democratic activists should publicly distinguish between opposition to the Islamic Republic and hostility to Muslims, while also rejecting antisemitism and Holocaust denial.

Fifth, prepare a post-regime secularism charter. This charter should guarantee freedom of religion and freedom from religion, equal citizenship for women and minorities, removal of religious tests for office, neutral public education, and judicial independence.

Sixth, prohibit movement branding at extremist rallies. Diaspora activists should avoid presenting the Lion and Sun flag, Crown Prince imagery, or Iranian liberation symbols in contexts dominated by anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, antisemitic, or neo-fascist politics. The reputational cost is greater than the tactical benefit.

12. Conclusion

Iranian liberation requires allies, but not submission to allied narratives. The United States and Israel may be indispensable strategic partners in weakening the Islamic Republic, but Iranian democrats must not allow their cause to be absorbed into American electoral cycles, Israeli security rhetoric, European culture-war politics, or sectarian hostility toward Muslims. The movement's strongest message is civic and constitutional: Iranians want to end theocratic authoritarianism and build a secular democratic state in which all citizens are equal before the law.

This strategy is not weakness. It is statecraft. It enables cooperation with Israel against proxies without adopting anti-Muslim rhetoric. It enables cooperation with the United States without becoming a client project. It enables reassurance of Europe and Gulf Arab states. It enables Iranian Muslims, secular citizens, Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, atheists, agnostics, monarchists, republicans, liberals, conservatives, and social democrats to stand within one national framework.

The most persuasive future for Iran is not a revenge ideology. It is a lawful, secular, pluralist, economically viable and regionally stabilising state: a free Iran that defeats political Islam by making citizenship stronger than coercive ideology.

Executive Summary of the Argument

- The Iranian opposition should cooperate with every state that helps end the Islamic Republic, but it should not become rhetorically or strategically subordinate to U.S. or Israeli foreign-policy agendas.
- The central distinction is between opposing political Islam as state power and avoiding hostility toward Muslims as people of faith.
- A free Iran should present itself to Europe and the Gulf as a source of stability, reduced migration pressure, energy security, trade, and pluralist regional peace.
- A Cyrus Accords framework should mean mutual recognition, sovereignty, non-interference, religious liberty, and shared prosperity—not anti-Islamic escalation.

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Note on method: This paper is a policy analysis based on the user-supplied strategic narrative, public demographic data, international legal documents, public reporting on Reza Pahlavi's positions, and political science literature on secularism, democratic transition, alliances, and securitisation. It does not claim to represent the official policy of Reza Pahlavi or any organisation.