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PROTESTS AND REGIME SUPPRESSION IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN

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Green Movement members tangle with Basij and police forces, 2009.

The nationwide protests that engulfed Iran in late 2019 were ostensibly a response to a 50 percent gasoline price hike enacted by the administration of President Hassan Rouhani.[1] But in little time, complaints extended to a broader critique of the leadership. Moreover, beyond the specific reasons for the protests, they appeared to reveal a deeper reality about Iran, both before and since the 1979 emergence of the Islamic Republic: its character as an inherently "revolutionary country" and a "movement society."[2]

Since its formation, the Islamic Republic has seen multiple cycles of protest and revolt, ranging from ethnic movements in the early 1980s to urban riots in the early 1990s, student unrest spanning 1999–2003, the Green Movement response to the 2009 election, and upheaval in December 2017–January 2018. The last of these instances, like the current round, began with a focus on economic dissatisfaction and then spread to broader issues. All these movements were put down by the regime with characteristic brutality.

In tracking and comparing protest dynamics and regime responses since 1979, this study reveals that unrest has become more significant in scale, as well as more secularized and violent. Tehran's response, in turn, has also grown more violent. Furthermore, each wave has prompted the Islamic Republic to augment its repressive toolkit in preparation for the next round.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AND MASS UPRISING

Protests during the first decade of the Islamic Republic were typically driven by ethnicity and politics and led by groups such as the leftist Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) rather than Islamic factions. They drew comparatively little support from civil society and were quickly suppressed by an ascendant elite, bolstered by the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.[3] Specific regime tools in crushing these protests were club-wielding civilians, many of whom were later recruited into the Islamic Republic's repressive machinery anchored in the revolutionary committees, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the IRGC's Basij Resistance Force. These organizations later became the backbone of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's larger coercive apparatus.

THE URBAN POOR UNDER RAFSANJANI, 1989–97

Unlike Khomeini, the founding leader of the Islamic Republic, his successor, Ali Khamenei, lacks both charisma and religious credentials, shortcomings that have contributed to the various waves of protest beginning in 1989 and continuing until the present day. Khamenei's rise to Supreme Leader was supported by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as Iran's president from 1989 to 1997. Under Rafsanjani, and with support from Khamenei, Iran's economic orientation became more liberalized, with market deregulation, currency devaluation, and the cutting of subsidies. These policies, however, spurred massive inflation, greater inequality, and a spate of unrest around the country. Between August 1991 and August 1994, major upheavals took place in Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Qazvin, and Tabriz, along with frequent minor clashes in many other urban centers.[4] Most of these incidents involved urban squatters bemoaning the destruction of their improvised communities. Unprecedented since the revolution, these urban popular uprisings were limited in breadth and motivated by economic grievance, differing from the earlier protests focused on politics and ethnicity.

In some cases, such as Bagherabad in south Tehran and Koy-e Tollab in Mashhad, riots started in response to the municipality's demolition of houses that were built without a permit in the first decade after the revolution.[5] Protestors consisted mostly of rural migrants and slum dwellers who settled in these urban outskirts to "build shelters, organize communities, and acquire amenities such as fresh water and electricity, more often than not by unlawful means."[6] They were the very "*mostazafan*" (lit. downtrodden) or "*koukhnishinan*" (lit. hut dwellers) whom Ayatollah Khomeini had called the rightful inheritors of the revolution.

Although small in scope, these protests turned violent because of the desperate conditions experienced in the affected communities. In Mashhad, protestors vandalized police stations and set fire to municipal vehicles. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested and four were ultimately hanged; six police officers were killed.[7] According to a leading official in Khorasan province, just one out of the hundreds arrested held a high school diploma—and this individual struggled with drug addiction. The others battled poverty and unemployment.[8]

Another notable instance of unrest occurred in Qazvin in August 1994, when the Iranian Majlis (parliament) rejected the city's demand to become a province

independent of Zanjan. While this riot was perceived to be politically driven, the main causes were in fact economic. Qazvin officials and constituents believed that by separating from Zanjan, they would receive a larger budget and could administer themselves more effectively. Basij and IRGC personnel from Tehran province were tasked with suppressing the uprising, following the hesitancy of Qazvin-based Guards to do so.[9]

Lacking both policing experience and anti-riot equipment, the regime turned to its military, deploying weapons including the Katyusha multiple rocket launcher and shoulder-fired rocket-propelled grenades, according to one study.[10] While no official statistics are available, the opposition MEK claimed that fifty people were killed and three thousand arrested—although the group has a history of exaggerating such figures.[11]

Rising inflation later in Rafsanjani's presidential tenure, peaking at around 49 percent in 1995,[12] sparked additional unrest, such as in the southern Tehran district of Eslamshahr that April. Specific triggers included rising bus fares, along with the overall higher cost of living. The ensuing disorder saw the burning of buses, destruction of banks and government property, and looting. As in Qazvin, IRGC forces from Tehran were deployed and used military equipment to suppress the riots. Sources such as Amnesty International reported that up to ten people had been shot dead in Eslamshahr, but Iranian officials reported only one. Despite scant media coverage for this event, a consensus holds that dozens were injured, and hundreds arrested, many of whom remained in "detention without charges almost a year after their arrest."[13]

Indeed, almost all the tempest of the early 1990s was economically driven, led by dwellers of marginalized areas of big cities. The activities lacked oversight from any political organization.[14] Furthermore, the protests received little media coverage, since almost all the era's newspapers were state-owned and censored, reflecting a policy that has only hardened over the years. In justifying its crackdowns, the regime blamed "foreigners," "opportunists," and, most important, the MEK as instigators.[15]

As a broader response, the IRGC became convinced of the need to develop professionalized groups for dealing with internal dissidents. One initial step taken in the early 1990s was to establish security bodies including the Basij anti-riot personnel, divided into the Ashura (male) and al-Zahra (female) battalions. These battalions were initially composed of Basij members who had fought in the Iran-Iraq War.

When the protests expanded in Eslamshahr, the regime answered by establishing a new security headquarters as well as a military governorship for Tehran. Given the city's distinction as national capital, the IRGC Ground Forces also created a security command, called the Sarallah headquarters, led in name by the IRGC commander but effectively run by the deputy commander.[16] In times of crisis, Sarallah still acts today as Tehran's military authority, managing all security entities in Tehran province, including the police, Basij, members of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and the IRGC.[17] Although regarded by one source as "superficially similar to the commander of the Military District of Washington,"[18] the Sarallah headquarters has enormously greater combat power and influence than its U.S. counterpart. Sarallah has since seen the creation of two sub-headquarters, Nasser-e Sarallah and Qods-e Sarallah, which serve the northwest and south/southeast of Tehran, respectively, as well as oversee lesser security bodies.

In 1996, Iran's national police (NAJA)—formed six years earlier through the merging of city police forces, gendarmerie (mostly in rural areas), Islamic revolutionary committees, and judicial police—also established a specialized unit, the Supreme Leader's Guardian Special Forces (*Niroo-ye Vizhe Pasdar-e Velayat*, or NOPO). This force serves as anti-riot police and has been used to suppress dissidents and maintain political order.[19]

STUDENT PROTESTS AND POLITICAL GRIEVANCES UNDER KHATAMI, 1997–2005

Many of President Rafsanjani's social and economic policies, including the nationwide expansion of higher education, were continued by Mohammad Khatami, a reformist who was elected president in 1997. Under Rafsanjani, university enrollment jumped from 407,693 in 1989—the year he took office—to 1,192,329 in 1996. This trend continued in Khatami's administration, during which the student population expanded rapidly, exceeding 1.4 million in 2000 and then 2.1 million in 2004.[20] This increase aligned with a broader population surge, from 33.7 million in 1976 to 60 million in 1996, with 51 percent of the latter figure younger than twenty.[21]

During the Khatami era, the burgeoning student population, and the greater political freedoms afforded at universities, led to the expansion of students' political activities. Young and idealistic, these students challenged the Islamic Republic and made demands for political liberty. Specifically, beginning in 1997, students demonstrated frequently, protesting the lack of press freedoms, inadequate rights for political prisoners, and even the poor-quality food on campus.[22]

Students also criticized the influence of nonelective bodies, including the Ministry of Justice, Guardian Council, and Office of the Supreme Leader. According to research conducted in the late 1990s, "Students proved very active, demonstrating forceful support for the president and his pragmatic politics all over the country and throughout the year—especially at the universities of Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan, and particularly around the anniversary of his election, in late May and early June 1998."[23]

The largest student protests since the revolution occurred in July 1999, following the closure of the *Salaam* reformist newspaper.[24] The protests spread to universities in Tabriz, carried out mostly by university students demanding more political freedoms. During six days of rioting in Tehran, several people were killed, more than two hundred were injured, and hundreds more were arrested.[25] The Sarallah headquarters, formed four years earlier, seized control in Tehran by order of the Supreme National Security Council.[26]

The student protests continued in subsequent years. In 2002, they focused on the death sentence given to Hashem Aghajari, a history professor at the University of Tehran and a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War accused of blasphemy and insulting the clerical establishment. His sentence sparked five days of protests in Tehran, during which some five thousand students boycotted class and called for defending freedoms, "chanting slogans against the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei."[27]

Students mobilized to oppose a broad range of developments, including the privatization of universities, as advocated by the government. In July 2003, when students protested "neoliberal governmental plans in higher education," they targeted their ire at tuition fees for previously free state universities and the admission of students who had not passed the national entrance examination (*konkur*).[28] A standardized regimen, the *konkur* had proved a very competitive means of screening students, but the new policy allowed for the admission of part-time students who had not passed it.

In seeking control during the reformist era, conservatives enlisted semistate and nonstate actors, mainly the Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah (Supporters of the Party of God). These groups, while working to suppress dissident activity, consistently denied their responsibility on the question of human rights violations. For its part, Ansar-e Hezbollah, an unofficial entity formed after the Iran-Iraq War, consisted of retired IRGC members and of Basijis from both the wartime and

younger generations. These shadowy groups worked closely with IRGC commanders such as Muhammad Bagher Zolghadr, as well as the Supreme Leader's office, and became responsible for conducting targeted attacks on dissidents.[29]

Since its inception, Ansar-e Hezbollah has targeted cultural sites such as bookstores and cinemas, as well as intellectuals and dissidents. It has generally extended its mission of suppression to society at large and university spaces specifically. For example, in Isfahan during a Friday prayer service on January 15, 1999, agents physically attacked the followers of Ayatollah Jalal al-Din Taheri, because the cleric had criticized the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[30]

Meanwhile, the Basij, especially its university students' branch, emerged as a major anti-reform group at the start of the Khatami era. Ayatollah Khamenei and other conservative officials empowered these students in their efforts. In 1998, the head of the Students Basij Organization at the Shahid Rajaei Teacher Training University showed the violence of his group's position: "There are some brains whose calcium carbonate is too much [they are critical of the leader and the regime]. We must shoot at them so that the extra calcium carbonate will be ejected."[31]

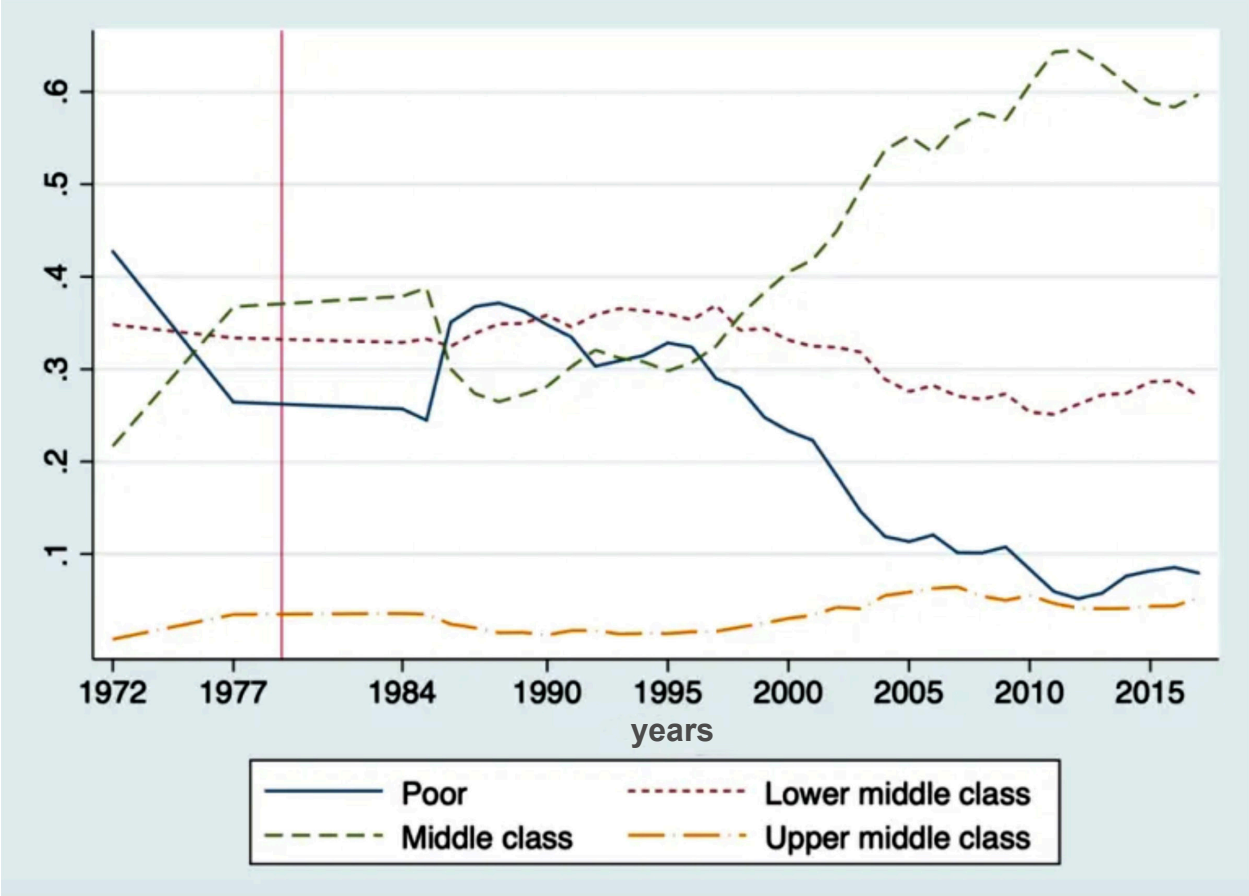
Following its success in suppressing student-driven dissent, the Basij has expanded its security branches, in part through the establishment of special units. These units were first shaped informally after student protests were put down in 1999 in west Tehran, but by a decade later they had become institutionalized.[32] Now called Fatehin ("victorious"), this consolidated group consists of members who have passed through more vigorous military training, including with snipers. Although the Fatehin is not explicitly an anti-riot force, it has been used to suppress mass unrest and social protests since its formation.[33]

SOCIO-POLITICAL DISTRESS IN THE MIDDLE CLASS UNDER AHMADINEJAD, 2005–13

The student demonstrations signaled early middle-class discontent under the Islamic Republic. At their core, both the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the war with Iraq subordinated Iran's middle class. Leaders of the revolution espoused values like poverty and contentment over consumerism and worldly striving. One consequence was large-scale emigration among members of the middle class.[34] Yet in a paradox, socioeconomic policies supported by the regime eventually fostered a robust Iranian middle class that went on to challenge the regime.[35] Whereas by 1988 the middle class had shrunk to barely over 15 percent of the total population, it began to grow slowly in Rafsanjani's second term, most likely due to postwar reconstruction initiatives. It then rose rapidly during Khatami's presidential term, possibly as a result of reduced economic instability, higher rates of economic growth, and a political-economic environment more inclusive of middle-class aspirations. By the reform era, the Iranian middle class made up more than 32 percent of the population, as measured in 2000.[36] And by the end of Khatami's tenure, the middle class had expanded even further, reaching 40 percent, according to Iranian economists.[37]

During Khatami's presidency, the growth of the middle class was accompanied by the earlier-noted rise in social and political freedoms. The urban middle class, especially youth and women, experienced less social restriction in everyday life than in previous years. But this easing, which occurred amid a wide gap between Iranian reformists and conservatives, was halted by the 2005 presidential election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.[38] An ideological hardliner,

THE SHARE OF INCOME CLASSES IN IRAN, 1972–2017



Source: Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Iran's Economy 40 Years After the Islamic Revolution," Brookings Institution, March 14, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/14/irans-economy-40-years-after-the-islamic-revolution/. Graphic created by Salehi-Isfahani based on micro-data files from Iran's Statistical Center. Reproduced with permission from Brookings.

Ahmadinejad shifted his attention toward lower-income Iranians, who were more religious and conservative than the modern middle class. Thanks to a jump in oil prices, income for the Ahmadinejad government increased rapidly, and inequality lessened as the lower classes gained support.

But the middle class—especially urban youth, students, and women—largely felt alienated by Ahmadinejad's populist socio-cultural policies oriented toward re-Islamizing society and his hostility toward symbols of Western culture.[39] In his first administration, he started the second cultural revolution, the first having occurred during the Khomeini period, by expelling professors and students critical of the regime; the goal was to "purify" universities of "corrupting" non-Islamic elements. Moral policing returned to the public with a stronger mandate, and several new moral policing programs, such as the Hijab and Chastity Plan (*Tarh-e Efaf va Hijab*), were implemented.[40]

Given their distaste for Ahmadinejad's policies, and the resulting pressures in daily life, members of the middle class tended to vote for Ahmadinejad's rivals in the 2009 presidential election, while the lower classes and rural residents mainly stuck with the incumbent. The incumbent's ultimate triumph was marred by claims of fraud, spawning the Green Movement and a period of massive unrest that

lasted months and shook the foundations of the clerical establishment.

The Green Movement was, in fact, a product of the modern Iranian middle, with support from across the regime's reformist elements. Its social base consisted mainly of urbanites, primarily youth, and did not include the poor and working classes. Like previous Iranian uprisings, the Green Movement spread mostly through Iran's big cities such as Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Tabriz.[41] It was mostly peaceful. The movement's official political leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi, and Zahra Rahnavard (Mousavi's spouse), were among Iran's political elites and relied on reformist parties such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front (*Jebheh-ye Mosharekate*) and National Trust Party (*Etemad-e Meli*). In line with the trend's nonviolent ethos, people participated in silent demonstrations, adopting the slogan "Where is my vote?" and appropriating the religious call "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest). Attacks on the Supreme Leader or religious authorities were kept to the margins, while specific demands prevailed for a vote recount or Ahmadinejad's resignation.

Unbowed by the movement's nonviolent character, the Islamic Republic responded with brutality, killing at least eighty people and detaining around four thousand.[42] Mousavi specifically has been under house arrest since 2010, though his wife has been granted more freedom, and many Green activists have fled the country. In Tehran, the IRGC's Sarallah security headquarters took control, and helped by the Basij and other vigilante groups, the regime eventually suppressed the wave. Given the movement's peaceful composition and its center within the urban middle class, Tehran avoided having to enlist military units such as the IRGC Ground Forces. This is the case despite the Green demonstrations marking the greatest unrest since the Islamic Republic's founding three decades earlier.

Among the tactics apparently used by the Islamic Republic against detainees was sexual violence. This was meant not only to dehumanize them but to stem further recruitment by creating an atmosphere of terror. Green Movement leader Karrubi called for an investigation into such abuses by elements such as the police and Basij. According to a parliamentarian who also belonged to an investigative committee, "[The raping] of some detainees through baton and soda bottle has been proved to us."[43]

The Islamic Republic invoked religious concepts to justify its suppression, labeling the Green Movement an agent of *fetneh* (sedition) and the protestors *mohareb*, or belligerent, enemies of God.[44] Such a religious justification was already familiar in the Islamic Republic, whose very existence was rooted in ideology. Moreover, such an approach was used particularly in the Green Movement case to explain lengthy prison sentences, and even the death penalty, for those failing to comply with the regime's demands.

Drawing from the well of Islamic history, the regime compared the 2009 unrest to the tragedy of Karbala, in which the third Shia Imam, Hussein, was killed by agents of the Umayyad Caliphate. In the regime's narrative, the Green Movement supporters were akin to backers of the Yazidi revolt against the Shia imamate and its leader, who was seeking to implement Islamic law. Green affiliates were cast as members of the secular middle class acting in defiance of Islam and Islamic values. During the Shia Ashura festival in 2009, the regime mobilized several religious groups into the streets to disrupt protests. These groups accused protestors of denigrating the holy occasion of Muharram and Imam Hussein himself.[45] The clerics asked the security forces and the judiciary to "punish demonstrators severely and without mercy," on grounds that the Green Movement created insecurity and terror that undermined the Islamic regime.
The regime's response to the Green Movement included dramatic structural changes to the security apparatus, including the police, Basij, and IRGC. The police presence was expanded with the goal of carrying out surveillance of citizens and controlling

society. New branches included cyber police and protection units, with other expansions involving the Intelligence and Public Security Police. The police also invested heavily in crowd-control equipment and vehicles to prepare for future unrest, purchasing most of this inventory from China. Still other innovations included mounted police and a canine unit for search-and-rescue operations.

Since Green Movement activities relied heavily on the Internet and social media specifically, the police established a special cyber bureau, known by its Persian acronym, FATA, to monitor users' activities online and investigate cyber activists. In one case, Sayyed Sattar Beheshti, a blogger, was arrested by the cyber police over his Facebook usage. He died in police custody on October 7, 2012, presumably while being tortured.[46]

When the IRGC added a Provincial Guard presence to every province, Tehran province received two units to ensure utmost preparation against a potential regime threat from a mass uprising.[47] Controlling the Basij and the IRGC Ground Forces in each province, the IRGC-PG serves as scaffolding for a military administrative system that has now been applied across Iranian society. PG offices have been established in each Basij region (*Nahieh-e Basij-e Sepah*) and *bakhsh* (township), as well as at the district and neighborhood levels.

The IRGC has also expanded its societal presence. In 2009, the Guard's intelligence directorate was upgraded to have independent status. The IRGC Intelligence and Security Organization, acting in parallel with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, uses a massive network of Basij and other informers, and operates its own interrogation and imprisonment system. IRGC intelligence likewise has city offices that work closely with their affiliated IRGC-PG units.

Under the Tehran-based Sarallah headquarters, the Provincial Guard has established security units comprising IRGC and Basij personnel. Basij members have been organized into Imam Ali battalions to ensure political order and suppress protests. They undergo training in anti-riot tactics and are equipped with tools such as motorcycles to achieve rapid deployment and intimidation. The Basij further expanded its footprint by coopting the Fatehin units, which previously had four battalions in Tehran alone. Thereafter, in 2010, they were officially recognized as Basij special forces and were replicated in each province.[48]

The wholesale suppression of the Green Movement, involving mass arrests and spurring wide-scale emigration, chilled Iranian society. Economically, this suppression facilitated the continuation of Ahmadinejad's policies focused on privatization and subsidy reform. The old subsidies on gasoline and electricity had largely benefited the middle class, the main consumers of these commodities. The replacement of the subsidies with a cash payout allowed lower-class Iranians—including laborers and peasants and especially those living in rural areas—to gain vital income.[49]

Before the election, the gradual cuts to subsidies had prompted spontaneous but small riots in October 2007, in which mainly lower-middle-class protestors set fire to dozens of gas stations and vandalized a few state buildings in big cities. The same did not happen in smaller cities or rural areas, where the policy was popular. After the Green Movement had been suppressed, Ahmadinejad phased out "price subsidies for all staple commodities"—not only electricity and gasoline, but also water and bread.[50]

Similarly, Ahmadinejad "privatized" state enterprises in a manner designed to permit maximum corruption while preserving actual state control and preventing efficiency improvements by private actors. The administration's mismanagement, as well as the country's larger patronage system, prompted the sale of state companies to semi-state or military organizations, enabling the eventual militarization of the economy.[51] The practical impact of such policies was to apportion some money to Ahmadinejad's

populist base, much to his cronies, and to generally forsake the middle class.

The imposition of international sanctions in June and July 2010, exacerbated by the regime's mismanagement and corruption, significantly widened inequality by the end of the Ahmadinejad era, pushing most of the middle class toward poverty. Indeed, in 2013 "40% of Iranians were below the international poverty line, almost double the proportion of eight years ago."[52]

CRY OF THE "DOWNTRODDEN" IN THE ROUHANI YEARS, 2013–PRESENT

Devastated by economic sanctions and Ahmadinejad's mismanagement, Iranians voted in 2013 for Hassan Rouhani, a comparatively less ideological, more pragmatic politician. Rouhani came to power promising to lift nuclear sanctions through negotiations with the West, to rebuild the national economy, and to normalize Iran's foreign policy.

The 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal with Iran is known, allowed billions of dollars to flow into the Iranian system through relaxed sanctions. Yet despite these stirrings of change,[53] Rouhani could not control Iran's "deep state"—comprising the Office of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC—which held the last word on Iran's strategic decisionmaking. Ayatollah Khamenei forbade the Rouhani administration from conducting any future negotiations with U.S. officials and squelched hopes for a broader rapprochement between Tehran and Washington. Hardliners also pushed for stricter socio-cultural policies, such as morality policing, spurring middle-class disappointment with the Rouhani government.

During Rouhani's second term, which began in August 2017, the administration's economic policies have led to greater inequality and rapid inflation. Like the economic policies of Rafsanjani, his mentor, Rouhani's policies are based on a top-down approach focused on commerce and aimed at allowing Iran's reentry into the global economic system. Furthermore, whereas Rouhani has generally sought to reduce inflation, the JCPOA complicated these plans, producing a surge of liquidity into Iran's economy. Rising inflation dealt a blow to the middle class, shrinking its ranks and increasing poverty.[54] Many who could not make their rent payments have moved from central big-city neighborhoods to outlying areas and poor suburbs. In the other direction, migration from villages to big-city outskirts has increased, a product of pervasive unemployment and environmental degradation, including pollution and drought.[55] Major social and political threats to the Islamic Republic emerged from the rise in rural migration to shantytowns and poor suburbs.[56]

The increasing numbers of "*hashi-ye nishinan*" (slum dwellers living in often-illegal settlements) has prompted IRGC fears that future unrest would "arise in smaller cities and in marginalized areas due to livelihood issues and the vulnerability of the working class," according to Gen. Nasser Shabani, then deputy commander of the Sarallah headquarters.[57] Residents of these areas are shaped by what the Iranian-American political sociologist Asef Bayat calls "spatial solidarity"—a term coined originally by the French geographer Bernard Hourcade—since they share common property and its associated needs.[58]

Threatened by the expansion of shantytowns, the IRGC initiated a plan in 2016 called Shahid Borunsi, named for a construction worker who died during the Iran-Iraq War and became a national icon.[59] The plan was aimed at maintaining public security in metropolitan areas, preventing the transformation of social problems into security issues, and improving the cultural and civic space in urban outskirts. Since the plan's inception, the IRGC has received a separate budget line to implement it, while creating headquarters in cities such as Tehran, Mashhad, Shiraz, and Isfahan.

The Shahid Borunsi plan, as already intimated, has social, cultural, and security components.[60] One emphasis involves revitalization, including the renovation of shantytowns, construction of mosques and seminaries, and construction of housing for clergy so that residents can have moral-spiritual guides to whom to turn. In each mosque, officials have created a Quranic kindergarten aimed at providing children ages three to six with the grounding of an Islamic cultural-behavioral education while stemming deviation. In some cases, construction covers other basic needs, such as recreation and sporting facilities.[61] The IRGC has likewise distributed food in these communities.

Since 2016 in Iran—with economic pressure still building from the 2010 sanctions and relief from the JCPOA not yet being felt—rising inequality and large-scale corruption have spurred frequent protests by teachers, nurses, bus drivers, industrial and agricultural workers, students, and pensioners, who cite broken promises and unjust working conditions as a cause. Some 400 labor protests occurred in 2015, followed by nearly 350 in 2017, then spiking to 900 in 2017.[62] These demonstrations, however, were relatively small in scope and easily dispatched by the regime's security forces.

Discontent in Rouhani's Second Term

The demonstrations of December 2017 vindicated IRGC fears of disquiet in smaller cities and urban fringes. Occurring months after Rouhani's reelection, and months before U.S. president Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, the "Dey" protests—named for the Iranian month that runs from late December to late January—started in the northeastern city of Mashhad and soon spread to 88 of Iran's 434 counties.[63] Iran's interior minister, for his part, claimed the protests had reached 100 cities.[64] Many of the affected metropolises had never before experienced protests or revolts, and were perhaps seen to lack the "revolutionary" spirit embraced in other regions.[65]

Unlike the Green Movement, which was rooted in middle-class calls for political liberalization, the Dey protests consisted largely of young and educated but simultaneously poor and often unemployed Iranians complaining of the high price of basic goods and calling for social justice.[66] Iranians aggrieved in other ways soon joined along, such as those who had lost their deposits in major nonbank credit firms such as the Caspian Credit Institution. According to Interior Ministry statistics about those arrested during the Dey protests, more than 90 percent were, on average, younger than twenty-five and likely educated.[67] According to Asef Bayat, this "middle-class poor" subset of society, politically active since the 2017 protests, usually

> holds college degrees; is versed in social media, possesses knowledge of the world, and dreams of a middle-class life. But it is pushed by economic deprivation to live the life of the traditional poor in slums and squatter settlements and subsist on family support or on largely precarious and low-status jobs—as cab drivers, fruit sellers, street vendors, or salespeople. A member of the middle-class poor frequents the city centers but lives on the periphery.[68]

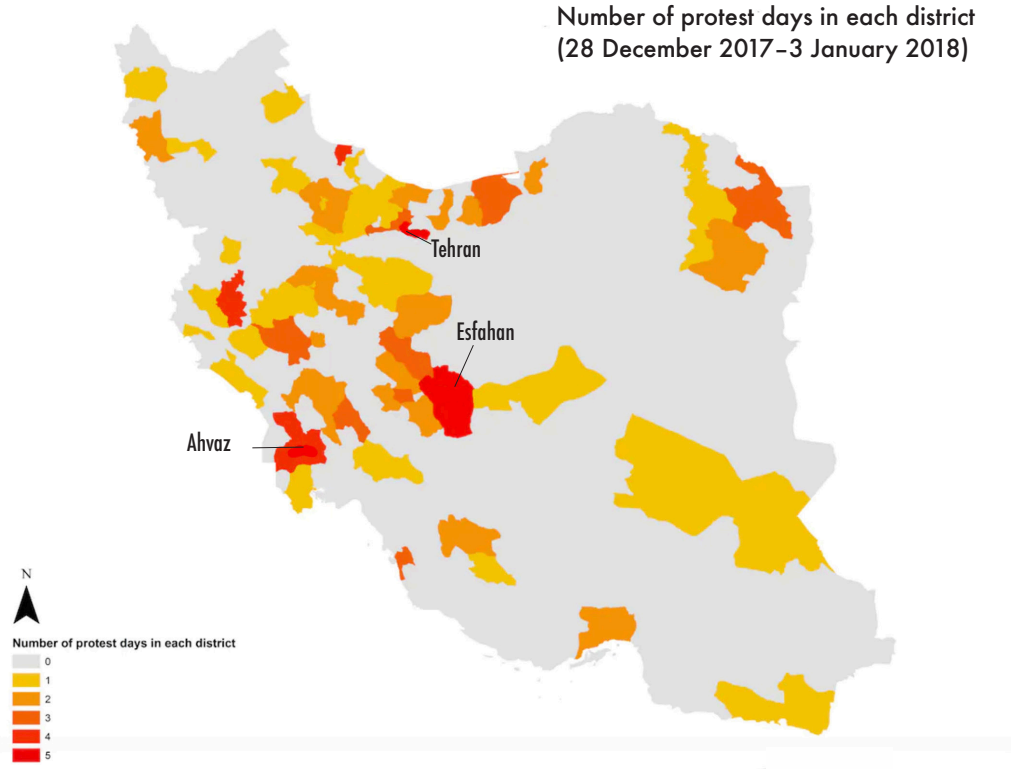
People took to the streets for many reasons, but principally based on accusations of regime incompetence and inefficacy. During the Dey protests, the slogans moved from political to economic terrain. "Where is my vote?" for example, was replaced by "No to inflation" and "Down with embezzlers!" Another slogan, this one showing a more sweeping shift in popular perceptions, went, "Reformists, hardliners, it is over for all of you."[69] First voiced during the 2017–18 protests, this assertion indicated disillusionment with the supposed duality of the hardliner-reformist dynamic, instead grouping them as two sides of the same coin.

According to a study by the Iranian sociologists Hamid Reza Jalaeipour and Abolfazl Hajizadegan, the protests held in thirty-seven cities were violent, mostly in Isfahan, Khuzestan, and Lorestan provinces, while Yazd, Ardabil, and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad provinces saw almost no violent protests. In fact, a correlation was observed between a city's population and the level of violence carried out by protestors.[70]

Unlike the 2009 Green Movement, which was supported mainly by reformists, the 2017–18 demonstrators projected a more nihilistic view regarding the supposed distinction between moderates and hardliners. In their assessment, the possibility of change was little more than illusory in the current system. Moreover, continued misery under Rouhani, along with his administration's inability to challenge hardliner stances and pervasive corruption, deeply disappointed the Iranian people, especially Rouhani's base of youth, women, and the urban middle class.[71]

In other areas too, such as disaster response, the leadership was seen as feckless, even though the Basij received training in this area. The real role of the Basij, the people know, is to mobilize swiftly to suppress mass protests. A comparison is illustrative. In November 2017, when the Iran-Iraq border region was struck by an earthquake, killing more than six hundred people, "reports suggested there were not enough helicopters to reach the mountainous region and many supplies that arrived were not distributed to the needy."[72] But in response to the 2017–18 Dey protests, airborne police forces were used for intimidation, intelligence gathering, and scattering

DISTRIBUTION OF PROTESTS, 2017–18



Source: Peyman Asadzade, "New Data Shed Light on the Dramatic Protests in Iran," *Washington Post*, January 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/12/what-data-show-us-about-irans-protests/. The map, used with Asadzade's permission, is derived from his personal data set from Persian sources.

of protestors. The police easily put down the protests, resulting in at least twenty-five deaths in the streets, overwhelmingly among protestors, and 3,700 arrests.[73] According to some reports, certain detainees even committed suicide as a result of the torture to which they were later subjected, including Sina Qanbari at Evin Prison and Vahid Heydari at Arak Prison.[74]

In December 2017, moreover, Iranian riot police were better organized, trained, and equipped than they were in 2009, especially in big cities, where they had long practiced anti-riot missions and were presumably more self-confident. This preparedness reduced the risk of overreaction and escalating of grievances through excessive force. In contrast, small cities overseen by ordinary police and provincial-level conscripts experienced a lower level of professionalism and often more casualties. Conscript police, an unfamiliar concept in the West, make up about 50 percent of the Iranian force, with some serving as officers.[75] The effective police response in 2017–18, meanwhile, also obviated the use of Basij and IRGC personnel, a sharp departure from 2009, when those forces were deployed in high numbers.

Apparently undeterred by the harsh response to the Dey events, demonstrators carried out "more than 4,200 protests...throughout Iran in the next two years...2018–2019, in which different groups of Iranians, from shopkeepers, to students, to truckers protested the deterioration of economic conditions, environmental degradation, and political and social grievances."[76] Economic grievances were apparently behind some 72 percent of these protests. Yet because the demonstrations were small in scale, NAJA and its special units put them down and maintained domestic public order without turning to other security forces such as the Basij.

The U.S. economic sanctions reinstated after President Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear deal, compounded by massive regime corruption and mismanagement, led to Tehran's decision to further cut subsidies in November 2019, leading to a threefold rise in gas prices.[77] Frustrated by the regime's economic performance, "hundreds of thousands of people came onto the streets protesting not only against the rapid rise of petrol [costs] but the desperate economic and political conditions in the country."[78]

The ensuing protest movement, which spread quickly across the country following the subsidy announcement, was the farthest-reaching ever in post-revolutionary Iran. As in the 2017–18 precedent, the November 2019 unrest happened in small cities and historically quiet provinces. According to IRGC political director Gen. Yadollah Javani, twenty-nine of Iran's thirty-one provinces saw protests, with major clashes occurring between demonstrators and security personnel in ten of them.[79] Ebrahim Hajiani, an official at Iran's Center for Strategic Studies, which is linked to the president's office, estimated that one hundred cities grappled with protests that November.[80] Distinct from previous rounds, the border provinces of Khuzestan and Kurdistan—dominated by Iranian Arabs and Kurds, respectively—experienced widespread protests in November 2019. Furthermore, compared to 2017–18, the 2019 unrest saw a broader range of participants, although the majority could be described as young, poor, or laborers.

According to Iranian economist Mohsen Ranani, laborers—who number about 17 million, 12 million of them on the books—have seen more deprivation than any other group in the four decades of the Islamic Republic.[81] Known as *mostazafan* ("oppressed," "downtrodden"), this population has historically been the main social base of the clerical regime, yet they have now begun to revolt. Disenfranchised, angry, unemployed, and hopeless, they have been labeled by some scholars as the "precarious" class.[82] This outcome is no doubt attributable to regime policies that isolated the country and resulted in international sanctions that brought about widespread deprivation and suffering.

Two important shifts point to a fundamental difference between the 2019 movement and its predecessors: radicalization and secularization. The radicalization part can be tied to the new social element of the protests. As two Iranian scholars explain, "There is an increasing sense of radicalization among protesters... [which]...could be the result of the political cul-de-sac which stems from hopelessness over the prospects for meaningful change, either through reform and a democratic transition, or else by economic progress."[83] The earlier-noted popular rejection of a reformist/hardliner distinction further signals the radical turn, visible in the 2017–18 uprising as well as the 2019 one. Demonstrators have gone so far as to call for revolution, chanting, "No reforms, no referendum, just strikes and revolution" and "This is your last month [Khamenei], it is time to go."[84]

The targeting in these chants of the Supreme Leader, rather than dictators more generically, marked a sharp change. Calls of "Death to Khamenei" and "The Supreme Leader lives like a God. We, the people, live like beggars" no doubt caught the leadership's attention. The IRGC also drew fire as the state's central repressive agent, embodied in slogans such as "The IRGC commits murders, and the Supreme Leader supports it." Such statements reflected the widely held view that IRGC generals and the clerical establishment have looted the national coffers, thereby increasing the unhappiness of ordinary citizens. In one index measuring the comparative misery of national populations, Iran ranked third.[85]

Secularization constitutes the second significant trend between the Green Movement and the more recent protests. Whereas the calls from 2009 had a largely religious cast—e.g., "Allahu Akbar," or "O Hussein" (referring to the third Shia Imam) followed by "Mir Hossein" (referring to Mousavi)[86]—rhetoric beginning in 2017 acquired an anticlerical, antireligious hue. "Clerics, get lost" was one notable example.[87] Another indicator of secularization, evident especially in 2019, was the targeting of seminaries as well as banks—many of them affiliated with the IRGC and regime elites—and Basij and police stations.[88]

Protestors have also lately voiced their disdain for Iran's foreign adventurism. Refrains include "Not Gaza, not Lebanon, I give my life for Iran!" and "We sacrifice our lives for Iran!" In addition, chants of "Death to the dictator!" and "Death to the Islamic Republic!" have been accompanied by restorationist language surrounding the Pahlavi monarchy, which ruled prior to the 1979 revolution. Some have sought to bless Reza Shah's soul for undermining the clerical establishment during his tenure.[89]

The speed with which the 2019 protests spread, along with the involvement of groups from border regions, elicited a harsh regime response. According to Iran's interior minister, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, some 200–225 individuals were killed in November. Mojtaba Zolnour, who chairs the Majlis's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee and formerly served as Khamenei's IRGC representative, claimed a similar figure: 230 people dead in mid-November, among them 178 civilians and 52 security personnel.[90] Unofficial counts, however, were quite a bit higher, with Amnesty International able to identify 304 fatalities, including children, and Reuters citing 1,500.[91] The number of arrests remains unclear, but a report by Radio Farda mentioned at least 8,600 arrests in November.[92]

According to Mohammad Fazeli, an Iranian sociology professor, most of those arrested since the 2019 uprising live in shantytowns and hold no more than a high school diploma.[93] While the regime tagged these individuals as *arazel obash* ("thugs"), scholars have called them "excluded"[94] or "precariat."[95] According to the Iranian Students Polling Association—which is allowed to publish only a summary of its results, omitting details that might appear damaging to the regime—their main grievances are economic, including inflation, high prices, unemployment, and corruption. In the same survey, 73 percent of those interviewed cited protest as their only possible course of action.[96] The heavy brutality of the regime

Tehran residents pass a burned bank, a casualty of the 2019 unrest. Image credit: Reuters

crackdown, meanwhile, is reflected in Amnesty International's finding of a "shoot to kill" order granted to security forces. Most of those killed were shot in the head or chest.[97] In 2009, by contrast, the aim had been to suffocate the protests gradually.

To further suppress the protests, in 2019 the regime for the first time completely shut down global Internet access for about a week. This marked an intensification from previous measures taken in 2009 and 2017–18, which involved mainly slowing global connection speeds. With the full-on restriction, Iranian citizens had access to only a domestic network, which, for example, allowed key services such as ATMs to keep functioning.

The far-reaching geographic scope of the 2019 protests compelled the regime to call in Basij militia forces, as well as IRGC Ground Forces, to back up police. The Guard worked in particular to suppress demonstrations in the southwestern city of Mahshahr, Khuzestan province, where, "according to witnesses and medical personnel," the force shot between forty and one hundred unarmed demonstrators.[98] For the first time in its history, the regime used the IRGC-GF for an anti-riot mission, despite its utter lack of training in this area, indicating a high level of concern for its survival.

These concerns were amplified by the regional and international context. Regionally, massive, youth-led anti-government protests in Iraq and Lebanon homed in on mismanagement, corruption, and the extent of Islamic Republic interference in these countries' domestic politics. For its part, Tehran perceived such protests to stem from a regional plot to undermine

fellow Shia and allied countries[99]—and likewise saw the 2019 protests as the continuation of a Western plot seeking regime change.[100] Internationally, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran, embodied in its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and imposition of economic sanctions, was also seen by the regime as a plot ultimately aimed at overthrowing it.

As in the aftermath of previous flare-ups, after 2019 the regime once again strengthened its security forces and invested in suppression technologies to prepare for the future resurgence it believes will come. New IRGC measures have included neighborhood patrols as well as "strike teams" in the big cities of Tehran and Khuzestan provinces.[101]

IRAN IN 2020 AND AFTER

Several months after the November 2019 protests had been stymied, another wave surged in cities including Behbahan—in Khuzestan province—and Shiraz.[102] In Behbahan, in July 2020, protestors focused on economic hardship and the regime's fumbled response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Familiar chants sounded: "We don't want a clerical regime." "Clerics, get lost." "Not Gaza, not Lebanon, I give my life for Iran." Although far more localized than the earlier iteration, this resurgence indicated that Iran remained combustible.

Even some conservative and religious Iranians were becoming more outspoken amid the fragile national situation. For many, extensive material insecurity had spawned a pathological mindset that haunted their daily lives.[103] One sociologist described an Iranian scene filled with *chiz bakhtegan naomid* (roughly, hopeless and disappointed citizens), in which everyone has lost something: the middle class, the option to enjoy a modern lifestyle; the poor, any opportunity to achieve economic prosperity; and different losses for other groups.[104]

The regime was already plagued by mismanagement and corruption before the Trump administration reimposed crippling sanctions following its withdrawal from the nuclear deal. A steep drop in oil prices ensued, along with the swift spread in early 2020 of the novel coronavirus. By early summer 2020, Iran's oil exports had fallen to a mere 100,000–200,000 barrels per day, from 2.5 million bpd in April 2018, the month before Washington walked away from the deal.[105] Meanwhile, the pandemic has hobbled Iran's service sector, which previously accounted for more than 40 percent of the national economy.

Adding to these economic concerns, Iran is experiencing a worsening of existing stagnation, created by a mix of recession and high inflation. The inflation is generated by Iran's typical short-term remedy for its economic woes: increased liquidity through the printing of more money. By around mid-2020, Iran's liquidity had been doubled, according to prominent Iranian economist Masoud Nili.[106]

Regime elites across the political spectrum perceive a threat in these economic trends—namely, that of future mass protests. For example, Ahmad Naderi, a hardline parliamentarian, warned that a Covid-induced collapse of the Iranian stock market would trigger "riots bigger than 2017 and 2019, and certainly bigger than in the last decade."[107] Similarly, former president Mohammad Khatami voiced alarm that any future "cycle of violence" spurred by protests would be more "intense" than in the past.[108] More important still, the news site Asr Iran published an op-ed about the dangers of Iran becoming like Lebanon after the August 4, 2020, Beirut blast. Dissatisfaction among Iranians, the article contended, had already reached unprecedented levels. Under IRGC pressure, this op-ed was removed two hours after its appearance.[109]

To neutralize the specter of mass uprising and its untenable consequences, the regime has adopted a twin strategy. The first component involves addressing instability in the working class by creating an ad hoc

welfare central command, known as the Imam Hassan Headquarters. This office is designed to effectively buy the loyalty of Iran's most vulnerable social groups by providing them with basic goods.[110] While such initiatives can temporarily improve conditions for the poor, they are insufficient in the longer term, given the increasing number of Iranians suffering economic hardship and the regime's shrinking funds. Iran's Islamic Parliament Research Center has warned that as many as 57 million Iranians could fall below the poverty line in 2020.[111]

The second component of the regime's playbook, and a more effective tactic for preventing possible mass unrest, is intensified suppression and the heightening of societal fears. As a first step, in June 2020 Brig. Gen. Hossein Nejat was tapped to replace Brig. Gen. Esmail Kowsari as head of the Sarallah headquarters. Nejat, who has identified Iran's urban poor as the topmost threat to the regime, has since set to work preparing Tehran elites for a battle with these "modern shantytown dwellers," who are unemployed, crushed by economic hardship, and increasingly informed by social media. Nejat has described this class as "illiterate people, who live in slums or the outskirts of big cities, hashi-ye neshinan whose minds are polluted by the cyberspace."[112] Labeling the phenomenon economic "sedition," the loyalist IRGC has initiated plans to quell any possible unrest resulting from economic difficulty.

The IRGC has, in turn, started preparing the Basij both mentally and physically for the next round of unrest. Attention has focused on specialized training and joint drills, as well as enhanced anti-riot tactics and added propaganda sessions (called "bastirt," or political vision) aimed at justifying the suppression of the poor. According to a Twitter account sympathetic to former president Ahmadinejad, an IRGC commander with an official uniform and vehicle visited a mosque to "prepare Basij members for suppressing of next widespread protests."[113] Another tweet, by an ex-IRGC security figure now living in exile, stated that managers of all civic buildings, such as municipal headquarters and electricity and water departments—especially on big-city outskirts—have been asked to prepare for possible riots. For example, officials have been encouraged to build taller perimeter protection walls, as high as three meters.[114] Meanwhile, by using its economic "sedition" hashtag, IRGC propaganda has sought to undermine the unity of possible protests and justify the prospective suppression of disadvantaged and poor people. Furthermore, the Guard has moved to break civil society networks that could lend vocal support to protestors. This course has entailed closing down even apolitical organizations, such as the Imam Ali anti-poverty organization. Indeed, the IRGC has sent the message that it will not tolerate any large independent organizations, even charities.[115]

Amplifying fear constitutes the last component of the IRGC's plan to render itself "uprising-proof." Death penalty sentences handed down to youth protestors involved in the last round, as recommended by the IRGC security and intelligence organizations, highlight the judiciary's role in this campaign. The police, for their part, have engaged in the unusual practice of rotating "experienced nonlocal provincial commanders to mitigate the risk that the commanders will sympathize with future protests."[116] The police have also taken steps to acquire new weapons and surveillance technology.

BREAKING THE CHAINS

Despite the possibility of near-term future protests, such an outcome is by no means foreordained, nor can one assume it would bring down the regime. Conversely, although the Islamic Republic has invested massively in its security and coercive

infrastructure and has successfully suppressed all political protests until now, this track record does not guarantee its future success in putting down a potential uprising, or even its future survival. As this study has shown, fears over stability will compel the regime to invest more and more in its suppression machinery, but paradoxically such moves will prompt greater discontent and resentment among the Iranian people. Moreover, international sanctions have weakened the regime's capacity to counter wide-scale protests. Exhaustion of security forces is a distinct possibility should future unrest spread throughout the country and drag on.

In addition to the extent of future protests, their timing and circumstances could affect regime prospects. For example, a power vacuum immediately following the demise of Supreme Leader Khamenei, who is eighty-one, might not only motivate the restive masses but undermine the morale of security forces, especially given a regime that bases its fervor on Khamenei's personal leadership. Competition between different factions fighting for survival and preeminence could create momentum for change.

History teaches that almost all dictators seem indomitable until they fall. No authoritarian regime, even an "ideocratic" or totalitarian one, will survive forever.[117] While some have been overthrown through foreign intervention, such as Nazi Germany and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, others have been ousted by military or palace coups (e.g., in Syria in 1970, Qatar in 1995) and still others toppled by revolution (Tunisia and Egypt in 2010–11).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has encountered increasing numbers of protests, and these protests have grown in size, scale, and violence. In response, the regime, following the guidance of the IRGC and other security and military leaders, has become more repressive and closed off. Coercion and repression have indeed become central tools for regime survival. But this approach has undermined Tehran's legitimacy and its ability to coopt various classes of society.

To subvert the regime's coercive apparatus, the next U.S. administration, along with its partners and allies, should focus on weakening Tehran's security capacity and its corresponding desire to suppress the Iranian people. To this end, any act of suppression or violation of human rights should be addressed and denounced strongly, with the U.S. 2012 Magnitsky Act, covering the Russia context, serving as a rough guidepost. In turn, Western actors should apply sanctions to individuals involved in human rights offenses. This not only puts the West on the side of the people; it also signals to Iranian elites that the West is not seeking retribution against *all* of them, but only against the worst perpetrators. Western actors should finally pursue measures to prevent Tehran from acquiring the latest technologies used for suppression. This includes sanctions encompassing facial recognition technology, which can be used to track dissidents and their activities. ❖

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