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# Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options

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# Summary

Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the United States and Iran have been at odds, although to varying degrees of intensity. During the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. officials identified Iran's support for militant Middle East groups as the primary threat posed by Iran to U.S. interests and allies. Iran's nuclear program took precedence in U.S. policy after 2002 as the potential for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon increased. In 2010, the Obama Administration orchestrated broad international economic pressure on Iran to persuade it to agree to strict limits on the program. The pressure contributed to the June 2013 election of the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran and the July 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement—the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" (JCPOA). That agreement exchanged sanctions relief for limits on Iran's nuclear program, but did not contain binding limits on Iran's ballistic missile program or any curbs on its regional influence or its human rights abuses.

The Trump Administration cited these deficiencies of the JCPOA in its May 8, 2018, announcement that the United States would exit the JCPOA and re-impose all U.S. secondary sanctions by November 4, 2018. The stated intent of Trump Administration policy is to apply maximum economic pressure on Iran to compel it to change its behavior on the various issues of concern to the United States, particularly its support for pro-Iranian regimes and armed factions. The U.S. exit from the JCPOA has raised concerns about the potential for U.S.-Iran tensions to escalate to the point of direct or indirect armed conflict. On August 16, 2018, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced formation of an "Iran Action Group" to coordinate all aspects of State Department activity on Iran. In September 2018, the Iran Action Group issued a report, entitled *Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities* that accused Iran of a long litany of objectionable behaviors. President Trump has indicated a willingness to meet with Iranian leaders, but the Administration has demanded that Iran reverse virtually all its current policies as a condition for any broader improvement in relations.

Some experts assert that the threat posed by Iran stems from the nature and ideology of Iran's regime, and that the underlying, if unstated, goal of Trump Administration policy is to bring about regime collapse. A regime change strategy presumably would take advantage of divisions and fissures within Iran, as well as evident popular unrest. Hassan Rouhani, who seeks to improve Iran's relations with the West, including the United States, won successive presidential elections in 2013 and 2017, and reformist and moderate candidates won overwhelmingly in concurrent municipal council elections in all the major cities. But hardliners continue to control the state institutions that maintain internal security in large part through suppression. In part as a response to repression as well as economic conditions, unrest erupts periodically, most recently during December 2017-January 2018, and sporadically since then.

See also CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit*, by Paul K. Kerr and Kenneth Katzman; CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman; and CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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# Political History

Iran is a country of nearly 80 million people, located in the heart of the Persian Gulf region. The United States was an ally of the late Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ("the Shah"), who ruled from 1941 until his ouster in February 1979. The Shah assumed the throne when Britain and Russia forced his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi (Reza Shah), from power because of his perceived alignment with Germany in World War II. Reza Shah had assumed power in 1921 when, as an officer in Iran's only military force, the Cossack Brigade (reflecting Russian influence in Iran in the early 20th century), he launched a coup against the government of the Qajar royal family, which had ruled since 1794. Reza Shah was proclaimed Shah in 1925, founding the Pahlavi dynasty. The Qajar dynasty had been in decline for many years before Reza Shah's takeover. That dynasty's perceived manipulation by Britain and Russia had been one of the causes of the 1906 constitutionalist movement, which forced the Qajar dynasty to form Iran's first Majles (parliament) in August 1906 and promulgate a constitution in December 1906. Prior to the Qajars, what is now Iran was the center of several Persian empires and dynasties whose reach shrank steadily over time. After the 16th century, Iranian empires lost control of Bahrain (1521), Baghdad (1638), the Caucasus (1828), western Afghanistan (1857), Baluchistan (1872), and what is now Turkmenistan (1894). Iran adopted Shiite Islam under the Safavid Dynasty (1500-1722), which ended a series of Turkic and Mongol conquests.

The Shah was anti-Communist, and the United States viewed his government as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf and a counterweight to pro-Soviet Arab regimes and movements. Israel maintained a representative office in Iran during the Shah's time and the Shah supported a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute. In 1951, under pressure from nationalists in the *Majles* (parliament) who gained strength in the 1949 Majles elections, he appointed a popular nationalist parliamentarian, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, as prime minister. Mossadeq was widely considered left-leaning, and the United States was wary of his drive for nationalization of the oil industry, which had been controlled since 1913 by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. His followers began an uprising in August 1953 when the Shah tried to dismiss him, and the Shah fled. The Shah was restored to power in a CIA-supported uprising that toppled Mossadeq ("Operation Ajax") on August 19, 1953.

The Shah tried to modernize Iran and orient it toward the West, but in so doing he alienated the Shiite clergy and religious Iranians. He incurred broader resentment by using his SAVAK intelligence service to repress dissent. The Shah exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1964 because of Khomeini's active opposition to what he asserted were the Shah's anticlerical policies and forfeiture of Iran's sovereignty to the United States. Khomeini fled to and taught in Najaf, Iraq, a major Shiite theological center. In 1978, three years after the March 6, 1975, Algiers Accords between the Shah and Iraq's Baathist leaders that temporarily ended mutual hostile actions, Iraq expelled Khomeini to France, where he continued to agitate for revolution that would establish Islamic government in Iran. Mass demonstrations and guerrilla activity by pro-Khomeini forces caused the Shah's government to collapse. Khomeini returned from France on February 1, 1979, and, on February 11, 1979, he declared an Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e-faqih* (rule by a supreme Islamic jurisprudent, or "Supreme Leader") was enshrined in the constitution that was adopted in a public referendum in December 1979 (and amended in 1989). The constitution provided for the post of Supreme Leader of the Revolution. The regime based itself on strong opposition to Western influence, and relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic turned openly hostile after the November 4, 1979, seizure of the U.S. Embassy and its U.S. diplomats by pro-Khomeini radicals, which began

the so-called hostage crisis that ended in January 1981 with the release of the hostages.[1] Ayatollah Khomeini died on June 3, 1989, and was succeeded by Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i.

The regime faced serious unrest in its first few years, including a June 1981 bombing at the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) and the prime minister's office that killed several senior elected and clerical leaders, including then-Prime Minister Javad Bahonar, elected President Ali Raja'i, and IRP head and top Khomeini disciple Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Beheshti. The regime used these events, along with the hostage crisis with the United States, to justify purging many of the secular, liberal, and left-wing personalities that had been prominent in the years just after the revolution. Examples included the regime's first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan; the pro-Moscow Tudeh Party (Communist); the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI, see below); and the first elected president, Abolhassan Bani Sadr. The regime was under economic and military threat during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, which at times nearly halted Iran's oil exports. Since that war, Iran has not faced severe external military threats but domestic political rifts have continued.

# Regime Structure, Stability, and Opposition

Some experts attribute the acrimony that has characterized U.S.-Iran relations since the Islamic revolution to the structure of Iran's regime. Although there are some elected leadership posts and diversity of opinion, Iran's constitution—adopted in public referenda in 1980 and again in 1989—reserves paramount decisionmaking authority for a "Supreme Leader" (known formally in Iran as "Leader of the Revolution"). The President and the *Majles* (unicameral parliament) are directly elected, and since 2013, there have been elections for municipal councils that set local development priorities and select mayors.

Even within the unelected institutions, factional disputes between those who insist on ideological purity and those considered more pragmatic are evident. In part because of the preponderant political power of the clerics and the security services, the regime has faced repeated periodic unrest from minorities, intellectuals, students, labor groups, the poor, women, and members of Iran's minority groups. (Iran's demographics are depicted in a text box below.)

U.S. officials in successive Administrations have accused Iran's regime of widespread corruption, both within the government and among its pillars of support. In a speech on Iran on July 22, 2018, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo characterized Iran's government as "something that resembles the mafia more than a government." He detailed allegations of the abuse of privileges enjoyed by Iran's leaders and supporting elites to enrich themselves and their supporters at the expense of the public good.[2] The State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report (p. 41) states that "corruption and mismanagement at the highest levels of the Iranian regime have produced years of environmental exploitation and degradation throughout the country."

[1] The U.S. Embassy hostages are to be compensated for their detention in Iran from proceeds received from various banks to settle allegations of concealing financial transactions on behalf of Iranian clients, under a provision of the FY2016 Consolidated Appropriation.

[2] Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. "Supporting Iranian Voices." Reagan Library, July 22, 2018.

**Supreme Leader:**
**Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i**

Born in July 1939 to an Azeri (Turkic) family from the northern city of Mashhad. Was jailed by the Shah of Iran for supporting Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution. After the regime took power in 1979, helped organize Revolutionary Guard and other security organs. Lost some use of right arm in purported assassination attempt in June 1981. Was elected president in 1981 and served until 1989. Was selected Khomeini's successor in June 1989. Upon that selection, Khamene'i's religious ranking was advanced in official organs to "Grand Ayatollah" from the lower-ranking "Hojjat ol-Islam." Still lacks the undisputed authority to end factional disputes and the public adoration Khomeini had. Has taken more of a day-to-day role since the 2009 uprising, including establishing strict parameters for Iran's nuclear negotiating team during the JCPOA talks. As to Khamene'i's health situation, the government acknowledged that he underwent prostate surgery in September 2014 but Khamene'i has since appeared in public regularly, including occasionally performing light physical tasks. Has not traveled outside Iran since becoming Supreme Leader. Lives in the Pasteur district of Tehran, named after French biologist Louis Pasteur.

**Policies**

Throughout career, has consistently taken hardline stances on regional issues, particularly toward Israel, repeatedly calling it a "cancerous tumor" that needs to be excised from the region. In March 2014, publicly questioned whether the Holocaust occurred—an issue highlighted by former president Ahmadinejad. He is widely believed to fear direct military confrontation with United States on Iranian soil. He meets with few Western officials and is avowedly suspicious of relations with the West, particularly the United States, as potentially making Iran vulnerable to Western cultural influence, spying, and possible regime destabilization efforts. Largely bowing to public opinion, Khamene'i acquiesced to the election in 2013 of the relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who favors opening to the West. Khamene'i did not oppose the JCPOA, paving the way for its adoption by the *Majles* and the Council of Guardians. In 2016, he accused the United States of not implementing JCPOA-related sanctions relief fully and thereby deterring foreign firms from returning to Iran. Earlier, he reputedly issued religious proclamation (2003) against Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, and has publicly (2012) called doing so a "sin." He fully backs efforts by Revolutionary Guard and other Iranian organs to support regional pro-Iranian movements and governments. Earlier in his career, Khamene'i tended to support the business community (bazaaris), and opposed state control of the economy, but as Supreme Leader he has asserted that officials, including Rouhani, need to promote a self-sufficient economy that can withstand the effects of international sanctions ("resistance economy"). Attributed late 2017-early 2018 unrest to meddling by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, but also acknowledged that protesters had legitimate grievances.

Khamene'i's office is run by Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, with significant input from Khamene'i's second and increasingly influential son, Mojtaba. Khamene'I is advised formally by the Expediency Council, and informally by *Keyhan* editor Hossein Shariatmadari and numerous other current and former officials, clerics, and other notables.

Photograph from http://www.leader.ir.

## Unelected or Indirectly Elected Institutions: The Supreme Leader, Council of Guardians, and Expediency Council

Iran's power structure consists of unelected or indirectly elected persons and institutions.

### The Supreme Leader

At the apex of the Islamic Republic's power structure is the "Supreme Leader." He is required to be a senior cleric and is chosen by an elected body—the Assembly of Experts—which also has the constitutional power to remove him, as well as to rewrite Iran's constitution (subject to approval in a national referendum). Upon Ayatollah Khomeini's death, the Assembly selected one of his disciples, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, as Supreme Leader.[3] Although he has never had Khomeini's undisputed political or religious authority, the powers of the office ensure that Khamene'i is Iran's paramount leader. Under the constitution, the Supreme Leader is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, giving him the power to appoint commanders.

Khamene'i makes five out of the nine appointments to the country's highest national security body, the *Supreme National Security Council (SNSC),* including its top official, the secretary of the body. Khamene'i also has a representative of his office as one of the nine members, who typically are members of the regime's top military, foreign policy, and domestic security organizations. The Supreme Leader can remove an elected president, if the judiciary or the *Majles* (parliament) assert cause for removal. The Supreme Leader appoints half of the 12-member *Council of Guardians*, all members of the *Expediency Council*, and the judiciary head.

#### *Succession to Khamene'i*

There is no announced consensus choice to succeed Khamene'i. The Assembly of Experts could conceivably use a constitutional provision to set up a three-person leadership council rather than select one person as a new Supreme Leader. Khamene'i reportedly favors as his successor Ibrahim Raisi, who Khamene'i appointed in 2016 to head the powerful Shrine of Imam Reza (Astan-e Qods Razavi) in Mashhad, which controls vast property and many businesses in the province. Raisi is a hardliner who has served as state prosecutor and was allegedly involved in the 1988 massacre of prisoners and other acts of repression.[4] However, the Assembly would not necessarily take his preferences into account after his passing, and Raisi's chances of achieving that post might have been diminished by Raisi's election defeat in the May 19, 2017, presidential elections. Yet, as further indication of Khamene'i's support for him, in March 2019, the Supreme Leader named Raisi as the next head of the judiciary, replacing Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, who has been widely named as a possible succession candidate. Another contender is hardline Tehran Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Ahmad Khatemi, and some consider President Rouhani as a significant contender as well. The succession chances of another potential candidate, hardline senior cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, were likely reduced by his loss of an Assembly of Experts seat in the February 2016 elections.

Two possible successors have passed away in the past few years, Former judiciary chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi, who was appointed in August 2017 to head the Expediency Council, died in late 2018. The January 2017 death of regime stalwart Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani

[3] At the time of his selection as Supreme Leader, Khamene'i was generally referred to at the rank of Hojjat ol-Islam, one rank below Ayatollah, suggesting his religious elevation was political rather than through traditional mechanisms.

[4] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/irans-likely-next-supreme-leader-is-no-friend-of-the-west/2016/09/26/eb3becc0-79fb-11e6-bd86-b7bbd53d2b5d_story.html?utm_term=.e6499d61d0be.

removed from contention the one potential successor who was a constant presence at Ayatollah Khomeini's side in the 1979 revolution. Rafsanjani was *Majles* speaker during 1981-1989 and president 1989-1997, and his family owns a large share of Iran's total pistachio production, which enabled him to patronize many key Iranian players. Rafsanjani's ouster as Assembly of Experts chairman in 2011 and the denial of his candidacy in the 2013 presidential elections were widely attributed to his tacit support of the 2009 protest movement and to the political activities of his children.

## Council of Guardians and Expediency Council

Two appointed councils play a major role on legislation, election candidate vetting, and policy.

### *Council of Guardians*

The 12-member Council of Guardians (COG) consists of six Islamic jurists appointed by the Supreme Leader and six lawyers selected by the judiciary and confirmed by the *Majles*. Each councilor serves a six-year term, staggered such that half the body turns over every three years. Currently headed by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the conservative-controlled body reviews legislation to ensure it conforms to Islamic law. It also vets election candidates by evaluating their backgrounds according to constitutional requirements that each candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islam, loyalty to the Islamic system of government, and other criteria that are largely subjective. The COG also certifies election results. Municipal council candidates are vetted not by the COG but by local committees established by the *Majles*.

### *Expediency Council*

The Expediency Council was established in 1988 to resolve legislative disagreements between the *Majles* and the COG. It has since evolved into primarily a policy advisory body for the Supreme Leader. Its members serve five-year terms. Longtime regime stalwart Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani was reappointed as its chairman in February 2007 and served in that position until his January 2017 death. In August 2017, the Supreme Leader named a new, expanded (from 42 to 45 members) Council, with former judiciary head Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi as chairman. Shahroudi passed away in December 2018 and Sadeq Larijani, head of the judiciary, was appointed by the Supreme Leader as his replacement. The Expediency Council's executive officer is former Revolutionary Guard commander-in-chief Mohsen Reza'i. The council includes former president Ahmadinejad. President Hassan Rouhani and Majles Speaker Ali Larijani were not reappointed as Council members but attend the body's sessions in their official capacities.

**Table 1. Other Major Institutions, Factions and Individuals**

| Regime/Pro-regime | |
|---|---|
| The regime derives support from a network of organizations and institutions such as those discussed below. | |
| Senior Shiite Clerics/Grand Ayatollahs | The most senior Shiite clerics, most of whom are in Qom, are generally "quietists"—they assert that the senior clergy should generally refrain from involvement in politics, although they do speak out on political issues. The ranks of the most senior clergy include Grand Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi and Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Sanei. Secretary of State Pompeo accused Shirazi in a July 22, 2018, speech of enriching himself through illicit trading of sugar. Another senior cleric is the hardline Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, who represents the "vocal" school of the senior clergy and is an assertive defender of the powers of the Supreme Leader. He lost his Assembly of Experts seat in February 2016 elections. |
| Religious Foundations ("Bonyads") | Iran has several major religious foundations, called "*bonyads*." Examples include the Martyr's Foundation, the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, the Astan Qods Razavi Foundation (linked to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad), and the Fifteen Khordad Foundation (which offers a bounty for the implementation of Khomeini's order that *Satanic Verses* author Salman Rushdie be killed). The bonyads, controlled by clerics and their allies, control vast amounts of property and valuable businesses, some of which were built from assets left behind when the Shah and his allies fled Iran in 1979. The bonyads are loosely regulated, politically influential, and largely exempt from taxation. |
| The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) | The IRGC is a military and internal security force, and an instrument of Iran's regional policy. The IRGC is sanctioned under several U.S. Executive orders, including most recently E.O. 13224 that sanctions entities determined to be supporting acts of international terrorism. The IRGC is discussed extensively in CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman. |
| Society of Militant Clerics | Longtime organization of moderate-to-hardline clerics. Its Secretary-General is Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Movahedi-Kermani. President Rouhani is a member. |

**Sources:** Various press accounts and author conversations with Iran experts in and outside Washington, DC. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo "Supporting Iranian Voices." Reagan Library, California, July 22, 2018.

## Domestic Security Organs

The leaders and senior officials of a variety of overlapping domestic security organizations form a parallel power structure that is largely under the direct control of the Supreme Leader in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The domestic security organs include the following:

- **The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).** The IRGC is a military and security organ that is widely discussed in this and other CRS reports on Iran. Its domestic security role is generally implemented through the volunteer militia force called the *Basij* that monitors adherence to the regime's directives and compliance with the country's law and customs. It is the *Basij* that is widely accused of arresting women who violate the regime's public dress codes and raiding Western-style parties in which alcohol, which is illegal in Iran, might be served. However, IRGC bases are often located in urban areas, giving the IRGC a capability to quickly intervene to suppress large or violent anti-government demonstrations.

- **Law Enforcement Forces.** This body is an amalgam of regular police, gendarmerie, and riot police that serve throughout the country. It is the regime's first "line of defense" in suppressing anti-regime demonstrations or other unrest.
- **Ministry of Interior.** The ministry, headed by Abdolreza Fazli, exercises civilian supervision of Iran's police and domestic security forces. However, the IRGC and Basij are generally outside Ministry control.
- **Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).** Headed by Mahmoud Alavi, the MOIS conducts domestic surveillance to identify regime opponents and try to penetrate antiregime cells. The Ministry works closely with the IRGC and *Basij*.

Several of these organizations and their senior leaders or commanders are sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses and other violations of U.S. Executive Orders.

## Elected Institutions/Recent Elections

Several major institutional positions are directly elected by the population, but international observers question the credibility of Iran's elections because of the role of the COG in vetting candidates and limiting the number and ideological diversity of the candidate field. Women can vote and run for most offices, and some women serve as mayors, but the COG interprets the Iranian constitution as prohibiting women from running for the office of president. Candidates for all offices must receive more than 50% of the vote, otherwise a runoff is held several weeks later.

Another criticism of the political process in Iran is the relative absence of political parties; establishing a party requires the permission of the Interior Ministry under Article 10 of Iran's constitution. The standards to obtain approval are high: to date, numerous parties have filed for permission since the regime was founded, but only those considered loyal to the regime have been granted license to operate. Some have been licensed and then banned after their leaders opposed regime policies, such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front and Organization of Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution, discussed in the text box below.

### The Presidency

The main directly elected institution is the presidency, which is formally and in practice subordinate to the Supreme Leader. Virtually every successive president has tried but failed to expand his authority relative to the Supreme Leader. Presidential authority, particularly on matters of national security, is also often circumscribed by key clerics and the generally hardline military and security organization called the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). But, the presidency is often the most influential economic policymaking position, as well as a source of patronage. The president appoints and supervises the cabinet, develops the budgets of cabinet departments, and imposes and collects taxes on corporations and other bodies. The presidency also runs oversight bodies such as the Anticorruption Headquarters and the General Inspection Organization, to which government officials are required to submit annual financial disclosures.

Prior to 1989, Iran had both an elected president and a prime minister selected by the elected Majles (parliament). However, the holders of the two positions were constantly in institutional conflict and a 1989 constitutional revision eliminated the prime ministership. Because Iran's presidents have sometimes asserted the powers of their institution against the office of the Supreme Leader itself, in October 2011, Khamene'i raised the possibility of eventually eliminating the post of president and restoring the post of prime minister.

## The Majles

Iran's *Majles*, or parliament, is a 290-seat, all-elected, unicameral body. There are five "reserved seats" for "recognized" minority communities—Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians (three seats of the five). The *Majles* votes on each nominee to a cabinet post, and drafts and acts on legislation. Among its main duties is to consider and enact a proposed national budget (which runs from March 21 to March 20 each year, coinciding with Nowruz). It legislates on domestic economic and social issues, and tends to defer to executive and security institutions on defense and foreign policy issues. It is constitutionally required to ratify major international agreements, and it ratified the JCPOA in October 2015. The ratification was affirmed by the COG. Women regularly run and small numbers generally win election; there is no "quota" for the number of women to be elected. *Majles* elections occur one year prior to the presidential elections; the latest were held on February 26, 2016.

## The Assembly of Experts

A major but little publicized elected institution is the 88-seat *Assembly of Experts.* Akin to a standing electoral college, it is empowered to choose a new Supreme Leader upon the death of the incumbent, and it formally "oversees" the work of the Supreme Leader. The Assembly can replace him if necessary, although invoking that power would, in practice, most likely occur in the event of a severe health crisis. The Assembly is also empowered to amend the constitution. It generally meets two times a year.

Elections to the Assembly are held every 8-10 years, conducted on a provincial basis. Assembly candidates must be able to interpret Islamic law. After the fourth election for the Assembly in December 2006, Rafsanjani was named its deputy chairman. He became its chairman in September 2007, but his opposition to the crackdown on the 2009 uprising ran him afoul of the Supreme Leader and he was replaced as chair of the body in March 2011 by the aging compromise candidate Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani. After Mahdavi-Kani died in 2014 and his successor, Mohammad Yazdi, lost his seat in the Assembly of Experts election on February 26, 2016 (concurrent with the Majles elections), COG Chairman Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati was appointed concurrently as the Assembly chairman in May 2016.

## Recent Elections

Following the Rafsanjani presidency of 1989-1997, a reformist, Mohammad Khatemi, won landslide victories in 1997 and 2001. However, hardliners marginalized him by the end of his term in 2005. Aided by widespread voiding of reformist candidacies by the COG, conservatives won a slim majority of the 290 *Majles* seats in the February 20, 2004, elections. In June 2005, the COG allowed eight candidates to compete (out of the 1,014 persons who filed), including Rafsanjani,[5] Ali Larijani, IRGC stalwart Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. With reported tacit backing from Khamene'i, Ahmadinejad advanced to a runoff against Rafsanjani, and then won by a 62% to 36% vote. During Ahmadinejad's first term, splits widened between Ahmadinejad and other conservatives to the point where pro-Ahmadinejad and pro-Khamene'i conservatives competed against each other in the March 2008 *Majles* elections.

*Disputed 2009 Election*. Reformists sought to unseat Ahmadinejad in the June 12, 2009, presidential election by rallying to Mir Hossein Musavi, who served as prime minister during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and, to a lesser extent, former *Majles* speaker Mehdi Karrubi. Musavi's

[5] Rafsanjani was constitutionally permitted to run because a third term would not have been consecutive with his previous two terms. In the 2001 presidential election, the Council permitted 10 out of the 814 registered candidates.

generally young, urban supporters used social media to organize large rallies in Tehran, but pro-Ahmadinejad rallies were large as well. Turnout was about 85%. The Interior Ministry pronounced Ahmadinejad the winner (63% of the vote) only two hours after the polls closed. Supporters of Musavi, who received the second-highest total (about 35% of the vote) immediately protested the results as fraudulent because of the hasty announcement of the results—but some outside analysts said the results tracked preelection polls.[6] Large antigovernment demonstrations occurred June 13-19, 2009. Security forces killed over 100 protesters (opposition figure—Iran government figure was 27), including a 19-year-old woman, Neda Soltani, who became an icon of the uprising.

The opposition congealed into the "Green Movement of Hope and Change." Some protests in December 2009 overwhelmed regime security forces in some parts of Tehran, but the movement's activity declined after the regime successfully suppressed its demonstration on the February 11, 2010, anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic. As unrest ebbed, Ahmadinejad promoted his loyalists and a nationalist version of Islam that limits clerical authority, bringing him into conflict with Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Amid that rift, in the March 2012 Majles elections, candidates supported by Khamene'i won 75% of the seats, weakening Ahmadinejad. Since leaving office in 2013, and despite being appointed by Khamene'i to the Expediency Council, Ahmadinejad has emerged as a regime critic, perhaps as retaliation against the Supreme Leader and other hardliners that he blames for his marginalization. His following appears to be limited, and he has faced prosecutions of alleged corruption, meanwhile returning to some of his early work as a professor of civil engineering.

[6] A paper published by Chatham House and the University of St. Andrews strongly questions how Ahmadinejad's vote could have been as large as reported by official results, in light of past voting patterns throughout Iran. "Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran's 2009 Presidential Election." http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk.

## Reformist Leaders and Organizations

The figures discussed below are "reformists" who seek political freedoms but do not advocate replacement of the regime. These reformist leaders were not widely used as symbols by protestors in the December 2017-January 2018 unrest in Iran. The persons below are a small sample of political opponents to the regime; the State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report says that there are more than 800 prisoners of conscience detained in Iran.

**Mir Hossein Musavi** is the titular leader of the Green Movement, the coalition of youth and intellectuals that led the 2009-2010 uprising. A noncleric and former Khomeini aide, Musavi served as foreign minister in 1980 and as Iran's last prime minister from 1981 to 1989, at which time constitutional reforms abolished the post. An advocate of state-controlled economy, as prime minister, Musavi often feuded with Khamene'i, who was president at that time. He was arrested in 2011 for sedition and he and his wife, activist Zahra Rahnevard, remain under house arrest. Khamene'i has termed Musavi and Karrubi (below) as "seditionists" and insists that they remain confined.

**Mehdi Karrubi** is an Iranian cleric, former Majles Speaker (1989-1992, 2000-2004), and supporter of the Green Movement. Failed presidential campaigns in 2005 and 2009 led Karrubi to question the elections' validity and to support runner-up Mir Hossein Musavi's dispute over the election in 2009. Imprisoned in the 1970s for protesting the government of Mohammad Reza Shah, Karrubi became a leading politician of the Islamic left following the 1979 revolution. Karrubi shares Musavi's political views on the need for state-controlled economy and civil rights for women. In 2014, Karrubi was moved from a detention facility to house arrest. In August 2017, Karrubi challenged the regime by going on a hunger strike to demand a formal trial and a withdrawal of security forces from his home. Security forces left but remain outside his home to control visits. He reportedly is in poor health.

**Mohammad Khatemi** captured global attention for his overwhelming 1997 and 2001 presidential election victories, and his subsequent attempts to ease social and political restrictions in the country. However, hardliners marginalized him by the end of his presidency in 2005. Khatemi endorsed Musavi in the 2009 election and, following the 2009 uprising, had his travel restricted and discussion or images of him banned in Iranian media. Khatemi reportedly helped organize reformists and other pro-Rouhani candidates in the 2016 Majles elections, and Rouhani has sought to end the media ban on discussions of Khatemi.

### Proreformist Organizations

The reformists are supported by several long-standing factions that supported the regime but fell out with hardliners and have become vocal regime critics.

*National Trust* (*Etemad-e-Melli*). Opposition grouping formed by Karrubi after his defeat in the 2005 election. Some of its leaders, such as Hengameh Shahidi, have been arrested and harassed by authorities.

*Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF).* The most prominent and best organized proreform grouping, but in 2009 lost political ground to Green Movement groups. IIPF leaders include Mohammed Khatemi's brother, Mohammad Reza Khatemi (deputy speaker in the 2000-2004 Majles) and Mohsen Mirdamadi. Backed Musavi in June 2009 election, and several IIPF leaders detained and prosecuted in postelection dispute. The party was outlawed in September 2010.

*Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization (MIR*) Composed mainly of left-leaning Iranian figures who support state control of the economy, but want greater political pluralism and relaxation of rules on social behavior. A major constituency of the reformist camp. Its leader is former Heavy Industries Minister Behzad Nabavi, who supported Musavi in 2009 election and has been incarcerated for most of the time since June 2009. The organization was outlawed by the regime simultaneously with the outlawing of the IIPF, above.

*Combatant Clerics Association* The group was formed in 1988 and its name is similar to the Society of Militant Clerics, but the group is run by reformists. Leading figures include Mohammad Khatemi, former Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur, and former Prosecutor General Ali Asgar Musavi-Koiniha.

### *June 2013 Election of Rouhani*

In the June 14, 2013, presidential elections, held concurrently with municipal elections, the major candidates included the following:

- Several hardliners that included Qalibaf (see above); Khamene'i foreign policy advisor Velayati; and then-chief nuclear negotiator Seyed Jalilli.
- Former chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, a moderate and Rafsanjani ally.
- The COG denial of Rafsanjani's candidacy, which shocked many Iranians because of Rafsanjani's prominent place in the regime, as well as the candidacy of an Ahmadinejad ally.

Green Movement supporters, who were first expected to boycott the vote, mobilized behind Rouhani after regime officials stressed that they were committed to a fair election. The vote produced a 70% turnout and a first-round victory for Rouhani, garnering about 50.7% of the 36 million votes cast. Hardliners generally garnered control of municipal councils in the major cities. Most prominent in Rouhani's first term cabinet were

- Foreign Minister: Mohammad Javad Zarif, a former Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, who was assigned to serve concurrently as chief nuclear negotiator, a post traditionally held by the chairman of the Supreme National Security Council. In September 2013, Rouhani appointed senior IRGC leader and former Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani as secretary (head) of that body; Shamkhani has espoused more moderate views than his IRGC peers.
- Oil Minister: Bijan Zanganeh, who served in the same post during the Khatemi presidency and attracted significant foreign investment to the sector. He replaced Rostam Qasemi, who was associated with the corporate arm of the IRGC.
- Defense Minister: Hosein Dehgan. An IRGC stalwart, he was an early organizer of the IRGC's Lebanon contingent that evolved into the IRGC-Qods Force. He also was IRGC Air Force commander and deputy Defense Minister.
- Justice Minister: Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi. As deputy Intelligence Minister in late 1980s, he was reportedly a decisionmaker in the 1988 mass executions of Iranian prisoners. He was Interior Minister under Ahmadinejad. Proposed legislation in the 115th Congress (H.Res. 188) would condemn Iran for the massacre and urge the United Nations to fully investigate it.

**Dr. Hassan Rouhani**

Hassan Rouhani is a Hojjat ol-Islam in the Shiite clergy, one rank below Ayatollah. He was born in 1948. He holds a Ph.D. in law from Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland. Rouhani is a long-time regime stalwart who was part of Ayatollah Khomeini's circle prior to the triumph of the Islamic revolution. He is also an associate and protégé of Rafsanjani, and Rouhani's pragmatic policy approach on issues such as the nuclear issue and relations with the United States has complicated Rouhani's relations with Khamene'i. Khamene'i criticized Rouhani's economic and foreign policies during the 2017 presidential election period, appearing to seek Rouhani's defeat.

**Career Background**

Often nicknamed the "diplomat sheikh," Rouhani was chief nuclear negotiator during 2003-2005, when Iran did agree to suspend uranium enrichment. Rouhani is a longtime member of the political establishment. Then-President Rafsanjani appointed him a member of the Supreme National Security Council in 1989, and he remains on that body. He has been a member of the Assembly of Experts since 1999 (and reelected to that body in the February 2016 election), and was a member of the Majles during 1980-2000, serving twice as deputy speaker. He has also been a member of the Expediency Council since 1991. He headed the Center for Strategic Studies, a foreign policy think tank that has advised the Expediency Council and the Supreme Leader, since 1992. Although he supported the crackdown against an earlier student uprising in July 1999, during the presidency of reformist figure Mohammad Khatemi, in 2013, Rouhani campaigned on a platform of easing the Islamic Republic's social restrictions and its suppression of free expression, helping him draw support from reformists.

**Rouhani Presidency**

Rouhani has focused mainly on negotiating and institutionalizing the JCPOA and on rebuilding Iran's international and regional economic ties, but not on seeking changes in Iran's regional policies. Hardliners who opposed Iranian concessions in the JCPOA were unable to persuade Khamene'i, the *Majles*, or the COG to block the accord. Sanctions relief caused the economy to grow since sanctions were lifted, but Khamene'i's speeches in 2016 and 2017 advocating building a "resistance economy" have been widely interpreted as contradicting Rouhani's emphasis on expanding trade relations with developed world.

Rouhani has sought to promote freedom of expression and political tolerance over the objections and contrary actions by hardliners in the judiciary and the security services. In September 2016, Rouhani achieved adoption of a new "charter for citizen's rights," and he has achieved the release of some prisoners incarcerated for involvement in the 2009 uprising, including prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh. However, the judiciary and security institutions have continued to arrest and prosecute U.S.-Iran dual nationals and other dual nationals for alleged efforts to undermine the regime. And neither Mousavi or Karrubi (see above) has been released. The arrest of Rouhani's brother in July 2017 for unspecified financial misfeasance was widely viewed as a move by judicial hardliners to undermine Rouhani's authority. Managed significant public unrest in late 2017-early 2018 by restraining hardline institutions from a major crackdown and acknowledging protester economic grievances. Has also apparently prevailed on hardliners to ease enforcement of the public dress code for women. Has not succeeded, to date, in marginalizing IRGC role in Iranian economy, and has faced escalating political pressure from hardliners since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, which Rouhani negotiated.

Photograph from http://www.rouhani.ir.

## *Majles and Assembly of Experts Elections in 2016*

On February 26, 2016, Iran held concurrent elections for the *Majles* and for the Assembly of Experts. A runoff round for 68 Majles seats was held on April 29. For the Majles, 6,200 candidates were approved, including 586 female candidates. Oversight bodies invalidated the

candidacies of about 6,000, including all but 100 reformists. Still, pro-Rouhani candidates won 140 seats, close to a majority, and the number of hardliners in the body was reduced significantly. Independents, whose alignments vary by issue, hold about 50 seats. Seventeen women were elected—the largest number since the revolution. The body reelected Ali Larijani as Speaker.

For the Assembly of Experts election, 161 candidates were approved out of 800 who applied to run. Reformists and their pro-Rouhani allies succeeded in defeating for an Assembly seat at least two prominent hardliners—current Assembly Chairman Mohammad Yazdi and Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi. COG head Ayatollah Jannati retained his seat, but came in last for the 30 seats elected from Tehran Province. He was subsequently named chairman of the body.

### *Presidential Election on May 19, 2017*

In the latest presidential election on May 19, 2017, Rouhani won a first-round victory with about 57% of the vote. He defeated a major figure, Hojjat ol-Eslam Ibrahim Raisi—a close ally of Khamene'i appointed by him in 2016 to head the large Astan-e-Qods Razavi Foundation. Even though other major hardliners had dropped out of the race to improve Raisi's chances of winning, Raisi received only about 38% of the vote.

Municipal elections were held concurrently. After vetting by local committees established by the *Majles*, about 260,000 candidates competed for about 127,000 seats nationwide. Over 6% of the candidates were women. The same alliance of reformists and moderate-conservatives that gave Rouhani a resounding victory also won control of the municipal councils of Iran's largest cities, including all 21 seats on the Tehran municipal council. The term of the existing councils expired in September 2017 and a reformist official, Mohammad Ali Najafi, replaced Qalibaf as Tehran mayor. However, Najafi resigned in March 2018 after criticism from hardliners for his viewing of a dance performance by young girls during a celebration of a national holiday. In April 2018, the deputy head of the department of the environment, Kaveh Madani, resigned after photos of him dancing in the United States five years prior surfaced on the internet.

### *Second-Term Cabinet*

Rouhani was sworn into a second term in early August 2017. His second term cabinet nominations retained most of the same officials in key posts, including Foreign Minister Zarif, Interior Minister Abdolreza Fazli, and Oil Minister Zanganeh. In 2018, since the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA in May, hardliners have attacked and threatened to try to impeach Zarif for his role in negotiating that accord. In late February 2019, after being excluded from a leadership meeting with visiting President Bashar Al Asad of Syria, Zarif announced his resignation over the social media application Instagram. Rouhani did not accept the resignation and Zarif resumed his duties, in part contributing to Zarif's resignation announcement in late February 2019. The resignation was not accepted and Zarif continued his duties.

Key features of the second term cabinet include

- Minister of Justice Seyed Alireza Avayee replaced Pour-Mohammadi. Formerly a state prosecutor, he oversaw trials of protesters in the 2009 uprising and is subject to EU travel ban and asset freeze.
- Defense Minister Amir Hatami, a regular military officer, became the first non-IRGC Defense Minister in more than 20 years and the first regular military officer to serve in the position. The change was interpreted as an effort by Rouhani to reduce the power of the IRGC.

- Rouhani's second term cabinet has two women vice presidents, and one other as a member of the cabinet (but not heading any ministry).

### *2017-2018 Unrest Challenges Regime*[7]

Rouhani's presidency has been marked by the JCPOA, reintegration into the global community, success in preserving the Asad regime in Syria, and further economic turmoil following the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. In December 2017, significant unrest erupted in more than 80 cities, mostly over economic conditions, although demonstrations were smaller than the 2009-2010 protests. Protests initially cited economic concerns—the high prices of staple foods—but quickly evolved to expressions of opposition to Iran's leadership and the expenditure of resources on interventions throughout the Middle East. Some protesters were motivated by Rouhani's 2018-2019 budget proposals to increase funds for cleric-run businesses ("bonyads") and the IRGC, while cutting subsidies.

Rouhani sought to defuse the unrest by acknowledging the right to protest and the legitimacy of some demonstrator grievances. Khamene'i at first attributed the unrest to covert action by Iran's foreign adversaries, particularly the United States, but he later acknowledged unspecified "problems" in the administration of justice.[8] Security officers used force against protester violence in some cities, but experts say they generally exercised restraint. The government also temporarily shut down access to the social media site Instagram and a widely used messaging system called "Telegram." Iranian official media reported that 25 were killed and nearly 4,000 were arrested during that period of unrest.

Since February 2018, some women have been protesting the strict public dress code, and some have been detained. Small protests and other acts of defiance have continued since, including significant unrest in the Tehran bazaar in July 2018 in the context of shortages of some goods and shop closures due to the inability to price their goods for profit. Since September 2018, workers in various industries, including trucking and teaching, have conducted strikes to demand higher wages to help cope with rising prices. Rounds of nationwide teachers' strikes began in mid-February 2019.

In mid-2018, possibly to try to divert blame for Iran's economic situation, the regime established special "anticorruption courts" that have, in some cases, imposed the death penalty on businessmen accused of taking advantage of reimposed sanctions for personal profit.[9] Iran also has used military action against armed factions that are based or have support outside Iran. In late September-early October 2018, Iran fired short-range ballistic missiles at bases of anti-Iran Kurdish groups in Iraq and against Islamic State positions in Syria.

*U.S. Response to the Unrest.* President Trump and other senior officials have supported the protesters by warning the regime against using force and vowing to hold officials responsible for harming protestors. The Administration also requested a U.N. Security Council meeting to consider Iran's crackdown on the late 2017 unrest, although no formal U.N. action was taken. The Administration also imposed U.S. sanctions on identified regime officials and institutions responsible for abuses against protestors, including then-judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani,

[7] The following information is derived from a wide range of press reporting in major newspapers and websites subsequent to December 28, 2017. Some activist sources report widely different numbers of protest sizes, cities involved, numbers killed or arrested, and other figures. CRS has no way to corroborate exact numbers cited.

[8] https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-khamenei-recognizes-protesters-grievances-1515511134; National Council of Resistance. "Khamene'i's Belated Confession to Injustice and Inability to Revform, a Desperate Attempt to Escape Overthrow. February 19, 2018.

[9] Erin Cunningham. "In Iran, Graft Can Lead to the Gallows." *Washington Post*, December 1, 2018.

representing the highest-level Iranian official sanctioned by the United States to date. In the 115th Congress, several resolutions supported the protestors, including H.Res. 676 (passed House January 9, 2018), S.Res. 367, H.Res. 675, and S.Res. 368.

## Demographics/Ethnic and Religious Minorities

**General.** Iran's population is about 83 million persons. In terms of ethnicity, about 60% is Persian; about 20%-25% is Azeri; about 7% are Kurds; about 4% are Arabs; and about 2% are Baluchis. Iran is about 99% Muslim, of which more than 90% are Shiites; about 8% are Sunnis; and 1% are Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Baha'i', or other religions.

**Azeris**. Azeris, who have a Turkic ethnicity, are predominant in northern Iran, particularly in areas bordering Azerbaijan. Azeris in Iran are mostly well integrated into government and society (Khamene'i himself is of Azeri heritage), but many Azeris complain of ethnic and linguistic discrimination. Each year, there are arrests of Azeris who press for their right to celebrate their culture and history. The government accuses them of promoting separatism.

**Christians**. Christians, who number about 300,000, are a "protected minority" with three seats reserved in the Majles. The majority of Christians in Iran are ethnic Armenians, with Assyrian Christians contributing about 10,000-20,000 practitioners. The IRGC scrutinizes churches and Christian religious practice, and numerous Christians remain incarcerated for actions related to religious practice, including using wine in certain services. At times, there have been unexplained assassinations of pastors in Iran, as well as prosecutions of Christians for converting from Islam—a practice illegal for any Iranian Muslim. Christians—along with the other two protected minorities, Zoroastrians and Jews—cannot publicly practice or advocate for their religion. One pastor, Yousef Nadarkhani, has been repeatedly arrested and released since 2006, including his May 2016 rearrest and release on bail in July 2016.

**Kurds**. There are about 5 million-11 million Kurds in Iran. The Kurdish language is not banned, but schools do not teach it and Kurdish political organizations, activists, and media outlets are routinely scrutinized, harassed, and closed down for supporting greater Kurdish autonomy. Abuses of Kurds are widely cited as providing political support for the Kurdish armed factions, with several Kurdish oppositionists having been executed since 2010. In May 2015, violent unrest broke out in the Kurdish city of Mahabad after a local woman was killed in unclear circumstances in a hotel room there, reportedly while with a member of Iran's intelligence services. Iranian Kurds recruited by the Islamic State terrorist organization conducted a major attack on Iran's parliament and the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 2017, killing 17 persons.

**Arabs.** Ethnic Arabs are prominent in southwestern Iran, particularly Khuzestan Province, where they are widely referred to as Ahwazi Arabs. The approximately 3 million Arabs in Iran encounter systematic oppression and discrimination, including torture and a prohibition on speaking or studying Arabic.

**Baluchis**. Iran has about 1.4 million Baluchis, living primarily in poorly developed and economically depressed southeastern Iran, in the area bordering Pakistan. Baluchis in Iran are mostly Sunni Muslims.

**Jews.** Also a "recognized minority" with one seat in the Majles, the approximately 10,000 member (according to the Tehran Jewish Committee) Jewish community enjoys somewhat more freedoms than Jews in several other Muslim states. On September 4, 2013, Rouhani's Twitter account issued greetings to Jews on the occasion of Jewish New Year ("Rosh Hashanah") and the Jewish Majles member accompanied Rouhani on his visit to the U.N. General Assembly meetings in September 2013. However, the Iranian government ignores and sometimes promotes anti-Semitic rhetoric in state-sanctioned media, statements, books, and other publications. Former President Ahmadinejad, for example, often questioned the existence of the Holocaust, claiming it to be a Zionist propaganda tool. In June 1999, Iran arrested 13 Jews that it said were part of an "espionage ring" for Israel, and 10 were convicted. All were released by April 2003.

**Baha'is.** There are an estimated 20,000 Baha'is in Iran, where this religion started, based on a 19th century self-declared Iranian prophet named Baha'ullah. The regime has subjected the Baha'is to unrelenting repression as members of what it describes as a "heretical" religion. Baha'i leaders have been repeated imprisoned, land and property of Baha'i adherents has been seized, Baha'is are banned from serving in goverment, and Baha'is have been routinely discriminated against for job and university positions. Virtually yearly, resolutions in the U.S. Congress have condemned the repression of the Baha'is of Iran. The March 17, 2017, report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Iran human rights (A/HRC/34/65) contained an extensive appendix listing Baha'is in prison in Iran. Two of seven Baha'i leaders (the "Yaran") sentenced in 2008 to 20 years imprisonment for espionage were released in the fall of 2018; the other five remain in jail.

**Sufis.** In February 2018, Iran arrested 300 Sufis demanding the release of their fellow faith members. Hundreds of Sufis remain in prison for their religious beliefs. Human Rights Watch characterized the arrests as "one of the largest crackdowns against a religious minority in Iran in a decade."

# Human Rights Practices[10]

U.S. State Department reports, including the Iran Action Group's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" document, and reports from a U.N. Special Rapporteur, have long cited Iran for a wide range of abuses—aside from its suppression of political opposition—including escalating use of capital punishment, executions of minors, denial of fair public trial, harsh and life-threatening conditions in prison, and unlawful detention and torture. In a speech on Iran on July 22, 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo recited a litany of U.S. accusations of Iranian human rights abuses, and stated "America is unafraid to expose human rights violations and support those who are being silenced."

State Department and U.N. Special Rapporteur reports have noted that the 2013 revisions to the Islamic Penal Code and the 2015 revisions to the Criminal Procedure Code made some reforms, including eliminating death sentences for children convicted of drug-related offenses and protecting the rights of the accused. A "Citizen's Rights Charter," issued December 19, 2016, at least nominally protects free expression and is intended to raise public awareness of citizen rights. It also purportedly commits the government to implement the Charter's 120 articles. In August 2017, Rouhani appointed a woman, former vice president Shahindokht Molaverdi, to oversee implementation of the Charter. The State Department's human rights report for 2017 says that key Charter protections for individual rights have not been implemented, to date.

A U.N. Special Rapporteur on Iran human rights was reestablished in March 2011 by the U.N. Human Rights Council (22 to 7 vote), resuming work done by a Special Rapporteur on Iran human rights during 1988-2002. Former Maldives Foreign Minister Ahmad Shaheed was appointed to this role in June 2011, and he was replaced by Asma Jahangir in September 2016. She issued two Iran human rights reports, the latest of which was dated August 14, 2017 (A/72/322), before passing away in February 2018. Her report findings were largely consistent with those of the State Department and those of her predecessor. The special rapporteur mandate was extended on March 24, 2018. On July 6, 2018, the U.N. Human Rights Council appointed British-Pakistani lawyer Javaid Rehman to the post. The U.N. General Assembly has insisted that Iran cooperate by allowing the Special Rapporteur to visit Iran, but Iran has instead only responded to Special Rapporteur inquiries through agreed "special procedures."

In November 2016, the U.N. General Assembly's Third Committee (which oversees human rights issues) adopted a resolution (85 in favor, 35 opposed, and 63 abstaining) expressing concern over Iran's "alarmingly" frequent use of the death penalty and again urging access to Iran by the Special Rapporteur.

Despite the criticism of its human rights record, on April 29, 2010, Iran acceded to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. It also sits on the boards of the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and UNICEF. Iran's U.N. dues are about $9 million per year.

Iran has an official body, the High Council for Human Rights, headed by former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Larijani (brother of the Majles speaker and the judiciary head). It generally defends the government's actions to outside bodies rather than encourages improvement of the government's human rights practices, although Larijani has, according to the Special Rapporteur, questioned the effectiveness of drug-related executions.

As part of its efforts to try to compel Iran to improve its human rights practices, the United States has imposed sanctions on Iranian officials alleged to have committed human rights abuses, and on

[10] Much of the information in this section comes from the State Department human rights report for 2017: https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper.

firms that help Iranian authorities censor or monitor the internet. Human rights-related sanctions are analyzed in significant detail in CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman. In April 2014, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on European Union (EU) diplomats to raise Iran's human rights record at official engagements.

### Women's Rights

Women can vote and run for office but female candidates for president have always been barred from running by the Council of Guardians. They can and have served in cabinet and vice presidential positions, as well as in mayoral positions, but are not permitted to serve as judges. As noted above, in August 2017, Rouhani named three women to his second term cabinet, but he disappointed women's groups by not appointing any to ministerial posts.

Women have been subject to arrest if they do not cover their head in public, generally with a garment called a chador, but, in late December 2017, authorities announced they would no longer arrest dress code violators. Instead, violators are required to attend classes to correct their behavior. Still, small numbers of women in various cities have been protesting the code since February 2018 by taking off their hijab and holding them up in front of gathered crowds. Government agents have arrested some of those protesters and, in May 2018, one such activist was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Women are permitted to drive and work outside the home without restriction, including owning their own businesses, although less than 20% of the workforce is female. Despite female majorities in higher education in past years, women are a third less likely to work after graduation than their male counterparts.

Women do not have inheritance or divorce rights equal to those of men, and their court testimony carries half the weight of a male's. A woman's husband has the power to restrict his wife's travel abroad, as well as limit her job prospects. Laws against rape are not enforced effectively. The law permits a man to have up to four wives as well as "temporary wives"—an arrangement reached after a religious ceremony and civil contract outlining the relationship's conditions. Women have also been banned from attending male sports matches, although that restriction was relaxed in early 2017.[11]

[11] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bowing-to-pressure-iran-grants-women-spectators-access_us_58a92da2e4b0fa149f9ac73d.

**Table 2. Human Rights Practices: General Categories**

| | |
|---|---|
| Media Freedoms | The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance monitors journalists reporting from Iran as well as media and communications operations. The government continues to block pro-reform websites, social media applications, and blogs—particularly during times of unrest—and to close newspapers critical of the government, but some editors say that the government has become more tolerant of critical media since Rouhani took office. In response to the November 2012 death in custody of blogger Sattar Beheshti, seven security officers were arrested and the Tehran "Cyber Police" commander was removed. Iran has set up a national network that has a monopoly on internet service for Iranians. The State Department's September 2018 "Outlaw Regime" report states that as of July 2018, according to Reporters without Borders, there are 20 journalists and 9 internet activists in prison for expressing their views online. Some individuals have been arrested in recent years for posting videos of themselves on social media dancing or performing Western music in clothing that violates Iran's dress code. |
| Labor Restrictions | Independent unions are legal but are restricted in practice. Many trade unionists remain in jail for protesting unpaid wages, precarious working conditions, and poor living conditions, or for peaceful trade union activities. The one authorized national labor organization is a state-controlled "Workers' House" umbrella but others, such as the several unions representing Iran's teachers, are tolerated. In 2014, Iran ratified an additional International Labour Organization convention. |
| Religious Freedom | Each year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom. No sanctions have been added on Iran under IRFA, on the grounds that Iran is already subject to extensive U.S. sanctions. The constitution specifies Ja'afari Shiite Islam as the official state religion and restrictions on religious freedom for some non-Shiite groups have been noted consistently in State Department and other reports. Iran's penal code provides the death penalty for attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims, as well as *moharebeh* (enmity against God) and *sabb al-nabi* (insulting the prophets)—crimes that critics say are selectively applied to regime opponents. |
| Executions Policy | Iran's per capita execution rate is among the highest in the world, despite recent reforms to reduce the number of executions for drug offenses. Total executions numbered about 1,000 for 2015, about 500 for 2016, and over 400 in 2017. Iran is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is obligated to cease the executions of minors. Yet, 80 juvenile offenders remained on death row as of 2018, with several executed in early 2018. Iran has not held accountable any officials involved in the summer 1988 executions of thousands of prisoners of conscience in Iran's prisons. |
| Human Trafficking | Since 2005, State Department "Trafficking in Persons" reports (including the report for 2018) have placed Iran in Tier 3 (worst level) for failing to take significant action to prevent trafficking in persons. Iranian women, boys, and girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation in Iran as well as to Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, and Europe. However, the State Department's 2018 Trafficking in Persons report credits Iran with taking steps to ratify the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. |
| Corporal Punishments/Stoning | Iran's judiciary continues to sanction corporal punishment, including flogging, blinding, stoning, and amputation. In 2002, the then-head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Shahroudi (mentioned above) issued a ban on stoning. However, Iranian officials later called that directive "advisory," thus putting stoning sentences at the discretion of individual judges, and the practice reportedly continues in some areas of Iran. |

**Sources:** State Department reports on human rights practices, on international religious freedom, and trafficking in persons. Trafficking in persons report for 2018: https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2018/index.htm.

# U.S.-Iran Relations, U.S. Policy, and Options

The February 11, 1979, fall of the Shah of Iran, who was a key U.S. ally, shattered U.S.-Iran relations. The Carter Administration's efforts to build a relationship with the new regime in Iran ended after the November 4, 1979, takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by radical pro-Khomeini "Students in the Line of the Imam." The 66 U.S. diplomats there were held hostage for 444 days, and released pursuant to the January 20, 1981 "Algiers Accords." Their release was completed minutes after President Reagan's inauguration on January 20, 1981.[12] The United States broke relations with Iran on April 7, 1980, two weeks prior to a failed U.S. military attempt to rescue the hostages.

Iran has since then pursued policies that successive Administrations considered inimical to U.S. interests in the Near East region and beyond.[13] Iran's authoritarian political system and human rights abuses have contributed to, but have not necessarily been central to, the U.S.-Iran rift, although some observers assert that Iran's behavior flows directly from the nature of its regime.

Iran has an interest section in Washington, DC, under the auspices of the Embassy of Pakistan, and staffed by Iranian Americans. The former Iranian Embassy closed in April 1980 when the two countries broke diplomatic relations, and remains under the control of the State Department. Iran's Mission to the United Nations in New York runs most of Iran's diplomacy inside the United States. The U.S. interests section in Tehran, under the auspices of the Embassy of Switzerland, has no American personnel.

The following sections analyze some of the key hallmarks of the Iran policies of successive U.S. administrations.

## Reagan Administration: Iran Added to the "Terrorism List"

The Reagan Administration designated Iran a "state sponsor of terrorism" in January 1984—a designation established by the Export Administration Act of 1979—largely in response to Iran's backing for the October 1983 bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut. The Administration also "tilted" toward Iraq in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.[14] During 1987-1988, U.S. naval forces fought several skirmishes with Iranian naval elements while protecting oil shipments transiting the Persian Gulf from Iranian mines and other attacks. On April 18, 1988, Iran lost one-quarter of its larger naval ships in an engagement with the U.S. Navy, including a frigate sunk. However, the Administration contradicted its efforts to favor Iraq's war effort by providing arms to Iran ("TOW" antitank weapons and I-Hawk air defense batteries) in exchange for Iran's help in the releasing of U.S. hostages held in Lebanon. On July 3, 1988, U.S. forces in the Gulf mistakenly shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Gulf, killing all 290 on board, contributing to Iran's decision to accept a cease-fire in the war with Iraq in August 1988.

[12] The text of the Algiers Accords can be found at https://www.nytimes.com/1981/01/20/world/text-of-agreement-between-iran-and-the-us-to-resolve-the-hostage-situation.html. The technical name of the Accords was: "The Declaration of the Government of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria," reflecting that it was a result of a request by Iran and the United States for Algerian mediation of the hostage crisis.

[13] Those policies, such as its national security policies and its development of an extensive nuclear program, are assessed in detail in CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[14] Elaine Sciolino, *The Outlaw State: Saddam Hussein's Quest for Power and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991), p. 168.

## George H. W. Bush Administration: "Goodwill Begets Goodwill"

In his January 1989 inauguration speech, President George H.W. Bush, in stating that "goodwill begets goodwill" with respect to Iran, implied that U.S.-Iran relations could improve if Iran helped obtain the release of U.S. hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran's apparent assistance led to the release of all remaining U.S. hostages there by the end of December 1991. However, no U.S.-Iran thaw followed, possibly because Iran continued to back terrorist groups in the Middle East and to oppose the U.S. push for Arab-Israeli peace that began after the 1991 U.S. liberation of Kuwait.

## Clinton Administration: "Dual Containment"

The Clinton Administration articulated a strategy of "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq—an attempt to keep both countries simultaneously weak rather than alternately tilting to one or the other. In 1995-1996, the Administration and Congress banned U.S. trade and investment with Iran and imposed penalties on foreign investment in Iran's energy sector, in response to Iran's support for terrorist groups seeking to undermine the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The election of the moderate Mohammad Khatemi as president in May 1997 precipitated a U.S. offer of direct dialogue, but Khatemi did not pursue the offer. In June 1998, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called for mutual confidence building measures that could lead to a "road map" for normalization. In a March 17, 2000, speech, she admitted past U.S. interference in Iran.

## George W. Bush Administration: Iran Part of "Axis of Evil"

In his January 2002 State of the Union message, President Bush named Iran as part of an "axis of evil" including Iraq and North Korea. However, the Administration enlisted Iran's diplomatic help in efforts to try to stabilize post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq.[15] The Administration rebuffed a reported May 2003 Iranian overture transmitted by the Swiss Ambassador to Iran for an agreement on all major issues of mutual concern ("grand bargain" proposal).[16] State Department officials disputed that the proposal was fully vetted within Iran's leadership. The Administration aided victims of the December 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran, including through U.S. military deliveries into Iran. As Iran's nuclear program advanced, the Administration worked with several European countries to persuade Iran to agree to limit its nuclear program. President Bush's January 20, 2005, second inaugural address and his January 31, 2006, State of the Union message stated that the United States would be a close ally of a "free and democratic" Iran—appearing to support regime change.[17]

## Obama Administration: Pressure, Engagement, and the JCPOA

President Obama asserted that there was an opportunity to persuade Iran to limit its nuclear program through diplomacy and to potentially rebuild a U.S.-Iran relationship after decades of mutual animosity. The approach emerged in President Obama's first message to the Iranian people on the occasion of Nowruz (Persian New Year) on March 21, 2009, in which he stated that the United States "is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran, and the international

[15] Robin Wright, "U.S. In 'Useful' Talks with Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2003.

[16] http://www.armscontrol.org/pdf/2003_Spring_Iran_Proposal.pdf.

[17] Helene Cooper and David Sanger, "Strategy on Iran Stirs New Debate at White House," *New York Times*, June 16, 2007.

community." He referred to Iran as "The Islamic Republic of Iran," signaling opposition to a policy of regime change. The Administration reportedly also loosened restrictions on U.S. diplomats' meeting with their Iranian counterparts at international meetings. In a major speech to the "Muslim World" in Cairo on June 4, 2009, President Obama acknowledged that the United States had played a role in the overthrow of Mossadeq and said that Iran had a right to peaceful nuclear power. In addition, President Obama exchanged several letters with Supreme Leader Khamene'i, reportedly expressing the Administration's support for engagement with Iran.

### *2009-2013: Emphasis on Economic Pressure*

In 2009, Iran's crackdown on the Green Movement uprising and its refusal to accept compromises to limit its nuclear program caused the Obama Administration to shift to a "two track" strategy: stronger economic pressure coupled with offers of negotiations that could produce sanctions relief. The sanctions imposed during 2010-2013 received broad international cooperation and caused economic difficulty in Iran. The Administration also altered U.S. trade regulations to help Iranians circumvent their government's restrictions on internet usage, and funded exchanges with civil society activists in Iran. In 2013, before the election of Rouhani, the Administration began direct but unpublicized talks with Iranian officials in the Sultanate of Oman to probe Iran's willingness to reach a comprehensive nuclear accord.[18] The Administration also repeatedly stated that a military option is "on the table."

### *2013-2017: Rouhani Elected, JCPOA Implemented*

The election of Rouhani in June 2013 contributed to a U.S. shift to emphasizing diplomacy, even though U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations had begun in the Sultanate of Oman in early 2013, prior to Rouhani's election. On September 20, 2013, on the eve of U.N. General Assembly meetings, the *Washington Post* published an op-ed by Rouhani stating a commitment to engage in constructive interaction with the world. President Obama, in his September 24, 2013, U.N. speech, confirmed that he had exchanged letters with Rouhani stating the U.S. willingness to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully and that the United States "[is] not seeking regime change."[19] The two presidents spoke by phone on September 27, 2013—the first direct U.S.-Iran presidential level contact since Iran's revolution.

President Obama expressed hope that the JCPOA would "usher[] in a new era in U.S.-Iranian relations,"[20] while at the same time asserting that the JCPOA would benefit U.S. national security even without a broader rapprochement. After the JCPOA was finalized in July 2015, the United States and Iran held bilateral meetings at the margins of all nuclear talks and in other settings, covering regional and bilateral issues. President Obama met Foreign Minister Zarif at the September 2015 General Assembly session, but no U.S.-Iran meetings occurred during the September 2016 U.N. General Assembly session, and there was no broad warming of U.S.-Iran relations. Subsequent to the JCPOA finalization

- Iranian officials argued that new U.S. visa requirements in the FY2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 114-113) would cause European businessmen to hesitate to travel to Iran and thereby limit Iran's economic reintegration. Then-Secretary of State Kerry wrote to Foreign Minister Zarif on

[18] http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-us-nuclear-khamenei-salehi-jcpoa-diplomacy.html#.

[19] Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2013.

[20] Roger Cohen. "U.S. Embassy, Tehran." *New York Times*, April 8, 2015.

December 19, 2015, that the United States would implement the provision so as to avoid interfering with "legitimate business interests of Iran."

- In January 2016, Kerry worked with Zarif to achieve the rapid release of 10 U.S. Navy personnel who the IRGC took into custody when their two riverine crafts strayed into what Iran considers its territorial waters.
- Coinciding with Implementation Day of the JCPOA (January 16, 2016), the dual citizens held by Iran at that time were released and a long-standing Iranian claim for funds paid for undelivered military equipment from the Shah's era was settled—resulting in $1.7 billion in cash payments (euros, Swiss francs, and other non-U.S. hard currencies) to Iran—$400 million for the original DOD monies and $1.3 billion for an arbitrated amount of interest. Administration officials asserted that the nuclear diplomacy provided an opportunity to resolve these outstanding issues simultaneously, but some Members of Congress criticized the simultaneity of the financial settlement as paying "ransom" to Iran. Obama Administration officials asserted that it had long been assumed that the United States would need to return monies to Iran for the undelivered military equipment and that the amount of interest agreed was likely less than what Iran might have been awarded by the U.S.-Iran Claims Tribunal.
- Iran conducted at least four ballistic missile tests from the time the JCPOA was finalized in 2015 until the end of the Obama Administration, which termed the tests "defiant of" or "inconsistent with" Resolution 2231. The tests prompted additional U.S. designations for sanctions of entities that support Iran's program.
- Obama Administration officials asserted that Iran's regional behavior did not change significantly after the JCPOA. Iran continued to provide roughly pre-JCPOA levels of support to allies and proxies in the region, and it continued "high speed intercepts" of U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf.
- After releasing all remaining jailed dual nationals in connection with Implementation Day, Iran subsequently jailed several other dual nationals.

There was no evident post-JCPOA movement on enhancements to mutual diplomatic representation such as the posting of U.S. nationals to staff the U.S. interests section in Tehran, or on a visit to Iran by then-Secretary of State Kerry. In 2014, Iran appointed one of those involved in the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran—Hamid Aboutalebi—as ambassador to the United Nations. But, in April 2014, Congress passed S. 2195 (P.L. 113-100), which gave the Administration authority to deny him a visa to take up his duties. The United States subsequently announced he would not be admitted. Iran replaced him with Gholam Ali Khoshroo, who studied in the United States and served in Khatemi's government. In May 2015, the two governments granted each other permission to move their respective interests sections to more spacious locations.

## Trump Administration Policy: Almost Entirely Sticks

The Trump Administration has shifted policy, asserting that the JCPOA addressed only nuclear issues and hindered the U.S. ability to roll back Iran's "malign" regional activities or reduce its military and missile capabilities. Administration officials assert that Administration policy is to pressure Iran's economy to (1) compel it to renegotiate the JCPOA to address the JCPOA's deficiencies and (2) deny Iran the revenue to continue to develop its strategic capabilities or intervene throughout the region. Administration statements of opposition to how Iran is governed

suggest that an unstated element of the policy is to create enough economic difficulties to stoke unrest in Iran, possibly to the point where the regime collapses.

The policy, and elements of it, have been articulated as follows:

- Citing Iran's arming of the Houthis in Yemen, on February 1, 2017, then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn stated that Iran was "officially on notice" about its provocative behavior. In April 2017, the Administration announced a six-month Iran policy review, based on the premise that the JCPOA "only delays [Iran's] goal of becoming a nuclear state" and had failed to curb Iran's objectionable regional behavior.
- During his May 20-24, 2017, visit to the region, President Trump told Arab leaders in Saudi Arabia that "Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve." The following month, then-Secretary of State Tillerson testified that the Administration would work to support elements in Iran that would lead to a "peaceful transition" of Iran's government.[21]
- On October 13, 2017, President Trump, citing the results of the policy review, stated that he would not certify Iranian JCPOA compliance (under the INARA law Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, P.L. 114-17), and that the United States would only stay in the accord if Congress and U.S. allies (1) address the expiration of JCPOA nuclear restrictions, (2) curb Iran's ballistic missile program, and (3) counter Iran's regional activities. The denial of certification under INARA triggered a 60-day period for Congress to take legislative action under expedited procedures to reimpose those sanctions that were lifted. Congress did not take such action.
- On January 12, 2018, the President announced that he would not continue to waive Iran sanctions at the next expiration deadline (May 12) unless his demands to address JCPOA weaknesses were addressed by Congress and the European countries. In their visits to the United States in April 2018, the leaders of France and Germany implored the United States to remain in the JCPOA.

## Withdrawal from the JCPOA and Subsequent Pressure Efforts

On May 8, 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and reimpose all U.S. secondary sanctions that were waived or revoked to implement the accord. The reimposition went fully into effect as of November 5, 2018.[22] Statements by President Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo explaining the policy unfolded as follows:

- On May 21, 2018, in his first speech as Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo announced a return to a U.S. strategy of pressuring Iran through sanctions and by working with allies against Iran's regional activities and proxies, as well as against its ballistic missile program, cyberattacks, and human rights abuses.[23] He also expressed U.S. "solidarity" with the Iranian people.

[21] http://www.irannewsupdate.com/news/terrorism/3934-iran-u-s-policy-moving-toward-regime-change.html.

[22] White House. Statement by the President on the JCPOA. May 8, 2018.

[23] Statement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Heritage Foundation. May 21, 2018.

- On July 22, 2018, in a speech to Iranian Americans at the Reagan Library in California, Secretary Pompeo recited a litany of Iranian human rights abuses, official corruption, and efforts to destabilize the region. The Secretary stated that "I have a message for the people of Iran. The United States hears you; the United States supports you; the United States is with you."
- On July 23, 2018, following threats by Rouhani and other Iranian leaders to cut off the flow of oil through the Persian Gulf if Iran's oil exports are prevented by sanctions, President Trump issued a Twitter post from his personal account: "To Iranian President Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE. WE ARE NO LONGER A COUNTRY THAT WILL STAND FOR YOUR DEMENTED WORDS OF VIOLENCE & DEATH. BE CAUTIOUS!" The tweet suggested to some that the United States might be intent on military action against Iran, but no hostilities appeared imminent by either side.
- On August 16, 2018, Secretary Pompeo announced the creation of an "Iran Action Group" at the State Department responsible for "directing, reviewing, and coordinating" all aspects of the department's Iran-related activities. The group is headed by Brian Hook, who holds the title of "Special Representative for Iran." In late September 2018, the group issued its "Outlaw Regime" report on Iran, in which Secretary of State Pompeo wrote in a preface that "The policy President Trump has laid out comes to terms fully with fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran is not a normal state.... Our end goal is not an Iran that remains forever isolated.... We seek a deal that ensures Iran does not support terrorism around the world and provides for greater opportunity to its own people."[24]
- On October 3, 2018, the Administration abrogated the 1955 U.S.-Iran "Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights." Iran's legal representatives had cited the treaty to earn a favorable October 2 judgment from the International Court of Justice demanding that the United States reverse some humanitarian-related sanctions on Iran. The treaty, which provides for freedom of commerce between the two countries and unfettered diplomatic exchange, has long been mooted by post-1979 developments in U.S.-Iran relations. National Security Adviser John Bolton stated at a news conference that the abrogation of the treaty would not affect the status of the interests sections in each others' countries.
- Illustrating the extent to which the Administration wants U.S. partners to adopt U.S. policy toward Iran, the Administration organized a ministerial meeting in Warsaw, Poland, during February 13-14, 2019, focused on Middle East issues and with particular focus on countering the threat posed by Iran. Vice President Mike Pence led the U.S. delegation, and in his keynote speech stated that "The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and join with us as we bring the economic and diplomatic pressure necessary to give the Iranian people, the region, and the world the peace, security and freedom they deserve." He also strongly criticized a European "special purpose vehicle," intended to facilitate trade with Iran without triggering U.S. sanctions, as "an effort to break American sanctions against Iran's murderous revolutionary

[24] The report can be accessed at https://it.usembassy.gov/outlaw-regime-a-chronicle-of-irans-destructive-activities/

regime."[25] Representatives of 62 countries attended[26] although, reflecting U.S.-European differences over Iran, several major European allies, including Germany and France, did not send their foreign ministers to the meeting.

[25] The White House. Remarks by Vice President Pence at the Warsaw Ministerial Working Luncheon." February 14, 2019.

[26] https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2019/02/289468.htm

## Detentions of U.S. Nationals and Dual Nationals

Iran does not recognize any dual nationality and detained dual nationals are not given help from foreign diplomats.

**Recent Past Detentions**

2007: Iranian American academic Haleh Esfandiari was imprisoned for several months in 2007 for allegations that her employer, the Woodrow Wilson Center, was involved in democracy promotion efforts in Iran.

2009: Iranian American journalist Roxanna Saberi was imprisoned for five months for expired press credentials.

2009-2011: American hikers Sara Shourd, Shane Bauer, and Josh Fattal were arrested in August 2009 after crossing into Iran from a hike in northern Iraq. Their 2010-2011 releases were brokered by Oman.

On January 16, 2016, in concert with JCPOA "Implementation Day," several detainees were released: former U.S. Marine Amir Hekmati, arrested in 2011 for spying for the United States; Reverend Saeed Abedini, a Christian convert of Iranian origin imprisoned since December 2012 for setting up Christian orphanages in Iran; *Washington Post* journalist Jason Rezaian, detained in July 2014; Nosratollah "Fred" Khosravi-Roodsari, who remained in Iran after his release; and U.S. citizen Matthew Trevithick, jailed in 2015. The United States released 7 Iranian Americans/Iranians imprisoned in the United States on sanctions violations, and dropped charges against 14 others not in U.S. custody.

**Still In Custody or Missing**

- Nizar Zakka (permanent resident, Lebanon national), information technology professional detained in September 2015 and sentenced to 10 years in prison in October 2016.
- In November 2015, Iran arrested U.S.-Iran national Siamak Namazi, a business consultant, on unspecified charges. Iran detained his father, Baquer Namazi, in February 2016. In October 2016, the Namazis were sentenced to 10 years in prison. Baquer Namazi is held despite failing health.
- Reza "Robin" Shahini: In July 2016, Iran detained U.S.-Iran dual national Reza "Robin" Shahini for crimes against the Islamic Republic, and on October 25 he was sentenced to 18 years in prison. He was released on bail in late March 2017, pending appeal, but he is still apparently not permitted to leave Iran.
- Karan Vafadari: Vafadari, an Iranian American, was arrested in July 2016, along with his wife, U.S. permanent resident Afarin Niasari. The art gallery owners, who are Zoroastrians, were sentenced in January 2018 to 27 years in jail for "engaging in corruption and depravity," referring to allegedly serving alcohol at their home.
- On July 16, 2017, Iranian judiciary officials announced that Xiyue Wang, a U.S. citizen and a graduate student at Princeton University, had been sentenced to 10 years in prison for spying for the United States. Mr. Wang was arrested in the summer of 2016 while conducting research in Iran on that country's Qajar dynasty.
- Robert Levinson: Former FBI agent Robert Levinson remains missing after a visit to Kish Island in March 2007 to meet an Iranian contact. In March 2018, Iran again denied knowing his status or location. In January 2013, his family released recent photos of him provided by captors through uncertain channels.
- Mohrad Tahbaz a U.S.-British-Iranian national, was arrested in January 2018, along with seven members of the Persian Heritage Wildlife Foundation. His colleague, Canadian-Iranian national Kavous Seyed-Emami, died in custody a few weeks after his arrest under unexplained circumstances.
- In January 2019, Iran confirmed it was holding U.S. national Michael White, arrested in July 2018 while visiting his Iranian girlfriend. No charges have been announced.

**Non-U.S. Dual Nationals**. May 2011: British-Iranian dual national Kamal Foroughi was arrested and sentenced to eight years in prison in 2013 for unspecified charges. 2016: U.K.-Iran dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Canadian-Iranian dual national Homa Hoodfar were arrested. Hoodfar was released in September 2016. April 2016: French-Iranian Nazak Afshar was sentenced to six years in prison and released on bail. Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani, a former member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team focused on financial issues, was jailed for alleged spying for British intelligence. March 2018: British-Iran national Shahabeddin Mansouri-Kermani, a banker, was sentenced on spying charges. May 2018: Iran-British national Mahan Abedin, who works for the British Council, and Iranian national Aras Amiri, a student, were detained. December 2018: Iran detained Iranian-Australian national Meimanat Hosseini-Chavoshi for "infiltrating Iranian institutions." February 24, 2019, a French businesswoman (from the French Caribbean island of Martinique), Nelly Erin-Cambervelle, who was arrested October 2018 for alleged "unauthorized entry," was released.

**Source**: State Department report mandated by Section 110 of the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, P.L. 115-44); various press reports.

# Policy Elements and Options

As have its predecessors, the Trump Administration has not publicly taken any policy option "off the table." Some options, such as sanctions, are being emphasized, while others are being considered or threatened to varying degrees.

## Engagement and Improved Bilateral Relations

Successive Administrations have debated the degree to which to pursue engagement with Iran. Included in that debate has been whether to set conditions for engagement. President Trump has publicly welcomed engagement with Iran's President Rouhani, but Administration officials have set strict conditions for any significant improvement in U.S.-Iran relations. For example, Secretary Pompeo, in his May 21, 2018, speech referenced above, stipulated a list of 12 behavior changes by Iran that would be required for a normalization of U.S.-Iran relations. Many of the demands enumerated by Secretary Pompeo—such as ending support for Lebanese Hezbollah and withdrawing entirely from Syria—go to the core of Iran's revolution and are unlikely to be met by Iran under any circumstances.

Among the stated overtures for talks, in his July 2018 speech in California, discussed above, Secretary of State Pompeo said "As President Trump has said, we're willing to talk with the regime in Iran, but relief from American pressure will only come when we see tangible, demonstrated, and sustained shifts in Tehran's policies."[27] At a July 30, 2018, press conference, President Trump stated he would be willing to meet President Rouhani without conditions, presumably during the September 2018 General Assembly meetings in New York. Rouhani indicated that the U.S-Iran relationship was not conducive to such a meeting, and President Trump later stated he would not meet with Rouhani during the General Assembly meetings, even though President Rouhani is probably "an absolutely lovely man." In early December, President Rouhani stated that the United States directly requested negotiations with Iran on eight occasions in 2017, and "indirectly" requested negotiations on three occasions in 2018. He said that Iran rebuffed these overtures.[28]

## Military Action

Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to back up other policy options with a capability to exercise military force against Iran. Prior to the JCPOA, supporters of military action against Iran's nuclear program argued that such action could set back Iran's nuclear program substantially.[29] A U.S. ground invasion to remove Iran's regime does not appear to have gained serious consideration at any time.

The Obama Administration repeatedly stated that "all options are on the table" to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, including military action against Iran's nuclear facilities.[30] However, the Obama Administration argued that military action would set back Iran's nuclear

[27] Secretary of State Pompeo at the Reagan Library. Op. cit.

[28] Reuters, December 4, 2018.

[29] Joby Warrick, "Iran: Underground Sites Vulnerable, Experts Say," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2012. For an extended discussion of U.S. air strike options on Iran, see Rogers, Paul. *Iran: Consequences of a War*. Oxford Research Group, February 2006.

[30] Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff'," *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.

advancement with far less certainty or duration than would a nuclear agreement. And Iranian retaliation could potentially escalate and expand throughout the region, reduce Iran's regional isolation, strengthen Iran's regime domestically, and raise oil prices.[31] After the JCPOA was finalized, President Obama reiterated the availability of this option should Iran violate the agreement.[32] Obama Administration officials articulated that U.S. military action against Iran might also be used if Iran (1) attacks or prepares to attack U.S. allies; or (2) attempts to interrupt the free flow of oil or shipping in the Gulf or elsewhere.

The Trump Administration has similarly stated that "all options are open," referring to military action. The Administration's pullout from the JCPOA was accompanied by threats to take unspecified action if Iran were to leave the accord and restart banned aspects of its nuclear program. The Administration's threats to counter Iran's threats to the freedom of navigation, cyberattacks, regional malign activities, and missile program could also suggest that the Administration is more willing to employ military options against Iran than was the Obama Administration. The apparent propensity to counter Iran militarily was exemplified by President Trump's July 23, 2018, tweet that was cited above. In early August 2018, following Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz in response to the reimposition of U.S. sanctions, CENTCOM Commander General Joseph Votel said that U.S. forces in the region were "watching for changes in the environment"—a veiled warning that U.S. forces would counter any Iranian military action that threatened U.S. interests.[33]

Whereas the United States has not initiated military action against Iranian or Iran-backed forces in Syria, the Administration has publicly supported Israel's frequent strikes on Iranian and Hezbollah infrastructure there. And, among other military actions against Iran, the U.S. Navy has conducted operations to interdict Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. For detailed information on U.S. military activity in the region that is, in whole or in part, directed against Iran and Iranian allies, see CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

With regard to presidential authorities, S.J.Res. 41, which passed the Senate on September 22, 2012, in the 112th Congress, rejects any U.S. policy that relies on "containment" of a potential nuclear Iran. No legislation has been enacted that would limit the President's authority to use military force against Iran, but neither has there been legislation authorizing the use of force against Iran.

[31] http://2scottmontgomery.blogspot.com/2011/12/panetta-brookings-speech.html.

[32] Speech by President Obama at American University. August 7, 2015. President Obama Interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria. Broadcast on August 9, 2015.

[33] Missy Ryan. U.S. Military Warns Iran over Activity in Shipping Passageway. Washington Post, August 9, 2018.

## Current Iran Policy Objectives and Actions

**Characterization of the Policy Problem**: Iran's regime poses a broad threat to U.S. interests and allies because it

- conducts malign activities throughout the region (supporting pro-Iranian governments and armed factions)
- supports terrorist groups and acts of international terrorism
- continues to harbor ambitions to develop a nuclear weapon
- is developing nuclear-capable ballistic missiles in defiance of U.N. Resolution 2231
- conducts illicit financial activities and cyberattacks
- represses the aspirations of Iran's people and misuses and steals Iran's national wealth
- detains U.S. nationals, U.S. dual-nationals, and dual-nationals of other countries

**Stated Policy**: To place maximum pressure through U.S. sanctions to compel Iran's regime to change its behavior.

- To use economic sanctions to deny Iran the revenue to carry out malign activities, to build up its military capacity, or develop its nuclear program and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

To counter Iran's regional malign activities by

- maintaining a robust U.S. military presence in the region, including about 35,000 U.S. forces deployed to Persian Gulf state military facilities. Such facilities include Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the Naval Support Activity facility in Bahrain, Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait.
- building the capacity of partner governments and supporting their actions against Iran's malign activities
- providing sophisticated rocket and missile defense to Israel
- providing counterterrorism assistance to partner governments throughout the region.

**Conditions for Policy Change:** To welcome a revised nuclear deal and potential normalization of U.S. relations with Iran if Iran meets stipulated demands including

- dismantling all nuclear infrastructure
- ending development of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles
- ends support to terrorist groups and regional armed factions, including Afghan Taliban.
- completely withdraws its forces and militias from Syria
- releases all U.S. citizens and dual nationals
- President Trump has stated a willingness to meet Iran's President Rouhani

**Possible Unstated Policy Objective**: To use Iran's economic problems to stoke economic and political unrest that could lead to political change in Iran.

- U.S. officials have consistently stated support for the Iranian people to have "a government they deserve"
- U.S. reports and statements consistently accuse Iranian leaders of a wide range of abuses

Sources: State Department "Outlaw Regime: Iran's Destructive Activities" report; Secretary of State Michael Pompeo speech at the Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018, various other administration statements.

## Economic Sanctions

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and reimposition of all U.S. sanctions has major implications. The table below summarizes sanctions that have been used against Iran.

**Table 3. Summary of U.S. Sanctions Against Iran**

***Ban on U.S. Trade With and Investment in Iran.*** Executive Order 12959 (May 6, 1995) bans almost all U.S. trade with and investment in Iran. P.L. 111-195 (Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act, CISADA) codifies the trade ban, which generally does not apply to foreign subsidiaries of U.S. firms. Generally remains in force.

***Energy Sector Sanctions.*** The Iran Sanctions Act (P.L. 104-172), as amended, authorizes the imposition of 5 out of a menu of 12 sanctions on firms that invest more than $20 million to develop Iran's petroleum (oil and gas) sector; sold Iran more than $1 million worth of gasoline or equipment to import gasoline or refine oil into gasoline; sold $1 million or more worth of energy equipment to Iran; provided shipping services to transport oil from Iran; engaged in an energy joint venture with Iran outside Iran; or bought Iran's sovereign debt. Another law—P.L. 112-239—sanctions most foreign dealings with Iran's energy, shipping, and shipbuilding sector, as well as the sale of certain items for Iranian industrial processes and the transfer to Iran of precious metals (often a form of payment for oil or gas). Waived in accordance with the JCPOA.

***Sanctions On Iran's Central Bank.*** Section 1245 of the FY2012 National Defense Act (P.L. 112-81) prevents foreign banks that do business with Iran's Central Bank from opening U.S. accounts unless the parent countries of the banks earn an exemption by "significantly reducing" their purchases of Iranian oil. Another law, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (P.L. 111-195, CISADA) bans U.S. accounts for banks that do business with sanctioned entities. The Department of the Treasury in November 2011 declared Iran's financial system an entity of primary money laundering concern. CISADA remains active but entities "delisted" for sanctions under the JCPOA are no longer subject to CISADA sanctions.

***Terrorism Sanctions***. Iran's designation by the Secretary of State as a "state sponsor of terrorism" triggers (1) a ban on the provision of U.S. foreign assistance to Iran under Section 620A of the Foreign Assistance Act; (2) a ban on arms exports to Iran under Section 40 of the Arms Export Control Act (P.L. 95-92, as amended); (3) under Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act (P.L. 96-72, as amended), a significant restriction—amended by other laws to a "presumption of denial"—on U.S. exports to Iran of items that could have military applications; (4) under Section 327 of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (P.L. 104-132), a requirement that U.S. representatives to international financial institutions vote against international loans to terrorism list states. Executive Order 13224 (September 23, 2001) authorizes a ban on U.S. transactions with entities determined to be supporting international terrorism. The Order was not specific to Iran, but several Iranian entities have been designated. All remain in force.

***Sanctions Against Foreign Firms that Aid Iranian Military or Weapons of Mass Destruction Capacity.*** The Iran-Syria-North Korea Nonproliferation Act (P.L. 106-178, March 14, 2000, as amended) authorizes the Administration to impose sanctions on foreign persons or firms determined to have provided assistance to Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Sanctions include restrictions on U.S. trade with the sanctioned entity. Remains in force. The Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act (P.L. 102-484, October 23, 1992, as amended) provides for U.S. sanctions against foreign firms that sell Iran "destabilizing numbers and types of conventional weapons" or WMD technology. Executive Order 13382 (June 28, 2005) amended previous executive orders to provide for a ban on U.S. transactions with entities determined to be supporting international proliferation. Numerous Iranian entities, including the IRGC itself, have been designated.

***Divestment.*** A Title in CISADA authorizes and protects from lawsuits various investment managers who divest from shares of firms that conduct specified business with Iran. Remains in force.

***Sanctions Against Human Rights Abuses, Internet Monitoring, and Regional Activities.*** Various laws and Executive Orders (including CISADA, E.O 13553) impose sanctions on named Iranian human rights abusers, on firms that sell equipment Iran can use to monitor the internet usage of citizens or employ against demonstrators and on Iranian persons or entities that suppress human rights in Syria or contribute to destabilizing Iraq. Remains in force.

**Source**: CRS. For analysis and extended discussion of U.S. and international sanctions against Iran, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

## Regime Change

One recurring U.S. policy question has been whether the United States should support efforts within Iran to overthrow Iran's leadership. The Obama Administration faced this question during the 2009 Green Movement uprising, deciding in that case that effusive U.S. support for the uprising would undermine the opposition's position in Iran. President Obama did, however, give some public support to the demonstrators, and his 2011 Nowruz (Persian New Year) address mentioned specific dissidents and said "young people of Iran ... I want you to know that I am with you."[34] In a September 24, 2013, General Assembly speech, amid preliminary discussions with Iran on a possible nuclear agreement, President Obama explicitly stated that the United States does not seek to change Iran's regime.

The Trump Administration—in cited statements by Secretary Pompeo and other U.S. officials—asserts that its policy is to change Iran's behavior, not to change its regime.[35] However, the content of these and other statements by Administration officials, in particular Secretary Pompeo's speech to Iranian Americans at the Reagan Library on July 22, 2018, suggests support for a regime change outcome. In his speech on May 21, 2017, in Saudi Arabia, President Trump stated that his Administration is hoping that Iran's government will change to one that the Administration considers "just and righteous." In testimony before two congressional committees in June 2017, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the Administration supports a "philosophy of regime change" for Iran (Senate Appropriations Committee) and that the Administration would "work toward support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government" (House Foreign Affairs Committee). In his October 13, 2017, policy announcement on Iran, President Trump stated that

> we stand in total solidarity with the Iranian regime's longest-suffering victims: its own people. The citizens of Iran have paid a heavy price for the violence and extremism of their leaders. The Iranian people long to—and they just are longing, to reclaim their country's proud history, its culture, its civilization, its cooperation with its neighbors.

Subsequently, President Trump issued statements of support for the December 2017-January 2018 protests in Iran on Twitter and in other formats. In his May 8, 2018, announcement of a U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, President Trump stated

> Finally, I want to deliver a message to the long-suffering people of Iran. The people of America stand with you.... But the future of Iran belongs to its people. They are the rightful heirs to a rich culture and an ancient land, and they deserve a nation that does justice to their dreams, honor to their history and glory to God.

In his speech to the Heritage Foundation on May 21, 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo added that the United States expresses total solidarity with the Iranian people. In his Reagan Library speech on July 22, 2018, Pompeo recited a litany of Iranian regime human rights abuses and governmental corruption that called into question its legitimacy and, in several passages and answers to questions, clearly expressed the hope that the Iranian people will oust the current regime. The apparent support for a regime change policy was furthered by Secretary Pompeo's announcement during that speech that the Broadcasting Board of Governors is launching a new full-time Persian-language service for television, radio, digital, and social media to help "ordinary Iranians inside of Iran and around the globe can know that America stands with them."

[34] White House, "Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz," March 20, 2011.

[35] Pompeo speech at the Reagan Library, July 22, 2018, op. cit.

At times, some in Congress have advocated that the United States adopt a formal policy of overthrow of the regime. In the 111th Congress, one bill said that it should be U.S. policy to promote the overthrow of the regime (the Iran Democratic Transition Act, S. 3008).

Many of Iran's leaders, particularly Supreme Leader Khamene'i, continue to articulate a perception that the United States has never accepted the 1979 Islamic revolution. Khamene'i and other Iranian figures note that the United States provided funding to antiregime groups, mainly promonarchists, during the 1980s.[36] Comments by various U.S. Administrations on the issue of Iran regime change have been noted above.

[36] CRS conversations with U.S. officials responsible for Iran policy. 1980-1990. After a period of suspension of such assistance, in 1995, the Clinton Administration accepted a House-Senate conference agreement to include $18-$20 million in funding authority for covert operations against Iran in the FY1996 Intelligence Authorization Act (H.R. 1655), according to a *Washington Post* report of December 22, 1995. The Clinton Administration reportedly focused the covert aid on changing the regime's behavior, rather than its overthrow.

### The Shah's Son, Student Activists, and Other Prominent Dissidents

Some Iranians abroad, including in the United States, want to replace the regime with a constitutional monarchy led by Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-based son of the late former Shah and a U.S.-trained combat pilot. The Shah's son, born in 1960, has condemned the regime for the 2009 crackdown and called for the international community to withdraw representation in Tehran. He appears periodically in broadcasts in Iran through Iranian exile-run stations in California, as well as in other Iran-oriented media. He gave a lecture at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in December 2018.

Pahlavi has always retained some support from the older generations in Iran, but he has tried to broaden his following by denying he seeks to restore the monarchy. Since March 2011, he has increasingly cooperated with—and possibly attempted to co-opt—younger leaders in a "National Council of Iran" (NCI), which was established with over 30 groups in April 2013. The Council drafted democratic principles for a post-Islamic republic Iran but it suffered defections and its activity level diminished to the point where it largely disbanded. In April 2018, a discovery in Tehran of a mumified body was possibly that of his grandfather, Reza Shah, who ruled from 1925-1941 and is remembered fondly by some Iranians for instituting law and order.

Student dissident groups composed of well-educated, Westernized urban youth have been the backbone of the Iranian opposition. The Office of Consolidation of Unity is the student group that led the 1999 riots but which later became controlled by regime loyalists. An offshoot, the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS), led by U.S.-based Amir Abbas Fakhravar, believes in regime replacement and in 2013 formed a "National Iran Congress" to advocate that outcome. The group has drafted a constitution, modeled after western constitutions, for a future republic of Iran. Cofounder Arzhang Davoodi has been in prison since 2002 and in July 2014 was sentenced to death. The sentence has not been implemented to date.

Other dissidents, some in Iran, others in exile (including in the United States), have criticized the regime for decades.

Journalist Akbar Ganji left Iran in 2006 after serving 6 years in prison for alleging high-level involvement in the 100 murders of Iranian dissident intellectuals.

Religion scholar Abdolkarim Soroush left Iran in 2001 after challenging the doctrine of clerical rule.

Former Revolutionary Guard organizer Mohsen Sazegara broadcasts online to Iran from his base in the United States.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate (2003) and Iran human rights activist lawyer Shirin Abadi, who for many years represented clients persecuted or prosecuted by the regime, left Iran after the 2009 uprising.

Other significant dissidents in exile include former Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani, Mohsen Kadivar, and U.S.-based Fatemah Haghighatjoo.

Some well-known dissidents have been incarcerated periodically or continuously since 2010, including filmmaker Jafar Panahi and famed blogger Hossein Derakshan, and journalist Abdolreza Tajik. The elderly leader of the Iran Freedom Movement, Ibrahim Yazdi, was released from prison in April 2011 after resigning as the movement's leader. Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was released from prison in September 2013, but has been jailed again since June 2018 for representing women who protested against compulsory hijab. In May 2015, the regime arrested Narges Mohammadi, a well-known activist against regime executions.

## Democracy Promotion and Internet Freedom Efforts

Successive Administrations and Congresses have sought to at least lay the groundwork for eventual regime change through "democracy promotion" programs and sanctions on Iranian human rights abuses. Legislation authorizing democracy promotion in Iran was enacted in the 109th Congress. The Iran Freedom Support Act (P.L. 109-293, signed September 30, 2006) authorized funds (no specific dollar amount) for Iran democracy promotion.[37] Several laws and Executive Orders issued since 2010 are intended to promote internet freedom, and the Administration has amended U.S.-Iran trade regulations to allow for the sale to Iranians of consumer electronics and software that help them communicate. Then-Under Secretary of State

[37] This legislation was a modification of H.R. 282, which passed the House on April 26, 2006, by a vote of 397-21, and S. 333, which was introduced in the Senate.

Wendy Sherman testified on October 14, 2011, that some of the democracy promotion funding for Iran was used to train Iranians to use technologies that circumvent regime internet censorship.

Many have argued that U.S. funding for such programs is counterproductive because the support has caused Iran to use the support as a justification to accuse the civil society activists of disloyalty. Some civil society activists have refused to participate in U.S.-funded programs, fearing arrest.[38] The Obama Administration altered Iran democracy promotion programs somewhat toward working with Iranians inside Iran who are organized around apolitical issues such as health, education, science, and the environment.[39] The State Department, which often uses appropriated funds to support prodemocracy programs run by organizations based in the United States and in Europe, refuses to name grantees for security reasons. The funds shown below have been obligated through DRL and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in partnership with USAID. Some of the funds have also been used for cultural exchanges, public diplomacy, and broadcasting to Iran. A further indication of the sensitivity of specifying the use of the funds is that, since FY2010, funds have been provided for Iran civil society/democracy promotion as part of a broader "Near East regional democracy programs."

Iran asserts that funding democracy promotion represents a violation of the 1981 "Algiers Accords" that settled the Iran hostage crisis and provide for noninterference in each other's internal affairs. The George W. Bush Administration asserted that open funding of Iranian prodemocracy activists (see below) was a stated effort to change regime behavior, not to overthrow the regime, although some saw the Bush Administration's efforts as a cover to achieve a regime change objective.

### *Broadcasting/Public Diplomacy Issues*

Another part of the democracy promotion effort has been the development of Iran-specific U.S. broadcasting services to Iran. Radio *Farda* ("tomorrow," in Farsi) began under Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), in partnership with the Voice of America (VOA), in 2002. The service was established as a successor to a smaller Iran broadcasting effort begun with an initial $4 million from the FY1998 Commerce/State/Justice appropriation (P.L. 105-119). It was to be called Radio Free Iran but was never formally given that name by RFE/RL. Based in Prague, Radio *Farda* broadcasts 24 hours/day, and its budget is over $11 million per year. No U.S. assistance has been provided to Iranian exile-run stations.[40] As noted above, Secretary Pompeo has announced a new Persian-language channel for Iranians through various media, but it is not clear whether this new service will augment existing programs or form an entirely new program.

*VOA Persian Service.* The VOA established a Persian-language service to Iran in July 2003. It consists of radio broadcasting (one hour a day of original programming); television (six hours a day of primetime programming, rebroadcast throughout a 24-hour period); and internet. The service has come been criticized by observers for losing much of its audience among young,

[38] Three other Iranian Americans were arrested and accused by the Intelligence Ministry of actions contrary to national security in May 2007: U.S. funded broadcast (Radio Farda) journalist Parnaz Azima (who was not in jail but was not allowed to leave Iran); Kian Tajbakhsh of the Open Society Institute funded by George Soros; and businessman and peace activist Ali Shakeri. Several congressional resolutions called on Iran to release Esfandiari (S.Res. 214 agreed to by the Senate on May 24; H.Res. 430, passed by the House on June 5; and S.Res. 199). All were released by October 2007. Tajbakhsh was later rearrested and convicted for "actions against national security" in 2010 and sentenced to five years. He left Iran for the United States in January 2016.

[39] CRS conversation with U.S. officials of the "Iran Office" of the U.S. Consulate in Dubai, October 2009.

[40] The conference report on the FY2006 regular foreign aid appropriations stated the sense of Congress that such support should be considered.

educated, antiregime Iranians who are looking for signs of U.S. official support. The costs for the service are about $20 million per year.

**Table 4. Iran Democracy Promotion Funding**

| | |
|---|---|
| FY2004 | Foreign operations appropriation (P.L. 108-199) earmarked $1.5 million for "educational, humanitarian and non-governmental organizations and individuals inside Iran to support the advancement of democracy and human rights in Iran." The State Department Bureau of Democracy and Labor (DRL) gave $1 million to a unit of Yale University, and $500,000 to National Endowment for Democracy. |
| FY2005 | $3 million from FY2005 foreign aid appropriation (P.L. 108-447) for democracy promotion. Priority areas: political party development, media, labor rights, civil society promotion, and human rights. |
| FY2006 | $11.15 million for democracy promotion from regular FY2006 foreign aid appropriation (P.L. 109-102). $4.15 million administered by DRL and $7 million for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. |
| FY2006 supp. | Total of $66.1 million (of $75 million requested) from FY2006 supplemental (P.L. 109-234): $20 million for democracy promotion; $5 million for public diplomacy directed at the Iranian population; $5 million for cultural exchanges; and $36.1 million for Voice of America-TV and "Radio *Farda*" broadcasting. Broadcasting funds are provided through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. |
| FY2007 | FY2007 continuing resolution provided $6.55 million for Iran (and Syria) to be administered through DRL. $3.04 million was used for Iran. No funds were requested. |
| FY2008 | $60 million (of $75 million requested) is contained in Consolidated Appropriation (H.R. 2764, P.L. 110-161), of which, according to the conference report, $21.6 million is ESF for prodemocracy programs, including nonviolent efforts to oppose Iran's meddling in other countries. $7.9 million is from a "Democracy Fund" for use by DRL. The appropriation also fully funded additional $33.6 million requested for Iran broadcasting: $20 million for VOA Persian service; $8.1 million for Radio Farda; and $5.5 million for exchanges with Iran. |
| FY2009 | Request was for $65 million in ESF "to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for a democratic and open society by promoting civil society, civic participation, media freedom, and freedom of information." H.R. 1105 (P.L. 111-8) provides $25 million for democracy promotion programs in the region, including in Iran. |
| FY2010 | $40 million requested and used for Near East Regional Democracy programming. Programs to promote human rights, civil society, and public diplomacy in Iran constitute a significant use of these region-wide funds. |
| FY2011 | $40 million requested and will be used for Near East Regional Democracy programs. Programming for Iran with these funds to be similar to FY2010. |
| FY2012 | $35 million for Near East Regional Democracy (NERD), and Iran-related use similar to FY2010 and FY2011. |
| FY2013 | $30 million for NERD, with Iran use similar to prior two fiscal years. About $583,000 was obligated for Iran democracy promotion. |
| FY2014 | $30 million for NERD. About $1 million was obligated for Iran democracy promotion. |
| FY2015 | $30 million for NERD. About $675,000 was obligated for Iran democracy promotion |
| FY2016 | $32 million for NERD, About $900,000 was obligated for Iran democracy promotion. |
| FY2017 | $32 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years. |
| FY2018 | $15 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years. |
| FY2019 | $15 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years. |

**Sources:** Information provided by State Department and reviewed by Department's Iran Office, February 1, 2010; State Department Congressional Budget Justifications; USAID Explorer database.

**Ethnicity- and Sect-Based Armed Groups**

**Sunni Armed Opposition: Jundullah**

*Jundullah is* composed of Sunni Muslims primarily from the Baluchistan region bordering Pakistan. The region is inhabited by members of the Baluch minority and is far less developed than other parts of Iran. On the grounds that *Jundullah* has attacked civilians in the course of violent attacks in Iran, the State Department formally named it an FTO on November 4, 2010. *Jundullah* has conducted several attacks on Iranian security and civilian officials, including a May 2009 bombing of a mosque in Zahedan and the October 2009 killing of five IRGC commanders in Sistan va Baluchistan Province. The regime claimed a victory against the group in February 2010 with the capture of its top leader, Abdolmalek Rigi. The regime executed him in June 2010, but the group retaliated in July 2010 with a Zahedan bombing that killed 28 persons, including some IRGC personnel. The group was responsible for a December 15, 2010, bombing at a mosque in Chahbahar that killed 38.

**Kurdish Armed Groups**

One armed Kurdish group operating out of Iraq is the Free Life Party, known by its acronym PJAK. Its leader is believed to be Abdul Rahman Hajji Ahmadi, born in 1941, who is a citizen of Germany and lives in that country. Many PJAK fighters reportedly are women. PJAK was designated by the Department of the Treasury in early February 2009 as a terrorism supporting entity under Executive Order 13224, although the designation statement indicated the decision was based mainly on PJAK's association with the Turkish Kurdish opposition group Kongra Gel, also known as the PKK. Five Kurds executed by Iran's regime in May 2010 were alleged members of PJAK. In July 2016, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) announced a resumption of "armed struggle" against the regime, which had been suspended for 25 years, following clashes with the IRGC that left several dead on both sides. KDP-I fighters involved in the clashes reportedly had entered Iran from Kurdish-controlled territory in Iraq. The Kurds who were recruited by the Islamic State for the June 2017 attacks in Tehran, discussed above, did not have clear affiliations with the established Kurdish armed groups discussed above. In late September 2018, Iran fired ballistic missiles at a base of the KDP-I in northern Iraq,

**Arab Oppositionists/Ahwazi Arabs**

Another militant group, the *Ahwazi Arabs*, operates in the largely Arab-inhabited areas of southwest Iran. Relatively inactive over the past few years, and the regime continues to execute captured members of the organization. The group purportedly was responsible for a September 22, 2018, attack on a military parade in the city of Ahwaz, which killed 25 persons, mostly IRGC personnel. Iran accused not only the Ahwazi Arabs but also Saudi Arabia, the Islamic State organization, and the United States for supporting that attack. On October 1, 2018, Iran retaliated for the assault by launching ballistic missiles at suspected Islamic State positions inside Syria.

## *State Department Public Diplomacy Efforts*

The State Department has sought outreach to the Iranian population. In May 2003, the State Department added a Persian-language website to its list of foreign-language websites, under the authority of the Bureau of International Information Programs. The website was announced as a source of information about the United States and its policy toward Iran. In February 14, 2011, the State Department began Persian-language Twitter feeds in an effort to connect better with internet users in Iran. In part to augment U.S. public diplomacy, the State Department announced in April 2011 that a Persian-speaking U.S. diplomat based at the U.S. Consulate in Dubai would make regular appearances on Iranian media.

Since 2006, the State Department has been increasing the presence of Persian-speaking U.S. diplomats in U.S. diplomatic missions around Iran, in part to help identify and facilitate Iranian participation in U.S. democracy-promotion programs. The Iran unit at the U.S. Consulate in Dubai has been enlarged significantly into a "regional presence" office, and "Iran-watcher" positions have been added to U.S. diplomatic facilities in Baku, Azerbaijan; Istanbul, Turkey; Frankfurt, Germany; London; and Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, all of which have large expatriate Iranian populations and/or proximity to Iran.[41]

[41] Farah Stockman, "'Long Struggle' With Iran Seen Ahead," *Boston Globe*, March 9, 2006.

## People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK, PMOI)/National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)

The best-known exiled opposition group is the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK), also known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI). It is the main organization within the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which acts as a parliament-in-exile. Secular and left-leaning, the PMOI was formed in 1965 by university students opposed to the Shah of Iran. It has been widely characterized as blending several left-leaning ideologies with Islam, but it advocates universal suffrage, a non-nuclear Iran, and abolition of use Sharia law in Iran. The group allied with pro-Khomeini forces during the Islamic revolution and, according to State Department reports, supported the November 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The group' was exiled after unsuccessfully rising up against the Khomeini regime in mid-1981, and thousands of its members have since been executed, including those massacred in prison in 1988. The PMOI was led until 1989 by spouses Maryam and Massoud Rajavi, the former of which has been NCRI President-elect since 1992. Mrs. Rajavi is based in France and the whereabouts of Massoud Rajavi are unknown. The PMOI elects a Secretary-General every two years and the Rajavis are no longer involved in its day-to-day operations.

The State Department designated the PMOI as an FTO in October 1997, during a time when the Clinton Administration was trying to forge dialogue with President Khatemi. In August 2003, the Department of the Treasury ordered the NCRI's offices in the United States closed. The FTO designation was based on State Department reports asserting that the members of the PMOI were responsible for the killing of seven American military personnel and contract advisers to the former Shah during 1973-1976; and bombings at U.S. government and U.S. corporate offices in Tehran to protest the 1972 visits to Iran of President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger. The reports also listed as terrorism several attacks by the group against regime targets (including 1981 bombings that killed high-ranking officials), attacks on Iranian government facilities, and attacks on Iranian security officials. The group has denied involvement in the attacks. The group's alliance with Iraq's Saddam Hussein contributed to the designation, even though Saddam was a U.S. ally when the group moved to Iraq in 1987.

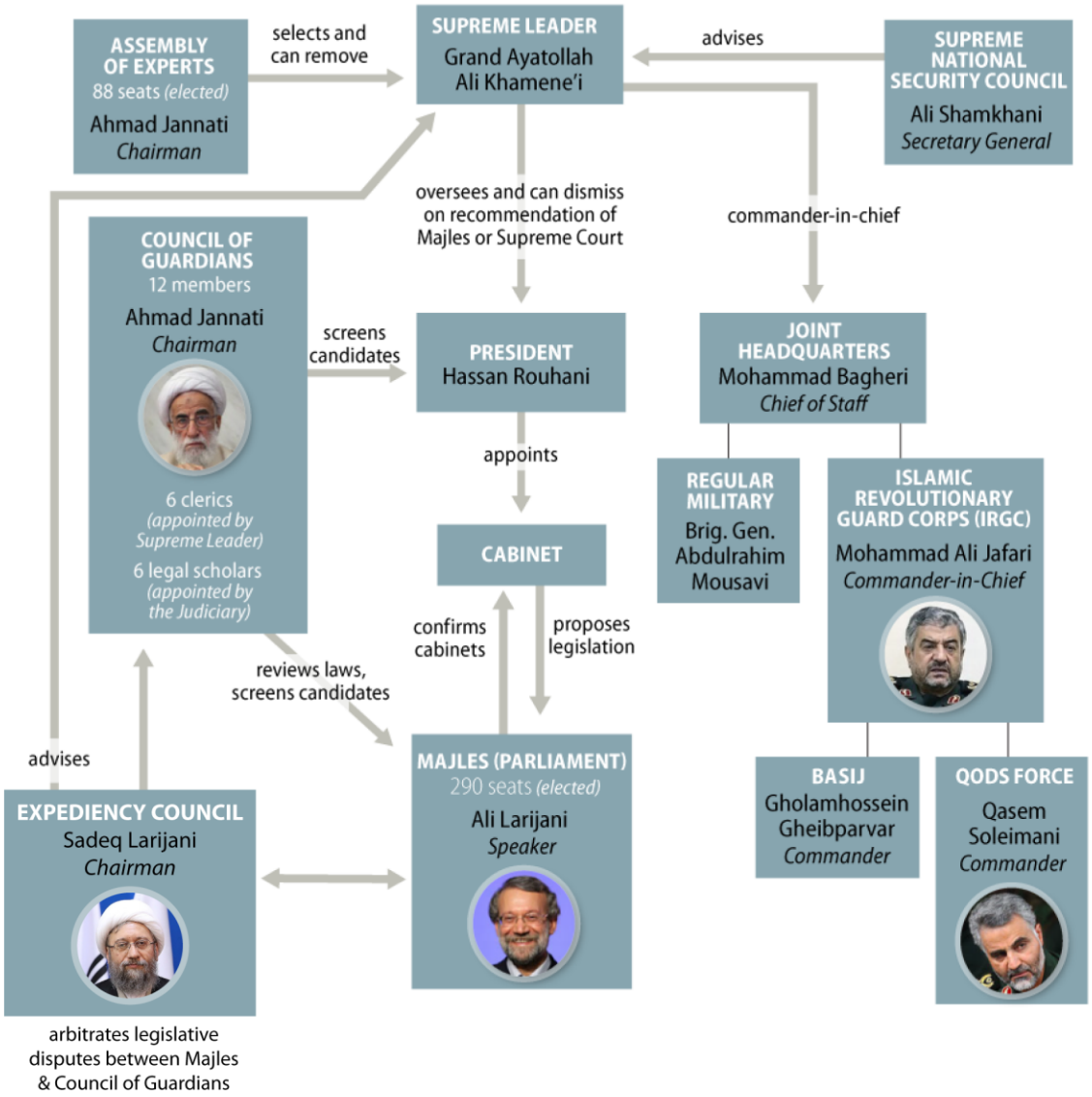
The PMOI challenged the FTO listing in the U.S. court system and, in June 2012, the Appeals Court gave the State Department until October 1, 2012, to decide on the FTO designation, without prescribing an outcome. On September 28, 2012, maintaining there had not been confirmed acts of PMOI terrorism for more than a decade and that it had cooperated on the Camp Ashraf issue (below), the group was removed from the FTO list and was "de-listed" from its designation as a terrorist group under Executive Order 13224. State Department officials, in a background briefing that day, said, "We do not see the [PMOI] as a viable or democratic opposition movement." However, regime officials often blame the PMOI for stoking unrest in Iran, suggesting regime nervousness about the group's support level within Iran and degree of organization. One indication of the regime's fear of the group was a June 2018 plot, orchestrated by an Iranian diplomat in Vienna, Austria and foiled by European security organizations, to bomb a PMOI rally in France. The group has also been credited for exposing Iranian nuclear sites and other proliferation-related locations and actions. The State Department has been meeting with the MEK since its removal from the FTO list, including in Iraq. The NCR-I reopened its offices in Washington, DC, in April 2013.

**Camp Ashraf Issue**

The situation of PMOI members in Iraq has been resolved. U.S. forces attacked PMOI military installations in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom (March 2003) and negotiated a ceasefire with PMOI elements in Iraq, under which the 3,400 PMOI members consolidated at Camp Ashraf, near the border with Iran. Its weaponry was placed in storage, guarded by U.S. and Iraqi personnel. In July 2004, the United States granted the Ashraf detainees "protected persons" status under the 4th Geneva Convention, although that designation lapsed when Iraq resumed full sovereignty in June 2004. The Iraqi government's pledges to adhere to all international obligations with respect to the PMOI in Iraq have come into question on several occasions: on July 28, 2009, Iraq used force to overcome resident resistance to setting up a police post in the camp, killing 13 residents of the camp. On April 8, 2011, Iraq Security Forces killed 36 Ashraf residents. In December 2011, the Iraqi government and the United Nations agreed to relocate Ashraf residents to the former U.S. military base Camp Liberty, near Baghdad's main airport. The relocation was completed by September 17, 2012, leaving a residual group of 101 PMOI persons at Ashraf. Despite the move, the government failed to prevent Iraqi Shiite militias from attacking Camp Liberty residents with rockets and other weaponry. And, on September 1, 2013, 52 of the residual Ashraf residents were killed by gunmen that appeared to have assistance from Iraqi forces. Seven went missing. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92) called for "prompt and appropriate steps" to promote the protection of camp residents. In September 2016, the 280 remaining residents of Camp Liberty were resettled in Albania and there are no more PMOI members there.

**Sources**: Various press reports and CRS conversations with NCR-I representatives and experts.

**Figure 1. Structure of the Iranian Government**




Images sources, clockwise: Ahmad Janneti and Mohammad Ali Jafar from Tasnim News Agency; Qasem Soleimani and Ali Larijani from http://akkasemosalman.ir; Sadeq Larijani from http://farsi.khamenei.ir

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**Source:** CRS.

**Figure 2. Map of Iran**

**Source:** Map boundaries from Wikimedia Commons, 2007. Graphic: CRS.

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