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

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SUMMARY

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

U.S.-Iran relations have been mostly adversarial since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, occasionally flaring into direct conflict while at other times witnessing negotiations or tacit cooperation on selected issues. U.S. officials have consistently identified Iran's support for militant Middle East groups as a significant threat to U.S. interests and allies, and Iran's nuclear program took precedence in U.S. policy after 2002 as that program advanced.

The Obama Administration sought to change longstanding policy toward Iran by engaging it directly to obtain a limited July 2015 multilateral nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). That agreement exchanged sanctions relief for limits on Iran's nuclear program, but did not contain binding curbs on Iran's missile program or its regional interventions, or any requirements that the Iranian government end its human rights abuses. The Trump Administration largely returned to prior policies of seeking to weaken Iran strategically. Trump Administration officials cited the JCPOA's perceived shortcomings in a May 8, 2018 U.S. exit from the JCPOA and the subsequent re-imposition of all U.S. secondary sanctions to apply "maximum pressure" on Iran. The stated intent of Trump Administration policy is to compel Iran to change its behavior, including negotiating a new nuclear agreement that encompasses the broad range of U.S. concerns. Iran has responded by undertaking actions against commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf, supporting attacks by allies in Iraq and Yemen to attack U.S., Saudi, and other targets in the region, and by exceeding nuclear limits set by the JCPOA. The Administration has added forces to the Gulf region, as well as explained the January 3, 2020, airstrike that killed a top Iranian commander, Qasem Soleimani, as efforts to deter further such Iranian or Iran-backed actions.

Along with the Trump Administration shift in policy, the United States and Iran have had minimal direct contact since 2017. However, President Trump continues to indicate a willingness to meet with Iranian leaders without preconditions. Iranian leaders say there will be no direct high level U.S.-Iran meetings until the United States reenters the 2015 JCPOA and lifts U.S. sanctions as provided for in that agreement. Administration officials have detailed a litany of objectionable behaviors that Iran must change for there to be a normalization of relations, most of which require Iran to cease arming and supporting armed factions in the region.

Some experts assert that the threat posed by Iran stems from the nature and ideology of Iran's regime, and that the unstated goal of Trump Administration policy is to bring about regime collapse. President Trump has specifically denied that this is the U.S. objective. Any U.S. regime change strategy presumably would take advantage of divisions and fissures within Iran, as well as evident popular unrest resulting from political and economic frustration. Significant protests and riots, including burning of some government installations and private establishments, have broken out since 2017. There has not been unrest recently in response to the government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has affected Iran significantly and in which the official response has been widely criticized as ineffective.

There are also significant leadership differences in Iran. 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. However, the killing of Soleimani contributed to a significant victory by hardliners in the February 21, 2020, *Majles* (parliamentary) elections. Hardliners also continue to control the state institutions that maintain internal security largely through suppression and by all accounts have been emboldened by U.S. policy to challenge the United States and pursue significant U.S. concessions in order to avoid conflict.

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; CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman; and CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas.

Contents

Political History ... 1
Regime Structure, Stability, and Opposition ... 2
Unelected or Indirectly Elected Institutions: The Supreme Leader, Council of Guardians, and Expediency Council ... 4
The Supreme Leader ... 4
Council of Guardians and Expediency Council ... 4
Domestic Security Organs ... 6
Elected Institutions/Recent Elections ... 7
The Presidency ... 7
The Majles ... 8
The Assembly of Experts ... 8
Recent Elections ... 8
Periodic Unrest Challenges the Regime ... 14
Human Rights Practices ... 17
U.S.-Iran Relations, U.S. Policy, and Options ... 19
Reagan Administration: Iran Placed on "Terrorism List" ... 20
George H. W. Bush Administration: "Goodwill Begets Goodwill" ... 20
Clinton Administration: "Dual Containment" ... 21
George W. Bush Administration: Iran Part of "Axis of Evil" ... 21
Obama Administration: Pressure, Engagement, and the JCPOA ... 21
Trump Administration: JCPOA Exit and "Maximum Pressure" ... 23
Withdrawal from the JCPOA and Subsequent Pressure Efforts ... 24
Policy Elements and Options ... 27
Engagement and Improved Bilateral Relations ... 27
Military Action ... 27
Economic Sanctions ... 29
Regime Change ... 30
Democracy Promotion and Internet Freedom Efforts ... 33

Figures

Figure 1. Structure of the Iranian Government ... 38
Figure 2. Map of Iran ... 39

Tables

Table 1. Other Major Institutions, Factions, and Individuals ... 6
Table 2. Human Rights Practices: General Categories ... 18
Table 3. Summary of U.S. Sanctions Against Iran ... 30
Table 4. Iran Democracy Promotion Funding ... 35

Contacts

Author Information..... 39

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 Dynasty, 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 Shia Islam under the Safavid Dynasty (1500-1722), which ended a series of Turkic and Mongol conquests.

During the Cold War, the United States viewed the Shah 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 1949 elections, he appointed a popular nationalist parliamentarian, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, as prime minister. Mossadeq was widely considered left-leaning, and the United States opposed his drive to nationalize 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, but in so doing he alienated the Shia 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 Shia 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 and other anti-government 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, in part due to the destruction of its oil export capacity and its need to ration goods.

Regime Structure, Stability, and Opposition

The structure of authority in Iran defies easy categorization. There are elected leadership posts and a diversity of opinion among the ruling elite, but Iran's constitution—adopted in public referenda in late 1979 and again in 1989—reserves paramount decisionmaking authority for a "Supreme Leader" (known 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 select mayors and set local development priorities. Throughout Iran's power structure, there are disputes between those who insist on ideological purity and those considered more pragmatic. Nonetheless, the preponderant political power wielded by the Shia Islamic clergy and the security apparatus has contributed to the eruption of repeated periodic unrest from 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."[2] 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. 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."[3]

[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.

[3] Department of State. "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities." September 25, 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." He still lacks the undisputed authority and the public adoration Khomeini had, and competes with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani of Iraq and other Shia clerics for the role of *marja taqlid* ("source of inspiration")—the leading Shia figure who holds the allegiance of millions of Shias regionwide and worldwide. As to Khamene'i's health situation, the government acknowledged that he underwent prostate surgery in September 2014, but he has since appeared in public regularly. Has not traveled outside Iran since becoming Supreme Leader. Lives in the Pasteur district of Tehran. He and his wife have four sons and two daughters.

Policies

Khamene'i sets overall policy direction, particularly on regional and national security issues, but tends to allow elected presidents to pursue policy initiatives that they assert advances Iran's interests, for example the JCPOA. 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. 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. In 2019, he directly criticized President Hassan Rouhani for expecting the United States to uphold the JCPOA long term.

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 the IRGC 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. Mojtaba was sanctioned by the Trump Administration in November 2019.

Photograph from http://www.leader.ir. Sources: various press

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 chosen by an elected body—the Assembly of Experts—which also has the constitutional power to remove him, as well as to redraft Iran's constitution and submit it for approval in a national referendum. The Supreme Leader is required to be a senior Shia cleric. Upon Ayatollah Khomeini's death, the Assembly selected one of his disciples, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, as Supreme Leader.[4] 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.

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.

Under the constitution, the Supreme Leader is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, giving him the power to appoint commanders. Khamene'i appoints five out of the nine members of the country's highest national security body, the *Supreme National Security Council (SNSC),* on which sit the heads of the regime's top military, foreign policy, and domestic security organizations. Senior IRGC leader and former Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani, who espouses more moderate views than his IRGC peers, has headed that body since September 2013.[5]

Succession to Khamene'i

There is no designated successor or immediately obvious choice to succeed Khamene'i. The Assembly of Experts could conceivably use a constitutional provision to set up a three-person leadership council as successor rather than select one new Supreme Leader. Khamene'i reportedly favors Hojjat ol-Eslam Ibrahim Raisi, whom he appointed in March 2019 as head of the judiciary, and 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 has served as state prosecutor and was allegedly involved in the 1988 massacre of prisoners and other acts of repression.[6] Raisi lost the May 2017 presidential election to Rouhani.

Raisi's predecessor as judiciary chief, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani,[7] remains a succession candidate. Another contender is hardline Tehran Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Ahmad Khatemi, and some consider President Rouhani as a contender as well.

Council of Guardians and Expediency Council

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

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[4] 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.

[5] Shamkhani was sanctioned by the Administration in January 2020 as part of the Supreme Leader's office. See CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[6] "Iran cleric linked to 1988 mass executions to lead judiciary."Associated Press, March 7, 2019.

[7] Larijani was sanctioned by the Administration in 2019.

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, who is over 90 years of age, 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 a policy advisory body for the Supreme Leader, and it employs researchers and experts to develop policy options on various issues. Its members serve five-year terms. Longtime regime stalwart Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani served as the body's chairman until his January 2017 death. In August 2017, the Supreme Leader expanded the council from 42 to 45 members, and former judiciary head Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi became chairman. Shahroudi passed away in December 2018 and Sadeq Larijani, who was then head of the judiciary, was appointed by the Supreme Leader as his replacement. Iran's president and speaker of *Majles* 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 Shia Clerics/Grand Ayatollahs	The most senior Shia 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 – an exemption that often causes unrest and protest of privileges enjoyed by regime insiders.
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 E.O. 13224 that sanctions entities determined to be supporting acts of international terrorism. On April 8, 2019, the IRGC was also designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), a designation that has not previously been applied to a military organization of any country. In April 2019, the Supreme Leader replaced IRGC commander-in-chief Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari with his deputy, Major General Hossein Salami, and he replaced several other IRGC officials including the IRGC head of security.
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. The IRGC is discussed extensively in CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman. See also CRS Insight IN11093, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard Named a Terrorist Organization*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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. State Department and other human rights reports on Iran repeatedly assert that internal security personnel are not held accountable for human rights abuses. Several security organizations and their senior leaders are sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses and other violations of U.S. Executive Orders.

The domestic security organs include the following:

- **The IRGC and Basij.** The IRGC's domestic security role is implemented primarily through its volunteer militia force called the *Basij.* To suppress large and violent antigovernment demonstrations, the *Basij* gets backing from the IRGC, whose bases are located mostly in urban areas and which can quickly intervene. In July 2019, Khamene'i replaced appointed a new Basij commander, Gholamreza Soleimani, who was sanctioned by the Administration in January 2020 and who is not related to the late IRGC-Qf commander Qasem Soleimani.

The *Basij* is widely accused of arresting women who violate the regime's public dress codes and raiding Western-style parties that serve alcohol, which is illegal in Iran.

- **Law Enforcement Forces.** This body is an amalgam of regular police, gendarmerie, and riot police that serve throughout the country. These forces generally implement the regime's initial response to non-violent demonstrations or unrest.
- **Ministry of Interior.** The ministry exercises civilian supervision of Iran's police and domestic security forces. The IRGC and *Basij* do not report to the ministry.
- **Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).** The MOIS conducts domestic surveillance to identify regime opponents. It also surveils anti-regime activists abroad through its network of agents placed in Iran's embassies. It works closely with IRGC-Qods Force agents outside Iran, although the two institutions sometimes differ in their approaches, as has been reportedly the case in deciding on which politicians to support in Iraq.[8]

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 size and ideological diversity of the candidate field. Women can vote and run for most offices, but the COG has consistently interpreted the Iranian constitution as prohibiting women from running for president. Candidates must receive more than 50% of the vote to avoid a runoff that is usually held several weeks later.

Another criticism of the political process is the relative absence of political parties. Establishing a party requires the permission of the Interior Ministry (Article 10 of Iran's constitution), but the standards to obtain approval are high. Since the regime was founded, numerous groups have filed for permission to operate as parties, but only a few—considered loyal to the regime—have been granted licenses 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 top directly-elected institution is the presidency, which is formally and in practice subordinate to the Supreme Leader. Virtually every 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 IRGC. However, the presidency is the most influential economic policymaking position and 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, and it oversees the various official pension funds and government-run social services agencies.

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

[8] "Leaked Iranian intelligence reports illustrate the folly of the US's Middle East strategy." The Strategist, November 20, 2019.

conflict and a 1989 constitutional revision eliminated the prime ministership. In part because Iran's presidents have often sought to expand their authority, Khamene'i has periodically raised the possibility of 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—Jew, Zoroastrian, and Christian (three seats). 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 some generally are elected, and there is no "quota" for the number of women. *Majles* elections occur in the year prior to the presidential elections.

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 most likely occur only in the event of a severe health crisis. The Assembly is also empowered to draft amendments to 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. In March 2011, the aging compromise candidate Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani was named chairman, but he died in 2014. His successor, Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, lost his seat in the Assembly of Experts election on February 26, 2016 (held concurrently with the *Majles* elections), and COG Chairman Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati was appointed concurrently as the assembly chairman in May 2016.

Recent Elections

Following the presidency of regime stalwart Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani during 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 more than 1,000 who filed candidacies), including Rafsanjani,[9] 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. Splits later erupted among hardliners, and pro-Ahmadinejad and pro-Khamene'i candidates 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

[9] 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) two hours after the polls closed, prompting Musavi supporters (who was announced as receiving 35% of the vote) to protest the results as fraudulent. But, some outside analysts said the results tracked preelection polls.[10] 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 meanwhile also returning to his prior work as a professor of civil engineering.

[10] 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 widely termed "reformists" – they seek political freedoms but do not advocate replacement of the regime. Since the 2009 Green Movement uprising, these reformist leaders apparently are not as widely followed as they were for the years just after the uprising, and they apparently have been displaced by younger, anti-regime activists skilled in the use of social media. 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.

Pro-reformist 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 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 former president Mohammad Khatemi.

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 denied Rafsanjani's candidacy, which shocked many Iranians because of Rafsanjani's prominence, as well as that 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.

Rouhani's first term cabinet contained a mixture of hardliners and moderates, including the moderates Mohammad Javad Zarif, a former Ambassador to the United Nations in New York, appointed concurrently as chief nuclear negotiator, and Bijan Zanganeh as Oil Minister. Zanganeh served in the same post during the Khatemi presidency and replaced Rostam Qasemi, who was associated with the corporate arm of the IRGC. The notable hardliners included Defense Minister Hosein Dehgan, an IRGC stalwart and 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. (He is currently a military advisor to the Supreme Leader.) Another hardliner was Justice Minister Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi who, as deputy intelligence minister in late 1980s, reportedly was a decisionmaker in the 1988 mass executions of Iranian prisoners.

Dr. Hassan Rouhani

Hassan Rouhani, a Hojjat ol-Islam in the Shia clergy (one rank below Ayatollah) straddles the academic world as well as holder of a Ph.D. in law from Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland. Rouhani, born in 1948, 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'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. Hardliners who opposed Iranian concessions in the JCPOA were unable to persuade Khamene'i, the *Majles*, or the COG to block the accord, but he faces escalating political pressure from hardliners since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. An illustration of that pressure has been the conviction of his brother, Hossein Fereidoun, on charges of corruption and his sentencing on October 1, 2019, to five years in prison, Rouhani has not sought changes in Iran's regional policies. Sanctions relief during 2016-2018 caused the economy to grow since sanctions were lifted, but Khamene'i's advocacy of a "resistance economy" have been widely interpreted as contradicting Rouhani's emphasis on developing trade relations.

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 to incarcerate the leaders of the 2009 uprising. Rouhani managed significant public unrest in late 2017-early 2018 by restraining hardline institutions from a major crackdown and acknowledging protester grievances. Has also apparently prevailed on hardliners to ease enforcement of the public dress code for women. Has not succeeded, to date, in efforts to marginalize the IRGC role in Iran's economy.

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. The CoG approved 6,200 candidates, including 586 female candidates, and invalidated about 6,000, including all but 100 reformists. Pro-Rouhani candidates won nearly half the seats,

and the number of avowed hardliners in the body was reduced significantly. Independents, whose alignments vary by issue, won 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 pro-Rouhani candidates defeated two prominent hardliners—the incumbent 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 of 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, even though other hardliners dropped out of the race to improve Raisi's prospects.

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. More than 6% of the candidates were women. The alliance of reformists and moderate-conservatives 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 for his viewing of a dance performance by young girls celebrating a national holiday. The mayor, as of November 2018, is Pirouz Hanachi.

Rouhani's second term cabinet nominations retained most of the same officials in key posts, including Zarif. Since the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, hardliners have threatened to try to impeach Zarif for negotiating that accord. In February 2019, after being excluded from a leadership meeting with visiting President Bashar Al Asad of Syria, Zarif announced his resignation. Rouhani did not accept the resignation and Zarif stayed on.

Key changes to the second-term cabinet include the following:

- Minister of Justice Seyed Alireza Avayee replaced Pour-Mohammadi. Formerly a state prosecutor, Avayee oversaw trials of protesters in the 2009 uprising and is subject to EU travel ban and asset freeze.
- Defense Minister Amir Hatami became the first non-IRGC Defense Minister in more than 20 years and the first regular military officer in that position.
- The cabinet has two women vice presidents, and one other woman as a member of the cabinet (but not heading any ministry).

Majles Vote on February 21, 2020

The latest *Majles* elections were held on February 21, 2020, in the context of a balance of power that shifted to hardliners, at least in part as a result of the U.S. policy of exiting the Iran nuclear deal and placing economic pressure on Iran. The outpouring of public grieving for the U.S. killing of IRGC-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 suggested that hardliners in Iran have been ascendant.

During December 2019, about 15,000 candidates filed candidacies for the 290 *Majles* seats. The COG disqualified nearly half, including 90 incumbents that were mostly professed moderates or reformists. Among the reformists not allowed to run was Rouhani's son-in-law Kambiz

Mehdizadeh.[11] Speaker Larijani decided not to seek re-election, as did former speaker Gholam Haddad Adel. The turnout was about 42%, lower than in most recent Iranian elections, and hardliners won an overwhelming 230 of the 290 seats, including sweeping Tehran's 30 seats in the body.[12] The hardliner victory has set up IRGC stalwart and former Tehran mayor Mohammad Baqr Qalibaf as the favorite to selected *Majles* speaker when the body is inaugurated on May 28.

The next presidential elections, in which Rouhani will not be eligible to run again, is scheduled for May or June of 2021.

Periodic Unrest Challenges the Regime[13]

As noted, the regime has faced periodic flare-ups of significant unrest. In December 2017, protests erupted in more than 80 cities, mostly based on economic conditions but reflecting opposition to Iran's leadership and the expenditure of resources on interventions throughout the Middle East. Some protesters were apparently motivated by Rouhani's 2018-2019 budget proposals to increase funds for cleric-run businesses ("*bonyads*") and the IRGC. The government defused the unrest by coupling acknowledgment of the legitimacy of some demonstrator grievances with use of repressive force and a shutdown of access to social media sites such as the messaging system called "Telegram."[14] Iranian official media reported that 25 were killed and nearly 4,000 were arrested during that unrest.

During 2018-19, small protests and other acts of defiance took place, including shop closures in the Tehran bazaar in July 2018 and protests by some women against the strict public dress code. In addition, workers in various industries, including trucking and teaching, have conducted strikes to demand higher wages to help cope with rising prices. In early 2019, protests took place in southwestern Iran in response to the government's missteps in dealing with the effects of significant flooding in that area. The regime tasked the leadership of the relief efforts to the IRGC and IRGC-QF, working with Iraqi Shia militias who are powerful on the Iraqi side of the border where the floods took place.

In mid-2018, possibly to try to divert blame for Iran's economic situation, the regime established special "anti-corruption courts" that have, in some cases, imposed the death penalty on businessmen accused of taking advantage of reimposed sanctions for personal profit.[15] Iran also has used military action against armed factions that are based or have support outside Iran.

Significant unrest flared again on November 15, 2019, in response to a sudden government announcement of a reduction in subsidies for the price of gasoline. Prices rose 50% for amounts up to 15 gallons per month, and 300% (to about $1 per gallon) for amounts purchased beyond that amount. The government explained the subsidy reduction as a consensus government decision that was necessary in order to increase cash transfers to the poorest 75% of the population. To counter the protests, the government allowed peaceful protests, used repression against violent acts, and shut down access to the internet and social media. As he has done in past periods of unrest, Supreme Leader Khamene'i blamed the protests on agitation by foreign powers, while

[11] US Institute of Peace. Iran Primer. "Iran's 2020 Parliamentary Elections." February 3, 2020.

[12] "Factbox: The outcome of Iran's 2020 parliamentary elections." Atlantic Council, February 26, 2020.

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

[14] National Council of Resistance, "Khamene'i's Belated Confession to Injustice and Inability to Reform, a Desperate Attempt to Escape Overthrow," February 19, 2018.

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

also accusing exiled opposition groups of involvement. He also stated that dissatisfaction over the fuel price hikes was "understandable" but was necessary. On November 20, 2019, President Rouhani stated that the regime had achieved "victory" and had put down the unrest.

In mid-December 2019, based on surveys of persons inside Iran, Amnesty International asserted that over 300 protesters had been killed by security forces in the unrest, and thousands arrested.[16] The Iranian government asserted the figure was "fabricated." U.S. officials said in January 2020 that, based on a Reuters report that said it had obtained information from security officials inside Iran, security forces had killed 1,500 protesters in the unrest.[17]In the aftermath of the unrest, the State Department solicited Iranians to send photos and other information to the State Department documenting the Iranian crackdown and any other instances of regime human rights abuses.

January 2020 Unrest. Unrest re-emerged briefly in January 2020. Demonstrators took to the streets in mid-January 2020 after Iran admitted – after several days of concealment – that its military forces had mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet in the hours after Iran launched its January 8, 2020, missile strike in Iraq that was retaliation for the U.S. killing of IRGC-QF commander Soleimani. All 176 passengers, which included 82 Iranians, were killed. There have not been significant incidents of unrest reported to protest the government's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak in the winter-spring of 2020, even though many accounts indicate that the government's response to the outbreak has been ineffective and lacking in transparency.

The Trump Administration and other senior officials have supported each wave of protests by warning the regime against using force and expressing solidarity with the protesters. In response to the 2017 unrest, the Administration requested U.N. Security Council meetings to consider Iran's crackdown on the unrest, although no formal U.N. action was taken, and sanctioned then-judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani. On November 18, 2019, Secretary of State Pompeo stated, "The United States is monitoring the ongoing protests closely. We condemn strongly any acts of violence committed by this regime against the Iranian people and are deeply concerned by reports of several fatalities. We've been at that since the beginning of this administration."[18]

In the 115th Congress, several resolutions supported Iranian protestors, including H.Res. 676 (passed the House January 9, 2018), S.Res. 367, H.Res. 675, and S.Res. 368. In the 116th Congress, H.Res. 752 passed the House on January 28, 2020. The resolution, among other provisions: urges the Administration to work to convene emergency sessions of the United Nations Security Council and the United Nations Human Rights Council to condemn the ongoing human rights violations perpetrated by the Iranian regime and establish a mechanism by which the Security Council can monitor such violations; and encourages the Administration to provide assistance to the Iranian people to have free and uninterrupted access to the internet, including by broadening General License D–1 (which allows for the exportation to Iran of equipment that citizens can use to circumvent regime censorship of the internet).

[16]"'Vicious crackdown': Iran protest death toll at 304, Amnesty says." December 17, 2019.

[17] "US Confirms Report Citing Iran Officials as Saying 1,500 Killed in Protests." Voice of America. December 23, 2019.

[18] Department of State. "Press Briefing by Secretary Pompeo." November 18, 2019.

Demographics/Ethnic and Religious Minorities

General. Iran's population is about 83 million persons. 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 Shias; about 8% are Sunnis; and 1% are Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Baha'i', or other.

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 separatism.

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 and media outlets are routinely closed for supporting greater Kurdish autonomy or for allegedly supporting Kurdish armed factions. In May 2015, violent unrest broke out in the Kurdish city of Mahabad after a local woman was killed in a hotel there while with a member of Iran's intelligence services. Iranian Kurds recruited by the Islamic State terrorist organization attacked 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.

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 services. At times, there have been unexplained assassinations of pastors in Iran, as well as prosecutions for converting from Islam to Christianity and for proselytizing. One Pastor, Yousef Nadarkhani, has been repeatedly arrested.

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 substantial freedoms. However, the Iranian government sometimes promotes anti-Semitic rhetoric in state-sanctioned media. Then-President Ahmadinejad often questioned the existence of the Holocaust. 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 government, and are routinely discriminated against for employment. Virtually yearly congressional resolutions have condemned the repression of Iran's Baha'is. The March 17, 2017, report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Iran (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."

Sources: Various press reports, U.N. reports, and human rights organization reports.

Human Rights Practices[19]

U.S. State Department reports 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 and use of force against protesters. Such abuses include use of capital punishment, executions of minors, denial of fair public trial, harsh and life-threatening conditions in prison, and unlawful detention and torture. Many of these abuses have been reported to be practices among Iran's regional neighbors as well. Other than the release of U.S. and dual-nationals held, curtailing Iran's human rights abuses has not been named as a U.S. condition for improved relations.

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. The State Department's recent human rights reports say that key charter protections for individual rights of freedom to communicate and access information have not been implemented.

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. The rapporteur appointed in 2016, Asma Jahangir, issued two Iran reports, the latest of which was dated August 14, 2017 (A/72/322), before passing away in February 2018. The Special Rapporteur mandate was extended on March 24, 2018, and British-Pakistani lawyer Javaid Rehman was appointed in July 2018. 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."

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.

[19] Much of the information in this section comes from the State Department Country Report on Human Rights for 2019; Iran.

Women's Rights

Women can vote and run for office, but women who have sought to run for president have always been barred from doing so by the Council of Guardians. They have served in cabinet and vice presidential positions, as well as in mayoral posts, 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 are often arrested if they do not cover their head in public, generally with a garment called a *chador*, but, in 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 2017.[20]

In recent years, women have protested the ban on their attending sports events such as soccer matches. On October 10, 2019, following negotiations between the FIFA world soccer organization and Iran, women were allowed to attend a match between Iran and Cambodia. However, only a limited number of women were given seats and had to stay in a segregated, cordoned-off areas of the stadium.

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

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 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.

Table 2. Human Rights Practices: General Categories

Media Freedoms	The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance monitors journalist 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. Iran continues to arrest some activists who use social media to agitate against the government. Iran has set up a national network that has a monopoly on internet service for Iranians.
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

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

	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 Shia Islam as the official state religion and restrictions on religious freedom for some non-Shia groups are widely reported. 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 applied to oppositionists.
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. Iran reportedly executed over 100 persons between January 1 and June 30, 2019, including two juveniles. 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. Iran has not held accountable officials involved in the summer 1988 executions of thousands of prisoners.
Human Trafficking	Since 2005, State Department "Trafficking in Persons" reports (including the report for 2019) 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.
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 issued a ban on stoning. However, Iranian officials later called that directive "advisory," thus putting stoning sentences at the discretion of individual judges.

Sources: Most recent State Department reports on human rights practices, on international religious freedom, and trafficking in persons.

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

The February 11, 1979, fall of the Shah of Iran led to a dissolution of 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.[21]The United States broke diplomatic relations with Iran on April 7, 1980, two weeks before the failed U.S. military attempt to rescue the hostages ("Desert One").

[21] 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.

Iran has since pursued policies that every successive U.S. Administration has considered inimical to U.S. interests in the Near East region and beyond.[22] Iran's authoritarian political system and human rights abuses have contributed to the U.S.-Iran rift.

The two countries have minimal official direct contact. Iran has an interest section in Washington, D.C., 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. In May 2015, the two governments granted each other permission to move their respective interests sections to more spacious locations. Since April 2019, Iran's Ambassador to the United Nations has been Majid Takht Ravanchi. U.S. officials and U.S. government employees, including Members of Congress and staff, generally are not granted visas by Iran to visit.

The following sections analyze some key hallmarks of past U.S. policies toward Iran.

Reagan Administration: Iran Placed on "Terrorism List"

The Reagan Administration designated Iran a "state sponsor of terrorism" in January 1984, largely in response to Iran's backing for the October 1983 bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut.[23] The Administration also "tilted" toward Iraq in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.[24] During 1987-1988, at the height of that war, 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 ("Operation Praying Mantis"), including a frigate sunk. However, in 1986, the Administration provided some arms to Iran ("TOW" anti-tank weapons and I-Hawk air defense batteries) in exchange for Iran's help in the releasing of U.S. hostages held by pro-Iranian Hezbollah in Lebanon ("Iran-Contra Affair"). 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, almost all of whom were Iranian nationals, contributing to Iran's decision to accept U.N. Security Council Resolution 598 that provided for a cease-fire with Iraq in August 1988.

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

The George H.W. Bush Administration appeared to hold out prospects for improved U.S.-Iran relations. In his January 1989 inauguration speech, President George H.W. Bush, stated that "goodwill begets goodwill" with respect to Iran, reportedly implying that U.S.-Iran relations could improve if Iran helped obtain the release of remaining U.S. hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran's apparent assistance led to the release of all remaining U.S. hostages by the end of 1991. No U.S.-Iran thaw followed, possibly because Iran continued to back violent groups opposed to the Administration's push for Arab-Israeli peace that followed. Iran benefited strategically from the Bush Administration's 1991 defeat of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, and pro-Iranian groups launched a significant but ultimately unsuccessful uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime in the aftermath of that war.

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[22] Those policies are assessed in CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[23] The terrorism list was established in 1979 under Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act.

[24] Elaine Sciolino, *The Outlaw State: Saddam Hussein's Quest for Power and the Gulf Crisis* (1991), p. 168.

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.[25] As part of that policy, 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, possibly under pressure from Iran's hardliner refused to enter into direct talks. As part of the unsuccessful attempt to reach out to Khatemi's government, 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, Secretary Albright 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.[26] However, the Administration enlisted Iran's diplomatic help in efforts to try to stabilize post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq.[27] 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).[28] 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—phrasing that suggested support for regime change.[29]

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 improve U.S.-Iran relations more broadly. The approach emerged in President Obama's first message to the Iranian people on the occasion of Nowruz (Persian New Year, 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 community."[30] He referred to Iran as "The Islamic Republic of Iran," appearing to reject a policy of regime change. The Administration reportedly also loosened restrictions on U.S. diplomats' meeting with their Iranian

[25] Speech by NSC Senior Director for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk, to the Soref Symposium of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East." 1993.

[26] Text of President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address. *Washington Post*, January 29, 2002.

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

[28] "Bush Team Snubbed `Grand Bargain' on Iran's Atomic Work in 2003." *Bloomberg*, December 10, 2007.

[29] "Strategy on Iran Stirs New Debate at White House," *New York Times*, June 16, 2007.

[30] "Barack Obama offers Iran 'new beginning' with video message." *The Guardian*, March 20, 2009.

counterparts at international meetings. President Obama said that he exchanged several letters with Supreme Leader Khamene'i, expressing an intent to engage Iran.

In 2009, Iran's crackdown on the Green Movement uprising and its refusal to immediately accept limits on its nuclear program contributed to an Administration shift to a "two track" strategy: stronger economic pressure coupled with offers of sanctions relief if Iran accepted nuclear program limitations. International sanctions imposed on Iran during 2010-2013 received broad international cooperation and caused significant economic difficulty in Iran. In early 2013, the Administration began direct but unpublicized talks with Iranian officials in the Sultanate of Oman on a nuclear accord.[31] Apparently seeking to capitalize on the election of Rouhani in June 2013, President Obama's September 24, 2013, U.N. General Assembly speech confirmed an exchange of letters with Rouhani stating U.S. willingness to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully and that the United States "[is] not seeking regime change."[32] The two presidents spoke by phone on September 27, 2013—the first U.S.-Iran contact at that level since Iran's revolution.

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 bilateral issues. President Obama expressed hope that the JCPOA would "usher[] in a new era in U.S.-Iranian relations,"[33] while at the same time asserting that the JCPOA benefitted U.S. national security on its own merits. Still, a broad warming of U.S.-Iran relations was elusive.

- Coinciding with Implementation Day of the JCPOA (January 16, 2016), dual Iranian-American citizens held by Iran 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, but some Members of Congress criticized the simultaneity of the financial settlement as paying "ransom" to Iran. Obama Administration officials asserted that it was long assumed that the United States was liable for the Iranian funds paid 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 subsequently jailed several other dual nationals (see box below).
- Iran did not discontinue any of its support to allies and proxies in the region, its challenges to U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf, or its ballistic missile tests. Iranian arms exports were banned by Resolution 2231 that endorsed the JCPOA, and the Resolution called on Iran not to develop missiles capable of carrying a nuclear payload. The Obama Administration termed the missile tests "defiant of" or "inconsistent with" Resolution 2231.
- There was no expansion of diplomatic representation, such as the posting of U.S. nationals to staff the U.S. interests section in Tehran, nor did then-Secretary of State Kerry visit Iran. However, in January 2016, Kerry worked with Zarif to achieve the rapid release of 10 U.S. Navy personnel who the IRGC took into

[31] "Inside the secret US-Iran diplomacy that sealed nuke deal." *Al Monitor*, August 11, 2015.

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

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

custody when their two riverine crafts strayed into what Iran considers its territorial waters.

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

Trump Administration: JCPOA Exit and "Maximum Pressure"

The Trump Administration shifted U.S. policy sharply from that of its predecessor by abrogating the JCPOA and applying "maximum pressure," through U.S. sanctions on Iran's economy, to: (1) compel it to renegotiate the JCPOA to address the broad range of U.S. concerns and (2) deny Iran the revenue to continue to develop its strategic capabilities or intervene throughout the region. Some Administration statements have also suggested the policy hopes to create enough economic difficulties to stoke unrest in Iran, possibly to the point where the regime collapses.[34] As U.S.-Iran tensions that increased in mid-2019 turned to hostilities in late 2019 and early 2020, U.S. officials articulated that deterring Iranian provocative actions, in part through a buildup of U.S. forces in the region, was a component of U.S. policy as well.

- 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 regional behavior. In April 2017, the Administration announced a six-month Iran policy review, arguing that the JCPOA "only delays [Iran's] goal of becoming a nuclear state" and had failed to limit Iran's regional influence.
- During his May 2017, visit to the region and first international trip after taking office, 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…."
- On October 13, 2017, President Trump, citing the policy review, stated that he would not certify Iranian JCPOA compliance (under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, INARA, 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 triggered a 60-day period for Congress to take legislative action under expedited procedures to re-impose those sanctions that were lifted. Congress did not take action.
- On January 12, 2018, the President announced that he would not continue to waive JCPOA-related Iran sanctions at the next expiration deadline (May 12) unless the JCPOA's weaknesses were addressed by Congress and the Europeans.

[34] Mike Pompeo Supporting Iranian Voices Address. Reagan Library and Foundation. July 22, 2018.

Withdrawal from the JCPOA and Subsequent Pressure Efforts

On May 8, 2018, following visits to the United States by the leaders of France and Germany arguing for the United States to remain in the JCPOA, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and reimpose all U.S. secondary sanctions by November 4, 2018.[35] Since then, the Administration has taken additional steps to apply "maximum pressure" on Iran's economy and regime.

- *U.S. Demands Articulated.* On May 21, 2018, in his first speech as Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo articulated 12 requirements that Iran must meet in a revised JCPOA and to achieve normalized relations with the United States. Most of the requirements focused on cessation of Iranian support for its allies and proxies, including in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen.[36]
- 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 posted the following threat on Twitter: "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!"
- *Iran Action Group Created.* On August 16, 2018, Secretary Pompeo announced the creation of an "Iran Action Group" responsible for coordinating the State Department's Iran-related activities. The group is headed by Brian Hook, the State Department "Special Representative for Iran." In September 2018, the group issued its "Outlaw Regime" report on Iran, referenced earlier.
- *U.S.-Iran Treaty of Amity Abrogated*. 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, 2018 International Court of Justice ruling that the United States reverse some sanctions on Iran. The Administration argued that 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. The treaty also provides for compensation to Iran for steps that would now constitute enforcement of U.S. sanctions on Iran, such as seizure of Iranian assets in the United States. The abrogation of the treaty did not affect the status of the interests sections in each others' countries.
- Seeking to persuade 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 particularly on countering the threat posed by Iran. The meeting spawned follow-up meetings of the "Warsaw Process," focused on Gulf maritime security as well as broader Middle East issues such as women's rights in the region. Whereas the effort produced some, selected partner cooperation on some Iran-related security issues, the Warsaw Process has not

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

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

caused a broad shift among partner countries to supporting the U.S. policy of maximum pressure on Iran.[37]

- *IRGC Named an FTO.* On April 8, 2019, the Administration designated the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), blaming it for involvement in multiple past acts of Iran-backed terrorism and anti-U.S. actions.[38]
- *Oil Purchase Sanctions Exceptions Ended*. On April 22, 2019, the Administration announced it would no longer provide exceptions to countries that pledged to reduce their purchases of Iranian oil under the FY2012 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 112-81).[39]
- In May 2019, U.S.-Iran tensions escalated significantly and steadily, culminating in U.S.-Iran direct military conflict—particularly following a September 14, 2019, attack, attributed to Iran, on Saudi critical energy infrastructure. In the aftermath of the January 3, 2020, U.S. strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani and the January 8, 2020, Iranian missile retaliation on an Iraqi base housing U.S. forces, the Administration has continued to impose sanctions on Iranian entities and additional sectors of Iran's economy. Administration officials also have deployed additional forces and equipment to the region. Senior officials, including Secretary Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, and National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, have explained the decision to strike Soleimani and the U.S. force buildup as efforts to "restore deterrence" against further Iranian provocative actions.[40] President Trump has also continued to express willingness to meet with Iranian leaders without preconditions to negotiate a revised nuclear agreement as previously outlined.
- In February 2020, the Administration offered Iran humanitarian assistance to help it deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. Iran publicly refused any U.S. aid.
- In April 2020, several Administration officials, including Secretary Pompeo, stated that the United States would exercise all available diplomatic options at the U.N. Security Council to extend the ban on arms transfers to and from Iran that, under Resolution 2231, is to expire on October 18, 2020. Some of these options might include use of provisions in 2231 to end the JCPOA entirely.[41]

[37] See CRS In Focus IF11132, *Coalition-Building Against Iran*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[38] See CRS Insight IN11093, *Iran's Revolutionary Guard Named a Terrorist Organization*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[39] See CRS Insight IN11108, *Iran Oil Sanctions Exceptions Ended*, by Kenneth Katzman.

[40] Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example. Hoover Institution, January 13, 2020.

[41] See CRS In Focus IF11429, *U.N. Ban on Iran Arms Transfers*, by Kenneth Katzman.

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. As of May 2020, Iran holds four U.S. citizens on national security charges but press reports indicate that the United States and Iran might be negotiating a prisoner swap, potentially including Michael White (see below).

Recent Past Detentions

2007-11: 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. Iranian American journalist Roxanna Saberi was imprisoned for five months in 2009 for expired press credentials; and hikers Sara Shourd, Shane Bauer, and Josh Fattal were detained in August 2009 after crossing into Iran from northern Iraq. The hikers'r 2010-2011 releases were brokered by Oman.

January 16, 2016 JCPOA-related swap: Released by Iran - former U.S. Marine Amir Hekmati, arrested in 2011; Reverend Saeed Abedini, a Christian convert of Iranian origin imprisoned since December 2012; *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.

September 2015. Nizar Zakka, a permanent U.S. resident and Lebanon national, was detained. Released June 2019.

July 2016. Reza "Robin" Shahini was detained for crimes against the Islamic Republic, and sentenced to 18 years in prison. He was released on bail in late March 2017 and later left Iran.

In July 2017, Iranian judiciary officials announced that Xiyue Wang, a U.S. graduate student at Princeton University who was researching Iranian history, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for spying for the United States. Iran released him on December 7, 2019, simultaneous with a U.S. release of an Iranian scientist (Massoud Soleimani) held on charges of violating U.S. sanctions on Iran.

U.S. and U.S.-Iran Dual Nationals Still In Custody or Missing

- Robert Levinson, a former FBI agent, went missing after a visit to Kish Island in 2007 to meet an Iranian contact. In November 2019, hopes were raised for Levinson's fate when the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances said that Iran had acknowledged it has a court case "open" on Levinson. However, in March 2020, U.S. officials reportedly told the family that they had substantial indications that Levinson had passed away at some point in the prior few months.
- In November 2015, Iran arrested U.S.-Iran national Siamak Namazi, a business consultant, and it detained his father, Baquer Namazi, in February 2016. In October 2016, they were sentenced to 10 years in prison.
- July 2016: Karan Vafadari, a U.S.-Iran national, was arrested, 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.
- January 2018: Mohrad Tahbaz, a U.S.-British-Iranian national, was arrested 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.
- January 2019: Iran confirmed it was holding U.S. national Michael White, arrested in July 2018.

Non-U.S. Dual Nationals. May 2011: British-Iranian dual national Kamal Foroughi was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2013 for unspecified charges. April 2016: U.K.-Iran dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Canadian-Iranian dual national Homa Hoodfar were arrested; Hoodfar was released in September 2016. Ratcliffe was furloughed to house arrest in Iran in March 2020 to avoid coronavirus infection. April 2016: French-Iranian Nazak Afshar was sentenced to six years but released on bail. Abdolrasoul Dorri-Esfahani, a former member of Iran's nuclear negotiating team focused on financial issues, was jailed for spying for British intelligence. March 2018: British-Iran national Shahabeddin Mansouri-Kermani, a banker, was sentenced for spying. 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: French businesswoman Nelly Erin-Cambervelle, who was arrested October 2018 for "unauthorized entry," was released. July 15, 2019: France-Iran dual national Fariba Adelkhah, an anthropologist, and her colleague, French national Roland Marchel, have been imprisoned since mid-2019. An Australian academic, Kylie Moore-Gilbert, has been held since late 2018 and two Australian bloggers were released in October 2019 after 10 weeks in jail.

Source: 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 to varying degrees.

Engagement and Improved Bilateral Relations

Successive Administrations have debated the degree to which to pursue engagement with Iran, either for limited purposes or to achieve a dramatic change in U.S.-Iran relations. President Trump has publicly welcomed engagement with Iran's leaders, and the Administration has set extensive conditions for a significant improvement in U.S.-Iran relations as articulated by Secretary of State Pompeo, in his May 21, 2018, speech referenced above. Many of the stipulated conditions would affect the core principles of Iran's revolution and national security policies and are unlikely to be met by Iran.

Several apparent overtures by both countries to negotiate directly have not come to fruition. In December 2018, 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.[42] In May 2019, President Trump apparently sought to de-escalate tensions with Iran by restating his interest in direct talks, stating the following on May 9, 2019:

> What they [Iranian leaders] should be doing is calling me up, sitting down; we can make a deal, a fair deal ... but they should call, and if they do, we're open to talk to them.

The President restated an interest in talks with Iran on a revised nuclear deal in a statement in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian retaliatory strike on Ayn Al Asad base in Iraq on January 8, 2020.[43]

Administration officials also have welcomed some of the mediation efforts, including by Japan, some of the Gulf states, and several European countries. France reportedly sought, at the G-& summit in Biarritz in August 2019 and then at the September 2019 General Assembly meetings, to orchestrate a meeting between President Trump and Iranian president Rouhani. No meeting or direct contact between the two presidents occurred. On July 31, 2019, the Administration imposed U.S. sanctions on Zarif, asserting that he is not a decision-maker but instead mostly a mouthpiece for the regime, a move that might potentially complicate efforts to organize direct U.S.-Iran talks. Rouhani has since stated on several occasions that Iran will not negotiate with the Trump Administration unless it first eases sanctions that were reimposed when the Administration exited the JCPOA.

Military Action

Successive Administrations have sought to support U.S. policy with a capability, and implicit or explicit threat, to use 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

[42] "Rouhani: US made 11 attempts to negotiate with Iran in last two years." *Middle East Monitor*, December 4, 2018.

[43] White House. Remarks by President Trump on Iran. January 8, 2020.

substantially.[44] A U.S. ground invasion to remove Iran's regime apparently has not been considered at any time, reportedly even at the height of recent U.S.-Iran tensions.

The Obama Administration repeatedly stated that "all options are on the table" to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.[45] However, the Obama Administration asserted that military action would set back Iran's nuclear advancement with far less certainty or duration than would a nuclear agreement, and that Iranian retaliation could potentially escalate and expand throughout the region, reduce Iran's regional isolation, strengthen Iran's regime domestically, and raise oil prices.[46] After the JCPOA was finalized, President Obama reiterated the availability of this option should Iran violate the agreement,[47]attack or prepared to attack U.S. allies, or interrupt the free flow of oil or shipping in the Gulf or elsewhere.

The Trump Administration has similarly stated that "all options are open." In 2019 and 2020, President Trump has threatened and undertaken some military action against Iran in response to potential Iranian actions, most notable of which was the January 3, 2020, strike that killed IRGC-QF commander Soleimani. As recently as March 2020, the United States has struck Iran-backed militias in Iraq that have attacked U.S. forces there and caused U.S. military deaths.

President Trump and his advisors, including in a January 2020 speech at Stanford's Hoover Institution by Secretary Pompeo, stated that one of the rationales for the Soleimani strike was to restore deterrence against Iran that had apparently eroded from the U.S. refusal to respond to Iran's prior provocations.[48] President Trump has signaled, in part by not responding to Iran's retaliatory strike on Ayn Al Asad base in Iraq, that the Administration does not want continuing conflict with Iran.[49]

At the same time, the Administration has assembled a small coalition of Gulf and other allied states to conduct Gulf maritime security operations to deter further Iranian attacks, inaugurated in November 2019 as the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). In the context of U.S.-Iran tensions, see CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas, cited above.

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. The U.S. Navy has conducted operations to interdict Iranian weapons shipments to the Houthi rebels in Yemen.[50]

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[44] 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.

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

[46] "Panetta: Military Strike Would Delay Iranian Nuclear Project by No More Than Two Years." *Haaretz*, December 3, 2011.

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

[48] Secretary of State Pompeo. "The Restoration of Deterrence: The Iranian Example." Hoover Institution, January 13, 2020. Pompeo says killing of Suleimani is part of 'bigger strategy' to deter US foes. The Guardian, January 13, 2020.

[49] Mark Landler, Maggie Haberman and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Tells Pentagon Chief he Does not Want War with Iran," *New York Times*, May 16, 2019.

[50] 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, CRS Report R45795, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, by Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas, and CRS Report R46148, *U.S. Killing of Qasem Soleimani: Frequently Asked Questions*, coordinated by Clayton Thomas. The latter CRS report covers issues of authorization for U.S. use of force and war powers issues.

Current Iran Policy Objectives and Actions

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

- conducts malign activities throughout the region by 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, and
- 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 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 and deter Iranian provocative action by

- maintaining a robust U.S. military presence in the region, including about 35,000 U.S. forces deployed in Persian Gulf state military facilities such as 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; and
- providing counterterrorism assistance to partner governments throughout the region.

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

- dismantling all nuclear infrastructure,
- ending development of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles,
- ending support to terrorist groups and regional armed factions, including Afghan Taliban,
- completely withdrawing its forces and militias from Syria, and
- releasing all U.S. citizens and dual nationals.

President Trump has stated a willingness to meet Iran's President Rouhani without preconditions.

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 reimposition of all U.S. sanctions forms the cornerstone of the Administration's maximum pressure policy. 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.

Energy and other Sector Sanctions. The Iran Sanctions Act (P.L. 104-172), as amended, authorizes the imposition of five out of a menu of 12 sanctions on firms that invest in Iran's energy sector; sell Iran gasoline to Iran; sell energy equipment to Iran; transport oil from Iran; engage in an energy joint venture with Iran outside Iran; or buy 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). Sanctions against other Iranian industries and commodity exports were imposed in 2019 and 2020.

Sanctions On Iran's Central Bank/Banking System. 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. In September 2019, the Administration designated the Central Bank as a terrorism entity under Executive Order 13224.

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 is not specific to Iran.

Sanctions Against Foreign Suppliers of Arms or Weapons of Mass Destruction Technology. Several laws sanction supplies of arms or militarily useful technology to Iran. They include The Iran-Syria-North Korea Nonproliferation Act (P.L. 106-178, March 14, 2000, as amended); The Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act (P.L. 102-484, October 23, 1992, as amended); Executive Order 13382 (June 28, 2005); and the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, P.L. 115-44). Numerous Iranian and third country entities, including the IRGC itself, have been designated under these authorities.

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 extensive analysis 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 to overthrow Iran's leadership. Khamene'i and other Iranian figures note that the United States provided funding to anti-regime groups, mainly pro-monarchists, during the 1980s.[51] Over the

[51] CRS conversations with U.S. officials responsible for Iran policy. 1980-1990. After a period of suspension of such

past two decades, each successive Administration has stated that the United States does not seek to change Iran's regime, although all recent Administrations have criticized Iran's regime for human rights abuses and expressed support for democracy in Iran. Several Administrations have publicly supported Iranian demonstrators agitating for more rights.[52]

Trump Administration officials have repeatedly stated that U.S. policy is to change Iran's behavior and prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, not to change its regime.[53] However, some statements by Administration officials, in particular Secretary Pompeo's speech to Iranian Americans at the Reagan Library on July 22, 2018, have suggested support for regime change. 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 the Reagan Library speech mentioned above, Secretary 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 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." Also in that speech, Secretary Pompeo's announced 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." Secretary Pompeo held a well-publicized meeting with diaspora and dissident Iranians at the State Department on December 19, 2019. His remarks to the gathering returned to themes similar to those expressed at the Reagan Library, particularly in criticism of the regime's suppression of dissent. The Secretary stated at the meeting that U.S. officials had received 36,000

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.

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

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

pieces of information in response to a solicitation for Iranians to report to the United States on examples of regime human rights abuses.[54]

Yet, President Trump has repeatedly ruled out a policy of regime change. During his May 2019 visit to Japan, President Trump, stated

> These are great people—has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership. We are not looking for regime change. I just want to make that clear. We're looking for no nuclear weapons.[55]

At times, some in Congress have at times advocated a regime change policy. 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).

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, appears periodically in broadcasts to Iran from Iranian exile-run stations in California, as well as in other Iran-oriented media. 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 2011, he has increasingly worked with younger opposition figures, perhaps in part to respond to critics who assess him as relatively inactive against the regime. Iranian leaders often blames the Shah's son, as well as the rival People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (see box below) for instigating unrest when demonstrations take place. 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" that has drafted a U.S.-style, secular constitution for a future republic of Iran. Cofounder Arzhang Davoodi has been in prison since 2002. A 2014 death sentence has not been implemented to date. Some of these dissidents have used news channels on the Telegram messaging network, one of which was called Amadnews, to agitage against the regime. In October 2019, the founder of Amadnews, Ruhollah Zam, was lured from his base in France to Najaf, Iraq, where he was captured by the IRGC-QF and brought to Iran.

Other dissidents, some in Iran, others in exile (including in the United States), have criticized the regime for decades. They include journalist Akbar Ganji, who left Iran in 2006 after serving 6 years in prison for alleging high-level involvement in the 100 murders of Iranian dissident intellectuals; former Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani; U.S.-based Fatemah Haghighatjoo; and religion scholar Abdolkarim Soroush.

Some well-known dissidents have been incarcerated periodically or continuously since 2010, including famed blogger Hossein Derakshan. 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 2019, she was sentenced to 33 years in prison. In May 2015, the regime arrested Narges Mohammadi, a well-known activist against regime executions.

Sources: CRS periodic conversations with Iranian exiles, and various press.

[54] Secretary of State Michael Pompeo. Human Rights and the Iranian Regime. December 19, 2019.

[55] Noah Bierman, "Trump Pushes Off War Talk on Iran, Says 'Regime Change' is not Goal," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 2019.

Democracy Promotion and Internet Freedom Efforts

Successive Administrations and Congresses have sought to promote political evolution in Iran 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.[56] Several laws and Executive Orders issued since 2010 are intended to promote internet freedom, and U.S.-Iran trade regulations were amended in 2011-12 to allow for the sale to Iranians of consumer electronics and software that help them communicate. Then-Under Secretary of State 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 censorship of the internet.

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. 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.[57] 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 the State Department bureaus of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and 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" (NERD).

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. The service is expanding into television as well, according to officials at the U.S. Agency for Global Media.

[56] 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.

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

No U.S. assistance has been provided to Iranian exile-run stations.[58]

VOA Persian Service/VOA365. The VOA established a Persian-language service to Iran in July 2003. It consists of radio broadcasting; television; and internet. In 2019, it was revised as VOA365, and is led by the VOA in partnership with RFE/RL Radio Farda. The service broadcasts nine hours per day and, as of 2019, is ramping up to 11 hours per day of broadcasting. The service broadcasts into Iran hard news as well as U.S. television programs ("soft programming") licensed for rebroadcast to Iran. The service has been criticized by Iranian exiles in the United States for failing to forthrightly confront the regime's messaging, although USAGM officials say such calls would be ineffective and not necessarily consistent with the VOA's mission. The costs for the service are about $20 million per year.

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

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	$42 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years.
FY2019	$15 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years
FY2020	$40 million requested for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years
FY2021	NERD included in $84.5 million for State Near Eastern Affairs regional request.

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/Jaysh al-Adl

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. The group changes its name to Jaysh al-Adl in 2012, and the 2010 FTO designation applies to that name as well.

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.

Sources: State Dept. Terrorist Designations of Balochistan Liberation Army and Husain Ali Hazzima and Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of Jundallah, July 2, 2019. Various press.

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. In February 2011, the State Department began Persian-language Twitter feeds. Since 2006, the State Department has added staff to the several U.S. diplomatic missions in the countries around Iran with Persian-speaking diplomats. 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 over the past ten years 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.[59]

[59] 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 People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), also known as the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK). It is the main organization within the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which claims to be a parliament-in-exile. 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, but was forced into exile after unsuccessfully rising up against the Khomeini regime in mid-1981. Tens of 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.

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 assertion 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.

In 2012, following a court challenge by the group, a U.S. 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. 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 NCRI reopened its offices in Washington, DC, in April 2013. The regime blamed the group for instigating some of the protests that took place in November 2019.

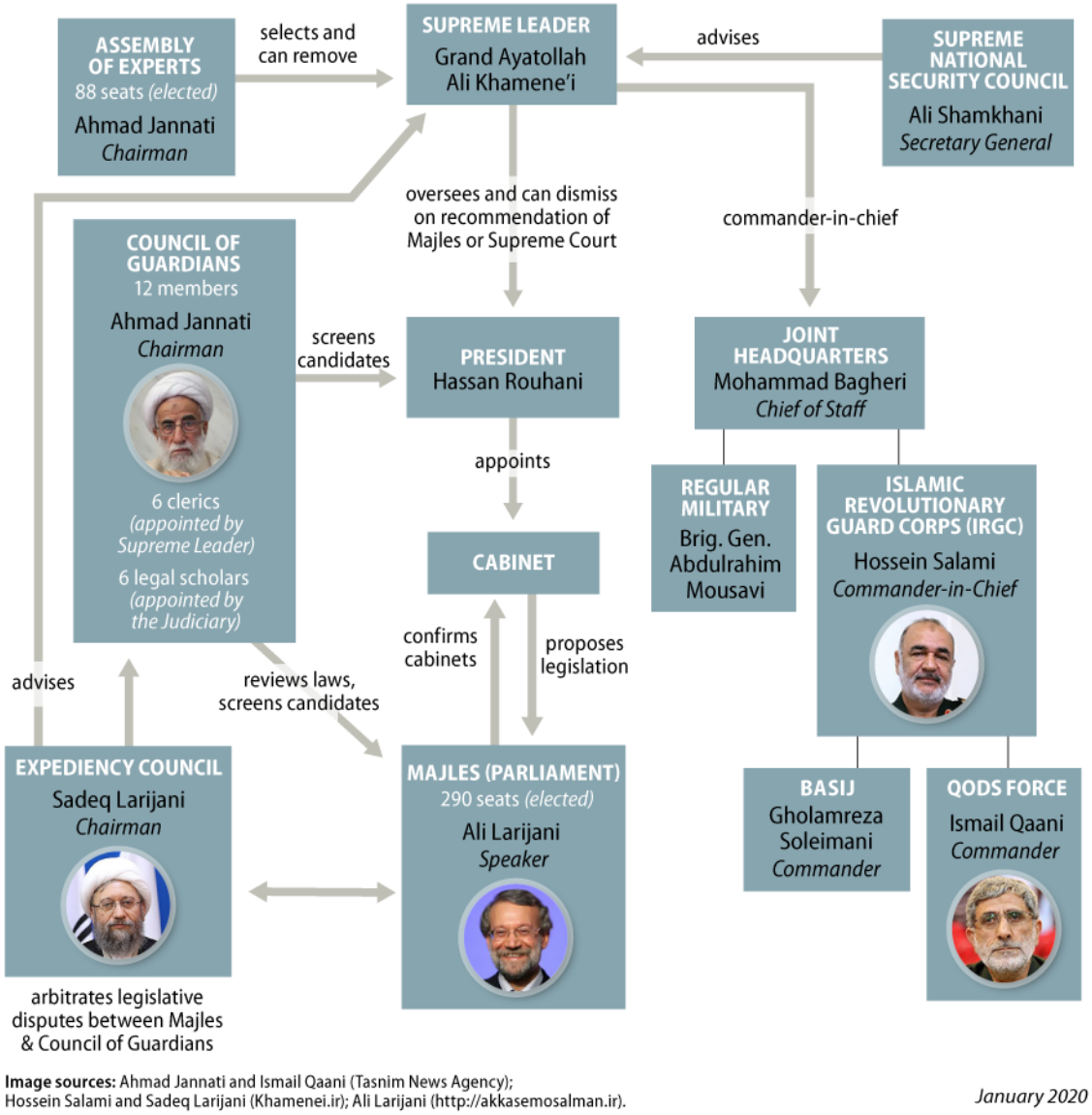
Whereas it is not possible to independently assess the extent of the PMOI's following in Iran, regime officials often blame the PMOI for stoking unrest in Iran, suggesting regime nervousness about the group's support level within Iran and degree of organization. In May 2019, Iranian intelligence officials arrested many members of PMOI "resistance cells" that have been formed in Iran to carry out opposition activities. 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.

Camp Ashraf Issue

During Operation Iraqi Freedom (March 2003), U.S. forces in Iraq required 3,400 PMOI elements in Iraq to consolidated at Camp Ashraf, near the border with Iran, and to place its weaponry 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 came into question on several occasions when pro-Iranian militias and Iraqi forces used force against the PMOI residents of Camp Ashraf and, after 2012, against their new location at Camp Liberty, near Baghdad's main airport. 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 last remaining residents of Camp Liberty were resettled in Albania and there are no more PMOI activists living openly in Iraq. Fearing that the PMOI might organize protests there, regime agents attempted to bomb the group's Nowruz (Persian New Year) celebration in March 2018. The plot was foiled by Albanian law enforcement and the Albanian government expelled Iran's Ambassador.

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

Figure 1. Structure of the Iranian Government



Source: CRS.

Figure 2. Map of Iran

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

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