



Conference Summary - Understanding Iran

January 31, 2020

Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Iran
Related Expert: Ilan I. Berman

On January 29th, the American Foreign Policy Council held its inaugural Capitol Hill seminar on “Understanding Iran.” The event, designed to go “beyond the headlines” and explore Iran’s internal political dynamics and its foreign policy priorities, featured presentations by: Alireza Nader of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies; Iran democracy activist Mariam Memarsadeghi; Farhad Mansourian of the Foreign Affairs Intelligence Network, and; Atlantic Council Senior Fellow Nader Uskowi.

Alireza Nader

The latest round of protests in Iran has been met with a brutal governmental response. Some 1,500 people are estimated to have been killed by the regime to date, while many more have been imprisoned. This extreme violence and repression accurately reflects the depths of concern among officials in Tehran. Iranian officials fear that their government’s legitimacy, and perhaps even its existence, is now in danger.

This concern stems from popular attitudes toward the regime, which reflect a profound decline in the government’s popular legitimacy. More and more people now lack the appetite to even participate in national politics – including the upcoming parliamentary elections in late February. This disengagement reflects a fundamental realization on the part of the Iranian people: there is no “reformist versus hardliner” debate within Iran, as many in the West still believe. More and more, the entire system is seen as corrupt and unreformable. That, in turn, has propelled continued resistance to clerical rule. As the legitimacy of the Iranian regime has declined, the Islamic Republic has become more and more reliant on the use of internal force (via its security services and the Basij) as well as its extensive patronage system to keep the Iranian population in line.

Mariam Memarsadeghi

In light of the dramatic events taking place in recent weeks within Iran, it’s easy to forget that anti-regime protests have deep roots and long predate the latest developments. Iran’s democratic opposition has been persistent in its activities. It has relied on tactical sequencing and tactical diversity, organizing things such as strikes across various economic sectors, that have helped keep the pressure on the regime. Overwhelmingly, the Iranian people are against both “reformists” and “hardliners,” and are seeking fundamental change toward a new, democratic government. They believe it is impossible to reform and rehabilitate an ideological, totalitarian regime like the Islamic Republic.

But they need help to do so, and so far the international community has not been sufficiently attuned to the plight of ordinary Iranians. In the United States, the current, polarized state of national politics has impeded moral clarity and a consensus regarding the need to support those struggling courageously for an Iran in keeping with peace, security and American national interests. Internationally, meanwhile, too many countries still attempt to appease the Iranian regime. This is a critical error; the international community needs to provide much more moral solidarity and practical support to the Iranian people.

Farhad Masourian

The latest protests taking place within the Islamic Republic represent a major challenge to the stability and legitimacy of the regime in Tehran. In response, the Iranian leadership has laid out high-level plans to counter and defuse the Iranian opposition. The extent of these plans suggests that Iran’s leaders believe that pre-revolutionary conditions now exist within the country. The problem is not only external to the regime; there now seem to be significant fissures within the country’s security forces themselves.

In response, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has given “carte blanche” to the heads of the country’s security forces to purge their ranks. He has also set the scene for massive internal repression and violence by equating the current protestors with traitors. These steps, however, suggest the regime is increasingly running scared, despite its efforts to project a frightening image to the world.

Nader Uskowi

The Iranian regime has long operated from the notion that the best defense is a good offense, and the Revolutionary Guards – and especially their paramilitary arm, the Qods Force – have historically been a big part of that strategy. The January 3rd killing of Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani is therefore a major blow to the Islamic Republic’s regional strategy – at least in the near term. The killing was the culmination of an escalating series of provocations against the U.S. by Iranian proxies, which had been directed by Soleimani and the Qods Force.

There are clear signs that the Trump administration is shifting America's force posture in order to be able to respond to further provocations from the Iranian side. This has left the Iranian regime with only bad options, at least in military terms. However, it has also raised the potential for regional conflict, because we are witnessing a reduction of centralized control by the Iranian regime on its various regional proxies. That lead to less restraint and more independent activity by those forces, moving forward.