

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## NAVIGATING THE IRANIAN OPPOSITION

ILAN BERMAN



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# NAVIGATING THE IRANIAN OPPOSITION

## A NATIONAL SECURITY BLUEPRINT FOR THE UNITED STATES

ILAN BERMAN

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Mr. Berman is the editor of six books and the author of six others, including *Tehran Rising: Iran's Challenge to the United States* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), *Iran's Deadly Ambition: The Islamic Republic's Quest for Global Power* (Encounter Books, 2015) and *The Fight for Iran: Opposition Politics, Protest, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Nation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This study is the product of extensive in-person interviews, closed-door workshops and in-depth discussions with scholars, subject matter experts and former high-ranking U.S. government officials carried out between October of 2023 and July of 2024. I was greatly aided in this effort by AFPC researchers Chloe Smith and Aditya Waddodagi, as well as AFPC President Herman Pirchner, Jr. and AFPC Vice President of Operations Richard Harrison. They all have my sincere thanks. So do the numerous experts who were kind enough to share with me their time, wisdom and insights into the potential futures that could face Iran in the years ahead. To the extent that this study breaks new ground, the credit should go to all of them.

ILAN BERMAN

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nearly half a century after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran stands at a critical juncture. Widespread popular disaffection, pronounced economic decline, dwindling religiosity, and pervasive societal malaise have coalesced into a volatile and potentially transformative political climate. The recent “woman, life, freedom” movement has highlighted a fundamental rejection of the Islamic Republic’s religious system of government on the part of many Iranians. And despite the regime’s current, dominant position, these underlying tensions persist, suggesting that Iran may face another cycle of anti-regime activity in the near future.

This paper outlines six key principles that should guide U.S. policymakers in navigating Iran’s complex opposition landscape and shaping a post-theocratic Iran that is aligned with American strategic interests:

1. **National integrity:** Support opposition elements that are firmly committed to maintaining Iran’s territorial cohesion. Iran’s diverse ethnic makeup, while a potential point of leverage, should not be exploited to fragment the country. A fractured Iran poses significant security risks, particularly given the advanced state of the country’s nuclear program. Balkanization could lead to a “loose nukes” scenario, making the security of Iran’s nuclear technology, enriched uranium stockpiles, and related components an overriding concern.
2. **Civil society:** Prioritize opposition groups advocating for robust civil society and meaningful engagement across Iran’s political spectrum. Such a focus is necessary to counter the Islamic Republic’s long legacy of repression and its systematic undermining of pre-Islamic culture. Support should be directed toward forces committed to broadening and strengthening the country’s civil society, ensuring true pluralism and participation from diverse political factions and perspectives.
3. **Secular governance:** Promote legislative frameworks allowing for the broadest possible expression of faith without compelling adherence to any particular belief system or religion. Such an approach would recognize the growing distance from religion exhibited by the Iranian population writ large, and seek to avoid the unintended consequences that have accompanied recent embraces of state religion in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.
4. **Nuclear development:** Recognize that a will to nuclear power will likely persist in a post-theocratic Iran, given broad popular support for nuclear status among ordinary Iranians. However, opposition forces must commit to pursuing any development in this arena through a transparent, verifiable process that is both internationally monitored and regulated.
5. **Pluralism:** Focus on fostering religious tolerance, gender equality, and social inclusiveness rather than insisting on Western-style democracy as the only acceptable outcome of a

post-theocratic transition. Historical data suggests that environments which protect religious, gender, and ethnic minority rights have a better chance of evolving in a pluralistic, inclusive direction. The U.S. should encourage cooperation among disparate Iranian opposition groups and foster durable coalitions committed to these principles.

6. **Accountability and rehabilitation:** Encourage opposition plans that balance holding regime officials accountable for past atrocities with reintegrating key segments of the current power structure into the country's future political order. This is particularly crucial with regard to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which wields extensive economic and strategic influence in present-day Iran. As such, the complete exclusion of the IRGC from public life would be difficult and potentially unwise. However, its subordination to the new political order is essential. Opposition forces should articulate a clear process for rehabilitating and reintegrating this and other key regime groups while ensuring their accountability.

The United States needs to communicate clear expectations for Iran's future while empowering those opposition elements that are best positioned to steer the country in a direction compatible with American interests. Yet policymakers must approach this task judiciously, recognizing the challenges of influencing internal dynamics and the mixed record of past U.S. interventions abroad.

Ultimately, Iran's future rests with Iranians themselves. But the U.S. can and should play a constructive role by articulating principles that would put a post-theocratic Iran on a trajectory of security and prosperity that is consonant with American interests.







# A NATIONAL SECURITY BLUEPRINT FOR THE UNITED STATES

In the Fall of 2022, Iranians from all walks of life took to the streets to vent their rage at their country's ruling clerical regime. The immediate cause for their anger was the September 2022 death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of regime security forces for the crime of improperly wearing her Islamic headscarf, or *hijab*. Quickly, however, what began as grassroots unrest over regime brutality transformed into something more: a fundamental rejection of the Islamic Republic's religious system of government. And as the protests went on, hopes rose in the West that they might, at long last, coalesce into a real challenge to the country's four-plus decades of draconian clerical rule.

Two years on, the promise of what has come to be known as the “woman, life, freedom” movement has mostly dissipated. The Iranian regime, once on the back foot in the face of widespread domestic unrest, has now regained the upper hand sufficiently to relaunch its war on women. In recent months, Iranian authorities unveiled a new plan dubbed “Noor” to more stringently police female dress and ensure it complies with religious edicts.<sup>1</sup> Its launch has been paralleled by a resurgence in the activity of the country's notorious morality police, who now reportedly exhibit “a stronger presence around Tehran's central districts, full of police patrols, morality vans and police motorcycle patrols.” Businesses found not to be enforcing the country's mandate of compulsory *hijab* risk getting shut down, while individuals not in compliance will receive warnings and could face legal action.<sup>2</sup>

This restrictive *status quo*, moreover, is unlikely to change meaningfully. While current Iranian president Masoud Pezeshkian campaigned on a platform that included appeals for a relaxation of the country's morality code, authorities have tightened restrictions still further since his election in July 2024. To that end, they have doubled down on “Noor” with a follow-on scheme that aims to expand its scope and breadth. Dubbed “Tuba,” the three phase plan is said to involve the training of some 1,500 “missionaries” to proselytize a “culture of chastity and hijab” in schools

and education centers around the country. A particular focus of the new effort appears to be the country's youth, a demographic which has proven itself particularly resistant to, and dismissive of, religiously imposed curbs on female dress.<sup>3</sup>

This new assertiveness at home has been mirrored by a more aggressive regional profile. Thanks to a confluence of global factors, from lackluster U.S. Mideast policy to the benefits conferred to it by the tragic events of October 7, 2023, the Iranian regime is now experiencing a strategic renaissance of sorts. This more favorable geopolitical climate, in turn, has helped to reinvigorate the great power ambitions of Iran's leaders and intensified the Islamic Republic's activism, both in its immediate neighborhood and beyond.<sup>4</sup> And while Iran's strategic position has eroded significantly in recent months as a result of Israeli military action against its interests and proxies, the regime's global ambitions continue to persist.

Nevertheless, as numerous experts have pointed out, the “woman, life, freedom” protests represent a watershed of sorts. They mark the crossing of an ideological Rubicon, showcasing the fundamental alienation of Iran's captive population from its ruling regime.<sup>5</sup> They also highlight a quickening in the pace of domestic unrest, instances of which have taken place with growing frequency since the late 1990s.<sup>6</sup> As a result, these observers contend, Iran will invariably face another cycle of anti-regime activity, and likely sooner rather than later. In turn, those future protests may succeed where previous ones have not, and catalyze fundamental political change within the Islamic Republic.

Even if they do not, however, Iran is already on track to experience a significant transition in coming years due to a confluence of socio-political factors.

One is demographic in nature. The Islamic Republic today is experiencing a generational shift that will profoundly influence both its internal politics and its place in the world. Although Iran ranks among the older countries of the Middle East, its population structure is unique — and politically significant. During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran witnessed a pronounced “youth bulge” as a result of the high fertility rates that prevailed during the Pahlavi era. The impact of this demographic surge has proven lasting. As of 2010, over 60% of Iran's population was estimated to be under 30 years old.<sup>7</sup> Today, almost 40% of Iran's roughly 86 million citizens are estimated to be 24 years old or younger.<sup>8</sup>

Put another way, a majority of Iranians were either not alive or not old enough to be politically aware when the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution took place forty-five years ago. As a result, Iran's younger generations lack any formative experience with the Revolution and its underlying tenets. They likewise lack the ideological bonds that could firmly tether them to the current regime in Tehran, such as those that prevail among Iran's older generations. Consequently, this demographic cohort has emerged as a paramount source of anxiety for Iran's ruling elite.

Another driver is declining religiosity. Today, nearly a half-century after Khomeini's faith-based revolt swept the Shah from power in Tehran and installed a radical theocracy in his stead, religious identification is experiencing a precipitous decline within the country, as exemplified by plummeting mosque attendance and a generalized turn away from religiosity on the part of ordinary Iranians. This increasing secularization has further widened the gap between Iran's theocratic leadership and a populace that now feels less and less bound by the ideological principles of the 1979 revolution. And as religiosity within the Islamic Republic has declined, so too has the political legitimacy of the country's current clerical regime — to the point that it is now widely viewed as a bankrupt concept.

This represents a fundamental change. In 2009, when the “Green Movement” emerged as a reaction to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election to the Iranian presidency, the Iranian opposition's aspirations still centered on reforming the Islamic Republic from within. Indeed, that movement's figureheads, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were both establishment insiders who had previously held senior governmental positions. As such, they advocated for gradual, incremental changes to the existing order, rather than the pursuit of a qualitatively new one. Since that time, however, societal attitudes have changed dramatically. Despite long-standing fractures along political, ideological, and cultural fault lines, an increasing prevalent consensus among Iranian opposition forces is that the Iranian regime is irredeemably corrupt, ideologically bankrupt, and must be discarded.<sup>9</sup>

For its part, Tehran's ruling establishment is painfully aware of this tectonic attitudinal shift. In recent years, the regime has responded to domestic unrest with escalating repression and brutality in a heavy-handed campaign that has encompassed mass killings and the unprecedented severing of internet access nationwide.<sup>10</sup> Put simply, Iran's leadership recognizes that it has irrevocably lost the “hearts and minds” of a vast swath of its citizenry. As a result, it now increasingly demonstrates that it is prepared to employ any means necessary, no matter how draconian, in order to cling to power.

Nevertheless, these internal changes have cumulatively presented the Iranian regime with what is arguably the greatest challenge in its 45-year history. To be sure, the Islamic Republic may still weather these shifts intact. However, it may not — and the unraveling of the existing Iranian order would carry tremendous consequences for the Middle East, and for American interests in that region.

Precisely what shape a future Iran might take, however, is far from clear. As yet, there is precious little consensus and clarity over the necessary prerequisites for a smooth transition to a more free and representative government in Tehran, either among Iran's assorted opposition forces or between Western governments. And in Washington, there is a distinct lack of insight into how it might be possible to decisively align the country with American strategic priorities.

Such an approach begins with the Iranian opposition. Today, the constellation of forces opposed to the ruling regime in Tehran remains riven by deep ideological fissures and lacks a coherent cooperative approach.<sup>11</sup> This sorry state of affairs has frustrated American policymakers looking for agents of change in Iran. It has also served as a boon to the Iranian government, which has stood out as the only durable interlocutor for successive U.S. administrations seeking greater engagement.

Altering this equation will require policymakers in Washington to adopt a qualitatively different approach. Rather than relying on sporadic, piecemeal engagement with various opposition groups and actors, each of which possesses its own agenda and political priorities, the United States itself needs to articulate a defined set of principles it believes are integral to the formation of any future Iranian government. Doing so is essential if the U.S. is to proactively shape the contours of the Iranian opposition debate. Simply put, America need to clearly and unambiguously lay out what sort of government it wants to take power in Tehran, and its expectations of the opposition actors that will play a part in bringing about this change.

What follows is a set of operating principles that can help to refine American thinking about Iran's multi-faceted opposition. These principles can also assist with identifying those elements in the Iranian opposition that are most consonant with the long-term national security interests and strategic priorities of the United States.

## PRINCIPLE I: NATIONAL INTEGRITY IS PARAMOUNT

More often than not, Iran tends to be depicted as a monolith. In popular news coverage and policy discussions alike, the country is portrayed as a unitary actor, with its ruling clerical regime enjoying streamlined decision-making, broad popular support (or at least acquiescence), and uncontested legitimacy. This, however, is far from the case. Today's Iran represents a complex patchwork of ethnicities and cultures brought together by successive Iranian empires and dynasties that collectively spanned more than a millennium. Indeed, at the height of its power in the late 1600s, the Safavid dynasty covered a swath of territory stretching from central Afghanistan to southeastern Turkey and encompassing millions of people and dozens of distinct ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup>

The precise ethnic makeup of contemporary Iran is both widely disputed and deeply political. According to U.S. government estimates, Persians make up as much as 61 percent of the national population of Iran, with the country's Azeri, Kurdish and Arab minorities accounting collectively for 28% more.<sup>13</sup> Foreign assessments differ substantially, with the size of Iran's Persian majority tallied at anywhere between 50 and 65% of the national total.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars, however, suggest a more diverse — and potentially combustible — mix. According to Brenda Shaffer of Georgetown University, for instance, there is compelling evidence that Persians in actuality make up less than



half of Iran's total population, with their number overshadowed by the collective size of the country's Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen and Baluch communities.<sup>15</sup>

For its part, Iran's ruling clerical regime has attempted to harness this diverse ethnic make-up in its own favor. It has long been conventional wisdom that the Azeri extraction of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has played at least some role in keeping the country's largest ethnic minority quiescent. More recently, moves like the authorized presidential candidacy (and subsequent election) of Masoud Pezeshkian, an ethnic Azeri and Kurd, have provided at least a veneer of inclusivity within the Islamic Republic's rigid political system.

## ETHNORELIGIOUS DISTRIBUTION



Source: USIP Iran Primer

Nevertheless, contemporary Iran is characterized by deep ethnic fissures, as well as by state repression of what it views as a clear and present danger to its authority and legitimacy. This state of affairs dates back to the very start of the Islamic Republic. As historians have noted, the Iranian regime's early years saw the mass repression of ethnic groups, which became targets of regime coercion and violence as the new authorities in Tehran strove to assert control over the country.<sup>16</sup>

That situation has persisted since. Although the Islamic Republic's constitution formally provides equal rights to all ethnic minorities, in practice life in contemporary Iran is punctuated by instances of discrimination, unequal treatment and politically motivated persecution of ethnic minorities so widespread as to be classified as “systemic” in nature.<sup>17</sup> As human rights watchdog Amnesty International noted recently, “[e]thnic minorities, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, faced widespread discrimination, curtailing their access to education, employment, adequate housing and political office.”<sup>18</sup>

Some scholars have suggested that these circumstances represent a point of potential leverage for the West — one that can be used against the current clerical regime.<sup>19</sup> Others have been even more explicit, advocating the provision of backing for ethnic forces as a potential weapon against the Islamic Republic.<sup>20</sup>

Notably, however, such a policy is deeply unpopular among Iranians themselves. Contemporary public opinion within Iran strongly indicates that territorial integrity represents a cardinal issue for Iranian citizens.<sup>21</sup> It also suggests that Iranians (even those deeply disaffected with the current regime) would likely extend authorities a measure of support if faced with a potential “Balkanization” of their country. As a result, if the West is seen to be backing such an approach, it could very well generate a “rally around the flag” effect that both bolsters and strengthens the current regime in Tehran, and does so at the expense of Iranian opposition elements.

There are likewise practical reasons for Western policymakers to avoid such a fragmentation, chief among them the increasingly mature state of Iran's atomic effort. The Islamic Republic today is perilously close to nuclear capability, and continuing to move closer to that goal in spite of Western sanctions and multilateral pressure. In its February 2024 report to the United Nations Security Council, the International Atomic Energy Agency gauged that Iran now has the know-how to make enough weapons-grade uranium for seven nuclear weapons in one month, nine in two, and 13 in five.<sup>22</sup> More recently, Secretary of State Antony Blinken publicly disclosed that the U.S. government now assesses Iranian regime's “breakout time” to develop nuclear weapons to potentially be as little as 1-2 weeks.<sup>23</sup>

This progress makes the security of Iran's nuclear technology, enriched uranium and potentially its nuclear weapons an overriding concern. Much the same way the breakup of the USSR led to the threat of “loose nukes” in the 1990s and spawned a thriving — if short-lived — illicit



trade in WMD materials,<sup>24</sup> any future political order in Iran that lacks sufficient structural safeguards will invariably make it a massive proliferation risk. Such a scenario, moreover, is far more likely to come about in the event of a dissolution of the Islamic Republic along ethnic lines. In the recent past, instances of governmental fragmentation, from the Soviet collapse to the crack-up of Yugoslavia, were uniformly accompanied by conditions of lawlessness and weak governmental control.<sup>25</sup> There is little reason to believe that Iran, if broken up along ethnic lines, would not follow a similar trajectory.

Simply put, a fragmented Iran cannot be expected to be able to sufficiently guarantee the safety and security of its nuclear materiel or technology. That, in turn, will necessitate significant international oversight and monitoring in the event of a post-theocratic splintering of the country. **As a result, U.S. national security would not be well served by extending support to opposition elements that advocate the breakup of Iran, either directly or indirectly.**

## PRINCIPLE II: COMMIT TO STRENGTHENED CIVIL SOCIETY

Throughout its history, the Islamic Republic has been at war with Iranian society. Since its inception, the country's current clerical regime has waged a systematic campaign to undermine the pillars of Iran's vibrant pre-Islamic culture, to enforce conformity with its exclusionary religious-based polity, and to prevent the accretion of Western cultural norms and mores.

This hostility is embedded in the regime's ideological fabric. The doctrine of *velayat e-faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) first articulated by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini explicitly rejects Western concepts of governance as "idolatry" and argues in favor of absolutist religious-based rule.<sup>26</sup> In this formulation, divine principles are paramount, both superseding and obviating man-made concepts such as human rights and individual freedoms. And the *faqih*, the enlightened cleric who Khomeini believed should rightly govern the masses, has broad authority to reject practices deemed not to be in keeping with righteous Islamic rule. The people, in turn, have the duty "to listen to him and obey him."<sup>27</sup>

The country's religious regime weaponized this formulation to amass power, eliminate dissent, and impose religious conformity on its captive population in the immediate post-revolutionary period. However, the pattern persisted during the ensuing two decades, as Khomeini's government expanded its authority and consolidated control over political, social and cultural discourse in the country in the name of true Islam.<sup>28</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, and in the wake of the 1989 death of Khomeini, there was hope in some quarters that the Islamic Republic would turn over a more pragmatic leaf.<sup>29</sup> Whatever changes did take place, however, did not extend to significant domestic loosening. Even during





Source: Shutterstock

periods of perceived political liberalization (such as the presidential tenure of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005), the Iranian regime maintained extensive restrictions on the country's political climate and social currents, employing censorship, repression and force to maintain control.<sup>30</sup>

That trend has both persisted and deepened. Amid the growing domestic unrest and economic, political and social discontent of recent years, the Iranian regime has resorted to increasingly draconian measures to preserve its hold on power. In its most recent *Freedom in the World* survey, democracy watchdog Freedom House once again classified the Islamic Republic as “not free,” highlighting a host of structural deformities.<sup>31</sup> Notably, Iran has been deemed steadily more repressive by the organization's standards; in 2019, it merited a score of 18 out of 100 in terms of political rights and civil liberties.<sup>32</sup> By 2021, that figure had worsened to 16 out of 100.<sup>33</sup> Today, it stands at just 11 out of 100.<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, the discontent now visible on the Iranian “street” differs materially from previous rounds of domestic unrest, despite the persistence of the trends noted above. During the 2009 “Green Movement,” for instance, swathes of the country remained unaffected and continued to



function as usual.<sup>35</sup> This in turn provided a sense of normalcy for the country despite the widespread nature of the protests, and facilitated a return to “business as usual” once the uprising gradually lost steam. By contrast, the current unrest within Iran is substantially more broadly based, stemming from a wide range of factors, among them “economic conditions, environmental issues, political grievances, and cultural issues.”<sup>36</sup> The September 2022 killing of Mahsa Amini has broadened the basis for grassroots protest within the Islamic Republic still further by highlighting the plight of women under clerical rule, which has been likened by international organizations to “gender apartheid.”<sup>37</sup>

The present, fragmented state of Iranian society, and the activation of virtually all economic strata by the cross-cutting nature of the female-driven protest wave, is undoubtedly a challenge for the current regime. It also represents an important metric for any post-theocratic order, which will need to accommodate — and be responsive to — the new and expanded demands of the Iranian people. It should be instructive for the United States as well. **Given the Islamic Republic’s long legacy of repression, American engagement must be geared toward supporting and bolstering opposition forces that commit to a broadening and strengthening of the country’s civil society, so as to ensure true pluralism and the engagement of voices from across the national political spectrum.**

## PRINCIPLE III: STOP SHORT OF SPECIFYING A STATE RELIGION

Today, Iranians are increasingly looking beyond the clerical state. Recent years have witnessed a massive decline in religiosity within the Islamic Republic. Just how much was documented in a September 2020 internet survey of over 50,000 Iranians by Netherlands-based polling institute GAMAAN. Thirty-one percent of respondents in the GAMAAN survey self-identified as atheists or stated they did not have a defined faith, while over half (51.8 percent) of those aged 20-29 and 46 percent of those aged 30-49 reported having transitioned away from religion altogether. In all, 46.8 percent of participants in the survey disclosed having abandoned their religious beliefs in recent years.<sup>38</sup>

This trend has become so acute as to be deemed “highly alarming” by regime officials.<sup>39</sup> There is good reason for their concern. By official estimates, some two-thirds of Iran’s 75,000 mosques have been closed as a result of significant declines in attendance, prompting increasingly frantic (albeit largely unsuccessful) official attempts to lure Iranians back to places of worship.<sup>40</sup>

A number of factors have contributed to this deepening disaffection with the Muslim faith. Economically, Iran’s clerical leadership has failed to meaningfully expand prosperity for ordinary Iranians during its four-and-a-half decades in power. When tallied by the World Bank in 2018, Iranians were found in real terms to be thirty percent poorer than immediately prior to the 1979

revolution.<sup>41</sup> This is so despite the fact that the country boasts the world's second-largest natural gas reserves, and holds nearly half of the oil reserves of the OPEC cartel.<sup>42</sup> The current regime, with its iron grip on the levers of Iranian society, is widely seen as responsible for this pronounced "failure to thrive."

Demographics, too, are working against Iran's rulers. More than half of the country was born after the events of 1979 propelled Iran's clerical class to power, has no recollection of the Islamic Revolution, and lacks the ideological bonds that would tether it securely to the current regime. It does, however, know exactly what it is missing. The Islamic Republic now ranks as one of the Middle East's "wired" nations. When tallied last year, internet penetration in Iran was gauged at 78.6 percent, marginally higher than neighboring Iraq (74.9 percent) and Egypt (72.2 percent), and significantly more than war-torn Syria (35.8 percent) and Yemen (26.7 percent).<sup>43</sup> This high level of connectivity, coupled with decades of access to foreign media, culture and commerce, has made the Iranian people painfully aware of their own government's shortcomings. In turn, most of these failings are attributed to the rigid, inflexible ideological nature of the regime, which has stymied international cooperation and commerce, embroiled the country in instances of foreign adventurism at great cost to the average Iranian, and transformed the nation into an international pariah.

This disaffection has broad implications for any future Iranian government, and how it should approach the role of religion in the country's future. Here, the recent experiences of two of Iran's neighbors should be instructive. In both Afghanistan to Iran's east and Iraq to its west, the U.S.-led "Global War on Terror" resulted in the removal of old regimes and their replacement with alternative, Western-supported governments. Yet in both places, subsequent decisions to enshrine Islam as the country's official religion proved to be fateful.

In Afghanistan, the post-Taliban constitution adopted in January 2005 defines Islam as the "religion of the state," and mandates that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam."<sup>44</sup> In so doing, it establishes a legislative basis for the unequal treatment of both women and religious minorities — an inequality that, with the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul in 2021, has been harnessed to dramatic effect.<sup>45</sup>

In Iraq, the post-Saddam order likewise has been underpinned by a constitution identifying Islam as "fundamental source of legislation," and proscribing the passage of any law that "contradicts the established provisions of Islam." However, unlike Afghanistan's post-war constitution, Iraq's fundamental law prohibits the passage of legislation that runs counter to "the principles of democracy" or "the rights and basic freedoms" it enumerates.<sup>46</sup> Yet, as experts noted at the time, even this comparatively more inclusive formulation was problematic because it failed to define *which* interpretation of Islam would be used as the basis of the state — thereby setting the stage for potential abuse by more extreme religious actors.<sup>47</sup>



Source: Shutterstock

This is precisely what has happened in subsequent years. As the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) outlined in its most recent annual report: “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained precarious for religious minorities in Iraq... Iraqis of many faith backgrounds, especially religious minorities, faced ongoing political marginalization by the government as well as abuse by both government-affiliated and nonstate actors.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, new laws introduced in Iraq’s parliament, though ostensibly in line with the country’s constitution, would enable authorities to curtail freedom of religion or belief, as well as freedom of speech, still further.<sup>49</sup>

These examples should prove cautionary for Iranian opposition forces. While a range of opposition initiatives have now begun to consider the need to draft a new constitution, little consensus exists regarding its substance — at least so far. Here, opposition action (and U.S. support) should be guided by the growing distance from religion exhibited by the Iranian population writ large, and by the unintended consequences of recent regional embraces of a defined state religion. **Thus,**



**consonant with the American tradition, the United States should support forces that advocate frameworks for the broadest possible expression of faith, without compelling adherence to one in particular.**

## **PRINCIPLE IV: A NUCLEAR IRAN IS TOLERABLE, WITH SUFFICIENT CONSTRAINTS**

After roughly a quarter-century of development, Iran's nuclear program is mature, distributed and resilient. It is also, by all indications, a popular venture, with most Iranians supporting nuclear status of some sort for their country.

To this end, an August 2022 poll carried out by the University of Maryland's Center for International & Security Studies found that of more than 1,000 Iranians surveyed telephonically, just 4% believed Iran should pursue no nuclear program whatsoever. Thirty-six percent of respondents in the same study, meanwhile, argued that the Islamic Republic should pursue "both atomic bombs and nuclear power," while a plurality (56%) were convinced that it should pursue atomic development only for power generation.<sup>50</sup> Given these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that a future Iran, irrespective of the type of government it ultimately adopts, will likely be interested in the pursuit of nuclear power (though perhaps not of nuclear weapons).

This priority should not be perceived as a problem, *per se*. After all, Iran's nuclear ambitions have not always been viewed as threatening. To the contrary, in the late 1950s, the nuclear aspirations of Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi were jumpstarted by Washington itself, with the Eisenhower administration providing the country with a small research reactor via its "Atoms for Peace" program.<sup>51</sup> In subsequent years, Iran's interest in nuclear development grew apace with the country's mounting economic prosperity. However, it did so transparently, and in cooperation with the West. To that end, the Shah's Iran was one of the original signatories of the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). That agreement went into force in 1970, opening Iran's nuclear development to international inspection by the United Nations.<sup>52</sup> It was not until the Shah was swept from power at the end of that decade that the country's nuclear program went underground. When it resurfaced in the early 2000s, it did so to widespread international concern, given the Iranian regime's status as a state sponsor of terrorism and destructive regional actor.

That history is instructive, because it highlights the fundamental reason for Western concern. Iran's nuclear program is perceived as inherently menacing by the West not because of the technology involved. Indeed, over the past quarter-century, the United States has agreed to assist the nuclear aspirations of several of its international partners.<sup>53</sup> Rather, the widespread distrust that has accompanied Iran's nuclear advances stems from the opaque, unaccountable way in which that progress has been made, as well as the radical character and aggressive impulses of the regime that will ultimately come to possess nuclear status.



Source: Shutterstock

This dynamic should be one of overriding importance to the Iranian opposition. To date, assorted groups have been quick to pledge denuclearization as a confidence-building measure toward the West, and a way of mustering support from Washington and European capitals.<sup>54</sup> Yet such a policy position is probably untenable over the long run, given Iranian domestic sentiment on the nuclear issue. As a result, whatever its initial stance, a post-theocratic Iranian government will likely be propelled into an embrace of nuclear development as a matter of domestic appeal, national prestige and international standing.

Such a shift, however, would not necessarily lead to a rupture with the United States and other Western powers, provided the prospective Iranian government takes pains to carry out its atomic work in an open, verifiable and candid way. If Iran's nuclear program is pursued in such fashion, with the new order adhering to both international standards and safeguards, Western reactions are likely to be muted. More than anything else, however, the reaction of the United States and other foreign governments will depend on the nature of the regime that will ultimately become a nuclear possessor.



With that in mind, the United States must make clear to Iranian opposition forces that they need to commit to the pursuit of any and all nuclear development via a transparent, verifiable process that is both internationally monitored and internationally regulated.

## PRINCIPLE V: PROMOTE PLURALISM, NOT NECESSARILY DEMOCRACY

In discussions of Iran's future, Western analysis all too often posits that a post-theocratic order in Tehran will inevitably be democratic in nature. In turn, many of the platforms, position papers and public statements of the opposition groups now arrayed against the Iranian regime reflect that preference, pledging to shepherd Iran into a democratic, representative future.

Such an outcome, however, is not likely. Rather, as political scientists Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz have pointed out, autocratic regimes that experience sufficient domestic stressors to undergo some sort of internal transition do not generally head toward greater pluralism. In fact, in historical terms, "autocratic to autocratic" transitions in which a ruling

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“selectorate” with significant economic and political power assumes control of the state are far more common.<sup>55</sup>

Nor is it even necessarily desirable, from a strategic perspective. For instance, policymakers and experts in Israel have expressed a clear preference *against* such an outcome, despite Israel’s own status as a vibrant democracy. They have done so on the basis that authoritarian regimes tend to behave more predictably, as well as because their own country has had extensive experience navigating relations with the undemocratic regimes that populate the Middle Eastern region.<sup>56</sup> They further posit that it would be possible for Israel to coexist with an undemocratic Iran, provided this new government is more accountable in nature and less antagonistic toward the Jewish state.<sup>57</sup>

But if democracy is not a prerequisite for American national security, pluralism undoubtedly is. The experience of the past century strongly suggests that environments in which religious, gender and ethnic minority rights are protected have a much better chance of evolving in a pluralistic, inclusive direction than those where they are not. This holds true in the case of modern Turkey, where far-reaching reforms instituted by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the 1920s and 1930s expanded rights and opportunities for both women and ethnic minorities — creating the basis for broader prosperity that allowed the country to transition beyond its status as the “sick man of Europe.”<sup>58</sup> In Iran itself, the Shah’s groundbreaking 1963 referendum, popularly known as the “White Revolution,” upgraded the legal status of women, expanded opportunities for the country’s lower economic strata, and ushered in a period of reform that lasted until Khomeini’s radical religious revolt sixteen years later.<sup>59</sup> In the present day, the political changes articulated in Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030” plan<sup>60</sup> — including greater empowerment for women, a relaxation of religious strictures, and a greater societal opening toward the West — are in the process of fundamentally transforming the Kingdom, with far-reaching implications for its economic prosperity and global outlook.

Statistical data bears this out. According to the Harvard Business School’s Social Progress Index, countries with wide disparities in religious, gender and social cohesion tend to have lower GDPs, exhibit higher levels of group grievance, and perform more poorly in terms of health and education.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, on the Legatum Institute’s Legatum Prosperity Index, the countries that rank lowest share a number of commonalities, including limited religious freedoms, a lack of protections for women, and frequent or even institutionalized discrimination against ethnic minorities.<sup>62</sup>

This reality should guide the future of Iran. Those political alternatives that offer the greatest opportunities for societal pluralism hold out the best hope for the country to meaningfully transition beyond the strictures, and the deformities, of the Islamic Republic. Sadly, however, such a scenario is far from assured. Iranian opposition forces today are typified by factionalism, disorganization, and personality politics. As a result, despite their promise, they have failed to

meaningfully coalesce into a collective that can provide the best assurances for religious tolerance, gender equality, and social inclusivity.

**Therefore, to the extent it is able, the United States should encourage cooperation among disparate Iranian opposition groups, and foster the creation of durable coalitions within the Iranian opposition committed to religious freedom, gender equality and social cohesion.**

## PRINCIPLE VI: EMPHASIZE ACCOUNTABILITY AND REHABILITATION

When it comes to post-totalitarian transitions, a great deal depends on how successfully a country's new government grapples with its repressive past — and how effectively it circumscribes the power of the institutions of the old order. The collapse of the Soviet Union provides the largest contemporary case in point. The immediate post-Soviet period in Central Europe, Eastern Europe and the Baltics saw a number of nations chart their own respective paths toward lustration and accountability. Without fail, however, their respective successes or failures hinged on the way the new, post-Soviet governments grappled with the previous political order and the instruments by which it successfully projected force inward.<sup>63</sup> Put another way:

...the relationship between arbitrary security and arbitrary power is so close that whenever a society rids itself of a despotic government but fails to root out that regime's security organs—including the people, structures, and habits that are associated with it—it is more likely than not that some political force will find those same organs useful. And in the end, the new regime will turn out to be not so new after all.<sup>64</sup>

So it will inevitably be with Iran. In large part, the durability of any post-theocratic order will depend on how it addresses the deformities, excesses and key structures of the present-day Islamic Republic.

Here, the country's clerical army looms exceedingly large. Since its establishment in the early days of Khomeini's revolution, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, has become a central pillar of regime power and authority. Today, it serves as the custodian of the regime's strategic programs, including its increasingly mature nuclear effort, as well as an extensive web of proxies stretching across the Greater Middle East.<sup>65</sup> In economic terms, too, the Guards wield enormous power. One recent expert assessment estimated the IRGC to control "roughly a third of Iran's total economy (both formal and informal)."<sup>66</sup> In practical terms, the IRGC is today insinuated throughout virtually the entirety of Iran's economy, with significant stakes in the country's telecommunications, construction and transportation sectors. This ubiquitous

presence, in turn, guarantees that the power of the Guards will be difficult to dislodge from Iranian life following a collapse of the current order.

Might it be possible to change the IRGC's orientation? Some have contended that, much like the Soviet collapse forced the KGB to de-ideologize to remain relevant and powerful in the new Russia, so too will the Guards adopt a more pragmatic posture in a post-theocratic Iran. Others, however, argue that the IRGC — a foundational element of Khomeini's radical religious revolution — will stay both ideologically pure and committed to the core tenets of the Islamic Republic well into the future.<sup>67</sup> As a result, they advocate the necessity of sidelining the IRGC in a future Iranian polity.

Yet history provides a cautionary tale in this regard. Some two decades ago, following the invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, the Coalition Provisional Authority infamously barred anyone who had been a member of Iraq's Ba'ath Party from participating in post-Saddam politics. This edict, with its fundamental misreading of authoritarian politics, in which membership in the Ba'ath for decades had served as a prerequisite for access to all manner of social services, contributed significantly to the creation of a home-grown insurgency and set the country on a path of protracted civil strife.

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The same danger exists in Iran, where involvement with revolutionary institutions — including the IRGC and its feared domestic militia, the *Basij* — is widespread. Indeed, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, the IRGC boasts between 150,000 and 190,000 personnel,<sup>68</sup> while the ranks of the *Basij* have been judged to run to between 5 and 7 million.<sup>69</sup> As such, completely excluding *Basijis* and Guardsmen from public life in a post-theocratic order would be both complicated and unwise.

But if the outright removal of the IRGC is not feasible, its subordination to the new order must be. Much of the long-term political success sought by opposition forces hinges upon putting in place a process that forces the IRGC and its constituent parts to become willing participants in, and stakeholders of, the new order. Indeed, for a political transformation to succeed,

...a nation's new leadership must be willing and able to change the government. From the outset it must be ready to articulate and enforce the proper relationship between itself and its intelligence and security organs, and to hold the elements to account for past transgressions. If it does not, the corrosive nature of totalitarian secret police structures can serve to corrupt and distort the character, and the direction, of the new regime.<sup>70</sup>

**Therefore, U.S. support for Iranian opposition forces should be conditioned not only on the presence of a plan to hold accountable those responsible for the atrocities of the former regime, but also of a coherent process to rehabilitate and reintegrate key segments of the present-day Islamic Republic.**

## AMERICA'S ROLE

When might Iran change, and in what ways? Nearly fifty years after its last major political transformation, that question continues to bedevil decisionmakers, both in Washington and far beyond the Capital Beltway.

There are no definitive answers. History has shown all too clearly that revolutions are notoriously hard to predict. Almost without exception, the significant political upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not reliably anticipated, either by informed observers or by much better resourced (and presumably more competent) intelligence agencies. Indeed, even Iran's own Islamic Revolution caught the U.S. government by near-total surprise when it took place in February 1979.<sup>71</sup> As such, there is significant hazard in predicting when, how and in what way political change might come to Iran.

Even so, it is apparent that Iran is fast approaching an inflection point of some sort. Nearly half-a-century after the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's religious uprising fundamentally altered the complexion of the country, virtually every objective measure suggests that it is once again ripe



for change. Popular disaffection, economic decline, dwindling religiosity and widespread societal malaise have combined into a political cocktail potentially lethal to the country's current clerical regime.

Yet the United States should approach this revolutionary potential with caution, because supporting Iran's opposition comes with its own set of significant challenges. One is that diaspora groups have historically had a mixed record of influencing their country's future course after the collapse of the old regime. In instances where they were assisted in assuming power (as was the case with the expatriate leadership of France and Germany during and after World War II), these groups played a decisive role in shaping the direction of the future state. However, in instances where there was no occupation or precipitating function that eased their rise to power — such as in Poland and Hungary after the Soviet collapse — diaspora groups, no matter how organized, only ended up playing a marginal role.

Another is the degree of connectivity between the different wings of the Iranian opposition. Today, Iranian opposition forces are effectively bifurcated, divided between an external opposition made up of activists and organizations in the Iranian diaspora and internal protest groups within the Islamic Republic itself. To be sure, diaspora groups persistently claim to have extensive access to, and interaction with, Iran's internal forces. There have indeed been instances that demonstrate such interplay, among them disclosures of the regime's clandestine nuclear work by the Mujahideen e-Khalq and recent protests that have exhibited significant shows of support for former Iranian Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi. In the main, however, this level of connection has proven hard to quantify with any degree of confidence, and this lack of clarity has helped deter Western governments from committing decisively to supporting Iranian agents of change.

Finally, America's own track record of involvement in promoting change abroad remains decidedly mixed. As the past century has shown, more often than not U.S. political interventions abroad have failed to follow Washington's plans for smooth, pro-Western transitions — with post-Saddam Iraq the most recent and painful case in point.<sup>72</sup> Given this difficult history, the United States must remain judicious in its involvement with Iranian opposition forces, as well as temper its expectations of playing a decisive role in setting the country's future course.

Ultimately, Iran's future remains for Iranians themselves to decide. Nevertheless, the U.S. can and should articulate what would most securely put a post-theocratic Iran on a trajectory of security and prosperity that is consonant with American interests. And it should, to the extent that it is able to do so, empower those elements of the Iranian opposition which can best steer the country in that direction.



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# AFPC MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Over the past quarter-century, the Middle East has taken center stage on the American foreign policy agenda. Regional dangers with international implications abound, from the expansionist ambitions of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the enduring phenomenon of radical Islamism. Simultaneously, the political transformation of Turkey, sweeping societal changes in Saudi Arabia, and the intrusion of external actors such as Russia and China have succeeded in demolishing the traditional geopolitical status quo, with profound implications for both the United States and its allies. AFPC's work helps provide policymakers, experts, and the media with the tools to understand and navigate these complex new realities.

## CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONIES

AFPC scholars have testified before the U.S. Congress more than two dozen times on topics related to Iran and the Middle East. They have spoken before eight different committees in both the House of Representatives and Senate, including the House Foreign Affairs Committee, the House Committee on Homeland Security, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee.

## FACT-FINDING MISSIONS

AFPC supplements its analytical work on Middle East politics with original, cutting-edge insights gleaned from on-the-ground research throughout the region. Over the past half-decade, AFPC's research missions have included trips to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Qatar, Israel, and Turkey. The findings from these trips have resulted in studies, reports and editorials that have helped U.S. policymakers in Congress and the Executive Branch to better understand and navigate the changing currents of a volatile region.

## IRAN FREEDOM INITIATIVE

Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran represents one of the greatest challenges to U.S. policy in the Middle East, as well as to the safety and security of American allies in the region. Established in 2006, the American Foreign Policy Council's Iran Freedom Initiative is committed to assisting American policymakers to develop and implement strategy toward Iran – and to promoting the spread of pluralism and democratic principles in that country.

- **IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR**

AFPC provides critical insights into the broad ideology and mechanics of the Islamic Republic of Iran via its *Iran Democracy Monitor* e-bulletin. Published periodically, this monitor tracks the levels of radicalism and reform in Iran, focusing on issues such as human rights, governmental repression and the state of the Iranian opposition.

- **CHARTING IRAN'S GLOBAL INFLUENCE**

For much of the past two decades, the international community has focused on just one dimension of the contemporary threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran: its determined

quest for nuclear capability. Until quite recently, relatively little sustained analytical work has been devoted to Iran's growing quest for global influence beyond its immediate neighborhood, and to the strategic objectives underpinning this expansion. For years, AFPC has devoted extensive attention to this aspect of the Iranian challenge through activities such as fact-finding missions, studies and Congressional assistance, concentrating on issues such as Iran's growing presence in Latin America and Africa, its burgeoning cyber capabilities, its propaganda and disinformation efforts, and other destabilizing global activities that have as yet garnered insufficient attention from U.S. policymakers.

- **PUBLIC EDUCATION**

AFPC maintains an extensive schedule of public education and advocacy work relating to Iran, taking the form of original research and analysis, presentations and media appearances. AFPC's work on Iran has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Foreign Affairs, Politico, The National Interest, the Washington Times and National Review, among other publications, and its experts have provided expert commentary to news outlets such as Bloomberg, CNN, MSNBC, Fox, the Voice of America and C-SPAN regarding the contemporary challenge to American interests that is posed by the Islamic Republic.

## **ORIGINAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS**

AFPC scholars maintain an active schedule of research and writing on the Middle East. These insights – in the form of articles, editorials and policy papers – look “over the horizon” at emerging challenges and opportunities in the region, and help to inform U.S. decision makers about political developments and significant trends.





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