Iranian security policy defies simple explanation. Religion, nationalism, ethnicity, economics, and geopolitics all are important factors influencing Iran's goals and tactics in its relationship with the outside world. So too are the agendas of key security institutions and the ambitions of their leaders. If anything, Iran's foreign policy is becoming more complex. The Islamic Republic, long a source of instability in the Middle East, is itself under severe pressure to change.

Iran's politics and even basic structure of government are in flux. The 1997 election of Mohammed Khatami as president triggered a struggle between reformers and revolutionaries that has changed the political debate in Iran. Because Iranian politics today are not predictable, this study focuses on the more fundamental sources of Iran's foreign policy. Although the relative priority that different leaderships would give to them varies, these sources are likely to remain important factors that drive decisionmaking under most conceivable future governments.

This study seeks to untangle this complex skein of motivations. Through an analysis of recent Iranian foreign policy, we identify the ideological and nonideological stimuli to Iranian decisionmaking and to important institutional inputs. Such an understanding will aid the United States as its troubled relationship with the Islamic Republic continues to evolve.
KEY OBSERVATIONS

Although most of this study focuses on describing decisionmaking and the particular outcomes that characterize Iran’s security policy, several broader observations (discussed in the final chapter of this report) deserve notice:

• Domestic, foreign, and security policies cannot be separated. All of Iran’s major policy decisions involve a complex calculus of Iran’s overall vulnerability, its need to ensure the regime stays in power, and its commitment to revolutionary ideals. Iran’s leaders weigh all these factors when making their decisions.

• The Islamic Republic is increasingly prudent. Particularly near Iran’s own borders, the Islamic regime has tended to support the status quo with regard to territorial integrity, has avoided major military provocations, and has shown a preference for working with governments over substate movements.

• Iran’s policies toward Israel and the United States are often an exception to its overall shift toward prudence. Restrictions on relations with both countries remain one of the strongest remnants of the revolutionary legacy.

• Differences between Iran’s regular armed forces and its revolutionary armed forces are decreasing. As their commitment to professionalism has grown, and their Islamist ardor waned, the revolutionary forces have increasingly conducted business in a manner similar to that of the regular forces.

• Iran’s ideology is often a mask for realpolitik. Iran still supports Shi’a radicals and other Islamists throughout the world—and champions the anti-Israel front—but its motives and its priorities are increasingly dictated by cold national interest concerns.

• In general, Iran’s security forces respect and follow the wishes of Iran’s civilian leadership, even though they vigorously champion their own agendas whenever possible. Conducting “rogue operations,” or otherwise acting without civilian approval, is rare to nonexistent.

• Iran’s decisionmaking, while often chaotic, is not anarchic. There are rules to Iran’s decisionmaking on major security issues, but the rules appear to be in constant flux and are informal, if
well known. On most issues, many important players have a voice. In addition, the system emphasizes consensus, preventing individuals or small numbers of institutions from dominating overall policy.

- Iran’s security institutions have overlapping responsibilities, which leads to inconsistent implementation of the same directives. However, the emphasis on consensus, along with the relative lack of military autonomy, prevents too much deviation from agreed-upon objectives.

- The leaderships of Iran’s security forces, particularly of the regular military, are often voices of restraint. Iran’s security forces prefer shows of force to active confrontations. When tensions with several neighbors have escalated, Iran’s military forces have conducted maneuvers and buildups near the respective areas of conflict but have deliberately sought to avoid open confrontations. The military forces fear that almost any broad conflict would be costly and deeply unpopular.

To support these arguments and to gain a broader understanding of Iran’s security policy, this report takes several tacks. First, it discusses the basic drivers of Iran’s security policy, including a range of ideological, strategic, and domestic factors, all of which play into Iran’s decisionmaking. Second, it looks at the particular agendas of various security institutions, particularly the regular armed forces (the Artesh) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Third, it explores how these drivers and agendas interact, examining Iranian decisionmaking on security issues. Fourth, it assesses the actual outputs of Iran’s security policy—relations with key states and policies on important issues, such as Iran’s support for coreligionists abroad—and explores the interplay of factors that shape Iran’s behavior.

Taken together, these four approaches shed light on Iran’s overall security policy methods, objectives, and characteristics.

METHODOLOGY . . . AND CAVEATS

The data for this study draw on a range of sources. Most important, we relied on interviews with knowledgeable Iranians in the United
States, in Europe, and in Iran itself. Almost all these individuals asked not to be identified by name. We also drew on media coverage of events in Iran, again relying on both Iranian and Western sources. Finally, we used existing scholarly works to supplement the findings.

Although this report relies primarily on interviews, these have several inherent limits. First, many of those interviewed had information that was at best indirectly received. It was often impossible for us to verify the information beyond checking it with other individuals interviewed and with our own knowledge of events. Second, the subject of this report is highly sensitive. Iran, like many countries, does not have an open debate on many key civil-military issues. As a result, information was often scarce. Third, many of those interviewed almost certainly pushed their own agendas and biases. We tried to filter these out, but perfection on this score is impossible.

Several other caveats are in order. Understanding Iran’s security decisionmaking is difficult at best for outside analysts. Iran’s behavior often appears inconsistent, and its decisionmaking style—due to its complexity—confuses outsiders. One consistent finding of this report was the importance of individual personalities and personal networks in setting policy. Unearthing the particulars of each key individual, however, was beyond the scope of this report. Even more important, Iran’s entire political system is in flux. Many of the rules that have applied for the first two decades of the Islamic Republic no longer apply or are honored more in the breach. Thus, the conclusions of this report should be reconsidered as time goes on and more data come in.

**STRUCTURE**

The remainder of this study has six chapters. Chapter Two identifies deep sources of Iranian foreign policy, noting how factors such as geopolitics, religion, nationalism, ethnicity, and economics affect Iran’s foreign policy goals and behavior. Chapter Three focuses on the characteristics of security decisionmaking in Iran. Chapter Four describes key security institutions and their agendas. In Chapter Five, the changing and ambiguous relationship between Iran’s security institutions and Iranian society is explored. Chapter Six de-
scribes the impact of the above sources of foreign policy on Iran’s behavior. This study concludes with Chapter Seven, which draws general observations on Iran’s security policy.