

# IRAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY DEBATE

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE U.S.-IRAN NEGOTIATIONS



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## **Perspective**

EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE

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**W**estern observers often think of the Iranian national security decisionmaking process as a top-down exercise by the supreme leader. In reality, however, it is a bargaining process, in which infighting and consensus-building shape policy outputs.<sup>1</sup> Domestic debates on key issues play a critical role in framing, molding, and selling foreign and security policies. Despite significant, regime-imposed limits on acceptable speech and dissent, these debates can be vigorous and include voices from much of the political spectrum—even as many are punished for taking part in the discourse.<sup>2</sup> In the West—particularly in the United States—the nuances of these debates frequently get lost in translation, fade away in a busy news cycle, or are drowned out by the regime’s bombastic tropes, which have come to dominate its rhetoric over the past four decades.

How does Iran’s domestic debate on key foreign policy and national security issues affect that country’s policy outputs and posture on the international stage and vis-à-vis the United States? The dynamics of Iran’s national security debate reveal how different power centers in Tehran have responded to key national security and foreign policy ideas, where a level of consensus exists, and where there are significant disagreements within the system, as well

as areas of change and continuity in the regime’s debates and resulting policy outputs. Broad consensus within the system (formalized by the supreme leader) corresponds to Iran’s redlines, but there are opportunities for negotiation where there is significant dissent and disagreement. Understanding where the regime is in consensus and where there is tension is critical to developing a realistic policy on Iran and ensuring successful engagement in any future negotiation.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution moved Iran from the camp of U.S.-aligned nations into the realm of U.S. adversaries, successive U.S. presidential administrations have tried to change the regime’s behavior. To this end, they have used the wide range of tools in the U.S. foreign policy toolkit, including economic sanctions, political pressure, military threats, and diplomacy. Identifying areas in which Iran might be inclined to step back from its positions is critical to reaching a settlement with Iran and achieving U.S. policy objectives. Areas of disagreement and tension within the regime can be leveraged in negotiations with Tehran and provide starting points to develop zones of possible agreement between the two nations.<sup>3</sup>

The Trump administration’s stated objective is to strike a comprehensive deal that addresses several key

areas of concern with Tehran's foreign and security policies. These areas of concern span the country's nuclear and ballistic missile activities, military interventions in the region, and support for terrorist groups and militias. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo laid out these areas of concern in a 12-point list following President Donald Trump's May 8, 2018, announcement that he was withdrawing the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—a multilateral agreement signed by Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, China, and the European Union. The 12 points capture the core of what the administration sees as critical challenges stemming from the Islamic Republic's behavior.<sup>4</sup> Although the Trump administration's 12 points have been vigorously debated in Washington, almost every U.S. administration since 1979 has identified and sought to address the same set of challenges. In the absence of a negotiated solution or a change in regime, future administrations are likely to grapple with the same challenges.

Existing policy discussions have largely ignored the role of the domestic debate and elite attempts to win public opinion in shaping Iranian national security policies. These discussions also have omitted how divisions within the regime might offer areas of possible agreement in negotiations.<sup>5</sup> More generally, scholars of Iranian studies have seldom applied discourse theory to their subject. *Discourse theory* is a cross-disciplinary enterprise aiming to build understanding of the intersection of language and politics through linguistics, hermeneutics, and political science. It is based on the assumption that “linguistic ambiguities and rhetorical innovations facilitate the advancement of new political strategies and projects.”<sup>6</sup>

This Perspective identifies areas of consensus and fissure within the Iranian political elite, drawing from open-source material (including primary sources, such as official statements made by Iranian officials and government reports) as well as from news reports from outlets associated with blocs across the Iranian political spectrum.

## Consensus and Division In Iranian Decisionmaking

The Iranian political system is notoriously complex. Its key power centers include the office of the supreme leader, which sets the framework for decisionmaking and serves as the final arbiter of disputes; the executive branch, led by the president; the legislative branch, called the Majles; the judiciary; and the Iranian armed forces, which is composed of the Artesh (the conventional military) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). (Figure 1 charts the key power centers involved in the national security decisionmaking process).

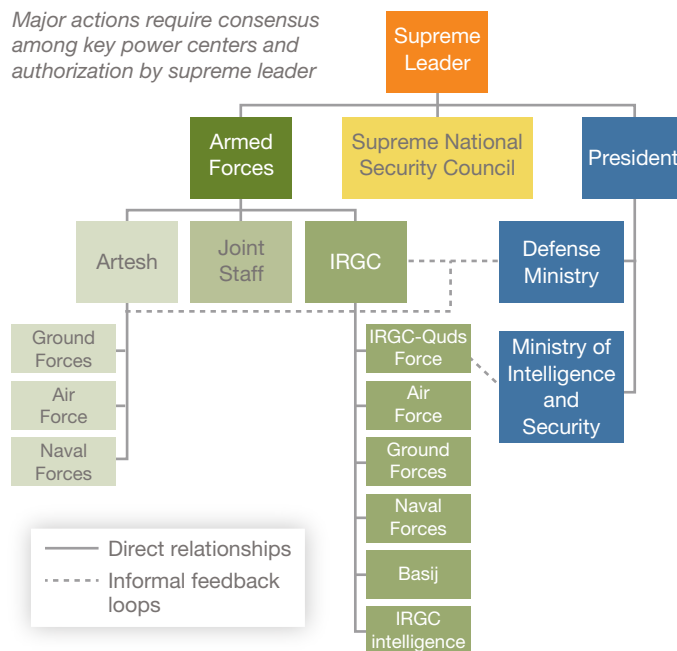
Representatives from each of these different power centers convene at the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) to deliberate on matters pertaining to national security.<sup>7</sup> The Iranian decisionmaking process privileges the informal over the formal, partly because of the weakness of Iranian institutions—a decisionmaking style that predates the Islamic Revolution.<sup>8</sup> Instead of formal political parties, informal factions compete for influence and shape policy outcomes. The SNSC is designed to streamline this process and formalize it somewhat.<sup>9</sup> It helps the supreme leader formulate national security redlines by presenting the outcomes of its deliberations and highlighting areas of consensus to the supreme leader.

Although the SNSC's deliberations take place behind closed doors (not unlike in other countries), various power centers and individuals frequently bring elements of these deliberations into the public realm. Typically, after the different factions have had an opportunity to weigh in, the supreme leader sets the boundaries within which national discourse can occur; he is the most significant decision-maker because he possesses a veto power over all other decisions.<sup>10</sup> He also can intervene outside the SNSC to arbitrate and bolster his chosen side at critical junctures, but he tries to shield himself from criticism by preserving an apolitical façade when possible.<sup>11</sup>

Within his own office (known as the *beyt-e rahbari*), the supreme leader has a number of advisory bodies, each working on specific (and sometimes overlapping) portfolios.<sup>12</sup> The Office of the Supreme Leader oversees international affairs, as well as political and security files. A separate body, known as the Special Offices, includes a military affairs office, as well as an intelligence unit. Finally, an advisory body oversees a number of portfolios, including military affairs, defense industries, international affairs, and the Muslim world. Through these offices, the supreme leader has his own apparatus that provides him with the intelligence and advice that shape Iranian redlines.

The IRGC and the executive branch have the most sway over specific national security issues; the IRGC largely dominates decisionmaking on regional portfolios, while the executive branch has more sway over the country's approach to international powers, such as European nations, Russia, and China. Because of its significance and the controversy in Iranian politics, the United States occupies a different place from other states in Iranian thinking

FIGURE 1  
Key Power Centers in National Security Decisionmaking

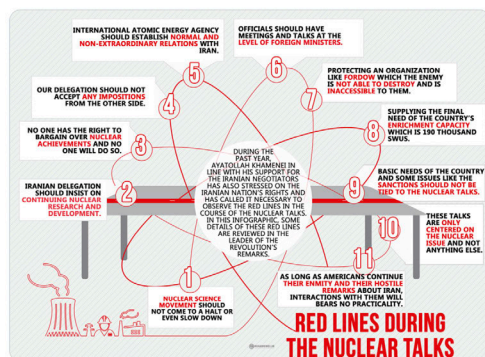


and is the subject of a more vigorous debate among all the power centers in Tehran. The Artesh plays a smaller role in determining national security positions. The Majles has limited power over the decisionmaking process;<sup>13</sup> it is able to check the executive, but it does not have the authority to overrule the supreme leader.<sup>14</sup> It does, however, play an important role in shaping public opinion and bringing these opinions into the decisionmaking process. It further embeds certain policies into the Iranian system through lawmaking.



Khamenei.ir  
@khamenei\_ir

#Iran's red lines in the nuclear talks  
#IranTalks #IranTalksOman



4:23 AM · Nov 9, 2014 · Twitter Web Client

**SUPREME INTERVENTION:** Iran's supreme leader used Twitter to draw red lines that were the counters for JCPOA negotiations in 2014. Khamenei often publicly arbitrates conflicts at critical points while trying to appear apolitical.

An example of this process occurred during the 2012–2015 nuclear talks between Tehran and the world powers, which ultimately produced the JCPOA. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei initially endorsed the negotiations and fixed redlines that provided the contours for what outcome would be acceptable.<sup>15</sup> As the talks continued, infighting intensified, leading him to take a clear and public stance and, on several occasions, even cautiously come out in support of the negotiators to shield them from opponents.<sup>16</sup> In some

instances, Khamenei seems to have accepted (albeit not without strong criticism) ultimate outcomes that he had previously deemed unacceptable. This might have occurred because Khamenei had adopted maximalist positions as part of a negotiation strategy or simply because he changed his mind. For example, Khamenei accepted the JCPOA, which did not ultimately remove all sanctions—despite his previous declarations that all sanctions needed to be lifted at once for any final agreement to be acceptable.<sup>17</sup>

Different factions and power centers try to shape and dominate the public discourse, rally the public and other stakeholders to support their positions, and pressure their opponents into accepting their desired outcomes. By helping power centers build support for their positions, debate plays a critical role in pushing competitors to compromise. Different factions compete to win public opinion, which constitutes an important part of the policymaking process, albeit to a lesser degree than in liberal democracies. Ultimately, as a 2001 RAND report explained, “the system requires compromise in order to avoid paralysis.”<sup>18</sup> This reliance on compromise to keep the country moving is partly caused by the presence of checks without real balances in the Iranian system.

Although the position of the supreme leader was designed to serve as the ultimate balancer, the current occupant of the office has often shied away from such intervention, preferring to preserve an apolitical image. This is particularly important because disagreements within the system do not always neatly align with political camps, as is often assumed in the United States. Reformists and hardliners do have different perspectives on a number of issues, but their positions also align on a number of topics. Similarly, political blocs and power centers have





“N. Korea learned the lesson from [the JCPOA] and didn’t get fooled by the United States.”

—Hardline newspaper  
Keyhan, March 2, 2019

**STATE PROPAGANDA:** The regime tightly controls the media as a key instrument of power and a way to advance the leadership’s agenda.

internal disagreements on specific matters. For example, despite often being seen as a monolith, IRGC commanders have taken different—even opposing—positions on certain questions, such as the range of Iran’s missiles and the desirability of negotiating with the United States on the nuclear program.

The media is an important consensus-building tool for the regime; it is also a useful vehicle for outside observers to discern domestic debates in an otherwise opaque system. As elsewhere, the media is an important instrument of power, and it is tightly controlled by the regime and used by various power centers to advance their own agendas.<sup>19</sup> Iranian power centers have built a significant traditional media and internet presence, creating or participating

in print and broadcast media coverage through newspapers, radio stations, and television channels. In addition, they have established websites and social media accounts through official social media and through unofficial, unverified accounts on such key platforms as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and the messaging app Telegram.<sup>20</sup> The Iranian political elite and security forces widely use social media, even as they ban various platforms for the broader population.<sup>21</sup>

The regime places limits on speech and confines dissent. It also imposes restrictions on media activity through a number of tools, including monitoring, censorship, filtering, and restraining access to platforms.<sup>22</sup> These restrictions ensure that public discourse performs as desired

“If the IRGC didn’t exist, the country would also not exist.”

—IRGC Instagram account,  
May 12, 2018



sangarefarhangi · Following

...



**LOGO AND LEADERS:** The IRGC, whose affiliates post its logo and photos of its leaders, has a robust social media presence. Iran’s security forces and political elite use social media even as they block average Iranians from various platforms.

by the system (securing buy-in of key stakeholders and creating an impression of openness) while mitigating the threat of free speech. Managed dissent serves to bolster the regime at home and abroad. If political blocs, media outlets, or public figures transgress the boundaries of acceptable discourse, they pay a high price. The reformist faction is a frequent target of campaigns seeking to limit discourse, as dissenting engagement with the system is desirable only insofar as it remains within the system’s boundaries.<sup>23</sup>

Instances of domestic crackdown on speech include shutting down newspapers and magazines (for example, *Seda* magazine was shut down in spring 2019 for arguing that the country faced a juncture and had to decide whether it would negotiate or go to war), blocking social media access (social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, are filtered in Iran), and arresting and imprisoning reporters.<sup>24</sup> However, many Iranian power centers and officials are active on the very social media platforms they prohibit for others and use them to amplify their own positions.

Among Iran’s power centers, the IRGC stands out as the entity with the most noticeable media and social media activity. The IRGC has affiliated newspapers, websites (including two important news outlets, *Tasnim* and *Fars News*), and thousands of verified and unverified social media accounts across different platforms. They leverage this presence for both domestic and international messaging, including signaling and amplifying their posture and directly and indirectly criticizing their opponents. In particular, IRGC-affiliated accounts apply the IRGC defense playbook to domestic debates: They use unofficial, often anonymous accounts to pressure their opponents while preserving plausible deniability.



The following sections outline four key areas of debate in Iranian national security thinking:

1. national security and military capabilities
2. relations with the United States
3. views on regional security
4. international orientation and the economy.

These four areas include the national security policies and defense capabilities deemed problematic from the U.S. perspective, including nuclear and missile programs, support for nonstate actors, and military interventions. Each section will first discuss areas of agreement (and, therefore, potential regime redlines) before identifying fissures within the political and military elites (areas that can be leveraged to create zones of possible agreement).

## National Security and Military Capabilities

As a number of RAND reports have stated over the years, Iran's elites view their country's military doctrine in largely defensive and asymmetric terms.<sup>25</sup> Although elites do not always agree on the nature and level of the threat posed by their adversaries and how best to approach them, the broad consensus within the system is that Iran should have a strong military and the capabilities to deter enemies and raise the costs of conflict.

Fundamentally, Iran's defense posture is based on deterrence. Because of its status within the international community as a pariah state, the general isolation of the Islamic Republic over the course of its existence, and sanctions, Iran is unable to acquire the military technology needed to compete with other nations. As a result, the



When @realDonaldTrump insisted that "Iran is killing ISIS", exactly who did he think was doing the fighting & making the sacrifice?

ISIS would've held two Arab capitals & fielded a Terrorist Army on Europe's doorstep had #IRGC not fought alongside brave peoples of Iraq & Syria.



1:27 PM · Apr 10, 2019 · Twitter for Android

**INTERNAL DEBATE:** Iran's foreign minister defends the intervention in Syria—one of Iran's most internally divisive security acts—using as fodder comments that President Trump made as a candidate in 2016.

country lacks the conventional capabilities of its adversaries and rivals. Since the 1980s, Iran has acquired two key deterrents: its missile program and its nonstate partners in the region. More recently, it has also invested in building its cyber capabilities to serve as a force multiplier.

In general, overt military engagement, intervention, and operations are most likely to generate debate and dissent within the system as they are visible and, at times, publicized. However, the regime has been most inclined to

work covertly. Its decision to undertake mostly covert rather than overt operations stems from a number of logistical, operational, and strategic considerations, as well as public sentiment. In recent years, one of Iran's most divisive security policy decisions, both within the elite and within the public, has been its intervention in the Syrian conflict, as Iran deployed its own forces in addition to nonstate partners and proxies. The following sections assess two key elements of Iran's national security strategy—the Iranian missile program and nonstate partners—and where areas of consensus and disagreement exist over these elements.

## Missiles

Iranian power centers broadly agree that their country's missile program is a vital deterrent to Iran's enemies.<sup>26</sup> However, the consensus seems to stop at this point. Iranian power centers, and even individuals within them, do not agree on the specifics of their country's missile program. In particular, IRGC commanders do not always agree on the redlines for the missile program. Power centers also differ on whether the missile program is a possible subject for negotiations with the West.<sup>27</sup> Although some have argued that Iran's missile program is merely a defensive asset and should be a redline in any engagement with foreign powers, others, including President Hassan Rouhani, contend that Iran can put its missiles on the table—in the context of the system's acceptable parameters.<sup>28</sup> These parameters include the range of Iran's ballistic missiles, including the possibility of intercontinental ballistic missiles, which is another area of disagreement.

Currently, Iran has a self-imposed 2,000-km missile range limit.<sup>29</sup> As demonstrated in Figure 2, this range

includes Iran's immediate neighbors, as well as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Egypt, parts of Russia, and small parts of Eastern Europe. This self-imposed limit is the source of disagreement within the system in general and the Iranian military in particular. Although the IRGC is frequently characterized as a monolithic force whose positions are aligned with the hardline bloc, its commanders have presented a range of views on this topic, as well as on other issues, such as the nuclear program. Some military commanders have argued in favor of increasing the range limit, while others have contended that 2,000 km covers all of Tehran's potential targets.<sup>30</sup> Both sides base their arguments on a blend of military exigencies and political symbolism.

IRGC hardliners argue that Iran should expand its missile range from 2,000 km. Former IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohsen Rezai—known for his hawkish stance on national security issues—has called for expanding the range of Iranian missiles to 5,000 km. Another notoriously conservative IRGC figure, current IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, has argued that Iran has the capabilities to increase the range of its missiles and does not do so because of political and strategic decisions. He has threatened to remove this self-imposed limit in retaliation for the imposition of sanctions on Iran.<sup>31</sup>

Salami's predecessor, former IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari, represents the other side of the debate. He has contended that the 2,000-km limit is sufficient for his country, as it would allow the regime to hit all the U.S. targets it might wish to strike.<sup>32</sup> For this group, the political decision to limit the range of Iranian missiles is not separate from the country's military requirements, and unless there is a change in these requirements, the decision should stand.

Publicly available information about other dimensions of Iran's missile activities is fairly limited. The IRGC often unveils new missile technology and tests missiles in an attempt to send a message to domestic constituents and foreign audiences (as well as to improve its technology). In this sense, the very act of testing missiles is often part of the Iranian political discourse, although it is not typically debated in public. However, the pattern of Iranian missile tests indicates that the IRGC, the entity in charge of developing, testing, and proliferating missile technology in Iran, can be persuaded to increase or decrease the number of tests.<sup>33</sup>

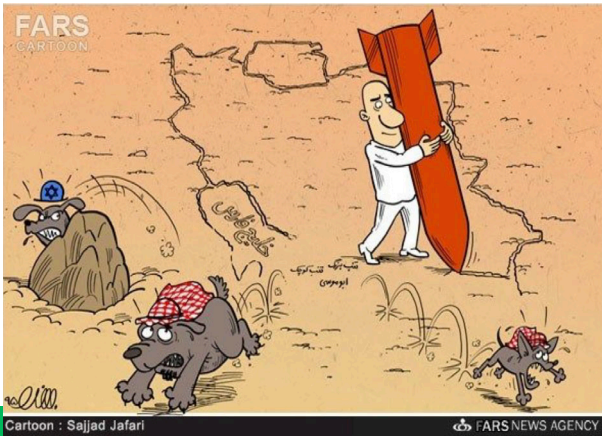
For example, Iran drastically reduced the number of its missile tests during the first and second rounds of nuclear talks. From 2002 to 2005, (shortly before and during the first round of talks), Iran reduced the number of missile launches from more than 30 to fewer than five in total. During the second round of nuclear talks, Iran conducted few launches, with none occurring in 2014 as the talks were progressing. Iran increased the number of launches after the collapse of the first round of talks and after the second round of talks' successful conclusion in 2015. In both cases, the increase was probably meant to show strength after having made concessions at the negotiating table; Iran might also have needed to catch up on necessary tests postponed during the talks. Although other factors (chiefly perceived external threats and technical needs) cannot be discounted in driving the decisions behind the launches, the pattern suggests that an agreement on limits on missile tests may be achievable in the context of negotiations.

Finally, Iran's proliferation of missiles and missile technology are a key concern for the United States and its regional partners. These activities are scarcely debated in

FIGURE 2  
Iran's Missile Range



public in Iran, mostly because Tehran has largely denied supplying its proxies with missiles and missile technology to preserve plausible deniability. However, a new trend may be emerging, as some quarters in Tehran have begun to (often indirectly) take credit for missile strikes on U.S. partners in the region by Iranian nonstate partners, particularly the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>34</sup> This is likely a response to the U.S. maximum pressure strategy and designed to communicate to the United States that its actions will entail reactions and costs. Nevertheless, Iran largely continues



**MISSILE MEME:** A cartoon on social media shows Iran's neighbors fleeing and hiding from an Iranian missile. Iran maintains that its missiles are primarily for deterrence, but factions within the country disagree about the specific policies that apply to its arsenal.

to refrain from officially and publicly admitting that it supplies its nonstate partners with missile technology. Therefore, the United States may be able to contain some of Iran's missile technology proliferation without great domestic cost for the regime.

## Nonstate Partners and Proxies

Iran's relationship with nonstate actors is perhaps one of the least publicly debated national security issues within the Iranian elite. The regime's nonstate actor strategy is fairly centralized. IRGC-Qods Force Commander Qassem

Soleimani answers directly to the supreme leader and plays the key role in cultivating the network and shaping the country's nonstate client priorities and policies.<sup>35</sup> The regime believes that its proxies provide it with an additional deterrent (complementing its missile program) and a means of power projection.<sup>36</sup> Nonstate partners afford the regime the ability to make up for its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis its adversaries.<sup>37</sup> Ties with nonstate actors enable Iran to develop and maintain presence and influence in key countries throughout the region without expending Iranian lives and while minimizing the costs of its policies.<sup>38</sup> The topic has long been a source of discontent within the population, a segment of which views the country's support for these groups as one-sided and costly. The elite broadly considers nonstate partners as a key component of its national security strategy.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, certain aspects of Iran's nonstate actor strategy are more contentious than others. For example, the regime's tactical ties with al-Qaeda have reportedly led to debates within the system.<sup>40</sup> Generally, Iran's support for nonstate actors is rarely discussed publicly, as the country strives to keep most of these relationships quiet. With a few exceptions, Tehran denies financing, equipping, and training nonstate partners. Two categories of exceptions exist. First, Iran has no qualms about publicizing its ties with groups whose image is either largely positive or uncontroversial, such as the Kurdish Peshmerga.<sup>41</sup> Second, Iran also makes public its relationships with its closest nonstate allies.<sup>42</sup> These are generally militias and terrorist groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Fatemiyoun Division (a group of Afghans, mostly Shi'a, created in 2014 to fight for the Assad regime), that closely align with and

are dependent on the Islamic Republic and over which the regime's command and control is most significant.<sup>43</sup>

Tehran is unlikely to give up its support for nonstate clients altogether because it views nonstate actors as a key pillar of national and regime security, and it has invested a great deal of effort and reputational cost in them. However, it does adjust the amount and nature of its support for these groups.<sup>44</sup> Iran might agree to limit its support for some members of its network of nonstate partners or offer to deactivate or disband some of the groups that do not directly affect Iranian security and over which it exercises the most control. Iran might also agree to help disarm other groups and integrate them into their respective political landscapes—although, in some countries, this may not be desirable from a U.S. perspective.

Different nonstate actors rank differently in Iran's calculus. Iran is unlikely to give up its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon for the foreseeable future, as it sees the group as critical to its own security. Iraqi Shi'a militias are also instrumental to the country's ability to project power in and influence Iraq and to deter and harass U.S. forces. However, the Houthis are less directly significant to Iranian national security, and the Houthis and Iranians have a tumultuous relationship. Iran might be more willing to disband the Zeinabiyoun, a group of Pakistani Shi'as that it created to serve a narrow purpose (supporting the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war) and over which it exercises significant command and control.

## Relations with the United States

The Iranian regime openly and actively presents a negative view toward the United States. Chants of “death to



# دمشون گرم!

جوانان کشورهای اسلامی (لبنان، فلسطین، عراق، یمن، سوریه و  
نیجریه) با مدیریت مجمع جوانان مقاومت برای یاری سیل زدگان  
ایرانی می شتابند. این اتحاد میان مسلمین؛ ثمره مقاومت است.

**FLOOD BROTHERS:** A hardline Instagram account praised Iranian proxies—a web of insurgent and terrorist allies—for providing flood aid in Iran. While leadership generally supports this network, many Iranians view it as unethical, one-sided, and costly.

America” are a permanent feature of Tehran's rhetoric—although its leaders claim these are directed toward U.S. policies, not people. Opposition to a pro-U.S. foreign policy was a key driver behind the movement that overthrew the monarchy and one of the few positions shared by different groups of revolutionaries at the time. Today, the political and military elites continue to broadly view the United States as an antagonistic force. However, this adversarial outlook has not created a consensus position as to how to deal with that threat, and Iranian policymakers differ about the best approach toward Washington.



"These 4 individuals: If only officials and those optimistic about negotiations with the United States were interested in history! They would've studied the fate of people and countries which trusted America. Mossadeq, Saddam, Qaddafi, Morsi . . . Those hopeful about America took a blow from America itself."

—Proregime Twitter account,  
August 30, 2018



**SUSPICIOUS MINDS:** Washington is viewed with much skepticism and distrust. This tweet illustrates examples of deposed leaders who negotiated or were allied with the United States.

Diplomacy with the United States is one of the most contentious issues in Iran, regularly pitting power centers against each other.<sup>45</sup> The resulting outcome of these debates has largely translated into a reluctance to normalize relations with the United States; members of power centers view Washington with a great deal of skepticism and distrust. This is not to say that all members of the political elite in Iran believe that it would be in their country's best interest not to resume relations with the United States. Rather, as a whole, the system opposes normalization in large part because of the boundaries fixed by the supreme leader. Iran has largely felt threatened by the United States, but the nature and severity of the threat are the subject of vigorous debate within and among the power centers. Negotiations with the United States are often contentious and translate into much infighting.

Generally, hardliners and conservatives view the United States more negatively and as a source of insecurity and instability in the region. They also do not see negotiations with the United States as a viable way of easing tensions and settling disputes. For this group, the United States cannot be trusted. It seeks to foment uprising in Iran regardless of who is in office; some administrations just choose to do so more overtly than others. Importantly, this group is more inclined to characterize the U.S. government as a monolith and to play down the differences between administrations. As a result, U.S. administrations might see their Iran policies as fundamentally different from those of their predecessors, but hardliners in Iran do not always perceive these shifts.

Since becoming supreme leader, Khamenei has embodied this group.<sup>46</sup> However, he has on occasion permitted negotiations with the United States—most notably in



the context of the nuclear talks—even as he frequently reminded negotiators that their mandate was limited to the nuclear file and that they were not authorized to discuss matters pertaining to regional security.<sup>47</sup> In addition to the aforementioned 2012–2015 nuclear talks, Khamenei likely also endorsed the 2001 U.S.-Iran engagement on the future of Afghanistan in the context of the Bonn process.<sup>48</sup>

Others within Iranian decisionmaking circles argue that they must engage the United States and that diplomacy can help settle some outstanding issues. This group includes much of Rouhani's foreign policy team.<sup>49</sup> Those favoring negotiations with the United States can be divided into two camps: those who see engagement as an end in itself and those who view it as a means. Former President Mohammad Khatami, a reformist, championed the "Dialogue Among Civilizations" as a way to open up Iran and to engage the West.

Upon taking office, Khatami's hardline successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, closed down the center dedicated to advancing this goal.<sup>50</sup> Ahmadinejad's tenure led to greater international isolation but ultimately ended with Washington and Tehran engaged in talks about the Iranian nuclear program—some in secret and some more openly. Yet, although the two sides were engaged in negotiations, the Iranian side was not as forthcoming until Rouhani's election.<sup>51</sup> During the nuclear talks, as Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was in bilateral meetings with his U.S. counterpart, then-Secretary of State John Kerry, his detractors at home were denouncing his weakness and taking steps to undermine the negotiators and showcase their own strength.<sup>52</sup>

Whether the United States constitutes a real threat to Iran is also an area of disagreement among different power

"Looted Through Negotiations: Parts of Iran were looted throughout history, albeit not through war, but with agreements by Iranian statesmen with an inclination toward negotiations/Lesson to be learned by those who said that the shadow of war has been removed from Iran."

—Hardline Twitter account, January 16, 2018



**NEGOTIATIONS ARE NONNEGOTIABLE:** Hardliners and conservatives maintain that the United States cannot be trusted. They do not view negotiations as a viable way of easing tensions and settling disputes.

centers. On the one hand, Khamenei and Iran's armed forces have publicly held the position that the United States is not looking for an active military conflict with Iran but rather is engaged in psychological operations and economic warfare against the country.<sup>53</sup> In private, however, they seemingly have assessed that their country was in a dangerous position on several occasions, such as after President George W. Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq and during spring 2019, with rising tensions between Washington and Tehran under Trump.

Conservatives believe that the United States is adamant that the Islamic Republic must be replaced with a different form of government. They characterize all U.S. approaches to Iran with a great deal of skepticism, including U.S. diplomatic efforts, military threats, and political pressure and economic sanctions. For them, Washington's endgame is regime change in Iran. Moderates and reformists perhaps view U.S. policy as less consistent from administration to administration and become alarmed when they perceive U.S. policy toward Iran as becoming more aggressive—as was the case in May 2019, when a number of pro-reform and pro-moderate news outlets warned that the country had to make a choice between dialogue and war with the United States.

These differing views had already shaped much of the debate around the 2012–2015 nuclear talks, as well as the subsequent discourse about whether Tehran should remain in the JCPOA after Washington's withdrawal from it in 2018. For example, the pro-reform magazine *Seda* ran a cover story arguing that the country had reached a juncture where it had to choose between war and peace. The Iranian authorities suspended the magazine after this

story's publication. This episode provides an example of the limits of acceptable public debate within Iran.<sup>54</sup> *Seda* seems to have crossed a line when it presented the country with only two options in light of escalation with the United States, thus contradicting key regime officials and military commanders (including Khamenei and IRGC commanders) who had asserted that Iran would not have to fight or negotiate but could resist perceived U.S. threats and provocations.

The JCPOA was one of the most hotly contested issues in Iranian foreign policy since the revolution.<sup>55</sup> This disagreement stemmed in part from fundamental distrust of the United States in some quarters, as well as opposition to Iran making any concessions on its nuclear program.<sup>56</sup> Khamenei held the position that the United States could not be trusted but also tacitly accepted some concessions—at least within the parameters he had set for the talks—as inevitable or acceptable.<sup>57</sup> Rouhani and his team, led by Zarif, pushed for a deal, which, they argued, would provide a key to international reintegration and economic recovery. For their opponents—a group of hardliners that transcended the traditional blocs of the regime—negotiations with the United States, in general, and the JCPOA, in particular, were signs of weakness.<sup>58</sup> This split in regime opinion contrasts with the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, during which U.S. and Iranian objectives aligned neatly as the two adversaries sought to topple the Taliban and create an Afghan government capable of stabilizing the country.<sup>59</sup> Broadly, even those Iranians who disagreed with the premise of U.S.–Iranian engagement could agree that this particular incident was different.

Since Trump took office in January 2017, the Iranian debate on relations with the United States has evolved.



**ADVERSE COVERAGE VERSUS GIVING COVER:** The magazine *Seda* (left) was temporarily shut down after this May 2019 cover story, which argued that Iran must choose between war and peace. The magazine *Sazandegi* (right, from August 2018) has the Iranian leadership's back: "There will be no war and we won't negotiate."



A year after US' unlawful abrogation of JCPOA, Europe can't muster political will to defy US' [#EconomicTERRORISM](#). Not even by setting up a single banking channel for humanitarian aid.

E3 are instead busy appeasing [@realDonaldTrump](#) by pressuring UN over our defensive capabilities



11:14 AM · Apr 3, 2019 · Twitter for Android

**A TEST FOR THE WEST:** Zarif criticizes Iran's European partners in the JCPOA a year after the United States withdrew. He had advocated the deal as a key to international reintegration and economic recovery.

Although the system is still broadly divided between those arguing for engagement (the level of which is vigorously debated) and those who oppose any such approach, some hardliners have become more interested in negotiation and some moderates have switched sides, arguing for more resistance. For example, after a year of pressure from hardliners, the Rouhani government made an announcement on the anniversary (May 8, 2019) of Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA that Iran was going to take incremental steps to ramp up some nuclear activities

limited by the JCPOA.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, adopting language mirroring Khamenei's remarks earlier that year, Rouhani stated that the country's only way forward was to "resist" the U.S. pressure—although he left some room for negotiations, contrary to Khamenei's stance.<sup>61</sup>

This shift does not mean that negotiations cannot and will not take place between the United States and Iran. Even as tensions were seemingly spiraling out of control in the Strait of Hormuz in late spring and early summer 2019, the Iranians were seemingly making some overtures to the United States.<sup>62</sup> However, the system seemed broadly in agreement that the adequate response to the United States would entail raising the costs of the maximum pressure campaign on the United States; forcing U.S. allies and partners and the rest of the international community to convince the administration to reduce pressure; and preparing for eventual negotiations by building levers and accumulating bargaining chips that it could put on the table to avoid making significant concessions. Domestically, the regime wished to also show strength in the face of U.S. pressure.

The Rouhani government's response to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and pursuit of the maximum pressure campaign was dictated by several key considerations. First, having lost significant political capital following the U.S. withdrawal from the deal, which in turn led to renewed sanctions instead of the promised economic recovery, Rouhani and his team were forced to show muscle in their approach to the United States to avoid being seen as weak or naïve. As a result, Rouhani's denunciation of U.S. intentions and policies became more forceful, and Zarif frequently accused the United States of engaging in "economic terrorism."<sup>63</sup> Second, at the same time, Rouhani and his team hoped to preserve the JCPOA—a goal that

they seemingly shared with the broader system. As a result, Iranian steps designed to pressure Europe into action and to raise the costs of the maximum pressure campaign on the United States were calculated, incremental, and largely reversible. This strategy was designed to force the Europeans to provide Iran with sanctions relief and the international community to incentivize the United States to dial down pressure to prevent the collapse of the deal.<sup>64</sup>

The decision to introduce these steps in violation of the deal were taken by the system broadly and were streamlined through the SNSC. They were designed to extend the life of the JCPOA until 2020 in the hope that a Democratic administration would return to the deal or to buy time (and, thus, leverage) for any future talks with the United States (should Trump be reelected).<sup>65</sup> As Rouhani put it, “The hour they return to the JCPOA, we will return to it as well.”<sup>66</sup>

## Views on Regional Security

Iranian leaders broadly agree on the historic narrative regarding Iran’s role in the region. They believe that Iran’s history, geostrategic location, resources, and human capital make it an important power in the region that should exercise an important role in shaping the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>67</sup> They also agree that Iran is in an unstable region, making the country fundamentally vulnerable.<sup>68</sup> Foreign powers have long determined outcomes in their backyard. The United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States, to name a few, have all interfered in Iranian affairs, and, as Iranians see it, unless the country is able to stand on its own two feet and hold its own in the region, it will be vulnerable to such meddling again.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, Iran’s

experience during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), in which it had to defend its territorial integrity and national unity, shape the country’s perceptions of itself and the world today.<sup>70</sup> As a result, Iranian military planners and decisionmakers broadly believe that the regional balance of power must be to their advantage or their country’s very survival and territorial integrity will be jeopardized.

However, domestic constraints—including the country’s economy and the challenges inherent to regional conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen—create sources of tension within the country’s elite. Thomas Juneau divides these constraints into two sets: structural ones and those stemming from the “containment ring” that was created in response to the regime’s actions since the revolution.<sup>71</sup> This first category includes challenges embedded in the regional environment, and the latter includes economic sanctions.<sup>72</sup> From Tehran’s perspective, it must overcome both sets of challenges to protect its interests; however, there are significant differences of opinion about how to do so. Iran’s most recent interventions have led to important debates within the regime about the role of Iranian power in shaping the regional landscape and the desirability and productiveness of Tehran’s policies in those conflict zones.<sup>73</sup>

The regime mostly agrees about the contours of the country’s policy in Afghanistan and Iraq. For Iranians, these two countries constitute the most-significant challenges to their national security, as they share porous borders with Iran and intersecting populations. Conflict or foreign presence and influence in Afghanistan and Iraq directly affect Iran, as do adversarial terrorist groups (such as the Islamic State and its Afghan offshoot, the Islamic State in Khorasan).<sup>74</sup> There is also a large Afghan refugee



“Powerful Iran: Over are the times when they organized a conference in Tehran about our fate without Iran knowing; today, Idlib’s future is determined in Tehran with Iran’s presence.

—Hardline Instagram account,  
September 7, 2018



fetan.ir · Following

...



# ایران قدرتمند

گذشت اون زمانی که بدون اطلاع ایران توی تهران کنفرانس برگزار میکردن تا سرنوشتمون رو تعیین کنن، امروز سرنوشت ادلب با حضور ایران در تهران مشخص میشه.

**THEN AND NOW:** A tweet contrasts images from 1945 and today to illustrate Iran’s self-determination and regional influence.

and immigrant population in Iran, and the risk of additional migrant and refugee flows because of intensified conflict in Afghanistan is an important factor in determining the Iranian position.<sup>75</sup>

In general, Iran ranks Afghanistan and Iraq as critical to its own national security. Lebanon and Syria also are significant components of Iran’s national security strategy, but they are instrumental to regime survival and stability, not to core Iranian national security. Although neither country shares borders with Iran, both are home to key Iranian allies. Under the Assad family, Syria has been the only reliable state ally the Islamic Republic has had since its establishment.<sup>76</sup> Damascus has also been a critical conduit to Lebanon, where Iran’s chief proxy and foremost nonstate ally, Hezbollah, is based. Therefore, although instability in these countries does not directly challenge Iran, the two states are significant to Iranian interests and regime stability. Yemen is neither important to Iranian national security nor to regime stability. Instead, it is a merely an asset that allows Iran to opportunistically counter its key regional rival, Saudi Arabia.

Important areas of disagreement over regional involvement exist within the different power centers. For example, while the Iranian government has long seen some aspects of the regime’s policies in Iraq as undermining its long-term objectives, the IRGC, the primary decisionmaker on the Iraq portfolio, has pushed them forward.<sup>77</sup> These tensions came to a head in 2014 with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq; it became clear to the regime that its support for the sectarian policies of Baghdad had helped the group, which Iran viewed as a significant threat to its own security. Similarly, although Iranian diplomats in particular understood that their playbook helped cultivate a sense of



alienation and disempowerment with Sunni Iraqis and gave rise to more suspicions of Iran in Iraq, the IRGC privileged power projection in the country and mostly dismissed such concerns.<sup>78</sup>

Iran's relationship with its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf similarly divides the political elite. Iranian decisionmakers see Saudi Arabia as a source of instability in the region, with an ideology espoused by jihadist groups and wealth that has helped finance terrorist groups.<sup>79</sup> Yet the best approach to Saudi Arabia is vigorously debated within the Iranian system. Some, including Rouhani and members of his government, have argued for negotiating with the Saudis to settle disputes.<sup>80</sup> The IRGC and other power centers have largely rejected this position, arguing that Tehran is in a position of strength and should, therefore, not seek to engage Riyadh; IRGC commanders often call for a more muscular response to what they perceive as Saudi-backed terrorism in their country and the region.<sup>81</sup> In response, Rouhani has changed his approach to Saudi Arabia to adjust to pushback from hardliners.<sup>82</sup>

Although Iran's role in Syria is one of the most significant sources of tension within the regime, it is also the only instance of troop deployment by Tehran since the Iran–Iraq War (although the number of actual Iranian boots on the ground remains small in comparison to the number of U.S. forces).<sup>83</sup> Tehran has committed blood and treasure to propping up the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus and, as a result, expects to have a seat at the table on any future settlement in Syria.<sup>84</sup> But Iranian involvement in the process may be unacceptable to the United States due to a numbers of factors, including the nefarious role played by Tehran in propping Assad and supporting him even as he massacred civilians and employed chemical weapons, and

“Iran’s Power. Everyone said Assad must go, but the Islamic Republic said Assad must stay [. . .] so the world would know that the time when the West singlehandedly ruled the Middle East is over. And now it’s Iran who will determine the future of the Middle East and its oppressed nations in the shadow of resistance.”

—Hardline Instagram account,  
February 26, 2018



## قدرت ایران

همه گفتند اسد باید برود اما جمهوری اسلامی گفت اسد باید بماند و اسد ماند تا دنیا بداند دوران یکه تازی غرب در خاور میانه به پایان رسیده و این ایران است که آینده خاور میانه و ملت های مظلوم منطقه را در سایه مقاومت ترسیم میکند.

**REGIONAL KINGMAKER:** Iran has committed to propping up Assad, although its support of the dictator has generated tension within the regime. Iran has committed blood and treasure to Syria—and expects a seat at the table as a result.

the threat posed by Iranian presence in Syria to Israel, a close U.S. partner.

A lower-hanging fruit in Iran's regional involvement lies in its support for the Houthis in Yemen. Although Iran's support for the Houthis is widely reported in the United States, the extent of this support remains disputed. By most accounts, the regime's involvement in the conflict has been relatively small, even as it has increased since the start of the Saudi-led coalition's involvement in Yemen.<sup>85</sup> Tehran long hesitated to publicize its ties with the Houthis and even denied them, but it now has admitted to providing some support to the group and published a photo of Khamenei's meet and greet with Houthi operatives.<sup>86</sup> As a result, in Iran, there is little public debate about the country's support for the Houthis; Iranians do not see Yemen as directly relevant to their own security, and the regime's limited albeit growing control over the Houthis has at times made them more of a liability than an asset for Tehran's image.

Khamenei set the framework of the debate about Iran's presence in Yemen and ties to the Houthis by noting that his country was merely providing humanitarian aid to Yemenis in light of the Saudi-led war there.<sup>87</sup> The regime frowned upon acknowledging the Iranian role in Yemen so much that, in 2017, it took a rare step of directing its wrath toward a conservative media outlet by temporarily closing the state-run hardline newspaper, *Kayhan* (whose editor-in-chief, Hossein Shariatmadari, is a notorious hardliner who was appointed by Khamenei) after the newspaper ran a cover story praising the Houthi missile attack against Saudi Arabia.<sup>88</sup> However, as the Houthis have succeeded in bogging down Saudi Arabia and its allies, Iran has become more forthcoming about its support, which it has

reportedly increased.<sup>89</sup> The publicization of the Iranian ties with the Houthis also serves to quiet discontent within the country, as it allows the regime to control the narrative around Iran's support for the group, which many Iranians object to as costly and one-sided.

## International Orientation and the Economy

Iran's relations with major powers have been a source of tensions within the country's elites for centuries.<sup>90</sup> Decades before the revolution, some Iranians advocated closer ties with Russia, while others looked to France, Germany, the United Kingdom, or the United States.<sup>91</sup> Still others believed that the country should aim to become more self-sufficient and dial down its reliance on foreigners altogether. Upon its creation, the Islamic Republic quickly adopted the slogan "neither East nor West." In practice, Iranian foreign policy has reflected this slogan, even as various factions have pushed the country in one direction or the other.

Today, several camps exist within Iran. Some of these camps broadly overlap with certain blocs, while others are less clearly defined. For example, as discussed earlier, moderates and reformists argue that their country should overcome international isolation and improve its relationship with the West—mostly Europe, but to a lesser degree, the United States. On the flip side, hardliners tend to advocate more self-reliance, and many push for a more inward-looking economy—a concept formalized and imbedded into the country's economic policy under the banner of the "resistance economy," which aims to build a resilient economy that can withstand the impact of sanctions.<sup>92</sup>

A number of figures within the regime—a group that transcends traditional blocs—argue that the country should look east. Over the course of the 21st century, Khatami sought to build better ties with the West, Ahmadinejad mostly isolated the country but also looked east, and the moderate Rouhani aimed to reconcile both approaches.<sup>93</sup> These leaders' outlooks largely reflect that of the factions they represent, with reformists looking to mend ties with the West, hardliners rejecting the West and focusing instead on cultivating relations with the Non-Aligned Movement, and moderates hoping to strike the right balance. Rouhani hoped to redevelop Iran's relations with the West but was forced toward Russia and China after the perceived Western failure to deliver on the JCPOA.<sup>94</sup>

Most power centers recognize that Iran's economy must be developed—and this cannot be achieved without any ties to the outside world. This is why a semiconsensus around Iran's return to the negotiating table emerged at the height of international sanctions on the country and led to its return to the negotiating table in 2012. However, the degree to which this must be done with foreign help, rather than reliance on domestic capacity and resources, remains a point of contention within the system. Hardliners have long called for a more self-reliant and inward-looking economy, while moderates and reformists believe that reintegration into the global economy is key to the country's economic woes.

Following the JCPOA, it became increasingly clear to key figures within the regime, including Khamenei and Rouhani, that the country could not expect economic recovery without significant changes in the Iranian financial sector and economy. As a result, a consensus emerged

## “Both a Partner and a Rival”

—*Sazandegi* cover,  
September 2018



**A WINK AND A NOD TO AN ALLY:** A magazine cover of a winking Putin nods at Iran's relationship with Russia but also illustrates a lack of trust. At times, Iran has sought better ties to the West, but the JCPOA conflict has forced it to turn to Russia and China for partnership.

“No to FATF because I don’t want the symbol of my country’s power and security to be called terrorists and for me to validate it.

—Pro-IRGC Twitter account,  
October 6, 2018



**FATF DEBATE:** As part of economic reforms, Iran has debated adhering to the FATF’s standards to increase transparency. However, U.S. actions (including withdrawing from the JCPOA and designating the IRGC as a terrorist group) further soured many on the FATF and other efforts.

within the regime that reforms were needed. Accordingly, in the months following the JCPOA’s 2016 implementation, the Iranian government took some steps to increase transparency and fight corruption and mismanagement. Rouhani worked to curb some of the IRGC’s economic activities—a key obstacle to attracting foreign businesses, investors, and financial institutions to the country.<sup>95</sup>

After the signing of the JCPOA, Rouhani’s government pushed for the adoption of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards on money laundering and terrorism financing.<sup>96</sup> The FATF debates are part of the larger discussion in Iran about the viability of the economic status quo. The moderates supported this move as part of their efforts to tackle the domestic barriers to Iran’s integration into the global economy (such as the lack of a regulatory landscape, corruption, and mismanagement) as they found themselves helpless in the face of external obstacles (such as the U.S. sanctions and businesses’ risk aversion)—clashing with conservatives who saw the FATF as a threat to national security and yet another concession to the West without any return.<sup>97</sup> The vigorous debate on FATF has nevertheless allowed for the country to take steps toward the adoption of these standards.

Hardliners and entities close to the IRGC denounced the Rouhani government’s efforts and accused moderates and reformists of being the source of corruption and mismanagement—attempting to secure a nuclear deal instead of focusing on making the country more self-reliant over the course of three years and, later, in the context of the series of floods that affected several regions in Iran, displacing hundreds and causing millions of dollars in damage.<sup>98</sup>

Trump's designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization in April 2019 might have discredited efforts in Iran to reduce the IRGC's reach in the Iranian economy and introduce transparency measures. It forced the entirety of the political spectrum to fall in line with the IRGC or risk being deemed a U.S. puppet or an enemy of the revolution. In the days following the designation, virtually all key players within the regime reiterated their support for the IRGC; Zarif, typically known for his softer approach to the United States, reportedly advised the SNSC to reciprocate and label U.S. forces in the U.S. Central Command region as terrorists.<sup>99</sup> Iranian media from across the political spectrum also condemned the move, and Iranian lawmakers even attended a legislative session wearing IRGC uniforms to signal unity.<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusions

Despite significantly restricting discourse, the Iranian system is highly reliant on both internal and public debates as part of the consensus-building process. Although Iran's system is by no means a democracy, it does possess certain democratic elements, including reliance on electoral processes to determine positions in the executive and legislative branches, and elections help the regime receive the populace's buy-in and legitimize it at home and abroad. In this sense, public opinion in Iran matters, and attitudes help shape policy to some extent. As a result, different factions within the system compete to win public opinion and do so by engaging in public debates. However, because Iran is not a democracy, these debates take place within the confines of what is deemed acceptable by the system. Despite being often disregarded, these domestic debates

are relevant to U.S. policymakers, as they allow identification of promising areas for negotiations and, equally importantly, could help ensure that any resulting agreement receives buy-in within the system and, thus, will be sustainable over a long period of time.

The supreme leader frequently formulates the regime's redlines on core issues. These areas of full consensus are unlikely to provide areas of agreement in any negotiations, as they are solidly established and, from the regime's perspective, entail a threat to regime survival and national security should Tehran back down from them. Similarly, even if the United States and Iran were able to strike a deal encompassing these areas, such a deal would likely be difficult to sustain over a long period of time and across different governments within Iran. In contrast, elements of Iranian national security that are debated by the regime provide zones of possible agreement and can help draw the contours of an agreement that would receive broad support in Tehran and thus be sustained from government to government.

The United States has several diplomatic options at its disposal. First, it can try to realize the Trump administration's stated objective of a comprehensive deal, tackling all aspects of the Iranian regime's behavior that Washington deems problematic—including its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, support for nonstate groups, and military interventions in the region. Such an approach would allow the United States to turn its focus to great-power competition, but this approach has a number of shortcomings and would be difficult to attain, as the regime would likely see such negotiations as capitulation.

Second, the United States could pursue a similar approach as with the 2012–2015 nuclear talks, siloing each



area of disagreement and engaging in comprehensive negotiations on each area—simultaneously or in a step-by-step process. By doing so, the United States and Iran can isolate areas of disagreement on which to work within the framework of what is achievable with the current leadership.

Both sides would recognize that normalization is not an achievable objective and would instead focus on establishing specific channels of communication and limiting key aspects of Iran's military programs and regional activities.



## Notes

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<sup>10</sup> “Iran's Paradoxical Decision-Making Process,” Stratfor, August 19, 2016. As of August 26, 2019:

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<sup>13</sup> “Iran's Paradoxical Decision-Making Process,” 2016.

<sup>14</sup> “Iran's Paradoxical Decision-Making Process,” 2016.

<sup>15</sup> “Khotut-e Qermez-e Mozakereh' az Didgah-e Rahbar-e Enqelab dar Didar-e Karkonan-e Sazman-e Energy-e Atomi,” *Fars News*, April 14, 2014. As of August 26, 2019:

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," *The Iran Primer*, 2010. As of August 27, 2019: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>

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<sup>41</sup> "Safar-e Sardar Soleimani be Kurdistan-e Iraq (Aks)," *Asr-e Iran*, October 14, 2017. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/565985/>  
سفر سردار سلیمانی به کردستان عراق عکس

<sup>42</sup> For examples of state-sponsored and state-aligned outlets publishing photos of the Lebanese Hezbollah leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrollah with Khamenei, see "Aks-e Yadegari-e Nasrollah ba Rahbar-e Moazam-e Enqelab," *Mashregh News*, April 15, 2013. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/207098/>

"Vakonesh-e Seyyed Hassan Nasrollah be Moqayeseh-ye o ba Rahbar-e Moazam-e Enqelab," *Bashgah-e Khabarnegaran-e Javan*, July 24, 2016. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5705956/>

and "Phototitre/Ravayat-e Seyyed Hassan Nasrollah az Didar ba Imam Khamenei dar Avayel-e Bohran-e Suriyeh," *Tasnim*, September 22, 2017. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/06/21/1516573/>

فتوتیتر روایت سید حسن نصرالله از دیدار با امام خامنه ای در اوایل بحران سوریه

<sup>43</sup> "Nagofteha-ye Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah az Vali-e Amr-e Moslemin," *Khamenei.ir*, June 6, 2011; "Ravayat-e Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah az didar-e ba Imam Khamenei dar Avayel-e Bohran-e Suriyeh," *Tasnim*, September 12, 2017; "Hozur-e Sardar Soleimani dar Kenar-e Razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar Khatt-e Moqadam-e Jebbeh-ye Suriyeh + Film," *Bashgah-e Khabarnegaran-e Javan*, March 28, 2018; "Gozareshi az Fa'alat-e Roozaneh-ye Razmandegan-e Fatemiyoun dar Manadeq-e Seylzadeh-ye Iran + Tasavir," *Bashgah-e Khabarnegaran-e Javan*, April 13, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "Trump's Sanctions on Iran Are Hitting Hezbollah, and It Hurts," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> "Seda-ye Trump az Holqum-e Modaeeyan-e Eslahat Daramad," *Kayhan*, May 13, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <http://www.kayhan.ir/fa/news/160165>

<sup>46</sup> Robert Pear, "Man in the News; Iran's New Supreme Leader; Ali Khamenei," *New York Times*, June 15, 1989; "Khamenei Dismisses Idea of Renegotiating Iran Nuclear Deal with U.S.," Reuters, May 29, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> For example, see Khamenei's open letter to Rouhani following the signing of the JCPOA: Ali Khamenei, "Nameh-ye Rahbar-e Enqelab be Raes-e Jomhoor Darbareh-ye Elzamat-e Ejra-ye BARJAM," *Khamenei.ir*, October 19, 2015. As of August 27, 2019: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=31168>; and Masoud Akbari, "Mozakereh ba America Samm Ast Yani 'Hasteh-e Raft vali Tahrimha Mand'!" *Kayhan*, May 22, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/161019/>  
ها مانند E2%80%8C ای رفت ولی تحریم E2%80%8C مذاکره با آمریکا سم است یعنی هسته

<sup>48</sup> James Dobbins, "How to Talk to Iran," *Washington Post*, July 22, 2007. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2007/07/how-to-talk-to-iran.html>

<sup>49</sup> Rouhani and the moderates hardened their line on negotiations with the United States following Trump's announcement that he was withdrawing the country from the JCPOA and reimposing sanctions on Iran. Although Rouhani and Zarif both made overtures toward Washington, they were immediately rebuked by hardliners and forced to take a more conservative position on engagement with the United States. Rouhani has tried to fall in line with the broader system by indicating that he would not negotiate with the United States as long as the Trump administration holds its position of seeking a change in the regime's behavior in 12 areas. Some reformists have consistently advocated talks between the two countries. See "Revayat-e Mohebian az Tarh-e 'Mozakereh ba Trump' dar Jalaseh-ye Rouhani," *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, May 13, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/>

بخش سایت خوان 62/3525103 روایت محبیان از طرح مذاکره با ترامپ در جلسه روحانی  
and "Farib-e Pompeo dar Tarh-e Mozakereh-ye bedun-e Pishshart Faqat Divanegan ra Zoqdadeh Mikonad," *Kayhan*, June 2, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <http://www.kayhan.ir/fa/news/161851/>

شرط فقط دیوانگان را E2%80%8C فریب نمی دهد E2%80%8C مذاکره بدون پیش کند



Floats Offer on Nuclear Inspections; U.S. Skeptical,” Reuters, July 18, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-usa-zarif/iran-for-eign-minister-reported-to-make-nuclear-offer-us-skeptical-idUSKCN1UD310>

<sup>63</sup> For example, see Javad Zarif [@JZarif], “Today, Iran is taking its second round of remedial steps under Para 36 of the JCPOA. We reserve the right to continue to exercise legal remedies within JCPOA to protect our interests in the face of US #EconomicTerrorism. All such steps are reversible only through E3 compliance,” Twitter post, July 7, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1147806420936658944?s=20>; and Javad Zarif [@JZarif], “31 yrs ago today, US warship shot down #IR655—a passenger jet—over Iran’s territorial waters, killing 290 innocents incl 66 children. US aggression against Iran did not begin with @realdonaldtrump. Courage & foresight—true grit in the face of #B\_Team’s thirst for war—can end it.” Twitter post, July 3, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1146389280538943488?s=20>

<sup>64</sup> “Rouhani dar Jalaseh-ye Heyat-e Dolat: Har Saati ke be Barjam Bazgardand, Ma Ham Bazmigaradim/Mardom Bedanand ke dar Mored-e Barjam Lahzeh-yi Ehsasi Amal Nakardim,” *Fararu*, July 2, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://fararu.com/fa/news/404546/>  
گرددیم مردم بداندند که در مورد برجام ۸۰٪ هر ساعتی که به برجام بازگردند ما هم باز می ای احساسی عمل نکردیم ۸۰٪ لحظه

<sup>65</sup> “Rouhani dar Jalaseh-ye Heyat-e Dolat: Har Saati ke be Barjam Bazgardand, Ma Ham Bazmigaradim/Mardom Bedanand ke dar Mored-e Barjam Lahzeh-yi Ehsasi Amal Nakardim,” 2019.

<sup>66</sup> “Rouhani dar Jalaseh-ye Heyat-e Dolat: Har Saati ke be Barjam Bazgardand, Ma Ham Bazmigaradim/Mardom Bedanand ke dar Mored-e Barjam Lahzeh-yi Ehsasi Amal Nakardim,” 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Longley Alley et al., 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Longley Alley et al., 2018.

<sup>69</sup> For example, see Ali Khamenei, “Bayanat dar Didar-e Nokhbegan-e Javan-e Elmi,” *Khamenei.ir*, October 18, 2017. As of August 27, 2019: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=37949>

<sup>70</sup> “Iran Should Be Prepared for Every Imaginable Scenario: General,” *Mehr News*, August 30, 2010. As of August 27, 2019: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/41629/Iran-should-be-prepared-for-every-imaginable-scenario-general>

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Juneau, “The Enduring Constraints on Iran’s Power After the Nuclear Deal,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 134, No. 1, 2019, pp. 39–61.

<sup>72</sup> Juneau, 2019, p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Longley Alley et al., 2018.

<sup>74</sup> See Nader et al., 2014; Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, “Iran’s ISIS Policy,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 1, 2015, pp. 1–15.

<sup>75</sup> See Mohsen Milani, “Iran’s Policy Towards Afghanistan,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Spring 2006, pp. 235–256.

<sup>76</sup> Mohsen Milani, “Why Tehran Won’t Abandon Assad(ism),” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013, pp. 79–93.

<sup>77</sup> Soufan, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> For a detailed account of the divisions within the Iranian political system over Iraq policy, see Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> “Zarif: Arabestan be Donbal-e Dargiri ba Iran Ast/Alaqe-e be Control Mantaqeh Nadarim,” *Fars News*, December 22, 2018. As of August 27, 2019:

<https://www.farsnews.com/news/13971001000841/>  
ای به کنترل منطقه ۸۰٪ ظریف عربستان به دنبال درگیری با ایران است علاقه

<sup>80</sup> “Chera Zarif be Arabestan Naraft?” *ISNA*, March 11, 2019. As of August 27, 2019:

<https://www.isna.ir/news/97122010567/> چرا ظریف به عربستان نرفت  
“Mozakereh ba Arabestan Momken Ast,” *IRNA*, July 18, 2018. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.irna.ir/news/82974174/> مذاکره با عربستان ممکن است

<sup>81</sup> For example, see “Farmandeh-ye Sepah: Terrorist-ha-ye Jenayat-e Zahedan dar Hemayat-e Pakistan Hastand/Barkhordeman ba Arabestan Motefavet Khahad Bud,” *Tasnim*, February 16, 2019. As of August 27, 2019:

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/11/27/1948061/>  
فرمانده سپاه تروریست های جنایت زاهدان در حمایت پاکستان هستند برخوردمان با عربستان متفاوت خواهد بود







<sup>96</sup> These provisions are known as Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combatting the Financing of Terrorism (CFT; *FATF Reference Document: AML/CFT Evaluations and Assessments—Handbook for Countries and Assessors*, Paris, April 2009. As of August 27, 2019: <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Handbook%20for%20assessors.pdf>)

<sup>97</sup> During the intense debates about AML/CFT adoption, parliamentarians summoned Zarif as some lawmakers viewed the Foreign Ministry's push for the provisions as an admission that Iran engaged in money laundering and terrorism financing while others believed that Zarif was yet again jeopardizing national security by making too many one-sided concessions to the West as he had done during the nuclear talks ("Zarif be Majles Ehzar Shod," *Alef*, November 14, 2018. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.alef.ir/news/3970823094.html>)

<sup>98</sup> "Fars az Gheybat-e Raeis Jomhoor Gozaresh Midahad—Seyl dar Shomal; Rouhani dar Jonub/Chera Safar-e Norouzi-ye Raeis Jomhur Taatil Nemishavad?" *Fars News*, March 25, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://www.farsnews.com/news/13980105000193/>

شودE2%80%8Cسیل-در-شمال-روحانی-در-جنوب-چرا-سفر-نوروزی-رئیس-جمهور-تعطیل-نمی

<sup>99</sup> "Zarif Recommends Rouhani Put US CENTCOM on List of Terror Organizations," *Mehr News*, April 8, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/143908/Zarif-recommends-Rouhani-put-US-CENTCOM-on-list-of-terror-organizations>

<sup>100</sup> "Part 7: Iranian Media on IRGC Designation," *The Iran Primer*, April 9, 2019. As of August 27, 2019: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/apr/09/part-7-iranian-media-irgc-designation>; "Iranian MPs, DM Appear in IRGC Uniform to Show Strong Support for IRGC," *Fars News*, undated. As of August 27, 2019:

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## About This Perspective

Despite significant limits on acceptable speech in Iran, national and elite debates can be vigorous. They often include voices from across the political spectrum of opinions permitted by the regime. Domestic debates on key issues play a critical role in framing, molding, and selling foreign and security policies. However, in the United States, the nuances of these debates are often lost in a busy news cycle and drowned out by the regime's bombastic rhetoric, which has come to define Iran's image over the past four decades. This Perspective details how Iran's domestic debates affect key foreign policy and national security issues, including the country's posture on the international stage and vis-à-vis the United States. Understanding consensus as well as division among Iran's elite is critical to developing a realistic policy toward Iran, particularly during this time of growing tension with the United States. Areas of consensus among Iranian elites indicate regime redlines; disagreements among regime elites could offer opportunities in future negotiations among Iran, the United States, and other members of the international community.

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## About This Perspective

Despite significant limits on acceptable speech in Iran, national and elite debates can be vigorous. They often include voices from across the political spectrum of opinions permitted by the regime. Domestic debates on key issues play a critical role in framing, molding, and selling foreign and security policies. However, in the United States, the nuances of these debates are often lost in a busy news cycle and drowned out by the regime's bombastic rhetoric, which has come to define Iran's image over the past four decades. This Perspective details how Iran's domestic debates affect key foreign policy and national security issues, including the country's posture on the international stage and vis-à-vis the United States. Understanding areas of both consensus and division among Iran's elite is critical to developing a realistic policy toward Iran, particularly during this time of growing tension with the United States. Areas of consensus among Iranian elites indicate regime redlines; disagreements among regime elites could offer opportunities in future negotiations involving Iran, the United States, and other members of the international community. Based on Iran's internal divisions, the areas that appear most conducive for compromise include the technical details of Iran's missile program, Iran's regional activities (particularly in countries deemed less essential to national security, such as Yemen), and increased transparency in the Iranian economy.



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