

Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability

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Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability

Testimony of Ariane M. Tabatabai¹
The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
United States House of Representatives

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my analysis and testify before the subcommittee today on “Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and Implications for U.S. Interests and Regional Stability.” This testimony includes an explanation of the internal dynamics within Iran, courses of action we anticipate from the regime, and options for the United States moving forward.

Internal Dynamics

The Iranian political and security landscapes are notoriously opaque and complex. Myriad power centers and cross-cutting factions exist, representing the parts of the political spectrum deemed acceptable by the regime and sidelining the rest of society. Although censorship, repression, and voter suppression have been consistent features of the Islamic Republic since its inception in 1979, 2019—the regime’s 40th year in power—marked new trends. It revealed the regime’s heightened perception of threats both at home and abroad, a new boldness in operations, and a new capability (the ability to completely shut down the internet).³ So far, Tehran’s actions in 2020 indicate the regime’s willingness to continue to attempt to sideline not only those outside of the regime’s base but also groups and individuals typically associated with the pragmatist segments of the system. The regime is currently primarily engaged in two types of efforts to limit dissent: (1) preventing and stopping popular opposition and (2) limiting dissent

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ Ariane M. Tabatabai, *Iran’s National Security Debate—Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-344-RC, 2019, p. 5.

within the ranks of the regime, which includes restricting certain factions' involvement in the political process.

Preventing and Stopping Popular Opposition

In November 2019, protests broke out throughout Iran after the government implemented a change in its long-standing fuel subsidy policy, leading to a sharp increase in gasoline prices.⁴ The regime took two main actions to crack down on dissent.

First, as it typically does, the regime deployed security forces to intimidate, arrest, and even kill protesters. However, the speed and magnitude of these efforts was stronger than in recent history. Over three days, security forces killed a still-disputed number of people (ranging from several hundred individuals, according to Amnesty International, to possibly more than 1,000, according to the U.S. Department of State). Over the next month, they arrested thousands.⁵ In contrast, during the 2009 Green Movement—the previous time that the regime viewed internal unrest as particularly challenging to its legitimacy—the official number of fatalities was 30 a full six weeks after the June 12 election that sparked protest (the actual number was possibly closer to 80).⁶ More were killed in the following months as civil unrest continued,⁷ and by June 2010, “dozens of demonstrators” had been killed and “thousands arrested,” but that total came a year after the beginning of the Green Movement, as opposed to the month after the November 2019 protests, where several hundred were killed in just three days.⁸

Second, the regime shut down Iranians' access to the internet, disrupting the flow of information into and out of the country.⁹ By doing so, the regime was able to crack down effectively on protesters while delaying international reactions. International rights groups and governments were unable to react in real time to the events in Iran, and Iranians did not have access to information beyond state media. Although the Islamic Republic had been limiting access to the internet (particularly media and social media platforms) and exploring a national intranet for a number of years, this marked the first instance in which the regime was effectively able to cut off inbound and outbound internet traffic, reportedly leaving the country to operate at 5 to 7 percent of its usual connectivity levels.¹⁰

In January 2020, Iranians once again took to the streets throughout the country after the targeting of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Qassem

⁴ Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, “Iran Abruptly Raises Fuel Prices, and Protests Erupt,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2019.

⁵ Amnesty International, “Iran: Thousands Arbitrarily Detained and At Risk of Torture in Chilling Post-Protest Crackdown,” December 16, 2019; Humeyra Pamuk, “U.S. Says Iran May Have Killed More Than 1,000 In Recent Protests,” Reuters, December 5, 2019.

⁶ Simon Jeffrey, “Iran Election Protests: The Dead, Jailed and Missing,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2009.

⁷ Robert F. Worth and Nazila Fathi, “Police Are Said to Have Killed 10 in Iran Protests,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2009.

⁸ “Timeline: Iran’s Post Election Protests,” *Financial Times*, June 11, 2010.

⁹ Erin Cunningham, “More Than 100 Protesters Are Feared Killed in Iran Crackdown, Amnesty International Says,” *Washington Post*, November 19, 2019.

¹⁰ Lily Hay Newman, “How the Iranian Government Shut Off the Internet,” *Wired*, November 17, 2019.

Soleimani. The crowds that gathered to mourn Soleimani were large, possibly in the millions. While state engineering (both in terms of incentives offered, such as time off from work, and threats) likely encouraged some attendees, many Iranians took to the streets in a show of nationalism—partially because of Soleimani’s popularity, but perhaps because of concerns about a potential escalation with an outside power.¹¹

However, this period of solidarity with the regime was brief. Support faded and protests resumed after the downing of a Ukrainian airliner, leading to the death of all 176 crew and passengers onboard.¹² This time, protesters voiced their discontent with the regime’s blatant disinformation campaign surrounding the crash. The regime initially claimed that the crash was caused by a technical issue. A few days later, the IRGC Aerospace commander admitted that an Iranian system had accidentally shot down the plane, mistaking it for an U.S. cruise missile.¹³ Perhaps the regime had realized that it could not hide the details of the incident or was trying to move ahead of and shape the narrative around the incident. Regardless, the Soleimani and airliner protests indicate that discontent with the regime, nationalism, and concerns about another potentially costly war all co-exist.

Security forces used violence against the January 2020 protests and the regime attempted to disrupt the flow of information once again, but they do not appear to have perceived these protests as significant enough to use the same tools as in November, or they may have seen the political and economic costs of doing so as outweighing their benefits.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the regime has clearly built its capabilities and demonstrated its will to resort to more extreme tools should it face more existential challenges in the months ahead, and is more likely to achieve its goals of ensuring regime survival than not.

Limiting Intra-regime Opposition

The regime has also demonstrated its resolve to limit intraregime opposition. As of mid-January 2020, the Guardian Council, the entity responsible for restricting elections, had disqualified 90 of the 247 sitting members of parliament from participating in February’s parliamentary elections.¹⁵ According to the official narrative, members are disqualified for “nonpolitical” reasons, although it is clear that at least some of the sitting members have been

¹¹ Erin Cunningham et al., “Soleimani’s Funeral Procession in Iran Sees Massive Crowds and Calls for Revenge,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2020; Najmeh Bozorgmehr, “Huge Crowds Turn Out to Mourn Iran’s Soleimani,” *Financial Times*, January 5, 2020.

¹² “Plane Shot Down Because of Human Error, Iran Says,” *New York Times*, January 11, 2020.

¹³ The IRGC had anticipated and planned for a U.S. response to its targeting of Iraqi bases housing U.S. servicemembers; “Sardar Hajizadeh: Nirooha-ye Mossalah va Sepah Nemikhashtan In Majara Ra Penhan Konand,” IRNA, January 11, 2020.

¹⁴ “Iran: Scores Injured As Security Forces Use Unlawful Force to Crush Protests,” *Amnesty International*, January 15, 2020.

¹⁵ “Kadkhodayi: Sallahiat-e 90 Namayandeh-ye Majles be Dalil-e Masael-e Mali Rad Shod,” *Tasnim News*, January 13, 2020.

disqualified because of their political leanings.¹⁶ Parliamentary elections tend to see a lower turnout than presidential ones, and a lower turnout tends to favor hardliners and conservatives, as the regime's core base is more likely to vote than the rest of the population. By disqualifying candidates, the regime is both eliminating potential challengers to chosen candidates and signaling to the populace that its votes do not matter. A more hardline parliament would stymie any efforts made in the remainder of President Hassan Rouhani's second and final term, which will come to an end with Iran's next presidential elections in mid-2021. Having lost most of his political capital following President Donald Trump's May 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Rouhani will face significant obstacles in leaving a legacy that favors pragmatist candidates in 2021.

For his part, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appears to have been much more involved in day-to-day security and defense decisionmaking than usual. Although Khamenei typically sends representatives to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), he took the rare step of personally attending and chairing the emergency session of the SNSC following Soleimani's death.¹⁷ Likewise, Khamenei led the Tehran Friday prayer on January 17—the first time he has done so since the Arab Spring.¹⁸ Khamenei only leads the Friday prayer when the nation or regime faces an emergency, and he uses this platform to telegraph redlines and expectations to the regime and populace—as he did during the Green Movement, providing the green light to his security forces to target and kill protesters.

Khamenei's direct supervision of and involvement in different events since Soleimani's death indicate that the regime perceives threats at home and abroad. The regime is feeling the impact of the U.S. maximum pressure campaign while weathering dissent from its population and within its own ranks. However, the maximum pressure has not led to a change in regime behavior, but rather has produced the contrary result: Tehran has doubled down on its most problematic behavior.

Iran's Likely Courses of Action

Despite continued popular unrest, the regime appears unlikely to fundamentally change its domestic or foreign policy behavior. The Islamic Republic also appears unwilling to meaningfully negotiate with the United States for the remainder of Trump's first term, choosing to wait for the results of the 2020 election before returning to the negotiating table. And although Iran appears to have made a symbolic response to Soleimani's death—using military force in a way aimed at avoiding U.S. casualties—the regime probably does not feel that it has achieved

¹⁶ “Tahan Nazif: 90 Darsad-e Namayandegan-e Radd-e Salahiat Shode be Dalael-e Gheyr-e Siasi Taaeed Nashodeand,” *Tasnim News*, January 20, 2020.

¹⁷ “Taaeed-e Jalaseh-ye Rahbar-e Enqelab ba Aza-ye Shura-ye Aali-e Amniat Baad Az Shahadat-e Sardar Soleimani,” *Donya-ye Eqtessad*, January 3, 2020.

¹⁸ “Imam Khamenei Namaz-e Jomeh-ye In Hafeh-ye Tehran Ra Eqameh Mikonand,” *Tasnim News*, January 12, 2020.

full justice for Soleimani’s killing. The United States should be prepared for a further response from Iran, likely a more subtle response that is intended to limit our ability to respond.¹⁹

The Iranian toolkit is much more limited than that of the United States, but while Iran is not currently able to fundamentally challenge the United States, it can continue to be a nuisance and threaten U.S. regional partners. Iran’s toolbox is designed to allow the regime to overcome its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the United States. It includes the following:

- disinformation through social media campaigns to sway public opinion; attempts to interfere in elections
- cyber attacks and efforts to target U.S. persons, organizations, agencies, and infrastructure
- a network of proxies, including tens of thousands of fighters across several theaters and countries, which can attack U.S. troops, facilities, assets, interests, and partners, as well as perform kidnappings
- direct IRGC attacks on U.S. troops, facilities, assets, interests, and partners
- resumption of attacks on regional partners and oil production infrastructure and transport
- resumption of nuclear activities that were halted under the JCPOA.

Options for the United States

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s 12 points cover a breadth of policy issues relevant to the United States, and—regardless of the ongoing debates about how to prioritize or compartmentalize these issues—his general aims cross partisan lines.²⁰ Current and future administrations are likely to grapple with the issues covered by the 12 points, including Iran’s nuclear and missile programs, regional interventions, and support for terrorist and insurgent groups. Importantly, our European allies and regional partners also view these categories of Iranian actions as challenging. The United States has a number of tools available to address the challenges posed by Iran. An effective solution to these challenges would include a multilateral, multilayered approach and grounded in Iran and the Middle East’s current political reality, rather than on what the Iranian political system might look like in the future. Congress could play an effective role in shaping such an approach by pressing the administration to lay out its process and objectives clearly and to explain in what ways its current strategy helps the United States achieve these objectives.

Although the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy has clearly suffered and popular discontent continues to grow, U.S. policy toward Iran must be based on reality. Clearly, the United States should seek to be prepared for all scenarios, including a potential collapse of the regime—which

¹⁹ Elisa Catalano Ewers and Ariane Tabatabai, “How Will Iran Respond to Soleimani’s Killing—And Where Will the Escalation End?” *Washington Post*, January 7, 2020.

²⁰ The 12 points include a full account of the Iranian nuclear program’s possible military dimensions and a verifiable halt to any such activity in the future; end of enrichment and a commitment never to pursue plutonium reprocessing (including closing the Arak Heavy Water Reactor); all site access to the International Atomic Energy Agency; ending the proliferation of ballistic missiles; release of all U.S. citizens and nationals of allied countries detained in Iran; an end to support for terrorist groups in the region; and withdrawal from various Middle Eastern conflicts (Mike Pompeo, “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy,” *Heritage Foundation*, May 21, 2018).

could bring about a friendly democratic government (which remains a low probability scenario for the foreseeable future) or lead to another authoritarian regime, such as one led by the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MeK), an unlikely contender for power with a troubling history.²¹ The United States might even witness regime collapse in Iran and a lengthy, bloody civil war that would further destabilize the Middle East and have repercussions in South and Central Asia. However, for the foreseeable future, the United States should craft policies that advance U.S. interests even if the Islamic Republic remains in place—because this is the most likely outcome. The administration has noted that the United States is achieving its objectives with the maximum pressure campaign, but it has mostly focused on tactical, rather than strategic, goals.²² Congress could request more information about how the administration defines the success of its policy. Similarly, the administration could explain what, if anything, it is doing to mitigate the obvious costs associated with the maximum pressure campaign.²³ These costs include the humanitarian impact of sanctions on Iranians, such as the shortage of medical goods and products. From a U.S. policy perspective, these costs also include potential setbacks, including the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement leading to the Iranian decision to resume certain nuclear activities limited by the deal.²⁴

In the event of further escalation from Iran, the United States should consider proportional options that meet its strategic objectives. In addition to the surprising and arguably disproportionate act of killing Soleimani, the administration has responded to a range of Iranian actions by committing more troops to the region and imposing sanctions on Iran. However, deploying more forces—whose mission and operational status is unclear—to the region might not actually deter Iran, and the deployment arguably offers more targets for asymmetric Iranian retaliation. Merely moving troops is not sufficient to deter an adversary when redlines and objectives are not clearly and credibly communicated. The United States has identified and discreetly targeted Iranian and proxy capabilities—such as radar installations—connected with Iran’s missile project, and it has conducted covert or military actions against Iranian proxies that attack U.S. assets. Such responses could be effective if they are deployed surgically and are accompanied by clear messaging to Tehran. Ultimately, the U.S. has the conventional capabilities to address any direct action Iran might take at sea or on land in the vicinity of U.S. assets. In the event of escalation by Iran, the United States very well might have to consider and pursue a kinetic response, but it should do so when its own strategic gains are clear and with a gradual approach, avoiding going from zero to 100.

²¹ Elizabeth Rubin, “The Cult of Rajavi,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2003; Human Rights Watch, *No Exit—Human Rights Abuses Inside the Mojahedin Khalq Camps*, New York, May 18, 2005.

²² Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, “Trump’s Sanctions On Iran Are Hitting Hezbollah, and It Hurts,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2019.

²³ Reports suggest that far from slowing and dialing down its support for proxies, Iran is building and expanding its network of nonstate allies and partners. See Seth G. Jones, “War By Proxy—Iran’s Growing Footprint in the Middle East,” Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 11, 2019.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Maximum Pressure”—*US Economic Sanctions Harm Iranians’ Right to Health*, New York, October 29, 2019; “Iran May Leave NPT If Nuclear Case Sent to UNSC, Zarif Warns,” *Tasnim News*, January 20, 2020; “Iran’s 5th Step Keeps Balance in JCPOA, Diplomat Says,” *Tasnim News*, January 7, 2020.

Given recent developments, appetite for negotiations in Iran is likely limited. Nevertheless, the United States can prepare the groundwork for engagement by sending clear signals to Tehran that it is serious about seeking a diplomatic solution and avoiding conflict (as the President has on a number of occasions). Currently, U.S. policy toward Iran is heavily reliant on sanctions. Sanctions are a critical means to achieving America's objectives, but they are only fully effective if they are coupled with other U.S. instruments of power, and their overuse can destroy their efficacy.²⁵ If Iran believes that sanctions are a constant in U.S. policy and it will be sanctioned regardless of its behavior, the regime will have little incentive to seek engagement and to change its policies. Second, the administration should consider offering a cohesive message to Iran that clearly lays out U.S. objectives, what the United States is willing to offer to Iran, and what Iran would have to offer in return. This would need to be done within the framework of a realistic plan that does not rely on maximalist positions. Absent this, Tehran may interpret the administration's ultimate goal as its complete surrender, and such capitulation is a nonstarter for Iran and has historically led nations to go to war. Congress could request more clarity in this messaging and decisionmaking process as well as encourage coordination with allies.

Third, to curate an attainable and sustainable agreement (or series of agreements), the United States should consider identifying zones of possible agreement and the regime's absolute redlines. This can be achieved by identifying areas of consensus within the regime (such as the need for a missile program to meet defense needs) and leveraging existing fissures within the Iranian system.²⁶ Such fissures stem from disagreements within the system regarding the appropriate course of action on certain matters, including the future of Iran's nuclear and missile programs (issues include the range of these missiles, testing, and the proliferation of capabilities to terrorist groups and militias).

An acceptable outcome to both parties is likely to involve a single comprehensive deal addressing all sets of challenges posed by Iran or a series of agreements on these different items.²⁷ The former would have the benefit of addressing the threat posed by Iran and allowing the United States to focus more on great power competition as directed by the National Defense Strategy and the National Security Strategy. However, the diversity of the issues the United States wishes to tackle, coupled with the intricacy of the technical aspects of the nuclear and missile files, would make such an agreement challenging to attain and sustain. In particular, there are questions about what a process leading to such an agreement would look like; where different relevant partners and allies would fit in the process; and how different aspects of such an agreement would be implemented and verified. Alternatively, the United States could try to attain a series of comprehensive agreements by siloing each major issue, allowing for more tailored processes and mechanisms to address vastly different challenges. The United States could work with its partners to lead these negotiations in a step-by-step manner or in parallel to

²⁵ Jacob J. Lew and Richard Nephew, "The Use and Misuse of Economic Statecraft," *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2018.

²⁶ Tabatabai, 2019.

²⁷ Tabatabai, 2019, pp. 23–24.

each other. Ultimately, no single agreement (or even series of agreements) are likely to satisfy every U.S. concern with the Islamic Republic.