

How the Iranian Regime Survived: Examining Internal and External Strategies

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ABSTRACT *Following the Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the reimposition of economic sanctions, Iran witnessed public unrest that threatened the survival of the regime. Throughout its history, the Iranian regime has deployed various intricate internal and external strategies that have worked separately at times, and overlapped at others, to secure the regime against threats and guarantee its survivability. It is important to discover the strategies the Iranian regime has followed to survive the stifling crises it has faced since its establishment in 1979, in order to evaluate whether it will be able to survive its chronic economic crises. While the regime has purposely supported the Palestinian cause, strengthened its relations with non-state actors, and engaged in religious discourses on an external level, it has also achieved militarization and securitization, populated unelected governmental institutions with personnel loyal to its clerical and military institutions rather than qualified persons and pursued legitimacy renewal on an internal level.*

Keywords: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Green Movement, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iraq, Syria

Insight Turkey 2021

Vol. 23 / No. 3 / pp. 93-116

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been exposed to U.S. sanctions since its establishment in 1979, with nuclear-related sanctions being the most effective. Those unprecedented sanctions have isolated Iran, harmed its financial system, and severely constrained its overall economy. Economic activity and government revenues in Iran rely to a large extent on oil revenues, which lead to constant volatility.

With the 2015 signing of the landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, also called the Nuclear Deal),¹ international sanctions on Iran were lifted, and billions of dollars of assets were unfrozen, which permitted the selling of Iranian oil.² However, economic sanctions were reimposed in 2018, following the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the deal. Iran's overall economic atmosphere suffered due to these sanctions, especially amid the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Iranian Rial had fallen to 193,400 against the U.S. dollar by June 20, 2020,³ while the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) suffered a 4.7 percent contraction in 2018-2019 and further declined by 7.6 percent during 2019-2020. The oil sector contracted by 14.1 percent, contributing to an overall negative growth, and the non-oil sector also declined by 2.1 percent in 2018-2019.⁴

A series of public protests erupted in various Iranian cities throughout 2017-2018 and 2019-2020, due to economic hardships. These riots indicated that the regime was struggling to meet its ends. The protestors drew a direct link between their demands and the involvement of Iran in foreign conflicts. During the protests, they shouted slogans such as, "Leave Syria alone, deal with us!"⁵ Protestors believed that Iran's spending in Syria should be brought instead into the domestic arena to fulfill the population's needs. Iran has largely been nurturing parties and conflicts outside the republic, so much so that in a speech in 2015, Hassan Nasrallah declared: "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁶ Also, unprecedentedly, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, the conservative lawmaker and the former chairman of the Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, declared in May 2020 that Iran had spent \$20-30 billion in Syria that must be reimbursed.⁷

The latest 2019 events were not the only protests that the regime has witnessed since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Iran has indeed witnessed multiple protests throughout its republican history. Moreover, the regional arena has also been perplexing to the Iranian regime and its existence. In its turn, the regime has sought to employ various strategies that aim in the first place to secure its survival in an unstable domestic and regional atmosphere. This paper seeks

to review the various crises through which the regime has, as a response, followed a certain path to confront. It hopes to address how the regime strengthens and promotes itself internally and externally by answering the question: How was the Iranian regime able to survive, despite the various crises it has faced since its establishment?

The Iranian regime has followed various internal and external strategies that aim to ensure its resilience and endurance. Those strategies represent the whole set of actions and plans that aim at achieving long-term survival

Since Iran is largely driven by security and stability impulses, this paper argues that the regime's behaviors depart from its efforts at survival, which could be better understood in the scope of regime 'resilience,' that is, "the attributes, relational qualities, and institutional arrangements that have long given regimes [...] the capacity to adapt governance strategies to changing domestic and international conditions," rather than regime 'persistence,' which refers to "anachronistic, one-person dictatorships stubbornly clinging to power while falling increasingly out of touch with their societies and rapidly changing environments."⁸ Indeed, Iran lies in the Middle East, where almost all of the states seek their regime's survival and secure their status domestically and regionally against any potential threats. However, the paper does not attempt to make comparisons between regimes of the region with regard to the various strategies that they follow to survive. Rather, it tends to explore how the Iranian regime is resilient and adaptive to change in seeking its survival.

The Iranian regime has followed various internal and external strategies that aim to ensure its resilience and endurance. Those strategies represent the whole set of actions and plans that aim at achieving long-term survival. The 'internal' strategies are mainly seen in the following variables: a rising militarization trend, an increased securitization effort, seeking internal legitimacy renewal, and considering 'loyalty' as the main criterion in governmental appointments during various presidential administrations. The regime's 'external' survival strategies can be traced in the following variables: strengthening non-state actors, carrying the banner of political Islam, supporting the Palestinian cause—which may be extended to include supporting weakened peoples outside Iran that suffer under their regimes and promoting a discourse of hatred toward the U.S. and Israel—all of which have contributed to popularizing the Iranian regime among other populations and regimes, which has ensured the regime's survival.

Both internal and external strategies work at times separately, while at other times they overlap. For example, the militarization trend within Iran evidenced

in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) increased involvement in politics has been clearly reflected in the IRGC's increased external endeavors. Therefore, in addition to exemplifying those separate internal and external strategies, this paper seeks to trace a link between both kinds of strategies to evaluate whether the regime will be able to survive its economic crisis and the rising discontent of a restive population.

Some of the above variables could therefore be linked to each other to represent a 'nexus' between internal and external survival strategies, as follows: (i) an increased securitization trend within Iran would lead to increased support to weakened populations outside Iran; (ii) an increased militarization trend within Iran would lead to increased support to non-state actors outside Iran; (iii) appointing loyalists to various state positions would ensure that Iran's external movements are not being criticized at home; (iv) achieving foreign gains by defending the Palestinian cause, defending the weak, attacking Israel and the U.S., is associated with internal legitimacy renewal, which in turn is linked to increasing the regional favorability of the Iranian state, thereby ensuring the regime's survival. In other words, external threats have been exploited to reinforce internal legitimacy.

The paper transitions as follows. First, it briefly discusses the scope of the Iranian regime and addresses the transformations that the regime has witnessed and that have assisted in formulating the regime's strategies. Second, it moves to tackle the external approach of the Iranian regime and examine how it has reacted to various external occurrences to consolidate itself. Third, the internal strategies are displayed. Finally, the paper addresses the mixed strategies that the Iranian regime had adopted toward the nuclear agreement.

The Iranian *Modus Operandi*

Regime survival long has been a motive of Iran's foreign policy, as seen in the regime's use of external crises, such as the U.S. hostage crisis,⁹ the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988, and the nuclear issue, to rally support from its domestic population. The regime had also occasionally abandoned its revolutionary ambitions; for instance, to align with Syria's secular, pan-Arab, Ba'athist regime,¹⁰ and has exploited international crises to develop its regional tactics, strategies, and policies, in a way that serves to fulfilling its foreign interests and tapping opportunities, as when the U.S. opened up subversive opportunities for Iran through its invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹¹ Apart from religious explanations, the Iranian regime's survival has sometimes been associated with what may be termed 'economic and social populism,' as the regime promised to produce a welfare state that contributes to eliminating 'poverty, illiteracy, slums, and unemployment,' and offers "free education, accessible medical care, decent

housing, pensions, disability pay, and unemployment insurance.”¹²

Iran’s military has a considerable influence on various structures in the system, which enables it to determine regime stability.¹³ It promotes an ‘insider-outsider divide’ which delegitimizes domestic opponents and excludes movements or protests. This divide was first employed to frustrate the July 1999 university students’ protests.¹⁴ The protests were triggered by students’ frustration with the narrowing of the freedom of the press. However, the students were violently attacked by ultraconservative military organizations such as Ansar-e Hizbullah¹⁵ and the *Basij* (Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed),¹⁶ and later the IRGC itself. Student casualties and thousands of arrests resulted from these clashes. The military organizations not only ransacked and assaulted students in their dormitories but also attacked the protesters with gunfire and lethal blows while ranging the streets on their motorbikes.¹⁷

This strategy was similarly applied to crush the Green Movement¹⁸ and legitimate counter-mobilization efforts¹⁹ following the fraudulent June 2009 elections where Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won with a percentage of 63.3 of the votes. Security forces violently attacked the protesters, again with the support of the *Basij* on their motorcycles. Trials were conducted, and some accused individuals had to confess on state television that they had committed crimes against the nation; these forced confessions were accompanied by statements that condemned the U.S. and Israel for being behind the movement. Newspapers, magazines, and websites that supported the movement were targeted by the government, shut down, and their journalists imprisoned. The IRGC subsequently bought a huge stake in the telecommunication industry, through which it could control the Internet within Iran. Moreover, Ali Khamenei ordered house arrests against leaders of the movement.²⁰

As a result of crushing the 2009 demonstrations, there was a ‘transfer of power from regime clerics to the IRGC,’²¹ but in tandem with Iran’s increasing reliance on the coercive apparatus, which has always been loyal to the regime, the IRGC gained a high profile in ensuring regime survival, and was even described a ‘deep state’ or a ‘veritable state within a state.’²²

Later, the regime seemed steadfast while facing regional changes such as the Arab uprisings of 2011. It depended heavily on its military and security apparatuses, such as the *Basij* and the IRGC,²³ to eliminate revolutions and coups, and to expand Iran’s presence externally by forming an axis of resistance to challenge the U.S. and Israel, while deterring them from attacking Iran, whether directly or through proxies such as Hezbollah.²⁴

Iranian foreign policy is complex, characterized by ambiguities and rapid movements

An man waves an Iranian flag and flashes a Victory sign to commemorate the 42nd Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Tehran on February 10, 2021.

MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL / NurPhoto via Getty Images



However, the regime was still vulnerable to the domestic economic demands of the masses.²⁵ The sanctions that were imposed on Tehran in 2012 led to major political anger, and thus demonstrations in Iran. The then ruling president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, held a defiant attitude;²⁶ the subsequent election of Hasan Rouhani as president in 2013 brought back pragmatism and moderation, and after years of intensifying sanctions, it was the time for Iran to move toward signing a nuclear agreement with global powers.²⁷ The regime had to take this 'highly painful decision' due to its economic decline, which in turn triggered a threatening social resentment to the regime's legitimacy and survival.²⁸

Despite the perception that the regime, in trying to retrieve its legitimacy – especially after the Green Movement – would abstain from using violence to suppress its opposition and refrain from negotiating abroad,²⁹ the opposite was proven in 2017 when Tehran witnessed some of its largest demonstrations, which were primarily motivated by economic grievances, throughout 150 cities in various provinces. These protests continued during early 2018, but were suppressed by the IRGC, police forces, and *Basij* units.³⁰ Despite their suppression, these protests pushed Iranian officials to realize that they must deal with citizens' economic frustrations by initiating anti-corruption reforms, despite denouncing the protesters as agents of the West.³¹ In addition to economic grievances, protestors were further incited by Iran's costly involvement and foreign expenditures in regional conflicts, and its support to Palestine, Lebanon, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad; the riots were characterized by slo-

gans stating: “Forget Syria! Think of us!”³² This indicates that Iran’s foreign behavior ambitions, which sought to garner domestic support from hard-line religious actors, obtain a prestigious geopolitical role vis-à-vis the West with regard to the Israel-Palestinian conflict and, finally, gain popularity among Arab State populations,³³ had led to some domestic criticisms, and therefore internal challenges to its external policies.

The Palestinian cause has long been a soft power tool for the Iranian regime, through which it has enhanced its political presence in the Arab region

By 2018, Iran had returned to a state of functioning under severe circumstances due to the ‘maximum pressure’ policy enacted by the U.S. The effects of the reimposed sanctions were rough and harmful, paralyzing the Iranian economy. As the Rial rapidly lost value against the dollar, exports dwindled to new lows, oil exports plummeted, the cost of basic goods doubled and viable diplomatic off-ramps were eliminated.³⁴ Moreover, an increasing gap may be noticed between the regime and the Iranian people; the recent parliamentary elections in 2019 witnessed about 42 percent participation, the lowest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.³⁵

However, Iranians were dumbfounded by the increase in petrol prices by November 2019, and the shock was soon reflected in street protests against the desperate economic and political conditions. The IRGC and the *Basij* were again deployed to support the security forces. Indeed, the 2017 and 2019 protests, despite being triggered by economic conditions, revealed an “increasing sense of radicalization among protesters, while the state is prepared to resort to extreme violence to maintain control.”³⁶

The role of the military establishment in political life has been the focus of various scholarly attempts to study Iran’s domestic affairs. However, these attempts have been unable to identify the major behavioral trends of the military or the direction or aim of this behavior. Many of these mainstream analyses ignore Iran’s complex network within the ruling establishment and among the country’s military and religious institutions. This paper seeks to bridge this gap. It also delves into the operationalization of the security apparatus that the regime has used to confront dissent at home. It will focus on the reasons why the regime perceives demonstrations and protests as threats, and has consequently adopted security measures.

Studies concerned with internal dynamics have generally ignored an important factor that stabilizes the Iranian regime: its need for loyal factions and supporters rather than qualified officials. This paper aspires to inspect this factor in more depth to examine how it has contributed to regime survival. Moreover,

Iran has exploited the diverse religious composition in the region and the presence of Shia minorities, to back non-state actors that would serve its geopolitical interests, thus increasing its reach in the region

by linking the aims of Iran's external behavior with its attempt to preserve the regime domestically.

Finally, only a few studies have been able to link the internal and external pressures that have enabled the Iranian regime to draw upon various tools and methods to extend its longevity; therefore, this paper will thoroughly draw the 'nexus' between Iran's internal and external strategies to better analyze its behavior.

Three-Dimensional External Policy

Iranian foreign policy is complex, characterized by ambiguities and rapid movements. The regime has repeatedly used foreign policy crises to gather support among Iranians. It exploited the U.S. hostage crisis, the Iran-Iraq war, and the Salman Rushdie affair of 1989 to perpetuate its rule. And despite Iran's interests in the Arab region, it has compromised some of its policies in other regions. For instance, it neglects its revolutionary ambitions if the existence of the Iranian state is threatened. One example is the delivery of Israeli arms to Iran after the Iraqi invasion in 1980. Additionally, with the Iran-Contra affair in 1986, Israel intermediated in arranging talks between the U.S. and Iran to facilitate the shipment of U.S.-made arms to the Khomeini government in Iran. Another example is Iran's alliance with the pan-Arab regime in Damascus. Furthermore, it provided aid to Christian and animist rebels in Southern Sudan against Jaafar Nimeiry 1969-1985, who backed Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.³⁷ Later, with the outbreak of the Nagorno-Karabakh war 1988-1994 between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Iran backed Christian Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijan to prevent Azeri nationalism from spilling over into Iran. During the Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2000, Iran did not provide any support to Muslims in Chechnya, as it feared harming its vital relationship with Russia. And Iran has been silent regarding the Chinese repression of the Muslim Uyghurs population since the 1990s.³⁸

this paper explores how the regime responded to its legitimacy crisis, particularly following the 2009 demonstrations, by building up its efforts toward renewing its legitimacy.

Most previous studies have taken Iran as an influencing country in the region, but they have not discussed how being a regional power benefits regime prolongation on a domestic level. This study hopes to answer these questions

However, major events in the Arab region have impacted the Iranian regime, starting with the Iran-Iraq war, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the September 11 attacks, the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq in 2003, and, finally, the Arab uprisings in 2011. Some of these events bled into Iranian interests in the region. For instance, after the September 11 attacks, Iran was able to get rid of the Taliban and the Iraqi regime in less than two years. It also opened the doors to export to both Afghanistan and Iraq, which revived the Iranian economy. However, Iran's ability to increase its influence in the region was accompanied by a loss amongst Arab public opinion, as it revealed the Iranian model as a sectarian state.³⁹ However, the image of the regime abroad as the defender of the weak fed a kind of a national pride to a segment of Iranians who may not otherwise have liked the regime because of its religious nature; yet still agree with maintaining Iran influential regionally and globally. Therefore, after 1989, the establishment focused on responding to the challenges it faced through various strategies.⁴⁰

The Iranian regime was able to profit from the regional Middle Eastern scene in a way that strengthened its presence, influence, and policy in the area. Iranian moves are guided by three interlinked and effective strategies that assist its advancement on an external level: support to the Palestinian cause, strengthening relations with non-state actors, and engaging in or evoking religious discourses.

The Palestinian cause has long been a soft power tool for the Iranian regime, through which it has enhanced its political presence in the Arab region. It has tried to use the Palestinian issue as a way of proving that regimes of the region are corrupt, and allies of the West. This approach was considered by the Arab regimes an attempt to destabilize Arab security.⁴¹ The regime has publicly declared hatred toward the U.S. and Israel. This started with the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, which was followed by the U.S. hostage crisis. Then, in 1979, the newly established regime cut off Iran's relations with Israel and alternatively granted the headquarters of the Israeli embassy in Tehran to the Palestine Liberation Organization.⁴² From 1989 through 1992—the milestone of the peace agreement⁴³—the position was taken by Iran on the political settlement process, or what is known as the Madrid Conference, had a role in highlighting its hostility to Israel and winning popularity in the Arab region, which strengthened its presence.

Therefore, while other countries in the region were labeled corrupt and suffered injustice, Iran demonstrated itself as the poor and the oppressed role model, particularly to the Palestinians. However, this image started to change in 1997, when Mohammad Khatami became president, as his election process gave rise to internal disputes that climaxed after Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005.⁴⁴ Those disputes represent a deep crisis between moderate and radical

Islamic groups, who adopted a differing interpretation for the way of governance, which cumulated, after Ahmadinejad's presidency, in the impossibility of establishing a dialogue between the opposing sides.⁴⁵

Still, during that period, various Iranian leaders accused the U.S. and Israel on different occasions. In May 1989, Hashemi Rafsanjani was quoted as saying: "if in retaliation for every Palestinian martyred in Palestine they will kill and execute, not inside Palestine, five Americans or Britons or Frenchmen, they (Israelis) could not continue these wrongs."⁴⁶ In December 2000, Iran's Supreme Leader, Khamenei, described Israel as a "cancerous tumor of a state that should be removed from the region."⁴⁷

Supporting the Syrian regime was another tool Iran used to prove its hatred toward Israel. It had supported the Syrian regime's efforts at claiming it had been targeted due to its resistance to Israel. The Iranian regime believed that the more resistance to Israel was invoked, the greater the opportunity to obtain legitimacy. This was one of the soft power tools that may have succeeded in the years before 2010. However, the political mood changed in the region after that year, as the Syrian regime did not persuade those who demanded change, especially with the transition to armed confrontation,⁴⁸ which also led to a change in the way Iran is viewed.

The second external strategy followed by the Iranian regime is a smart one. Since the 1980s, the regime has consistently pursued strengthening its relations with non-state actors in the region, mainly Islamic movements in the Levant, such as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movements in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It has backed those actors fighting for the Palestinian cause. This further gave the regime a justification for its spending outside of Iran. Those actors have a deterrent value in the sense that they serve as a 'tripwire for Israeli aerial strikes against the Islamic Republic.'⁴⁹

Backing non-state actors in the Middle East has taken on a national security dimension, especially with those actors close to Iran's borders. Iran has exploited the diverse religious composition in the region and the presence of Shia minorities, to back non-state actors that would serve its geopolitical interests, thus increasing its reach in the region. Iran backed the Houthis in Yemen, who are considered a security threat to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. Similarly, Iran supported militias and groups in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, different Shia militias, like the al-Mahdy Army and the Iraqi Sadrists, have become a crucial element in implementing stability –from an Iranian perspective– in Iraq,⁵⁰ ensuring that a government hostile to Iran does not rise to power in Iraq, concomitantly tying the U.S.' hands, and preventing it from attacking Iran from Iraq. Also, in Afghanistan, Iran sought to accomplish two goals at once, that is, leveraging its position vis-à-vis the U.S. by providing large amounts of

aid to the Karzai government, and backing a major non-state actor, the Taliban. Essentially, it can be said that there has been a U.S.-Iran proxy war in the region for several years now.⁵¹

Finally, by positioning itself in the context of political Islam, Iran engages itself in, and hereby evokes, religious discourses in the region. After the 1979 revolution, the Iranian regime strengthened its de facto legitimacy by positioning itself as expanding Shia influence in the Arab world and exporting the Islamic Revolution: “Through its *umm al-qura* (mother of villages) theory, Iran has sought to replace the capital of the Islamic world, Makkah, with Qom.”⁵² By competing with Saudi Arabia, Iran’s goal is to promote itself as the leader of the Islamic world and to provide itself religious authority. This became clear following the attacks of September 11, as Iran criticized the Islamic thought that justified what had occurred, and directed its references to Saudi Arabia.⁵³ This goal of promoting itself as the leader of the Islamic world, coincides with Iran’s adoption of a religious tone that enhances Pan-Islamism, which basically calls upon Arabs to revolt against corrupted governments, mimicking the Iranian style of revolution. Iran has tried to export the Islamic revolution to Sunni-dominated Gulf countries, using the remotely controlled Shia minorities, as in Bahrain. Examples of this are clear; for instance, when an attempted coup by some pro-Iranian Shias in 1981 reflected Iran’s influence in a regional religious context, and when major clashes occurred in Bahrain with the Arab Spring.⁵⁴

Moreover, Iran explained its intervention in Syria based on the presence of Wahhabi takfiri forces supported by regional countries feeding instability in the region. Iran’s adoption of a strategy that blames Islamic groups in Syria was aimed at achieving a set of long-term strategic goals; transforming the Syrian revolution from a popular revolution demanding change in a peaceful way to one that poses threats to regional and international security; thus, European countries would be prompted to intervene to preserve the Syrian regime and thus preserve the status quo, which accordingly would benefit Iran with the survival of its strategically.⁵⁵ Iran also “attempted to project the rise of the Islamists in the region as an extension of the Iranian Islamic revolution or, in a wider sense, as an Islamic awakening.” For instance, Khamenei declared that the Arab uprisings were not only caused by socio-economic motives but also had an Islamic form. However, it is more realistic to argue that Iran attempts to foster fragility in some states in the region to increase its influence, more than it hopes that Islamists will seize power.⁵⁶ Similarly, its support to non-state actors, despite contributing to other states’ fragility, also increases Iran’s influence.

The Iranian position became difficult when Iran failed in persuading Hamas to stand with the Syrian regime against the Syrian people

The 2003 invasion of Iraq helped enhance the IRGC's profile in the Iranian atmosphere, especially with the fear of a U.S.- or Israeli-led attack on Iran

Even though this strategy is still followed by Iran, it was effective until two incidents occurred. First, the inactive sectarianism in Iraq, which is an excessive attachment to religious sects that led to heated tension and conflict between those various sects, was ignited with the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. Before that year, governments in the region hated Iran, while nations admired it. After sectarianism was introduced and Iran was perceived as a major contributor in fueling it, both governments and nations hated Iran. Therefore, Iran started losing its bases in the region and its influence gradually shrank. Second, the Arab uprisings in 2011 played a major role in this movement. The uprisings led to an escalation in the non-trustworthy and negative tone by Arab nations toward Iran due to its foreign policy in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. This thus led to the demonization of Iran among Arab nations and portray it as the source of all evils in the region. Further, due to the 2009 Green Movements, the regime began to lose much of its legitimacy, as its score worsened from a 7.8 in 2007 on the State Legitimacy Index to 8 in 2008, 8.3 in 2009, and to a sharp 9.0 in both 2010 and 2011.⁵⁷ So, the Iranian regime was forced to support the Syrian regime. Although it seems contradictory, Tehran had shown great empathy with the Arab revolutions. Khamenei believed “the regime-changing events in Tunisia and Egypt were natural extensions of Iran’s own Islamic revolution” and further praised the Egyptian protesters.⁵⁸ On the other hand, Iran’s support to the Syrian regime was in fact an ongoing economic and military alliance that dates back to decades prior to the revolution. Therefore, a strategy to help Iran regain its legitimacy was constituted. This strategy sought to secure Iran’s regional and security interests and positioning itself as a major player of the refusal to Israel axis along with Syria and Hamas movement in Palestine. Besides, it made Iran gamble on its military, soldiers, and leaders loses in Syria, and promote that its presence there has costed it a lot.

The Iranian position became difficult when Iran failed in persuading Hamas to stand with the Syrian regime against the Syrian people; the situation became even more difficult for Tehran when the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood refused to talk with Iran to formulate a solution in Syria. All of this was evidence of the failure of the soft power tools in which Iran had invested after the Islamic Revolution. Of course, Hamas and the Brotherhood’s refusal to open channels of dialogue with Iran was because Tehran became stigmatized by regional and international actors as sectarian following the developments in Iraq in 2003. However, the process of mobilizing forces from outside Syria brought Iran



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during his meeting with members of government formed by President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran, Iran on August 28, 2021. IRANIAN LEADER PRESS OFFICE / AA

back to the square of a sectarian state, exploiting its network of relations with Shias in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁹

Iran's approach externally had maximized its standing among other populations of the region, despite the fact that some of their regimes had invested in efforts to publicize Iran as a demon and attribute various instances of chaos and sabotage to its ideology and policy. However, the regime not only faced attacks from the outside, but it also faced internal threats. So, apart from the external approach, the Iranian regime also followed internal strategies in responding to internal challenges, and thereby secured its survival. The following section deals with those internal strategies.

Four Strategic Internal Pillars for Survival

Several major events have marked the Iranian landscape since the establishment of the Islamic Revolution. They are mainly related to rapid social and economic changes, decreases in the regimes' legitimacy, and mass disappointments and dissatisfaction, as was apparent in the widening protests.

On a grassroots level, during the reformists period from 1997-2005, the Iranian regime succeeded in neutralizing its internal opponents and critics, opening the political environment for more popular participation and increasing social freedoms. However, after the return of the conservatives in Iran in 2005 and

Iran's militarization strategy coincides with another strategy followed by the regime, which helped in strengthening the position of the IRGC

the dominance of the military establishment, economic sanctions were imposed by the UN Security Council and Iran started to prioritize frustrating any military action against Iran resulting from its nuclear program. At that time, the regime did not enjoy strong support internally to the degree that it had during the era of Khatami. This drop in popular support helped the regime move toward signing the nuclear agreement in 2015; significantly considering economic sanctions, as signing the agreement represented a catalyst for improving the economic situation in Iran. However, the regime has followed a multi-dimensional strategy in practicing its art of survival.

One response to all these political and social changes was a rising militarization trend; that is, an increased militarizing of the clerical regime at home and the incorporation of the military into various state sectors. In Iran, the military gained a high profile in ensuring regime survival and securing the military establishments' reputation as a protector of the revolution. This trend can be traced back to the 1980s, as, over the past four decades, the regime's coercive military apparatus has successfully repressed political opposition. In 1981, the IRGC was able to put down the oppositional leftist Muslim organizations *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (Mujahedin of Iran or MEK),⁶⁰ and later in 1988, it carried out widespread executions of political prisoners, mostly MEK members, whose estimated numbers range from 4,500-5,000 according to human rights organizations.⁶¹

However, since the 1990s, economic-driven riots started appearing, and have been violently crushed by military forces. Examples of this include the 1993-1994 post-war economic austerity, the 1999 and 2003 student risings, the 2009 Green Movements, and the 2017-2018 social protests. Since 1997, the IRGC has established "a network of political guides (*hadyan-e siyasi*) to propagate its political ideas," which has dramatically expanded with the emergence of hard-liners.⁶² As of 2008, "the Guard had more than 8,000 political guides. By 2011 and 2013, the figures had risen to 12,000 and 14,000, respectively."⁶³

The military's clout is evident in the 1999 confrontations between students at Tehran University and the security forces during Khatami's presidency. When Khatami criticized the way the security and military establishment dealt with these events, General Rahim Safavi, the Commander in Chief of the Revolutionary Guards, violently retorted that the military would respond by 'cutting out tongues and severing throats.'⁶⁴

The 2003 invasion of Iraq helped enhance the IRGC's profile in the Iranian atmosphere, especially with the fear of a U.S.- or Israeli-led attack on Iran.

Therefore, while the IRGC suffered contentious relations during the Khatami era, it enjoyed a leveraged position under Ahmadinejad.⁶⁵ One consequence of the 2005 elections was the increasing engagement of the IRGC in politics, as it brought Principlists to power; this group had been striving since the 1990s to promote themselves in domestic Iran by obtaining enrollment in university graduate programs and joining the civilian apparatus. Moreover, for those Principlists, “provincial governorships and mayoral offices, the Ministries of Intelligence and Interior and newspapers such as *Keyhan* and *Resalat* became especially favorite places of employment.”⁶⁶

In 2009, the IRGC suppressed demonstrations against fraudulent elections and ensured a second-term presidency for Ahmadinejad. After the 2005 elections, the president appointed administrative and diplomatic individuals in the executive branch, mostly former IRGC officials,⁶⁷ and gave the IRGC’s economic institutions a role in major economic projects. In fact, the IRGC had not suppressed the 2009 Green movement using hard power only. It also dedicated cyber bodies to control internet access and monitor the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) in such a way that every online communication was censored.⁶⁸

Indeed, during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the presence of the military in the political scene became more prominent. IRGC personnel were appointed to various government positions, and the military institution achieved a greater grip on the economy, thus obtaining a bigger platform. Hereby, the IRGC was not merely the most powerful body in terms of military might; it also owned great shares in the country’s economic sector, particularly in construction, media, energy, telecommunication, banking, electronics, nuclear power, etc. The IRGC’s economic benefits are still used to reinforce the military’s activities at home and abroad. For instance, one IRGC-affiliate company, *Khatam al-Anbia*, secured a deal worth around \$7 billion in 2006 in various sectors, as it had benefited from the privatization program introduced by President Ahmadinejad.⁶⁹ This largesse was interpreted as a kind of quid-pro-quo by Ahmadinejad, who had been supported by the IRGC during the elections. During the Ahmadinejad era, the military budget increased nearly three times, from \$6.8 billion in 2005 to \$12.58 billion in 2009.⁷⁰ In 2013, in an interview with General Hamadani, an IRGC commander, it was revealed that “45,000 *Basij* forces had participated in the suppression of the 2009 mass uprising. He noted that the IRGC had also organized 5,000 thugs.”⁷¹ Militarization continued during the Rouhani period as well. Rouhani sought to undermine and marginalize the IRGC’s influence, but it continued to control a significant portion of Iran’s underground economy, as he, for instance, awarded *Khatam al-Anbia* vast projects in the lucrative energy sector.⁷² The military succeeded in defusing the 2017 protests by coupling acknowledgment of the legitimacy of grievances with repressively suppressing and shutting down access to social

Iran has followed a final strategy on both internal and external levels: that of seeking legitimacy renewal

media, and securing arrests.⁷³ On November 20, 2019, President Rouhani declared that the regime had accomplished ‘victory’ by putting down the unrest.⁷⁴ In 2019, the budget of the IRGC was increased from 202 trillion to 255 trillion Rials, the equivalent of \$4.7 billion.⁷⁵

Iran’s militarization is thought to be further consolidated during times of sanctions relief. For instance, this occurred after signing the nuclear deal, as it contributed to investing in defense power by raising the military’s pervasive influence in the economy and providing an account of its activities.

Iran’s militarization strategy coincides with another strategy followed by the regime, which helped in strengthening the position of the IRGC. Securitization, which can be defined as perceiving or viewing every kind of demonstration as a national security threat that must be tackled using maximum power or force, is another strategy the regime used to handle different events that occurred in Iran by depicting them as threats. By stigmatizing demonstrators through various accusations, demonizing them, and depicting them as tools of external actors, the regime was able to crush movements or attempts to oppose the regime, thereby gradually crushing any possible future opposition. Securitization measures have been applied to all of the demonstrations that have taken place since 2009, starting with the Green Movement, when protestors were met with a tight fist, a series of raids, arrests, and detentions. This pattern has continued until today.

An embedded strategy of the regime can also be identified: populating unelected governmental institutions with personnel loyal to the clerical and military institutions, rather than assigning qualified persons to these posts. Indeed, popular protests are not the only drivers behind the regime breakdown, as another threat to regime survival may take the form of a coup conducted by political and military elites.⁷⁶ Therefore, appointing loyalists to various posts was a strategy through which the regime secured its survival. Hussein-Ali Montazeri, an advocate of Islamic democracy who was placed under house arrest for openly criticizing Khamenei’s authority, is an example of how the establishment is not ready to pardon individuals who are thinking beyond the present limits or more freely about how things should be. Similarly, the arrest and detention of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and his wife, as well as Mehdi Karoubi, after they urged their supporters to organize demonstrations in light of the Arab uprisings of 2011, is also evidence that the regime still sought to keep advocate conservative figures dominant in the political arena. The clerical establishment in Iran has always enjoyed the power of choosing the personnel appointed to state positions. The clerical leader has a tight grip over the mil-

itary and appoints the highest-ranking members of the judiciary. Moreover, he chooses the officials of the National Security Council and the state-owned radio and television. He thereby secures a loyal security apparatus that is ready to confront domestic dissent.⁷⁷

Choosing loyalists rather than qualified persons was the pattern throughout the 1980s until the mid-1990s. When Khatami became president in 1997, he substituted key figures in the government with technocrats. This lasted until Ahmadinejad won the presidential seat in 2005. As mentioned above, during his presidency, Ahmadinejad appointed many of his cabinet officials and governors from the ranks of the IRGC.⁷⁸ When Ahmadinejad was opposed in 2009, Khamenei supported the president, involving himself in the political sphere in a way that was considered unprecedented. In 2008, when the Iranian parliament repeatedly refused to approve Ahmadinejad's nominee, Ali Kordan, for the Interior Ministry, the president told parliament his nominee was the Supreme Leader's 'candidate.'⁷⁹ However, during the 2013 elections, Khamenei announced that he was not supporting any candidate in the face of rumors regarding his support to Saeed Jalili. As Khamenei's "explicit backing of Ahmadinejad in 2009 tarnished his image, he acted with more prudence in 2013."⁸⁰ In 2020, and for the first time since the Islamic Republic was established, a former military general and member of the senior cadre of the IRGC, Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, was elected as speaker of the Iranian parliament.

Iran has followed a final strategy on both internal and external levels: that of seeking legitimacy renewal. Legitimacy renewal is a strategy that is constantly followed by a regime after any major challenge or crisis, where it seeks to propose several measures and actions to renew or freshen its legitimacy, where the latter is considered a tool to obtain and to assure the regime's survival. The internal legitimacy status of a regime highly affects the regime's external stance. With the 2009 elections and the public demonstrations that followed, the regime faced a decline in its legitimacy that coincided with the increased power of the IRGC. Therefore, the regime has taken actions outside Iran in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, during the Arab Spring, in particular, to help improve its image internally and reinforce its legitimacy. For instance, the Iranian regime was able to capitalize upon the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq by representing him as a national hero. Additionally, the regime has used its militias' dead personnel in Syria and Iraq as opportunities for investment that would promote and renew the regime's legitimacy locally. This strategy was not effective until after 1989, as the Iraq-Iran war had ended, and the charismatic legitimacy-nurturer, the founder of the republic, and Khomeini, who enjoyed a charismatic legitimacy, was already dead. Indeed, the regime's legitimacy was also prone to tarnish due to the impact of the economic crisis. It has been announced that "Iran's state television may have to



Ceremony held for the delivery of Certificate of election of Iran's New President Ebrahim Raisi (R), who won the presidential elections held on June 18 in Iran, at Imam Khomeini Huseyniyesi in Tehran, Iran on August 3, 2021.

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shut down several foreign language channels” under the pretext of “financial strains caused by sanctions, mismanagement, falling viewership figures and long-standing differences between the state broadcaster and the presidential administration.”⁸¹ These include the *al-Kowsar* TV network, Iranian radio's *Dari*, “the English-language *Press TV* and the Arabic news network *al-Alam*, the Spanish language *Hispan TV* as well as *i-Film* channels in Arabic and English.”⁸² Such cuts may further strain social discontent internally and damage the regime's legitimacy externally, as some of these channels have been broadcasting Shia ideological programs, which act as a propaganda platform to obtain external legitimacy.

Iran's Economic Crisis and the Nuclear Deal

During the period of 2002-2010, the Tehran nuclear program was added to the regional tensions associated with Iran.⁸³ Although Iran continued its political positions in Syria and Yemen, at the same time it chose to open to the West. This manifested in the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program in 2015. The keenness of the Iranian political system to reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear program does not seem far from the gradual loss that Iran faced in files such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Iran appeared to be at the stage of preparing for political alternatives that would reduce the impact of losses or changes if the Syrian political regime fell completely.⁸⁴ Iran's decision to sign the agreement also stems from the fact that the regime's legitimacy was severely harmed after

Changes that occurred at the beginning of the 21st century led Iran to shift its course from revolutionary discourse toward survival efforts

the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings. So, legitimacy renewal was a motive that the regime exploited to facilitate its way toward signing the nuclear agreement.

If Iran were to achieve a nuclear agreement, it would have succeeded in bypassing the Arab Spring storm with the fewest possible losses, renewing its legitimacy and assuring the Arabs that it was able to extract important concessions from its western opponents related to its right to a peaceful nuclear program.⁸⁵ Therefore, the Iranian deal is considered a dependent and an independent variable at the same time, as it affects and is affected by Iranian internal and external behaviors.

Indeed, the U.S. pressure has benefited Iran politically. For example, when the U.S. put sanctions on Iran for the first time in the mid-1980s, Iran only had a few friends globally. However, by the mid-1990s, the U.S. and Israel were the regime's only enemies, and it enjoyed strong relations with India, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, and China, and advanced relations with other Asian, African, and European countries.⁸⁶

In previous time periods, Iran's posturing on the nuclear issue had been beneficial to the regime. This was particularly true when the U.S. was wrapped up with Iraq and Afghanistan, during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War in Lebanon, during the rise of Hezbollah and Hamas, and during the ascendance in oil prices, all of which enhanced Iran's position and status.⁸⁷ When the year 2009 approached, this all changed. Iran started facing internal threats from protesters, who were chanting: "stop supporting Syria; focus on our situation" and "Neither for Gaza nor for Lebanon, my soul is sacrificed for Iran."⁸⁸

By the end of Ahmadinejad's second term, the economic situation was rapidly deteriorating. As a result of sanctions, Iran's inflation rate dropped from 10.4 percent in 2005 to 10.1 percent in 2010, while it skyrocketed in 2011 (20.6 percent) and 2012 (27.3 percent). The inflation rate reached 31.5 percent in March 2013. Iran's oil exports shrank from 2.4 million barrels per day to 1.1 million in 2011 and 2013, respectively. Iran's GDP shrank by 1.9 percent in 2012 and revenues from oil exports have significantly declined since then. The Iranian Rial started losing its foreign exchange value; it lost around 40 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar in September 2012 alone.⁸⁹ Meanwhile,

while the Trump Administration withdrew from the nuclear deal and intentionally targeted the Iranian economy, and while most of the demonstrations throughout the Iranian regime's history have been economically driven, the 2017-2018 riots must prove that economic needs and political demands are closely related.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Changes that occurred at the beginning of the 21st century led Iran to shift its course from revolutionary discourse toward survival efforts. This does not mean that Iran changed its strategies, but the prior use of these strategies was affected due to the various changes and developments it witnessed since the regimes' establishment in 1979.

Survival strategies on an external basis include the Palestinian cause, advocating a religious discourse, and backing non-state actors, whereas on an internal basis they include militarization, securitization, preferring loyalists overqualified personnel, and legitimacy renewal. Internal and external strategies have a direct link to each other, and both together fuse to ensure the regime's survival. Those strategies have been present in almost every challenge or crisis that the regime has faced. In fact, Iran's regional role in the Middle East is heavily impacted by the evolution of its domestic policies and by shifts within the state. The growing role of the IRGC as an actor in regional conflicts is to some extent a reflection of the militarization and securitization trends within Iran. Conversely, anger among segments of Iranian society toward the regime's inability to fulfill their economic needs has increasingly manifested in the contestation of the regime's role regionally. These changing dynamics have affected the regimes' rationale domestically, making it shift the justification of its regional involvement from the spread of Shia influence to more pragmatic reasons framed around security interests. However, the primacy of military institutions like the IRGC will continue to have a direct impact on Iran's regional role in the Middle East. The more Iran faces pressures and sanctions from the U.S. and the West, the more it will seek to be active in foreign policy.

To understand the debate about how far the Iranian regime will continue to endure, it is essential to study Iran in terms of its abilities and resources. Iran's economic resources are limited and restricted. It is very critical that Iran, over the lifespan of its 40-year-old republic, has witnessed all of these various crises and imbalances. The regimes' above-mentioned strategies may need to be reconsidered in light of the newly reimposed U.S. sanctions. Moreover, if Iran still hopes to have an influential role in the region, then it might need to further honor its domestic and international legitimacy, as this is the key to achieving its own survival. Legitimacy, the most important aspect of ensuring

the survivability of any regime, is a factor to bond both internal and external regime policies.

However, given the appointment of Qalibaf as the head of the Iranian parliament, it does not seem likely that the regime will be able to reduce its military and security brutality. The course of events might further be complicated if a hard-liner also wins the presidential elections of 2021. Therefore, an expanded military role should not be overlooked. However, overestimating the regime's will to use violence distorts the image and further complicates the already distorted internal scene, is a false reading for Iran's current situation, especially with that Tehran is economically and humanitarily suffering the consequences of COVID-19. The nuclear deal is also a key factor in determining the future of the regime. It remains ambiguous whether Iran is ready to compromise some of its nuclear objectives, or if international players will alleviate the sanctions. The present economic hardships indicate that Iran is passing through a transformation phase. ■

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