



# THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC IN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

The need for a paradigm  
shift in the EU's Iran policy

By  
Ali Fathollah-Nejad

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Produced at a crucial, if not historic, time for both Iran and the European Union, this *Chaillot Paper* examines the Islamic Republic of Iran's current unprecedented domestic woes and what this signifies for European policy.

In chapter one, the study examines the triple crisis (socio-economic, political and ecological) with which the Islamic Republic is grappling. It describes the mounting socio-economic misery suffered by the majority of Iranians, with high poverty rates and a largely hollowed-out middle class; the political crisis, with the authoritarian regime's repression of civil society, the loss of popular legitimacy of the ruling establishment's reformist faction over the last decade, and the monopolisation of power by the hardliners; and the ecological crisis, driven by poor political decisions and exacerbated by the effects of climate change, affecting the livelihood of tens of millions and giving rise to protests which have inevitably become politicised. The paper argues that, in this three-pronged crisis, the political crisis constitutes the centre of gravity, since the other two crises are to a great extent a consequence of policies favoured by a regime primarily concerned with its own interests, and can therefore not easily be resolved without an overhaul of the political system. Against this backdrop, calls for domestically-driven regime change have been at the centre of the protests that have swept across Iran since mid-September 2022.

Chapter two goes on to trace the genesis and evolution of popular protests by examining the 2017–2018 and November 2019 nationwide protests, which may be seen as having constituted the start of a long-term revolutionary process in Iran, before discussing the specificities of the current revolutionary protests. The former two protest waves were reflective of the Islamic Republic losing considerable support among the lower classes – conventionally considered as its social base

– as they had taken to the streets *en masse* chanting slogans against the entirety of the ruling regime. But the fact that the most recent protest wave starting in autumn 2022 has transcended class, sectarian and ethnic differences has elevated it to a qualitatively new level to the extent that it is now commonly perceived as a revolutionary movement, by Iranians both inside and outside the country, as well as by many observers and analysts. A major shift has therefore occurred, with many Iranians now dismissing any chance of the Islamic Republic being reformed and instead calling for regime change. The duration and likely evolution of this revolutionary process is difficult to predict, but now that the demands and aspirations of Iranian civil society have been so clearly and vehemently articulated, state–society relations appear unsustainable in their current mode. At the time of writing, in spring 2023, the regime and the protesters appear to have become locked in a stand-off, with neither side being able to entirely subdue the other.

Chapter three looks at geopolitical developments in the Middle East over the last decade, especially since the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed. While Iran's regional standing was arguably at its height then, perceptions of the country have become much more negative since, and its soft power has substantially diminished as it has appeared increasingly belligerent. The regime in Tehran is seen as posing a threat to many neighbouring states and societies, which also weighs upon regional acceptance of European approaches towards the Islamic Republic.

Chapter four briefly discusses Iran's foreign policy, its nuclear strategy and the role of sanctions, especially since the latter issue has not been sufficiently examined. Chapter five reviews Europe's Iran policy, its expectations regarding the JCPOA's wider ramifications and its mixed results so far, and offers a set of

lessons to be learnt by the EU. It then broadens the lens by looking at the downsides of the long-pursued Western ‘authoritarian stability’ paradigm and also draws comparisons with misguided policy assumptions regarding Russia that are partly mirrored in the Iran case. Finally, the concluding chapter argues for a paradigm shift in the West’s Iran policy as a necessary precondition to putting it on a more sustainable footing, in a way that would satisfy both European interests and those of Iranian society at large. Such a shift would require moving away from the exclusive focus on the nuclear issue – which provides Tehran with a strategic advantage, its nuclear escalation

tactics having driven Iran’s Western interlocutors into reactive mode – while addressing security challenges emanating from the Islamic Republic’s neglect of the interests of the Iranian nation and its probably irreversible disconnect with society, as well as from its destabilising foreign policy actions in theatres from the Middle East all the way to Ukraine, whose repercussions have been costly for Europe. In this context, the paper finally presents a set of policy recommendations, which can provide an effective and timely response to the major changes already underway as a result of the Iranian revolutionary process.

## IRAN AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE

The present study comes at a highly sensitive juncture, both for Iran and for Europe. In Iran, starting on 17 September 2022, the Islamic Republic experienced the most serious protests since its inception in 1979. This national revolt has been broadly based and quite diverse in terms of class and ethnic composition, and therefore constitutes a revolutionary uprising against the regime of unprecedented breadth and magnitude. The protests had started amid efforts by the international community – China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States – to re-engage Iran to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). At the same time, major debates regarding core tenets of EU security and foreign policy have been triggered by Russia’s war on Ukraine which has been going on for well over a year now. Highlighting the security challenges Iran poses even beyond its own region, in the second half of 2022, Tehran entered the stage when it was revealed that it was supplying military assistance to Moscow.

By mid-2023, while street protests have subsided (except for Sistan–Baluchistan province)<sup>(1)</sup>, the deepening economic crisis has led to thousands of workers engaging in strike action<sup>(2)</sup>. Crucially, the protests that started in September 2022 appear to have triggered a profound socio-cultural change due to ‘nationwide socio-political disobedience by women’<sup>(3)</sup>: Iranian women are appearing in public without the mandatory hijab, thereby ‘re-set[ting] the terms of their relationship with the state’<sup>(4)</sup>. This has happened despite the repressive tactics of the regime which tightened the hijab laws in mid-April 2023 through the use of cameras and heavy fines<sup>(5)</sup>. One senior commentator aptly described this ‘irreversible process’ amounting to a kind of ‘cultural revolution’ as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic: ‘Without the hijab, this “republic” becomes an emperor without clothes’<sup>(6)</sup>. Ultimately, the combination of these social, cultural, political and economic grievances has produced a situation where the Iranian regime appears to be sitting on a volcano, as noted by observers inside and outside the country<sup>(7)</sup>.

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- (1) Esfandiari, G., “‘I will keep protesting’”: Anti-regime demonstrations continue to rock Iran’s Baluchistan, even as nationwide rallies subside’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 March 2023 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-protests-baluchistan-antiregime-crackdown/32333082.html>).
  - (2) See ‘Strikes in Iran gaining momentum with over 80 plants joining’, Iran International, 25 April 2023 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202304257727>); ‘Activists detained, workers threatened as oil industry workers strike in Iran’, Center for Human Rights in Iran, 4 May 2023 (<https://iranhumanrights.org/2023/05/activists-detained-workers-threatened-as-oil-industry-workers-strike-in-iran-2/>).
  - (3) Sadrzadeh, A., ‘Gottes Gebote und chinesische Hightech’ [God’s commandments and Chinese high-tech], *Iran Journal*, 29 April 2023 (<https://iranjournal.org/gesellschaft/hijab-im-iran-chinesische-hightech>).
  - (4) Motevalli, G., ‘Uncovered and unbowed, women keep Iran’s protests alive’, *Bloomberg*, 8 March 2023 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-08/international-women-s-day-ditching-hijabs-keeps-iran-s-protests-alive-in-tehran>).
  - (5) Ibid.
  - (6) ‘Gottes Gebote und chinesische Hightech’, op. cit.
  - (7) See e.g. ‘Zibakalam’s warning: the fire of protests rages under the ashes’, AkharinKhabar.ir, 31 March 2023 (<https://akharinkhabar.ir/politics/9460843/مهدار-زيباکلام-آتش-اعز-اضدات-زير-خاکستر-روشن-است>); Fathollah-Nejad, A., ‘Iran: Why the revolutionary process is likely to persist’, BTI Blog, Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), Bertelsmann Stiftung, 14 March 2023 (<https://blog.bti-project.org/2023/03/14/iran-why-the-revolutionary-process-is-likely-to-persist/>).



In particular, the deepening economic crisis is seen as potentially triggering a future uprising of the poor<sup>(8)</sup>, who now constitute the bulk of the population.

Against this backdrop, this paper is structured as follows: Chapter 1 examines and revisits the Islamic Republic's structurally rooted crises (socio-economic, ecological and political) which represent a threat to the regime's stability and even survival. It also explores the gender gap and the status of women in Iran. Chapter 2 looks at the various nationwide protests against the regime that have taken place in the past half decade, culminating in the momentous 2022 uprising, which has set the country inevitably on the path of a revolutionary process. Such a starting point and analysis is essential to the formulation of an effective EU policy towards Tehran predicated upon the reality of changing dynamics in Iran rather than driven by pre-existing European beliefs that may have lost their relevance since the 2015 JCPOA was signed and especially since autumn 2022. Chapter 3 addresses substantial changes in Middle East geopolitics on display a decade after the start of the negotiations that culminated in the 2015 JCPOA, while taking into account the latter's side effects. Chapter 4 then examines Iranian foreign policy from the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021) to that of Ebrahim Raisi (2021–), looking at elements of both continuity and change. In doing so, it identifies core pillars of Iran's foreign and nuclear strategy, an understanding of which is indispensable for a more effective EU foreign policy towards Tehran. Chapter 5 reviews the EU's Iran policy, explaining the need for a paradigm shift in its approach to the Islamic Republic. Finally, the concluding chapter puts forward a number of policy recommendations for the West's stance on Iran, arguing for a middle ground between the equally unpromising postures of belligerence or appeasement.

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(8) 'Five economists' analysis of the protests: We are in a dangerous corner' [in Persian], *Fararu News*, 7 October 2022 (<https://fararu.com/fa/news/578962/فراز-خداوند-چهار-اقتصاددان-از-اعتراضات-در-پیچ-خطر-ناکی-فراز-خداوند>); 'Warning about the economic effects of the recent protests: the number of people falling into the lower deciles or at risk of poverty is worrying' [in Persian] *Eghtesad News*, 23 October 2022 (<https://www.eghtesadnews.com/fa/tiny/news-551631>).

## CHAPTER 1

# THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AMID AN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Socio-economic, political and ecological dimensions

Since the nationwide protests that occurred at the turn of 2017–2018 (known as the Dey protests), Iran has been in the grip of an acute triple crisis – socio-economic, political and ecological – arguably heralding a new and distinct chapter in the tumultuous four-decade history of the Islamic Republic<sup>(1)</sup>. While each of these elements has the potential to destabilise the country and the regime, their co-existence amplifies such threats. The political crisis must be seen as the epicentre, since both the socio-economic and ecological crises are to a significant extent a result of the regime's (poor) governance decisions.

## THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS

Iran's socio-economic crisis has continued to worsen during recent years, affecting all levels of society and in many cases being the engine of protests that have turned political. This crisis, for instance, was highlighted in June 2022 in a remarkable open letter signed by 61 economists in Iran, which delineates in great detail the country's economic woes while stressing that the root cause lies in the failure of governance<sup>(2)</sup> – reflecting the fact that, as indicated before, the political crisis constitutes the centre of gravity of the confluence of crises besetting the country.

The socio-economic crisis is also embedded in the context of a massive fall in the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and high inflation. Between 2012 and 2021, Iran's GDP declined by 46 %<sup>(3)</sup>. While in 2022 the global

(1) For a comprehensive and contextualised discussion of Tehran's triple crisis, see Fathollah-Nejad, A., *The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 protests amid a triple crisis*, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, and Brookings Doha Center, Doha, April 2020 (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-islamic-republic-of-iran-four-decades-on-the-2017-18-protests-amid-a-triple-crisis/>).

(2) For an English translation, see 'An open letter from 61 Iranian economists issues stark warning', Bourse Bazaar Foundation, 17 June 2022 (<https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2022/6/17/an-open-letter-by-iranian-economists-to-the-iranian-government-and-people>).

(3) World Bank, 'GDP (current US\$) – Iran, Islamic Rep.' (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=IR>).

average for inflation stood at 9.4 %, according to OECD estimates<sup>(4)</sup>, in Iran in the second half of the year it was at 52.2 %, making it the country experiencing the tenth-highest inflation rate worldwide<sup>(5)</sup>. In some sectors, especially those disproportionately affecting lower-income households, the inflation rate is much higher. For instance, according to official reports, in late 2022 the inflation rate for food items reached more than 70 %<sup>(6)</sup>, while in summer 2022 it stood at 86 %, a record over the last decade<sup>(7)</sup>. In spring 2022, it was reported that transportation costs had increased by up to 45 %<sup>(8)</sup>. However, some economists have suggested that the real inflation rate in Iran is more than double the official figure<sup>(9)</sup>.

## A state-controlled economy

The Islamic Republic's economy is highly state-centred and politically controlled, with a significant informal sector. Around 80 % of Iran's economic activity is attributed to the state sector, which includes state-owned and semi-state-owned companies. Meanwhile, the private and cooperative sectors make up the remaining 20 %. Many of the state-owned enterprises are not under the control of the government but rather powerful religious, revolutionary and military foundations known

as *bonyâds*, which enjoy various benefits such as tax exemptions and preferential access to lucrative government contracts. The Supreme Leader exercises direct or indirect control over these foundations. Moreover, according to the Iranian National Tax Administration in August 2020, the informal economy was estimated to account for 37.7 % of Iran's GDP in the fiscal year 2017/18, while tax evasion was estimated to be at 3.5 %. Additionally, in late February 2020, MP Hadi Ghavami claimed that approximately 30 % of the country's GDP was associated with the underground economy or smuggling<sup>(10)</sup>.

Thus, the socio-economic crisis has been shaped by the Islamic Republic's political economy and the government's economic policies. It is cemented by the politico-ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic, which favours regime loyalists over the rest of the populace, and by the absence of much-needed structural reforms. The economy, for its part, remains under the monopolistic control of state and semi-state entities (sometimes referred to as the Iranian 'deep state'), while also being marked by illiberal neoliberal economic policies introduced since the 1990s. The power structure, consisting of institutionalised state-business-military relations, has been aptly described as a 'monopolistic,

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- (4) Condon, J., Kwiatkowski, K. and Smit, S., 'Global Economics Intelligence executive summary, December 2022', McKinsey Company, 11 January 2023 (<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/global-economics-intelligence-executive-summary-december-2022>).
- (5) Trading Economics, 'Inflation rate | World' (<https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/inflation-rate?continent=world>).
- (6) 'A differing report from *Jomhour-e Eslami* newspaper on the real inflation rate of people's dinner table' [in Persian], *Aftab-e Yazd*, 28 December 2022 (<https://www.aftabeyazd.ir/1243>). Before the September 2022 protests, official figures stated the inflation rate for food items in some provinces had reached at least 90 %; see Dadashi, A. 'Food inflation in 10 provinces reached over 90 % – Qazvin is on the verge of recording 100 % food inflation' [in Persian], *Tejarat News*, 31 July 2022 (<https://tejaratnews.com/-1401-هاشیر-استان-تورم-خوراکی-استان-هاشیر-1401>). All official figures referred to here have been provided by the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI).
- (7) 'Food prices increased by 86 % compared to July last year' [in Persian], *Bazaar*, 24 July 2022 (<https://www.tahlilbazaar.com/news/163707/> (قیمت-خوراکی-ها-۸۶-درصد-نسبت-به-مهر-سال-قبل-افزایش-یافت)).
- (8) 'Increase in the price of transportation tariffs up to 45 % – Details about the price of train and bus tickets documents' [in Persian], Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA), 25 April 2022 (<https://www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-1222789>).
- (9) According to calculations by Steve H. Hanke, professor of applied economics at Johns Hopkins University, in early March 2023 the real inflation rate was at about 125 %, the fourth highest worldwide; see Hosseini, M., Interview with Steve Hanke [in Persian translation], *Manoto TV* (London) (<https://twitter.com/ManotoNews/status/1631777572299177986>). For a graph comprising his calculations for the period between May 2016 and December 2022, see: [https://twitter.com/steve\\_hanke/status/1628544667049422853](https://twitter.com/steve_hanke/status/1628544667049422853).
- (10) *BTI 2022 Country Report: Iran*, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022 ([https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2022\\_IRN.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_IRN.pdf)), p. 19.

religious-commercial system' <sup>(11)</sup> or a 'capitalist state with a paramilitary polity and theocratic rule' <sup>(12)</sup>. It thus encompasses the economic empires of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), of the *bonyâds* (religious foundations) and of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The IRGC's business conglomerate is estimated to account for one third to two thirds of Iran's GDP, and includes massive shares in the oil, gas, transport, construction and communication sectors <sup>(13)</sup>. Its largest entity, Khatam al-Anbiya, the country's biggest construction firm and possibly even its largest company overall, was estimated in 2010 to be directly or indirectly linked to 75 % of Iran's economy <sup>(14)</sup>. Later, at the time of the 2015 JCPOA, this conglomerate was believed to have 135 000 employees, 5 000 sub-contractors and more than 800 subsidiaries across many sectors, including construction and engineering but also energy, including nuclear power, and defence <sup>(15)</sup>. The value of its contracts then was estimated at almost USD 50 billion, roughly 12 % of the country's GDP <sup>(16)</sup>.

Exact figures, as well as recent figures, are hard to obtain, as *bonyâds* benefit from tax

exemptions and state subsidies, while their operations and accounting are notoriously opaque. By the mid-2000s, it was estimated that this network of parastatal religious foundations constituted one fifth of Iran's GDP <sup>(17)</sup>, illustrating the economic power of the clergy. Almost a decade later, about 120 entities were believed to be part of the *bonyâd* network, which accounted for half of Iran's GDP, according to the former deputy industry minister, Mohsen Safai-Farahani, quoted in 2013 <sup>(18)</sup>. Last but not least, presiding over a wide network of *bonyâds* as well as other major actors in Iran's economy <sup>(19)</sup>, Supreme Leader Khamenei was reported to control a financial empire worth USD 93 billion in 2013 <sup>(20)</sup>, with the US embassy in Baghdad estimating it to have increased to USD 200 billion by 2019 <sup>(21)</sup>.

## Illiberal neoliberalisation

Alongside this monopolistic structure, a process of 'illiberal neoliberalisation' <sup>(22)</sup> was introduced by the Islamic Republic, which has included austerity measures, clientelist privatisation, deregulation and the prioritisation of

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- (11) Abdolvand, B. and Liesener, M., 'Reformbewegung zwischen politischer Demokratisierung und wirtschaftlichem Verteilungskrieg' [Iran: Reform movement between political democratisation and economic war of allocation], *Eurasisches Magazin*, No 10, October 2009 (<https://www.eurasischesmagazin.de/artikel/Reformbewegung-zwischen-politischer-Demokratisierung-und-wirtschaftlichem-Verteilungskrieg/20091007>).
- (12) Ibid.
- (13) Dagher, M., 'The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from an Iraqi view – a lost role or a bright future?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 30 July 2020 (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-iraqi-view-lost-role-or-bright-future>).
- (14) Abdolvand, B. and Schulz, H., 'Iran: Herrschaft ohne Ordnung' [Iran: Rule without order], *Eurasisches Magazin*, 7 August 2010 (<https://www.eurasischesmagazin.de/artikel/Herrschaft-ohne-Ordnung/20100807>).
- (15) Ottolenghi, E., Ghasseminejad, Fixler, A. and Toumaj, A., *How the Nuclear Deal Enriches Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps*, FDD Press, Washington DC, p. 19 ([https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/IRGC\\_Report.pdf](https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/IRGC_Report.pdf)).
- (16) Faucon, B. and Fitch, A., 'Iran's guards cloud Western firms' entry after nuclear deal', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 July 2015 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-guards-cloud-western-firms-entry-after-nuclear-deal-1437510830>).
- (17) Molavi, A., *Soul of Iran*, Norton, New York, 2006, p. 176.
- (18) Quoted in Hulpachova, M., 'How to succeed in Iran: lessons from Russia and China', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2015 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jun/04/iran-private-businesses-linked-regime-organizations>).
- (19) 'Fact check: are Ali Khamenei's living standards "below average"?', *IranWire*, 19 April 2022 (<https://iranwire.com/en/khameneicom/103191-fact-check-are-ali-khameneis-living-standards-below-average/>); Pompeo, M. R., 'The United States targets foundations controlled by Iran's Supreme Leader', US Embassy in Georgia, 13 January 2021 (<https://ge.usembassy.gov/the-united-states-targets-foundations-controlled-by-irans-supreme-leader/>).
- (20) Stecklow, S., Dehghanpisheh, B. and Torbati, Y., 'Assets of the Ayatollah: The economic empire behind Iran's supreme leader', *Reuters*, 11 November 2013 (<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>).
- (21) 'The faces of the corrupt Iranian regime' [in Arabic], US Embassy in Baghdad, 25 April 2019 (<https://www.facebook.com/USEmbassyBaghdad/photos/a.377892219303/10157202138749304/>).
- (22) Matin, K., 'Rojhelat rises: reflections on the general strike in Iranian Kurdistan', *The Region*, 12 September 2018 (<https://theregion.org/article/13107-rojhelat-rises-reflectionson-general-strike-iranian-kurdistan>).

capital over labour,<sup>(23)</sup> and has led to a further deterioration in the socio-economic conditions of Iranian workers by deepening their precarity.

Social mobility is also hampered by the lack of economic freedom. The 2022 Fraser Global Research Institute report ranks Iran with 4.96 points 159<sup>th</sup> out of 165 countries. Compared to the 2017/18 edition, when Iran received 5.72 points, the country has experienced a continuous decline in economic freedom, primarily resulting from its international economic isolation, lack of transparency, and financial corruption<sup>(24)</sup>. The primary challenges remain highly restrictive regulations, weak protection of minority investors and underdeveloped financial markets. Iran ranked 169<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in the Heritage Foundation's 2023 Index of Economic Freedom. Among 14 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, Iran is placed at 14, and well below world as well as regional averages<sup>(25)</sup>.

As a consequence, Iran's economy suffers from mismanagement, nepotism, corruption, brain drain and capital flight – all of them at internationally high levels. In terms of corruption, since 2017 Iran's score in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (which measures perceived levels of public sector corruption on a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 meaning 'highly corrupt' and 100 'very clean') has deteriorated from 30 in 2017, through 28 in 2018 and 26 in 2019, settling at 25 ever since 2020, thereby ranking 147<sup>th</sup> among 180 countries. Among the top three economies

of the Middle East, this leaves Iran with the worst rating by far: while the situation in Turkey also deteriorated during the same period, dropping from a score of 40 and rank 81 in 2017 to 36 points and rank 101 in 2022, Saudi Arabia managed to improve its score from 49 to 51 points (temporarily peaking at 53 in 2020 and 2021) and rose from rank 57 in 2017 to 54 in 2022<sup>(26)</sup>.

Although US sanctions have had considerable negative repercussions for Iran's economy (especially by leading to the collapse of its oil exports during the Donald Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign, with Iranian oil exports dropping in volume from USD 60.7 billion in 2018 to USD 21 billion in 2020)<sup>(27)</sup>, their overall share in the country's economic woes has not been subject to a thorough scholarly analysis. Meanwhile, economists have found that the EU's targeted sanctions have far less impact on ordinary people than general sanctions<sup>(28)</sup>. Lastly, Iran's economy suffers from low levels of capital formation and of productivity<sup>(29)</sup>. In the absence of reforms, the country is poised to become mired in a low economic growth trap, which would only exacerbate the unemployment crisis, paving the way for new waves of discontent<sup>(30)</sup>.

In fact, despite conventional wisdom to the contrary, it would appear that the situation in Iran mirrors that of many countries throughout the Middle East, whose socio-economic indicators, especially for social groups such as

(23) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Rouhani's neoliberal doctrine has failed Iran', Middle East Institute, Washington DC, 18 May 2017 (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/rouhanis-neoliberal-doctrine-has-failed-iran>).

(24) Gwartney, J., Lawson, R., Hall, J. and Murphy, R., 'Economic freedom of the world: 2022 annual report', Fraser Institute, 2022 (<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/economic-freedom-of-the-world-2022.pdf>).

(25) The Heritage Foundation, '2023 Index of economic freedom: Iran', 2023 (<https://www.heritage.org/index/country/iran>).

(26) Transparency International, '2022 Corruption Perceptions Index', 2022 (<https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>).

(27) Trading Economics, 'Iran oil exports' (<https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/oil-exports>).

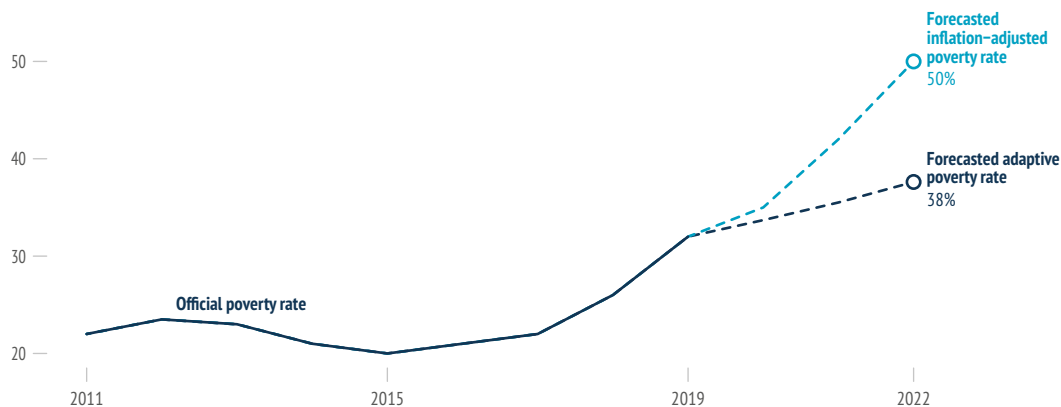
(28) Ghodsi, M. and Karamelikli, H., 'The impact of sanctions imposed by the European Union against Iran on their bilateral trade: general versus targeted sanctions', *World Trade Review*, Vol. 21, No 1, 2022, pp. 33–58.

(29) On capital formation, see Trading Economics, 'Iran gross fixed capital formation' (<https://tradingeconomics.com/iran/gross-fixed-capital-formation>); on productivity, see , CEIC, 'Iran labour productivity growth' (<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/iran/labour-productivity-growth>).

(30) Kalhor, N., 'Why economic growth has not led to job creation in Iran', *Al-Monitor*, 28 March 2018 (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/03/iran-economic-growth-job-creation-lagging-rouhani-reform.html>).

## Rising poverty

Official and estimated poverty rates, 2011–2022, %



Data: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare of Iran, 2019, and estimations by Mahdi Ghodsi as of January 2023

women, young people and graduates, are worse than those of many other world regions<sup>(31)</sup>.

## Poverty, inequality and precarity

As a result, and given the lack of clarity in international and domestic data sources (the former being often based on the latter), it can be assumed that a clear majority of Iranians live in precarious conditions, with poverty and precarity disproportionately affecting women, workers and pensioners. In a decade, the absolute poverty rate has doubled: from 2013 to 2017 it stood at 15 %, but it rose to 30 % between 2017 and 2019<sup>(32)</sup>. A summer 2021 report on poverty published by Iran's Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare indicates that in 2019 one third of Iranian households were living below the poverty line<sup>(33)</sup>. In October 2022, during the uprising, Iranian media

cited a labour expert who said that 65 million of the country's 84 million population lived below the poverty line<sup>(34)</sup>.

Meanwhile, Iran's rich, many of whom are affiliated to the regime, have increased their wealth. In January 2021, Zohreh Al-Sadat Lajevardi, an MP from Tehran, said that '\$58 billion of the "42,000 rial currency" [referring to the then exchange rate with the US dollar] has been distributed among certain people'<sup>(35)</sup>. In June of the same year, *Forbes* reported that 'in 2020, the number of high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) in Iran grew by 21.6 %, way above the global average of 6.3 %. The collective wealth of these dollar millionaires grew even faster at 24.3 %'<sup>(36)</sup>.

One of the consequences of the socio-economic crisis is *precarious housing*. While the cost of rent has skyrocketed in large cities such as Tehran, Mashhad and Isfahan, in late June 2022 the head of Iran's State Welfare

(31) See Achcar, G., *The People Want: A radical exploration of the Arab uprising*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2013.

(32) Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA), 'The report on the situation of poverty and inequality in the country in the last two decades will be unveiled' [in Persian], 2 June 2021 (<https://www.ilna.news/fa/tiny/news-1085068>).

(33) Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare, Islamic Republic of Iran, 'Collection of poverty monitoring reports' [in Persian], 2021 (<https://poverty-research.ir/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/16.pdf>).

(34) *Aftab News*, Twitter post, 21 October 2022 (<https://twitter.com/SharghDaily/status/1583411432242413569>).

(35) Quoted by Tasnim News Agency, 30 January 2022 (<https://tn.ai/2442470>).

(36) Williams, O. A., 'Iran sees millionaire boom amid sanctions, Covid-19 and an election', *Forbes*, 28 June 2021 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliverwilliams/2021/06/28/iran-sees-millionaire-boom-amid-sanctions-covid-19-and-an-election/?sh=280133c6a93b>).

Organisation (*Behzisti*), Ali-Mohammad Gha-deri, said that about 13 million Iranians were living in slum areas – 15 % of the total population. He emphasised that ‘this shocking statistic is the result of an imbalance in development’<sup>(37)</sup>. This official figure is close to the one proffered by the current president, Ebrahim Raisi, during one of the 2021 presidential election TV debates, invoking the number of 16 million slum dwellers and blaming it on then-President Hassan Rouhani’s poor economic management<sup>(38)</sup>.

**GDP growth has largely been accompanied by a dearth of job creation.**

to be considerably higher, probably at least twice as high. Yet, according to SCI figures from late 2021, the *overall unemployment rate* for 18 to 35 year-olds rose from 15.6 % in spring 2021 to 17.6 % in summer 2021, while the unemployment rate for men from the same age group rose from 12.9 % to 14.6 % in the same period<sup>(42)</sup>. In comparison, a year earlier (in November 2020), the Islamic Parliament Research Centre corrected the overall unemployment rate from 9.8 % to a massive 24 %<sup>(43)</sup>.

## Youth, women and graduate unemployment

Official figures provided in autocracies ought to be taken with a grain of salt. In Iran, for instance, the Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI) counts all those working even a single hour per week as employed<sup>(39)</sup>, thus dramatically distorting social reality in the country. In addition, Iranian scholars have suggested that those without salaries, housewives, soldiers and students are also excluded from the official unemployment statistics<sup>(40)</sup>.

The official unemployment rate stood at 9.2 % in spring 2022,<sup>(41)</sup> with the real rate believed

The lack of sufficient *job creation* has been a major shortcoming. Even during an oil boom, GDP growth has largely been accompanied by a dearth of job creation. This phenomenon is also related to the rentier state structures of Iran’s hydrocarbon industries, which are by definition capital-intensive but poor on job creation<sup>(44)</sup>. Despite the economic dominance of state and semi-state entities in Iran, it is the highly marginalised private sector that is creating most of the employment.

As mentioned, unemployment is particularly high among young people (aged between 15 and 24) and women. Over the last few years, *youth unemployment* has hovered around the one quarter mark; in the 2021/2022 Iranian fiscal year (ending on 20 March 2022), the rate remained unchanged from the previous year,

(37) Yaqoubi, N., ‘Head of the country’s welfare organisation: there are 13 million slum-dwellers in the country’ [in Persian], Iran Student Correspondents Association (ISCA), 24 June 2022 ([iscanews.ir/xCL3F](https://iscanews.ir/xCL3F)).

(38) Curiously, although campaigning on a platform of economic populism, in the 2017 race Raisi ended up coming second to the incumbent, with 15.7 million votes. In 2021, his votes had increased to 18 million, granting him the presidency in a largely engineered election. See Fathollah-Nejad, A., *Iran 1400 Brief: Beyond the headlines*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Middle East and North Africa programme, Amman, 14–20 June 2021 ([https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/iran-weekly-7\\_0.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/iran-weekly-7_0.pdf)).

(39) SCI, ‘Labor force’ (<https://www.amar.org.ir/english/Metadata/Definitions-Concepts/Labor-Force>).

(40) Shahriyari, H., Amiri, M., Shahriyari, Z. and Farzin, F., ‘What is the best index for unemployment?’, *International Journal of Epidemiologic Research*, Vol. 5, No 1, 2018, pp. 1–2 (<https://www.sid.ir/paper/351428/en>).

(41) SCI, ‘Iran – Main indicators’ (<https://www.amar.org.ir/english/Main-Indicators>).

(42) ‘Unemployment rate for “young women” has reached 31 %’ [in Persian], Iranian Students’ News Agency, 2 November 2021 (<https://www.isna.ir/news/1400081007557/>).

(43) ‘The Parliament’s research centre: in spring of the current year, the unemployment rate is 24 %, not at 9.8 %’ [in Persian], Students News Network, 21 November 2020 (<https://snn.ir/fa/news/891433/>).

(44) See Stehrer, R., ‘wiw Growth and Productivity Database’, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw), Vienna, January 2022 ([https://euklems.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/wiwiw\\_GPD\\_2022-01-28.pdf](https://euklems.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/wiwiw_GPD_2022-01-28.pdf)).

standing at 23.7 % <sup>(45)</sup>, and in the first quarter of the ensuing year it slightly increased to 24 % <sup>(46)</sup>. Meanwhile, economists have suggested a much higher rate of 40 % <sup>(47)</sup>. In particular, the situation of Iran's rural youth is extremely difficult. For context, Iran's rural population has halved from the time of the revolution, from around 50 % in 1979 to roughly 25 % at the turn of the 2020s <sup>(48)</sup>. In fact, as the 2019 Rural Development Report showed, a massive 22 % of the world's then 27.6 million most affected rural youth were living in Iran <sup>(49)</sup>. Meanwhile, according to the SCI, the unemployment rate for young women from the same age group was more than double that of their male counterparts, rising from 27.8 % to 31 % in spring to summer 2021 <sup>(50)</sup>.

Moreover, Iran's labour market suffers from a *gender gap* (see the separate discussion on this topic at the end of this chapter) and low participation of women. According to the SCI, labour force participation among women (aged 15 and higher), that is, those employed or looking for a job, stood at only 13.8 % in the first quarter of the Iranian year 1400 (March–June 2021), whereas that of men reached 68 % for the same period. In other words,

women's participation rate was one-fifth that of men <sup>(51)</sup>. Alternatively, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, female workforce participation in 2021 stood at merely 14.35 % <sup>(52)</sup>, and that of their male counterparts five times as high at 68.09 % <sup>(53)</sup>.

In the same period, *graduate or higher-education unemployment* stood at 13.2 %, while accounting for almost two fifths of overall unemployment. Here too, there is a huge gender gap, with female graduates being affected over 2.5 times as much as their male counterparts <sup>(54)</sup>. According to the SCI, in the second quarter of the Iranian year 1401 (22 June–22 September 2022), around 41 % of the total unemployed population were graduates, with the unemployment rate of male and female graduates standing at 27.9 % and 68.7 % respectively. The unemployment rate for university graduates stood at 13.2 % in the same period, for men at 8.8 % and women at 23.2 % – thus 2.6 times as high <sup>(55)</sup>.

This overview indicates why these three groups – youth, women and graduates – who suffer disproportionately from socio-economic deprivation may also feel compelled to campaign

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- (45) 'Youth unemployment at 16.5%: SCI', *Financial Tribune*, 9 June 2022 (<https://financialtribune.com/articles/113841/youth-unemployment-at-165-sci>).
- (46) 'Iranian youth unemployment reaches 24 percent in Q1', *Financial Tribune*, 18 July 2022 (<https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/114387/iranian-youth-unemployment-reaches-24-percent-in-q1>).
- (47) See for example Hakimian, H., 'What's driving Iran's protests?', *Project Syndicate*, 15 January 2018 (<https://www.neweurope.eu/article/whats-driving-irans-protests/>).
- (48) 'World Bank, 'Rural population (% of total population) – Iran, Islamic Rep.' (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?end=2021&locations=IR&start=1960&view=chart>).
- (49) International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), *Creating Opportunities for Rural Youth: 2019 Rural Development Report*, Rome, 2019, pp. 80–82 (<https://www.ifad.org/ruraldevelopmentreport/>); see also Kabbani, N., 'High unemployment rates among rural youth are destabilizing the Near East and North Africa region', *Brookings Institution*, 4 July 2019 (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/high-unemployment-rates-among-rural-youth-is-destabilizing-the-near-east-and-north-africa-region/>).
- (50) Iranian Students' News Agency, 'Unemployment rate for "young women" has reached 31%' [in Persian], 2 November 2021 (<https://www.isna.ir/news/1400081007557/>).
- (51) 'Iranian labor market marred by gender gap', *Financial Tribune*, 20 July 2022 (<https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/114423/iranian-labor-market-marred-by-gender-gap>).
- (52) World Bank, 'Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.' (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?end=2021&locations=IR&start=1990&view=mapyear=2021>).
- (53) World Bank, 'Labor force participation rate, male (% of male population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.' (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.MA.ZS?end=2021&locations=IR&start=1990&view=mapyear=2021>).
- (54) '39.7 % of university graduates unemployed in Q1', *Financial Tribune*, 19 July 2022 (<https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/114403/397-of-university-graduates-unemployed-in-q1>).
- (55) 'Graduates account for over 40% of Iran's Q2 jobless population: SCI', *Financial Tribune*, 16 October 2022 (<https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/115563/graduates-account-for-over-40-of-iran-s-q2-jobless-population-sci>).



for radical change in Iran. In fact, they have been at the forefront of the 2022 revolutionary uprising.

## A middle class descending into poverty

In addition to these socio-economic indicators, over the last few years a hollowing-out of the middle class has set in, as a result of deepening economic pressures. This means that it has begun to share the same economic predicament as the lower classes. The erosion of the financial security and purchasing power of the middle class may also impact upon the evolution of its political demands.

At present, Iran's middle class has abandoned its long-standing belief in the establishment's reformist faction as it has lost hope that the latter will fulfil its aspirations and demands. The results of the most recent parliamentary and presidential elections in 2020 and 2021 respectively show that the middle class is also disillusioned with the entire political system.

According to a 2020 report by the Islamic Parliament Research Centre entitled 'A picture of the economic situation of the country: challenges and solutions', the purchasing power of the middle class has decreased significantly, having shrunk by about one third compared with 2011<sup>(56)</sup>. Plagued by high inflation rates and considerable reduction in GDP per capita, at least since the latter part of the Rouhani presidency, whole swathes of Iran's middle class have fallen into poverty. Generally speaking, it is estimated that as a result the

population's purchasing power in the current Iranian year (that started on 21 March) will decrease by one third<sup>(57)</sup>.

Masoud Khansari, then president of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines, remarked on 21 July 2020: 'With poverty increasing every day, six deciles of society are now below the poverty line'<sup>(58)</sup>. According to the existing categorisation in terms of income deciles, the lowest four deciles are considered to comprise the lower classes and the fifth to seventh deciles the middle class. While the lower classes have become poorer, two deciles belonging to the middle class – namely the fifth and sixth – have also now joined the lower classes of society<sup>(59)</sup>.

## The implications of the socio-economic crisis for regime security

Iran's deepening socio-economic crisis has over the last few years spurred serious concerns among senior officials as to its ramifications for political stability and even regime survival. For instance, Mehdi Farahi, an IRGC general, declared in 2020 that 'When millions of young people are unemployed, the armed forces see this as a major threat to national security, and ultimately as an important problem for themselves'<sup>(60)</sup>. In this context, regime-affiliated entities have warned about the political risks of austerity measures and rising prices. In May 2022, following the Raisi administration's scrapping of subsidies for imported wheat, which led bread prices to

(56) 'Report of the Islamic Parliament Research Centre of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the economic situation in Iran' [in Persian], Student News Network, 4 June 2020 (<https://snn.ir/fa/news/852570>).

(57) 'People's purchasing power next year will be at least 30% less than this year', *Etemad*, 22 December 2022 (<https://www.etemadonline.com/tiny/news-591314>).

(58) 'Khansari, President of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce: 6 deciles of society are below the poverty line' [in Persian], *Etemad*, 21 July 2020 (<https://etemadonline.com/content/420841>).

(59) Heiran-Nia, J., 'Iran's middle class has been eroding for some time: Now it's only getting worse', *IranSource*, Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, 30 June 2022 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-middle-class-has-been-eroding-for-some-time-now-its-only-getting-worse/>).

(60) 'Commander Seyyed Mehdi Farhi stated: reasons for the armed forces to turn to skill training' [in Persian], *Ebtekar*, 1 Farvardin 1401 / 21 March 2022 (<https://ebtekarnews.com/?newsid=165049>).

skyrocket by up to 300 %<sup>(61)</sup>, Yaser Jebraeili – a political activist who has a close relationship with Iran's centres of power and is the author of a pro-Khamenei book published in 2019<sup>(62)</sup> – warned that what could be witnessed was nothing less than outright confrontation between the people and the Islamic Republic<sup>(63)</sup>. In this vein, even the Student *Basij*, the student wing of the notorious paramilitary force, warned President Raisi that the sudden removal of the flour subsidy could cause unrest, adding that 'society is not prepared for this level of price increases and this level of disorganisation in its implementation'<sup>(64)</sup>.

## THE POLITICAL CRISIS

The Islamic Republic is in the throes of several crises, which have deepened over the years, widening the gap between state and society and depriving the ruling regime of much of its popular legitimacy. Among the factors contributing to this protracted and deepening crisis are the fact that authoritarian structures suppress a vibrant yet relatively weak civil society, the failure of reformism and the concomitant end of factional politics which

defined the country's political system for decades and, last but not least, the improbability that the Islamic Republic can be reformed. All these factors constitute significant obstacles to gradual change and reform.

Authoritarianism and repression have been constant features of the Islamic Republic, complicating prospects for positive change. There is a considerable absence of political freedoms, as attested by (i) the political repression of dissidents, ethnic and religious minorities, as well as women, students, workers and their respective social movements<sup>(65)</sup>; (ii) press censorship<sup>(66)</sup>, with Iran listed as the third-worst country for press freedom, behind only Eritrea and North Korea, according to the World Press Freedom Index 2022<sup>(67)</sup>; (iii) the systematic restriction of cultural and academic freedoms<sup>(68)</sup>; and (iv) the world's highest per capita execution rate<sup>(69)</sup>.

The 2017 and 2022 editions of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Global Rights Index, an annual survey of violations of trade union rights, have ranked Iran in its worst category, in which no rights are guaranteed, noting that the independent trade union movement has regularly faced acts of repression, executions and extrajudicial killings<sup>(70)</sup>.

(61) 'Soaring bread prices spark protests and shop fires in Iran, IRNA reports', *Reuters*, 13 May 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/soaring-bread-prices-spark-protests-shop-fires-iran-irna-2022-05-13/>).

(62) 'The "Leader's Narrative" book unveiled', *Iran Press*, 7 July 2019 (<https://iranpress.com/content/12245/the-%E2%80%98leader-narrative%E2%80%99-book-unveiled>).

(63) 'A frank criticism by a principlist about high prices and the danger of conflict between the people and the regime' [in Persian], *Donya-e Eqtesad*, 5 May 2022 (<https://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/fa/tiny/news-3862557>).

(64) 'The strong warning letter of Basij students to Raisi: people can't bear all these costs/the country will experience chaos and social unrest' [in Persian], *Khabar Online*, 5 May 2022 (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1628268/> - نامه هشدار تندیسج - دانشجویی جبهه رژیسی مردم تحمل همه این گرانگی).

(65) Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State, '2021 country reports on human rights practices: Iran', Washington, DC, pp. 22, 32–33 (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/iran>).

(66) *Ibid.*, pp. 33–37.

(67) Reporters without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2022* (<https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2022>).

(68) '2021 country reports on human rights practices: Iran', *op. cit.*, pp. 40–42.

(69) Amnesty International, 'Death penalty 2021: facts and figures', 2022 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/death-penalty-2021-facts-and-figures/>); European Parliament, 'Resolution on the death penalty in Iran', 2022/2541(RSP), 17 February 2022 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0050\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0050_EN.html)).

(70) ITUC, *The 2017 ITUC Global Rights Index: The world's worst countries for workers*, 2017, pp. 91–92 ([https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/survey\\_ra\\_2017\\_eng-1.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/survey_ra_2017_eng-1.pdf)); ITUC, *The 2022 ITUC Global Rights Index: The world's worst countries for workers*, 2022 (<https://files.mutualcdn.com/ituc/files/2022-ITUC-Rights-Index-Exec-Summ-EN.pdf>).

## The failure of reformism

For most of the Islamic Republic's history after its war with Iraq (1980–1988), its presidents have emanated from the reformist and so-called moderate establishment faction, the only exceptions being the presidencies of the hardliners Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) and now Ebrahim Raisi (since mid-2021). Particularly since the late 1990s, with the presidential victory of Mohammad Khatami, the reformists were widely considered to be the most promising agent of change from within the political establishment. However, at least with the 2017–2018 Dey protests, they experienced an existential crisis, when demonstrators for the first time virulently targeted them alongside the Islamic Republic's hardline faction<sup>(71)</sup>. The poor performance of the two-term presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021), a centrist who was backed by the reformist faction, arguably delivered the final nail in the coffin of reformism, after the comparably disappointing legacy of the 8-year presidency of the reformist Mohammad Khatami, with erstwhile supporters losing hope of any positive change on their watches. In the wake of the Dey protests, senior officials admitted the new reality, with for example Mohsen Rezaei, Secretary of the Expediency Council and former IRGC commander, proclaiming on state TV that 'the era of administering the country fractionally is over. The roots of the country's problems can no longer be solved with the dichotomy of principlism-reformism. This game is over'<sup>(72)</sup>.

Later, Iran's hardline centres of power went on to ruthlessly take advantage of the collapsing legitimacy of their domestic reformist rivals,

by disqualifying the bulk of them from running in the 2020 parliamentary and the 2021 presidential elections. Both elections resulted in the landslide victory of the wider conservative camp. Yet, in a stark display of the crisis faced by the reformists, their only remaining presidential candidate garnered only 10 % of the votes cast<sup>(73)</sup>. In other words, even regardless of the widespread disqualification of reformist candidates by the hardline-dominated Guardian Council, people's trust in reformism had been massively damaged.

Whether the Islamic Republic offers the necessary space for reform has long been a matter of acute political and academic controversy, yet developments over the past decade have to all intents and purposes buried the future of reformism in Iran. Proponents of the possibility of reform within the framework set by the *Nezâm*, or system of the Islamic Republic, point to the numerous and regular elections held since the 1979 revolution. Their unpredictable outcomes – especially in the case of presidential elections (except for the most recent one in 2021) – can indeed lead to political changes and new reconfigurations of power among the political elite. Although the hardline-dominated Guardian Council vets candidates for regime loyalty, the electoral component of the political system's so-called republican pillar allows for some degree of dynamic political participation among voters during campaign seasons. It has thus been argued that the system's inherent contradictions allow for a 'pluralistic momentum', with space for civil society activism and the potential to move towards democratic reform<sup>(74)</sup>. For this reason, the Islamic Republic's political system has been described as a form of electoral authoritarianism<sup>(75)</sup>.

(71) Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'There's more to Iran's protests than you've been told', *PBS NewsHour*, 13 April 2018 (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/opinion-theres-more-to-irans-protests-than-youve-been-told>).

(72) Nader, A., Twitter post, 22 April 2018 (<https://twitter.com/alirezanager/status/98812550278598661>). The video was previously posted by *Iran Tag* on 19 February 2018, but is no longer available there.

(73) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Where's Iran going?', *Orient XXI*, 14 April 2020 (<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/where-s-iran-going,3799>).

(74) See Adib-Moghaddam, A., *Iran in World Politics: The question of the Islamic Republic*, Hurst, London, 2007, pp. 155–184 ('Part IV: Iran's Pluralistic Momentum and the Future of Iranian Democracy').

(75) Ghoabadzadeh, N. and Rahim, L. Z., 'Electoral theocracy and hybrid sovereignty in Iran', *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 22, No 4, 2016, pp. 450–468 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13569775.2016.1175097?journalCode=ccp020>).

It is conventionally assumed that the Islamic Republic's institutional set-up is based on two pillars: one theocratic, the other republican. However, given the fact that in many respects the theocratic pillar dominates and supersedes the so-called republican pillar, the latter can therefore at best be described as a semi-republican pillar<sup>(76)</sup>.

The fact that reformists and centrists have neglected to structurally address the issues of poverty and inequality, in other words the social question, in a country with deep-seated socio-economic problems, has contributed significantly to their weakness, and has paved the way for the re-emergence of right-wing populism in Iran<sup>(77)</sup> – a kind of vicious cycle inherent to contemporary Iranian politics. It was according to this logic that the Khatami presidency was followed by that of Ahmadinejad, whose main campaign slogan was to 'put the oil money on people's dinner tables', while Rouhani was challenged in the 2017 presidential campaign by the ultra-conservative contender Raisi, who won a remarkable 38.3 % of the vote. While Iranian reformists have refrained from addressing the economic hardships experienced by a large portion of society, for ideological, political and economic reasons, proponents of right-wing populism purport to be committed to wealth redistribution, without actually implementing such a policy once they have assumed power. As a result, quite predictably, Rouhani's

## **The Islamic Republic has been insulated against significant change emerging from within.**

socio-economic failure paved the way for right-wing populist forces to gain in strength, eventually culminating in Raisi's presidential victory on an economic populist platform<sup>(78)</sup>.

The culmination of this political crisis, a profound crisis of regime legitimacy, was on full display during both the 2020 parliamentary

and the 2021 presidential elections, which saw the lowest participation rates since the revolution, with 42.6 % and 48.5 % respectively. Yet the crisis of reformism was reflected both in the low participation rate and in the paltry score of the only reformist presidential candidate. It can therefore be argued that meaningful reform

within the system has remained elusive, given the fact that the political élite's moderate faction has evaded both tackling the country's pressing social problems and delivering economic and political reform. As a result of these aspects, in tandem with the constitution's granting of almost absolute power to the position of Supreme Leader, which *de facto* undermines the separation of powers and the rule of law<sup>(79)</sup>, the Islamic Republic has been insulated against significant change emerging from within. This profound if not irreversible crisis of reformism has been a combined result of, primarily, the reformists' own failures to push for real reform and, secondarily, more recently, the decision by the Islamic Republic's top leadership to *de facto* bar them from domestic political competition<sup>(80)</sup>.

(76) See e.g. Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Kritik der Iran-Analysen unter Präsident Rohani: Von Dämonisierung zu Glorifizierung' [Critique of Iran analyses under President Rouhani: From demonisation to glorification], in Ernst, O. (ed.) *Iran-Reader 2017: Beiträge zum deutsch-iranischen Kulturdialog*, Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), Sankt Augustin and Berlin, pp. 9–24, here pp. 14–15 (<http://www.kas.de/wfj/de/33.49042/>).

(77) See also Fathollah-Nejad, A. and Sarkohi, A., 'The social question – the neglected topic in Iranian politics and the presidential campaign', Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 31 May 2019 (<https://www.fes.de/en/referat-naher-mittlerer-osten-und-nordafrika/iran-elections/artikelseite-iranelections/irans-soziale-frage-im-schatten-von-politik-und-wahlkampf/>).

(78) Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Where will the Rouhani administration's neoliberal doctrine lead Iran to?' [in Persian], *Political Economy Critique* (Iran), November/December 2017 (<https://pecritique.com/2017/11/20/>); Moslemian, R., 'How Rouhani's "rational" approach could pave the way for return of Ahmadinejad', *Meidaan*, 14 May 2016 (<https://meidaan.com/english/archives/rouhanis-rational-approach-pave-way-return-ahmadinejad/>).

(79) See for example Fathollah-Nejad, A., *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2021, pp. 125–127 ('The Supreme Leader: a supreme position of power and influence').

(80) See 'Where's Iran going?', op.cit.

# THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Aside from its socio-economic and political crises, Iran – much like the rest of the Middle East and North Africa region<sup>(81)</sup> – is facing a drastic ecological crisis. The largely home-made and rapidly advancing environmental degradation, caused by decades of misguided policies further exacerbating the external effects of climate change, has become a source of economic hardship, ill health, social disruption and political protests. Droughts combined with the authorities' poor water management policies mean that Iran's groundwater resources are almost fully exhausted, while demand remains high, especially from the ever-thirsty, inefficient agricultural sector and because of the demographic explosion of the past four decades<sup>(82)</sup>. Inadequate distribution policies further add to the problem, with (as of 2022) 29 out of the 31 provinces of the country suffering from water scarcity, especially in towns and cities<sup>(83)</sup>.

In summer 2021, for instance, water shortages led to protests that were severely suppressed<sup>(84)</sup>. In the same year, according to one expert from the Iran Meteorological Organisation, 97 % of

the country was dealing with water shortages<sup>(85)</sup>. The administration has regularly failed to deliver on pledges to resolve those water shortages, as only fairly modest steps were taken and the economic crisis together with the impact of US sanctions impeded necessary large-scale investments<sup>(86)</sup>.

The drought crisis is also leading to the emergence of a number of other ecological challenges. As groundwater resources are becoming depleted, the country's desertification is getting worse. As a result, some parts of the country will be rendered uninhabitable within the next 20 years, according to Ahad Vazifeh, head of the National Centre for Drought and Crisis Management at the Iran Meteorological Organisation<sup>(87)</sup>. Not only does this lead to forest dieback and a decline in biodiversity, but it also causes an increase in cases of land subsidence, thus particularly affecting highly populated areas and critical infrastructure<sup>(88)</sup>. The expanding desertification is also leading to a massive rise in sandstorms and as a result – together with the pollution caused by obsolete motor vehicles – drastically increasing air pollution in major cities, thereby posing health risks for millions and regularly forcing authorities to close down schools and offices<sup>(89)</sup>. In fact, Iranian cities, especially Tehran and many in the south, are among the

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- (81) Borghesi, S. and Ticci, E., 'Climate change in the MENA region: environmental risks, socioeconomic effects and policy challenges for the future', in Aimone Secat, L. A., Gallego, H. and Sala, C. (eds.), *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2019*, European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), Barcelona, 2019, pp. 289–292.
- (82) Mahdavi, G., 'Desertification in Iran: a ticking time bomb?', *IranWire*, 27 April 2021 (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/69429>).
- (83) Bakhtiari, F., 'Has Iran entered a 30-year dry spell?', *Tehran Times*, 16 May 2022 (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/472653/Has-Iran-entered-a-30-year-dry-spell>); Al-Aloosy, M., 'Water insecurity: Iran's formidable threat', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 May 2022 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/water-insecurity-irans-formidable-threat>).
- (84) Fathollah-Nejad, A., *Iran 1400 Brief: Beyond the Headlines*, 12–18 July 2021 ([https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/rouhani-administration-to-an-end-\\_iran-1400-brief-\\_12.07-18.07-edited.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/rouhani-administration-to-an-end-_iran-1400-brief-_12.07-18.07-edited.pdf)) and 19–25 July 2021 ([https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/i-am-thirsty-\\_iran-1400-brief-\\_19.07-25.07.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/i-am-thirsty-_iran-1400-brief-_19.07-25.07.pdf)).
- (85) Fassihi, F., 'Iran forcefully clamps down on protests against growing water shortages', *New York Times*, 26 November 2021 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/world/middleeast/iran-protests-water-shortages.html>).
- (86) Al-Aloosy, M., 'Water insecurity: Iran's formidable threat', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 May 2022 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/water-insecurity-irans-formidable-threat>).
- (87) 'Scary warnings at the Khabar Café from the head of the Drought Centre: it doesn't rain, water has run out!/"Life in some cities is not possible in 20 years"' [in Persian], *Khabar Online*, 25 June 2021 (<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1529766/>).
- (88) Madani, K., 'Iran's decision-makers must shoulder the blame for its water crisis', *The Guardian*, 5 August 2021 (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/05/iran-environmental-crisis-climate-change>).
- (89) Hosseini, V. and Shahbazi, H., 'Urban air pollution in Iran,' *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 49, No 6, 2016, pp. 1029–1046.

most polluted in the world<sup>(90)</sup>. This occurs in a context in which, according to the World Health Institute's Global Wellness Economy Ranking, Iran ranks last out of 150 countries<sup>(91)</sup>. The total economic cost of the pollution is difficult to calculate, but would have to include not only reductions in visibility, deterioration in the quality of life and lost days of education (due to school closures), as well as long-term damage to cultural sites and infrastructure, but also a significant loss in agricultural productivity, increasingly challenging food security<sup>(92)</sup>. This is especially perceptible because vulnerability to food insecurity has been on the rise for some time, caused by reduced agricultural production, natural disasters, food price hikes, subsidy cuts, and high levels of unemployment and underemployment, therefore limiting Iranians' access to nutritious food<sup>(93)</sup>. As the continuing droughts make Iran increasingly dependent on wheat imports<sup>(94)</sup>, the spillover effects of Russia's war on Ukraine have meanwhile aggravated this problem by disrupting supply chains and creating shortages on the world market, as both countries together account for 30 % of the world's grain production<sup>(95)</sup>.

## **I**ranian cities are among the most polluted in the world.

## Political ramifications of the environmental crisis

As Iran's environmental crisis is not only primarily man-made but has also been drastically exacerbated by decades of inefficient and misguided government policies, it has become a major political issue, further contributing to popular anger over other socio-economic and political woes. This explosive combination of high unemployment, environmental degradation and frustration with the government's policy failures could for example be witnessed in the Dey protests and the following waves of protest, as the 261 environmental protests that took place between January 2018 and October 2019 alone illustrate<sup>(96)</sup>.

As the regime obviously fears protests driven by the environmental catastrophe, which threatens the livelihoods of tens of millions of Iranians and further exacerbates other grave socio-economic issues, many of these protests have met with violent repression by security forces<sup>(97)</sup>. Moreover, activities by civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations are strictly regulated and monitored, with several environmental campaigners, much like activists in other fields, being

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- (90) 'Iranian cities top world's most polluted list', *Fanack*, 14 May 2018 (<https://fanack.com/climate/features-insights/iranian-cities-worlds-most-polluted-list-98199/>); 'Iranian city ranked world's worst for air pollution', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 May 2016 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-zabol-worlds-worst-air-pollution/27729901.html>).
- (91) Global Wellness Institute, 'The Global Wellness Economy: Country Rankings', February 2022 ([https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GWI2022\\_GlobalWellnessEconomy\\_CountryRankings\\_Final.pdf?inf\\_contact\\_key=ca4ac98786ec4dc64f18foe6074c5c9b](https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/GWI2022_GlobalWellnessEconomy_CountryRankings_Final.pdf?inf_contact_key=ca4ac98786ec4dc64f18foe6074c5c9b)).
- (92) 'Air pollution costs Iran billions in economic and social damage', *Radio Farda*, 14 November 2019 (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/pollution-costs-iran-billions-in-economic-and-social-damage-/30270960.html>).
- (93) World Food Programme Iran Country Office, *Food and Nutrition Security in Iran: A summary report*, World Food Programme, 2016 (<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000021105/download/>).
- (94) 'Iran faces second year of big wheat imports after drought, says grain union', *Reuters*, 10 May 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/business/iran-faces-second-year-big-wheat-imports-after-drought-says-grain-union-2022-05-10/>).
- (95) 'Ukraine war affecting food security in Iran: Agriculture min.', *Iran Press*, 8 May 2022 (<https://iranpress.com/content/58433/ukraine-war-affecting-food-security-iran-agriculture-min>).
- (96) Jones, S. G. and Newlee, D., 'Iran's protests and the threat to domestic stability', *CSIC Briefs*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, November 2019, p. 6 ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones\\_IranProtestsStability\\_FINAL.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones_IranProtestsStability_FINAL.pdf)).
- (97) *Ibid.*

detained and given long prison sentences for their engagement<sup>(98)</sup>.

Today, as the ecological crisis deepens further, it ‘can act as a “threat multiplier” to the viability of the Islamic Republic’, with ‘Iran’s environmental issues hav[ing] the potential to tap into communities that may not have already mobilized their support for the Woman, Life, Freedom movement’, as two environmental experts have noted<sup>(99)</sup>. However, this crisis nevertheless offers opportunities for cooperation with the EU, for example at the nexus between climate action and the empowerment of civil society actors<sup>(100)</sup>.

## THE GENDER GAP

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran’s population has more than doubled, growing from 37 million to 88.5 million today<sup>(101)</sup>. Among the population, 44 million are female, 70 % of whom were born after the revolution, and

have therefore only experienced life under the Islamic Republic<sup>(102)</sup>. Not only has the population significantly expanded but so has access to education. In Iranian society today, women (constituting half of the population) are almost just as educated as men, with 21.1 %<sup>(103)</sup> and 22.3 %<sup>(104)</sup> respectively having completed at least short-cycle tertiary education, according to the latest data available published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics for 2014.

The unemployment rate is unevenly distributed between the sexes. In addition, as stated earlier, female workforce participation in 2021 was one-fifth that of men. Regarding unemployment, which was officially put at 11.46 % in 2021<sup>(105)</sup>, 18.96 % of women are unemployed<sup>(106)</sup>, double the rate of men (9.89 %)<sup>(107)</sup>. However, among Iran’s youth (i.e. those in the age group between 15 and 24 years), the average unemployment rate is more than double that figure for men at 24.02 % and higher again among women at 41.68 %<sup>(108)</sup>. As a result, while women are as educated as men, their unemployment rate is double that for men and their workforce

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- (98) ‘Iran among countries “bullying” NGOs, says new report’, Radio Farda, 22 February 2019 (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-among-countries-bullying-ngos-says-amnesty-international/29784765.html>); ‘Iran sentences eight environmental activists on charges of spying for U.S.’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 18 February 2020 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-sentences-eight-environmental-activists-for-allegedly-spying-for-u-s-/30441439.html>).
- (99) Hakim, S. and Makuch, K., ‘Springtime in Iran signals the renewal of an environmental movement’, *IranSource*, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, 21 April 2023 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/springtime-in-iran-signals-the-renewal-of-an-environmental-movement>).
- (100) Lienard, C., ‘Rethinking the EU–MENA climate cooperation – discussion paper following the 13 July 2022 webinar event “The Water–Climate Nexus: Avenues for EU–MENA Cooperation”’, Brussels International Center, Brussels (<https://www.bic-rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/BIC%20August%202022%20Discussion%20Paper%20-%20The%20Water-Climate%20Nexus%20Event%2C%20Clementine%20LIENARD.pdf>); Adebahr, C. and Lazard, O., ‘How the EU can help Iran tackle water scarcity’, Carnegie Europe, 7 July 2022 (<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2022/07/07/how-eu-can-help-iran-tackle-water-scarcity-pub-87281>).
- (101) Statista, ‘Population of Iran from 1800 to 2020’ (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1066934/population-iran-historical/>).
- (102) Population Pyramid, ‘Iran (Islamic Republic of) 2022’ (<https://www.populationpyramid.net/iran-islamic-republic-of/2022/>).
- (103) World Bank, ‘Educational attainment, at least completed short-cycle tertiary, population 25+, female (%) (cumulative) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.CUAT.ST.FE.ZS?locations=IR>).
- (104) World Bank, ‘Educational attainment, at least completed short-cycle tertiary, population 25+, male (%) (cumulative) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.CUAT.ST.MA.ZS?locations=IR>).
- (105) World Bank, ‘Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?end=2021locations=IRstart=1991view=chart>).
- (106) World Bank, ‘Unemployment, female (% of female labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?end=2021locations=IRstart=1991view=map>).
- (107) World Bank, ‘Unemployment, male (% of male labor force) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.MA.ZS?end=2021locations=IRstart=1991view=map>).
- (108) World Bank, ‘Unemployment, youth male (% of male labor force ages 15–24) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.MA.ZS?locations=IRview=map>); World Bank, ‘Unemployment, youth female (% of female labor force ages 15–24) (modeled ILO estimate) – Iran, Islamic Rep.’ (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.FE.ZS?locations=IRview=map>).

participation only one fifth of that of their male counterparts. This demonstrates the structural discrimination in place against women, alongside the existing gender apartheid and segregation as well as the exclusion of women from religious, judicial, military and top political positions<sup>(109)</sup>.

## STIFLING A NATION'S ASPIRATIONS

The circumstances discussed above – the triple crisis and the gender gap – mean that the Iranian people have reached a state of desperation, with hopes for development dashed and a loss of faith in the future. As a case in point, the World Happiness Index, with its indicators ranging from economic and health aspects to perceptions of personal freedom, positive and negative emotions, placed Iran 118<sup>th</sup> out of 153 countries in 2020 and 101<sup>st</sup> out of 137 in 2023<sup>(110)</sup>, with Tehran and Mashhad among the ten cities whose inhabitants expressed the most pessimistic outlook worldwide in 2020<sup>(111)</sup>. This lack of hope for the future has led partly to major waves of emigration and partly to more frequent and radical outbursts

of popular anger within past and current nationwide uprisings, fuelled by growing frustration about the way the country is governed. The situation at the turn of 2022–2023 was reflective of a society marked by unrest and turmoil, nurtured by deepening socio-economic inequality and a political impasse.

Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian society has matured, with a rapidly expanding population and education levels. The overall high level of educational attainment in the country is reflected by the fact that the number of books published in Iran – 102 691 in 2018 – is the highest in the region (followed by Turkey with 75 667 in 2019) and Iran ranks among the top 10 countries worldwide (sixth in 2013 and eighth in 2018–2020) in this regard<sup>(112)</sup>. Moreover, Iranian society has become truly globalised, enabling it to draw comparisons with living standards elsewhere in the world through social and other media. As a result of all this, society is structurally hampered in its overall evolution: the democratic and developmental aspirations and hopes of the Iranian people are stifled by the regime, while they are held hostage to the state's poor governance. In this context, women have taken centre stage, to the extent that one author has aptly described freedom in Iran as 'being female'<sup>(113)</sup>.

(109) See also Khezri, H., 'Unrest across Iran continues under state's extreme gender apartheid', *The Conversation*, 27 September 2022 (<https://theconversation.com/unrest-across-iran-continues-under-states-extreme-gender-apartheid-183766>); Rehman, J., 'Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran', United Nations Human Rights Council, 13 January 2022, pp. 12–13 (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/005/44/PDF/G2200544.pdf>).

(110) Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D., De Neve, J.-E., Aknin, L. B. and Wang, S. (eds.), 'World Happiness Report 2023', Sustainable Development Solutions Network (<https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2023/WHR+23.pdf>).

(111) Helliwell, J. F., Layard, R., Sachs, J. D. and De Neve, J.-E. (eds.), 'World Happiness Report 2020', Sustainable Development Solutions Network (<https://happiness-report.s3.amazonaws.com/2020/WHR20.pdf>).

(112) Rizzo, N. 'Number of books published per year [2023]', WordsRated, 2 February 2022 (<https://wordsrated.com/number-of-books-published-per-year-2021/>).

(113) Atai, G., *Iran: Die Freiheit ist weiblich* [Iran: Freedom is female], 2021, Rowohlt, Berlin.



## CHAPTER 2

# PROTESTS AGAINST THE REGIME

## A genealogy

The nationwide protests against the Islamic Republic which started in mid-September 2022 have been widely hailed as revolutionary, being described by one leading scholar as ‘the most severe and sustained political upheaval ever faced by the Islamist regime in Iran’<sup>(1)</sup>. The protests have assumed a different character from previous protest movements and have therefore presented an unprecedented challenge for the survival of the regime. To better comprehend them, it is pertinent to delineate the genesis and evolution of the present revolutionary episode, by examining two previous waves of nationwide protests over the last few years. These protests can also be contextualised historically, as they effectively address the 1979 revolution’s central promises of social justice, democracy and freedom from great power tutelage – none of which have been realised four decades on<sup>(2)</sup>.

To examine state-society relations in Iran, and concomitantly prospects for regime stability, it is useful to look at the social contract between the ruling elite and the citizens

in the Islamic Republic. This presents both socio-economic and political dimensions, the former concerning the provision of social and economic benefits, while the latter is relevant to political participation or the lack thereof<sup>(3)</sup>.

The triple crisis affecting the Islamic Republic, coupled with its unreformability, has given birth to a revolutionary process that was arguably kicked off by a new type of protests that erupted at the turn of 2017–2018, known as the Dey protests. As this author has suggested in a study devoted to this episode, they marked the start of a long-term revolutionary process because for the first time the lower classes, which had hitherto been considered the regime’s main social base, took to the streets *en masse* chanting revolutionary slogans<sup>(4)</sup>. The following sections will discuss the nature of the Dey protests and their *de facto* continuation in the Aban protests in November 2019. It will then provide a brief examination of the momentous and unprecedented uprising that swept Iran in the autumn of 2022, which has

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- (1) Bayat, A., ‘Is Iran on the verge of another revolution?’, *Journal of Democracy*, Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy (NED), March 2023 (<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/is-iran-on-the-verge-of-another-revolution/>). The version in Persian was published under the same title in *Zeitoon*, 28 February 2023 (<https://www.zeitoons.com/109631>).
  - (2) Fathollah-Nejad, A., ‘The revolution’s broken promises’, in Maloney, S. (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution at Forty*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, 2020, pp. 8–17 (<https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/2502204/pdf>).
  - (3) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., ‘The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s social contract and its repercussions’, paper presented at the workshop ‘Social Contracts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – Drivers of Change’, organised by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), 24–26 August 2022, Bonn (Germany).
  - (4) See *The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On*, op. cit.; Young, M., Interview with Ali Fathollah-Nejad, ‘Can the Iranian system survive?’, Carnegie Middle East Center, 29 September 2022 (<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/88044>).

fully plunged the country into a revolutionary process.

## THE DEY AND ABAN PROTESTS

The Dey protests that occurred at the turn of 2017–2018<sup>(5)</sup> and the Aban protests of November 2019<sup>(6)</sup> derive their names from the months of the Iranian calendar in which they started, under which names they entered the country's political lexicon. The discussion that follows will compare them with the 2009 Green Movement. In addition, Iran has been facing a record number of protests every year since 2016 (the year of the JCPOA's implementation), rising to 4 000 in 2021 and 2022 (see diagram on page 23).

The Dey and Aban protests have a number of similarities and distinct features, especially in comparison with the 2009 Green Movement. They were both triggered by deepening socio-economic grievances<sup>(7)</sup>, in the former case a rise in prices of basic food staples and

in the latter case the overnight tripling of fuel prices. Protest slogans quickly turned political, targeting all key components of the regime, be they clerical (the ruling Shia clergy) or military (the IRGC), hardline or reformist (referring to both major factions of the political establishment). That was because people blamed the political system (*Nezâm*) of the Islamic Republic for their socio-economic malaise; after all, the country's elite has monopolised both political and economic power for decades. Crucially, whereas the reformists had been spared criticism during the Green Movement – as reformist leaders had even drafted its manifesto<sup>(8)</sup> – the Dey protests for the first time demonstrated deep public anger towards the reformist establishment faction.

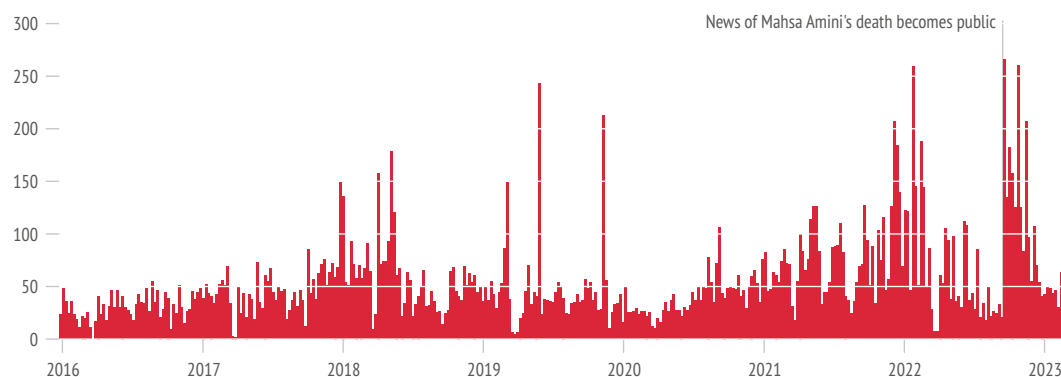
Their geographical scale and reach was unprecedented, in both cases spreading to about 100 towns and cities in all corners of the country, whereas the Green Movement was a phenomenon largely confined to bigger cities, especially Tehran.

Their social base – again in contrast to the Green Movement, which largely originated from the urban middle class – was composed of the lower classes and the 'middle-class poor'. The

- (5) On the Dey protests, see Ansari, A., 'As protests rage in Iran, there are few certainties – except that the Revolution has run out of steam', *Prospect*, 3 January 2018 (<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/as-protests-rage-in-iran-there-are-few-certainties-except-that-the-revolution-has-run-out-of-steam>); Hakimian, H., 'What's driving Iran's protests?', Project Syndicate, 15 January 2018 (<https://www.neweurope.eu/article/whats-driving-irans-protests/>); Rivetti, P., 'What's behind the recent protests in Iran?', Raidió Teilifís Éireann, 8 January 2018 (<https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2018/0108/931707-whats-behind-the-recent-protests-in-iran/>); Ehsani, K. and Keshavarzian, A., 'The moral economy of the Iranian protests', *Jacobin*, 11 January 2018 (<https://jacobin.com/2018/01/iranian-protests-revolution-rouhani-ahmadinejad>); Vaez, A., 'Iran's protests: time to reform', openDemocracy, 15 January 2018 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/iran-s-protests-time-reform/>); Bayat, A., 'The fire that fueled the Iran protests', *The Atlantic*, 27 January 2018 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/iran-protest-mashaad-green-class-labor-economy/551690/>).
- (6) On the Aban protests, see Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Why Iranians are revolting again', Brookings Institution, 19 November 2019 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/19/why-iranians-are-revolting-again/>); Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Iran's bloody protests are just the beginning', *Deutsche Welle*, 28 November 2019 (<https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-irans-bloody-protests-are-just-the-beginning/a-51450365>); Maloney, S., 'Iranian protesters strike at the heart of the regime's revolutionary legitimacy', *Brookings Institution*, 19 November 2019 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/19/iranian-protesters-strike-at-the-heart-of-the-regimes-revolutionary-legitimacy/>); Fathi, A., Interview with Nader Hashemi, 'Violence "reflects the Iranian regime's desperation"', *Qantara.de: Dialogue with the Islamic World*, 4 December 2019 (<https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-nader-hashemi-on-the-protests-in-iran-violence-reflects-the-iranian-regimes>).
- (7) Whereas the Dey protests started with then-President Rouhani's ultraconservative domestic rivals initiating protests in Mashhad against his administration's economic performance, they quickly spiralled out of control to target the entirety of the regime. This shows that intra-regime schisms certainly played a role, albeit not a decisive one, in explaining these protests.
- (8) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Iran's Green Movement: a critical and comparative analysis', paper presented at the conference 'The Protest Movements in the Contemporary Middle East', Panel 1, 'Elections in the wake of the protest movements: towards a redefinition of state-society relations?', organised by the Oriental Institute, Czech Academy of Sciences, and Centre français de recherche en sciences sociales, Prague, with the support of Groupe de recherches et d'études sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient, Lyon, and Cercle des Chercheurs sur le Moyen-Orient, Oriental Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, 29–30 May 2014. The paper was also presented at the 21st International DAVO Congress of Contemporary Research on the Middle East, University of Cologne, 26 September 2014.

## Weekly protests since 2016

In Iran



Data: ACLED, 2023;  
An earlier version of this graph was prepared by Samira Barzin, University of Oxford

latter term designates a new social class that has emerged, which possesses middle-class qualifications (university degrees) and concomitant aspirations to social mobility but has ended up being socio-economically deprived, a situation facilitated by the way in which the Islamic Republic's political economy has erected a hidden wall between regime insiders and outsiders, thereby defining their respective chances of social ascension and mobility<sup>(9)</sup>. The lower classes, hitherto considered to be an integral part of the regime's social base or at least loyal to it, took to the streets chanting revolutionary slogans, delivering a severe shock to the Islamic Republic's elite.

The protest slogans could be categorised as follows<sup>(10)</sup>: (i) calls for social justice and condemnations of the oligarchic nature of the regime<sup>(11)</sup>; (ii) criticism of the entire elite and its

above-mentioned core components, including the Supreme Leader<sup>(12)</sup>; (iii) denunciations of the regime's prioritisation of its regional great power ambitions and failure to address domestic woes<sup>(13)</sup>. Another revealing slogan chanted during those protests by a variety of groups, even including schoolgirls, as well as in other demonstrations in-between and since, has been 'Our enemy is right at home, they always say it's America!' [*Doshman-e mâ haminjâst, hamash migan Âmrikâst!*]. A 2021 public opinion survey in Iran, whose methodology is more reliable in this authoritarian context than polling institutes that rely on phone interviews<sup>(14)</sup>, showed that 73 % of respondents agreed with this last slogan. In addition, 70 % of respondents effectively opposed Tehran's 'axis of resistance' policies towards the Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas, Iraq's Shia militias, Yemen's Houthis and

(9) 'The fire that fueled the Iran protests', op.cit.

(10) 'There's more to Iran's protests than you've been told', op.cit.; Fathollah-Nejad, A. and Sarkohi, A., "Fürchtet euch!" Wenn Slogans für sich sprechen' ['Be afraid! When slogans speak for themselves], *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 16 January 2018.

(11) Slogans included 'Bread, job, freedom!', 'The people are begging, the clerics act like God!', 'Capitalist mullahs, give us our money back!' and 'Thieves plunder, the government supports them!'.

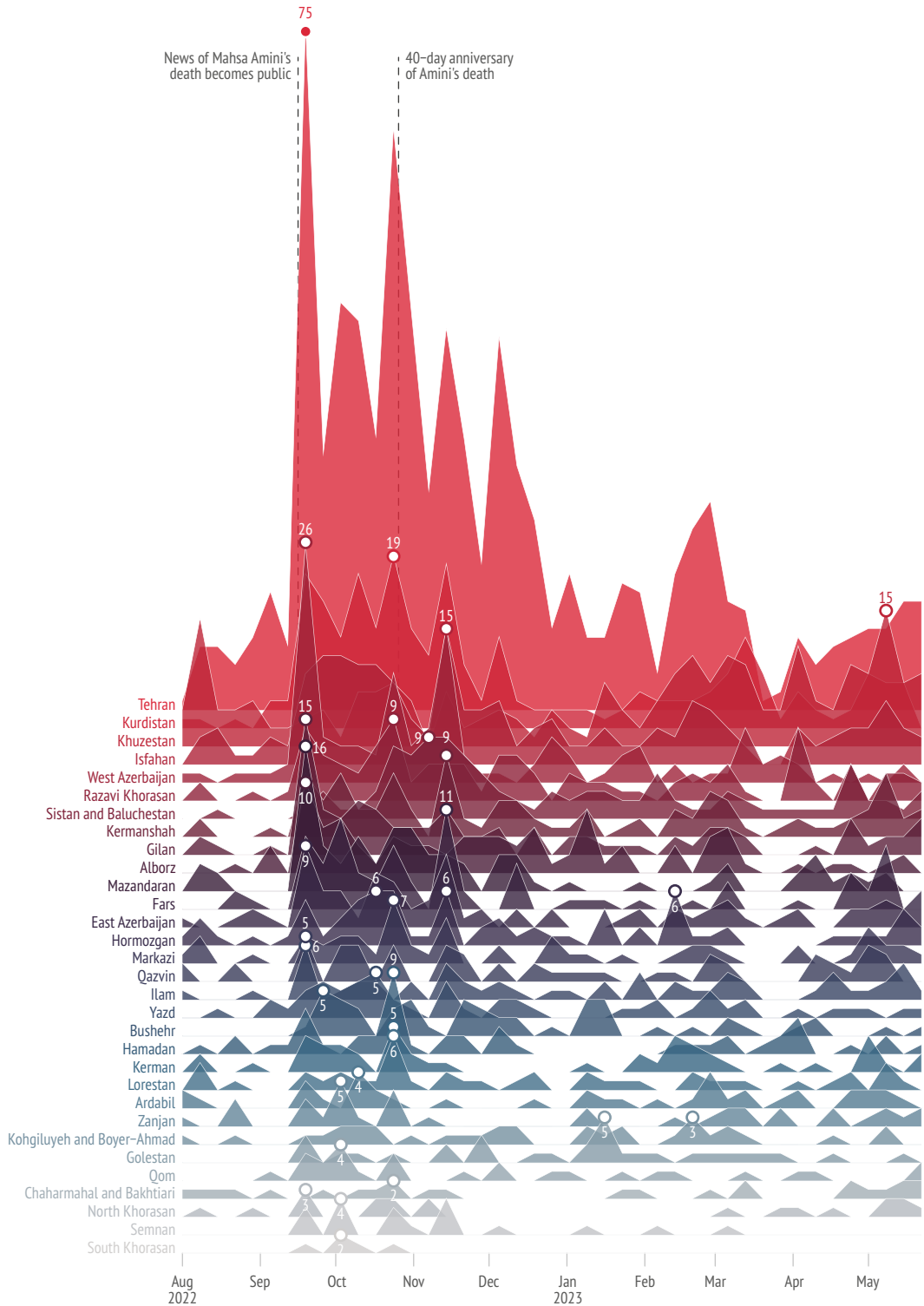
(12) Chants included 'Seyyed Ali [Khamenei], pardon us, it's time [for you] to leave!', 'Down with Khamenei!', 'Down with the dictator!', 'Down with Rouhani!', 'We don't want to be ruled by clerics!', 'Sepah [IRGC] are traitors!', 'Reformists, principlists [right-wing conservatives]: the game is over!', 'Islamic Republic, no more, no more!' and 'We want neither Mir [Hossein Mousavi] nor a [Supreme] Leader, we want neither bad nor worse!'.

(13) Slogans included 'Leave Syria alone and deal with us!', 'Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, my life for Iran!' and 'Both Gaza and Iran: down with the tyrants!'.

(14) For the latter, see for example IranPoll (<https://www.iranpoll.com/>), whose results show much lower discontent with – if not support for – the Islamic Republic and its foreign policies. These results have even been comprehensively presented and favourably discussed on Iranian state TV by the former editor-in-chief of the English edition of the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency.

## Weekly protests since Mahsa Amini's death

By Iranian province, 1 Aug 2022 – 31 May 2023



Data: ACLED, 2023; An earlier version of this graph was prepared by Samira Barzin, University of Oxford

Syria's Assad regime<sup>(15)</sup>. In fact, although it has been largely ignored in the West, over the last decade domestic criticism within Iran against such policies, which are often labelled by Tehran as an Iranian regional 'war on terror', has mounted, including among students and some politicians<sup>(16)</sup>.

Meanwhile, the extent of participation and of repression both varied. First, according to the Ministry of the Interior, 50 000 people took part in the Dey protests, whereas the number quadrupled to 200 000 for the Aban protests, with these official estimates probably downplaying the real size of the protests. Second, the Dey protests ended after about a week due to a combination of repression and the fact that the middle class did not participate in them. However, during the Aban protests, the crackdown reached new levels, with a near-total internet blackout for over a week (and up to 3 weeks in the most restive regions), during which security forces conducted a 'killing spree'<sup>(17)</sup>, operating a shoot-to-kill policy, killing about 1 500 protesters in about half a week<sup>(18)</sup>. Therefore, the Aban protests turned into a traumatic experience for Iranians – something even acknowledged by senior regime figures – which has led to, *inter alia*, the creation of a people's tribunal to investigate these crimes<sup>(19)</sup>. Given the absence of an effective international response to the lethal crackdown, questions were raised about

## The Aban protests proved to be a traumatic experience for Iranians.

the possibility of the international community taking responsibility for protecting Iranians' right to peaceful protest, including the possibility of granting them internet access during a state-imposed blackout aimed at averting the spread of the protests and hiding the brutal repression from the eyes of the world<sup>(20)</sup>.

The Dey and Aban protests can be seen as a watershed moment in the changing dynamics in the relationship between the Islamic Republic and the poor<sup>(21)</sup>, which started in the 1990s with the introduction by the government of illiberal neoliberal economic policies into Iran's monopolistic capitalist structures. The

relationship has dramatically deteriorated ever since with rising social protests. In fact, the Iranian state has not only alienated the middle class, which called in 2009 for greater freedoms and reforms within the confines of the Islamic Republic, but has arguably lost much ground among the lower strata of society as it has ignored their demands for social justice. This has proved to be extremely costly politically, as the post-revolutionary regime assumed power precisely with the declared ambition to care for the interests of these 'downtrodden' sections of society (or *mostazafin* in regime parlance). Given this, the long-established social contract whereby the regime provided for the lower classes' material welfare in exchange for political acquiescence has obviously broken down.

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- (15) Maleki, A. and Tamimi-Arab, P., *Iranians' Attitudes Toward International Relations: A 2021 Survey Report*, Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN), Netherlands, October 2021 (<https://gamaan.org/2021/10/27/iraniansattitudes-toward-international-relations-a-2021-survey-report/>).
- (16) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Iran: fighting "terror" publicly, mourning the dead secretly', Al Jazeera, 1 May 2018 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/5/1/iran-fighting-terror-publicly-mourning-the-dead-secretly>); Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Iranians respond to the regime: "Leave Syria alone!"', Al Jazeera, 2 May 2018 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/5/2/iranians-respond-to-the-regime-leave-syria-alone>).
- (17) 'Iran: death toll from bloody crackdown on protests rises to 208', Amnesty International, 2 December 2019 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/12/iran-death-toll-from-bloody-crackdown-on-protests-rises-to-208/>).
- (18) 'Special report: Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest – "Do whatever it takes to end it"', Reuters, 23 December 2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport-idUSKBN1YRoQR>).
- (19) The so-called Aban Tribunal (<https://abantribunal.com/>); see also Sadr, S., 'Aban will not die: how truth remains a powerful weapon against the Islamic Republic', Atlantic Council, 26 January 2022 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/aban-will-not-die-how-truth-remains-a-powerful-weapon-against-the-islamic-republic/>).
- (20) 'Iran's bloody protests are just the beginning', op.cit.
- (21) Saffari, S., 'Iran protests: changing dynamics between the Islamic Republic and the poor', Seoul National University Asia Center, June 2018 (<http://diverseasia.snu.ac.kr/?p=324>).

## 2019–2022: A TRAUMATISED SOCIETY

After the 2019 Aban protests (often referred to as Bloody November), Iranian society was affected by a number of traumatic events that occurred in the 2020–2022 period. These included the shooting-down of a Ukrainian passenger jet over Tehran by the IRGC in early January 2020, resulting in an international outcry, and the subsequent mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic, which saw regime interests prioritised over those of society, with the result that Iran became the epicentre of the disease in the Middle East<sup>(22)</sup>.

The widening gulf between state and society then resulted in the lowest ever participation rates in both the February 2020 parliamentary and the June 2021 presidential elections, which were also a result of boycotting campaigns. In both elections, the wider conservative camp – a spectrum often simply referred to as hardliners, encompassing traditional conservatives, ultra-conservatives or fundamentalists, and extremists, including a younger generation of Islamist revolutionaries – monopolised power in the Islamic Republic. This camp now controls all levers of power, including the theocratic and semi-republican institutions, the military, the security and intelligence apparatuses, and the media. However, this monopolisation of power carries a not inconsiderable risk of backfiring against the regime if it fails to satisfy people's demands, given the conservative camp's control of the country's wealth and resources. This could then further deepen political disillusionment to the point of jeopardising regime stability.

Ahead of the revolutionary uprising that began in mid-September 2022, Iran had witnessed two protest waves, amid a variety of daily protests by various social and professional groups, such as pensioners and teachers, between May and mid-June. The first wave emerged after the administration cut subsidies for essential food staples and removed the preferential exchange rate for the US dollar, as a way to reduce the budget deficit. This sparked street protests in various cities, which were initially driven by socio-economic grievances but quickly turned political<sup>(23)</sup>. The second wave occurred after a building under construction collapsed on 23 May in Abadan, a major city in Iran's Khuzestan province, killing over 40 people. This led to widespread protests, especially when it transpired that the construction company, which was affiliated with regime networks, had violated safety regulations. Popular anger was further amplified by the fact that the government deployed security rather than emergency relief forces to deal with the disaster. The street protests then spread to a few other cities, in solidarity with the people of Abadan<sup>(24)</sup>.

## 'WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM!': THE REVOLUTIONARY 2022 UPRISING

The death of the 22-year old Kurdish Iranian Mahsa 'Zhina' Amini in the custody of Tehran's so-called morality police (*Gasht-e Ershād*) on 16 September 2022 sparked a nationwide uprising against the regime that

(22) Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'COVID-19 after an "annus horribilis": the coronavirus in Iran after a "horrible year"', *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 25 August 2020 (<https://www.thecairoreview.com/home-page/covid-19-after-an-annus-horribilis/>).

(23) Dehghanpisheh, B., 'Economic protests challenge Iran's leaders as hopes for nuclear deal fade', *Washington Post*, 27 May 2022 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/27/iran-nuclear-deal-subsidies-protests/>).

(24) On the Metropal building collapse in Abadan, see Bouzari, R. and Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'A country in free fall, a corruptocracy in full swing: why a building collapse in Iran matters', Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., 7 June 2022 (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/country-free-fall-corruptocracy-full-swing-why-building-collapse-iran-matters>).

was unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic. Protests quickly spread to all parts of the country, assuming a political dimension well beyond the hijab issue and the intersection of gender and ethnic discrimination, with the demonstrators' core slogan being *zan, zendegi, âzâdi* ('woman, life, freedom!') and demands for regime change<sup>(25)</sup>. While in detention, Amini was transferred to hospital in a coma on 15 September and died the next day. On 16 September, protests first started in Kurdistan. They included general strikes, for example in the dead woman's hometown, Saqqez, on 20 September, as called for by several Kurdish groups, and clashes with security forces in different towns. They quickly spread all over the country, to at least 85 cities and towns. While there was much opposition to the hijab rules and their draconian implementation, protests quickly targeted the Islamic Republic's head of state, referred to as a 'dictator', and the regime as a whole, with chants such as *Marg bar Dictateur* ('Death to the dictator!') and *Marg bar Jomhuri-e Eslâmi* ('Death to the Islamic Republic!').

The protests were characterised by *civil disobedience* (above all, women removing their headscarves, in many cases with men applauding them) and flash mobs in areas with little security presence. Frequently, *decentralised* protests took place in cities, that is, several protests taking place at the same time in various parts of the same city. European media coverage of the protests suggested that the protest movement lacked *leadership*, claiming that they were therefore doomed to fail sooner or later. However, given Iran's

## **A key role has been played by underground neighbourhood youth activist groups.**

historical experiences, as well as the situation on the ground, there is a need for some clarification on this point. First, there is indeed no single national leader assuming charismatic leadership or authority *à la* Ayatollah Khomeini in the context of the 1979 revolution. In fact, owing to this very experience of upheaval and revolution, which turned out to be a traumatic experience for Iranian society, as Khomeini – despite all his promises to the contrary – ended up usurping power and establishing a dictatorship, there is widespread reluctance to risk recreating such a situation. Instead, there is a preference for leaders to emerge in the process of resistance against the regime rather than having any predetermined ones<sup>(26)</sup>. Second, there is no organisation with known figures, as the regime could easily arrest them and thereby deal a heavy or even fatal blow to the protests, as happened for example with the Green Movement leaders who were put under house arrest.

However, the longevity of the 2022 protests suggests the existence of a certain level of grassroots coordination and organisation. A key role in this regard has been played by underground neighbourhood youth activist groups, who first emerged in Tehran, calling for protests and strikes, many of them decentralised so as to make it more difficult for them to be dismantled by the security forces<sup>(27)</sup>. In early December 2022, 30 such groups formed an umbrella organisation called the Neighbourhood Youth Alliance of Iran (*Ettehâd-e Javânân-e Mahallât-e Iran*) or United Youth of Iran (UYI). In its first joint statement, it called for 3 days of action

(25) Also in the words of the imprisoned prominent Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for the Freedom of Thought, cited in: Vick, K., 'Why Iran's leading women's rights defender thinks the protesters could topple the regime', *Time*, 29 September 2022 (<https://time.com/6218181/iran-protests-nasrin-sotoudeh-human-rights/>).

(26) See her statements during the QA discussion moderated by Abbas Milani, 'Shirin Ebadi: until we are free (film screening discussion)', Stanford University, 30 November 2022 (<https://youtu.be/drdcB2dyqTo>).

(27) Sinaee, M., 'Underground youth group in Iran emerging as protest leader', *Iran International*, 14 October 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202210149035>).

on 5–7 December<sup>(28)</sup>, which saw major strikes in key bazaars and industries throughout the country with many shopkeepers joining<sup>(29)</sup>. These actions raised the spectre of a general strike and marked a qualitative step forward in the revolutionary protests. Moreover, it is speculated that other networks – councils or committees – also assume such coordinating and organising tasks, probably run by various professional groups<sup>(30)</sup>.

In sum, all these aspects made it difficult for the security forces to extinguish the flames of uprising and defiance raging throughout the country, which gave significant momentum to this protest wave. Exactly 4 months into the revolutionary uprising, protests had taken place in 164 cities (a considerably higher number than during the Dey and Aban protests) and across 144 universities, while the death toll was estimated at 525 (including 71 children), with almost 20 000 protesters jailed and 68 members of the regime security forces killed<sup>(31)</sup>.

## A diverse social base

The protests have cut across social classes and ethnic divides. Not only have the lower and middle classes participated in the protests, but even members of the upper classes (e.g. sports and TV celebrities) too. In terms of ethnicity, there is involvement by and solidarity between people from various Iranian ethnic backgrounds, Persian and non-Persian. For

instance, after protests erupted in Kurdistan, people from neighbouring Azeri-speaking Tabriz joined in, chanting ‘Tabriz is awake, and it supports Kurdistan!’ The same solidarity was seen across regions and ethnicities. According to a leaked government poll, 84 % of Iranians hold a positive view of the uprising<sup>(32)</sup>.

At the forefront of the protests are four groups: (i) women; (ii) youth (15 to 24 year-olds, Iran’s ‘Generation Z’); (iii) students; and (iv) marginalised ethnic groups – all facing disproportionately high unemployment rates, while in addition suffering from various other forms of discrimination. Also taking part are schoolchildren, teachers and university professors. The last two groups have staged strikes to demand that their students imprisoned during the protests be freed. In the case of women, these protests have seen their most forceful street presence since their massive demonstrations against the mandatory hijab at the outset of the 1979 revolution, thus again placing women at the vanguard of the struggles against the Islamic Republic. Women face gender-based socio-economic and political discrimination in Iran. Young people also suffer greatly from unemployment and sociocultural restrictions imposed by a gerontocratic Islamist elite. In early October 2022, that is, half a month into the uprising, the average age of most detained protesters was 15, according to the IRGC’s deputy commander, Ali Fadaavi<sup>(33)</sup>. Students, for their part, have actively engaged in protests during the uprising, despite the crackdown on the student movement

(28) ‘Underground groups uniting in Iran “to overthrow Islamic Republic”’, *Iran International*, 5 December 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212058011>).

(29) ‘Iranians start three-day nationwide strikes to oust regime’, *Iran International*, 5 December 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212052265>).

(30) See for example Fargahi, N., Interview with Shirin Ebadi, “Wenn das keine Revolution ist, was ist es dann?” [If this is not a revolution, then what is it?], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 January 2023 (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/iran-shirin-ebadi-proteste-1.5724965>): ‘Last time, in 1979, we had a leader named Khomeini, and just look where that got us. Right now, there is no single figurehead as leadership, but people have networked widely among themselves and formed various councils and committees to coordinate the uprising in all parts of the country. They have managed to keep people united in the streets for more than three months.’

(31) HRANA English, Twitter post, 17 January 2023 ([https://twitter.com/HRANA\\_English/status/1615485325119307780](https://twitter.com/HRANA_English/status/1615485325119307780)).

(32) ‘Fars confidential bulletin quoted Khomeini: Don’t arrest Maulvi Abdul Hamid, disgrace him’ [in Persian], *Radio Farda*, 22 November 2022 (<http://www.radiofarda.com/a/black-reward-files/32155427.html>).

(33) ‘Commander Fadaavi: the average age of many of those arrested is 15 years old’, [in Persian], *Barkhat News*, 5 October 2022 (<https://www.barkhat.news/political/166496860259/sardar-fadavi-the-average-age-of-many-of-those-arrested-is-15-years-old>).



at universities, while they face various forms of political discrimination. Iran's marginalised ethnicities, above all the Sunni Kurds and Baluchis, face disproportionate socio-economic, confessional and political discrimination<sup>(34)</sup>.

## The reaction of the regime to the protests

In late November 2022, an internal regime memo prepared by the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency was revealed by the hacktivist group Black Reward. The leak involved 200 gigabytes of data, including classified video footage and audio files. Crucially, it demonstrated the grave concerns shared by top regime officials over the protests calling for regime change, and some regime strategies to counter them. For instance, the revelations show that it was estimated that at least 10 % of the population (i.e. over 8 million people) were ready to take to the streets against the Islamic Republic<sup>(35)</sup>. According to the only official estimate, by the Minister of Interior, at the height of the protests in early November 45 000 people took part in street protests and 18 000 in those taking place at universities. Independent estimates, however, based on the ratio of people arrested by authorities in single cities according to official announcements, suggest a much higher number of 600 000–700 000 protesters. Some scholars have even suggested three times that number, i.e. two million demonstrators.<sup>(36)</sup>

Moreover, the audio recording of a conversation between top IRGC officials signalled their worries about the sheer extent of the protests, including the vanguard role of women in the demonstrations and the powerful symbolism of women removing the state-imposed hijab. The officials stressed the danger that that symbolic action would create a domino effect, expressed concern about the support for the protests expressed by Iranian celebrities and lamented the regime's utter failure in the 'media war'<sup>(37)</sup>. Another important part of the Fars News Agency report is devoted to protests in Sistan and Baluchistan province, located in the geostrategically sensitive south-east of the country and home to a Sunni majority. After regime forces killed around 100 worshippers after Friday prayers on 30 September 2022 (the single deadliest day of the national uprising, referred to as 'Bloody Friday'), the most influential Iranian Sunni cleric, and also Friday Prayer Imam, Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzah, raised his voice against the Iranian authorities, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He even suggested that a referendum on the choice of the country's political system ought to take place. The leaked document made it clear that Khamenei had stressed that Molavi Abdolhamid 'should not be arrested. Rather, he should be dishonored'<sup>(38)</sup>. In early December 2022, in the capital city of the province, Zahedan, people once again chanted 'death to Khamenei!', while also carrying placards with slogans such as 'Iran! Baluchistan and Kurdistan will not abandon you!' and 'We fight for Iran, not against Iran!'<sup>(39)</sup>. At the same time, Hassan Rahimpour Azghadi, a member of Iran's Supreme Council of the Cultural

(34) See for example Boroujerdi, M., 'Sunnis in Iran: protesting against decades of discrimination and repression', Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 November 2022 (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunnis-iran-protesting-against-decades-discrimination-and-repression>).

(35) 'Fars News Agency's hacked bulletin: 10% of the country's population is ready for nationwide "chaos"' [in Persian], Radio Farda, 1 December 2022 (<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/farsnews-bulletin-hack-black-reward-protests-iran/32157764.html>).

(36) 'Is Iran on the verge of another revolution?', op.cit.

(37) Khani, M. and Sahebi, G., 'Was die iranische Führung über die Proteste denkt' [What the Iranian leadership thinks of the protests], *Der Spiegel*, 4 December 2022 (<https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/proteste-in-iran-geleakte-aufnahme-enthuellt-die-strategie-der-iranischen-fuehrung-a-37ed6a7c-89cb-4e9c-96ec-cea49b38b4c5>).

(38) Tayebi, A., 'Leaked document says Iranian leadership is seeking to discredit Sunni cleric', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 December 2022 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-sunni-cleric-discrediting-leaked-document/32157807.html>).

(39) Iran International, Twitter post, 2 December 2022 (<https://twitter.com/iranintl/status/1598624584516997123?s=52t=ctQM1V-NeSJRY9pLbUEDIA>).

Revolution, declared that the ongoing protests should be perceived by the authorities as ‘an alarm before death’<sup>(40)</sup>.

The regime’s reaction to these protests has taken various forms, including repression, control and censorship, intimidation and psychological warfare.

Lethal repression and human rights violations included massacres in the Kurdish and Baluch regions of Iran<sup>(41)</sup>. Besides the large number of people detained or killed during protests, in December 2022 and January 2023 four protesters were hanged<sup>(42)</sup>. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, described such executions as ‘state-sanctioned killing’<sup>(43)</sup>. In 2023, Iran engaged in what has been described as an ‘execution spree’: at least 209 prisoners had been hanged by May<sup>(44)</sup>, with people from ethnic minorities featuring prominently among the victims<sup>(45)</sup>. Also, prisoners were subjected to torture and rape<sup>(46)</sup> and detained child protesters tortured<sup>(47)</sup>.

The internet blackout was the most extensive since the Aban protests in 2019. Also, in

this context, about three weeks into the 2022 protests, 300 000 online businesses (mainly retailers) were reportedly closed due to Instagram and WhatsApp being banned in the country<sup>(48)</sup>. Internet blackouts have largely continued in Sistan-Baluchistan province due to the ongoing Friday protests there. The regime has sought to delegitimise the protests as a Kurdish separatist plot, instigated by outside forces (Israel and the United States). This was coupled with charges of Islamophobia, vandalism and terrorism<sup>(49)</sup>.

A wave of gas attacks targeting girls’ schools, starting in November 2022 and lasting into the spring of 2023, has taken place, poisoning more than 7 000 girls in more than 100 schools around the country. This can be considered as an act of revenge against girls’ schools as they had been a major centre of anti-regime protests, and are clearly designed to create a climate of fear and intimidation. With the regime likely to be complicit, either directly or indirectly by tolerating extremist elements carrying out the attacks, the Islamic Republic also wants to send a signal that the country would have to face more extremism in the

(40) ‘Regime insider says Iran protests are alarm before death’, Iran International, 1 December 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212015629>).

(41) Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The state of the world’s human rights*, 2023 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/poi10/5670/2023/en/>).

(42) Dehghanpisheh, B., and Berger, M., ‘Iran hangs two more people in brutal campaign against protesters’, *Washington Post*, 7 January 2023 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/07/iran-executions-protesters/>).

(43) Farge, E., ‘Iran executions are “state sanctioned killing” – UN rights chief’, *Reuters*, 10 January 2023 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-executions-amount-state-sanctioned-killing-un-rights-chief-2023-01-10/>).

(44) ‘Iran: “Frightening” number of executions as Türk calls for end to death penalty’, press release, UN Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 9 May 2023 (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/05/iran-frightening-number-executions-turk-calls-end-death-penalty>).

(45) ‘Iran: Chilling execution spree with escalating use of death penalty against persecuted ethnic minorities’, Amnesty International, 3 March 2023 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-chilling-execution-sprees-with-escalating-use-of-death-penalty-against-persecuted-ethnic-minorities/>).

(46) Esmaili, B., Rafiei, F., Pinkert, R., and Drepper, D., ‘Wie das Regime Demonstranten foltert’ [How the regime tortures demonstrators], *tagesschau.de*, 1 February 2023 (<https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/iran-gefaengnisse-folter-101.html>); ‘How Iran used a network of secret torture centers to crush an uprising’, CNN Special Report, 21 February 2023 (<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2023/02/middleeast/iran-torture-jails-black-sites-mahsa-amini-protests-cmd-intl/>).

(47) ‘Iran: Child detainees subjected to flogging, electric shocks and sexual violence in brutal protest crackdown’, Amnesty International, 16 March 2023 (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-child-detainees-subjected-to-flogging-electric-shocks-and-sexual-violence-in-brutal-protest-crackdown/>).

(48) ‘Widespread recession in online markets’ [in Persian], *Shargh*, 12 October 2022 (<https://www.sharghdaily.com/fa/tiny/news-858238>).

(49) See, *inter alia*, Hafezi, P. and Butler, D., ‘Putting Kurds in spotlight, Iran’s leaders try to deflect national protest’, *Reuters*, 17 October 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/putting-kurds-spotlight-irans-leaders-try-deflect-national-protest-2022-10-17>).

event of its collapse, thereby trying to portray itself as the lesser evil<sup>(50)</sup>.

The government introduced some measures to appease public anger, including the enactment of an emergency bill on 9 October 2022 raising the salaries of civil servants, including 700 000 pensioners, establishing more secure contracts for newly employed teachers, and providing for payment of unpaid wages to sugarcane workers as well as a 50 % increase in the basic-needs subsidy for poor families<sup>(51)</sup>. Moreover, after the regime started claiming in early 2023 that it had terminated ‘the riots’, an alleged general amnesty was put in place for ‘tens of thousands’ arrested during the protests. While the extent to which this amnesty has actually been implemented is unclear, those freed had to sign a written commitment that they would not take part in anti-regime protests in the future or else had to face heavier punishment<sup>(52)</sup>.

The regime has tightened censorship and intensified state surveillance of the population. With Moscow’s and Beijing’s help, Tehran has gained access to advanced digital surveillance technologies, also used to monitor the adherence to the hijab law in public places<sup>(53)</sup>.

## A climate of distrust has set in among regime insiders.

In a gesture toward the regime’s social base and to reward the loyalty of the *Basij* militia and boost their morale, in March 2023 the Iranian parliament decided to exempt all ranks of the *Basij* from paying electricity, gas and water fees and municipal taxes<sup>(54)</sup>.

Reformist figures have intervened in an effort to defuse popular anti-regime sentiment. Two months into the 2022 protests, it was reported that the Iranian authorities had asked the moderates to help them bring the protests under control<sup>(55)</sup>. It seems that the families of the late Ayatollah Khomeini and former president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani were approached for this purpose. Fatemeh Hashemi, the daughter of the late president, confirmed her meeting with Mojtaba Khamenei<sup>(56)</sup>, the Supreme Leader’s influential son. *Sobh-e Sadeq*, an IRGC-affiliated weekly, suggested that former president Mohammad Khatami, as a respected political figure, could unify reformists in favour of the regime, demarcating a line between ‘the enemies’ and the Islamic Republic<sup>(57)</sup>. Yet, given the collapse in the legitimacy of the reformist-moderate faction, widely viewed as a safety valve ensuring regime survival and not as a credible force for change, such efforts have been largely futile.

(50) See Böhm, D., ‘Angebliche Giftattacken in Iran: “Sie wollen uns Frauen einschüchtern” [Purported poison attacks in Iran: “They want to intimidate us women”], *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (international edition), 6 March 2023, p. 7 (<https://www.nzz.ch/international/iran-aufregung-ueber-angebliche-vergiftung-von-schuelerinnen-ld.1728796>); Shahi, A., ‘Iran: poisoning of thousands of schoolgirls piles more pressure on Islamic Republic struggling for survival’, *The Conversation*, 10 March 2023 (<https://theconversation.com/iran-poisoning-of-thousands-of-schoolgirls-piles-more-pressure-on-islamic-republic-struggling-for-survival-201310>).

(51) ‘Is Iran on the verge of another revolution?’, op.cit.

(52) Azizi, H. and van Ween, E., ‘Lost in transition: Where might Iran be heading?’, Clingendael Institute, 23 March 2023 (<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/lost-transition-where-might-iran-be-heading>).

(53) Lieber, D., Faucon, B. and Amon, M., ‘Russia supplies Iran with cyber weapons as military cooperation grows’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2023 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-supplies-iran-with-cyber-weapons-as-military-cooperation-grows-b14b94cd>); Khorrami, N., ‘How China boosts Iran’s digital crackdown’, *The Diplomat*, 27 October 2022 (<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/how-china-boosts-irans-digital-crackdown/>); Faucon, B., Lin, L., ‘U.S. weighs sanctions for Chinese companies over Iran surveillance buildup’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 February 2023 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-weighs-sanctions-for-chinese-companies-over-iran-surveillance-buildup-11675503914>).

(54) ‘Free water and electricity for Basij bases’ [in Persian], *Eghtesad Online*, 1 March 2023 (<https://www.eghtesadonline.com/n/3ZGC>).

(55) Faucon, B. and Cloud, D. S., ‘Confronting Iran protests, regime uses brute force but secretly appeals to moderates’, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 November 2022 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-protests-government-mahsa-amini-11669137860>).

(56) ‘Confirmation of the meeting between Fatemeh Hashemi and Mojtaba Khamenei’ [in Persian], *Ensaf News*, 24 November 2022 (<http://www.ensafnews.com/382860/تایید-دیدار-فاطمه-هاشمی-و-مجتبی-خامنه>).

(57) ‘IRGC media outlet: Seyyed Mohammad Khatami could pave the way for dialogue’ [in Persian], *Arman Shargh*, 23 November 2022 (<https://armanshargh.ir/?p=117426>).

## Fissures among the elite?

Although no apparent fractures in the political establishment can be observed, there are signs of fissures.

The regime's failure to put an end to the protests in the initial months can also be attributed to some reluctance among the security forces ordered to use lethal force against the demonstrators. This is even more remarkable given the Islamic Republic's heavy investment in its security forces since the 2009 Green Movement and their focus on quelling street protests, which was done without restraint<sup>(58)</sup>. Supreme Leader Khamenei has criticised this failure, and replaced the police chief in January 2023. Khamenei asked the newly appointed Brigadier-General Ahmad-Reza Radan, who played a significant role in suppressing the Green Movement in 2009, to win the 'satisfaction of the dear people in guarding security and protecting public calm'. According to state media, the Supreme Leader also insisted on 'respecting the dignity of police forces and training specialized police forces for different sectors'<sup>(59)</sup>. Earlier, in November, 2 months into the uprising, the Raisi administration appointed an IRGC commander as the new governor of Tehran Province. Alireza Fakhari had previously been the deputy coordinator of the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters. It has been an important development amid the ongoing protests in the country,

suggesting a militarised hand to be deployed to crack down on protests in Tehran<sup>(60)</sup>.

The execution on 14 January 2023 of the former Iranian deputy defence minister Alireza Akbari, believed to be close to the then Secretary-General of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, allegedly on charges for spying for the United Kingdom, is another sign that a climate of distrust has set in among regime insiders<sup>(61)</sup>.

## IRAN IN THE THROES OF A REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Iran has witnessed an increasing number of uprisings: the student uprising in 1999<sup>(62)</sup>, the Green Movement in 2009, the Dey protests in 2017–2018, the Aban protests in 2019 and finally the 2022 protests. A diverse array of social groups (teachers, pensioners, truck drivers, students, women) have been protesting in Iran over the last few years. As previously indicated, in 2021 and 2022 around 4 000 protests took place – a record since 2016 (see diagram on page 23). Yet many of these uprisings were scattered or fragmented, with little solidarity between them. Continuing

(58) See e.g. Golkar, S., 'The evolution of Iran's police forces and social control in the Islamic Republic', *Middle East Brief*, No 120, July 2018, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University (<https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb120.pdf>).

(59) 'Leader names Ahmadreza Radan as Iran's police chief', *Tehran Times*, 7 January 2023 (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/480576/Leader-names-Ahmadreza-Radan-as-Iran-s-police-chief>).

(60) 'Governor of Tehran was elected: the record of the new governor of Tehran' [in Persian], *Hamshahri Online*, 20 November 2022; 'Iranian government appoints military commander as Tehran governor', *Iran International*, 20 November 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211203021>).

(61) Mehrabi, E., 'Alireza Akbari: a bloody score is settled in the Islamic Republic', *IranWire*, 15 January 2023 (<https://iranwire.com/en/politics/112657-alireza-akbari-a-bloody-score-is-settled-in-the-islamic-republic>).

(62) On this, see Bina, C. 'The Hot Summer of Defiance: The student protests for freedom and democracy in Iran', *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1999, pp. 47–60. See also Rivetti, P., *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2020 (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-32201-4>).

fragmentation would keep them weak; hence the participants realise that only solidarity between them can help empower them<sup>(63)</sup>.

Political observers as well as academics have framed the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ protests as having a revolutionary dimension. Shirin Ebadi has considered them the ‘start of a revolution’<sup>(64)</sup>. In academic circles, Asef Bayat, a leading scholar of social movements in the Middle East, has described them as a ‘revolutionary episode’<sup>(65)</sup> characterised by an unprecedented progressive, life-affirming outlook, as well as a strong feminist dimension: ‘Women, their dignity and, more generally, human dignity are at the centre, which makes this revolutionary movement exceptional.’ There is also a strong desire among the youth of the country ‘to get their lives back, a normal life.’ Importantly, Asef Bayat sees a ‘paradigm shift’ at the centre of these protests, ‘something that is perhaps rare in revolutionary movements’, devoted to ‘the promotion of women and their dignity, and basically human dignity’<sup>(66)</sup>. He also contends that the protests have reflected

## The protests have cut across class and ethnic divisions in an unprecedented show of solidarity.

resistance from large parts of society against the ‘internal colonization’ imposed by the regime<sup>(67)</sup>. Roham Alvandi, a prominent historian of modern Iran at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), also maintains that the protests constitute a revolution in the making, while stressing: ‘Most importantly, we have seen over the last month, for the first time since 1979, clear evidence of a national consensus in Iran that the Islamic Republic must go. This is a huge step for Iranian society, given the deep scepticism and fear that many Iranians have of revolution’<sup>(68)</sup>. The sociologist Azadeh Kian, a specialist in gender and politics in Iran, has interpreted the protests as an ‘ongoing revolution’ with an intersectional dimension<sup>(69)</sup>, further warning that the conflict pitting a modernised society against a discredited theocracy is only likely to worsen<sup>(70)</sup>. Anoush Ehteshami argues that ‘a democratising uprising’ is under way in Iran, as the regime is confronted by a perfect storm consisting of three interconnected cyclones: a socio-economic crisis, a political impasse and international isolation<sup>(71)</sup>. In his take on

(63) ‘The protests are distinguished by outpourings of solidarity between groups often pitted against each other, with men filling the ranks of protesters led by women, and urban elites voicing support for ethnic Kurds who are often treated as an underclass in Iran.’ Daragahi, B., ‘A woman’s death fuels a nation’s rage: Iran erupts over 22-year-old who died after hijab arrest’, *The Independent*, 25 September 2022 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-hijab-b2171219.html>).

(64) Rohde, S., ‘Proteste im Iran – Shirin Ebadi: „Das ist der Beginn einer Revolution“’ [Protests in Iran – Shirin Ebadi: “This is the start of a revolution”], *Deutschlandfunk*, 8 October 2022 (<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/interview-shirin-ebadi-100.html>).

(65) So has the Tehran-based novelist and political essayist Amir-Hassan Cheheltan; Cheheltan, A. H., ‘Die bluttriefende Wunde’ [The blood-dripping wound], *Der Spiegel*, 31 October 2022 (<https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/iran-schriftsteller-amir-hassan-cheheltan-ueber-sein-land-die-bluttriefende-wunde-a-39e78c7e-a785-4446-8199-4e3c3325bba7>).

(66) Quoted in Golshiri, G., ‘Iran braves repression: “Our suffering from all these years of injustice has become more powerful than fear”’, *Le Monde* (English edition), 16 October 2022 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/16/iran-braves-repression-our-suffering-from-all-these-years-of-injustice-has-become-more-powerful-than-fear\\_6000517\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/16/iran-braves-repression-our-suffering-from-all-these-years-of-injustice-has-become-more-powerful-than-fear_6000517_4.html)); Azmoudeh, M. V.-M., ‘A great paradigm shift in the Iranian mentality’ [in Persian], *Etemad*, 10 October 2022 (<https://www.pishkhan.com/news/280418>).

(67) ‘Is Iran on the verge of another revolution?’, op. cit.

(68) Alvandi, R., Twitter post, 23 October 2022 (<https://twitter.com/DrRohamAlvandi/status/1584257686341754881>).

(69) Kian, A., ‘Transformational intersectional impacts of the ongoing revolution in Iran’, talk delivered at the webinar ‘Iran, the Middle East, and the World Order: Exploring key transformations’, Center for Middle East and Global Order (CMEG), 23 May 2023 (<https://cmeg.org/exploring-key-transformations-webinar>).

(70) See Golshiri, G. and Zerrouky, M., “‘In Iran, we need sanctions targeting those repressing protesters’”, *Le Monde* (English edition), 17 October 2022 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/17/in-iran-we-need-sanctions-targeting-those-repressing-protesters\\_6000690\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/17/in-iran-we-need-sanctions-targeting-those-repressing-protesters_6000690_4.html)). See also Kian’s early October 2022 appearance at the European Parliament in Strasbourg: ‘Opening of 3–6 October plenary session in Strasbourg’, European Parliament (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220930IPR41918/opening-of-3-6-october-plenary-session-in-strasbourg>).

(71) Ehteshami, A., ‘From dissatisfaction to mobilisation: the Islamic Republic’s perfect storm’, *Global Policy*, 13 December 2022 (<https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/13/12/2022/dissatisfaction-mobilisation-islamic-republics-perfect-storm>).

the events, the historian Ali Ansari also regards the protests as revolutionary<sup>(72)</sup>. More cautiously, Iranian Studies professor Hamid Dabashi has referred to the protests as a 'massive social uprising'<sup>(73)</sup> and noted that 'Iran in the autumn of 2022, like Egypt in the winter of 2011, is on the edge of a new era. Uprisings may or may not have any tangible political results, but the societies that give birth to them are never the same as they were before'<sup>(74)</sup>.

Not only are these ongoing protests already the longest running of all, but they have cut across class and ethnic divisions in an unprecedented show of solidarity. This is precisely the cross-cutting intersectional dimension that has been the missing link in past major uprisings. In 2009, the Green Movement was mainly driven by the urban middle class protesting against electoral fraud, exemplified by the chant 'Where is my vote?': the protesters were thus calling for political participation within the confines of the Islamic Republic, with reformist political figures as leaders and at its height 3 million people on the streets. Subsequently, the Dey protests at the turn of 2017–2018 and their *de facto* continuation the Aban protests in November 2019 were both triggered by socio-economic questions (in the former case higher food prices, and in the latter an overnight tripling of fuel prices), but immediately turned political with slogans being chanted against all pillars of the Islamic Republic, the clerical (the ruling Shia clergy) and military (the IRGC) wings of the power structure as well as both the hardline and reformist factions of the political establishment. They also took place on an unprecedented geographical scale, spreading to around 100 cities and towns. According to Interior Ministry figures, 50 000 people took part in the Dey protests and 200 000 in the Aban protests. The

latter, in particular, was brutally repressed<sup>(75)</sup>. In these two uprisings, large sections of the middle class had not joined the protests on the streets – hence, a crucial intersectional dimension was missing.

The question that follows is whether this intersectional dimension can become an *intersectional alliance*, which would take the revolutionary process into a qualitatively new phase. To assess the likelihood of this happening, a look at the labour movement's potential to inflict important economic disruption is key. After all, in the 1979 revolution, strikes by oil workers were central in bringing down the Shah's regime. And today, despite some diversification of the Iranian economy, state revenues still heavily depend on income derived from the hydrocarbon industries. There are signs of increasing solidarity with the revolutionary protests on the part of the labour movement and its activists. This is predicated upon the realisation that: (i) the uprising is a revolutionary one and (ii) the protests led by women and other sections of society under the banner of *zan, zendegi, âzâdi* are not only a struggle against the Islamic Republic's gender discrimination that is worth supporting but also intimately linked to the interests of workers, who cannot expect any improvement under the current regime. In short, there is rising awareness of a common struggle<sup>(76)</sup>.

## Worker participation in the protest movement

Over the course of the protests, the labour movement engaged in important strikes, e.g. those that took place in early December 2022. Among them are contract workers in key

(72) Ansari, A., 'Failures of imagination', *Substack*, 16 November 2022 (<https://samf.substack.com/p/failures-of-imagination>).

(73) Dabashi, H., 'How Iranian women's bodies became an ideological battleground', *Middle East Eye*, 28 September 2022 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-women-bodies-became-ideological-battleground>).

(74) Dabashi, H., 'Women, life, freedom: How Iran protests were foretold in film', *Middle East Eye*, 16 December 2022 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-protests-women-life-freedom-film-foretold-how>).

(75) 'Iran: death toll from bloody crackdown on protests rises to 208', op. cit.

(76) See for example the statement by the Ahvazi workers' activist Meytham Al-Mahdi of the Arab ethnic minority, now in Swiss exile, on his Instagram profile (<https://www.instagram.com/tv/Cjf5MKZANJE/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D>).

sectors of the economy, including important petrochemical, oil, steel and agro-business plants in Iran's southern Bushehr and Khuzestan provinces<sup>(77)</sup>. More recently, a wave of labour strikes took place across at least ten provinces in Iran, as employees from significant industries such as oil, gas, steel and copper demanded better working conditions and healthcare<sup>(78)</sup>. According to the reformist daily *Etemad*, 10 000 workers participated in the strikes<sup>(79)</sup>. Workers in at least 110 industrial and production units went on strike, including workers employed by sub-contractors in the energy and oil sectors. The protests are mainly directed against the decision of the so-called National Council of Workers, whereby the minimum wage was increased by only 21 %. In view of the inflation rate and the economic situation in Iran, the workers are demanding a wage increase of 79 %, the reduction of daily working hours from 10 to 8 hours, better dormitory accommodation for workers and health insurance. However, the CEO of the Pars Special Economic Energy Zone (PSEEZ) threatened that 'with the end of the legal deadline, 4 000 of them will be replaced by new workers', and later fired them from the South Pars site<sup>(80)</sup>. At the same time, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gave a speech to a group of selected workers, claiming that 'the enemy attempted to pit the working class against the Islamic Republic but failed due to the workers' intelligence'<sup>(81)</sup>.

Retired civil servants also continue to protest about low pensions. Telecommunications

company retirees have demonstrated in 10 provincial capitals, as well as in Tehran. In Tehran, the protest took place in front of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology. The protesters chanted, 'Our enemy is here! They lie that it is America!' Since the privatisation of Iran's state telecommunications company in the 2000s, the new owners have refused to pay wages on time. They have also reduced their health insurance contributions<sup>(82)</sup>.

On 20 March 2023, the government had approved the minimum wage for workers for the new Iranian year starting on the following day. According to the decision, the minimum wage of workers as well as of ordinary employees will be increased by 27 %, thus set at about 8 million tomans. This was announced after the final decision of the Supreme Labour Council, which is composed of representatives of the government, employers and workers approved by the regime. According to Article 41 of Iran's labour law, wages are to increase in line with the rate of inflation announced by the Central Bank of Iran. However, as inflation has reached new records almost monthly in the past few decades, the lawmakers added to the article that the wage should ensure the livelihood of a family with an average of 3.3 persons. According to Alireza Mahjoob, head of the state trade union House of Workers, this amounts to at least 15 million tomans per month – currently about 264 euros<sup>(83)</sup>. This means that the workers' monthly wage is far

(77) See for example Faucon, B., 'Iran's labor strikes give protest movement added momentum', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2022 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-labor-strikes-give-protest-movement-added-momentum-11666532352>); Safi, A., 'Iran intensifies crackdown against workers amid ongoing strikes', *IranWire*, 14 October 2022 (<https://iranwire.com/en/politics/108594-iran-intensifies-crackdown-against-workers-amid-ongoing-strikes/>). Information also based on interviews with Dr Nassim Mehran, an anthropologist working on workers' activism in oil-rich Khuzestan, November and December 2022, Berlin.

(78) 'Workers' strike in "110 industrial units" only in the first week of [Iranian month of] Ordibehesht' [in Persian], *Radio Farda*, 28 April 2023 (<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/workers-iran-strike/32383561.html>).

(79) Cited in '1. Mai im Iran: Verhaftungen und Entlassungen von Arbeiter\*innen' [May Day in Iran: Arrests and Dismissals of Workers], *Iran Journal*, 29 April 2023 (<https://iranjournal.org/news/1-mai-im-iran-verhaftungen-und-entlassungen>).

(80) 'Dismissal of 4,000 protesting workers in the south of the country/Leadership: Workers' protest is a help to the regime' [in Persian], *TejaratNews*, 29 April 2023 (<https://tejaratnews.com/اخراج-کارگران-پیمانگاز-پتروشیمی-1402->).

(81) 'Supreme Leader: They tried to pit the labour community against the regime, but they could not because of the intelligence of the workers' [in Persian], *Fars News Agency*, 29 April 2023 (<https://t.me/farsna/280299>).

(82) 'Streiks und Proteste: Arbeiter\*innen erhöhen den Druck' [Strikes and protests: Workers increase pressure], *Iran Journal*, 24 April 2023 (<https://iranjournal.org/news/streiks-arbeiter-iran>).

(83) Tehrani, M., 'Iran's government stabbing workers in the back' [Irans Regierung fällt Arbeiterschaft in den Rücken], *Iran Journal*, 31 March 2023 (<https://iranjournal.org/wirtschaft/irans-regierung-faellt-arbeiterschaft-in-den-ruecken>).

below the legally determined level. Most ordinary workers rarely receive more than the state-defined minimum wage. According to an Iran-based sociology lecturer, the monthly wages of workers cover only half of their minimum expenses<sup>(84)</sup>. And, according to various Iranian news outlets, more than 50 % of the population were living below the poverty line in the last Iranian year 1401 (March 2022–2023), while the economic daily *Jahân-e Sanat* puts the number at 60 %<sup>(85)</sup>.

Key challenges to workers participating more extensively in strikes include the potential divergent interests between permanent workers and contract workers, as well as their differing capacities to take risks, their lack of economic resources and the militarisation of Iran's energy industry, as it is largely controlled by the IRGC.

## The ingredients of a revolution

Against this backdrop, there are still additional elements that would need to materialise for the current protest movement in Iran to catapult the country into a *revolutionary situation*, one that is defined as 'a condition of "dual power" where an organised revolutionary force backed by millions would come to confront a crumbling government and divided security forces'<sup>(86)</sup>. This being the case, as well as fissures among the power and security apparatus, both a *quantitative and qualitative*

*expansion* of the revolutionary movement would be required. The former would involve street protests with hundreds of thousands of people, which would also galvanise the participation of others, while making it difficult even for security forces as fearsome as those in the Islamic Republic to crack down on them. In particular, this requires the active participation of those aged 25 to 40, a demographic group that has not yet extensively participated in street protests<sup>(87)</sup>. This would necessitate permanent strikes in key sectors of the economy and more active engagement from various social groups from the mainstream of society<sup>(88)</sup>. For these to materialise, a credible alternative to the regime would need to emerge that would be 'capable of garnering popular confidence'<sup>(89)</sup>. As the following section describes, efforts from both inside and outside of Iran – albeit in their infancy and fraught with important challenges – are underway towards forming a broad-based organised opposition that may possibly evolve into a credible alternative down the road. However, in the absence of such a revolutionary situation emerging and short of radical reform implemented by the regime, Iran risks 'a state of perpetual crisis and ungovernability', and as a result recurring waves of popular protests and state repression or a *de facto* counter-revolution, with the movement's protagonists being marginalised during the 'process of critical decisionmaking while the free-riders, counter-revolutionaries, and custodians of the *status quo* mov[e] to the center'<sup>(90)</sup>

(84) Ibid.

(85) "‘Jahân-e Sanat’ examines the phenomenon of rising poverty: A wrong half a century' [in Persian], *Jahân-e Sanat*, 14 August 2022 (<https://jahanesanat.ir/?p=279874>).

(86) 'Is Iran on the verge of another revolution?', op. cit.

(87) According to Jack Goldstone, an academic specialist of social movements and revolutions: see Jafari, S., 'A conversation with an expert on social movements: Is Iran on the verge of revolution?' [in Persian], Euronews Persian, 26 October 2022 (<https://persi.euronews.com/2022/10/26/exclusive-interview-jack-goldstone-protests-in-iran-revolution-social-movements-mahsa-amin>); see also the reaction of Asef Bayat, who agrees with Goldstone's take but adds the elements of temporality (as the emergence of a revolutionary situation may take time) and event (which may lead to a change in social norms and mental attitudes) to the analysis: Bayat, A., 'Mr. Goldstone's revolution and the rise of "woman, life, freedom"' [in Persian], Aasoo, 29 March 2023 (<https://www.aasoo.org/fa/articles/4265>).

(88) See also Böhme, C., 'Irans Führung verliert den Rückhalt' [Iran's leadership loses its support], *Der Tagesspiegel* (Berlin), 2 December 2022 (<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/internationales/irans-regime-und-die-proteste-ein-langfristiger-revolutionarer-prozess-8930479.html>).

(89) 'Is Iran on the verge of a revolution?', op. cit.

(90) Ibid. For a comprehensive discussion, see Kadivar, M. A., *Popular Politics and the Path to Durable Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2022.



## Domestic and opposition forces share their vision

Amid reflections on the revolutionary process and expectations of what a post-Islamic Republic Iran could look like, domestic civil society groups as well as diaspora groups have started to raise their voices and share their vision.

First, on 11 December 2022, the Neighbourhood Youth Alliance of Iran, or United Youth of Iran, issued a 43-article manifesto, whose demands can be deemed representative of the aspirations of Iranian society at large: the overthrow of the Islamic Republic; the ‘formation of an inclusive, democratic government’ that is secular (i.e. separates religion and state), respects ethnic, gender, political and religious diversity, and is committed to international conventions and charters, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the formation of political parties that ‘must have freedom of action within the framework of law, respect for the country’s territorial integrity, fundamental human rights, transparency, and [...] must abide by democracy’; a future government that will work for the welfare of citizens, particularly those incapable of providing for themselves without state assistance, provide free education and healthcare to all, protect the environment and ensure that the rich pay their taxes in proportion to their income; the right of the Iranian people to self-determination, citizens’ equality before the law, full gender equality, freedom of

belief and religion, freedom of speech, freedom to form trade and other unions, and personal freedoms; and last, but not least, a new Iranian foreign policy based on securing national interests, maintaining global peace and non-interference<sup>(91)</sup>.

This youth alliance recalls the case of Sudan before its 2018–2019 revolution, which could serve as a model for Iran. The driving force of the revolutionary movement there was the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an underground grassroots civil society network of associations of teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers and other professionals<sup>(92)</sup>. In Iran, such an association would ideally include representatives from the three major constituents of Iranian civil society, namely the women’s, labour and student movements, but also youth and marginalised ethnicities (which are the driving forces of the current protest wave, along with women) as well as trade and professional associations<sup>(93)</sup>. However, it is unclear whether such underground professional associations, tasked with organising protests, already exist in Iran.

Second, five months into the protests and coinciding with the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1979 revolution, 20 independent Iranian trade unions, feminist groups and student organisations released a joint charter calling for ‘fundamental economic, social and political reforms’. Their statement defines the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ movement as ‘the beginning of a social, modern and human revolution to free the people from all forms of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, tyranny, and dictatorship.’ At the outset, it notes that the end to the country’s ‘economic, political and social crisis’ is ‘unimaginable within the existing political framework’. The charter then lists the ‘minimum demands’

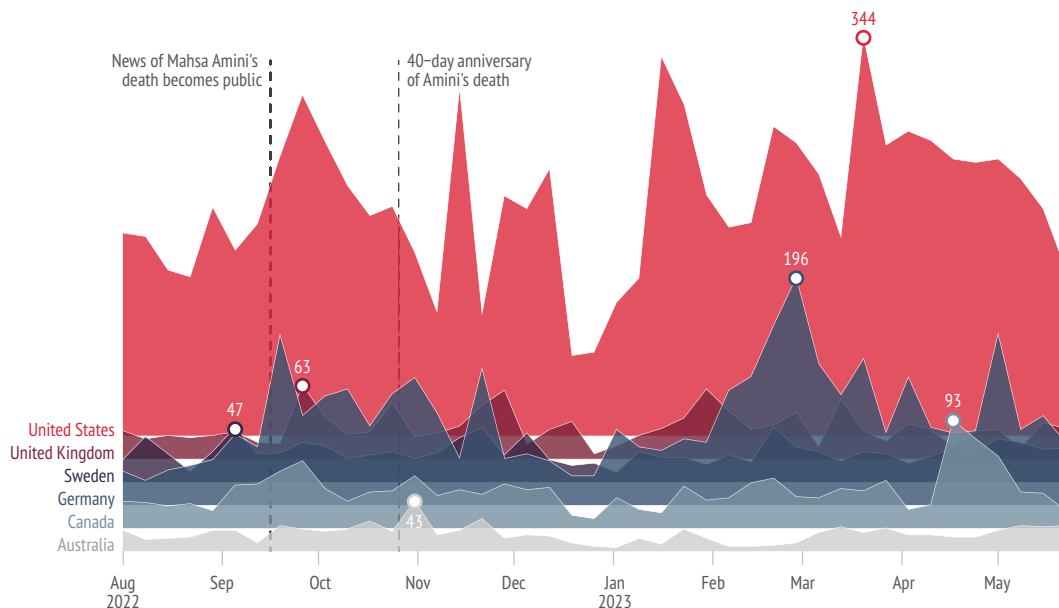
(91) For the manifesto (in Persian), see United Youth of Iran, Twitter post, 11 December 2022 ([https://twitter.com/UYI\\_fa/status/1601914147335200768?s=20t=zM2HAW4OghGKoZ-ByE7Tcw](https://twitter.com/UYI_fa/status/1601914147335200768?s=20t=zM2HAW4OghGKoZ-ByE7Tcw)); see also Sinaee, M., ‘Revolutionary youth groups in Iran publish manifesto for future’, Iran International, 11 December 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212111841>).

(92) Achcar, G., ‘Sudan’s revolution at a crossroads’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2020 (<https://mondediplo.com/2020/05/06sudan>).

(93) Fathollah-Nejad, A., ‘An Iran opposition coalition was long overdue: it’s an important step forward on the rocky road to change’, Atlantic Council, 5 January 2023 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/an-iran-opposition-coalition-was-long-overdue-its-an-important-step-forward-on-the-rocky-road-to-change/>).

## Weekly protests since Mahsa Amini's death

In selected diaspora countries, 1 Aug 2022 – 31 May 2023



Data: ACLED, 2023;

An earlier version of this graph was prepared by Samira Barzin, University of Oxford

in socio-economic, political and ecological matters that are also reflective of the interests of various social movements and endorses a 'revolution against every form of religious and non-religious tyranny that has been imposed over the past century' (94). Indeed, both documents can arguably be seen as offering blueprints for much-needed socio-economic, political and ecological change as well as for a post-Islamic Republic constitution. They are also the product of domestic social forces whose role will be crucial within the revolutionary process.

Third, by spring 2023, a number of messages of solidarity were conveyed by civil society activists and groups inside Iran, in support of radical transformation. A statement was released by activists of the revolutionary 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement and the women's movement – also marking eight months after the

protests started last September – expressing their solidarity with the nationwide workers' protests in late April. They referred to the workers' protests as the potential foundation for a general strike, which they considered as the 'key to victory' against the 'criminal government'. While describing the workers as the most oppressed section of society, their statement further stressed: 'We believe that the labour movement and the women's movement are inextricably linked with each other and have a long way to go in the fight against discrimination and inequality [...].' The statement was also signed by teachers, trade unionists, political, civil and labour activists as well as former political prisoners (95). Furthermore, on the occasion of International Workers Day (or May Day), a Charter of Freedom, Prosperity and Equality was released by civil society activists, aiming to bring the labour movement

(94) 'Trade unions issue charter of minimum demands', *IranWire*, 16 February 2023 (<https://iranwire.com/en/politics/113866-iranian-trade-unions-civic-groups-issue-charter-of-minimum-demands/>).

(95) 'Women's movement activists support workers' strikes: the solidarity of society is necessary against the system of oppression', *Iran International*, 9 February 2023 (<https://www.iranintl.com/202304295227>).

and its specific demands under the flag of the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ movement<sup>(96)</sup>.

On 10 December 2022, the Youth of Tehran Neighbourhoods (*Javânân-e Tehran*) urged the Iranian diaspora to ‘gather under one flag’ to support protesters in Iran<sup>(97)</sup>. Then, on New Year’s Eve 2022, prominent Iranian diaspora figures issued a statement of solidarity on social media in support of the revolution in Iran, forming a so-called coalition (*etelâf*). The unofficial group included the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and lawyer Shirin Ebadi, former Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, the women’s rights activist and journalist Masih Alinejad, the actress and Amnesty International ambassador Nazanin Boniadi, the actress and activist Golshifteh Farahani, the football legend and pro-revolution activist Ali Karimi, and the then-president and spokesman of the Association of Victims’ Families of Flight PS752, Hamed Esmailion<sup>(98)</sup>. Earlier, on 30 November 2022, Ebadi had suggested that such a coalition could assume a role during the transition period (i.e. between the demise of the Islamic Republic and the day of elections for a new Iran), which might also necessarily include negotiating with regime defectors,

as in the case of South Africa transitioning from apartheid<sup>(99)</sup>. At a widely noted meeting held at Georgetown University on 10 February, the group announced their intention to soon release a joint charter that ‘includes the demands of the people: something that relies on the declaration of human rights, on equality; that accepts the territorial integrity of Iran; and that reaffirms the decentralization of power’<sup>(100)</sup>, leading to the Charter of Solidarity and Alliance for Freedom (The Mahsa Charter) – briefly referred to as the *Manshour-e Hambastegi* – published a month later<sup>(101)</sup>. However, following internal dissensions, Esmailion<sup>(102)</sup> and Pahlavi left the group, with the others pledging to continue their work<sup>(103)</sup>.

In any case, despite their differences and even if they are not able to directly affect domestic dynamics in Iran itself, prominent opposition voices outside the country may provide the vast Iranian diaspora – whose combined net worth is believed to be roughly USD 2.5 trillion<sup>(104)</sup> – with a unified and thus more effective voice that could push the international community, above all the governments of the Western countries in which they reside, to increase pressure on Tehran<sup>(105)</sup>.

(96) ‘Charter of Freedom, Prosperity, Equality’ [in Persian], 1 May 2023 (<https://telegra.ph/-04-29-منشور-آزادی-رفاه‌پرایی-۱۰۴-۲۹>).

(97) Sinaee, M., ‘Teheran protest youth group urges coalition of opposition abroad’, Iran International, 11 December 2022 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212117502>). For the original tweet in Persian, see: [https://twitter.com/javanane\\_t/status/1601654225754214400](https://twitter.com/javanane_t/status/1601654225754214400).

(98) ‘An Iran opposition coalition was long overdue’, op.cit.; See also Farahzad, F., ‘Special interview with Hamed Esmailion, on the third anniversary of the shooting-down of flight PS752’ [in Persian], Iran International, 6 January 2023 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAUSigW1Vz8>).

(99) See her statements during the question and answer discussion moderated by Abbas Milani, ‘Shirin Ebadi: until we are free (film screening discussion)’, Stanford Iranian Studies Program, 30 November 2022 (<https://youtu.be/drdcB2dyqTo>).

(100) Masih Alinejad cited in ‘The Future of Iran’s Democracy Movement’, panel organised by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS), Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 10 February 2023 (<https://giwps.georgetown.edu/event/the-future-of-irans-democracy-movement-event/>).

(101) See ‘The charter of solidarity and alliance for freedom (The Mahsa charter)’, Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran, 9 March 2023 (<https://adffiran.com/en/docs/mahsa-charter>); ‘Exiled Iranian opposition figures release charter for “free, democratic” Iran’, *IranWire*, 10 March 2023 (<https://iranwire.com/en/news/114654-exiled-iranian-opposition-figures-release-charter-for-free-democratic-iran/>).

(102) See Hamed Esmailion’s statement on retiring from the group [in Persian] at: <https://twitter.com/esmailion/status/1649513329969229827>; and his first public interview on his decision: ‘Interview with Hamed Esmailion’ [in Persian], Iran International, 22 April 2023 (<https://twitter.com/IranIntl/status/1649842868897431554>).

(103) ‘Statement of four of the signatories of the Mahsa charter’ [in Persian], Interview with Masih Alinejad, Iran International, 26 April 2023 (<https://youtu.be/qREbEK88oUI>). See also Azizi, A., ‘After a failed coalition effort, where is the Iranian opposition headed?’, *IranSource*, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, 10 May 2023 (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/after-a-failed-coalition-effort-where-is-the-iranian-opposition-headed/>).

(104) ‘From dissatisfaction to mobilisation: the Islamic Republic’s perfect storm’, op.cit.

(105) ‘An Iran opposition coalition was long overdue’, op.cit.

# WHAT A POST-ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN WOULD MEAN FOR EUROPE AND THE WORLD

In this context, it is worth noting how a democratic Iran would also potentially benefit Europe. Advantages could include a sea change in Iranian foreign relations: namely an end to the destabilising 'axis of resistance' policies in the Middle East, which would also entail a significant reduction in the European resources devoted to countering their adverse effects in the region; an end to acts of terrorism carried out by the IRGC regionally and globally; a normalisation of relations with Israel and the United States; the removal of all sanctions and a revitalisation of trade with Europe, which would also massively increase Iranian energy exports, thus easing tensions in the world market; and a considerable decrease in refugee flows from Iran and Syria (where the Islamic Republic has been a major source of conflict).

Furthermore, the desire for a secular democracy is a product of a process of secularisation that has been gathering momentum in Iranian society over the past few decades<sup>(106)</sup>, and has led to a deepening socio-cultural gap between society and the state. To put it another way, it appears that many Iranian citizens aspire to 'de-Islamising' state and society four decades after the Islamic Republic embarked on the systematic Islamisation of Iran<sup>(107)</sup>.

While there are many unknowns so far, with regard to both domestic forces as well as the

stance taken by international players, the IRGC is likely to make every effort to preserve what might be called its 'full-spectrum dominance' in a post-Khamenei Iran. This could for example take the form of a shift in the ideological mix of Shia nationalism and Islamism towards a stronger emphasis on Iranian nationalism, thereby reducing the power of the clergy as well as the significance of the role of the Supreme Leader, effectively turning Iran into a *de facto* military dictatorship. Divisions within the IRGC between those professing religious fundamentalist beliefs and those with more secular leanings, however, as well as the positioning of Tehran's main external supporters, above all Russia, will have a significant influence. Furthermore, a loosening of social restrictions, such as on the hijab issue, similar to developments in Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, may be possible. As there is a widespread awareness among Iranians that the clergy and IRGC are equally responsible for the failure of governance, this would not necessarily diminish popular opposition. It would probably lead the 'long-term revolutionary process' to continue well into post-Khamenei Iran<sup>(108)</sup>.

## AN IRREVERSIBLE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS?

There has been a tendency in some Western policy and academic circles to put forward the notion of a *de facto* Iranian exceptionalism in the Middle East, which stipulates that there is popular distaste for revolutionary change

(106) Abdolmohammadi, P., 'The revival of nationalism and secularism in modern Iran', LSE Middle East Paper Series, No 11, November 2015 ([https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64581/1/\\_lse.ac.uk\\_storage\\_LIBRARY\\_Secondary\\_libfile\\_shared\\_repository\\_Content\\_LSE%20Middle%20East%20Centre%20Papers\\_Abdolmohammadi\\_Revival%20of%20nationalism%20Iran\\_2015.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/64581/1/_lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_LSE%20Middle%20East%20Centre%20Papers_Abdolmohammadi_Revival%20of%20nationalism%20Iran_2015.pdf)).

(107) See also Sasse, S., 'Armin Eschraghi: "Der Iran hat eine Entislamisierung erlebt"' ['Iran has experienced a de-Islamisation'], *Die Tagespost*, 2 January 2023 (<https://www.die-tagespost.de/politik/armin-eschraghi-der-iran-hat-eine-entislamisierung-erlebt-art-234533>); Golkar, S., 'The Mahsa Amini protests and the defeat of Islamism in Iran', Hudson Institute, 18 April 2023 (<https://www.hudson.org/mahsa-amini-protests-defeat-islamism-iran>)

(108) 'Can the Iranian system survive?', op. cit.

in Iran four decades after the tumultuous and traumatic experiences of the 1979 ‘Islamic Revolution’. However, as the Dey and Aban protests, and even more clearly the 2022 uprising, have demonstrated, Iranians are echoing the same revolutionary demands as those expressed in the slogans of the Arab Spring uprisings. The latter have been conceptualised as a ‘long-term revolutionary process in the Arab world’, driven by deeply rooted structural socio-economic and political grievances<sup>(109)</sup>. Not only does the Islamic Republic’s triple crisis mirror that of the Arab world and thus looks likely to continue to fuel further waves of anti-regime protests<sup>(110)</sup>, but it also suggests an Iranian version of a long-term revolutionary process that is predicated upon the same conditions as those prevailing in the Arab Middle East.

Interviewed by the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency in early 2019, a year after the Dey protests, the political scientist and strategist Mohammad-Reza Tajik articulated precisely this argument. Tajik, who has served as senior advisor to key reformist figures (both to President Khatami and to the former presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi) while heading the Khatami presidency’s Strategic Studies Centre and acting as his Vice-Minister of Intelligence in charge of psychological warfare, provided a sober assessment of the predicament in which Iran would find itself.

Drawing upon Antonio Gramsci and Alain Badiou, he stated: ‘The state of interregnum is a condition where the past is dying and the future cannot be born, tradition is dying [yet] the modern cannot be born, the ruling discourse is in the process of dying [and] cannot be reborn, like the reformist discourse’<sup>(111)</sup>.

Investigating the Dey and Aban protests, scholar Tareq Sydiq argues that ‘the experience of such events creates ruptures that shape the emergence of generations beyond demographic similarities. [...] Barring major changes to accommodate this development, the regime may be facing the emergence of a new generational group whose attitudes and strategies could shape politics in Iran for decades to come’<sup>(112)</sup>. This diagnosis, too, reinforces the argument that challenges the notion of Iranian exceptionalism and posits that Iran is in the midst of an irreversible long-term revolutionary process.

With the number of protests diminishing since mid-November 2022, it appears that a stalemate has set in, with neither the regime nor the protesters’ side being able to overwhelm the other, and the movement having entered a new phase of ‘strategic reflection and planning’<sup>(113)</sup>. Despite the relative decline in the number of protests, it is worth recalling that revolutionary processes usually entail phases of both relative calm and uproar. The same

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- (109) See Achcar, G., *The People Want: A radical exploration of the Arab uprising*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2013; Achcar, G., *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab uprising*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2016; Achcar, G., ‘The seasons after the Arab Spring’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 2019 (<https://mondediplo.com/2019/06/05/sudan>); ‘Prospects for the current protest uprising’ [in Persian], *Political Economy Critique* (Iran), 2 January 2018, (<https://pecritique.com/2018/01/02/انداز-های-خیزش-اعتراضی-کنونی>).
- (110) Fathollah-Nejad, A. and Palm, A., ‘MENA spring 3.0: the persistent “triple crisis” in Europe’s neighbourhood’, in Sus, M. and Hadeed, M. (eds), *European Security 2030: The results of the Dahrendorf foresight project*, Dahrendorf Forum, 2019, pp. 50–53 (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Dahrendorf/FINAL-LSE-DAHRENDORF-REPORT-Online.pdf>).
- (111) ‘Special interview with Mohammad-Reza Tajik: Is Iranian society on the verge of collapse?’, Tasnim News Agency, jointly conducted with *Farikhtegan* daily, 30 January 2019 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/11/10/1934719>). Gramsci’s famous dictum reads: ‘The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’ Hoare, Q. and Nowell Smith, G. (eds), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Lawrence Wishart, London, 1971, p. 276.
- (112) Sydiq, T., ‘Youth protests or protest generations? Conceptualizing differences between Iran’s contentious ruptures in the context of the December 2017 to November 2019 protests’, *Middle East Critique*, Vol. 31, No 3, 2022, pp. 201–219: p. 201 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19436149.2022.2087951?src=>).
- (113) Hadi Ghaemi, head of the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), cited in Massoud, R., ‘Iran: où en est le mouvement de contestation cinq mois plus tard?’ [Iran: Where does the protest movement stand five months later?], Radio Canada, 16 February 2023 (<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1956716/iran-mouvement-contestation-analyse-repression>). [Quote translated from French into English.]

was true in the year prior to the 1979 revolution<sup>(114)</sup>. Now, with a sharp drop in the value of the Iranian currency since the start of the year, protests driven by economic grievances may be expected, which as past events have shown could quickly turn political.

Crucially, when analysing the situation in Iran, one should beware of the pitfalls of pre-conceived assumptions and jaded perspectives, or, in other words, analytical prejudice. As the prominent historian Ali Ansari cautioned, 'long periods of stupor – reinforcing a sense of the "unchanging east" – can lead to both political and analytical complacency as regimes become over-confident and analysts become bored. It is precisely in such situations that we should become wary'<sup>(115)</sup>. Thus, foreign intelligence services also failed to foresee the 1979 revolution just a few months before it happened. Ansari cites Sir Anthony Parsons, the United Kingdom's then ambassador to Tehran, who later wrote 'our failure was not so much one of information but one of imagination', necessitating a 'considered application' of the latter when analysing today's Iran<sup>(116)</sup>.

In any case, it is likely that Iran's revolutionary process will continue, as the structural grievances driving it are likely to persist and even deepen, as a result of the political elite's neglect of the population's needs and its prioritisation of its own survival. As a result, the consequences, not just for Iran but for the wider region, are likely to be instability and turmoil for years, short of radical policy changes or, for that matter, a revolutionary transformation.

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(114) Rasler, K., 'Concessions, repression, and political protest in the Iranian revolution', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 61, No 1, 1996, pp. 132–152.

(115) 'Failures of imagination', op. cit.

(116) Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

# THE RISE AND FALL OF IRANIAN POWER

## Navigating a hostile regional environment

A tumultuous decade has passed since the height of the last Iranian nuclear crisis and the last sustained round of negotiations over Tehran's nuclear programme. Changes in the geopolitical landscape in West Asia since then include the relative ascent and decline of Iran's regional standing; a more assertive and expansive Iranian regional policy despite hopes of pacifying regional geopolitical tensions as enshrined in the preface to the JCPOA; the second wave of the Arab revolutionary uprisings ('Arab Spring 2.0') engulfing two countries central to the Islamic Republic's 'strategic depth' policy<sup>(1)</sup>, namely Iraq and Lebanon; and the United States' relative retreat from a multipolar Middle East coinciding with the increasing involvement of the non-Western great powers China and Russia in the region. Arguably, the success of Iran's Middle East policy and its ability to project power hinge upon the extent to which the United States is prepared to pursue a more robust strategy towards Iran, the strength of Iran's regional foes and the Islamic Republic's soft power standing in the region<sup>(2)</sup>. In fact, for Tehran's

defence establishment, both 'hard' and 'soft presence' (in the words of Supreme Leader Khamenei) are equally important for its power projection<sup>(3)</sup>.

15 years ago Tehran's geopolitical standing was stronger, reaching its apex by the mid-2000s amid the debacle of America's occupation of Iraq, which had resulted in Iran becoming the main powerbroker in the region. On the ground, Iran's offensive 'forward defence' counter-strategy against the US military occupations of neighbouring Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated its capacity to create trouble. Moreover, the Islamic Republic had become the Middle East's unrivalled soft power, as the incendiary anti-US and anti-Israel rhetoric of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) had captivated Arab public opinion, facilitated by the deafening silence of Arab leaders *vis-à-vis* Washington's and Tel Aviv's policies. This combination of hard and soft power arguably provided Iran with significant leverage in the nuclear negotiations with Washington leading to the 2015 JCPOA.

(1) Strategic depth is a concept used by the Islamic Republic to denote its regional sphere of influence, which is considered key to its security. In many cases, Iran's 'forward defence' strategy is deployed there. See *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, op. cit., pp. 209–214.

(2) Soft power can be defined in brief as the state's ability to further its interests and project power and influence by co-opting hearts and souls rather than by coercive means. See for example Nye, J., *Bound to Lead: The changing nature of American power*, Basic Books, London, 1990; Nye, J., 'Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept', *Palgrave Communications*, 21 February 2017 (<https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20178>).

(3) See Zimmt, R., 'Iran, the "Resistance Front" and the New World Order: Summary of a conference held at the Iran Supreme National Defense University', The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Israel Intelligence Heritage Commemoration Center (IICC), 23 May 2023 (<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-the-resistance-front-and-the-new-world-order-summary-of-a-conference-held-at-the-iran-supreme-national-defense-university-dr-raz-zimmt/>).

However, ever since, the Islamic Republic, imbued with a sense of geopolitical hubris, has overplayed its hand in regional geopolitics and has found itself overstretched in various theatres of conflict across the region (above all in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen)<sup>(4)</sup>, while still benefiting from relative weakness and blunders on the part of most of its rivals (especially Saudi Arabia). In addition, the Arab Spring uprisings demonstrated the decline of Iranian standing and soft power in the region. This was especially evident in the second wave of the Arab Spring, with mass anti-government demonstrations in Iraq (starting on 1 October 2018) and Lebanon (starting on 17 October) arguably constituting the second single most important event contributing to the decline of Iranian soft power in Arab public opinion. During the protests that took place in both countries, demonstrators chanted anti-Iranian slogans such as 'Out, out Iran!; Baghdad free, free!'<sup>(5)</sup> or 'This is Lebanon, not Iran!'<sup>(6)</sup>, signalling a turning point for Iran's standing in the Middle East<sup>(7)</sup>. Despite the decline of its soft power, Iran still pursued an expansive regional agenda (especially in Syria and Iraq), which was increasingly unpopular with its Arab neighbours, at both state and societal levels. Western powers were reluctant to directly engage in those theatres following the lessons the West had drawn from the 2003 Iraq War, and Europe did not wish to endanger Iranian goodwill and compliance with the JCPOA.

Moreover, prompted by the combination of the JCPOA's adverse effects, Iran's more offensive regional posture and deep concerns among traditional US Arab allies over Washington's

reliability as a security guarantor, new alignments between hitherto conflicting anti-Iran powers have emerged over the last 5 years.

## THE DECLINE OF IRANIAN SOFT POWER IN THE ARAB WORLD

The ebb and flow of Iranian soft power – briefly defined as the ability to win hearts and minds – is an important indicator of the prospects for Tehran's future influence in the region. A look at the evolution of Iran's regional standing is also important for the acceptance of an EU Iran policy in the Arab world, including among EU partners. In particular, as the Islamic Republic likes to portray itself as the chief force protecting Middle Eastern Shia communities, a closer examination of Iran's standing in two key states in West Asia with an important Shia presence, namely Iraq and Lebanon, may be warranted.

In the wake of the post-9/11 invasions and occupations by the United States as well as Israel's expansionary policies under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon (2001–2006), in the mid-2000s Iran's soft power influence reach its apogee in the Arab world, with Iran's President Ahmadinejad continuously being named

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- (4) See Azizi, H., 'A radical Iran: implications for the Persian Gulf and the Levant', in Jalilvand, D. and Vogt, A. (eds), 'Radicalization during the Rouhani Years: Iran's political shifts and their implications', Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin, 2021, pp. 29–35 (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/17699.pdf>); Azizi, H., 'Challenges to Iran's role in Iraq in the post-Soleimani era – complex rivalries, fragmented alliances, declining soft power', *SWP Comment*, No 44, July 2021, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin ([https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2021C44\\_IransRoleInIraq.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2021C44_IransRoleInIraq.pdf)); see also remarks made by Shafeeq Ghabra during a Brookings Doha Center panel entitled 'Iran in 2018 and beyond: amidst external and internal challenges', 26 February 2018, Doha (<https://www.brookings.edu/events/iran-in-2018-and-beyond-amidst-external-and-internal-challenges/>).
- (5) Ahmed, N., 'Iraq protests: slogans reflect anti-Iran sentiment', *Radio Farda*, 31 October 2019 (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iraq-protests-slogans-reflect-anti-iran-sentiment/30246333.html>).
- (6) Collard, R., 'Untouchable no more: Hezbollah's fading reputation', *Foreign Policy*, 27 November 2019 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/27/lebanon-protests-hezbollah-fading-reputation/>).
- (7) See Ostovar, A., 'After Soleimani', *New Lines Magazine*, 3 January 2021 (<https://newlinesmag.com/essays/after-soleimani>).



as the third most popular world leader up until 2011<sup>(8)</sup>.

However, developments since the 2010s have reduced Iran's standing in the region. The turning point that precipitated the collapse of Iranian soft power was Tehran's support for the embattled Assad regime in Syria from 2011 onwards, which contrasted with the Islamic Republic's initial embrace of the uprisings that had toppled pro-US autocrats in Egypt and Tunisia. Tehran's support for Assad adversely affected the way in which it was perceived in Arab public opinion right across the region, which now considered Iran the third-largest threat to the Arab world, just behind Israel and the United States. That view has not altered since<sup>(9)</sup>.

## The protests in Iraq and Lebanon

In 2018–2019, the second wave of the Arab Spring saw mass protests in Iraq and Lebanon, which targeted the countries' sectarian elites (including the Shia leaderships which were strongly supported by Iran) and political systems (of which Iran is part and parcel through its sectarian proxies), calling for the overthrow of the entire system – arguably the *leitmotif* of the Arab Spring. While protests took place predominantly in Shia-majority areas of Iraq, starting in Baghdad and then spreading south to Najaf and Basra, the protests in Lebanon took place across different cities, including

in the south, targeting the leaders of the Shia Amal Movement (Nabih Berri) and Hezbollah (Hassan Nasrallah). In Lebanon, on 29 October 2018, for the first time Amal Movement and Hezbollah supporters attacked protesters in central Beirut and destroyed their tents.

### The protests in Iraq and Lebanon displayed a distinctly anti-Iranian character.

The protests displayed a distinctly anti-Iranian character, even among those countries' Shia populations. While in a poll conducted in 2019–2020 an overwhelming total of 86 %

of Iraq's Shia population expressed negative views about Iranian foreign policy towards their country<sup>(10)</sup>, a mere 17 % of Lebanon's Shia community shared this impression<sup>(11)</sup>. However, even within the latter population group, negative perceptions of Iran's foreign policy in the Arab region doubled from 9 % in 2014 to 18 % in 2017–2018<sup>(12)</sup>.

These differences between Iraq's and Lebanon's Shia communities need to be accounted for. In Lebanon, the protests signalled the end of the long-held taboo among the country's Shia population against criticising Hezbollah and its Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, long seen as untouchable given their mantle of a religious-cum-political organisation<sup>(13)</sup>. In demonstrations in late November 2019, for instance, mostly young protesters chanted anti-Iranian slogans such as 'Terrorists, terrorists, Hezbollah are terrorists!', denouncing Iranian influence in their country. A week earlier, following the eruption of the Aban protests in Iran, protesters in downtown Beirut expressed solidarity and the fight for a

(8) Telhami, S., *Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey 2008*, University of Maryland, Baltimore, 2008, pp. 95–97; Telhami, S., *Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey 2011*, University of Maryland, Baltimore, 2011, p. 48.

(9) Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *The 2019–2020 Arab Opinion Index*, Doha, 2020, p. 32.

(10) Kamrava, M. and Dorzadeh, H., *Arab Opinion toward Iran 2019/2020*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2020, p. 10.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

(13) Author's conversation with two political activists involved in the 'Lebanese revolution' in 2019.

common cause by chanting 'From Tehran to Beirut, one revolution that won't die!' <sup>(14)</sup>

As in both Baghdad and Beirut the most powerful external actor is considered to be Tehran, it has been Iran that has the most to lose from a change in the *status quo*. This wave of protests in Iraq and Lebanon has therefore sent two worrying messages to the Islamic Republic: first, it challenges Iran's claim to speak in the name of Shia Islam in the Middle East; second, it echoes the street protests that have rocked Iran since 2018 and the related risk that they, too, may dramatically spiral out of control.

The Iraqi and Lebanese uprisings were stopped in their tracks as a result of the coronavirus pandemic that struck the world in 2020, due to a lack of overarching leadership and structure (especially in the case of Lebanon) and to the use of lethal repression (particularly in Iraq), leading to a sigh of relief in Tehran. In Iraq, in contrast to Lebanon, anti-Iranian sentiment was much stronger among the country's Shia majority. Tehran was seen as a chief supporter of Iraq's post-2003 Shia-dominated political class, whose corruption also left the Shia community there disillusioned. While in Iraq there is considerable resentment of Iranian tutelage among the Shia, in Lebanon Hezbollah continues to be the single most important player in the country as it experiences an existential economic crisis amid political stagnation <sup>(15)</sup>.

## Iran's role in the crackdown

The late Qassem Soleimani personified Iran's influence in the Arab world. He commanded the IRGC's foreign operations arm, the Qods Force, which plays a prominent role in implementing Iran's regional policies in West Asia, and he reportedly made appearances in both Iraq and Lebanon during the protests there. While in Lebanon there were only rumours of Soleimani being in Beirut in the fourth week of the protests <sup>(16)</sup>, his presence in Iraq was much more palpable.

If these protests were covered at all in Iran, the Islamic Republic tried to portray them as in both cases instigated by Tehran's enemies. In a speech on 30 October 2019, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei portrayed those protests as orchestrated by foreign powers and urged demonstrators to remain within the framework of the law – a rejection of protesters' calls for revolution – before implicitly calling on Iran's supporters there to suppress the protests <sup>(17)</sup>.

A week after the protests in Iraq broke out, Soleimani reportedly flew into Baghdad's Green Zone to chair a meeting of Iraqi top security officials (to the latter's surprise) in lieu of the prime minister. He was quoted as telling them 'we in Iran know how to deal with protests', adding 'this happened in Iran and we got it under control' <sup>(18)</sup>, probably a reference to the Dey protests of December 2017/January 2018, which were suppressed after about 10 days, and the 2009 Green Movement, when snipers killing protesters were prominently involved. In the days after Soleimani's

(14) Collard, R., 'Untouchable no more: Hezbollah's fading reputation', *Foreign Policy*, 27 November 2019 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/27/lebanon-protests-hezbollah-fading-reputation/>).

(15) Ibid.

(16) Kebbi, J., 'En Irak comme au Liban, l'Iran confronté à une situation inédite', *L'Orient – Le Jour* (Beirut), 30 October 2019 (<https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1193182/en-irak-comme-au-liban-liran-confronte-a-une-situation-inedite.html>).

(17) 'Iran's role in violence against protesters in Iraq and Lebanon', Radio Farda, 30 October 2019 (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-role-in-violence-against-protesters-in-iraq-and-lebanon/30244037.html>).

(18) "'We in Iran know how to deal with protests", Soleimani told Iraqi officials in surprise visit', *Associated Press*, 31 October 2019 (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/2019-10-31/ty-article/anti-government-protests-in-iraq-and-lebanon-threatening-irans-regional-influence/0000017f-f1fa-d497-a1ff-f3fa1c410000>).

visit, clashes between demonstrators and security forces escalated, with the death toll reaching over 100, while a number of protesters were shot by snipers<sup>(19)</sup>. Tehran is cognisant of the dangers spontaneous popular mobilisations could pose to regime survival, which helps explain the brutal tactics of its proxies.

There might also be some cross-border spillover effect, especially between the oil-rich provinces in southern Iraq and south-western Iran, where people face a similar set of socio-economic, political, environmental and water challenges<sup>(20)</sup>. Despite Tehran's official statements that Arbaeen – a key Shia religious festival with millions of pilgrims, also from Iran, travelling to Karbala on foot – demonstrates the bonds of brotherhood between Iranians and Iraqis, amid the 2019 Iraqi protests, the Iranian foreign ministry asked Iranians to postpone their trips to the south of Iraq (where the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala are located), in view of the high level of anti-Iranian sentiment among the demonstrators<sup>(21)</sup>.

In Iraq, the casualty figures of the 2018–2019 protests were quite high. A year later, the Iraqi Parliamentary Human Rights Committee reported that at least 319 people had been killed, and the Independent High Commission for Human Rights of Iraq said an additional 15 000 were injured<sup>(22)</sup>. The high level of violence

against peaceful protesters has also affected Tehran's reputation, as Iranian-backed Shia militias are believed to have been the main perpetrators of that lethal crackdown, further igniting protesters' outrage about Iranian interference in their country's affairs.

Before and after the 2019 protests, sporadic demonstrations in Iraq's Shia-dominated south against Tehran and its proxies took place. For instance, in 2018 and 2019, hundreds of Iraqis in the country's south opposed pro-Iranian groups, with angry crowds torching Iranian consulates in the major cities of Basra, Najaf (on both 27 November and 1 December 2019)<sup>(23)</sup> and Karbala.

Protest slogans denouncing Iranian influence have been more common in Iraq than in Lebanon. In Iraq, slogans chanted by protesters included 'Tehran out, Baghdad remains free!'<sup>(24)</sup> and 'Iran out, out – Baghdad, free, free!'<sup>(25)</sup>, while in Baghdad there were also chants against the IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani<sup>(26)</sup>. In Lebanon, the slogan 'All means all, and Nasrallah is one of them!' were heard in condemnation of the country's entire political class.

Iraq is probably the most essential terrain of Iran's strategic depth. Tehran does not want to see the resurgence of a strong Iraq that could wage war against it, as happened

## Iraq is probably the most essential terrain of Iran's strategic depth.

(19) In Iraq, the death toll was over 400. See Davison, J., 'Iraq protesters burn shrine entrance in holy city, PM quitting "not enough"', Reuters, 30 November 2019 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-protests-idUSKBN1Y4070>).

(20) See also Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Marx goes Gulf: the rise of the working class', in Gaub, F. (ed.), 'Conflicts to Come: 15 scenarios for 2030', *Chaillot Paper* No 161, December 2020, EUISS, Paris (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/conflicts-come>), pp. 17–20.

(21) 'Iran tells citizens to postpone travel to Iraq amid protests', Radio Farda, 29 October 2019 (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-tells-citizens-to-postpone-travel-to-iraq-amid-protests/30242412.html>).

(22) Tawfeeq, M., 'Iraq protests death toll rises to 319 with nearly 15,000 injured', CNN, 10 November 2019 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/09/middleeast/iraq-protest-death-toll-intl/index.html>).

(23) 'Iraqi protesters torch Iranian consulate for second time within week', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1 December 2019 (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iraqi-protesters-torch-iranian-consulate-for-second-time-within-week/30301841.html>).

(24) Raouf, H., 'Has Iran succeeded in extending its influence inside Iraq?' (in Arabic), *Independent Arabia*, 12 December 2019 (<https://www.independentarabia.com/node/78461/?العراق%20في%20مخيط%20نفوذها%20داخل%20العراق>).

(25) Al-Qalamji, A., 'The Iraqi Revolution that broke Iran's back' (in Arabic), *Al-Araby*, 22 November 2019 (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/الثورة العراقية التي قصمت ظهر ايران>).

(26) On the latter, see Zarqa, S., 'Demonstrators in Baghdad chant slogans against the commander of the Iranian Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani' (in Arabic), *Akhbar Alan* (Dubai), 24 October 2019 (<https://www.akhbaralaan.net/?p=354209>).

under Saddam Hussein, nor does it want to see a failed state in Iraq, as this would open spaces for anti-Iran terrorist groups (such as the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS) or states (especially the United States) to gain leverage there and effectively use Iraq as a launching pad for an attack on neighbouring Iran. Tehran also wants to retain its privileged access to Iraq's political class, many of whom were based in Iran during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Moreover, Tehran believes that Iraq's confessional make-up (about two thirds of the overall population are Shia) is receptive to Islamic Republic's power projection there. In other words, Iran will not let go of Iraq easily. Furthermore, in both the Iraqi and Lebanese cases, Iran has sufficient power to block any new government deemed detrimental to its interests.

However, given the fact that the factors that fuelled the uprisings have not gone away, the re-emergence of such protests with their distinctly anti-Iranian flavour is quite possible. Moreover, developments in both Lebanon and Iraq will continue to take centre stage in Tehran's foreign policy as they are both key to Iran's doctrine of strategic depth. Hezbollah, which is armed and financed by Tehran, is Iran's most formidable proxy deterring Israeli aggression against Iran and can be deployed (for example in Syria) and train other proxies (such as Yemen's Houthis). And Iraq, because of past historical animosities leading to the Iran-Iraq War, which has considerably shaped Iranian strategic thinking, and because of its geographical proximity, with a 1 599 km shared border, is often regarded as a key arena in terms of Iran's ambition to expand its 'strategic depth'. With the Iraqi protesters being largely millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), a new political generation was thus born, which given its strong distrust and antipathy towards Iran, will present a significant obstacle to the continuation of unabated Iranian influence in Iraq. Thus, despite the narrative that the Iraqi protests are driven by intra-Shia rivalry, be it intra-Iraq or between Iran and Iraq, they are primarily a consequence of Iraqis' deep dissatisfaction with their mostly Shia rulers and their Iranian patrons.

## FROM ANTI-IRAN ALIGNMENTS TO THE IRAN-SAUDI DEAL

While the JCPOA has been successful in non-proliferation terms by effectively curbing Iran's nuclear programme, Tehran has invested an important part of the economic dividends that have accrued to it as a result of the JCPOA into the expansion of its regional activities and its ballistic missile programme, much to the chagrin of regional foes as well as Arab populations more generally. For this reason, Iran's regional enemies (Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), as well as a considerable portion of Arab public opinion, have come to see the JCPOA and Obama's Iran policy in retrospect as handing the region to Tehran on a silver plate, thus turning out to be detrimental to those states' geopolitical standing and Arab peoples' political emancipatory ambitions alike.

Furthermore, as a result, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have built powerful links with and lobbies in key Western countries, had demanded to be included (or at least have their interests taken into consideration) in the already ongoing Iran talks, after they had been sidelined during the Obama era.

This set of grievances and demands later fed into discussions about renegotiating the JCPOA following the United States' withdrawal from it in 2018 and the desire of many regional players to seek a 'JCPOA plus' that would also address those areas neglected during the Obama era, namely Iran's regional policies, its missile programme and ideally its dismal human rights record.

Meanwhile, the emergence of an Arab-Israeli camp expressly formed against Iran was formalised with the Abraham Accords in September 2020 and more recently on display at the Negev Summit in March 2022. This development has drawn strong condemnation from Tehran, including from the commander of the IRGC, Major General Hossein Salami. After

the Negev Summit, he warned ‘some regimes on the southern side of the Persian Gulf’ that ‘the continuation of such relations [with Israel] is not acceptable at all’, thereby making clear that such a coalition constitutes a security threat for Iran<sup>(27)</sup>. For Tehran, the Abraham Accords have extended the arc of threat from Israel all the way to its southern shores; Tehran fears that Israel may station important military and/or intelligence assets in countries on the Persian Gulf. However, the accords have merely formalised cooperation among the parties that was already known to Iran, and the UAE is reluctant to antagonise Tehran as both have in recent years engaged in exchanges between high-level security officials<sup>(28)</sup>.

In a major development, in March 2023 Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to restore diplomatic relations and re-open embassies within two months. In 2016, both cut diplomatic ties after extremist mobs had attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad after Riyadh had executed Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr<sup>(29)</sup>. These assaults on Saudi Arabia’s diplomatic missions, probably tolerated by the regime, had belied expectations of Iranian moderation post-JCPOA. According to the statement released by Saudi Arabia, both Tehran and Riyadh have now agreed to respect mutual state sovereignty, not to intervene in each other’s internal affairs and to seek to enhance regional and international peace and security<sup>(30)</sup>. The deal, whose exact contents are unknown, was signed in China, which is

the most important trading partner for both Riyadh and Tehran, while being the largest buyer of Iranian oil, mostly illicitly given US extra-territorial sanctions. It seems likely that according to secret clauses of the deal, Tehran may have agreed to stop arming Yemen’s Ansar Allah (the Houthis rebel forces) thereby bringing an end to the war on Saudi Arabia’s southern borders<sup>(31)</sup> and attacks of Iranian proxies in Iraq against Saudi Arabia, in return for Riyadh refraining from supporting Iranian opposition groups or TV channels, according to an outlet close to Tehran<sup>(32)</sup>.

The agreement took place after the failure of five rounds of talks in Iraq and Oman over the preceding two years. For the Saudi kingdom, the deal could bring more security, avoiding a repetition of the September 2019 drone attacks – blamed on Iran – which halved oil production at its Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais, and thereby facilitate reaching its grand strategic Vision 2030<sup>(33)</sup>.

In Iran, important state-run dailies such as *Kayhan*<sup>(34)</sup>, which is widely regarded as the mouthpiece of Supreme Leader Khamenei and has previously criticised the Saudi government, have welcomed the normalisation of relations with Riyadh, hailing it as a victory against the United States and Israel. However, neither the Supreme Leader nor the IRGC have publicly reacted to the deal. Instead, shortly after the deal was announced, on the occasion of his address for the Iranian New Year,

(27) ‘Israeli presence in Persian Gulf region a cause of insecurity: IRGC chief warns’, Tasnim News Agency, 31 March 2022 (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/03/31/2689022/israeli-presence-in-persian-gulf-region-a-cause-of-insecurity-irgc-chief-warns>).

(28) Motamedi, M., ‘UAE’s top security official visits Iran to develop “warm ties”’, Al Jazeera English, 6 December 2021 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/6/uaes-top-security-official-visits-iran-to-develop-warm-ties>).

(29) Fathollah-Nejad, A., ‘Iran and Saudi Arabia: The impending storm’, Qantara.de, 6 January 2016 (<https://en.qantara.de/node/22283>).

(30) ‘Iran and Saudi Arabia agree to restore relations’, Al Jazeera English, 10 March 2023 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/10/iran-and-saudi-agree-to-restore-relations>).

(31) On the latter, see Nissenbaum, D., Said, S. and Faucon, B., ‘Iran agrees to stop arming Houthis in Yemen as part of pact with Saudi Arabia’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 March 2023 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-agrees-to-stop-arming-houthis-in-yemen-as-part-of-pact-with-saudi-arabia-6413dbc1>).

(32) Illaik, H., ‘Exclusive: The hidden security clauses of the Iran-Saudi deal’, *The Cradle*, 12 March 2023 (<https://thecradle.co/article-view/22445/exclusive-the-hidden-security-clauses-of-the-iran-saudi-deal>).

(33) On the latter, see the official webpage at <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>.

(34) ‘Agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia: A blow to America and the Zionist regime’ [in Persian], *Kayhan*, 10 March 2023 (<https://kayhan.ir/fa/news/261634/توافق-ایران-و-عربستان-ضربه-کارتی-جه-آمریکا-و-زیم-صهیونیسمتی>).

Khamenei emphasised Iran's determination to support the 'axis of resistance' <sup>(35)</sup>. Before, on the very day on which the deal was announced, Khamenei stressed that Iran's presence in the Middle East is 'our strategic depth; this itself is a means of strengthening the *Nezâm*' <sup>(36)</sup>. Indeed, the Islamic Republic's identity and survival are interwoven with the axis of resistance, making it unlikely that the Iranian leadership will sacrifice its regional influence for the sake of normalising ties with Saudi Arabia.

After years of Tehran perceiving no need to normalise relations with Riyadh, as it felt that it had the upper hand in regional geopolitics, arguably the combination of unprecedented internal challenges (i.e. the revolutionary protests) and external pressure (the danger of international isolation) following the 2022 protests pushed it to seek *détente* <sup>(37)</sup>. Thus the Islamic Republic was able to pull off a major coup on the international stage by portraying itself as a constructive player in international security <sup>(38)</sup>.

Given the increasing international isolation of the Islamic Republic as a result of its harsh crackdown on the protesters, the Chinese-brokered agreement with Saudi Arabia is a political victory for Tehran. As a result of recent developments the Islamic Republic's legitimacy has been significantly dented both domestically and internationally, which is why Iranian authorities needed to reduce tensions and threats. As such, the deal allows Iran to return to the headlines as a country that has

taken a step towards ensuring regional peace and security.

## The Chinese-brokered agreement with Saudi Arabia is a political victory for Tehran.

However, whether the deal will prove to be lasting is far from certain. The Islamic Republic is unlikely to abandon its 'axis of resistance' policy in the Middle East, which has been the main source of tensions between Tehran and Riyadh. Sponsoring militia groups in the Arab world is inherently linked to

the ideological self-conception of the Islamic Republic and is also seen as providing indispensable 'strategic depth' for Tehran to counter perceived threats to its survival. Put in a different light, Tehran will have to deal with an emerging dilemma as it needs to reconcile two grand strategic preferences: the 'axis of resistance' and the 'Look to the East' policy with China at its core. Pursuing the former strategy risks alienating Beijing and its efforts at pacifying a region on which it relies for the bulk of its energy supply. This unstable equilibrium presents a serious challenge for the Iranian leadership in the future. Managing regional ambitions and deepening ties to non-Western great powers, particularly China, requires a delicate balancing act that could have significant implications for the Islamic Republic. Moreover, the nuclear *impasse* could escalate, with Israel deciding to strike Iranian nuclear infrastructure and Iran extending the war into several regional states, as suggested by a senior Iranian nuclear and foreign policy advisor <sup>(39)</sup>. In the scenario of such a military confrontation pitting Iran against Israel and/or the United States, Riyadh would be forced to

(35) 'Leader of the Revolution: What the enemy means by transformation is to change the identity of the Islamic Republic/ We reject participation in the war in Ukraine' [in Persian], Fars News Agency, 21 March 2023 (<http://fna.ir/3bocm3>).

(36) 'Statements during the meeting with members of the Assembly of Experts for Leadership' [in Persian], Khamenei.ir, 10 March 2023 (<https://khl.ink/f/49769>).

(37) Fathollah-Nejad, A. and Naeni, A., "'Maximum pressure' gears up: Protests drive Iran's Saudi deal", Qantara.de, 4 April 2023 (<https://en.qantara.de/node/49692>).

(38) Khosrozadeh, B., 'Kommt die Monarchie zurück?' ['Will the monarchy come back?'], *Wiener Zeitung*, 20 March 2023 (<https://www.wienerzeitung.at/meinung/gastkommentare/2182078-Kommt-die-Monarchie-zurueck.html>).

(39) See Koelbl, S., 'Iran und die Nuklearbombe: Wie tickt Teheran?' [Iran and the nuclear bomb: How does Tehran tick?], Interview with Nasser Hadian, *Der Spiegel*, 4 April 2023 (<https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/iran-und-die-nuklearbombe-wie-tickt-teheran-a-26e98a18-8f27-43a8-862b-f4f331e874a0>).

rely on US protection rather than pursue normalisation of relations with Tehran<sup>(40)</sup>.

## CONTENDING WITH AN ANTAGONISTIC REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Protests in Iraq and Lebanon pose a huge challenge to Iran, which has the most to lose in both theatres given its role as the most influential foreign player in the two countries. The more violently its allies and proxies act against the demonstrators, in an effort to safeguard Iran's power gains in both countries, the more rapidly Iran's soft power may deplete in the eyes of the people there. Moreover, given scarce domestic resources, any propping up of its Iraqi and Lebanese allies will come at the expense of funds needed at home, which could then pave the way for further social unrest in Iran itself. In addition, the anti-sectarian nature of the Iraq and Lebanon protests is perhaps the most vivid reminder of the limits of trying to understand the politics and faultlines in the region through the prism of sectarian rivalries.

This may have seriously affected the future of Iran's 'strategic depth' in West Asia, undermining the regime's key claim that the region's Shia are loyal to the Islamic Republic and supportive of its regional policies. One of the main arguments for Tehran's vital role *vis-à-vis* the region's Shia was that, amid the geopolitical turmoil in the region since 9/11,

the Shia would look to Iran as the guarantor of their survival amid hostile policies pursued by Sunni groups (such as ISIS) and powers (Saudi Arabia), Israel and the United States.

Amid the normalisation of relations between Tehran and Riyadh, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced that President Raisi has received an invitation from the King of Saudi Arabia to visit the Kingdom and has also invited Salman bin Abdulaziz to Tehran<sup>(41)</sup>. In this context, a Gallup poll was released, showing that the 'approval of Saudi Arabia's leadership is higher than Iran's in all 13 [Muslim-majority] countries surveyed in 2022'<sup>(42)</sup>. The survey shows that Saudi soft power is almost three times greater than that of Iran (with a median approval rating of 39 % vs 14 %), even in countries where the Islamic Republic's influence is significant. In Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen (Syria has not been polled) – which Tehran considers as fundamental geographical components of its strategic depth – Iranian leadership is approved by merely 14 %, 19 % and 12 % of respondents respectively, while approval of Saudi Arabia stands at 39 %, 35 % and 26 %, i.e. more than double that of Tehran. As a case in point, while Iran has invested in its pro-Palestine policy since 1979, approval of Iranian leadership in the Palestinian territories only stands at almost half of that of Saudi Arabia<sup>(43)</sup>. As a result, Tehran's soft power appears to be waning, amid a shifting and volatile geopolitical landscape in the Middle East.

(40) See also Steinberg, G., 'Abkommen zwischen Iran und Saudi-Arabien: Ende der diplomatischen Eiszeit?' [Agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia: End of the diplomatic ice age?], German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), 23 March 2023 (<https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/abkommen-zwischen-iran-und-saudi-arabien-ende-der-diplomatischen-eiszeit>).

(41) 'The Iranian government officially invited the King of Saudi Arabia to visit Tehran' [in Persian], *BBC Persian*, 17 April 2023 (<https://www.bbc.com/persian/world-652985849>).

(42) Loschky, J., 'Saudi Arabia's soft power outshines Iran's', *Gallup News*, 19 April 2023 (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/474251/saudi-arabia-soft-power-outshines-iran.aspx>).

(43) *Ibid.*

# IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY FROM ROUHANI TO RAISI

## Continuity and change

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a multifaceted and complex affair. It is driven by both ideological and material considerations <sup>(1)</sup>. Ideologically, the triad of Iranian nationalism, revolutionary Islamism and Third-Worldism has informed post-revolutionary Iranian foreign policy. There is therefore a strong degree of continuity amid some changes.

The main changes that have occurred pertain to geopolitical preferences held by various presidents, for instance Rouhani's Western orientation versus Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's and Ebrahim Raisi's Eastern-oriented outlook. For Hassan Rouhani, the geopolitical priority was to engage in 'constructive engagement' with the West with the aim of bringing about a diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear conflict in order to have onerous economic sanctions removed. Such economic relief was deemed crucial to ensure the security of the regime

– a belief embedded in the 'developmentalist' foreign policy school of thought associated with him <sup>(2)</sup>.

In contrast, Raisi stressed that it was important not to interweave Iranians' economic well-being with the fate of the JCPOA and economic sanctions. Instead, he hoped to draw economic benefits from a deepening of Iran's 'Look to the East' geopolitical orientation and by building stronger domestic economic capacities and boosting the country's economic self-sufficiency (a policy dubbed 'the resistance economy'), while pledging to grant full support to the Tehran-led 'axis of resistance' <sup>(3)</sup>. However, to show the strong degree of continuity, it is important to recall that Rouhani's engagement with the West was green-lighted and approved by the Supreme Leader himself, and could not have taken place without his assent. For that matter, Raisi's rise to the presidency

(1) For a comprehensive discussion, see *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, op.cit.

(2) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Revisiting Rouhani's school of thought: a critical discussion of its developmental and foreign policy doctrines', in Zaccara, L. (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Term (2013–2017)*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, pp. 43–56.

(3) In his first press conference as President-elect, Raisi's answers illustrated his views on foreign policy. He stressed that Iran will support Palestinian 'resistance' groups, while he rejected the idea of meeting with the US president even if Tehran's negotiation aims are realised. Meanwhile, Raisi asked the West to recommit to the JCPOA while he reiterated Iran's official position not to engage in talks with the West over its missile programme and its Middle East policies. He also stressed his willingness to expand the relationship with China. Later, Rouhani, in his first public meeting with his successor, Raisi, assured him that from now on he and all the members of his former cabinet were fully prepared to serve the President-elect: 'Rayeesi welcomes views by experts, thinkers', Fars News Agency, 19 June 2021 (<https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14000329000698/Rayeesi-Welcomes-Views-by-Experts-Thinkers>).



was only rendered possible because Khamenei *de facto* facilitated his ascension to power<sup>(4)</sup>.

Meanwhile, the most strategic areas of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy (namely regional policies and interactions with Washington) do not depend on a change of administration in Tehran, but are dominated and controlled by the key centres of power, namely the Supreme Leader's Office (a parallel quasi-government with thousands of employees) and the IRGC. Even in the Rouhani era, those two fundamental policy areas were dictated by the latter entities.

Continuity can also be seen in the primacy of regime interests over what may be labelled national interests, as the two are not congruent<sup>(5)</sup>. The so-called *Maslahat* principle, introduced in a 1988 *fatwa* by the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, to counter challenges to the newly consolidated state, is meant to safeguard the highest interests of the state in its pursuit of domestic politics or foreign policy, i.e. its overriding purpose is to secure the preservation of the regime<sup>(6)</sup>. In contrast, Iran's national interests, understood as benefiting the entire population, may warrant a distinctly different foreign policy, namely one centred on economic development and good relations with all states regardless of ideological affinities or enmities.

## Continuity can also be seen in the primacy of regime interests over national interests.

In the nuclear realm, the regime's focus is on benefiting from a deal politically and economically. Politically, the Islamic Republic benefits from the constant state of neither peace nor war with the United States, as it needs this managed enmity or confrontation to bolster its rule and legitimacy among its social base. Moreover, Tehran wants to be able to claim political victory whenever it deals with Washington. Economically, Tehran prioritises the interests of state and semi-state entities when it comes to dividends from sanctions relief. It is against this backdrop that, in the diplomatic process geared towards reviving the JCPOA, Tehran called on the United States to reverse the designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organisation by the State Department and, when that was rejected by the Biden administration, then demanded the removal of sanctions against Khatam al-Anbiya, the giant construction arm of the IRGC<sup>(7)</sup> – both demands that go beyond the JCPOA's framework and demonstrate the prioritisation of regime over national interests.

Before the recent monopolisation of power by the wider conservative camp, the factional divisions between so-called moderates and hardliners had exerted a certain impact in the area of foreign policy. On the one hand, influential Western media and pundits have routinely depicted the moderates as the only establishment faction that is eager to improve the country's strained relations with the West

(4) On the 2020 presidential elections, see Fathollah-Nejad, A., *Iran 1400 Brief: Beyond the headlines (Special edition: candidates' profiles)*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Middle East and North Africa ([https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/iran-weekly-5-updated\\_o.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/iran-weekly-5-updated_o.pdf)).

(5) This distinction was also made in the context of the nuclear conflict by the prominent German Iran-born intellectual Navid Kermani, who was also considered as a possible candidate to be the next President of Germany in 2016. In an interview on the occasion of Joe Biden's accession to the White House, he described the 'cardinal mistake' of the JCPOA, of which he was no enemy, as its 'one-sided' concentration on the nuclear deal, thus ignoring Tehran's foreign policy and, more importantly, its human rights record – this last barely featuring as a topic among senior policymakers. The result had been the misleading Western belief that, if it isolated one aspect of foreign policy, Iran 'would then be stable'. He then contended that 'Iran reacts to pressure pertaining to human rights.' Kermani finally argued that all these aspects need to be combined, while making an offer to the regime to respond to such demands. See Rohde, S., Interview with Navid Kermani, 'Orientalist Kermani zum Atomabkommen – "Nicht ein Problem isolieren und denken, dann sei Iran stabil!"' [Middle East scholar Kermani on the nuclear deal – 'Not isolating one problem and thinking Iran would then be stable'], Deutschlandfunk, 24 January 2021 (<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/orientalist-kermani-zu-atomabkommen-nicht-ein-problem-100.html>).

(6) *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, op. cit., pp. 224–225.

(7) See 'Nuclear talks: Iran offers concession on IRGC terror designation for sanctions relief', *Middle East Eye*, 19 June 2022 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-nuclear-concession-remove-irgc-terror-list-sanctions-relief>).

and to engage with it on issues of contention between the two parties. On the other, hardliners have been exclusively referred to as the enemies of the West and as friends of China, Russia and Iran's proxies in the Middle East<sup>(8)</sup>. However, such a facile and superficial reading ignored a number of key developments. For instance, it was under the Rouhani administration that Iran improved its relationship with Russia and the two countries initiated security and military cooperation in Syria. Also during this time, Tehran and Beijing signed a 25-year accord, which the Iranian side calls a 'strategic partnership'<sup>(9)</sup>. Furthermore, Iran's footprint in the Middle East significantly expanded during the 8 years of Rouhani's presidency. As in many areas of domestic politics, the Raisi administration is likely to be characterised by a strong degree of continuity in foreign policy. After all, the top decision-makers in Iranian foreign policy and with responsibility for key national security questions have remained unaltered, namely the Supreme Leader's Office and the IRGC. In addition, both Rouhani and Raisi were confidants of Khamenei before assuming their presidencies: the former was his representative on the Supreme National Security Council for two decades, and the latter was appointed to top regime positions by Khamenei, most recently at the helm of Iran's powerful and notorious judiciary and of the Astan-e Qods Razavi economic empire in the country's vast north-east. As a way of invoking his absolute authority over foreign policy, Supreme Leader Khamenei urged the 2021 presidential candidates not to discuss foreign policy in their campaigns. Therefore, it is unlikely that Raisi will leave a distinctive imprint on Tehran's foreign policy, despite the radicalisation of the Iranian administration's discourse.

## IRANIAN STRATEGY TOWARDS THE WEST AFTER TRUMP

Basically, the Islamic Republic relies on precisely the same strategy as it did a decade ago. Tehran's aim is to see regime-destabilising sanctions lifted by creating a sense of panic that it is about to acquire a nuclear bomb and – before the recent exclusion of reformists from the corridors of power – by exaggerating Iranian factionalism regarding the willingness to engage with Washington.

However, as a sober analysis reveals, both strategies lack substance. An openly nuclear Iran could alienate Tehran's key Chinese and Russian partners, while forfeiting the chance to see Western sanctions relaxed. Regarding supposed Iranian factionalism, the reality is that Tehran's foreign and nuclear strategy continues to be largely a product of Iranian elite consensus geared towards the aim of regime survival, with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC calling the shots. Hence, in this regard, nothing major has changed with the transition from the 'moderate' Hassan Rouhani administration to that of the hardliner Ebrahim Raisi. During the 'moderate' Rouhani era, the West was pushed to offer maximum concessions to Tehran, lest hardline domestic rivals be enraged and step up their confrontational stance towards the West – raising the spectre of the JCPOA process collapsing and Iran leaving the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) altogether. Today, in the absence of the moderate-hardliner dichotomy in Iranian foreign policy, it is implicitly suggested that failing to offer maximum concessions to Tehran would transform Iran into an ultimately anti-Western power in close alliance with China and Russia. However, a closer examination of Tehran's ties

(8) See also Fathollah-Nejad, A. and Naeni, A., 'What explains the decline of Iran's moderates? It's not Trump', *Order from Chaos*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 15 June 2020 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/15/what-explains-the-decline-of-irans-moderates-its-not-trump/>).

(9) Office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 'Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China', 11 April 2016 (<https://www.president.ir/EN/91435>).

with Beijing and Moscow reveals that such a triple axis is more of a myth than reality<sup>(10)</sup>.

Rushing to revitalise the JCPOA in a compliance-for-compliance approach would indeed satisfy nuclear non-proliferation concerns, yet it would also be likely to forego the chance to nudge Tehran towards a more comprehensive deal down the road once major US sanctions were lifted, thus depriving Washington of much-needed leverage to push for an ‘Iran deal plus’ after the JCPOA had been resuscitated.

Meanwhile, the geopolitical situation in the Middle East has changed considerably over the past decade. Therefore, merely returning to the approach to Iran that prevailed during the Obama era and re-establishing the JCPOA is likely to help entrench existing regional rivalries rather than attenuate them.

## REVISITING IRAN’S NUCLEAR STRATEGY

The Islamic Republic had feared Trump’s re-election in the 2020 US presidential elections and the continuation of the highly onerous maximum pressure campaign with its crippling sanctions, despite Supreme Leader Khamenei’s proclamation of Iranian indifference as to who the next incumbent of the White House would be. Therefore, the Rouhani administration had explicitly welcomed Biden’s accession to power in Washington. Indeed, the Iranian regime had pinned its hopes upon the Biden administration easing sanctions, as Trump’s maximum pressure policy had massively undermined Iran’s economy and the Islamic Republic’s economic lifeline, costing an

estimated USD 200 billion over the course of nearly 3 years<sup>(11)</sup>. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Iran’s gross official reserves plummeted to a record low of USD 12.4 billion in 2019 and even further to only USD 4 billion in 2020, after formerly having averaged USD 70 billion in 2000 to 2017 and peaked at USD 122.5 billion in 2018<sup>(12)</sup>.

### Iran’s ‘maximum resistance’ policy

On 8 May 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA and instead pursued a maximum pressure campaign against Iran with the reimposition of US extra-territorial sanctions. Initially Iran counted on the EU’s promises to compensate for the economic benefits lost to Tehran because of Washington’s exit from the deal. After this option failed, as ‘political Europe’ could not convince ‘economic Europe’ to engage in trade with Iran under the looming threat of US sanctions, Tehran then embarked upon a ‘maximum resistance’ policy in response to US maximum pressure in order to gain much-needed concessions in terms of sanctions relief. It adopted a three-pronged strategy.

Firstly, it pursued a strategy of ‘nuclear escalation’: through gradually rowing back on its JCPOA nuclear commitments, Iran advanced its nuclear programme to the point of nearing the status of a nuclear-threshold state. This represented a return to Iran’s position prior to the 2012 Oman Channel breakthrough in US–Iran talks by creating a sense of alarm about Iran’s nuclear intentions and offering the international community a stark choice between letting Iran acquire a nuclear bomb and bombing Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. The latter

(10) See for example Grajewski, N., ‘Illusory entente: the myth of a Russia–China–Iran “axis”’, *Asian Affairs*, 2022 (<https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/illusory-entente-myth-russia-china-iran-axis>).

(11) Teibel, A., ‘Iran’s Rouhani says U.S. sanctions cost country \$200 billion’, *Bloomberg*, 31 December 2019 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-12-31/iran-s-rouhani-says-u-s-sanctions-cost-country-200-billion>).

(12) International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook: Trade-offs today for transformation tomorrow: Statistical appendix*, Washington, DC, April 2021, p. 22 (<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2021/04/11/regional-economic-outlook-middle-east-central-asia>).

option has even less support today than in the post-9/11 era<sup>(13)</sup>.

The leadership in Tehran feels that, if it can accumulate leverage by markedly stepping up its nuclear programme, it can then enter negotiations with Washington from a position of strength and not weakness.

Secondly, it demonstrated its capacity to create mischief throughout the region to its regional foes and US troops, through acts of sabotage and other destabilising actions carried out by its proxies (above all, in Iraq through Iranian-sponsored Shia militias targeting the US presence there) and using drones and missiles<sup>(14)</sup>. The climax was reached with the September 2019 drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's key oil installations in Abqaiq and Khurais.

The third component of Iran's strategy was 'hostage diplomacy': kidnapping and jailing Iranian-Western dual nationals on dubious charges in an effort to use them as bargaining chips in dealings with their Western homelands, in exchange for financial or political gain, and as a demonstration of another facet of Iran's power of nuisance<sup>(15)</sup>.

Despite some Western assumptions to the contrary, this Iranian strategy has been the result of cross-factional elite consensus forged at the Supreme National Security Council, thus mirroring Tehran's approach during the previous nuclear crisis after sanctions had begun to cripple the economy by the end of the 2000s. Now as then, Tehran has rejected the inclusion of non-nuclear topics in the JCPOA, namely its

regional policies and missile programme, as it fears too much pressure in those realms.

## SANCTIONS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There have been contentious debates over the merits of sanctions policy *vis-à-vis* Iran and whether sanctions are an effective tool to bring about desired changes, be it on the nuclear conflict resolution front or regarding state-society relations in Iran. While the Trump administration regarded sanctions as a magic wand to pressurise Tehran into changing its behaviour, the Biden administration in unison with the dominant discourse in the EU has regarded maximum pressure sanctions as having been clearly counterproductive towards Iran. The reality, however, suggests a more nuanced and complex picture<sup>(16)</sup>, which holds important lessons for the future of the EU's Iran policy.

Regarding conflict resolution and the Iran nuclear dossier, it has been conventionally argued that sanctions tend to polarise the opposing parties and thereby protract or even torpedo a diplomatic settlement. During the nuclear crisis of the 2000s, evidence of their supposedly counterproductive effects and hardening Iranian defiance was presented by referring to the intensification of Western sanctions accompanied by the escalation of Iran's nuclear

(13) See Koelbl, S., 'Iran und die Nuklearbombe: Wie tickt Teheran?' [Iran and the nuclear bomb: How does Tehran tick?], interview with Nasser Hadian, *Der Spiegel*, 4 April 2023 (<https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/iran-und-die-nuklearbombe-wie-tickt-teheran-a-26e98a18-8f27-43a8-862b-f4f331e874a0>).

(14) See for example Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Iran's risky "counter-pressure" against the fallout of Trump's "maximum pressure" policy: the 4 January twin incidents', *AMEC Insights*, Afro-Middle East Centre (AMEC), Johannesburg, 24 January 2021 (<https://www.amec.org.za/iran/item/1712-iran-s-risky-strategy-against-the-fallout-of-trump-s-maximum-pressure-policy.html>).

(15) See also Daragahi, B., "'Yes, I am threatening you': Iran's regime quietly spreads chaos in an unprepared West", *The Independent*, 13 February 2023.

(16) See also 'A harmful U.S. sanctions strategy? *Foreign Affairs* asks the experts', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2019 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2019-06-11/harmful-us-sanctions-strategy>).

programme after 2006<sup>(17)</sup>. In the current new phase of the nuclear crisis, this has been mirrored more lately by maximum pressure applied by the Trump administration being met by maximum resistance from Tehran, including nuclear escalation.

However, in contrast to the conventional account of sanctions policy inevitably entrenching the opposing sides more deeply in their respective positions, and Iran's foreign policy stance becoming even more uncompromising, especially regarding its nuclear policy, a sober evaluation of the situation dating from more than a decade ago offers a different and more nuanced conclusion. This pertains to identifying the tipping point after which sanctions may produce the intended change, in this case facilitating a diplomatic settlement of the nuclear conflict. By the turn of 2011–2012, sanctions pressure on Iran was rising significantly, as in early 2012 the EU joined Obama's crippling sanctions with its own financial (SWIFT) and oil embargoes. As Nasser Hadian, a prominent Iranian policy advisor, and Shani Hormozi explain in an article published in winter 2011, an 'important segment of the Iranian elite', because of a changing cost–benefit calculation, urged a change of policy from 'counter–containment' to 'engagement'<sup>(18)</sup>. In this vein, a senior Iranian foreign and nuclear policy advisor to the government confided to the present author that Tehran does not bow to strong sanctions pressure, only to extreme pressure. The latter, it appears, was thus established by the turn of the 2010s, resulting in a shift in Iran's cost–benefit calculus that rendered the breakthrough of the secret US–Iran Oman channel in 2012 possible, a precursor of the official nuclear negotiations between 2013 and 2015. The path to such diplomatic success was arguably paved by the extreme pressure of US and EU sanctions on Iran, and Washington dropping its maximalist zero enrichment demand on Iran<sup>(19)</sup>.

(17) See Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Why sanctions against Iran are counterproductive: conflict resolution and state–society relations', *International Journal*, Vol. 69, No 1, 2014, pp. 48–65 ([https://www.academia.edu/9191667/Why\\_Sanctions\\_against\\_Iran\\_are\\_Counterproductive\\_Conflict\\_Resolution\\_and\\_State\\_Society\\_Relations](https://www.academia.edu/9191667/Why_Sanctions_against_Iran_are_Counterproductive_Conflict_Resolution_and_State_Society_Relations)). The author has since revised that assessment; see *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, op.cit., pp. 301–308.

(18) Hadian, N. and Hormozi, S., 'Iran's new security environment imperatives: counter containment or engagement with the US', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No 4, 2011, pp. 13–55: p. 48.

(19) For a detailed account, see *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, op. cit. pp. 301–308.

# REVIEWING EUROPEAN POLICY ON IRAN

## The need for a paradigm shift

The JCPOA has been hailed as the EU's single most important achievement over the last few decades, as it demonstrated the success of multilateral efforts in addressing one of the gravest challenges to international security and to non-proliferation and disarmament in a region neighbouring the Union. The EU tirelessly engaged in the diplomatic process that successfully culminated in the July 2015 JCPOA, often acting as mediator between the two main antagonists, Iran and the United States. However, while it thereby allayed its nuclear non-proliferation concerns through a significant rollback of Iran's nuclear programme and the setting-up of a robust International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection regime, other areas of concern that arguably also adversely affect security and stability had been sidelined in this process.

## SIDE-EFFECTS OF THE JCPOA AND EUROPEAN EXPECTATIONS

The 2015 JCPOA substantially curtailed Iran's then-advanced nuclear programme, ensuring its peacefulness, as it was placed under a strict regime of IAEA inspection, which the IAEA confirmed in numerous reports. However, beyond its undoubted merit in securing nuclear non-proliferation, the JCPOA was closely associated with optimistic expectations in the West, especially Europe, about its wider ramifications. One expectation was that the removal of Western unilateral and UN multilateral sanctions and the revitalisation of trade, especially with Europe, coupled with a post-JCPOA political *rapprochement*, would lead to a gradual opening of Iran's polity as well as its economy (according to the dictum of 'change through trade and *rapprochement*'<sup>(1)</sup>) ultimately also ameliorating the Iranian population's political and economic conditions. Another was the pacifying of Middle East geopolitics, as envisaged in the JCPOA's preface ('[The parties] anticipate that full implementation of this JCPOA will

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(1) In German, *Wandel durch Handel und Annäherung* – which is rooted in the former West German Willy Brandt administration's *Ostpolitik* during the Cold War.

positively contribute to regional and international peace and security' <sup>(2)</sup>). The hope was that Tehran would reduce its destabilising regional footprint and start to turn into a constructive player that would have a less conflictual relationship with the West and with regional Western-allied foes. In other words, Iran's neighbours in particular hoped that Tehran's 'constructive engagement' with the West would translate into a moderation of its regional policies. However, a sober analysis of these two sets of expectations – which envisaged gradual and incremental rather than revolutionary changes – offers little evidence of their realisation. This has been a key reason why the JCPOA has remained vulnerable to criticism from a wide range of audiences.

First, regarding expectations of change through trade and *rapprochement*, we can distinguish between economic and political aspects. Economically, after the JCPOA's implementation in January 2016, when nuclear-related sanctions were ultimately removed, Iran experienced considerable GDP growth. However, since this was mostly driven by revived oil exports, the growth in GDP was not inclusive, that is, the revenue filled the coffers of the regime but did not reach the bulk of the population. The result was widening income inequality in Iran, which arguably paved the way for social frustration to set in among many Iranians soon after the JCPOA entered into force in January 2016, ultimately culminating in an outbreak of popular unrest with the nationwide protests at the turn of 2017–2018. However, these adverse effects on the ground were barely noted in Europe, where the focus instead lay on

## **I**n recent years Iran has had one of the highest execution rates in the world.

the JCPOA's macroeconomic dividends for Iran rather than on the socio-economic repercussions <sup>(3)</sup>. Moreover, an aggravating factor was the fact that the bulk of business agreements with Tehran benefited the economic empires of the IRGC, the Supreme Leader and the *bonyâds*. In fact, a year into the JCPOA's implementation, 90 out of almost 110 agreements worth at least USD 80 billion had been signed with companies owned or controlled by those state or semi-state entities <sup>(4)</sup>. This, of course, is hardly surprising given that the Islamic Republic's political economy is dominated by these regime conglomerates, while lacking a genuine private sector and free entrepreneurship. However, this means that the authoritarian state has been financially replenished and strengthened in this process. Politically, while a slight opening could be observed during the Rouhani presidency, civil society freedoms and the human rights situation in Iran both deteriorated <sup>(5)</sup>. In fact, in recent years Iran has had one of the highest execution rates in the world and the highest rate in the Middle East.

Second, regarding Iran's regional posture, expectations that the regime would moderate its stance were disappointed as Tehran pursued more intransigent policies to maintain and expand its power throughout the region, much to the chagrin of its Arab neighbours. In fact, it pursued a two-pronged, and indeed duplicitous, foreign policy. While Iran's president and foreign minister engaged in what they called 'constructive engagement' with the West, displaying a moderate façade, Iran's regional policies continued to be dominated by

(2) European Union External Action Service, 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', 14 July 2015 ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/8710/joint-comprehensive-plan-action\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/8710/joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en)).

(3) See for example Fathollah Nejad, A., 'The West's Iran policy: for real change through trade', Qantara.de, 23 August 2017 (<http://en.qantara.de/node/28703>).

(4) Torbati, Y., Sharafedin, B. and Dehghanpisheh, B., 'After Iran's nuclear pact, state firms win most foreign deals', Reuters, 19 January 2017 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-contracts-insight-idUSKBN15328S>).

(5) See for example Fathollah-Nejad, A., *The Politics of Culture in Times of Rapprochement: European cultural and academic exchange with Iran (2015–16)*, Wissenschaftsverlag WeltTrends, Potsdam, 2020, pp. 18–21.

the IRGC and the Supreme Leader's Office <sup>(6)</sup>. The complementary division of labour in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was eloquently described by Karim Sadjadpour: 'Soleimani serves as Khamenei's sword, projecting Iranian hard power in the Middle East's most violent conflicts. [Foreign Minister Mohammad-Javad] Zarif, in contrast, serves as Khamenei's shield, using his diplomatic talents to block Western economic and political pressure and counter pervasive "Iranophobia." [...] Soleimani deals with foreign militias, Zarif with foreign ministries' <sup>(7)</sup>. While the West was pleased with Tehran's engagement with foreign ministries, Iran's neighbours had to contend with the Islamic Republic's foreign militias on their soil. As a result, the gap between the two sides in the perception of the JCPOA's merits and shortcomings could not be starker.

Even during the nuclear negotiations, Arab concerns emerged over US acquiescence to Iran's expanding support for Syria's Assad regime, in an attempt not to derail the ongoing nuclear negotiations <sup>(8)</sup>. In fact, Iran deepened its investments in its regional proxies and its missile programme – both seen as major security threats by its Arab neighbours. Tehran's policies fuelled rather than pacified the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, while contributing to escalating tensions with Saudi Arabia and Israel, two important EU partners.

## Tehran's policies fuelled rather than pacified the conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

## THE SHADOW OF THE OBAMA DOCTRINE

The Obama Doctrine was motivated by legitimate concerns about the catastrophic consequences of the 2003 US-led war on Iraq with its geopolitical fallouts, which were rightly considered to be strategic blunders for US interests, including Iranian regional empowerment and creating the conditions for the emergence of ISIS.

However, despite these valid criticisms of a militarist and myopic use of US power, basically the baby was thrown out with the proverbial bathwater: rigid non-interventionism became the new mantra as opposed to the enthusiasm for interventionism that characterised the neoconservative Bush/Cheney years. Both approaches can arguably have counterproductive policy outcomes. The Obama Doctrine effectively paved the way for military interventions by regional powers (above all Iran) and non-regional powers (e.g. Russia) to fill the military vacuum left by the United States in the Middle East. As a case in point, the Obama administration opted for a non-interventionist policy in post-2011 Syria, while Tehran and Moscow deliberately filled that void with their own military interventions <sup>(9)</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the Obama Doctrine viewed authoritarian stability as preferable to US military actions against those autocracies. This was seen most clearly in the case of Assad's Syria but was also evident in US

(6) Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'German-Iranian relations after the nuclear deal: geopolitical and economic dimensions', *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 18, No 1, 2016, pp. 59–75: pp. 64–67 (<https://www.insightturkey.com/fathollah/germaniranian-relations-after-the-nuclear-deal-geopolitical-and-economic-dimensions>).

(7) Sadjadpour, K., 'The return of Iranian hardliners' favorite moderate', *The Atlantic*, 7 March 2019 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/07/return-of-iranian-hard-liners-favorite-moderate-pub-78546>).

(8) See for example National Union for Democracy in Iran, Twitter post, 2 August 2022 (<https://twitter.com/NUFDIran/status/1554483912423788544>).

(9) See for example Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Iran and Syria's war: fighting "terror" publicly, mourning the dead secretly', *Al Jazeera English*, 1 May 2018 (<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iran-fighting-terror-publicly-mourning-dead-secretly-180430140249437.html>).



foreign policy in Yemen and Libya, where the United States allowed outside powers and internal strongmen to be the leading players in both conflicts. Tremendous human suffering was a by-product of this passive Obama-led US stance.

When it comes to Iran, the Obama Doctrine-inspired school of thought is cognisant of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy interests, some of which can be considered legitimate. More generally, advocates of this viewpoint do not fall into the trap of looking at regional geopolitics solely through the prism of Iran, unlike the former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and stalwart Trump allies Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and Muhammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia. Yet this view tends to overestimate the legitimate interests of the Islamic Republic and underestimate the malign effects and even rationales of Tehran's regional strategy. Most notably, it fails to take account of the tension that prevails between the interests of regime elites and those of the Iranian nation.

Thus, this school of thought may have a tendency to downplay the fact that Iran has effectively overplayed its hand in the region over the past decade, laying the foundations for the loss of its former soft power and instead fuelling considerable anti-Iranian sentiment, which was most vocally on display during the Iraqi and Lebanese Arab Spring 2.0 uprisings. In other words, in today's regional geopolitics, a more promising and effective Iran policy would require a reading and an approach that are different from those of the Obama era.

## STEERING A COURSE BETWEEN BELLIGERENCE AND APPEASEMENT

Debates on Iran policy have usually centred on the false choice between belligerence (i.e. the use of military force) and quasi-appeasement in the name of diplomacy (i.e. acquiescence in the face of Iranian threats and escalations). However, the middle ground between these options has not been sufficiently explored. While, in the context of the JCPOA, European policy towards Iran has been focused on engagement and providing incentives, the importance of pressure to help produce desired policy outcomes has been largely neglected. While it is true that Tehran's leaders have resisted even strong pressure, on occasions when the pressure has become acute, they have opted to drink the proverbial 'poisoned chalice' – a phrase invoking Ayatollah Khomeini's delayed acceptance of a UN ceasefire to end the Iran–Iraq War. More recently, drinking from the poisoned chalice was translated into showing 'heroic flexibility' in negotiations, as called for by Supreme Leader Khamenei on the eve of the official JCPOA talks when the pressure of 'crippling sanctions' had become too extreme (see chapter 4)<sup>(10)</sup>.

Moreover, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on Biden's watch provides significant insights into the administration's foreign policy doctrine, which in that context almost coincided with the Obama Doctrine. US military retreat, like non-intervention, may prove initially useful given the domestic unpopularity of wars being fought far away from home, as well as providing a semblance of security. The reality, however, is that the vacuum left by a US retreat provides space for non-Western great powers, all of which are authoritarian

(10) See also Bozorgmehr, N., 'Ayatollah invokes "heroic flexibility" to justify Iran deal: Iran's supreme leader insists the US has made more concessions', *Financial Times*, 15 July 2015 (<https://www.ft.com/content/33a7545c-249b-11e5-9c4e-a775d2b173ca>).

and therefore prefer authoritarian alliances, to intervene and shape the fate of those nations. The result is, often, less instead of more security, whether for the West or for the countries in question. The case of Iran, despite the absence of a viable military option, is comparable insofar as too conciliatory an approach is unlikely to persuade Iran to change course, but is rather likely to help cement regime strategies and thereby ultimately betray the hopes and aspirations of Iranian citizens and many Arabs in countries subjected to heavy Iranian influence. In sum, a new foreign policy doctrine urgently needs to be developed – especially now after the US fiasco in Afghanistan and the revolutionary process in Iran – in order not to repeat the mistakes of the Obama Doctrine, which ultimately failed to bring about pacification in the Middle East as envisaged by the JCPOA's preface.

## AUTHORITARIAN STABILITY: PARALLELS BETWEEN THE CASES OF RUSSIA AND IRAN

Russia's invasion of Ukraine took place in the wake of multiple efforts by European leaders to seek dialogue with President Vladimir Putin over his military build-up on Ukraine's borders on a scale not seen since World War II. Russia's actions have led to a new understanding in Europe's policy circles that a long-held paradigm of its foreign policy may no longer be sustainable, and may even amount to

appeasement, paving the way for autocratic aggression. The West's decades-long reliance on authoritarian stability has been rationalised as an effective means to ensure security, even at the price of tolerating the rule of autocracies, and is underpinned by the view that positive change will be attained in those authoritarian contexts only if the West patiently engages in political *rapprochement* and economic trade. The Ukraine episode may have dealt a decisive blow to the long-held hegemony of this central foreign policy paradigm. That has led political and security experts to acknowledge the fallacy of this approach, one based on the premise that, by itself, dialogue with autocracies may serve security and peace interests, as recent events have shown that pursuing such a path has the potential to undermine rather than uphold those goals.

Nonetheless, it is questionable to what extent the new foreign policy paradigm that seems to be emerging in key European states such as Germany<sup>(11)</sup>, which are thus drawing closer to Eastern European states that have traditionally been more aligned with the US position on Russia and Iran, will produce a similar rethinking and reorientation of Western policy on Iran. The revolutionary protests engulfing Iran since mid-September 2022 have prepared the ground for a new Iran policy, which should translate into more Western pressure on both Iran's domestic human rights record as well as its regional and ballistic missile policies.

The authoritarian stability paradigm that has driven much of US and European policy towards the region derives from Western states' aim of ensuring stability in authoritarian states that are regarded as strategic, in many cases in order to prevent disruptions to the free flow of oil, the outbreak of war and – more recently, and especially in the case of

(11) See for example Krause, J., 'Deutsche Sicherheitspolitik muss mehr sein als Friedenspolitik' [German security policy ought to be more than peace policy], *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14 December 2021 (<https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/deutsche-sicherheitspolitik-muss-mehr-sein-als-friedenspolitik-ld.1659337>); Maihold, G., Mair, S., Müller, M., Vorrath, J. and Wagner, C. (eds), 'German foreign policy in transition: Volatile conditions, new momentum', SWP Research Paper, No 10, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, December 2021 ([https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2021RP10\\_GermanForeignPolicy.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2021RP10_GermanForeignPolicy.pdf)); Saxer, M., 'Decoding the German *Zeitenwende*', Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft (IPG), Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Berlin, 9 March 2022 (<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/decoding-the-german-zeitenwende-5776>); Barker, T., 'The Berlin elite's Ukraine dilemma', *New Statesman*, 22 April 2022 (<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2022/04/olaf-scholz-the-berlin-elite-ukraine-dilemma>).

Europe – waves of refugees fleeing war-torn regions and heading west.

Another crucial element associated with this paradigm is expressed in the dictum ‘change through trade and *rapprochement*’. The concept suggests that positive change in authoritarian contexts can be attained only if the West patiently engages in economic trade and political *rapprochement*.

However, the 2010–2011 revolutionary Arab Spring uprisings (whose second wave unfolded in 2018–2019), anti-regime protests in Iran (2017–2018, 2019 and 2022) and, more recently, Russia’s war on Ukraine, have demonstrated that a policy predicated upon authoritarian stability premises cannot be regarded as sustainable in the long term. This paradigm can produce short-term stability through political, diplomatic and economic support given to the states concerned. Yet this policy, which can *de facto* end up cementing authoritarian rule, tends to embolden the ruling elite, which in all these cases also controls the countries’ political economy, thus amplifying the power gap between the authoritarian state and civil society. Therefore, sooner or later, as seen throughout the Middle East, authoritarian regimes’ iron-fist rule coupled with the pursuit of economic policies exacerbating poverty and social disparities lays the ground for popular anti-regime protests.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has spurred an intense debate in core EU countries about pundits painting a false and rosy picture of Putin’s Russia. In Germany, *Russland-Versteher* (literally ‘Russia understanders’, designating those who profess empathy or even sympathy with Moscow and its policies) have long dominated the country’s political and media discourse on Russia. In the wake of the invasion of Ukraine their role has come under scrutiny and been sharply questioned. In a variation on this debate on the *Russland-Versteher* and their key tenets, one could easily replace ‘Russia’ with ‘Iran’, as there are striking similarities if not outright parallels. The core assumptions that have long undergirded policy towards, and pundits’

beliefs about, Moscow and Tehran, may be summarised as follows:

- > Europe prefers to deal with big powers, often seen as geopolitical and civilisational equivalents, thereby neglecting to take into account the interests of the ‘buffer zone’ states in between. In the Russian case, the buffer zone has comprised Eastern European states; in the Iranian case, it has consisted of Iran’s western (the so-called Levant) and southern neighbours (the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf). In both cases, these states have lamented that Western or European engagement with Moscow or Tehran ignores their historical experiences and threat perceptions, and is ultimately harmful to their interests. This approach entails a tendency to disregard and even sideline the states and nations in the buffer zone, whose agency is effectively undermined, as they are often regarded as natural and thus legitimate spheres of influence for their bigger neighbours, politically, economically and even militarily. In the Iranian case, this translates into disdain for Arabs and their civilisational status – a view one senior French diplomat once aptly described to this author as a reflection of European ‘neo-orientalism’. In this context, Iran has been seen as a civilisational peer worthy of ample European attention and engagement.
- > The maxim of ‘change through trade and *rapprochement*’ is based on the belief that economic and political engagement with the Russian and Iranian regimes would sooner or later translate into economic and political liberalisation gaining a foothold in those countries, ultimately leading their regimes to become less repressive. Here, wishful thinking and the imposition of preconceived beliefs have often prevailed over a clear-eyed assessment that may end up contradicting those rosy expectations. In fact, it is doubtful that autocracies would invest the dividends from trade and closer ties with the West to provide more economic and political space for their civil societies, which would *de facto* help undermine their own dominance over them.

- > Connected to the second assumption is a certain sympathetic perception of Iranian and Russian leaders (e.g. Presidents Rouhani and Putin) bordering on glorification of their personas (hailed as 'modern' or 'moderate'), political and economic agendas (seen as 'reformist') and even political systems (described as 'regulated democracy'), effectively providing legitimacy for European *rapprochement* with them.

These striking similarities show that the case of Russia may be by no means the only instance of such misapprehensions or outright delusions, which entail dramatic and far-reaching repercussions for security in Europe and beyond, as Russia's war on Ukraine has painfully shown. The major consequences of such misconceptions are policy failures and the lack of strategic foresight.

Now Iran is likely to return to the centre-stage of international security, given the 2022 protests and its ever-advancing nuclear programme, while there is uncertainty over the possibility of reviving the JCPOA which was designed to rein in Tehran's nuclear aspirations. As a result, Europe needs to revisit some of its long-held assumptions about the Islamic Republic in order to avoid falling into another trap of self-deception with dramatic consequences down the road.

There has been a long-held concern among European policymakers that a more robust Iran policy would inevitably drive Tehran into the embrace of a powerful anti-Western global alliance with China and Russia. These fears

may have grown stronger given the possibility of a deepening East-West rift following Russia's war on Ukraine<sup>(12)</sup>. However, a look at the nature and evolution of Iran's relations with these great powers indicates that the prospects of such an anti-Western alliance taking shape are far from certain. Whereas during the 2000s Iran's relations with non-Western great powers were a function of their respective relations with the United States<sup>(13)</sup>, today the situation has changed, given the escalating conflict pitting Russia against the West. To guard against unprecedented external and internal pressures, Tehran envisages long-term comprehensive partnerships with both China and Russia, which it hails as strategic. It has already signed a 25-year pact with Beijing in March 2021 and plans to sign a 20-year co-operation pact with Moscow. Both agreements lack transparency, fuelling wild speculation

about their contents and raising fears about a regime sell-out of national interests and resources to these like-minded autocracies for the sake of gaining external guarantors of its survival<sup>(14)</sup>. However, both sets of bilateral relations are marked by a power asymmetry, putting Iran in the weaker position, especially as long as it is in conflict with the West, which both China and Russia fully know how to exploit. Moreover, despite their pledges, both powers have failed so far to make any major investments in Iran, deepening scepticism within the country as regards their reliability. It is this context that should help alleviate European concerns about Iran 'being lost' to China and Russia.

## Europe needs to revisit some of its long-held assumptions about the Islamic Republic.

(12) Khan, M., 'The unexpected consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *National Interest*, 22 March 2022 (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/unexpected-consequences-russian-invasion-ukraine-201314>).

(13) *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*, op.cit., pp. 288–299.

(14) On China and Iran, see Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Hic sunt dracones: is Iran set to forfeit its national interests to China?', *Qantara.de: Dialogue with the Islamic World*, 21 August 2020 (<https://en.qantara.de/node/41192>); Knipp, K., 'Iran looks to partner with China, as the West steps back', *DW English*, 1 August 2020 (<https://www.dw.com/en/iran-china-25-year-deal/a-54403582>); Fathollah-Nejad, A. and Naeni, A., 'The Islamic Republic's timely vaccine against U.S. pressure? Iran-China 25-year cooperation programme', *Qantara.de: Dialogue with the Islamic World*, 7 April 2021 (<https://en.qantara.de/node/43802>). On Iran and Russia, see for example Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the nature of Iranian-Russian relations', *Middle East Institute*, 21 March 2022 (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-invasion-ukraine-and-nature-iranian-russian-relations>).

Moreover, Europe's embargo on Russian oil has led some policy circles in Europe to look towards Iran as an alternative source of oil, thereby heightening the value of a revived JCPOA for Europe. In early May 2022, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said 'Europeans will be very much beneficiaries from this deal' as the 'the situation has changed now', adding that 'it would be very much interesting for us to have another [crude oil] supplier' <sup>(15)</sup>. However, in the wake of the revolutionary protests in Iran, it appears that this goal has been shelved, at least for now. In addition, sanctions against Moscow have made Iran and Russia competitors for oil exports, with Moscow's 30 % discount on its oil sales exceeding Iran's own discount, as both countries' exports mainly go to China, thus ultimately disadvantaging Tehran <sup>(16)</sup>. Yet, when it comes to accessing Iranian energy resources, Europe should consider Tehran's existing and planned long-term agreements with China and Russia. In this context, there are grounds to believe that Tehran has already granted both privileged access to its energy reserves and exploration rights: the large Chalous gas field in the Caspian Sea to Russian companies and the Persian Gulf oil to Chinese companies <sup>(17)</sup>. Such alleged Iranian concessions will complicate Europe's potential quest for energy in Iran.

## TOWARDS A NEW IRAN POLICY

In this section, focusing specifically on Iran, the potential benefits as well as possible limitations of a new transatlantic foreign policy towards authoritarian powers will be evaluated, one that sets aside the long-dominant authoritarian stability paradigm in favour of a new approach that regards aspects of human security <sup>(18)</sup> (most notably, respect for human rights and inclusive socio-economic development) as guiding principles. Such a new paradigm would make it possible to bridge the alleged gap between values and interests as driving forces for foreign policy action. This ambition is in fact in accordance with the EU's own proclaimed aims, enshrined already in its 2016 Global Strategy, proposing the foreign policy concept of 'principled pragmatism', which aims to combine 'a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment' with 'an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world' <sup>(19)</sup>. In this context, it is important for the EU to realise that interests and values are not necessarily mutually exclusive and contradictory concepts. Rather, there are grounds for arguing that promoting values such as human rights as well as political and social inclusion are highly relevant to produce stability in the long term. This has been demonstrated by the revolutionary processes in Europe's neighbouring regions (both in the Arab world and Iran) which called into question assumptions about authoritarian stability, a narrative subscribed to by the West as it facilitated

(15) Quoted in 'EU makes last-ditch effort to save Iran accord', *Financial Times*, 7 May 2022 (<https://www.ft.com/content/8d0a6389-0692-4fa6-8296-9fc745e410ca>).

(16) 'Russian oil selling at 30% discount to global benchmark, data show', Bloomberg News, 31 May 2022 (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-31/the-deepening-discounts-on-russian-oil-in-the-country-s-own-data>); Batmanghelidj, E., 'EU embargo of Russian oil spells trouble for Iran', Bourse Bazaar Foundation, 31 May 2022 (<https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2022/5/31/eu-embargo-of-russian-oil-spells-trouble-for-iran>).

(17) On the Russian part, see Fathollah-Nejad, A., 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the nature of Iranian-Russian relations', Middle East Institute, 21 March 2022 (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-invasion-ukraine-and-nature-iranian-russian-relations>).

(18) The concept of human security assembles insights from development studies, international relations, strategic studies and human rights. The concept was first comprehensively set out in the *Human Development Report 1994*, United Nations Development Programme, Oxford University Press, London, 1994 (<https://www.undp.org/publications/human-development-report-1994>).

(19) EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A stronger Europe – A global strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, p.8 ([http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf)).

the advancement of its own strategic interests there.

In this context, the revolutionary protests that started in September 2022 as well as Iran's military assistance to Russia's war on Ukraine can be seen as game-changing developments, which have made any further engagement with Tehran quite costly for Europe. Instead, a policy of pressure through sanctions and geopolitical containment appears to be the more realistic way forward. Such a reorientation in Western policy is appropriate regardless of whether the Islamic Republic falls or not<sup>(20)</sup>. For, as experience has shown, engaging in trade and *rapprochement* has not yielded the desired changes in the Iranian regime's behaviour either domestically or in terms of foreign policy, with the Islamic Republic primarily interested in furthering its own narrow interests.

To recalibrate its policy posture *vis-à-vis* Iran, Europe must forge greater unity both at continental and transatlantic levels. First, a unified European position on Iran would avoid opportunistic behaviour by single states (as is on display with the current policy on Russia and the lack of a unified stance); if this turns out to be too difficult to achieve, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom should formulate a common policy in unison. Second, a cohesive transatlantic Iran policy needs to be devised, to counter Tehran's repeated

efforts to drive a wedge between Europe and the United States. Adopting such a cohesive transatlantic approach would significantly enhance the West's tools of power and influence over Tehran.

In both cases, a unified stance is essential to augment the leverage exerted on Tehran and obstruct the Islamic Republic's efforts to exploit differences and divisions within Europe, and the West more generally, to advance its own interests. Failure to demonstrate such unity will only reinforce Tehran's view of Europe as an ultimately insignificant or secondary power, and of the West as lacking resolve and unable to act decisively and in a coordinated manner. It has been precisely this perception of Western weakness and its lack of a Plan B beyond the revival of the JCPOA that has fuelled Iran's offensive policies and strategies over the last few years.

In addition, while the war in Ukraine may have made Europe more inward-looking, Iran's military assistance to Russia in the conflict has demonstrated that the Iranian challenge is not confined to the Middle East and has a global, including European, dimension<sup>(21)</sup>. Tehran's involvement in the Ukrainian theatre of war, in conjunction with the revolutionary protests, has prepared the ground for European policymakers to start contemplating a new Iran policy.

(20) Steinberg, G., 'Proteste im Iran: Das Regime wankt nicht' [Protests in Iran: The regime does not waver], *Internationale Politik*, 29 November 2022 (<https://internationalepolitik.de/de/proteste-im-iran-das-regime-wankt-nicht>).

(21) 'Iran agrees to ship missiles, more drones to Russia', *Reuters*, 19 October 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-iran-agrees-ship-missiles-more-drones-russia-defying-west-sources-2022-10-18>); Nissenbaum, D. and Faucon, B., 'Iran ships ammunition to Russia by Caspian Sea to aid invasion of Ukraine', *Wall Street Journal*, 24 April 2023 (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-ships-ammunition-to-russia-by-caspian-sea-to-aid-invasion-of-ukraine-e74e8585>).

## CONCLUSION

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## REGAINING LOST WESTERN CREDIBILITY

To prepare the ground for such a paradigm shift in transatlantic foreign policy would necessitate a critical review of the assumptions underlying the notion of ‘authoritarian stability’, a unified or at least coordinated European and by extension transatlantic policy, and a reappraisal of European interests in an era of heightened systemic rivalry between democracies and autocracies. The latter requires that democracies unite against an emerging international alliance of autocracies<sup>(1)</sup>.

A central challenge for a new values-based transatlantic foreign policy is the West’s credibility deficit in terms of truly advancing human rights and democracy worldwide<sup>(2)</sup>. Arguably, the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ and US-led invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan can be seen as the ‘original sin’, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties<sup>(3)</sup>, which has undermined the West’s credibility in the eyes of many around the globe and even among a considerable section of Western intelligentsia. To

retrieve that lost credibility, therefore, requires as much consistency and avoiding of double standards as possible.

A new foreign policy paradigm should aim to advance human security in the countries concerned, while recalibrating our understanding of Western democracies’ national interests. Such a new approach could help re-establish much lost faith in values propagated by the West – which in fact are universal ones – and ultimately create a more sustainable basis for helping to ensure long-term stability and security in the Middle East.

## BUILDING UP EU DETERRENCE AGAINST IRAN

So far, EU policy on Tehran has been limited to ensuring the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme by trying to salvage the JCPOA. Yet, regardless of the deal’s fate, two other core policy and security challenges are likely to endure: (i) Iran’s destabilising and assertive regional

(1) See e.g. Applebaum, A., ‘The autocrats are winning’, *The Atlantic*, December 2021, pp. 42–50 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/the-autocrats-are-winning/620526/>).

(2) This was clearly on display in the statements by Samir Saran, the president of India’s main think tank, the Observer Research Foundation, during the World Economic Forum in Davos, in the panel ‘Russia: what next?’ on 23 May 2022 (<https://www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2022/sessions/russia-what-next>).

(3) See Wagner, J. (ed.), *Body Count: Casualty figures after 10 years of the ‘War on Terror’ – Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan*, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Washington, DC, 2015 (<http://www.psr.org/news-events/press-releases/doctors-group-releases-startling-analysis.html>).

policies, increasingly accompanied by expanding ballistic missile and drone programmes<sup>(4)</sup>; and (ii) Iran's systematic and grave violations of the basic rights of its citizens, amid a probably irreversible schism between state and society, which seriously calls into question regime stability. Therefore, a new comprehensive approach would need to address all these issues, embedded in a policy of applying pressure on Tehran and containing Iran regionally. In exchange for course corrections in those two areas of concern, incentives could be offered, which however should not serve to empower the regime to the detriment of civil society aspirations. Rather, Western policy should focus on warning Tehran about the costs of continuing its malign activities in both the domestic and international arenas, followed by the imposition of punitive economic and political measures in the event that Iran disregards those demands.

Most importantly, the EU should build up its deterrence against Iranian threats. In tandem with transatlantic coordination where the United States would provide the military backbone, elements of European deterrence would involve the threat of downgrading diplomatic and economic relations with Tehran (and acting on this threat in the event that Tehran refuses to modify its behaviour), the imposition of sanctions against the ruling establishment and

## **The Islamic Republic is unlikely to risk a larger confrontation with the West.**

activating the JCPOA's so-called 'snap-back' mechanism.

Triggering this mechanism would lead to the reimposition of UN sanctions in the event of 'significant non-performance of commitments under the JCPOA', which could be done ahead of the expiry of the JCPOA's sunset clauses in October 2023. Tehran enriching uranium to near-weapons grade levels in February 2023 could arguably provide the basis for the latter condition<sup>(5)</sup>.

In retaliation, Tehran could exit the NPT and thus end all remaining IAEA inspections in the country, thereby signalling its intention to proceed with acquiring the nuclear bomb. However, in doing so it would hugely increase the risk of military action against it at the hands of Israel and/or the United States, with Europe possibly aligned in the latter's camp, which could also imperil the survival of the regime in the event of a larger conflagration. While it is true that Europe should not take any form of Iranian threats (of retaliation) lightly, it should also refrain from taking them at face value, bearing in mind that for Tehran regime survival constitutes the highest priority. In this vein, the Islamic Republic is unlikely to risk a larger confrontation with the West, despite its regular proclamations to the contrary.

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- (4) The Islamic Republic is arguably the single most important destabilising factor in West Asia, with its policies undermining state stability and structures in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. While Israel is still viewed negatively by many Arab populations, Tehran's extensive regional meddling has led to Iran being regarded as the most important geopolitical threat, a perception which paved the way for the Abraham Accords.
- (5) Gambrell, J., 'Iran acknowledges accusation it enriched uranium to 84%', *Associated Press*, 23 February 2023 (<https://apnews.com/article/iran-politics-international-atomic-energy-agency-israel-government-benjamin-netanyahu-45b623742bb6bd4c7314de7df6c3fie9>). For a cautious initial take on those developments, see Henderson, S., 'Iran enriched uranium to 84 percent – but can it make a nuclear bomb?', *The Hill*, 20 February 2023 (<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3865793-iran-enriched-uranium-to-84-percent-but-can-it-make-a-nuclear-bomb/>).



Moreover, despite Tehran's rhetoric that it is close to becoming a nuclear power, experts suggest that it may still take at least 2 years for this to happen <sup>(6)</sup>. Meanwhile, a revived Obama-era deal would potentially leave the impending sunset clauses of the 2015 JCPOA untouched <sup>(7)</sup>, resulting in a financially replenished and emboldened regime, and heightened Iranian security challenges.

Finally, in the event of the ultimate demise of the JCPOA, a 'new framework' <sup>(8)</sup> with nuclear ambiguity as a new basis for Western-Iranian relations could emerge. In this scenario, which some observers see already internalised by both Tehran and Washington, Iran would be able to pursue uranium enrichment but would face military action by Israel and/or the United States if it chose to go down the route of becoming an openly nuclear state. This new nuclear era would produce 'strategic stability' between the main antagonists, Tehran and Washington, one that is based on 'ambiguity rather than clarity, intentions rather than capabilities' <sup>(9)</sup>.

**A 'new framework' with nuclear ambiguity as a new basis for Western-Iranian relations could emerge.**

## TOWARDS A TRANSATLANTIC FOREIGN POLICY CENTRED ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Western democracies have all too often pursued a strategy of uncritical engagement with autocracies. But now a critical and independent review of the downsides of the authoritarian stability paradigm should be envisaged, as several Western states advocate a foreign policy that sees respect for and promotion of human rights as essential. Specifically, the Biden administration has pledged to put human rights at the centre of US foreign policy, uniting democratic values with 'diplomatic leadership' <sup>(10)</sup>. Likewise, several EU Member States have committed to taking human rights seriously in their foreign policy. In Germany, for instance, the coalition government has pledged its foreign, security and development policies to be 'values-based'. 'Together with our partners', the coalition agreement goes on to state, Berlin is committed to safeguarding 'peace and human rights worldwide' and is thereby led by

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- (6) According to a former external advisor to the IAEA, Behrooz Bayat: Bayat, B., 'Keine Deals mit dem Mullah-Regime' [No deals with the mullah regime], *Der Standard*, 2 January 2023 (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000142215508/keine-deals-mit-dem-mullah-regime>). For the English version, see *ibid.*, 'A nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic, or a stab in the back of Iran's freedom movement?', *The Iran Post*, 30 January 2023 (<https://theiranpost.com/a-nuclear-deal-with-the-islamic-republic-or-a-stab-in-the-back-of-irans-freedom-movement/>). Also, according to the *Jerusalem Post's* editor-in-chief, the red line on Iran's nuclear programme has shifted: 'Even with military-grade uranium, Iran would still need to take the gas and turn it into uranium metal, a highly complicated process that – together with assembling a warhead that could be installed on a ballistic missile that could reach Israel – would take at least two years.' Katz, Y., 'Iran nuclear program hasn't crossed Israel's red line yet – opinion', *Jerusalem Post*, 8 September 2022 (<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-716694>).
- (7) In October 2023, the UN ban on assistance to Iran's ballistic missile programme will expire, and Tehran will be able to restart manufacturing advanced centrifuges. In 2026, most restrictions on the nuclear programme will end, and in 2031 all of them will be lifted. See 'Explainer: Timing of key sunsets in nuclear deal', *The Iran Primer*, United States Institute for Peace (USIP), 11 January 2023 (<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jan/11/explainer-timing-key-sunsets-nuclear-deal>).
- (8) 'France's Macron does not see room for progress on Iran nuclear deal right now', Reuters, 14 November 2022 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/frances-macron-need-find-new-framework-over-iran-nuclear-deal-2022-11-14/>).
- (9) For an elaboration of this argument, see Aronson, G., 'The United States and Iran are headed toward a new nuclear normal', *National Interest*, 5 January 2023 (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/united-states-and-iran-are-headed-toward-new-nuclear-normal-206076>).
- (10) Blinken, A. J., 'Putting human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy', Press statement, US Department of State, 24 February 2021 (<https://www.state.gov/putting-human-rights-at-the-center-of-u-s-foreign-policy/>).

'our values and interests' <sup>(11)</sup>. Meanwhile, the administration in Washington realises that it cannot effectively promote human rights on its own, but needs to do so in cooperation with allies. As US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated: 'Promoting respect for human rights is not something we can do alone, but is best accomplished working with our allies and partners across the globe' <sup>(12)</sup>. In this context, a European initiative to build a human rights-centred transatlantic foreign policy with Washington, directed not just towards the Middle East but also towards autocracies elsewhere, is overdue.

## REACHING OUT TO NON-WESTERN POWERS

Meanwhile, the West should try to integrate non-Western great powers in its new Iran strategy. While Russia may not be amenable to such collaboration as long as the war in Ukraine continues, China could be incentivised to cooperate with the strategy, as it would align with Beijing's interests in the Persian Gulf region centred on stability and energy flows – both objectives that are jeopardised by the Islamic Republic's current policies despite the recent Iran–Saudi *détente*. Meanwhile, Russia may see an indefinite JCPOA limbo as beneficial while it wages war against Ukraine. This would keep sanctions against Iran in place, limit Tehran's power relative to Moscow, and maintain growing Russian–Iranian trade. Politically, Russia

could count on Iran as an ally against the West regardless of the JCPOA's uncertain fate <sup>(13)</sup>.

## ENGAGING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY INSTEAD OF REFORMISTS

Developments over the last decade have shown that Europe's tendency to consider the Islamic Republic's reformists as the most promising agent of positive change in Iran has been misguided. It should now adjust to the new realities in Iran and instead opt for actively engaging with the country's civil society. Such a reorientation of European engagement must imperatively be undertaken in view of the collapse of the reformists' popular legitimacy and their eviction from the corridors of power at the hands of their hardline domestic rivals, as well as in view of the fact that empowering Iran's democracy-oriented civil society will in the long run help reconcile Europe's value- and interest-based goals.

The EU should support Iran's civil society, for example by imposing sanctions on Tehran's power élite and providing the population with tools to circumvent internet restrictions and blackouts <sup>(14)</sup>, and by funding European exchanges with Iranian civil society activists, especially from the women's, student and labour movements. In particular, the EU should speak out whenever grave human rights violations occur in Iran, which is likely to be a deterrent for Tehran. In Iran, even messages of solidarity from Western governments can now be seen as

(11) Social Democratic Party of Germany, 'Mehr Fortschritt wagen – Bündnis für Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit und Nachhaltigkeit', Koalitionsvertrag 2021–2025 zwischen SPD, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN und FDP, 24 November 2021, p.113 (<https://www.spd.de/koalitionsvertrag2021/>).

(12) 'Putting human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy', op. cit.

(13) Notte, H., 'Russia's invasion of Ukraine: The Iran nuclear price tag', February 2023, Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), Bonn (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/international/20083.pdf>).

(14) For other Middle East countries, see Gohdes, A. R., Dyer, S. and Banerji, L., 'In dozens of countries, governments rely on Internet shutdowns to hide repression', *Washington Post*, 4 December 2020 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/04/dozens-countries-governments-rely-internet-shutdowns-hide-repression/>).

an important element in encouraging people's struggles against authoritarianism, something former President Barack Obama has recently acknowledged<sup>(15)</sup>.

Such an overall approach, of course, would gain in effectiveness and legitimacy if the EU applied the same standard to all comparable authoritarian states in the Middle East (most notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria) within a policy of critical equidistance, conducted in close coordination with the United States. Clearly, forging a transatlantic Iran strategy would help boost the effectiveness of any EU approach to Iran, given Washington's military and financial might.

## LISTING THE IRGC AS A TERRORIST ORGANISATION

In a new twist in Iran policy, in mid-January 2023, the President of the European Commission and the European Parliament backed the idea of designating the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, a decision to be made by the Council of the European Union<sup>(16)</sup>. Meanwhile, next

to measures isolating Iran diplomatically and politically, designating the IRGC as a terrorist organisation has become the central demand of a major part of the Iranian diaspora, which has held rallies attended by thousands of participants in a number of European capitals and cities to urge the EU to take this step<sup>(17)</sup>. Some EU policymakers regard such a move against the key pillar of the Islamic Republic as likely to derail any prospective nuclear talks<sup>(18)</sup>, which helps explain why several rounds of rather mild sanctions were imposed by the EU against Iran in the context of the recent protests – 'an absolute face-saving minimum'<sup>(19)</sup>. However, there are fewer downsides and clear benefits of adding the IRGC to the EU's terrorism list than often assumed. Firstly, at a time of stalemate between the regime and the protesters, such a step would give renewed hope to Iranian civil society, signalling that the West's policy is changing course. Secondly, and more importantly, it would send a strong signal to Iran that the system of the Islamic Republic is doomed, with the West now adopting a robust Iran policy. Also, in this context, it may be instructive to note that the consequences of the US State Department designating the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) were less dramatic than many had assumed: Iran's retaliation by listing United States Central Command (CENTCOM) as a terrorist entity did not lead to

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- (15) See Collinson, S., 'A rare moment of public self-criticism by a former president', CNN, 18 October 2022 (<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/18/politics/barack-obama-iran-self-reflection-analysis/index.html>).
- (16) Irish, J., 'Davos 2023: EU's Von der Leyen backs listing Iran's Guards as terrorist group', *Reuters*, 17 January 2023 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/davos-2023-eus-von-der-leyen-backs-listing-irans-guards-terrorist-group-2023-01-17/>); 'In fear of IRGC terrorist listing, regime officials threaten Europe', *Iran International*, 18 January 2023 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301186217>). See also Lawal, S., 'EU: how the bloc's terror list works', *DW (Deutsche Welle) News*, 23 January 2023 (<https://www.dw.com/en/eu-how-the-blocs-terror-list-works/a-64352794>). For the legal debate, see Grischek, F., 'Why declaring the Iranian Revolutionary Guards a terrorist group is a trickier business than one may think', *Verfassungsblog*, 2 February 2023 (<https://verfassungsblog.de/why-declaring-the-iranian-revolutionary-guards-a-terrorist-group-is-a-trickier-business-than-one-may-think/>).
- (17) See e.g. 'Recommendations for the international community on Iran: Imposing costs on the Islamic Republic for Its human rights atrocities', Policy Briefing, Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), New York, 7 February 2023 (<https://iranhumanrights.org/2023/02/policy-briefing-recommendations-for-the-international-community-on-iran/>). For the most recent rallies, see 'Huge Paris rally urges EU terror listing for Iran Guards', *VOA News*, 11 February 2023 (<https://www.voanews.com/a/huge-paris-rally-urges-eu-terror-listing-for-iran-guards-/6958961.html>); Soler, P., 'Thousands of Iranians march through Brussels demanding stricter EU sanctions', *EUobserver*, 20 February 2023 (<https://euobserver.com/world/156739>); 'Massive rally in Brussels calls for designating IRGC as terror group', *Iran International*, 20 February 2023 (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302202702>).
- (18) See for example the statements by the senior EU foreign policymaker and Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, Jean Asselborn, in Müller, D., 'Sanktionspaket gegen Iran: EU-Außenpolitiker Asselborn – Diplomatische Kanäle offenhalten' [Sanctions package against Iran: EU foreign-policy-maker Asselborn – Keeping diplomatic channels open], *Deutschlandfunk*, 13 December 2022 (<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/eu-aussenminister-iran-sanktionen-ukraine-hilfe-interview-mit-jean-asselborn-dlf-b65fcdc5-100.html>).
- (19) Röttgen, N., 'Iran's revolution of freedom', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 February 2023 (<https://ecfr.eu/article/irans-revolution-of-freedom/>).

the regional escalation many feared, nor did it dampen Iran's eagerness to revive the deal<sup>(20)</sup>. While the former may be ascribed to the regime's concern that a full-blown escalation could lead the United States and/or Israel to wage a war against it that would jeopardise its stability and even survival, the latter is associated with hopes in Tehran that the economic dividends from a renewed deal could be used to consolidate the regime's own power. Thirdly, while critics of a listing have suggested that its consequences would be unfair on innocent conscripts, this argument does not account for the complex reality of recruitment procedures for IRGC conscripts and the indoctrination programme which they undergo during military service. According to IRGC experts, around 80 % of the 50 000 IRGC conscripts (out of an annual intake of 400 000 military conscripts) expressly choose to join the IRGC for their military service, with only 20 % recruited from poorer underprivileged backgrounds who do not necessarily have a choice regarding the branch of the armed forces in which they undertake their military service<sup>(21)</sup>.

## MOVING AWAY FROM THE FOCUS ON THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

The widely neglected downside of the EU's focus on the nuclear issue is that it allows Iran to dictate and set the pace, with Europe or the West merely reacting. If the EU maintains its narrow focus on the nuclear dossier, this will allow Tehran to continue to periodically heighten tensions over its nuclear programme (via its 'nuclear escalation' strategy), in order to gain leverage and extract concessions in other areas of strategic interest to it. Not unlike Moscow's

nuclear blackmail attempts amid the war on Ukraine, Tehran also uses the spectre of a nuclear Iran as a major point of pressure on the West to discourage it from adopting a more robust stance against it.

## THE JCPOA: AVOIDING UNCONDITIONAL DIPLOMACY

There is still confusion in policymaking circles about how to address the EU's nuclear non-proliferation interests in the context of a revival of the JCPOA, which would necessitate negotiations with a regime that has lost much of its popular legitimacy. While some argue that engagement on the nuclear issue is inevitable to avoid the purported worst-case scenario of a nuclear Iran, there are important risks that need to be taken into consideration.

Reviving the JCPOA would see nuclear-related sanctions removed, with the resulting economic dividends likely – as we know from past experience after the JCPOA's 2016 implementation – to benefit the Islamic Republic's state and semi-state entities, in short the regime, and not trickle down to the civilian population. These funds would then be used by Tehran to bolster its repressive apparatus at home and co-opt those employees in the large state bureaucracy who might consider taking the people's side against the regime, while financing its destabilising activities in the region and beyond. Coupled with the Islamic Republic's profound legitimacy deficit, such an unconditional revival of the JCPOA could be seen as a stab in the back of Iran's democracy movement. Similarly, the president of the Munich Security Conference Foundation, identifying Iran and Ukraine as the

(20) See Hagmann, J., 'Analyst über Iran und die Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz: "Streiks könnten das Regime brechen"', [Analyst on Iran and the Munich Security Conference: Strikes could break the regime], Interview with Ali Fathollah-Nejad, *taz - die Tageszeitung*, 17 February 2023 (<https://taz.de/Analyst-ueber-Iran-und-die-Muenchner-Sicherheitskonferenz/!5916681/>).

(21) Golkar, S. and Aarabi, K., 'Conscription is not an excuse for Iran's Revolutionary Guard', *Foreign Policy*, 30 January 2023 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/30/iran-revolutionary-guard-terrorism-military-conscription/>).

two major geostrategic challenges for 2023, has argued that the EU should not exercise restraint in imposing more rigid sanctions against Tehran for its grave human rights violations in the face of popular protests in order not to imperil the renegotiation of the JCPOA<sup>(22)</sup>.

Therefore, as long as Tehran continues to crack down on the protests, it would be costly for the

EU to unconditionally pursue the revival of the JCPOA. Before re-engaging in nuclear talks, the EU should demand that Tehran halt its violations of human rights, while the Union contemplates ways to ensure that it is Iran's civilian population, rather than the regime, that benefits from the economic dividends of a revived deal, and that these facilitate rather than hinder society's quest for democracy.

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(22) Bayat, B., 'Keine Deals mit dem Mullah-Regime' [No deals with the mullah regime], *Der Standard*, 2 January 2023 (<https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000142215508/keine-deals-mit-dem-mullah-regime>); Ischinger, W., 'Two geostrategic challenges for 2023: Ukraine and Iran', *Politico*, 5 January 2023 (<https://www.politico.eu/article/geostrategic-challenges-2023-ukraine-iran/>).

# ABBREVIATIONS

**GDP**

Gross domestic product

**IAEA**

International Atomic  
Energy Agency

**IMF**

International Monetary  
Fund

**IRGC**

Islamic Revolutionary  
Guard Corps

**ISIS**

Islamic State of Iraq and  
Syria

**ITUC**

International Trade Union  
Confederation

**JCPOA**

Joint Comprehensive Plan  
of Action

**MP**

Member of Parliament

**NPT**

Treaty on the Non-  
Proliferation of Nuclear  
Weapons

**OECD**

Organisation for Economic  
Co-operation and  
Development

**SCI**

Statistical Centre of Iran

**UAE**

United Arab Emirates

**USD**

US dollars

As of the autumn of 2022, the Islamic Republic of Iran was confronted with the most serious protests since its inception. The wave of protests, sparked by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, appears to have infused Iran's long-term revolutionary process with an irreversible momentum.

This *Chaillot Paper* examines the background to the protest movement, focusing on the profound crises – socio-economic, political and ecological – with which the Islamic Republic is currently grappling, as well as on the issue of gender discrimination and inequality.

It argues for a paradigm shift in the EU's approach to Iran that takes account of changing dynamics in the country, rather than being based on assumptions that may have lost their relevance since the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed and especially since the 2022 protests and the war in Ukraine. The paper identifies core elements of Iran's foreign and nuclear strategy, an understanding of which is indispensable for a more effective EU foreign policy towards Tehran, as well as providing a critical review of the EU's Iran policy. Finally, it puts forward a number of policy recommendations for the West's stance *vis-à-vis* Iran, arguing for a middle ground between the equally unpromising postures of belligerence and appeasement.