

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Beyond Control: Iran and its Opponents Locked in a Lopsided Confrontation

JUNE 2019 **BORZOU DARAGAH**

For much of its four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been blessed with a weak political opposition. While Iran has faced competent and powerful foreign enemies—such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the United States, and Israel—its Iranian political challengers, both domestically and abroad, have been largely fragmented, unrealistic in their aims, and sometimes as authoritarian as the regime. But, though few credible Iran watchers argue that opposition groups and figures arrayed against Tehran’s establishment pose a serious threat, Iran treats them as if they are mortal dangers to the regime. This paper attempts to sketch out the landscape of the various major political opposition groups, and begin to grapple with the question of why Iran perceives them as such a challenge.

A few years ago, a middle-aged woman in a big Iranian city began offering yoga classes in her apartment, in an attempt to provide a few friends some respite from the traffic-clogged streets, air pollution, financial worries, and day-to-day hassles that characterize life in Iranian metropolises. At first, only those from her immediate circle attended, but word of the classes spread, and they drew more and more women. Together, they learned to calibrate their breathing, practiced the art of stillness, and cleared their minds for an hour or two each week. The classes even helped the woman—this paper will call her Nasrine—make a little money on the side.

But, at some point, the classes caught the attention of the authorities. Nasrine was asked to come in for questioning by security officials. She was miffed, and intimidated, as there was nothing remotely political about her classes. During the initial meeting, she was asked about her affiliations, her personal and professional background, her family tree, her political views, the nature of her classes, and both the scientific and spiritual ideas underlying the yoga, then sent on her way.

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Reformist politician and former deputy interior minister Mostafa Tajzadeh (right) and former hardline parliamentarian Alireza Zakani (left) settle in ahead of a televised debate held in Tehran on January 23, 2019. Credit: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBEh9UQ1iw>.

Then, she was summoned again for an interrogation. And again. And again. It went on for months. There was never a substantive fear that she would be physically harmed during the interrogations. The men were polite enough, if brusque and willing to ask pointed, personal questions. But, there was always the implicit threat that she could be charged with one of the vague national security crimes that have ensnared political activists, human-rights attorneys, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and trade unionists in Iran.

In the course of the grueling interrogations Nasrine and her few confidantes concluded that it wasn't the workshops themselves that were the problem, but the instructor: a highly educated, upper-middle-class, and multilingual member of the country's traditional elite. Someone the authorities did not mold or control.

In the end, the authorities gave Nasrine a telling choice: stop teaching the classes, or continue to teach them, but not in her house. They offered her a space under their auspices, at one of the nearby neighborhood cultural centers run by the state. They even offered her a salary.

Nasrine opted to stop the classes.

Nasrine's story illustrates the Tehran regime's obsession with controlling every aspect of life in the Islamic Republic. It covers a range of interests that extend from mundane yoga workshops to the economy, from dissidents to the attire of young women. The Iranian regime does not like that which it cannot control, surveil, or manipulate; it remains fearful that somewhere within the chaotic ether of Iranian social and political life lies the seed of its future demise.

In part, it is a hypercharged reaction to Iran's legacy of periodic collapses into chaos throughout the twentieth century, and a pining for control that first emerged even before Iran's 1979 revolution.

The story also shows the methodical tools of repression used by the Islamic Republic's enforcers, who seek to contain, co-opt, or destroy anything in the Iranian sphere, whether inside or outside the home, within the country or abroad.

For years, scholars and experts have wondered why opposition to the regime is so weak, fragmented, and seemingly unable to pose a credible challenge to the system, or even to the often-arbitrary and partisan way it operates. Drawing on consultations with a dozen or

so Iran experts inside and outside the country, this paper is an attempt to grapple with that question.

It also seeks to assess the domestic opposition, including the reformists and the fledgling labor movement, and the foreign opposition, especially the monarchists and the Mujahedin-e-Khalq organization, both of which have caught the ear of the Donald Trump administration. In general, Iran appears to have little in the way of a credible foreign-based opposition, despite the educated and professional nature of the five million or so Iranians who have gone into the diaspora—and especially compared to the opposition formed against Saddam Hussein during his rule in neighboring Iraq.

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“There’s really no proper alternative in terms of a grand vision of how to keep the country together to integrate the competing forces,” said Adnan Tabatabai, an Iranian researcher and founder of a think tank based in Bonn, Germany. “There are only groups who seek revenge for what has happened to them.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it attempts to answer the question of why the regime seems so determined to stamp out any opponents, even undertaking high-risk covert operations

abroad to target what many consider weak or marginal actors.

The answers to these questions may be rooted in the same dynamic that drives security officials to spend months hounding a nonpolitical, middle-aged yoga teacher who invites a few pals over to her house.

“When you are in a closed political system—whether authoritarian, autocratic, dictatorial—any movement that is beyond your control could constitute a threat,” said Naysan Rafati, Iran researcher at the International Crisis Group. “Internal opposition groups, you can co-opt them, coerce them, arrest them, kill them, or pay them off with piecemeal changes. Exiles, by nature, constitute a threat because they lie beyond the scope of what you can control.”<sup>2</sup>

But, the regime also has other tools at its disposal, including a belligerent and nationalistic foreign policy that resonates with Iranians both inside and outside the country, and the flexibility to loosen the chains of repression in times of crisis.

For most Iranians, the sight of two bearded, graying men sitting at a table and calmly talking about their nation’s politics and recent history would hardly qualify as must-see programming, especially given the availability of far more titillating fare on satellite channels beamed in from abroad.

But, among professional Iran watchers, the hour-long January debates streamed online by (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-connected) *Fars News* and *Aparat.tv* made for startling viewing.<sup>3</sup> They pitted former hardline lawmaker Alireza Zakani against Mostafa Tajzadeh, the former reformist deputy interior minister, who spent seven years in prison.

Zakani passionately espoused the talking points of the regime hardliners. He accused those who protest against the government of sullyng the nation’s reputation, muddied the waters with “both sides” obfusca-

1 Adnan Tabatabai, telephone interview with author, January 31, 2019.

2 Naysan Rafati, telephone interview with author, January 30, 2019.

3 “Alireza Zakani vs Mostafa Tajzadeh,” YouTube video, January 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBEh9UQ1iw>; “The Events of the Year 2009 are Debated by Tajzadeh and Zakani,” Iranian Students’ News Agency, January 23, 2019, <https://www.isna.ir/news/97110301759/%D9%88%D9%82%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B9-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%DB%B8%DB%B8-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%88-%D8%B2%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C>.

tions about the regime's violent assaults on peaceful civil-society groups, and extolled the greatness of the Islamic Republic, while slamming unnamed corrupt officials in attempts to diminish the administration of President Hassan Rouhani.

Tajzadeh, however, stuck to no script. He systematically called out specific abuses of power by specific institutions, beginning with the 1999 violence against students in the dormitories in Tehran, which signaled the vicious counteroffensive by hardline regime elements against then-president Mohammad Khatami's reform program.

Pulling no punches, Tajzadeh called out the Revolutionary Guard, the Ministry of Intelligence, and the security forces, as well as the Guardian Council—a judiciary largely seen as a tool of the hardliners, and which has barred most candidates from running for office since the early 2000s.<sup>4</sup> He countered the official narrative on the massive 2009 uprising triggered by the disputed reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president, which Zakani said damaged the reputation of the country, and zeroed in on the shenanigans of the regime's most dangerous enforcers.

"Every time the country is calm, Ansar Hezbollah goes out stirs up trouble," he said during the debate, calling out a shadowy and fanatical pro-regime militia that operates as a kind of radical Islamist biker gang. "Who stormed the British embassy and set it on fire and ruined the reputation of the country?"

Tajzadeh even blasted state television for not allowing people like him on the air.

While the provenance of the debate remains unclear, it shows why some consider Iran's reformist bloc, though severely flawed, the best bet to alter Iran's course. Reformists burst prominently onto the scene with Khatami's election in 1997. Many of them were former revolutionary zealots who become disillusioned with the course of the Islamic Republic, and adopted many of the criticisms of Iran's domestic, and even foreign, policies held by critics abroad. Many in Iran, and elsewhere, see them as the best hope for peaceful

change in the country. For one thing, the reformists—like the network of labor unions and professional syndicates that occasionally takes up causes—are in Iran, standing on the front lines and able to engage with the hardliners.

"A challenge that emerges from abroad will always lack a degree of credibility in not being on the ground," said Ali Ansari, an Iran expert at the University of St Andrews. "At the same time domestic opposition will only gain traction if it can draw support from within disaffected elements within the system."<sup>5</sup>

"The regime itself is fluid. We have a hybrid regime that is not a conventional dictatorship. It's an electoral authoritarianism that opens a space for a limited number of people and groups to compete with each other."

But, the debate show also points to the flexibility of a regime that is very unlike an all-encompassing political dictatorship. The regime allows a sort of political messiness to unfold, even as it insists on keeping a close eye on it, often collecting dossiers to use against the players in case they step out of bounds.

"What is the regime? The regime itself is fluid," said Mehdi Khalaji, an Iran scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "It's easy to form an opposition when you face a system of dictatorship or totalitarianism. But we have a hybrid regime that's not a conventional dictatorship. It's an electoral authoritarianism that opens a space for a limited number of people and groups to compete with each other."<sup>6</sup>

4 "Controversial Debate: Zakani's Disclosure in Debate with Tajzadeh," AparatTV, January 15, 2018, <https://www.aparat.com/v/NuCj7>.

5 Ali Ansari, email interview with author, January 31, 2019.

6 Mehdi Khalaji, telephone interview with author, February 4, 2019.

Numerous examples exist of the regime showing flexibility, including the 1997 rise of Khatami and the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani. Even former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad now voices vociferous criticism of the regime.

“Different voices are allowed to be fed into the discursive realm,” Tabatabai said. “Ahmadinejad is calling out the injustice that exists in the country. These voices are coming from left and right. They are discussing some of the key topics where you have unresolved disputes that keep haunting the political reality.”<sup>7</sup>

But, as countless critics of the reformists have pointed out, throwing around fancy terms like “civil society” or “democracy” won’t resolve Iran’s myriad problems. Time and again, the reformists have failed to match their rhetoric with action, seemingly bowing before the hardliners when challenged, as when Khatami ultimately caved to pressure and condemned the student protesters in 1999.

“The active parties inside Iran are all superficial and demagogic, and seeking material interests while contributing to unfair wealth distribution,” said Mahdi Khalili, a Tehran political scientist.<sup>8</sup>

When they refuse to submit, they are easily pulled out of the game—put under house arrest, as in the case of reformist presidential candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, or tossed into jail, in the case of hundreds of other dissidents and activists who sought to change the system from within through disputed 2009 elections.

“Don’t underestimate the level of repression inflicted after 2009 and the dismantling of civil society,” Ansari said. “Since 2009, the paranoid state has emerged effectively under the security control of the Revolutionary Guard. So domestic opposition was always going to struggle.”<sup>9</sup>

The reformists have the most credibility among the political forces inside Iran, and—if they play their cards

correctly—they may be able to swing the 2021 presidential election in their favor. But, for now, the reformists remain beholden to moderate pragmatists, who have kept a tight lid on any kind of substantial change.

The general failure of the reformists to fundamentally shift Iran’s direction, either domestically or globally, has convinced many Iran watchers inside and outside the country that there is no significant change possible in the Islamic Republic without overthrowing or dismantling the regime.

“Reform is useless in Iran,” Iranian Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, once a steadfast believer in working within the system, told *Bloomberg News* last year.<sup>10</sup> “The Iranian people are very dissatisfied with their current government. They have reached the point and realized this system is not reformable.”

This is a view shared by conservatives in Washington, whose stars are ascendant under the Donald Trump administration, and who see Iran’s domestic political battles as a sort of showcase city meant to appease sympathetic foreigners. It is a rueful, sometimes painful, conclusion to which many longtime Iran observers have also arrived, including diplomats who served in Tehran and Iranian opponents of Western intervention, who take issue with the hardline agenda against Tehran that some in Washington tout.

“Why is there no change in Iran? Because of a permanent and unending struggle between Iranian civil society and the regime,” said one Tehran social scientist. “Every time when the rope is too tight, they release a little bit and in this lapse of time civil society becomes a little bit stronger. The regime is always intelligent enough not to let anything get too far.”<sup>11</sup>

**A**lmost every year on July 27, Farah Diba, the wife of Iran’s last monarch, makes her way to Cairo, to visit the Al-Rifa’i Mosque and the tomb of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Well-coiffed and perfumed, her entourage of well-wishers includes dozens of aging relics of the past, yearning

7 Tabatabai, telephone interview with author.

8 Mahdi Khalili, telephone interview with author, December 28, 2018.

9 Ansari, email interview with author.

10 Eli Lake, “Iran’s Nobel Laureate is Done with Reform. She Wants Regime Change,” *Bloomberg News*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-04-05/shirin-ebadi-is-done-trying-to-reform-iran-she-wants-regime-change>.

11 Anonymous, email interview with author, December 31, 2018.



Iranian monarchists rally outside a US-backed Middle East conference in Warsaw on February 13, 2019. *Credit: Borzou Daragahi.*

nostalgically for the splendor of pre-1979 Iran. Their miniskirts-and-nightclubs vision of Iran is popular among Iranians inside the country, as well as those in the diaspora. The monarchists and their figurehead—onetime Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi—have also been embraced by Trump.

Pahlavi, 60, is amiable and articulate in interviews, if slightly programmed, spewing talking points rather than insights born of experience or study. He and his aides strive hard to address issues relevant to Iranians in Karaj or Mashhad, such as poverty, gender imbalances, public services, and civil liberties. But, living in a tastefully designed ranch on a wooded lot in the suburbs of Washington, he is disconnected physically and viscerally from the realities on the ground in Iran. The monarchists have, however, managed to tap into surging Iranian nationalism, resurrecting a vision of Iran as

a glorious empire, which could help them connect to ordinary Iranians.

Still, what he leads can hardly be called a movement, much less an organization. It's more a notion, a vision with a figurehead in the crown prince. "They are a bunch of people who are not organized and they don't have any clear idea of the path ahead, but they just have a leader," Khalaji said.<sup>12</sup>

The monarchists' ideology is also all over the place. Some are nationalists, some are hypernationalists, and some are liberals. Mostly, they call for constitutional monarchy with Pahlavi offering himself up as a transitional figure, perhaps much like the white-bearded, black-turbaned cleric who swept his father from power. Though they have cogent, reasonable critiques of the Islamic Republic, some say they fail to acknowledge

<sup>12</sup> Khalaji, telephone interview with author.

how the deposed Shah's own failings—including his policy of cracking down on liberal and leftist opposition, while attempting to co-opt the Shia clergy—led to today's state of affairs, and have a gauzy view of the past, as well as an unrealistic understanding of what is happening now in Iran. For example, they grossly over-inflated the size, scale, and threat of small nationwide protests that erupted mostly in provincial capitals and county seats in late December 2017 and throughout 2018.<sup>13</sup>

"The monarchists are not monolithic," said Ali Fathollah Nejad, a scholar at the Brookings Doha Center. "They have a tendency to run into some hypernationalism, and glorification of Iran's past. They have good points in criticizing the current regime, but not in terms of criticizing what the Shah's regime has done. They don't have an understanding of what is happening in Iran because of their social milieu."<sup>14</sup>

The monarchist movement's amorphous structure may be its biggest limitation. Throughout Iran's history, from Reza Pahlavi in the 1920s to the Islamists in the 1970s, the best-organized, toughest, and unscrupulous force is the one that has taken control during times of disarray. The monarchists will be hard-pressed to seize power and become a viable force in Iran in the aftermath of any regime collapse.

"They are a bunch of people who are not organized," Khalaji said. "They don't have any clear idea of the path ahead. But they have a figurehead."

There are other opposition groups in the Iranian political realm. There are tiny groups of leftists or liberals, who get together and discuss politics over tea and sweets, though their momentum has long slowed and they're fading away. A smattering of new groups, such as Farashgard, or Iran Revival, have emerged during the Trump era, all of them dubiously claiming widespread support inside and outside Iran.

Groups advocating for major ethnic minorities—Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis—and represented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran or the Ahwaziya Arabs have

footholds in the Western diaspora, along Iran's borders, as well as among Iranians. Though far better organized than the monarchists, they have limited appeal, especially in an Iran that is surging with nationalistic fervor.

"Basically, since 1979 the Iranian opposition, despite occasional attempts to establish a more unified front has by and large been fairly disjointed, fractious, and personalized," said Rafati, of ICG. "There has been no Iranian opposition with a capital O, but oppositions. We've never seen anything reaching a cohesive vision for what Iran should like and how it should get there."<sup>15</sup>

"In general, Iran's monarchists, reformists, leftists, and ethnic nationalists despise each other—sometimes as much as they despise the regime."

Foreign powers managed to draw various elements of both the Syrian and Iraqi oppositions together into loose coalitions. But, because of Iran's class and ethnic divisions, it remains highly unlikely that Iran's opposition would ever unify under any banner. The trauma of the 1979 revolution and its aftermath lingers. Iranians once got together under one figure to oust a tyrannical regime. What's to say whoever replaces the regime won't be worse? In any case, there has yet to be any unified vision for how Iran would move away from the Islamic Republic to a different system, and no tangible roadmap.

In general, much to the benefit of the leadership in Tehran, Iran's monarchists, reformists, leftists, and ethnic nationalists despise each other—sometimes as much as they despise the regime. One group all of them despise, sometimes even more than they oppose and fear the regime, is the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization,

<sup>13</sup> Amir Tibon, "Iranian Shah's Son on Protests: 'People Chant, 'Death to the Dictator.' This Is About Much More Than Economic Issues,'" *Haaretz*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/shah-s-son-protesters-chant-death-to-the-dictator-ive-never-been-more-optimistic-1.5730330>.

<sup>14</sup> Ali Fathollah Nejad, telephone interview with author, January 30, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Rafati, telephone interview with author.



Supporters of the MEK rally outside a US-backed Middle East security conference in Warsaw on February 13, 2019. *Credit: Borzou Daragahi.*

sometimes known by its acronym, MEK, as well its numerous shadowy front groups. Confusing to many, this group seems to be the one that has caught the ear of the White House under Donald Trump.

Concrete walls and men with guns surround the MEK's compound, built along green hills between the Albanian capital of Tirana and the port city of Durres. The organization was set up in the mid-1960s by leftist students opposed to the Shah and his US backers, advocating a blend of Islamist and Marxist ideology. It sometimes resorted to violent attacks on US military bases and personnel then in Iran. It played a key role in the 1979 revolution, winning control of key installations, such as the Tehran airport and broadcast outlets. But, it fell afoul of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the first few months of the revolution and became one of the new regime's most fervent adversaries, eventually relocating to Iraq—where,

under the leadership of Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, it infamously teamed up with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq put the group in danger, with successive Shia governments in Baghdad unwilling to host it, and pro-Iranian militias regularly attacking it. Under a deal brokered with the United States several years ago, it moved to the Balkans, where it was mostly scattered in various empty apartment complexes.

The group's membership was in decline, and its future looked bleak, until November 6, 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. He adopted a strident anti-Iran policy that breathed new life into the group. The organization suddenly seemed to acquire mysterious millions of dollars, which it spent on real estate, computers, and events.<sup>16</sup>

16 Borzou Daragahi, "The 'Political Cult' Opposing the Iranian Regime Which Has Created a State Within a State in Albania," *Independent*, Sep-

Key allies MEK had cultivated for years—including White House National Security Adviser John Bolton and Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani—began making their way into positions of power, and its agenda of overthrowing the regime in Tehran gained ground in Washington.

Led by Maryam Rajavi amid the apparent illness of her husband, the organization is well-organized and disciplined. Beyond its two thousand, five hundred or so members in the camp in Albania, it likely has a network of thousands more in the Western diaspora, and has some supporters in Iran.

However, it is also deeply unpopular—even despised—among the vast majority of Iranians, both inside and outside the country, for its history of collaborating with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war, its campaign of terrorist bombings inside Iran that even targeted and disfigured Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and for the impression that it is a totalitarian organization that seeks to control its members' personal lives and even private thoughts, a claim it denies despite testimony by many former members.<sup>17</sup> Even the members themselves have begun to catch on to how disliked they are. In the online social media factory in Albania, they're told to mask their identities—to pretend to be liberal or leftist, or simply freedom-loving opposition activists, as they attack the regime and those Iran experts and commentators deemed insufficiently opposed to the authorities in Tehran.

MEK members now speak of a transition to democracy in Iran, proposing a six-month period during which they would be in charge, which terrifies many Iranians.

"Maybe the little Shah can have some chance in the future, but how and when, God knows," said one Tehran social scientist. "But no way for the MEK. They are the

most hated group. Personally and for many others, between the MEK and Islamic Republic, it is without any doubt that [Iranians] will choose Islamic Republic."<sup>18</sup>

Despite its lack of popular domestic support, Iran continues to view the MEK as a threat.

Over the last year, Iranian officials have been implicated in at least two attempts to allegedly target the group. In France, an Iranian diplomat based in Vienna and an Iranian-Belgian couple are accused of attempting to bomb a meeting of the MEK outside Paris, prompting EU sanctions against Iran's Intelligence Ministry.<sup>19</sup> In Albania, two alleged Iranian operatives were arrested and deported in a sketchy 2018 plot that prompted Tirana to expel Iran's ambassador and another diplomat.<sup>20</sup>

Iran has also been tied to 2015 and 2017 assassinations of Iranian Arab activists in the Netherlands, and an alleged attempted attack targeting the same Ahwaziya Arab separatist group in Denmark, prompting EU condemnation and sanctions.<sup>21</sup>

Iran has denied that it carried out any attacks or plots, calling them false-flag operations meant to put pressure on the Islamic Republic. But, Tehran may be intimidated by both groups, which are organized and have a history of staging attacks inside Iran. Iranian dissidents abroad have a long history of being shot dead under mysterious circumstances that are occasionally traced back to Iran.

"Regimes always fear what they cannot directly control," Rafati said. "One of the outgrowths has been this assassination campaign."<sup>22</sup>

Both the MEK and the Iranian Arab groups have alleged, but unproven, ties to Iran's regional rivals, Israel

tember 27, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/mek-maryam-rajavi-anti-iran-albania-cult-state-regime-a8556201.html>.

17 "German magazine ordered to pull claims about Iranian group," Associated Press, March 26, 2019, <https://www.apnews.com/3f52a313e71e47ecae57cfe7d3e26f24>.

18 Anonymous, email interview with author, December 31, 2018.

19 "France Blames Iran for Foiled Paris Bomb Plot," BBC, October 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45722523>.

20 Borzou Daragahi, "Iran Diplomats Expelled from Albania Plotted Against Dissidents, Source Says," Independent, December 20, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/iran-albania-diplomats-dissidents-mek-terrorism-trump-bolton-irgc-a8692876.html>.

21 Daniel Boffey, "Iran Behind Two Assassinations in Netherlands—Minister," *Guardian*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/08/iran-behind-two-assassinations-in-netherlands-minister>; "Denmark Accuses Iran of Activist Murder Plot," BBC, October 30, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46029981>.

22 Rafati, telephone interview with author.

and Saudi Arabia. Iran and some analysts are convinced Saudi Arabia is funneling resources to both groups.<sup>23</sup> And, stories abound of Israel using the MEK's clandestine networks inside Iran to funnel out secrets and assassinate nuclear scientists.<sup>24</sup>

Iran may only devote a small fraction of its clandestine services to such operations—the bulk of its surveillance and paramilitary power is extended across the Middle East. Still, it's clear that they irk Tehran, and prompt it to react. This may be a reflex rooted in the violent and turbulent years after the revolution, as well as a rallying cry to keep the fractious regime supporters united against a common enemy.

Iran's vigilance at keeping the opposition weak and intimidated—at home and abroad—may be one key to why the Islamic Republic has managed to defy doubters and survive forty years. The “nezam,” or system, has a good eye for identifying potential challengers, then quickly neutralizing them by means of cooptation, repression, or, as a last resort, murder.

“The best opposition people have been killed,” said Sirous Amerian, a scholar in New Zealand. “They get rid of them, or put them in such seclusion that people forget them.”<sup>25</sup>

**T**he scholar Ali Ansari cites the legend of Kaveh the Blacksmith, from the Persian epic *Shahnameh* by the poet Ferdowsi. Most Iranians know that after losing his son, Kaveh led a rebellion against a serpent tyrant, which led to the rise of the benevolent ruler Fereidoun. Few realize that he only rose up after withstanding the loss of numerous other sons to the serpent tyrant. There was a tipping point, a mysterious threshold past which Kaveh could no longer tolerate the injustice, prompting a rupture.

Terror at reaching that tipping point may be what drives the Iranian regime to crack down so hard on everything from well-organized opposition abroad, to

bookish reformists in Tehran, to Nasrine giving yoga classes in her apartment.

Attempting to gauge that threshold, to ascertain the popularity of the Islamic Republic, may be impossible. Even a survey would be difficult to trust—not only because of the repressive apparatuses at work, but also because some 70 percent of Iranians have never lived a day outside the confines of the regime. Perhaps only 10 or 20 percent of Iranians living now had reached adulthood by the time the Shah's Peacock Throne collapsed. The vast majority of Iranians have never known anything but the Islamic Republic, and asking an Iranian whether they oppose the Islamic Republic might be like asking an American not whether they support a Democrat or Republican, but whether they oppose the US party system.

Inside the country, Iranians believe that much of the malaise and antipathy toward the regime is rooted in economic corruption and mismanagement, rather than the country's ideological repression or its foreign policy. A poll conducted in December 2018 suggested that 71 percent of the country sees the economy as performing poorly, with 60 percent blaming mismanagement and corruption, and only one third blaming foreign sanctions. This despite the fact that more than 90 percent of the respondents said they supported the country's controversial nuclear and missile programs.<sup>26</sup>

Iran's leaders know the regime is in deep trouble, but they have had time to learn, and to avoid the mistakes of the Middle East's fallen and broken regimes. They know that cutting a nuclear deal with the West won't save the regime from a domestic uprising or foreign interference, a lesson Libya's Muammar Qaddafi learned. They know it cannot withstand the full weight of a broad US military onslaught and invasion, as Iraq's Saddam Hussein experienced. And, they know that employing only unbridled violence against opponents will backfire, as demonstrated by Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

23 Ian Black, “Saudi Talk of ‘Regime Change’ Takes Hostility to Iran to New Level,” *Guardian*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/on-the-middle-east/2016/jul/12/saudi-talk-of-regime-change-takes-hostility-to-iran-to-new-level>

24 Richard Engel and Robert Windrem, “Israel Teams with Terror Group to Kill Iran's Nuclear Scientists, U.S. Officials Tell NBC News,” *NBC News*, February 9, 2012, [http://rockcenter.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/02/08/10354553-israel-teams-with-terror-group-to-kill-irans-nuclear-scientists-us-officials-tell-nbc-news](http://rockcenter.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/02/08/10354553-israel-teams-with-terror-group-to-kill-irans-nuclear-scientists-us-officials-tell-nbc-news).

25 Sirous Amerian, interview with author, January 30, 2019.

26 Amir Farmanesh, “State of Iran Survey Series,” *IranPoll*, February 8, 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5525d831e4b09596848428f2/t/5c5e5723e2c483879c6948d2/1549686567106/IranPoll+State+of+Iran+Dec+2018+wave+slides+2019-2-8.pdf>.

They know that an agent of change can come from abroad, just as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took on the Shah from Paris. But, they also know that any successful revolt will be sparked from within, just as Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation led to the downfall of Tunisian leader Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali a month later.

The leaderless revolts of the last few years—as epitomized by the Arab Spring uprisings—may be the most likely way that opponents could challenge a regime as repressive and obsessed with control and surveillance as Iran's.

But, what keeps the regime's guardians awake at night is not the scattered protests that it can easily manage, but a threat that could emerge from that chaos. They fear any figurehead or movement that could: draw Tajzadeh and other reputable figures within the Islamic Republic's elite; assure minorities that their interests, language, and culture will be respected; and win the support of middle-class people like Nasrine, as well as labor-rights advocates and trade syndicates, bus drivers as well as teachers and intellectuals.

They know such a scenario is entirely possible, because that's how the regime came to power—and they want to make sure that never happens again.

“To my mind what the regime fears most is a popular insurrection whose ‘leader’ will only become apparent once it's well underway,” Ansari said. “Iranian tolerance is legendary, but when it breaks, it breaks big. The political elite are aware of this reality, and that explains their paranoia.”<sup>27</sup>

The paradox, of course, is that the repression that accompanies their paranoia may spark the very revolt that they fear the most.

**N**either the MEK nor the monarchists are blowing up power stations or railway lines in Iran. They hold rallies, give speeches to loyalists, and lobby politicians in Washington, Paris, and Brussels. Like the ethnic separatist groups operating at Iran's fringes (which sometimes do set off bombs), their support inside the country is limited. Yet, the re-

gime appears obsessed with trying to kill them off. Alleged assassination and bombing attempts include the 2015 killing of former MEK member Mohammad Reza Kolahi near Amsterdam, an exiled television executive in Istanbul in 2017, and an Arab activist in the Hague in 2017.<sup>28</sup> Alleged bomb plots targeted regime opponents in France, Denmark, and Albania last year.

The apparent overreaction on the part of the Islamic Republic can partially be explained by the ideological underpinnings of a regime that derives authority in large part from the divine. But, regime leaders also assess correctly that their enemies are intent on regime change, and so are attempting to ferret out any possible threat. It's important to remember that the regime itself came to power by exploiting economic and social problems to elevate a man from abroad, who was doing nothing more than making speeches.

Iran currently lacks a credible, powerful alternative to the Islamic Republic, which strengthens the regime. Ideally, monarchists, moderate Islamist reformists, liberals, nationalists, and leftists, inside the country and abroad, would band together under a figurehead or council to demand change in Iran, while pushing out extremists such as the MEK. To begin to achieve such a state, Iranian political actors across the board need to tone down their shrill rhetoric and wishful thinking, stop calling their rivals traitors, and show more political maturity and understanding of the real issues Iranians face—from inflation to healthcare woes to a collapsing retirement system.

While the United States may continue to have a relationship with these opposition groups, it should understand that its tangled relationship with Iran makes anything Washington touches toxic to many Iranians, especially under a current president widely perceived as Islamophobic.

In addition, the more Washington and its surrogates publicly talk about regime change as an objective, the more they feed into the internal rhetoric of the Iranian regime, and the more the regime will stifle dissent. Insofar as it can help the opposition, the United States should encourage it to act with political maturity, adopt a realistic view of its own capabilities, and

27 Ansari, email interview with author.

28 “Iran Satellite TV Head Shot Dead in Istanbul: Dogan News,” Reuters, April 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-iran-shooting/iran-satellite-tv-head-shot-dead-in-istanbul-dogan-news-idUSKBN17W0FO>.

critique the regime in a way that does not needlessly alienate potential sympathizers within the regime.

One result of the opposition groups' incoherence and lack of maturity is a lack of information and research about both the domestic and diaspora opposition. There is no central repository or council that collates contact information for opposition groups abroad, and very little has been done to document and list the civic and labor groups now protesting inside the country. Ironically, the best sources for such information would likely be the Iranian intelligence services, which almost certainly keep a close eye on all these groups.

A headquarters, or even a website address, that would collate information and contact information about the various opposition groups could be used by researchers and policymakers, as well as Iranians inside and outside the country, to scrutinize and connect with opponents of the regime and—once the current regime falls or fundamentally reforms—potentially build the type of broad-based opposition coalition that could help lead Iran to a pluralistic future.

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