Whatever It Takes to End It

IRAN'S SHIFT TOWARD MORE OPPRESSIVE GOVERNANCE

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CT **CRITICAL THREATS**

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Contents

Executive Summary

Iran is becoming a more authoritarian and repressive state, which has direct implications for the future of the region and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Iranian regime is intensifying its efforts to control the population and retain the ruling elite's hold on power amid mounting domestic crises and instability. Regime leadership has always used repression to secure power, but recent trends indicate a change in the political establishment's relationship with the Iranian people. The security services are building an increasingly adaptive and sophisticated police and surveillance state, improving their capability to violently suppress domestic dissent. US decision makers must recalibrate their policies vis-à-vis Tehran to reflect this new reality.

Restoring the JCPOA would not reverse Iran's shift toward more repressive governance. A worsening internal security environment, which may intensify in the years ahead, is driving this transition. Popular protests and violence against the regime have swelled throughout the country in recent years, stoking the Iranian leadership's fear of domestic instability. Civil disorder, largely driven by economic grievances, has become commonplace, testing the state's defenses against its own people. Factors further exacerbating authorities' concerns include the COVID-19 pandemic, the possibility that the US will someday resume a maximum-pressure policy, and political uncertainty in the lead-up to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's passing.

The regime is optimizing its internal security apparatus for social control. Iranian authorities have adopted a three-pronged counterprotest strategy, incorporating prevention, force, and censorship. This approach relies on an expansive constellation of neighborhood patrols, paramilitary forces, and security bases—all designed, in part, to forecast when protests will occur and crush them early. The regime is increasingly involving its conventional military—named the Artesh—and possibly foreign proxy fighters in internal security missions.

Advanced technologies are central to this counterprotest strategy. Iranian leadership sees the success of the Chinese Communist Party in controlling and monitoring its own population and seeks to partly emulate this model of social control. Iranian authorities have embraced the concept of internet sovereignty and are increasingly willing to disrupt the internet and telecommunications in Iran to abet their protest crackdowns. They are also investing in domestic surveillance infrastructure and artificial intelligence (AI) to suppress dissent. Iranian officials hope to harness AI's analytical potential to synthesize a broad range of data streams collected through increasingly diverse digital means to identify and preempt internal security threats in real time.

The regime's more authoritarian mode of governance could change how it interacts with the region and the JCPOA. Iran's rulers may come to perceive the success of their counterprotest strategy as a source of leverage and strength. The regime could believe that it can more effectively repress its citizens with little fear of consequence and that it is better prepared to survive without the economic benefits of the nuclear deal. Understanding this evolution from the Iranian leadership's perspective can help US policymakers address the national security challenge Iran poses to the US and its allies and partners.

Policy Recommendations

Below are three policy recommendations that the US should adopt.

Counter Digital Authoritarianism. The US should integrate its Iran policy into a larger effort to counter the global spread of digital authoritarianism. Iran could become yet another agent for proliferating repressive technologies and methods of social control abroad. Iranian regime leadership has demonstrated its capability and willingness to send its internal security apparatus to Iraq and Syria to support violent crackdowns against protesters and thereby preserve Iranian economic, political, and security interests there. Tehran could increasingly export such capabilities if Iranian authorities conclude such exchanges are in its interest as they refine their repressive tool kit. A broader US strategy to confront the global spread of digital authoritarianism is required, especially if Iran advances further along this trajectory.

Adjust the Approach to the JCPOA. The US should not allow Iran to exploit the JCPOA to deter the US from pursuing other matters of interest to American foreign policy and national security. Ascendant hard-liners will promote aggressive and authoritarian behavior in Iran and the region in the years ahead while refusing to compromise with the West on Tehran's missile program and regional activities. Given the opportunity, they would use funds derived from the revival of the JCPOA to abet such efforts. Khamenei and these hard-liners do not consider the nuclear agreement sustainable and may abandon, delay, and reverse its implementation to pressure the US on other matters. Prioritizing the JCPOA above all else will damage the United States' capacity to address the range of issues it faces vis-à-vis Iran.

Shine a Spotlight on Repression. The US should broadcast publicly when the regime conducts harsh crackdowns on its citizens. Iranian leadership seeks to hide its repression through internet shutdowns. The US can draw international attention to the regime's abuses and impose a cost on the Iranian leadership if it continues such behavior. The US should especially highlight Iran's use of foreign proxies for domestic crackdowns, if it occurs. Iraqi and Lebanese citizens should see where the allegiances of these proxies lie. The regime's use of foreign fighters for domestic missions in Iran could erode political support for Iranian proxies in their respective home countries or deter Tehran from co-opting them to hurt its own people.

Introduction

The Iranian regime is optimizing its domestic security services and policies to preempt and violently suppress internal dissent. This effort is partly a continuation of decades-long trends within Iran's security establishment but also marks an inflection in the regime's perception of its own population. Iranian leadership is behaving as if it increasingly regards its own people as threats and potential enemies rather than willing constituents. This change has profound implications for the policies and, indeed, survival of the postrevolutionary state.

Iran's move toward a more overtly authoritarian and repressive model of governance is the regime's response to its worsening domestic security environment. The clerical state has experienced some of the most violent and widespread anti-regime protests in its history in the past four years. Poor economic conditions exacerbated by US sanctions have fueled these protests, which have challenged the ruling elite's control in new ways. Disaffected citizens condemn regime leadership and periodically clash with state security forces.

This civil disorder will likely continue in the years ahead at varying levels of intensity and has stoked the political establishment's paranoia and fear for the regime's future. The looming succession of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasingly obvious and ostentatious Israeli penetration of the Iranian security sphere, and other flaws in the defense apparatus have compounded these stressors, further exacerbating authorities' concerns. Iranian leaders are therefore unlikely to reverse this shift toward greater repression, regardless of whether a renewed nuclear deal eases some of the economic pressure.

The regime accuses Washington of directly fomenting the domestic upheaval—not just of exacerbating the economic conditions actually fueling it. Tehran maintains that American presidents have waged a soft war (*jang-e narm*) against it for over a decade. Iranian authorities define soft war as the use of nonmilitary means, such as economic and psychological pressure and information operations, to erode the regime's legitimacy, cultivate domestic opposition, and propagate Western values. Iranian officials consider the recent protests a manifestation of this ideological conflict. They see Iran's streets as a battle space. Khamenei sharply enunciated this view in his first speech of 2021, accusing the US of having sought to start a civil war in Iran.[1]

The regime's brutality has grown along with its concerns over its stability. Iranian officials conducted the most brutal crackdown in the regime's history on nationwide protests—triggered by a sudden and poorly managed cut in fuel subsidies—in November 2019. Protests spread to around 100 cities across Iran.[2] Rioters set fire to public buildings in some locations, and Western media described parts of one major city as a "war zone."[3] Khamenei reportedly told his inner circle that the regime was in danger and ordered them to "do whatever it takes to end" the unrest.[4]

Security forces, responding to Khamenei's instruction, started firing live ammunition at protesters almost immediately, aiming for heads and torsos.[5] Estimates of civilians killed by the state range from 304 to 1,500.[6] In one instance in southwestern Iran, military snipers and armored vehicles with machine guns killed as many as 148 demonstrators, including some who retreated into a marsh.[7] The government arrested at least another 8,600 people and completely shut off internet access throughout Iran—for the first time—for over a week to restrict the free flow of information within and out of the country.[8]

This unprecedented crackdown underscores the Iranian leadership's uncompromising resolve and

increasing readiness to use extreme measures to control its population. The regime had used lethal force against its people many times previously—but not to the same extent. The suppression of the gasoline protests far surpassed state violence during previous protests, including the 2009 Green Movement, which was the largest protest wave in the regime's history.

In that instance, Iranians took to the streets to protest the fraud-plagued reelection of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. State security services killed around 70 and arrested another 4,000 people, significantly fewer than in 2019.[9] This contrast suggests that Iranian authorities view large-scale protests—even those triggered by economic stressors rather than political motives—as an inherently existential threat and have decided to kill protesters to retain power.

The securitized and militarized nature of the state's response to protests makes its armed forces the fulcrum on which its survival rests. Iranian leadership's apparent willingness to sacrifice high voter turnout to obtain its desired electoral outcomes in the 2020 parliamentary elections and 2021 presidential election suggests that the regime no longer sees the facade of democracy as an essential or sufficient relief valve for popular dissatisfaction.[10] Iran's rulers are doubling down on their effort to ideologize the population and presenting anyone who dissents with an ultimatum: submit or be punished.[11]

If this trend continues, the Islamic Republic of Iran will survive or fall based on the performance of its security services against its own people—more specifically, whether these forces retain the capability and willingness to crack down on disaffected Iranians. They have struggled with both in the past. The continuation and evolution of Iran's protest scene in the coming years will further test the regime's defenses against its own population. The political establishment is therefore building an increasingly adaptive and sophisticated police and surveillance state to meet this challenge and prevent the collapse of its clerical system. Trends in Iranian political and military decision-making indicate that the country's leaders will exercise little restraint for the foreseeable future against citizens they consider a threat.

The regime's adaptations to crush internal unrest have implications for President Joe Biden's administration and the international community. Iranian leadership is sharpening its repressive tool kit to secure both its own domestic power and that of its allies abroad. The US and its own allies must prepare for the consequences of an increasingly autocratic Iran unwilling to temper its behavior.

I. Internal Trends and State of Play

The Iranian regime faces a worsening domestic security situation, which its leaders cannot easily improve. Protests have occurred intermittently throughout the country in recent years. Disaffected citizens have decried corruption, high unemployment, inflation, poor public service provision, and the state's diversion of resources to defending Bashar al Assad in Syria and supporting groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian militants rather than improving the domestic economy.[12]

Smaller demonstrations have become commonplace between major protest waves, covering a wide spectrum of grievances, including ecological, humanitarian, political, religious, and social concerns.[13] Protests include disenfranchised minorities, labor unions, merchants (colloquially called *bazaaris*), students, and many others. Protesters' rhetoric frequently evolves into rejection and condemnation of the revolutionary government and the supreme leader himself.[14] Some demonstrators describe regime leadership as enemies, and others even fondly remember the Iranian government under the shah.[15] Protests remain largely unorganized but have become more enduring and inclusive over time.

It is, of course, unclear to what extent the regime retains popular support overall, but the evolution of the Iranian protest scene shows the state's legitimacy crisis among different communities and socioeconomic strata. The record-low turnout in Iran's 2020 parliamentary elections and 2021 presidential election may indicate that the public's disillusionment with the clerical state has grown.[16] The regime cannot feasibly resolve the underlying issues that fuel this popular discontent due to structural challenges and the state's political trajectory.

Recent waves of unrest have posed a greater challenge to the regime than previous protest movements. Protests are not new under the revolutionary government. Economic and political demonstrations have fluctuated consistently throughout the regime's lifetime, particularly after the Iran-Iraq War.[17] However, protests "have become more significant in scale, as well as more secularized and violent" in recent years.[18] This upheaval has peaked twice: the 2017–18 Dey demonstrations and 2019 gasoline protests. These movements were larger than any previous economic unrest and spread throughout the country.

Iranian authorities were unprepared for the pressures posed by these recent rounds of protests. The Dey demonstrations and gasoline protests included many urbanites but were concentrated largely in cities' peripheries, smaller municipalities, and the border regions.[19] Many protesters came from the lower, lower-middle, and working classes, historically core parts of the regime's support base. Ecological deterioration and economic hardships, such as inflation, rising housing costs, and unemployment, have increased migration toward cities' outskirts and suburbs in recent years, fueling popular discontent.[20] Marginalized ethnicities, often subject to discrimination, live in many of these locations and Iran's border regions.

Regime forces struggled the most to impose order in cities' peripheries and less-populated locations during the Dey demonstrations and gasoline protests. Frustrated citizens temporarily overpowered local security units and set fire to security bases in several small towns during Dey, likely due to the forces' inadequate discipline, preparedness, and training.[21]

The greatest violence during the gasoline protests similarly occurred in communities surrounding major cities, smaller towns, and the border regions. The regime reportedly lost control of some areas around the south-central city of Shiraz, where economically and ethnically marginalized communities are numerous, for several days, and rioters attacked buildings affiliated with the clerical establishment.[22] At least five security forces members died in clashes across Iran.[23]

The regime responded to these protest waves with more violence. Security forces killed around 22 citizens during Dey—significantly lower than the 304 to 1,500 estimated dead following the gasoline protests.[24] An early protester death count by Amnesty International during the gasoline protests indicated that some of the greatest repression occurred in western provinces—home to Iranian Arabs, Azeris, Kurds, and Lurs.[25] Military units deployed to fight demonstrators in southwestern Iran, indicating that the local security forces could not contain the protests.[26]

Regime control was weak in shantytowns, villages, and the border regions during the Dey and gasoline movements because the security services were better prepared for mass upheaval in Tehran and other major cities. The 2009 Green Movement had stressed regime security forces in the capital and other large cities, drawing Iranian leaders' attention to that problem. The security institutions responded by creating new anti-riot units specialized in densely populated environments, establishing new headquarters in Tehran, and expanding patrols across the capital and other locations.[27] The anti-riot police have concentrated nearly half their personnel around the capital region.[28]

Security forces have therefore performed better in major cities such as Tehran in recent years. Professional military personnel were more effective at suppressing dissent in Tehran using nonlethal means during the Dey protests, for example.[29] The security units stationed in Iran's urban centers likely had better equipment, experience, and training than their counterparts in less-populated areas.

Trajectory of the Domestic Environment

Protests will likely continue at varying levels of intensity in the coming years. The trajectory of the Iranian domestic political environment is not conducive to the political and economic reform needed to address popular grievances and materially improve the lives of Iran's citizens. Protest drivers, such as political suppression and economic troubles, will remain and possibly worsen in the years ahead.

Hard-liners have expanded their political control in recent years, marginalizing their moderate and reformist rivals. The hard-line faction includes many in the clergy and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) who opposed former President Hassan Rouhani and his moderate administration. Hard-liners have taken control of Iran's three government branches—the presidency, parliament, and the judiciary—from more moderate figures in recent years.

Hard-liners interfered in the 2020 parliamentary elections and 2021 presidential election to defeat moderates and reformists.[30] The ultraconservative Guardian Council—the state body constitutionally responsible for vetting and approving electoral candidates—spearheaded these efforts.[31] The council disqualified an abnormally high number of moderates and reformists from running in 2020, differentially citing corruption, which is endemic in parliament, and a lack of commitment to the Islamic Republic, an entirely subjective criterion.[32] The new legislature elected hard-liner and former IRGC officer Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as its speaker.[33] The Guardian Council later barred prominent moderates and reformists from running in the presidential race in June 2021 and cultivated a field of candidates that feigned political diversity while benefiting hard-liner Ebrahim Raisi, catalyzing his electoral victory.[34]

Supreme Leader Khamenei indirectly controls the Guardian Council and defended it from domestic criticism after both rounds of disqualifications.[35] This increasingly blatant regime interference may set a precedent for future electoral manipulation that preserves hard-liners' political gains. Khamenei appointed cleric Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei

as judiciary chief in June 2021, consolidating the hard-liners' influence over Iran's formal government structure.[36]

The Iranian economy will rebound slightly in the years ahead, but structural flaws will persist under the ascendant hard-liners. The International Monetary Fund forecasts some growth in Iran's real gross domestic product in the months ahead.[37] And hard-liners will develop some components of the economy, though its overall success remains far from certain. The economic philosophy of many hard-liners, including those in the Raisi administration, roughly combines autarky with selective external engagement with specific countries. Among their priorities is enhancing Iran's domestic production capacities to achieve self-sufficiency and mitigate sanctions' impact.

Hard-liners will not, however, likely implement the serious economic reform needed to resolve key protester grievances. The regime enables and relies on rampant corruption and nepotism, hindering economic efficiency. Transparency International ranked Iran 130th of 198 countries in its 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index—the same year in which the Dey demonstrations began.[38] It has only worsened since then, dropping to 149th of 198 in 2020—tied with Cameroon, Guatemala, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Tajikistan.[39]

State-run business conglomerates monopolize domestic markets to the private sector's detriment. Furthermore, the regime refuses to comply with international transparency standards set by the Financial Action Task Force, a refusal that has seriously hindered foreign investment in Iran, even during the period of US compliance with the nuclear deal. Protesters have lamented the poor economic conditions caused by this mismanagement and blame Khamenei's regime.

Hard-liners are deeply connected to regime institutions, such as the IRGC and state-run conglomerates, that benefit from the economy's flaws, disincentivizing reform. The IRGC controls and profits from many of these economic giants and obfuscates its dealings while diverting resources toward foreign adventurism.[40] Raisi and many of his ministers have enabled kleptocratic behavior and supported the regime's economic empire throughout their careers.[41]

Raisi faces long-term economic stressors as well. Birth rates have fallen, presenting demographic challenges to the workforce in the coming decades.[42] Global climate change endangers Iranian agriculture, driving internal displacement and further migration to major cities' restive suburbs, which were some of the initial factors driving recent protests. The government estimates that it will incur billions of dollars in damages annually from climate change in the coming decade.[43]

The potential restoration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will not resolve these structural or long-term economic issues or the popular discontent they fuel. US sanctions were not the initial or sole driver of the recent protest waves in Iran. The Dey demonstrations predated the May 2018 US withdrawal from the JCPOA by five months, though the reimposition of sanctions exacerbated many of Iran's economic challenges and likely facilitated the gasoline protests.

After the sanctions, deep recession and stagflation occurred. They dramatically reduced Iran's ability to export oil—a vital source of government revenue—and accelerated the devaluation of its currency. The rial dropped from 42,700 to the dollar on the free market on January 1, 2018, to 257,000 on January 1, 2021.[44] Iran's middle class has shrunk, and millions have entered lower income groups since the Trump administration began its "maximum pressure" strategy in 2018.[45]

Iran's economic challenges could exacerbate low-level insurgencies, which exist among disenfranchised communities in the border regions, further taxing the regime's internal security structure. Anti-regime violence is common in border areas and frequently escalates. Ethnic minorities in the country's west and southeast suffer discrimination and poor public service access. Separatist groups stoke dissent, and the Islamic State even has a limited presence in the southwest.[46] Groups such as the Kurdistan Free Life Party, in the northwest of Iran, and Army of Justice, in the southeast, frequently conduct attacks and kill local security personnel.[47] These groups leverage popular frustrations to radicalize, recruit, and drive their anti-regime agendas.

II. Iran's Counterprotest Strategy

The Iranian regime's strategy to counter protests relies on three key pillars: force, prevention, and censorship (Figure 1). Authorities use a coercive apparatus of government organs, including intelligence agencies, the judiciary, security forces, and state media, to protect the revolutionary system.

Security officials use the military concept of information superiority (*ashraf-e etelaati*) in this context.[48] The US Department of Defense defines information superiority as "the operational advantage derived from the ability to collect, process, and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information while exploiting or denying an adversary's ability to do the same."[49] The regime's precise definition of information superiority is difficult to discern, but the term's use reflects the importance of narratives and perceptions for imposing social control. The regime is therefore developing its security services into omnipotent monitors and thuggish enforcers and promoting this image to the public.

Iranian leaders are particularly concerned by the capacity for major anti-regime unrest in cities' surroundings and shantytowns that the 2017–18 Dey demonstrations and 2019 gasoline protests revealed. A powerful and well-connected IRGC general, Hossein Nejat, assessed in December 2019 that the US has a new approach to stoke civil unrest through the "illiterate" lower classes in cities' peripheries.[50] He claimed that these groups are easily influenced by information operations.[51] Nejat's remarks likely reflect a prevailing conclusion among the regime elite, especially IRGC commanders, in the aftermath of the 2019 crackdown: The urban poor and disaffected citizens in these communities are a major threat to the regime. The internal security apparatus has thus developed and expanded to improve the state's capability to crush internal dissent since 2017.
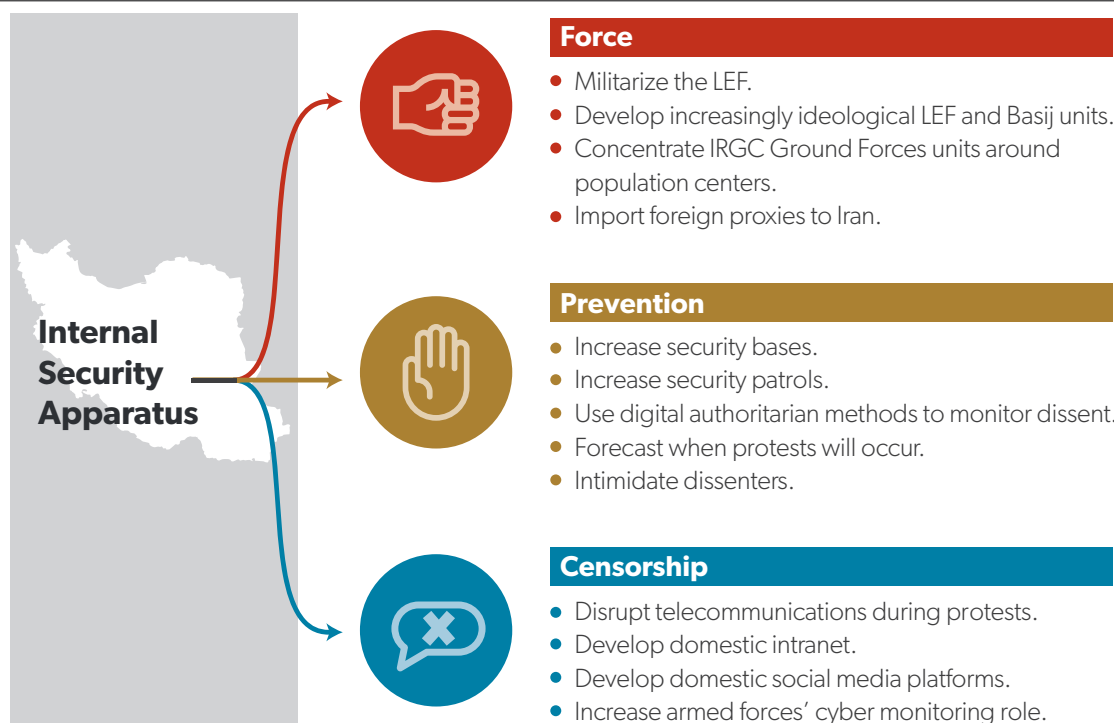
While actual crime remains a legitimate concern in Iran, Iranian authorities conflate political dissent with criminality, at least in their public remarks. Khamenei often labels protesters as "thugs" and demonstrations as foreign-provoked upheaval and a security concern.[52] The security forces will almost certainly co-opt anti-crime initiatives to suppress civil unrest.

Force

The most important component of the regime's counterprotest strategy is the use of force against protesters. Iranian leaders have built a multilayered security apparatus—a cohesive system of military and paramilitary units with varying levels of ideological training and zeal that uses a defense-in-depth philosophy—to control the population. These forces supplement one another, managing different kinds of internal threats and cooperating when needed to repress disaffected citizens and defend government assets and personnel.

Law Enforcement Forces. The first line of defense in the security structure is the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), which is the national police force responsible for internal stability. The LEF has many subordinate units, including the Prevention and Operations Police, which commands law enforcement stations across Iran, and the Intelligence and Public Security Police, which collects information on and arrests criminals, among other duties.[53]

The LEF also includes the Special Units—a highly trained, anti-riot force that deploys if regular police cannot contain civil disorder. This branch is known as one of the most ideologically fervent in the Iranian armed forces; it descends from the hard-line Islamic Revolutionary Committees, which merged with the

Figure 1. Iran's Counterprotest Strategy

Internal Security Apparatus

Force
- Militarize the LEF.
- Develop increasingly ideological LEF and Basij units.
- Concentrate IRGC Ground Forces units around population centers.
- Import foreign proxies to Iran.

Prevention
- Increase security bases.
- Increase security patrols.
- Use digital authoritarian methods to monitor dissent.
- Forecast when protests will occur.
- Intimidate dissenters.

Censorship
- Disrupt telecommunications during protests.
- Develop domestic intranet.
- Develop domestic social media platforms.
- Increase armed forces' cyber monitoring role.

Source: Author's research.

urban police, gendarmerie, and judicial police to form the LEF in 1991.[54]

The Special Units have participated in suppressing every major protest wave in Iran since their inception.[55] Their protocol is first to try to deter protests, then use "soft operations" (i.e., nonlethal crowd-control and dispersion tactics), and finally apply force to end riots, according to their commander.[56] The Special Units also operate the elite Supreme Leader Guardian Special Forces (NOPO), whose personnel undergo advanced examination to test ideological and religious commitment.[57] NOPO has the LEF's best marksmen and is primarily a counterterrorism and hostage-rescue force.[58] NOPO has also participated in violent protest suppression.[59]

The regime has increasingly militarized and outfitted the LEF with advanced capabilities in recent years to prepare for more violence. Parliament nearly doubled the LEF budget for the Persian calendar year that began in 2018—only months after the Dey demonstrations.[60] Funding for the national police that year rose to around 16 percent of the Iranian defense budget—more than was allocated toward Iran's conventional military, the Artesh, which received around 12.1 percent of the defense spending.[61] The budget allocated a 400 percent increase to a line item pertaining to the LEF's "purchase of weapons, equipment, and the strengthening of [law] enforcement stamina."[62]

Overall defense spending dropped in 2019 due to mounting US economic pressure and the dramatic depreciation of the rial, but the LEF's estimated budget remained stable at around 17 percent of that year's military finances.[63] The LEF's estimated budget again grew to 19 percent for the 2020–21 fiscal year, following the gasoline protests.[64] Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf altered the 2021–22 budget after parliament approved it, more than tripling a line item pertaining to "strengthening the stamina of defensive [law] enforcement," among other increases to the LEF's spending.[65] The final allocations in this most recent budget are unclear, given the extent to which Ghalibaf hid his changes. It is also difficult to identify precisely how much the

LEF's budget has grown in real figures given differences among Western analysts on how to calculate Iranian spending. Nevertheless, the trend described here demonstrates that the LEF's budget has steadily grown.

The LEF has also signed three cooperative agreements with the Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry since the Dey demonstrations to receive military-grade arms and equipment.[66] The defense ministry has no command authority over the armed forces, which include the LEF, but does manage Iran's defense industries. Two of the agreements came shortly after the Dey demonstrations and gasoline protests, which may indicate that the LEF is attempting to adapt to lessons learned.

The scope of these recent cooperative agreements is unclear, but the defense ministry has provided the LEF with drones, helicopters, and personnel communications equipment in recent years.[67] The militarization of the police will facilitate the use of extreme force to crush demonstrations. Communications technologies, such as personal radios, will become especially vital to crackdowns if the regime disrupts telecommunications during future protest waves (the likelihood of which is discussed later in this section). The LEF would require reliable independent communication networks to coordinate and execute its missions.

IRGC Ground Forces and Basij Organization. The next layers of the regime's internal defenses are the IRGC Ground Forces and Basij Organization. The IRGC Ground Forces oversees conventional units (e.g., divisions and brigades) and territorial units—known as provincial corps—throughout Iran. The Ground Forces operates 11 regional headquarters, each responsible for administering the conventional and territorial units in its respective area. These conventional units' basing indicates a primary focus on suppressing internal unrest and waging irregular warfare in the rear of a foreign invader rather than on defending against an invasion conventionally.[68] The IRGC Ground Forces has also deployed to Syria in recent years to coordinate the operations of Iranian paramilitary forces and support the IRGC Quds Force's use of proxy groups, such as Iraqi Shi'a militias.[69]

The Basij is a different branch of the IRGC that is coequal to the Ground Forces and responsible for civil defense and social control. It penetrates every segment of Iranian society, with duties that include organizing and recruiting regime supporters, indoctrinating its own members, producing state propaganda, conducting moral policing, and suppressing political dissent. Both the IRGC Ground Forces and Basij have participated in protest crackdowns when the LEF has failed to contain upheaval.

The Basij operates quasi-professional paramilitary units that suppress domestic dissent and support the LEF against protests as needed. These units receive varying levels of ideological-political training (i.e., indoctrination) and instruction in civil defense, counterinsurgency, and security operations. The following lists the different models of Basij units, ordered from least to most trained:

- **The Ashura (All-Male) Battalions and al Zahra (All-Female) Battalions.** These are designed for cultural, rescue, and security missions. They have historically provided civil defense, infrastructure protection, and low-level, anti-riot support but were reoriented after the 2009 Green Movement to focus more on intelligence gathering and psychological operations.[70]

- **The Beyt ol Moghaddas (All-Male) Battalions and Kowsar (All-Female) Battalions.** These are rapid-reaction forces trained to defend against invasion. The Basij elevates the most ideologically devout members of the Ashura and al Zahra battalions to these better-trained units.[71]

- **The Imam Ali Battalions.** These are anti-riot forces trained for urban environments and were formed after the Green Movement. They use motorcycles to disperse and intimidate crowds and rapidly traverse busy city streets.[72]

- **The Imam Hossein Battalions.** These are light infantry designed to fight insurgencies domestically and abroad. The IRGC Ground Forces draws on these units as a manpower reserve and has deployed them to Syria to defend the Assad regime in recent years.[73]

- **The Fatehin Battalions.** These are Basij special forces comprised of elite members from the Imam Ali and Imam Hossein battalions.[74] The Fatehin units have cracked down on protesters and deployed to Syria and operate a sniper element.[75] A senior IRGC commander stated that the regime would improve these battalions' capabilities following the gasoline protests.[76]

The IRGC provincial corps control the Ground Forces' conventional units and Basij security forces at the local level. The regime integrated the Basij Organization with the IRGC Ground Forces and established the provincial corps in 2008. Each of Iran's 31 provinces has one provincial corps, except for Tehran, which has two—one for the city and one for the larger province. This merger was part of the regime's newly established Mosaic Doctrine, which Iranian military strategists developed following the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, respectively.

Regime leadership feared that the US might next turn to Iran, possibly beginning with an air campaign aimed at decapitating regime leadership. The Mosaic Doctrine was thus meant to decentralize the IRGC and disperse it among the Iranian population. Doing so would make the IRGC harder for the US to target and allow it to continue operating even if the regime's senior leadership was disrupted or eliminated. The IRGC's decentralization was also aimed at facilitating efforts to control the population and conduct irregular warfare. The regime is now using this decentralized structure to confront domestic unrest.

The regime has developed this multilayered system of security forces in part to mitigate the risk of defections and insubordinations. Security personnel have periodically refused to quash demonstrations in Iran, for example in 1993 and 2009.[77] Iranian
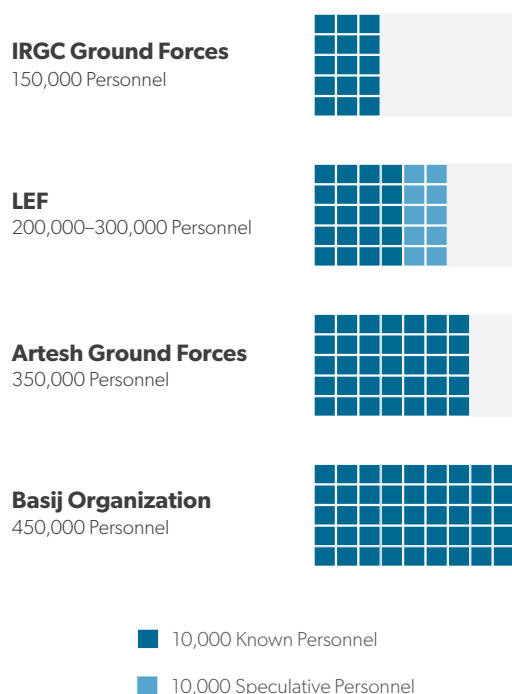
authorities have developed increasingly loyal units in response to this challenge and delegated sensitive security missions to them.

Nevertheless, dissent within the Basij remains a challenge to regime security. Videos of Basij members burning their membership cards as public renunciations of the regime circulated online during the Dey demonstrations.[78] These documents are not uncommon in Iran and could have belonged to casual Basij members rather than elite security personnel. However, indications of dissent became more obvious after the gasoline protests. Khamenei warned of enemy infiltration in the Basij following the gasoline protests, indicating that he perceived dissent among its ranks.[79] Iranian intelligence agents arrested over 10 Basij members tied to the crackdown on unknown charges following Khamenei's remarks.[80]

Artesh. An additional layer of the security apparatus is the Artesh, which the regime has increasingly used for controlling the population since the Dey demonstrations. The Artesh's role in protest responses has been historically minimal compared to the IRGC and LEF. The Artesh is largely focused on defending Iran from foreign aggressors and protecting the country's territorial integrity.

However, some of the constraints on the Artesh's role may have been lifted due to the high threat the regime perceives from internal unrest. The commander of the Artesh Ground Forces, Kiomars Heydari, stated in March 2021 that his forces had participated in suppressing major protest waves in recent years.[81] Iranian military leadership accepted an offer from the Artesh to "help security forces," and the Artesh stabilized disorderly cities, according to Heydari.[82] He also suggested the Artesh would participate in future protest responses.[83]

During the gasoline protests, the Artesh had a relatively minor role but prepared to intervene more aggressively. The Artesh guarded government facilities to relieve LEF forces stationed there, allowing the LEF to deploy elsewhere.[84] Iran's rulers have historically distrusted the Artesh, and many of its personnel are less ideological than their IRGC counterparts are, explaining regime leaders' hesitance to

Figure 2. Iranian Security Services' Manpower

IRGC Ground Forces
150,000 Personnel

LEF
200,000–300,000 Personnel

Artesh Ground Forces
350,000 Personnel

Basij Organization
450,000 Personnel

■ 10,000 Known Personnel

■ 10,000 Speculative Personnel

Source: Defense Intelligence Agency, "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," 2019, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf.

use the Artesh to a greater extent. Nevertheless, the Artesh Ground Forces staged a military exercise with three brigades and drone and engineering elements in northwestern Iran during the gasoline protests.[85] This maneuver was likely meant to deter protesters in the northwest, especially among the Azeri and Kurdish minorities, and was possibly cover for a partial mobilization to prepare for more-aggressive repression.

The Artesh periodically conducts similar exercises unrelated to protests, but this particular one likely had internal security considerations, given its timing and the extent to which the gasoline protests demanded the Iranian leadership's attention. The Artesh released a statement on the same day as the exercise, describing the protests as "sedition" and accusing foreign enemies of stoking the riots.[86] Artesh Commander Abdol Rahim Mousavi pledged to support the LEF and its missions in a meeting with

LEF Commander Hossein Ashtari weeks after the gasoline protests ended.[87]

The potential involvement of the Artesh in domestic security, even in a limited capacity, would provide Iranian authorities an additional asset to quash future protest waves. The Artesh Ground Forces has more than twice as many service members as the IRGC Ground Forces does, operates the bulk of the country's helicopter and tank arsenals, and has concentrated many of its units around the Iran-Iraq border—an artifact of the eight-year war against Saddam Hussein (Figure 2).[88] These qualities, combined with its use to relieve other security institutions, such as the LEF, make the Artesh a powerful instrument in preserving the regime's power, particularly in the restive border regions.

Proxy Fighters. Foreign proxies may be the final layer of the regime's coercive apparatus. Unconfirmed Western reports alleged that the IRGC has deployed its foreign proxies, such as elements of the Afghan Shi'a Fatemiyoun Division, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias, to Iran to support security forces' crackdowns during previous protest waves.[89] Opposition sources frequently circulate these allegations, but the veracity of their claims is far from certain.[90]

Nevertheless, there is a possibility the regime could import foreign fighters to suppress domestic dissent in the future. Iranian authorities have demonstrated their capability and readiness to quickly bring proxies to Iran to assist with various challenges. For example, the IRGC Quds Force sent the Fatemiyoun and Iraqi groups to southwestern Iran in April 2019 for disaster relief.[91] Heavy rains and severe flooding struck the country that month, extensively damaging infrastructure and partially submerging some towns.[92] Anti-regime sentiment and violence flared, particularly in southwestern Iran, and social media users speculated that the foreign forces were in Iran to suppress unrest if needed.[93] Iraqi and Lebanese forces deployed again in April 2020 to help manage the outbreak of COVID-19 in Iran.[94] The IRGC's demonstrated reliance on these groups in disaster scenarios indicates

that the regime would consider leveraging its foreign network to control the population should protests grow too severe for domestic forces to handle.

Incorporating foreign militias into the internal security structure serves two primary functions: reinforcing the security apparatus with additional manpower and mitigating the risk of widespread dissent among regime forces. Iranian leaders fear disloyalty and insubordination among security personnel asked to repress their fellow citizens. Part of their solution, as described already, includes using increasingly indoctrinated and loyal military units. Foreign proxy fighters are less prone to insubordination because they lack the personal connections to Iran's neighborhoods that the native IRGC and LEF members have.

Prevention

The regime has developed a diverse tool kit of social-control mechanisms in recent years to deter and preempt anti-regime protests before applying force is necessary. Iranian leaders' methods to build this coercive apparatus include strengthening the Islamic Republic's security infrastructure, co-opting emerging technologies, and using intimidation.

Security Bases and Patrols. The security services are expanding their presence—real and perceived—throughout Iran. Khamenei described the security forces as omnipotent monitors during a speech to a group of IRGC and Basij leaders immediately following the gasoline protests. He called on the Basij to maintain a "constant presence" everywhere in the country and prepare strategies, tactics, and contingencies to defend the regime from further unrest.[95] Khamenei was responding to the insecurity generated during the protests and articulating part of his theory of how to ensure it does not happen again.

To this end, the security forces are building more bases around Iran. The LEF had around 3,000 police stations during the Dey demonstrations.[96] Since Dey, LEF leaders have called for doubling the number of stations—to 6,000.[97] The LEF Tehran Provincial

Unit alone plans to increase the number of stations in the capital region from 84 to 200, with many likely in the city outskirts and suburbs.[98] Iranian officials have acknowledged that less-urban areas lack sufficient law enforcement facilities.[99]

The Basij is also expanding its security presence around Iran. It is unclear exactly how many Basij bases existed during Dey, but Iranian media suggested there were around 40,000 in 2017.[100] The Basij has expanded to 55,000 bases since then.[101] The IRGC Ground Forces is also installing new military bases—one outside Tehran city and another in rural Yazd Province.[102] This growing military footprint throughout Iran will abet the security forces in broadcasting their local pervasive presence, monitoring the public, mobilizing during unrest, and oppressing the population.

The security services have instituted a series of new patrols to increase their presence in Iran's streets and mitigate their lack of facilities in rural communities. The Basij and LEF increased cooperation after the Dey demonstrations and launched new joint Razaviyoun patrols to counter crime and dissent in 2019.[103] These patrols have since operated throughout Iran and are part of a "neighborhood-based security" initiative designed to entrench security forces' local presence. They include regular police and Basij members from the Beyt ol Moghaddas, Imam Ali, and Imam Hossein battalions.[104]

It is unclear whether less-professionalized and less-trained Basij forces, such as the Ashura and al Zahra battalions, participate in this program, but their seeming exclusion could indicate that the Razaviyoun patrols are meant to be highly loyal and ready to repress protests. In 2018, LEF Prevention and Operations Police Chief Mohammad Sharafi described a likely precursor to this initiative, noting that mobile security units "can deploy to cities' outskirts and crime areas to monitor the surroundings."[105] He later added, in 2019, that the patrols mitigate the LEF's lack of police stations.[106]

The Basij further reorganized to decentralize decision-making and consolidate its neighborhood presence based on lessons learned during the gasoline protests. In December 2019, Basij Organization Chief

Gholam Reza Soleimani discussed greater emphasis on regional commanders' initiative over "top-down" management and announced plans to strengthen the capabilities and number of women's Basij units.[107] Additionally, the IRGC Tehran Provincial Corps established more security bases and deployed Basij "strike teams" in September 2020 to deter crime as part of the IRGC's neighborhood-based security efforts.[108] The decentralization of the Basij, reinforcement of women's units, and further expansion of security forces into metropolitan areas comprise a broader regime effort to adapt to challenges presented by newer demonstrations and crush them early.

The state is also expanding its morality patrols across Iran as an additional layer to suppress dissent. The IRGC established 300 new patrols in January 2021 to promote the religious principle of enjoining good and forbidding wrong (*amr beh marouf va nahi aaz monkar*).[109] These groups, which are likely comprised of Basij members, issue verbal warnings to citizens not behaving in a manner deemed socially acceptable to the clerical establishment.[110] They coordinate with the LEF and judiciary in case of public displays of anti-regime sentiment, functioning as an additional means to identify and quickly end unrest before it spreads.[111] IRGC Tehran Provincial Corps Commander Hassan Hassan Zadeh, at the ceremony announcing the new patrols, emphasized the need to oppose any individual seeking to weaken the regime and stated that the patrols should not be limited to a "few specific issues."[112] Officials stated that there were 1,000 morality patrols across Iran in January 2021 and that they had plans for that number to reach 10,000.[113]

This expanding arsenal of neighborhood-based patrols—Razaviyoun, strike teams, and morality patrols, among others—forms a constellation of security personnel ever monitoring the public. This entrenchment enables the internal security apparatus to collect information, deter dissent, respond to protests promptly, and target and threaten regime opponents and dissidents.

Emerging Technologies. The regime is using emerging technologies to improve its monitoring capabilities as well. LEF commanders frequently discuss the importance of leveraging advanced technologies to better perform their duties. They describe this effort as "smartening" the police force.[114] This initiative is broad but includes using facial-recognition software and artificial intelligence (AI) to achieve internal stability. The LEF has increased cooperation with the Roads and Urban Development Ministry to install cameras throughout Iran, particularly in cities and towns, which will be used for some benign purposes such as traffic monitoring but also likely to collect information on the population.[115] The police have increasingly promoted their use of face-recognizing cameras and will inevitably co-opt such surveillance infrastructure to track and process images of dissidents and protest leaders.[116]

Former President Rouhani suggested as much when he threatened to use cameras during the gasoline protests to identify participants blocking traffic—a popular form of protest at the time.[117] Iranian technology companies are even developing facial-recognition software capable of identifying individuals wearing face masks because of the COVID-19 pandemic.[118] The proliferation of such advanced surveillance capabilities also supports the authorities' efforts to establish information superiority. Installing cameras capable of identifying and tracking citizens reinforces the public perception of Iran as a monitored and securitized environment—similar to establishing more bases and patrols—thereby deterring political upheaval.

AI will also facilitate the LEF's suppression of dissent. The potential use of AI in law enforcement is extensive and again has many benign applications. The danger lies in AI's analytical potential to synthesize a broad range of data streams collected through increasingly diverse digital means to identify and preempt internal security threats in real time. The state's installation of surveillance infrastructure, such as cameras and drones, and collection of its citizens' biometric data will further support this effort.[119] LEF Commander Ashtari has described on numerous occasions the need to use information superiority

and technology to forecast civil disorder and thereby enable security forces to adopt preemptive measures before unrest begins.[120] The Interior Ministry thus announced in March 2021 the formation of a monitoring committee, which is comprised of senior intelligence and security officials and designed to rapidly detect emerging security issues in Iran.[121]

Discipline and Intimidation. The final component of the regime's effort to prevent protests is the use of discipline and intimidation. The security institutions conducted open displays of brutish force and high-profile executions throughout 2020 to underscore the Iranian leadership's intolerance of criminality and political opposition. Security forces launched a campaign to counter "thugs" in late 2020 in response to Khamenei's order.[122] The LEF established specialized headquarters throughout Iran and raided cafes, gyms, parks, and restaurants in Tehran and conducted similar operations in other major cities.[123]

The police arrested hundreds over the following weeks and brutally beat detainees in front of crowds.[124] The security services use a database to sort "thugs" based on threat level and collect information on them accordingly.[125] Their offenses are unclear and could range from legitimate crime to political opposition. Nevertheless, the regime publicly humiliated and tortured these individuals to deter public displays of anti-regime sentiment in addition to ordinary lawbreaking.

Censorship

The third component of Iran's counterprotest strategy is controlling the domestic information space. Regime officials consider cyberspace a crucial domain where the cultural and ideological soft war against the US is fought. They thus seek to control internal narratives, monitor the population's cyber activities, and suppress political dissent online. The internal security apparatus has used several tools in recent years to increasingly censor and control the flow of information in Iran.

Disrupting Telecommunications. Iranian leaders have become more willing to disrupt domestic telecommunications to counter and preempt unrest since the gasoline protests. The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Ministry blocked internet access across Iran for over a week during the November 2019 crackdown, enabling the killing of hundreds of demonstrators, with limited coverage of their deaths.[126] Government authorities sought to prevent protester coordination and organization and restrict the free flow of information within and out of Iran. The regime has disrupted networks at least five times (listed below) at varying levels since then. The government has blocked internet in Iran before, such as during the Green Movement and Dey demonstrations, but disruptions have become more frequent since 2019. Iran's rulers have lowered their threshold for taking such action and will likely increase their manipulation of telecommunications to facilitate violent crackdowns against future protests.

- **December 2019.** Iranian leaders feared unrest after the end of the 40-day mourning period for those killed in the November 2019 crackdown and briefly blocked mobile services on December 25 in anticipation.[127]

- **March 2020.** As COVID-19 spread in Iran, killing Mohammad Mir Mohammadi, authorities disrupted telecommunications.[128] Mohammadi was close to Khamenei and had served on the Expediency Discernment Council—a quasi-legislative body that advises the supreme leader—since 2017.

- **July 2020.** The regime targeted networks when small-scale protests began in some cities responding to the planned execution of three protesters.

- **October 2020.** The government disrupted internet services in Tehran in response to peaceful demonstrations mourning the death of a popular Iranian dissident singer.[129]

- **February–March 2021.** The regime partially blocked cellular networks and internet access throughout Iran after days of localized disruptions in southeastern Sistan and Baluchistan Province.[130] Deadly protests erupted in the border regions after reports that Iranian security forces killed one to two dozen civilians transiting fuel between Iran and Pakistan.[131]

- **July 2021.** The regime disrupted internet services in southwestern Khuzestan Province as protests triggered by water shortages spread throughout the province and to some major cities, such as Tehran.[132]

Intranet and Indigenous Social Networks. The regime is also developing the infrastructure to replace foreign internet services and social media networks. Regime officials vowed to strengthen Iran's national intranet following the gasoline protests.[133] The Supreme Cyberspace Council, which includes Iran's top military and political figures and enforces state censorship, later approved a plan to complete the intranet.[134] Khamenei formed the council in 2012 to impose control over the domestic information space and protect Iran from the "harm" of the internet, referring to the potential cultural and ideological impact of international exposure on the country's population.[135] Khamenei considers Iran's internet sovereignty in the context of soft war.

This initiative to develop an intranet in Iran is almost a decade old at this point. The intranet would allow the regime to further censor and monitor internal communications without hindering most network functionality. Iranian officials also want to minimize the discontent and costs incurred by blocking the internet in the future; the shutdown in November 2019 sparked widespread domestic and international criticism and hurt Iranian businesses. It remains unclear, however, to what extent Iran can replace foreign internet services and on what timeline.

The regime has increasingly blocked social media platforms over the years, further restricting internet and speech freedoms. The government began censoring Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube around the 2009 presidential election to suppress reformists online as they competed against Khamenei's preferred candidate, Ahmadinejad. The judiciary later banned the popular messaging application Telegram and mandated all Iranian internet providers block the platform in April 2018—months after the Dey demonstrations.[136] The judiciary accused Telegram of collecting information on citizens, disseminating propaganda, disrupting national unity, facilitating illegal smuggling, and publishing illicit material.[137] The judiciary also threatened to prosecute individuals using virtual private networks (VPN) to access Telegram.[138]

Rouhani campaigned partly on protecting personal freedoms, such as free speech online, and the expansion of censorship discredited him among the public, especially during his second term. He criticized the judiciary's decision to censor Telegram, describing the ban as the "opposite of democracy."[139] Hard-line lawmakers, including Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf, more recently chastised Instagram after the gasoline protests, indicating that the regime could censor it next.[140] Rouhani's ICT minister, Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi, defended Telegram and opposed blocking it before the legislature.[141] The judiciary indicted Jahromi over this stance in January 2021.[142] Khamenei's regime has thus demonstrated that it is not open to discussion on this issue—even by senior and responsible members of the executive branch.

The regime has not currently banned Instagram, but hard-liners may expand censorship as they consolidate power. The previously described trends demonstrate that hard-liners have traditionally enabled and benefited from suppressing social media while politically damaging moderates and reformists.

Iranian authorities are promoting several indigenous social media platforms to reduce public reliance on foreign networking services. The regime touted domestic, state-approved alternatives, such as Soroush and iGap, in the weeks before banning Telegram.[143] There is also an equivalent to Instagram, which is designed to replace the American original. The substitution of popular platforms with internally

produced applications will expand the hard-line military's cyber monitoring of the population. Jahromi admitted in September 2020 that the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS)—Iran's highest military body, which is largely controlled by hard-line IRGC officers—is helping develop messaging services.[144]

Military Involvement in Cyberspace. The AFGS's involvement reflects the security services' prioritization of cyber control, particularly since the Green Movement. The LEF established a new division, the Cyber Police, in 2011 to counter cybercrimes, crack down on VPN usage, and track activists and dissidents online, among other responsibilities.[145] The Basij has established in recent years "cyber battalions"—units of internet trolls that confront and monitor anti-regime sentiments online while promoting pro-regime narratives and values.[146] The Imam Hossein Officer and Guard Training University—a state military academy controlled by the IRGC—established a "cyber division" in response to the gasoline protests.[147] The function of this unit is likely to educate and train officers involved in cyber and information operations.

Exporting Digital Authoritarianism

The regime's evolution to counter protests reflects a transition toward a more overtly repressive style of governance that increasingly features digital authoritarian methods. Iranian leadership is building an increasingly adaptive and sophisticated police and surveillance state, using aggressive discipline, censorship, and emerging technologies to secure its hold on power. The use of digital algorithms and predictive policing tactics to prevent and respond to protests could mirror, and is likely inspired by, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) experiments with social control and the role advanced technologies play therein.[148] Iran has observed how technology can secure other autocratic governments, looking to China as a model, and could seek to emulate it.

Senior Iranian officials consistently praise China in this regard, particularly the CCP's control of its domestic information space. Supreme Cyberspace Council Secretary Abol Hassan Firouz Abadi praised the Chinese model of internet sovereignty in September 2020.[149] Firouz Abadi made this remark in the context of censoring foreign internet platforms that could violate Iranian laws or "create cultural, social, political, and security issues" domestically.[150] In February 2021, Supreme Cultural Revolution Council Secretary Reza Ameli stated that Iran should emulate China's cyber policies.[151] The council is responsible for regulating and supervising Iran's cultural, educational, and religious development, dictating relevant polices and protecting society from outside ideologies and views perceived by regime leadership as threatening.

Moreover, Tehran and Beijing are cooperating on security matters, which may be facilitating this shift toward greater digital authoritarianism in Iran. The foundation for such cooperation has existed for over a decade; the US Department of Justice announced in February 2020 that China's telecommunications giant, Huawei, has assisted Iran with domestic surveillance since at least 2009, when it helped suppress the Green Movement.[152] Huawei has historically used unofficial subsidiaries to illegally sell electronics and telecommunications equipment to Iranian state-owned enterprises.[153]

Since 2009, the CCP has cultivated closer ties with the LEF. The regime sent cohorts of Interior Ministry and law enforcement personnel to China throughout 2017 to receive training from Chinese police.[154] Additionally, the Chinese ambassador to Iran has held periodic meetings with LEF commanders to discuss mutual support.[155] The CCP could have exchanged concepts and technical expertise related to AI, predictive policing, and internet sovereignty during these interactions.

The recently signed 25-year strategic cooperation agreement between China and Iran (the final text of which remains unpublished at this time) may further deepen their cooperation on internal security affairs. An early draft of the agreement outlines greater cooperation in the realms of defense and technology, including AI and cyber, among many other fields.[156] Tehran insists that the final text of the agreement

provides few specifics and describes it as a general architecture for strengthening bilateral engagement.[157]

Some Iranian officials believe that strengthening relations with the CCP may help secure the regime from domestic challenges. In September 2020, an Iranian parliamentarian discussed the possibility that China could support the development of the intranet, citing a lack of server infrastructure as Iran's primary obstacle.[158] Another parliamentarian lauded—in the context of the 25-year deal—the prospect of greater cooperation with Beijing on AI and controlling cyberspace.[159] It is unclear to what extent these individuals' remarks reflect Khamenei's thinking on the China-Iran strategic agreement, but their rhetoric demonstrates that this mentality exists among at least some in the political establishment. The development and evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran's relationship with the CCP may become crucial factors in extending the Iranian regime's life span.

Iran could become a net exporter of social control to defend its foreign influence and interests. Tehran has already demonstrated its willingness to send its internal security apparatus abroad. The regime deployed personnel from the IRGC Ground Forces, IRGC Intelligence Organization, Intelligence and Security Ministry, and LEF to Syria to advise and assist the Assad regime in its crackdown on protests at the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011.[160]

Each security body is involved in managing protests and suppressing political opposition in Iran. They shared equipment, such as drones, and their expertise with Assad to protect him—and thereby Iranian influence—in Syria.[161] An unidentified US official stated that Iran had also "shared techniques on internet surveillance and disruption with the Assad regime."[162] The LEF Special Units later deployed to Iraq when anti-government, anti-Iran protests spread throughout the country in late 2019.[163] The LEF likely augmented Iran's proxies for protest suppression.

Foreign instability that imperils Iran's regional project is often existential from Tehran's perspective. Regime leadership considers stability in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria—and Iranian influence in those

countries—integral to Tehran's deterrence power, national defense, and strategic depth.

Recognizing Iran's enduring commitment to protecting its foreign proxies and partners raises the question of whether the regime will impart its increasingly sophisticated capabilities and techniques to its friends. Senior regime officials often laud the exportability of the Basij model throughout the Middle East, in addition to countries such as Venezuela.[164] Khamenei's military adviser and former IRGC commander Yahya Rahim Safavi stated in September 2020 that Iran is "helping [Venezuela] with software and providing ideas, [including], for example, discussing how to form a popular Basij and repel cyberattacks."[165]

The proliferation of authoritarianism abetted by technological advancement is dangerous and troublesome. Iran has established technology-sharing platforms with Armenia, China, Kenya, Russia, Syria, and Turkey in recent years and plans to expand this bilateral cooperation to other states.[166] Such exchanges have many benign uses but could also facilitate the exportation of repressive technologies if Tehran concludes such trade is in its interests for financial, political, or security reasons. The turbulent security environment in Iran may be thus indirectly evolving the fundamental threat posed by the regime to US interests abroad.

Doubling Down on Ideology

The supreme leader and the political establishment are trying to ideologize the Iranian population as an additional means to mitigate internal pressures. Since 2019, Khamenei has popularized within regime discourse the notion that the Islamic Republic has entered a new phase in which the government and society must reaffirm and strengthen their commitment to the state's revolutionary ideals.[167] He argues that the Iranian nation must adopt the same ideological spirit and zeal to confront today's challenges as the revolution's founders did during the Iran-Iraq War.[168] Khamenei is particularly focused on imparting this mindset and worldview to Iran's

youth, on the theory that indoctrinating them will ameliorate many of the country's internal stressors.[169] Various regime organs, including the IRGC, have embraced this effort and are conducting media, political, religious, and sociocultural initiatives to this end.[170]

This activity demonstrates that the ruling elite have not entirely abandoned their desire to garner popular support for the regime. However, the hard-liners' interference in the 2020 parliamentary elections and 2021 presidential election demonstrates that expanding and preserving hard-liner control is a higher priority. Khamenei likely believes that ideologizing the populace will allow the regime to continue engineering elections in favor of hard-liners without needing to sacrifice high voter turnout, as was the case during the recent legislative and presidential elections.

III. Personnel Is Policy

Iran's political and military elite have also transformed in recent years in response to the domestic security environment. Supreme Leader Khamenei, as the regime's ultimate political authority and commander in chief, has sought to ideologically homogenize the Iranian leadership and politically neutralize moderate currents. He has enabled hard-liners and those inclined to support greater repression to take control of the government branches. Khamenei has also filled the top military posts with key loyalists and those experienced in political suppression in preparation for more popular upheaval. The following discussion examines the prevailing trends among Iran's political and military leadership to understand what decisions they will likely make before and during large-scale protests in the future.

Political Leadership

Iranian political leadership is becoming more hardline for the foreseeable future, which will enable more-repressive measures. The most important positions in this context are the president, parliament speaker, judiciary chief, and, above all, the supreme leader. Each official, except the supreme leader, serve ex officio on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which is Iran's highest defense and security policy body. The supreme leader sends personal representatives to the council on his behalf to articulate his parameters and preferences. Other SNSC members include the AFGS chief, IRGC commander, Artesh commander, and relevant ministers, such as those for foreign affairs, intelligence, and the interior. The SNSC, under Khamenei, dictates and oversees all efforts to quash protests.

Hard-liner Control in the Formal Government. Growing hard-liner control will enable more authoritarian behavior among Iran's formal government structure and SNSC. President Raisi, Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf, and Judiciary Chief Ejei have consolidated their political influence in recent years and have historically supported brutal repression against the population. Raisi abetted the regime's mistreatment, torture, and killing of thousands during Iran's mass execution of political prisoners in 1988.[171] He was a senior prosecutor at the time and has not moderated since then. He continued to suppress political opposition as judiciary chief from 2019 to 2021. The judiciary executed political prisoners throughout 2020, including Navid Afkari, a popular wrestler who participated in the Dey demonstrations, and Ruhollah Zam, an Iranian activist and dissident whom the regime abducted from Iraq in October 2019.[172] Raisi has also arrested and prosecuted political opponents ostensibly to combat corruption but actually to consolidate his political standing.[173]

Ghalibaf is a former IRGC and LEF commander who signed an infamous open letter from 24 IRGC leaders to reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1999, pressuring him to crack down on the student protests at the time.[174] The commanders threatened to intervene if Khatami did not act.[175] The late IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and his successor Esmail Ghaani also signed the letter.[176] Ghalibaf, while LEF commander, ordered the use of live gunfire against protests in 2003 and later defended the regime's ruthless crackdown on the 2009 Green Movement.[177]

Finally, Ejei has held several positions in the regime's intelligence and judicial bodies since its founding and has been particularly involved in suppressing free speech and political dissent since 1998.[178]

Potential Implications of Growing Hard-liner Control

Hard-liners, especially those aligned with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), may grant the IRGC greater influence over decisions pertaining to domestic repression. Hard-liners may appoint more IRGC-friendly politicians as provincial governors, as former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did, enabling greater IRGC influence at the local level.[180] Provincial governors are part of the provincial security councils, which oversee domestic stability in their jurisdictions. Growing IRGC control at the national and provincial echelons could facilitate the use of force more liberally than under Hassan Rouhani, who had an adversarial relationship with the IRGC.

A hard-line Information and Communications Technology minister may more readily disrupt tele-communications and block social media networks. A minister who opposes such measures cannot disobey the supreme leader if ordered to block networks but can argue against such action or intentionally slow its implementation. Hard-liners generally support significant state involvement in society, while Rouhani supported personal liberties to a greater extent. Hard-liners could expand censorship and further encroach on citizens' privacy.

An IRGC-friendly president and parliament speaker may more readily divert increased funding to the security services. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf has already done so in the most recent fiscal budget to empower the Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and Basij.[181] He likely favors the LEF, particularly given that he commanded it from 2000 to 2005.

This transition in recent years from a formal government (i.e., the administration, parliament, and the judiciary) run by moderates to one controlled by hard-liners will affect regime behavior mostly on the margins. Moderates, such as former President Rouhani, have supported repression and violent crackdowns, although with somewhat less enthusiasm than the hard-liners and with more interest in retaining some freedoms for the Iranian people.[179] However, a hard-liner-dominated SNSC will affect the regime's counterprotest strategy in some key respects (potential examples of which are listed in the sidebar above). Not all hard-liners support such repressive measures, but the particular individuals consolidating power (e.g., Ejei, Ghalibaf, and Raisi) have done so in the past and have not indicated any intent to moderate their authoritarian proclivities.

Supreme Leader Succession. Another hard-liner will likely succeed Khamenei as supreme leader. Raisi is a top contender. Khamenei favored him in the 2017 and 2021 presidential elections and has continually empowered him.[182] Iran's Assembly of Experts—the regime organ tasked with selecting the next supreme leader—elected him as its vice chairman a week after he became judiciary chief in 2019.[183]

Another prominent but less likely candidate to replace Khamenei is his second son, Mojtaba Khamenei, who is close to the IRGC and has historically supported aggressive authoritarianism and political suppression. Mojtaba was reportedly central to engineering Ahmadinejad's disputed election victory in 2009 and later took control of the Basij militia to crush the Green Movement.[184] He has become even more powerful since then. Ayatollah Khamenei has delegated some of his leadership responsibilities to Mojtaba since at least November 2019 and may consider him an heir.[185]

Raisi and Mojtaba are not the only succession candidates, but others' chances appear low. Many high-ranking clerics in the regime, such as Guardian Council Secretary Ahmad Jannati, are aging and will likely soon die. An individual such as Jannati could replace Khamenei, but he would not hold the position for long and thus quickly trigger another succession

crisis. Younger clerics, such as Ahmad Khatami, Hassan Rouhani, and Sadegh Amoli Larijani, are also potential candidates. But in 2019, Larijani lost the election to become Assembly of Experts vice chairman by a significant margin to Raisi, reflecting the body's preference for Raisi over Larijani as a leader.[186] Rouhani is increasingly marginalized, and it is unclear whether he or Khatami have sufficient political capital to make a serious bid for supreme leadership. The succession process is opaque, and its apparent trajectory could change unexpectedly. But the odds strongly favor a hard-liner following Khamenei.

Military Leadership

The evolution of the military leadership indicates that the commanders involved in internal security are preparing for more repression. Khamenei has reshuffled many of the armed forces' leaders since the Dey demonstrations and gasoline protests, installing a cadre of hard-line generals to vital positions (Figure 3). Understanding how the internal security apparatus has changed—and how it is prioritizing and will likely respond to future unrest—requires an examination of the individuals now leading it.

Changes to IRGC Leadership. The IRGC has undergone changes to its senior echelons to adapt to the evolving internal threat environment since the Dey demonstrations. Iranian military doctrine asserts that the regime faces soft, semihard, and hard threats.[198] Soft threats are those that erode social support and nonviolent activities such as peaceful protests. Semihard threats generally refer to active insurgencies and violent riots, and hard threats involve more-intense kinetic conflict.

The IRGC has renewed emphasis on its defense and security missions over the civilian and social initiatives that largely characterized the tenure of Mohammad Ali Jafari, who was the IRGC commander from 2007 to 2019. Jafari prioritized countering soft threats, which he described as the IRGC's main responsibility, especially during the early years of his tenure.[199] His major undertakings included forming the IRGC provincial corps and recasting them as political and sociocultural actors in addition to intelligence and security bodies.[200] Jafari tasked the provincial corps with leading the effort against soft threats at the local level.[201]
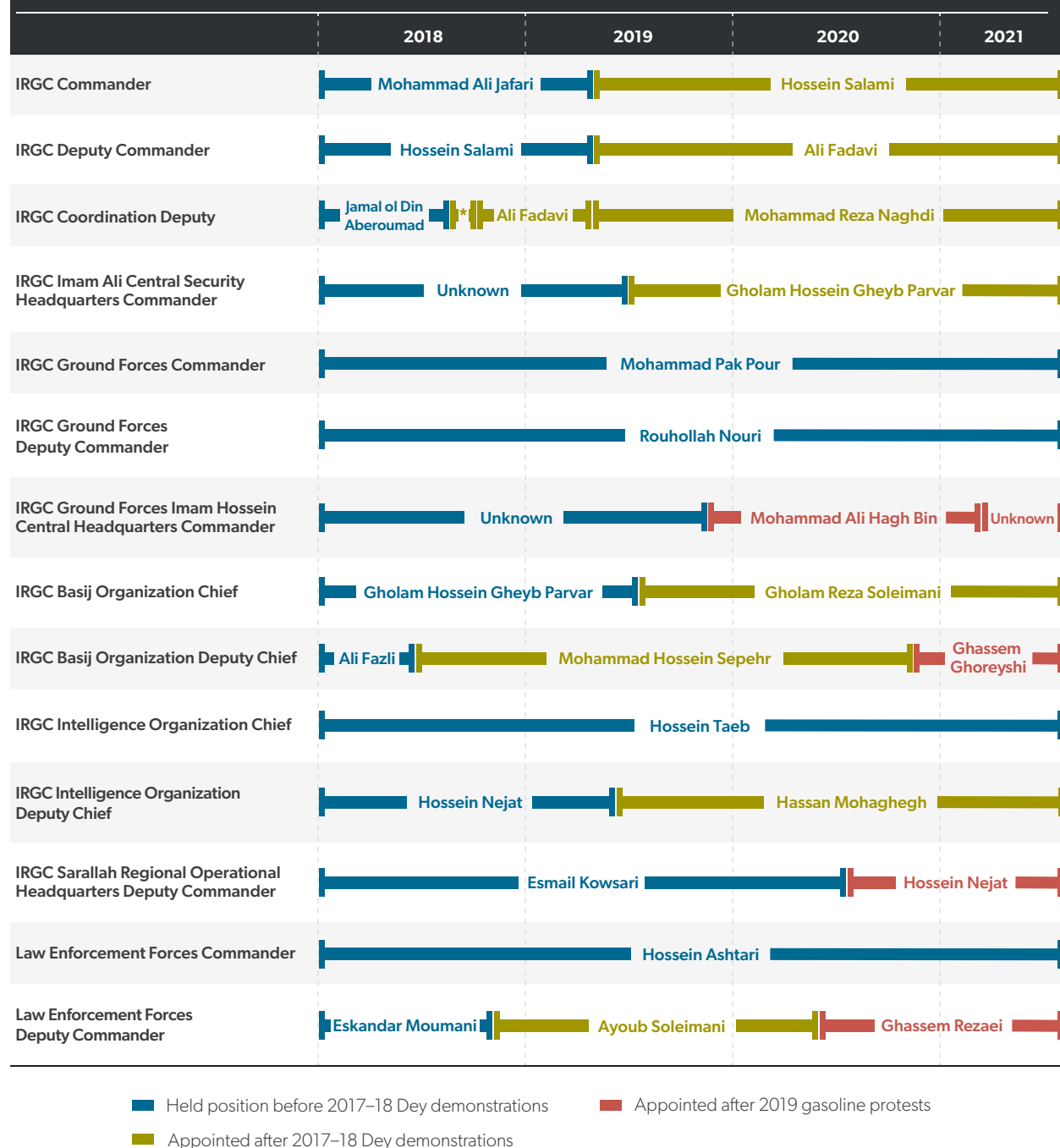
The appointment of Hossein Salami as IRGC commander in April 2019, along with other changes in the IRGC soon thereafter, reflected a reprioritization toward semihard and hard security challenges. Salami's promotion and those in the subsequent months were largely meant to prepare for a potential war between Iran and the United States. The Trump administration had designated the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization weeks earlier and was increasing its economic pressure on Tehran.[202] Salami's experience commanding units and developing Iranian warfighting doctrine made him a logical choice for military leadership. He frequently calls for offensive operations to deter and defend against adversaries.[203]

The IRGC began attacking regional oil assets and infrastructure shortly after Salami's promotion, culminating with the Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq crude-processing plant in September 2019.[204] This escalation was likely coincident with—rather than a result of—Salami's promotion; there is no reason to think that Jafari would have opposed such attacks had he remained in command. It is possible, however, that the more rhetorically aggressive and externally oriented Salami accelerated the regime's escalation in a way that Jafari might not have encouraged as eagerly.

Notwithstanding the external security aspect of Salami's appointment, the new military leadership is experienced in and well prepared for more crackdowns, if widespread protests reignite. The new IRGC deputy commander, Ali Fadavi, was one of the 24 commanders who signed the 1999 letter to then-President Khatami threatening to quash the student protests. The new IRGC coordination deputy, Mohammad Reza Naghdi, participated in the interrogation and alleged torture of jailed dissidents during those protests when he was the LEF Counterintelligence Organization chief.[205] Naghdi later suppressed the Green Movement as Basij chief.[206]

Figure 3. Evolution of Iranian Military Leadership Responsible for Internal Security Since the Dey Demonstrations

Supreme Leader Khamenei has reshuffled many of the commanders responsible for internal security since the 2017–18 Dey demonstrations. He has installed a cadre of hard-line officers, who are deeply experienced in suppressing political dissent and protests.

	2018	2019	2020	2021
IRGC Commander	Mohammad Ali Jafari	Hossein Salami		
IRGC Deputy Commander	Hossein Salami	Ali Fadavi		
IRGC Coordination Deputy	Jamal ol Din Aberoumad / * / Ali Fadavi	Mohammad Reza Naghdi		
IRGC Imam Ali Central Security Headquarters Commander	Unknown	Gholam Hossein Gheyb Parvar		
IRGC Ground Forces Commander	Mohammad Pak Pour			
IRGC Ground Forces Deputy Commander	Rouhollah Nouri			
IRGC Ground Forces Imam Hossein Central Headquarters Commander	Unknown		Mohammad Ali Hagh Bin	Unknown
IRGC Basij Organization Chief	Gholam Hossein Gheyb Parvar	Gholam Reza Soleimani		
IRGC Basij Organization Deputy Chief	Ali Fazli / Mohammad Hossein Sepehr			Ghassem Ghoreyshi
IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief	Hossein Taeb			
IRGC Intelligence Organization Deputy Chief	Hossein Nejat	Hassan Mohaghegh		
IRGC Sarallah Regional Operational Headquarters Deputy Commander	Esmail Kowsari		Hossein Nejat	
Law Enforcement Forces Commander	Hossein Ashtari			
Law Enforcement Forces Deputy Commander	Eskandar Moumani / Ayoub Soleimani		Ghassem Rezaei	

Legend:
- ■ Held position before 2017–18 Dey demonstrations
- ■ Appointed after 2017–18 Dey demonstrations
- ■ Appointed after 2019 gasoline protests

Note: *Hossein Salami.
Source: Author's research.

Evolution of the Iranian Military Leadership Responsible for Internal Security Since the Dey Demonstrations

As Figure 3 shows:[187]

April 2018. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari appointed Mohammad Hossein Sepehr as Basij Organization deputy chief.[188] Sepehr was previously the coordination deputy for the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC. The coordination deputy position is equivalent to a chief of staff in the US military. Sepehr replaced Ali Fazli.

April 2019. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed IRGC Deputy Commander Hossein Salami as IRGC commander and promoted him to major general.[189] Salami replaced Jafari, who now heads the IRGC Baghiyatollah Social and Cultural Headquarters and focuses on soft-war efforts.

May 2019. Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed IRGC Coordination Deputy Ali Fadavi as IRGC deputy commander and IRGC Cultural and Social Deputy Mohammad Reza Naghdi as IRGC coordination deputy to fill the personnel gaps following Salami's promotion.[190] The IRGC Intelligence Organization also merged with the IRGC Strategic Intelligence Directorate.[191] The new entity retained the name of the IRGC Intelligence Organization, and Salami appointed its leader, Hossein Taeb, chief of the new body. Salami also appointed IRGC Strategic Intelligence Deputy Hassan Mohaghegh as IRGC Intelligence Organization deputy chief.[192]

July 2019. Supreme Leader Khamenei appointed IRGC Saheb ol Zaman Esfahan Provincial Corps Commander Gholam Reza Soleimani as Basij Organization chief, replacing Gholam Hossein Gheyb Parvar.[193]

September 2019. IRGC Commander Salami appointed former Basij Organization Chief Gholam Hossein Gheyb Parvar as IRGC Imam Ali Central Security Headquarters commander.[194] This position is responsible for organizing and training the Basij Imam Ali battalions across Iran.

June 2020. IRGC Commander Salami appointed IRGC Imam Hossein Officer and Guard Training University Commander Fazli as IRGC second coordination deputy, which is equivalent to a deputy chief of staff in the US military.[195] Salami also appointed IRGC Cultural and Social Deputy Hossein Nejat as IRGC Sarallah Regional Operational Headquarters deputy commander, who is responsible for security around the capital region.[196] The IRGC commander serves ex officio as the Sarallah headquarters commander, while his deputy oversees its operations.

March 2021. IRGC Commander Salami appointed Ghassem Ghoreyshi as Basij Organization deputy chief.[197] Ghoreyshi was previously the coordination deputy for the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC. Ghoreyshi replaced Mohammad Hossein Sepehr.

Salami, Fadavi, and Naghdi all oversaw the bloodiest crackdown in the regime's history in November 2019—only months after their promotions—indicating how they may operate in the future. Ali Fazli, another signatory of the 1999 letter, became the IRGC second coordination deputy in June 2020, making him Naghdi's right-hand man. This dynamic existed previously, when Naghdi was the Basij chief from 2009 to 2016 and Fazli was the Basij deputy chief. Fazli focused on "improving the defense and combat preparedness of Basij forces . . . and preparing the Basij for realizing their strategic missions" at the time.[207] The implications of Fazli and Naghdi reuniting at the Revolutionary Guards' highest levels are unclear but could presage further internal violence.

Changes to Basij Leadership. Basij leadership has also changed in recent years to match the prioritization of defensive preparedness and security missions. Khamenei replaced Gholam Hossein Gheyb Parvar with Gholam Reza Soleimani as Basij chief in July 2019, per Salami's recommendation shortly after he became IRGC commander. Gheyb Parvar prioritized civic work and public engagement based on the priorities dictated to him by the supreme leader while he led the Basij under Jafari.[208] Khamenei and Soleimani contrastingly emphasized enhancing the Basij's defensive and security roles and cooperation with the IRGC during Soleimani's appointment process.[209] Soleimani is an experienced IRGC Ground Forces commander and has a history of supporting repression.

Gheyb Parvar was not a poor choice for internal security missions though, and the IRGC is using his skills elsewhere. He is now the IRGC Imam Ali Central Security Headquarters commander and is well suited for organizing and training the Basij Imam Ali battalions. He previously managed training in the IRGC Ground Forces and commanded the IRGC's Imam Hossein Central Headquarters, which oversees the Basij Imam Hossein battalions.[210] Gheyb Parvar led Iranian forces in Syria in his capacity as IRGC Imam Hossein Central Headquarters commander, demonstrating the degree to which regime leadership trusted him with priority missions.[211]

The Basij deputy chief has also changed, likely to prioritize enhancing the supreme leader's control. Basij deputy chiefs have historically been IRGC Ground Forces commanders and were likely responsible for strengthening Basij military units and integration into the IRGC.[212] The two deputy chiefs since the Dey protests, Mohammad Hossein Sepehr and Ghassem Ghoreyshi, have different backgrounds, having both previously served as the coordination deputy for the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC.

Khamenei maintains a network of clerical representatives overseeing every echelon of the armed forces and serving as political commissars. They oversee the armed forces' ideological-political training, the dissemination of propaganda, the spiritual commitment of military personnel, and the military personnel's total subordination to the supreme leader's will.[213] Sepehr's and Ghoreyshi's appointments may have resulted from the aforementioned indications of insubordination in the Basij and Khamenei's desire to have trusted agents in that important position.

Mojtaba's Network. A human network of senior officers close to Mojtaba Khamenei has consolidated influence over key internal security institutions. IRGC Intelligence Organization Chief Hossein Taeb, IRGC Intelligence Organization Deputy Chief Hassan Mohaghegh, and IRGC Sarallah Regional Operational Headquarters Deputy Commander Hossein Nejat all served with Mojtaba in the Habib Ibn Mazahir battalion during the Iran-Iraq War and have remained close with one another and Mojtaba in the following decades.[214] Mojtaba's relationship with Taeb, who was the Basij chief in 2009, likely facilitated Mojtaba taking control of the Basij militias to repress the Green Movement. Mojtaba, as discussed previously, has assumed some of his father's responsibilities since then, and the appointments of Taeb, Mohaghegh, and Nejat may reflect his efforts to install loyalists to sensitive security positions. Their promotions also underscore Mojtaba's confidence in them to control violent demonstrations and possibly allow him to exert his own control over their institutions.

Positions Remaining Unchanged. Some key internal security positions remain unchanged since the Dey demonstrations. Hossein Ashtari has commanded the LEF since 2015. Mohammad Pak Pour has been the IRGC Ground Forces commander since 2009. Both individuals have retained their positions through numerous protest waves and security incidents. It is unclear why Khamenei reshuffled so much of the armed forces' leadership without touching the LEF and IRGC Ground Forces. Nevertheless, Ashtari and Pak Pour remaining in these positions underscores Khamenei's confidence in them during some of the most violent domestic instability the regime has experienced.

IV. The Regime's Trajectory

US policy vis-à-vis Iran cannot reverse the regime's trajectory toward an increasingly adaptive, oppressive, and sophisticated police and surveillance state. Mounting internal pressures—including economic deterioration and fluctuating protests—and the Trump administration's maximum-pressure strategy combined to facilitate this shift, and regime leadership will not likely reverse course now. Some of the factors propelling this shift include Supreme Leader Khamenei's long-term strategic outlook, a succession crisis, and challenges facing the internal security apparatus.

Khamenei's Perspective

Khamenei likely expects to face maximum pressure again someday even though the US and Iran could revive the JCPOA. He has observed how US policy toward his government has evolved across decades and, particularly, how it has fluctuated across the presidencies of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Biden. Obama concluded the JCPOA, Trump withdrew from it, and Biden wants to restore and strengthen it. Khamenei seemingly believes all three presidents sought to weaken the regime but had different means to get there.

Khamenei does not likely consider an agreement such as the JCPOA sustainable, based on his experience. A future American president could pursue a pressure policy similar to that of Trump, using coercion and sanctions to address concerns of the United States. Therefore, Khamenei and his successor will likely seek to expand and reinforce the internal security apparatus in preparation for such actions, maintaining that Iran still faces a soft war from the US and that maximum pressure could return. The regime elite will want to ensure they are better prepared for domestic turbulence than they were during the 2017–18 Dey demonstrations and 2019 gasoline protests.

Khamenei's Departure

The prospect of Khamenei's departure from the scene is also partly driving authoritarian trends in Iran. Khamenei has ruled the regime for over three decades, and his passing will shake the system, leaving a power vacuum. His death will create a moment of uncertainty within Iran that oppositionists and anti-regime groups will certainly try to leverage to advance their agendas and interests. Iranian elite recognize the potential for large-scale instability immediately following Khamenei's death and want to ensure that the security infrastructure is prepared to guarantee a peaceful transition.

Israeli Infiltration

Another factor driving the regime toward greater authoritarianism is the Iranian leadership's growing fear of dissent within the security apparatus. Israel's penetration of the armed forces has become increasingly obvious over the years and especially in recent months. Mossad is likely responsible for six known major operations in Iran since 2018. Five of them occurred between July 2020 and July 2021.

- **January 2018.** Mossad raided a covert archive in Tehran, seizing sensitive documents tied to Iran's pre-2003 nuclear weapons program.[215]

- **July 2020.** Mossad sabotaged Iran's Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant.[216] The resultant

explosion destroyed a newly constructed centrifuge assembly facility.[217] An entity called the Homeland Cheetahs claimed responsibility for the attack and identified itself as a group of dissidents in the Iranian armed forces.[218]

- **August 2020.** Mossad killed al Qaeda's second-highest leader, Abu Muhammad al Masri, in Tehran. He had lived in Iran since 2003.[219]

- **November 2020.** Mossad killed senior Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri Zadeh in Absard, Tehran Province. Fakhri Zadeh headed Iran's pre-2003 nuclear weapons program.[220]

- **April 2021.** Mossad sabotaged the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant. The explosion caused an electrical power outage and damaged centrifuges.[221]

- **June 2021.** Mossad conducted a kamikaze drone attack on a centrifuge manufacturing facility tied to Iran's nuclear program near Karaj, Alborz Province.[222]

These attacks demonstrate Israel's capability to leverage agents within Iran's security sphere to attack the regime, highlighting an immense challenge to Iranian authorities. While the Homeland Cheetahs may represent disaffected individuals Israel co-opted to conduct the first attack on Natanz in July 2020, the group may alternatively be part of an Israeli information operation to stoke concern and paranoia among Iran's political establishment. The group most likely represents a combination of both possibilities.

Historic trends and Israeli infiltration demonstrate that disloyalty and insubordination are significant vulnerabilities in the Iranian security structure. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a toll on security personnel and their communities, leadership, and salaries, which may divide them from the regime.[223] Iran's rulers will likely expand domestic monitoring to prevent defections and further Israeli attacks. They will also likely strengthen their most ideological security elements to ensure that the political elite are surrounded by loyalists in case of

any internal uprising supported by dissenting security operatives. Factional infighting within the government fueled by paranoia may ultimately weaken the regime, but mounting stressors, such as each additional Israeli attack and other internal crises, have compounded the urgency for Iranian leaders to address these issues.

Bandwidth Constraints and Tough Decisions

The use of increasingly committed and well-trained units to defend Iranian officialdom introduces another vulnerability: limits on the security services' bandwidth during mass unrest. The regime's most elite and trusted units in the IRGC and LEF cannot cover all of Iran during nationwide protests. They are concentrated in high-population areas. Half the LEF Special Units members are stationed in Tehran, for instance.[224] According to opposition outlets, the security services experienced bandwidth constraints during the gasoline protests.[225]

The regime shuffles its forces to where they are needed most—typically the restive border regions—when violent protests erupt, because they cannot cover the whole country. The armed forces sent personnel during the gasoline protests from Tehran to Khuzestan Province, where some of the bloodiest clashes occurred, to quash the demonstrations.[226] Social media accounts alleged that anti-riot forces traveled to Sistan and Baluchistan Province from other nearby regions when riots began there in February 2021.[227] The regime likely uses its more professional and reliable units for these missions throughout the country. These deployments are necessary because local security personnel may lack either the capabilities and necessary training or the willingness to crack down on their own communities.

Iranian leaders will face difficult decisions if violent protests erupt throughout the nation's cities, towns, villages, and rural communities and the most elite security elements are overwhelmed. The regime would likely commit its best units to protecting its leadership and stabilizing priority locations,

such as the capital and other major cities. The first decision it would face is how to control secondary locations, such as cities' peripheries, smaller towns, rural areas, and the border regions. Authorities could use a phased approach, waiting to secure Tehran and other vital locations before deploying their most capable and trusted personnel to the secondary areas. Alternatively, the regime could assign greater urgency to ending the unrest altogether and task local security forces in secondary locations with quashing protests.

The second decision that Iranian leaders would face if they chose the latter option pertains to which local forces to use. These forces fall into two categories: (1) regular police and low-level Basij and (2) military units not responsible for social control. This first category of personnel does not receive extensive ideological-political training and is therefore likely to be less committed to the regime than members of more elite security units are. Overreliance on local personnel risks triggering larger trends of defection and insubordination and inadvertently exacerbating the security challenge posed to the regime.

The second category of personnel—regular military units—poses this same risk while introducing the possibility of extreme violence. Military units not trained for crowd control and protest management could apply a disproportionate level of force against frustrated citizens, which would likely end

the local protests but also entrench long-term anger at the state in that community. This scenario may at least partly capture what happened when the IRGC Ground Forces deployed to Mahshahr, Khuzestan Province, during the gasoline protests and killed 148 demonstrators.[228]

These difficult decisions will likely facilitate greater Artesh involvement in future protest crackdowns. The Artesh, as mentioned previously, guarded important locations during the gasoline protests to relieve the LEF to deploy elsewhere. Using the Artesh in this limited fashion mitigates the risk of triggering defections among the less indoctrinated service members. It remains unclear, however, whether the Iranian leadership trusts the Artesh sufficiently to entrust it with the capital's security while the internal security services confront widespread protests throughout Iran.

Iranian military planners recognize these vulnerabilities in the security apparatus and aim to improve their defenses further to minimize the risk of this contingency. Regime officials realize the damage inflicted on their credibility and popularity by the November 2019 crackdown. They can neither easily heal those wounds nor risk the entrenched anger in aggrieved communities challenging the political establishment's control. Therefore, these vulnerabilities and their consequences are driving the regime to upgrade its security apparatus and social control tool kit.

V. Conclusion

The Biden administration must account for Iran's evolution into an increasingly oppressive and possibly more secure autocracy while crafting both Iran-specific and broader foreign policies. The regime's relationship with its people seems unlikely to improve or become more considerate of basic human liberties and rights. Understanding the regime's likely trajectory will elucidate the Iranian position during future engagements over the JCPOA and enable the development of a framework to curtail Tehran's regional project and the expansion of digital authoritarianism worldwide. The path ahead for the US is fraught with difficult decisions. But there are also opportunities to correct thinking and adjust for the future.

Implications for the JCPOA

The first requirement is to understand what Iran's evolution means for the JCPOA and efforts to revive it. American policymakers must accept that the JCPOA will not empower Iran's moderate or reformist currents in the present circumstances. Instead, the most hard-line and radical political players will dominate the government's power centers for the foreseeable future. One could argue that the JCPOA would have increased the political standing of moderate figures, such as former President Rouhani, and tempered regime behavior with time had the US not torched the agreement, although the internal dynamics that led to Rouhani's marginalization might well have done so in any case.

Insecurities and paranoia about the US, paired with Iran's other economic, political, and social challenges, have set the regime on a terrible path from which it will not likely deviate, regardless of whether its assessment is true and whatever policy Washington now pursues. Khamenei and the ascendant hard-liners may accept the restoration of the JCPOA and removal of sanctions, viewing these changes in US policy as an opportunity to allocate more resources toward securing the regime from external and internal threats and developing Iran's indigenous production capacities enough to minimize the impact of future sanctions. However, they will remain concerned that maximum pressure could return and are preparing accordingly.

The Biden team should not allow Tehran to leverage the JCPOA to deter the US from pursuing other matters of interest to its foreign policy and national security. Khamenei and the hard-liners were always skeptical of the deal and likely never considered it sustainable. They will now be more prepared to abandon, delay, or reverse the implementation of the nuclear accord's provisions to pressure the US on other matters. Prioritizing the JCPOA above all else, with the acknowledgment that the deal will not likely bear the full results envisioned previously, will damage the Biden administration's capacity to address the range of issues it faces related to Iran. The US should, for instance, be undeterred when sanctioning officials responsible for human-rights abuses in Iran and condemning crackdowns when they occur.

Shine a Spotlight on Repression

The US should also broadcast publicly when the regime conducts harsh crackdowns on its citizens. Iranian leadership seeks to hide its repression through internet shutdowns. The US can draw international attention to the regime's abuses and impose a cost on Iranian authorities if they continue such behavior. The US should especially highlight Iran's

use of foreign proxies for domestic crackdowns, if it occurs. Iraqi and Lebanese citizens should see where the allegiances of these proxies lie. The regime's use of foreign fighters for domestic missions in Iran could erode political support for Iranian proxies in their respective home countries or deter Tehran from co-opting them to hurt its own people.

Counter Digital Authoritarianism

Finally, American policymakers should consider integrating their Iran policy into a larger effort to counter the spread of digital authoritarianism globally. The CCP is already exporting its intrusive technological ecosystem abroad and inspiring other countries to pursue similar policies of social control. The Iranian regime has unique access and relationships, particularly in but not exclusive to the Middle East, that it could use to send repressive capabilities and techniques abroad. Tehran could become yet another agent for proliferating authoritarianism abetted by technological prowess.

A broader American strategy to confront this challenge is required, incorporating the Iran problem set should the regime develop along this trajectory. The challenge presented by expanding surveillance and increasingly secure despots is one of the most significant that global democracies, especially those that are unstable, will face in the years ahead. Iran's potential entry into this field underscores the need for the US to meet this challenge—urgently.

About the Author

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About AEI's Critical Threats Project

The Critical Threats Project (**CTP**) at the American Enterprise Institute seeks to inform and educate policymakers, the intelligence and military communities, and all interested citizens who need to understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security. The project conducts intelligence analysis on unclassified information to produce continuous assessments of threats to the US and its allies. It develops these assessments into concrete plans for action using best practices drawn from the US military, intelligence community, and diplomatic corps. It provides the executive branch, Congress, the media, and the general public its assessments and recommendations on a nonpartisan basis. Like AEI, CTP accepts no money from the American government or any foreign government. CTP is directed by AEI Senior Fellow Frederick W. Kagan. Its two analytical teams focus on the threats posed by Iran and the Salafi-jihadi movement, especially in the Horn of Africa, Libya, West Africa, and Yemen.

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About Our Technology Partners

The conclusions and assessments in this report do not reflect the positions of our technology partners.

Neo4j is a highly scalable native graph database that helps organizations build intelligent applications that meet today's evolving connected data challenges including fraud detection, tax evasion, situational awareness, real-time recommendations, master data management, network security, and IT operations. Global organizations such as MITRE, Walmart, the World Economic Forum, UBS, Cisco, HP, Adidas, and Lufthansa rely on Neo4j to harness the connections in their data.

Ntrepid is a mission-driven provider of cutting-edge managed attribution technology solutions that allows organizations to discreetly and safely conduct sophisticated cyber operations in the most hostile online environments. We leverage our deep experience in the national security community to anticipate our customers' needs and provide solutions before the requirements are expressed. Our heavy investment in R&D allows us to stay ahead of the rapidly changing internet landscape. Ntrepid's innovative solutions empower advanced online research, analysis, and data collection, while obscuring organizational identity and protecting your mission.

Linkurious' graph visualization software helps organizations detect and investigate insights hidden in graph data. It is used by government agencies and global companies in anti–money laundering, cybersecurity, or medical research. Linkurious makes today's complex connected data easy to understand for analysts.

BlackSky integrates a diverse set of sensors and data unparalleled in the industry to provide an unprecedented view of your world. They combine satellite imagery, social media, news and other data feeds to create timely and relevant insights. With machine learning, predictive algorithms, and natural language processing, BlackSky delivers critical geospatial insights about an area or topic of interest and synthesizes data from a wide array of sources including social media, news outlets, and radio communications.

Sayari is a search company, not a traditional data vendor. They build search products that allow users to find corporate, financial, and public records in hard-target countries. Sayari products cover emerging, frontier, and offshore markets, and include corporate registries, official gazettes, litigation, vital records, customs data, and real property. They collect, structure, normalize, enrich, and index this data, often making it searchable for the very first time.

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