



**Congressional
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

Iran: Politics, Human Rights, and U.S. Policy

Kenneth Katzman

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

October 3, 2017

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RL32048

Summary

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the United States and Iran have been at odds politically and diplomatically over the perceived threat posed by Iran to a broad range of U.S. interests. U.S. officials also express a broad range of concerns about Iran's human rights abuses, including its repeated detentions of U.S.-Iran dual nationals. During the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. officials identified Iran's support for militant Middle East groups as the primary threat posed by Iran to U.S. interests and allies. Iran's nuclear program took precedence in U.S. policy after 2002 as the potential for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon increased. Beginning in 2010, the United States orchestrated broad international economic pressure on Iran to persuade it to agree to strict limits on the program—pressure that undoubtedly contributed to the June 2013 election of the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran and the eventual negotiation of a “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (JCPOA). The JCPOA, which began formal implementation on January 16, 2016, exchanged broad sanctions relief for nuclear program limits intended to ensure that Iran would require at least a year to produce a nuclear weapon after a decision to do so.

President Obama asserted that the implementation of the JCPOA presented an opportunity to construct a new and more positive U.S. relationship with Iran. However, Iran has continued to test ballistic missiles; maintained support for regional movements such as Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Houthi rebels in Yemen; arrested additional U.S.-Iran dual nationals; and conducted high speed intercepts of U.S. naval vessels in the Persian Gulf. The Trump Administration has characterized Iran as an adversary of the United States and stated a commitment to countering Iran's regional influence—although without taking steps that would conflict with U.S. commitments under the JCPOA. The Administration has not articulated a hope or intent to develop an improved relationship with Iran.

U.S. officials have consistently criticized Iran's clerical regime and its human rights record. Domestically, the JCPOA and sanctions relief have had broad support, but many Iranians say they also want greater freedoms of expression and assembly that Rouhani has not delivered. Hardliners continue to control the state institutions that curb dissent and free expression. Recent international criticism of Iran's human rights record has centered particularly on increases in the pace of executions. Still, Rouhani's ongoing public support was demonstrated by his clear first-round reelection victory on May 19, 2017. Rouhani garnered 57% of the vote to defeat Ibrahim Raisi, an ally of Iran's Supreme Leader, who was the only major hardline candidate still in the race on election day. Raisi received about 38% of the vote, and the few minor candidates who remained in the race until election day, as well as invalid ballots, constituted the remainder. Reformist and moderate candidates swept municipal council elections in all the major cities, including Tehran. Rouhani's new cabinet nominations appeared to reflect a continued commitment to pragmatic policies and global engagement, while maintaining core domestic and national security policies. The United States has supported programs to promote civil society in Iran, but successive U.S. Administrations, including the Trump Administration, have stopped short of adopting policies that specifically seek to overthrow Iran's regime.

See also CRS Report R43333, *Iran Nuclear Agreement*, by Kenneth Katzman and Paul K. Kerr; CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman; and CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Contents

Political History.....	1
Regime Structure, Stability, and Opposition	2
Unelected or Indirectly Elected Institutions: The Supreme Leader, Council of Guardians, and Expediency Council	4
The Supreme Leader	4
Council of Guardians and Expediency Council	5
Domestic Security Organs	6
Elected Institutions/Recent Elections.....	7
The Presidency.....	7
The Majles	7
The Assembly of Experts	8
Recent Elections	8
Human Rights Practices	15
U.S.-Iran Relations and U.S. Policy	18
U.S.-Iran Relations since the Hostage Crisis	18
Obama Administration: Pressure, Engagement, and the JCPOA.....	19
Trump Administration Policy.....	22
Military Options.....	26
Economic Sanctions.....	27
Regime Change Option.....	29
Democracy Promotion and Internet Freedom Efforts.....	30

Figures

Figure 1. Structure of the Iranian Government.....	35
Figure 2. Map of Iran	36

Tables

Table 1. Other Major Institutions, Factions and Individuals	6
Table 2. Human Rights Practices: General Categories.....	17
Table 3. Summary of U.S. Sanctions Against Iran	28
Table 4. Iran Democracy Promotion Funding	32

Contacts

Author Contact Information	37
Acknowledgments	37

Political History

Iran is a country of nearly 80 million people, located in the heart of the Persian Gulf region. The United States was an ally of the late Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (“the Shah”), who ruled from 1941 until his ouster in February 1979. The Shah assumed the throne when Britain and Russia forced his father, Reza Shah Pahlavi (Reza Shah), from power because of his perceived alignment with Germany in World War II. Reza Shah had assumed power in 1921 when, as an officer in Iran’s only military force, the Cossack Brigade (reflecting Russian influence in Iran in the early 20th century), he launched a coup against the government of the Qajar royal family, which had ruled since 1794. Reza Shah was proclaimed Shah in 1925, founding the Pahlavi dynasty. The Qajar dynasty had been in decline for many years before Reza Shah’s takeover. That dynasty’s perceived manipulation by Britain and Russia had been one of the causes of the 1906 constitutionalist movement, which forced the Qajar dynasty to form Iran’s first *Majles* (parliament) in August 1906 and promulgate a constitution in December 1906. Prior to the Qajars, what is now Iran was the center of several Persian empires and dynasties whose reach had shrunk steadily over time. After the 16th century, Iranian empires lost control of Bahrain (1521), Baghdad (1638), the Caucasus (1828), western Afghanistan (1857), Baluchistan (1872), and what is now Turkmenistan (1894). Iran adopted Shiite Islam under the Safavid Dynasty (1500-1722), which ended a series of Turkic and Mongol conquests.

The Shah was anti-Communist, and the United States viewed his government as a bulwark against the expansion of Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf and a counterweight to pro-Soviet Arab regimes and movements. Israel maintained a representative office in Iran during the Shah’s time and the Shah supported a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli dispute. In 1951, under pressure from nationalists in the *Majles* (parliament) who gained strength in the 1949 *Majles* elections, he appointed a popular nationalist parliamentarian, Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, as prime minister. Mossadeq was widely considered left-leaning, and the United States was wary of his drive for nationalization of the oil industry, which had been controlled since 1913 by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. His followers began an uprising in August 1953 when the Shah tried to dismiss him, and the Shah fled. The Shah was restored to power in a CIA-supported uprising that toppled Mossadeq (“Operation Ajax”) on August 19, 1953.

The Shah tried to modernize Iran and orient it toward the West, but in so doing he alienated the Shiite clergy and religious Iranians. He incurred broader resentment by using his SAVAK intelligence service to repress dissent. The Shah exiled Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1964 because of Khomeini’s active opposition to what he asserted were the Shah’s anticlerical policies and forfeiture of Iran’s sovereignty to the United States. Khomeini fled to and taught in Najaf, Iraq, a major Shiite theological center. In 1978, three years after the March 6, 1975, Algiers Accords between the Shah and Iraq’s Baathist leaders that temporarily ended mutual hostile actions, Iraq expelled Khomeini to France, where he continued to agitate for revolution that would establish Islamic government in Iran. Mass demonstrations and guerrilla activity by pro-Khomeini forces caused the Shah’s government to collapse. Khomeini returned from France on February 1, 1979, and, on February 11, 1979, he declared an Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini’s concept of *velayat-e-faqih* (rule by a supreme Islamic jurisprudent, or “Supreme Leader”) was enshrined in the constitution that was adopted in a public referendum in December 1979 (and amended in 1989). The constitution provided for the post of Supreme Leader of the Revolution. The regime based itself on strong opposition to Western influence, and relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic turned openly hostile after the November 4, 1979, seizure of the U.S. Embassy and its U.S. diplomats by pro-Khomeini radicals, which began

the so-called hostage crisis that ended in January 1981 with the release of the hostages.¹ Ayatollah Khomeini died on June 3, 1989, and was succeeded as Supreme Leader by Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i.

The regime faced serious unrest in its first few years, including a June 1981 bombing at the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) and the prime minister's office that killed several senior elected and clerical leaders, including then Prime Minister Javad Bahonar, elected President Ali Raja'i, and IRP head and top Khomeini disciple Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Beheshti. The regime used these events, along with the hostage crisis with the United States, to justify purging many of the secular, liberal, and left-wing personalities that had been prominent in the years just after the revolution. Examples included the regime's first Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan; the pro-Moscow Tudeh Party (Communist); the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI, see below); and the first elected president, Abolhassan Bani Sadr. The regime was under economic and military threat during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, which at times nearly halted Iran's oil exports. Since that war, Iran has not faced severe external military threats but domestic political rifts have continued.

Regime Structure, Stability, and Opposition

Some experts attribute the acrimony that has characterized U.S.-Iran relations since the Islamic revolution to the structure of Iran's regime. Although it provides for elected institutions, checks and balances, and diversity of opinion, the regime is widely considered authoritarian and the constitution ensures domination by Iran's Shiite clergy. Vast powers are invested in the position of "Supreme Leader" (known formally in Iran as "Leader of the Revolution"), who is required to be a senior cleric and is not term-limited. The Supreme Leader is chosen by an all-elected body (Assembly of Experts). The President and the *Majles* (unicameral parliament) are directly elected, and since 2013, there have been elections for municipal councils that set local development priorities and select mayors. Even within the unelected institutions, factional disputes between those who insist on ideological purity and those considered more pragmatic are evident. Aside from a 2009-2010 uprising against the reelection of then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the regime has faced only episodic unrest from minorities, intellectuals, students, labor groups, women, and members of Iran's minority groups. (Iran's demographics are depicted in a text box below.)

¹ The U.S. Embassy hostages are to be compensated for their detention in Iran from proceeds received from various banks to settle allegations of concealing financial transactions on behalf of Iranian clients, under a provision of the FY2016 Consolidated Appropriation.



**Supreme Leader:
Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i**

Born in July 1939 to an Azeri (Turkic) family from the northern city of Mashhad. Was jailed by the Shah of Iran for supporting Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution. After the regime took power in 1979, helped organize Revolutionary Guard and other security organs. Lost some use of right arm in purported assassination attempt in June 1981. Was elected president in 1981 and served until 1989. Was selected Khomeini's successor in June 1989. Upon that selection, Khamene'i's religious ranking was advanced in official organs to "Grand Ayatollah" from the lower ranking "Hojjat ol-Islam." Still lacks the undisputed authority to end factional disputes and the public adoration Khomeini had. Has taken more of a day-to-day role since the 2009 uprising, including establishing strict parameters for Iran's nuclear negotiating team. As to Khamene'i's health situation, the government acknowledged that he underwent prostate surgery in September 2014 but Khamene'i now appears in public regularly. In March 2017, a government video showed him shoveling small amounts of dirt to plant a tree on the occasion of Nowruz (Persian New Year).

Policies

Throughout career, has consistently taken hardline stances on regional issues, particularly toward Israel, repeatedly calling it a "cancerous tumor" that needs to be excised from the region. In March 2014, publicly questioned whether the Holocaust occurred—an issue highlighted by former president Ahmadinejad. He is widely believed to fear direct military confrontation with United States on Iranian soil. He meets with few Western officials and is avowedly suspicious of relations with the West, particularly the United States, as potentially making Iran vulnerable to Western cultural influence, spying, and possible regime destabilization efforts. Largely bowing to public opinion, Khamene'i acquiesced to the election in 2013 of the relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani, who favors opening to the West. Khamene'i did not oppose the JCPOA, paving the way for its adoption by the *Majles* and the Council of Guardians. In 2016, he accused the United States of not implementing JCPOA-related sanctions relief fully and thereby deterring foreign firms from returning to Iran. Earlier, he reputedly issued religious proclamation (2003) against Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, and has publicly (2012) called doing so a "sin." He fully backs efforts by Revolutionary Guard and other Iranian organs to support regional pro-Iranian movements and governments. Earlier in his career, Khamene'i tended to support the business community (*bazaaris*), and opposed state control of the economy, but as Supreme Leader he has asserted that officials, including Rouhani, need to promote a self-sufficient economy that can withstand the effects of international sanctions ("resistance economy").

Khamene'i's office is run by Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, with significant input from Khamene'i's second and increasingly influential son, Mojtaba. Also advised by *Keyhan* editor Hossein Shariatmadari and former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati.

Photograph from <http://www.leader.ir>.

Unelected or Indirectly Elected Institutions: The Supreme Leader, Council of Guardians, and Expediency Council

Iran's power structure consists of unelected or indirectly elected persons and institutions.

The Supreme Leader

At the apex of the Islamic Republic's power structure is the "Supreme Leader." He is chosen by an elected body—the Assembly of Experts—which also has the constitutional power to remove him, as well as to rewrite Iran's constitution (subject to approval in a national referendum). Upon Ayatollah Khomeini's death, the Assembly selected one of his disciples, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, as Supreme Leader.² Although he has never had Khomeini's undisputed political or religious authority, the powers of the office ensure that Khamene'i is Iran's paramount leader. Under the constitution, the Supreme Leader is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, giving him the power to appoint commanders.

Khamene'i makes five out of the nine appointments to the country's highest national security body, the *Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)*, including its top official, the secretary of the body. Khamene's also has a representative of his office as one of the nine members, who typically are members of the regime's top military, foreign policy, and domestic security organizations. The Supreme Leader can remove an elected president, if the judiciary or the *Majles* (parliament) assert cause for removal. The Supreme Leader appoints half of the 12-member *Council of Guardians*, all members of the *Expediency Council*, and the judiciary head.

Succession to Khamene'i

There is no clear consensus choice to succeed Khamene'i. If no consensus choice emerges, the Assembly of Experts could conceivably choose to use a constitutional provision to set up a three-person leadership council rather than select one person as a new Supreme Leader. Khamene'i reportedly favors as his successor Ibrahim Raisi, who Khamene'i appointed in 2016 to head the powerful Shrine of Imam Reza (Astan-e Qods Razavi) in Mashhad. The foundation centered on that shrine controls vast property and many businesses in the province. Raisi is a hardliner who has served as state prosecutor and was allegedly involved in the 1988 massacre of prisoners and other acts of repression.³ However, the Assembly would not necessarily take his preferences into account after his passing. Raisi's chances of achieving that post might have improved significantly if Raisi had defeated Rouhani in the May 19, 2017, presidential elections, although his 38% of the vote might be considered strong enough to keep his chances of succeeding Khamene'i viable. It is also possible that the Assembly of Experts might not consider the election results at all in evaluating Raisi as a successor.

Other commonly mentioned possible successors include former judiciary chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi, who was appointed in August 2017 to head the Expediency Council. Other contenders include judiciary head Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani and hardline Tehran Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Ahmad Khatemi. The succession chances of another potential candidate, hardline

² At the time of his selection as Supreme Leader, Khamene'i was generally referred to at the rank of Hojjat ol-Islam, one rank below Ayatollah, suggesting his religious elevation was political rather than through traditional mechanisms.

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/irans-likely-next-supreme-leader-is-no-friend-of-the-west/2016/09/26/eb3becc0-79fb-11e6-bd86-b7bbd53d2b5d_story.html?utm_term=.e6499d61d0be.

senior cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, were likely reduced by his loss of an Assembly of Experts seat in the February 2016 elections.

The January 2017 death of regime stalwart Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani removes from contention the one potential successor who could legitimately have claimed to have been a constant presence at Ayatollah Khomeini's side in the 1979 revolution. However, Rafsanjani's death, and the evident strong political support for his protege, President Hassan Rouhani, could elevate Rouhani himself as a possible successor to Khamene'i. Rafsanjani was not only the key mentor of Rouhani, but he also was a longtime key regime strategist, a Khomeini disciple, and an advocate of a "grand bargain" to resolve all outstanding issues with United States—a concept that Rouhani has advocated as in Iran's interests. Rafsanjani was *Majles* speaker during 1981-1989 and president 1989-1997, and his family owns a large share of Iran's total pistachio production, which enabled him to patronize many key Iranian players. Rafsanjani's ouster as Assembly of Experts chairman in 2011 was widely attributed to his tacit support of popular opposition to Ahmadinejad's 2009 reelection and to the political activities of his children. His daughter, Faizah, was jailed in September 2012 for participating in the 2009 protests, and five other family members were arrested in 2009 and 2010 on similar charges. That perception undoubtedly contributed to the COG denying his candidacy in the 2013 presidential elections.

Council of Guardians and Expediency Council

Two appointed councils play a major role on legislation, election candidate vetting, and policy formulation.

Council of Guardians

The 12-member Council of Guardians (COG) consists of 6 Islamic jurists appointed by the Supreme Leader, and 6 lawyers selected by the judiciary and confirmed by the *Majles*. Each councilor serves a six-year term, staggered such that half the body turns over every three years. Currently headed by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the conservative-controlled body reviews legislation to ensure it conforms to Islamic law. It also vets election candidates by evaluating their backgrounds according to constitutional requirements that each candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islam, loyalty to the Islamic system of government, and other criteria that are largely subjective. The COG also certifies election results. Municipal council candidates are vetted not by the COG but by local committees established by the *Majles*.

Expediency Council

The Expediency Council was established in 1988 to resolve legislative disagreements between the *Majles* and the COG. It has since evolved into more of a policy advisory body for the Supreme Leader and an overseer of the performance of the president and his cabinet. Its members serve five-year terms. Longtime regime stalwart Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani was reappointed as its chairman in February 2007 and again in March 2012, but his January 2017 death left the top position vacant. In August 2017, the Supreme Leader named a new, expanded (from 42 to 45 members) Council, with former judiciary head Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi as the new chairman. The Expediency Council's executive officer is former Revolutionary Guard commander-in-chief Mohsen Reza'i. The council appointed in August 2017 includes former president Ahmadinejad and former presidential candidate Mohammad Baqr Qalibaf. President Hassan Rouhani and *Majles* Speaker Ali Larijani were not reappointed as Council members but attend the body's sessions in their official capacities.

Table I. Other Major Institutions, Factions and Individuals

Regime/Pro-Regime	
The regime derives support from a network of organizations and institutions such as those discussed below.	
Senior Shiite Clerics/Grand Ayatollahs	The most senior Shiite clerics, most of whom are in Qom, are generally “quietists”—they assert that the senior clergy should generally refrain from involvement in politics, although they do speak out on political issues. The ranks of the most senior clergy include Grand Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi and Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Sanei, both of whom criticized the crackdown against oppositionists during the 2009 uprising. A more hardline senior cleric is Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, the founder of the hardline Haqqani school. He was a mentor to Ahmadinejad and is an assertive defender of the powers of the Supreme Leader. He lost his Assembly of Experts seat in February 2016 elections.
Religious Foundations (“Bonyads”)	Iran has several major religious foundations, called “ <i>bonyads</i> .” Examples include the Martyr’s Foundation, the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled, the Astan Qods Razavi Foundation (linked to the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad), and the Fifteen Khordad Foundation (which offers a bounty for the killing of author Salman Rushdie). The bonyads, controlled by clerics and their allies, control vast amounts of property and valuable businesses, some of which were built from assets left behind when the Shah and his allies fled Iran in 1979. The bonyads are loosely regulated and largely exempt from taxation. See CRS Insight IN10597, <i>Iran’s State-Linked Conglomerates</i> , by Kenneth Katzman.
The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)	The IRGC is a military and internal security force, and an instrument of Iran’s regional policy. It is discussed throughout this report and other CRS reports on Iran, particularly in CRS Report R44017, <i>Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies</i> , by Kenneth Katzman.)
Society of Militant Clerics	Longtime organization of moderate-to-hardline clerics. Its Secretary-General is Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Movahedi-Kermani. President Rouhani is a member.

Sources: Various press accounts and author conversations with Iran experts in and outside Washington, DC.

Domestic Security Organs

The leaders and senior officials of a variety of overlapping domestic security organizations form a parallel power structure that is largely under the direct control of the Supreme Leader in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The domestic security organs include

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The military and security organ that is widely discussed in this and other CRS reports on Iran. Its domestic security role is usually implemented through the volunteer militia force called the *Basij* that monitors adherence to the regime’s directives and compliance with the country’s law and customs. It is the *Basij* that is widely accused of arresting women who violate the regime’s public dress codes and raiding Western-style parties in which alcohol, which is illegal in Iran, might be served.
- Law Enforcement Forces. This body is an amalgam of regular police, gendarmerie, and riot police that serve throughout the country. It is the regime’s first “line of defense” in suppressing anti-regime demonstrations or other unrest.
- Ministry of Interior. The Ministry, headed by Abdolreza Fazli, exercises civilian supervision of Iran’s police and domestic security forces. However, the IRGC and *Basij* are generally outside Ministry control.
- Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Headed by Mahmoud Alavi, the MOIS conducts domestic surveillance to identify regime opponents and try to

penetrate anti-regime cells. The Ministry reportedly works closely with the IRGC and *Basij*.

The leaders of most of these organizations, including the IRGC and the ministers of Interior and of Intelligence and Security, are represented on the Supreme National Security Council. Several of these organizations and their senior leaders or commanders are sanctioned by the United States for human rights abuses and other violations of several U.S. Executive Orders, particularly E.O. 13553.

Elected Institutions/Recent Elections

Several major institutional positions are directly elected by the population, but international observers question the credibility of Iran's elections because of the role of the COG in vetting candidates and limiting the number and ideological diversity of the candidate field. Women can vote and run for most offices, and some women serve as mayors, but the COG interprets the Iranian constitution as prohibiting women from running for the office of president.

Another criticism of the political process in Iran is the relative absence of political parties; establishing a party requires the permission of the Interior Ministry under Article 10 of Iran's constitution. The standards to obtain approval are high: to date, numerous parties have filed for permission since the regime was founded, but only those considered loyal to the regime have been granted license to operate. Some have been licensed and then banned after their leaders opposed regime policies, such as the Islamic Iran Participation Front and Organization of Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution, discussed in the text box below.

The Presidency

The main directly elected institution is the presidency, which is formally and in practice subordinate to the Supreme Leader. Virtually every successive president has tried but failed to expand his authority relative to the Supreme Leader. Presidential authority, particularly on matters of national security, is also often circumscribed by key clerics and the generally hardline military and security organization called the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). But, the presidency is often the most influential economic policymaking position, as well as a source of patronage. The president appoints and supervises the cabinet, develops the budgets of cabinet departments, and imposes and collects taxes on corporations and other bodies. The presidency also runs oversight bodies such as the Anticorruption Headquarters and the General Inspection Organization, to which all government officials are formally required to submit annual financial statements. Presidential candidates must receive more than 50% of the vote to avoid a runoff which, if needed, is held several weeks later.

Prior to 1989, Iran had both an elected president and a prime minister selected by the elected Majles (parliament). However, the holders of the two positions were constantly in institutional conflict and a 1989 constitutional revision eliminated the prime ministership. Because Iran's presidents have sometimes asserted the powers of their institution against the office of the Supreme Leader itself, in October 2011, Khamene'i raised the possibility of eventually eliminating the post of president and restoring the post of prime minister.

The Majles

Iran's *Majles*, or parliament, is a 290-seat, all-elected, unicameral body. There are five "reserved seats" for the "recognized" minority communities of Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians (three of the five). The *Majles* votes on each nominee to a cabinet post, and drafts and acts on legislation.

Among its main duties is to consider and enact a proposed national budget (which runs from March 21 to March 20 each year, coinciding with Nowruz). It legislates on domestic economic and social issues, and tends to defer to executive and security institutions on defense and foreign policy issues. It is constitutionally required to ratify major international agreements, and it ratified the JCPOA in October 2015. The ratification was affirmed by the COG. Women regularly run and small numbers generally win election; there is no “quota” for the number of women to be elected. *Majles* elections occur one year prior to the presidential elections; the latest were held on February 26, 2016 (and a runoff on April 29).

The Assembly of Experts

A major but little publicized elected institution is the 88-seat *Assembly of Experts*. Akin to a standing electoral college, it is empowered to choose a new Supreme Leader upon the death of the incumbent, and it formally “oversees” the work of the Supreme Leader. The Assembly can replace him if necessary, although invoking that power would, in practice, most likely occur in the event of a severe health crisis. The Assembly is also empowered to amend the constitution. It generally meets two times a year.

Elections to the Assembly are held every 8-10 years (some variation in the term), conducted on a provincial basis. The fourth election for the Assembly was held on December 15, 2006, after which Rafsanjani was named its deputy chairman. He became its chairman in September 2007, but his opposition to the crackdown on the 2009 uprising ran him afoul of the Supreme Leader and he was replaced as chair of the body in March 2011 by the aging compromise candidate Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi-Kani. After Mahdavi-Kani died in 2014 and his successor, Mohammad Yazdi lost his seat in the Assembly of Experts election on February 26, 2016, (concurrent with the *Majles* elections), COG Chairman Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati was selected the new Assembly chairman in May 2016. Jannati serves in the two posts concurrently.

Recent Elections

Rafsanjani was elected soon after Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in June of 1989, was reelected in 1993, and was succeeded by the reformist Mohammad Khatemi, who won landslide victories in the elections of 1997 and 2001. However, hardliners subsequently marginalized him.

With widespread disallowance of reformist candidates by the COG, conservatives won a slim majority of the 290 *Majles* seats in the February 20, 2004, *Majles* elections. The COG narrowed the field for the June 2005 presidential elections to eight candidates (out of the 1,014 persons who filed), including most prominently Rafsanjani,⁴ Ali Larijani, IRGC stalwart Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. With reported tacit backing from Khamene’i, Ahmadinejad advanced to a runoff against Rafsanjani, and then won by a 62% to 36% vote. During Ahmadinejad’s first term, splits widened between Ahmadinejad and other conservatives to the point where the March 2008 *Majles* elections were essentially a contest between pro-Ahmadinejad and pro-Khamene’i conservatives.

Disputed 2009 Election. Reformists sought to unseat Ahmadinejad in the June 12, 2009, presidential election by rallying to Mir Hossein Musavi, who served as prime minister during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and, to a lesser extent, former *Majles* speaker Mehdi Karrubi. Musavi’s generally young, urban supporters used social media to organize large rallies in Tehran, but pro-

⁴ Rafsanjani was constitutionally permitted to run because a third term would not have been consecutive with his previous two terms. In the 2001 presidential election, the Council permitted 10 out of the 814 registered candidates.

Ahmadinejad rallies were large as well. Turnout was about 85%. The Interior Ministry pronounced Ahmadinejad the winner (63% of the vote) only two hours after the polls closed. Supporters of Musavi, who received the second-highest total (about 35% of the vote) immediately protested the results as fraudulent because of the hasty announcement of the results—but some outside analysts said the results tracked preelection polls.⁵ Large antigovernment demonstrations occurred June 13-19, 2009. Security forces killed over 100 protesters (opposition figure—Iran government figure was 27), including a 19-year-old woman, Neda Soltani, who became an icon of the uprising.

The opposition congealed into the “Green Movement of Hope and Change.” Some protests in December 2009 overwhelmed regime security forces in some parts of Tehran, but the movement’s activity declined after its demonstration on the February 11, 2010, anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic was suppressed. As unrest ebbed, Ahmadinejad promoted his loyalists and a nationalist version of Islam that limits clerical authority, bringing him into conflict with Supreme Leader Khamene’i. Amid that rift, the March 2012 Majles elections attracted 33% fewer candidates than the previous Majles elections, of which only 10% were women. Two blocs of candidates supported by Khamene’i won about 75% of the seats, weakening Ahmadinejad.

⁵ A paper published by Chatham House and the University of St. Andrews strongly questions how Ahmadinejad’s vote could have been as large as reported by official results, in light of past voting patterns throughout Iran. “Preliminary Analysis of the Voting Figures in Iran’s 2009 Presidential Election.” <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk>.

Reformist Leaders and Organizations

The figures discussed below are “reformists”—seeking dramatic change on issues such as freedom of expression, but not outright replacement of the regime.

Mir Hossein Musavi is the titular leader of the Green Movement, the coalition of youth and intellectuals that led the 2009-2010 uprising. A noncleric and former Khomeini aide, Musavi served as foreign minister in 1980 and as Iran’s last prime minister from 1981 to 1989, at which time constitutional reforms abolished the post. An advocate of state-controlled economy, as prime minister, Musavi often feuded with Khamene’i, who was president at that time and a supporter of the merchant community. Musavi supports political and social freedoms and reducing Iran’s international isolation while continuing to back state intervention in the economy to benefit workers and lower classes. His wife, activist Zahra Rahnevar, remains incarcerated with him since 2011 for her role in the uprising.

Mehdi Karrubi

Mehdi Karrubi is an Iranian cleric, former Majles Speaker (1989-1992, 2000-2004), and supporter of the Green Movement. Failed presidential campaigns in 2005 and 2009 led Karrubi to question the elections’ validity and to support runner-up Mir Hossein Musavi’s dispute over the election in 2009. Imprisoned in the 1970s for protesting the government of Mohammad Reza Shah, Karrubi became a leading politician of the Islamic left following the 1979 revolution. Karrubi shares Musavi’s political views on the need for state-controlled economy and civil rights for women. In 2014, Karrubi was moved from a detention facility to house arrest. In August 2017, Karrubi challenged the regime by going on a hunger strike to demand a formal trial and a withdrawal of security forces from his home. Security forces left but no trial has been set.

Mohammad Khatemi

Mohammad Khatemi captured global attention in May 1997 when, running on a reformist platform, he was elected president with almost 70% of the vote. He was reelected president in June 2001 with a similar percentage. Khatemi capitalized on a prevailing sentiment to ease social and political restrictions in the country. However, supporters became disillusioned when Khatemi failed to buck hardliners on reform issues, leaving him largely marginalized by the end of his presidency in 2005. Khatemi endorsed Musavi in the 2009 election and, following the 2009 uprising, had his travel restricted and discussion or images of him banned in Iranian media. Khatemi reportedly helped organize reformists and other pro-Rouhani candidates in the 2016 Majles elections, and Rouhani has sought to end the media ban on discussions of Khatemi.

Pro-reformist Organizations

The reformists are supported by several long-standing factions that supported the regime but fell out with hardliners and turned into forceful critics.

National Trust (Etemad-e-Melli). Opposition grouping formed by Karrubi after his defeat in the 2005 election.

Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF). The most prominent and best organized proreform grouping, but in 2009 lost political ground to Green Movement groups. IIPF leaders include Mohammed Khatemi’s brother, Mohammad Reza Khatemi (deputy speaker in the 2000-2004 Majles) and Mohsen Mirdamadi. Backed Musavi in June 2009 election, and several IIPF leaders detained and prosecuted in postelection dispute. The party was outlawed in September 2010.

Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization (MIR) Composed mainly of left-leaning Iranian figures who support state control of the economy, but want greater political pluralism and relaxation of rules on social behavior. A major constituency of the reformist camp. Its leader is former Heavy Industries Minister Behzad Nabavi, who supported Musavi in 2009 election and has been incarcerated for most of the time since June 2009. The organization was outlawed by the regime simultaneously with the outlawing of the IIPF, above.

Combatant Clerics Association The group was formed in 1988 and its name is similar to the Society of Militant Clerics, but the group is run by reformists. Leading figures include Mohammad Khatemi, former Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur, and former Prosecutor General Ali Asgar Musavi-Koiniha.

June 2013 Election of Rouhani

In the June 14, 2013, presidential elections, held concurrently with municipal elections, the major candidates included

- Several hardliners that included Qalibaf (see above); Khamene'i foreign policy advisor Velayati; and then-chief nuclear negotiator Seyed Jalilli.
- Former chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, a moderate and Rafsanjani ally.
- The COG disapproved Rafsanjani's candidacy, which shocked many Iranians because of Rafsanjani's prominent place in the regime. The candidacy of Ahmadinejad ally Esfandiar Rahim Mashai also was denied.

Green Movement supporters, who were first expected to boycott the vote, mobilized behind Rouhani after regime officials stressed that they were committed to a fair election. The vote produced a 70% turnout and a first-round victory for Rouhani, garnering about 50.7% of the 36 million votes cast. Hardliners generally garnered control of municipal councils in the major cities.

The *Majles* approved all but three of Rouhani's cabinet choices, including

- Foreign Minister: Mohammad Javad Zarif, a former Ambassador to the United Nations in New York. Rouhani assigned him to serve concurrently as chief nuclear negotiator, a post traditionally held by the chairman of the Supreme National Security Council. In September 2013, Rouhani appointed senior IRGC leader and former Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani as secretary (head) of that body; Shamkhani has held more moderate positions than his IRGC peers.
- Oil Minister: Bijan Zanganeh, who served in the same post during the Khatemi presidency and attracted significant foreign investment to the sector. He replaced Rostam Qasemi, who was associated with the corporate arm of the IRGC. Zanganeh has rehired and recruited oil industry technocrats.
- Defense Minister: Hosein Dehgan. An IRGC stalwart, he was an early organizer of the IRGC's Lebanon contingent that evolved into the IRGC-Qods Force. He also was IRGC Air Force commander and deputy Defense Minister.
- Justice Minister: Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, a controversial minister because, as deputy Intelligence Minister in late 1980s, he was reportedly a decisionmaker in the 1988 mass executions of Iranian prisoners. He was Interior Minister under Ahmadinejad. In the 114th Congress, H.Con.Res. 159 (not voted on) condemned Iran for the massacre and urged the United Nations to establish a Commission of Inquiry to fully investigate it.

Majles Elections in 2016

On February 26, 2016, Iran held concurrent elections for the *Majles* and for the Assembly of Experts. A runoff round for 68 *Majles* seats was held on April 29. For the *Majles*, 6,200 candidates were approved, including 586 female candidates. The oversight bodies invalidated the candidacies of about 6,000 who had applied to run, including all but 100 reformists. Despite the disqualifications, the pro-Rouhani candidates won about 140 seats, close to a majority, and sharply reducing the number of hardliners in the body. Independents, whose alignments vary by issue, hold about 50 seats. Seventeen women were elected—the largest female contingent since the revolution. The *Majles*, which convened on May 27, 2016, reelected Ali Larijani as Speaker.

Assembly of Experts candidates must be able to interpret Islamic law. For the election, 161 candidates were approved, out of 800 that filed to run. Reformists and their pro-Rouhani allies

succeeded in defeating for an Assembly seat at least two prominent hardliners—current Assembly Chairman Mohammad Yazdi and Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi. COG head Ayatollah Jannati retained his seat, but came in last for the 30 seats elected from Tehran Province. He was subsequently named chairman of the Assembly of Experts.



Dr. Hassan Rouhani

Hassan Rouhani is a Hojjat ol-Islam in the Shiite clergy, one rank below Ayatollah. He was born in 1948. He holds a Ph.D. in law from Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland. Rouhani is a long-time regime stalwart who was part of Ayatollah Khomeini's circle prior to the triumph of the Islamic revolution. He is also an associate and protégé of Rafsanjani, and Rouhani's pragmatic policy approach on issues such as the nuclear issue and relations with the United States has complicated Rouhani's relations with Khamene'i. Khamene'i criticized Rouhani's economic and foreign policies during the 2017 presidential election period, appearing to seek Rouhani's defeat.

Career Background

Often nicknamed the “diplomat sheikh,” Rouhani was chief nuclear negotiator during 2003-2005, when Iran did agree to suspend uranium enrichment. Rouhani is a longtime member of the political establishment. Then-President Rafsanjani appointed him a member of the Supreme National Security Council in 1989, and he remains on that body. He has been a member of the Assembly of Experts since 1999 (and reelected to that body in the February 2016 election), and was a member of the Majles during 1980-2000, serving twice as deputy speaker. He has also been a member of the Expediency Council since 1991. He headed the Center for Strategic Studies, a foreign policy think tank that has advised the Expediency Council and the Supreme Leader, since 1992. Although he supported the crackdown against an earlier student uprising in July 1999, during the presidency of reformist figure Mohammad Khatemi, in 2013, Rouhani campaigned on a platform of easing the Islamic Republic's social restrictions and its suppression of free expression, helping him draw support from reformists.

Rouhani Presidency

Rouhani has focused mainly on negotiating and institutionalizing the JCPOA and on rebuilding Iran's international and regional economic ties, but not on seeking changes in Iran's regional policies. Hardliners who opposed Iranian concessions in the JCPOA were unable to persuade Khamene'i, the *Majles*, or the COG to block the accord. Sanctions relief caused the economy to grow since sanctions were lifted, but Khamene'i's speeches in 2016 and 2017 advocating building a “resistance economy,” have been widely interpreted as contradicting Rouhani's emphasis on expanding trade relations with developed world.

Rouhani has sought to promote freedom of expression and political tolerance, but hardliners in the judiciary and the security services have circumscribed most of his efforts. In September 2013, Rouhani proposed a new “charter for citizen's rights.” In late 2013, Rouhani apparently prevailed on the judiciary to release nearly 80 political prisoners incarcerated for involvement in the uprising, including prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh. However, the judiciary and security institutions (discussed above) have continued to arrest and prosecute U.S.-Iran dual nationals and other dual nationals for alleged efforts to undermine the regime. Neither of the two main titular Green Movement leaders, Mousavi and Karrubi, who were detained in early 2011, has been released. Khamene'i has termed these figures “seditionists” and has insisted that they should remain confined indefinitely, although Rouhani's supporters say they are pressing for him to resolve the issue of their continued detention in his second term. The arrest of Rouhani's brother in July 2017 for unspecified financial misfeasance was widely viewed as a move by judicial hardliners to undermine Rouhani's authority.

Photograph from <http://www.rouhani.ir>.

Presidential Election on May 19, 2017

The latest presidential election was held on May 19, 2017. Rouhani was constitutionally eligible to run for reelection, declared his candidacy, and won a convincing first-round victory with about 57% of the vote. He defeated a major figure, Hojjat ol-Eslam Ibrahim Raisi—a close ally of Khamene’i appointed by him in 2016 to head the large Astan-e-Qods Razavi Foundation. Even though other major hardliners had dropped out of the race to improve Raisi’s chances of winning, Raisi received only about 38% of the vote. For more information on the 2017 presidential election, see CRS Insight IN10699, *Iran’s Presidential Elections*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Municipal elections were held concurrently. After vetting by local committees established by the *Majles*, about 260,000 candidates competed for about 127,000 seats nationwide. Over 6% of the candidates were women. The same alliance of reformists and moderate-conservatives that gave Rouhani a resounding victory also won control of the municipal councils of Iran’s largest cities, including all 21 seats on the Tehran municipal council. The term of the existing councils is to expire in September 2017 and, at that time, it is expected that a reformist or moderate official will replace be chosen to replace Qalibaf as Tehran mayor. The top vote getter in Tehran, and a reportedly strong candidate to be selected mayor, is Rafsanjani’s eldest son, Mohsen Hashemi.

Second Term Cabinet

Rouhani was sworn into a second term in early August 2017. His second term cabinet nominations retained most of the same officials in key posts, including Foreign Minister Zarif, Interior Minister Abdolreza Fazli, and Oil Minister Zanganeh. However, two key changes of note include

- Minister of Justice nominee Seyed Alireza Avayee replaces controversial predecessor Pour-Mohammadi
- Defense Minister Amir Hatami, who hails from Iran’s regular military replaces Hosein Dehgan, an IRGC stalwart. Hatami becomes the first Defense Minister not to come out of the IRGC in more than 20 years, and the first regular military officer to serve in the position. The change could be interpreted as an effort by Rouhani to reduce the power and influence of the IRGC.
- Rouhani named two females as vice presidents, and one other as a member of the cabinet. However, some Iranian women’s groups criticized him for not naming a woman to head a ministry.

On August 20, 2017, the *Majles* confirmed all but one of Rouhani’s second term cabinet nominees. The body disapproved Minister of Energy nominee Habibollah Bitaraf.

Demographics/Ethnic and Religious Minorities

General. Iran's population is about 83 million persons. In terms of ethnicity, about 60% is Persian; about 20%-25% is Azeri; about 7% are Kurds; about 4% are Arabs; and about 2% are Baluchis. Iran is about 99% Muslim, of which more than 90% are Shiites; about 8% are Sunnis; and 1% are Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Baha'i, or other religions.

Azeris. Azeris, who have a Turkic ethnicity, are predominant in northern Iran, particularly in areas bordering Azerbaijan. Azeris in Iran are mostly well integrated into government and society (Khamene'i himself is of Azeri heritage), but many Azeris complain of ethnic and linguistic discrimination. Each year, there are arrests of Azeris who press for their right to celebrate their culture and history. The government accuses them of promoting separatism.

Christians. Christians, who number about 300,000, are a "protected minority" with three seats reserved in the Majles. The majority of Christians in Iran are ethnic Armenians, with Assyrian Christians contributing about 10,000-20,000 practitioners. The IRGC oversees churches in the country, suggesting official scrutiny of Christian religious practice, and numerous Christians remain incarcerated on charges related to their religious practices, such as using wine in certain services. At times, there have been unexplained assassinations of pastors in Iran, as well as prosecutions of Christians for converting from Islam—a practice illegal for any Iranian Muslim. Christians—along with the other two protected minorities, Zoroastrians and Jews—cannot publicly practice or advocate for their religion. One pastor, Yousef Nadarkhani, has been repeatedly arrested, released since 2006, including his May 2016 rearrest and release on bail in July 2016.

Kurds. There are about 5 million-11 million Kurds in Iran. The Kurdish language is not banned, but schools do not teach it and Kurdish political organizations, activists, and media outlets are routinely scrutinized, harassed, and closed down for supporting greater Kurdish autonomy. Abuses of Kurds are widely cited as providing political support for the Kurdish armed factions, with several Kurdish oppositionists having been executed since 2010. In May 2015, violent unrest broke out in the Kurdish city of Mahabad after a local woman was killed in unclear circumstances in a hotel room there, reportedly while with a member of Iran's intelligence services. Iranian Kurds recruited by the Islamic State terrorist organization conducted a major attack on Iran's parliament and the tomb of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 2017, killing 17 persons.

Arabs. Ethnic Arabs are prominent in southwestern Iran, particularly Khuzestan Province, where they are known as Ahwazi Arabs. The approximately 3 million Arabs in Iran encounter systematic oppression and discrimination, including torture and a prohibition on speaking or studying Arabic.

Baluchis. Iran has about 1.4 million Baluchis, living primarily in poorly developed and economically depressed southeastern Iran, in the area bordering Pakistan. Baluchis in Iran are mostly Sunni Muslims.

Jews. Also a "recognized minority" with one seat in the Majles, the approximately 10,000 member (according to the Tehran Jewish Committee) Jewish community enjoys somewhat more freedoms than Jews in several other Muslim states. On September 4, 2013, Rouhani's Twitter account issued greetings to Jews on the occasion of Jewish New Year ("Rosh Hashanah") and the Jewish Majles member accompanied Rouhani on his visit to the U.N. General Assembly meetings in September 2013. However, the Iranian government ignores and sometimes promotes anti-Semitic rhetoric in state-sanctioned media, statements, books, and other publications. Former President Ahmadinejad, for example, often questioned the existence of the Holocaust, claiming it to be a Zionist propaganda tool. In June 1999, Iran arrested 13 Jews that it said were part of an "espionage ring" for Israel, and 10 were convicted. All were released by April 2003.

Bahai'is. There are an estimated 20,000 Baha'is in Iran, where this religion started, based on a 19th century self-declared Iranian prophet named Baha'ullah. The Baha'is in Iran have been subjected to unrelenting repression, by many accounts, as members of what the Islamic Republic describes as a "heretical" religion. Baha'i leaders have been repeatedly imprisoned, land and property of Baha'i adherents has been seized, Baha'is are banned from serving in government, and Baha'is have been routinely discriminated against for job and university positions. Virtually yearly, resolutions in the U.S. Congress have condemned the repression of the Baha'is of Iran. The March 17, 2017 report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Iran human rights (A/HRC/34/65) contains an extensive appendix listing Baha'is in prison in Iran.

Human Rights Practices⁶

International criticism of Iran's human rights practices has been long-standing. State Department reports and reports from a U.N. Special Rapporteur cite Iran for a wide range of abuses—aside from its suppression of political opposition—including escalating use of capital punishment, executions of minors, denial of fair public trial, harsh and life-threatening conditions in prison, and unlawful detention and torture.

State Department and Special Rapporteur reports have noted that the 2013 revisions to the Islamic Penal Code and the 2015 revisions to the Criminal Procedure Code made some reforms, including eliminating death sentences for children convicted of drug-related offenses and protecting the rights of the accused. A “Citizen’s Rights Charter,” issued December 19, 2016, at least nominally protects free expression and is intended to raise public awareness of citizen rights. It also purportedly commits the government to implement the Charter’s 120 articles. In August 2017, Rouhani appointed a woman, former vice president Shahindokht Molaverdi, as his assistant for citizenship rights with a mandate to oversee implementation of the Charter.

A U.N. Special Rapporteur on Iran human rights was re-established in March 2011 by the U.N. Human Rights Council (22 to 7 vote). A previous Special Rapporteur on Iran human rights existed during 1988-2002. Former Maldives Foreign Minister Ahmad Shaheed was appointed to this role in June 2011, and he was replaced by Asma Jahangir in September 2016. She has issued two reports to date, the latest of which is dated August 14, 2017 (A/72/322), with findings largely consistent with those of the State Department and those of her predecessor.

For refusing permission for the Special Rapporteur to conduct fact-finding visits to Iran, in December 2011, the U.N. General Assembly approved a resolution insisting that Iran cooperate with the efforts of the Special Rapporteur (by a vote of 89-30 with 64 abstentions). Iran responds to some of the Special Rapporteur’s inquiries through “special procedures” agreed with Iran. In November 2016, the U.N. General Assembly’s Third Committee (which oversees human rights issues) adopted a resolution (85 in favor, 35 opposed, and 63 abstaining) expressing concern over Iran’s “alarmingly” frequent use of the death penalty and again urging access to Iran by the Special Rapporteur. Despite the criticism of its human rights record, on April 29, 2010, Iran acceded to the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. It also has seats on the boards of the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and UNICEF. Iran’s U.N. dues are about \$9 million per year.

⁶ Much of the information in this section comes from the State Department human rights report for 2016: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265708.pdf>.

Women's Rights

Women can vote and run for office but female candidates for president have always been barred from running by the Council of Guardians. They can and have served in cabinet and vice presidential positions, as well as in mayoral positions, but are not permitted to serve as judges. As noted above, in August 2017, Rouhani named three women to his second term cabinet, but he disappointed women's groups by not appointing any to ministerial posts.

Women are subject to arrest if they do not cover their head in public, generally with a garment called a chador, but enforcement has relaxed somewhat since Rouhani took office. Women are permitted to drive and work outside the home without restriction, including owning their own businesses, although less than 20% of the workforce is female. Despite female majorities in higher education in past years, women are a third less likely to work after graduation than their male counterparts.

Women do not have inheritance or divorce rights equal to those of men, and their court testimony carries half the weight of a male's. A woman's husband has the power to restrict his wife's travel abroad, as well as limit her job prospects. Laws against rape are not enforced effectively. The law permits a man to have up to four wives as well as "temporary wives"—an arrangement reached after a religious ceremony and civil contract outlining the relationship's conditions. Women are also banned from attending male sports matches. In September 2014, an Iranian-British woman was jailed briefly for attending a volleyball match.

Iran has an official body, the High Council for Human Rights, headed by former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Larijani (brother of the Majles speaker and the judiciary head). It generally defends the government's actions to outside bodies rather than encourages improvement of the government's human rights practices, although Larijani has, according to the Special Rapporteur, questioned the effectiveness of drug-related executions.

As part of its efforts to try to compel Iran to improve its human rights practices, the United States has imposed sanctions on Iranian officials alleged to have committed human rights abuses, and on firms that help Iranian authorities censor or monitor the Internet. Human rights-related sanctions are analyzed in significant detail in CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman. In April 2014, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on European Union (EU) diplomats to raise Iran's human rights record at official engagements.

Table 2. Human Rights Practices: General Categories

Media Freedoms	The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance monitors journalists reporting from Iran as well as media and communications operations. It continues to block pro-reform websites and blogs and close newspapers critical of the government, but some editors say that the government has become more tolerant of critical media since Rouhani took office. In response to the November 2012 death in custody of blogger Sattar Beheshti, seven security officers were arrested and the Tehran “Cyber Police” commander was removed. Iran has set up a national network that has a monopoly on Internet service for Iranians. According to the September 2016 Special Rapporteur’s report, 47 journalists and “Internet users” are in jail. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported on December 13, 2016, that Iran had only 8 journalists in Iranian prisons, compared with 19 the year earlier. In late March 2017, security forces arrested 12 administrators of an online messaging application used by reformists.
Labor Restrictions	Independent unions are legal but cannot operate in practice. Many trade unionists remain in jail for protesting unpaid wages, precarious working conditions, and poor living conditions, or for peaceful trade union activities. The sole authorized national labor organization is a state-controlled “Workers’ House” umbrella. In 2014, Iran ratified an additional International Labour Organization convention.
Religious Freedom	Each year since 1999, the Secretary of State has designated Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom. No sanctions have been added on Iran under IRFA, on the grounds that Iran is already subject to extensive U.S. sanctions. The constitution specifies Ja’afari Shiite Islam as the official state religion and restrictions on religious freedom for some non-Shiite groups have been noted consistently in State Department and other reports. Iran’s penal code provides the death penalty for attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims, as well as <i>moharebeh</i> (enmity against God) and <i>sabb al-nabi</i> (insulting the prophets) - crimes that critics say are selectively applied to regime opponents.
Executions Policy	Human rights observer groups say the government has increased executions since Rouhani took office, numbering about 1,000 for 2015, about 500 for 2016, and about 250 in 2017 (to August). Iran is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is obligated to cease the executions of minors. Iran has not held accountable any officials involved in the summer 1988 executions of thousands of prisoners of conscience in Iran’s prisons.
Human Trafficking	Since 2005, State Department “Trafficking in Persons” reports (including the report for 2017) have placed Iran in Tier 3 (worst level) for failing to take significant action to prevent trafficking in persons. Iranian women, boys, and girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation in Iran as well as to Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, and Europe. However, the State Department’s 2017 report said the government had set up some centers to assist trafficking victims.
Stoning	In 2002, the then head of Iran’s judiciary, Ayatollah Shahrودي (mentioned above) issued a ban on stoning. However, Iranian officials later called that directive “advisory,” thus putting stoning sentences at the discretion of individual judges, and the practice reportedly continues.

Sources: State Department reports on human rights practices, on international religious freedom, and trafficking in persons. Trafficking in persons report for 2017: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271342.pdf>. International Religious Freedom report: <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/269134.pdf>

U.S.-Iran Relations and U.S. Policy

The February 11, 1979, fall of the Shah of Iran, who was a key U.S. ally, opened a deep and ongoing rift in U.S.-Iranian relations. Immediately after the revolution, the Carter Administration sought to engage the Islamic regime, but hopes to build a relationship ended after the November 4, 1979, takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran by radical pro-Khomeini “students in the line of the Imam (Khomeini).” The radicals held 66 U.S. diplomats hostage for 444 days, releasing them minutes after President Reagan’s inauguration on January 20, 1981. The United States broke relations with Iran on April 7, 1980, two weeks prior to a failed U.S. military attempt to rescue the hostages.

Iran has since then pursued policies that successive Administrations considered inimical to U.S. interests in the Near East region and beyond.⁷ Iran’s authoritarian political system and human rights abuses have contributed to, but have not necessarily been central to, the U.S.-Iran rift. The Iran policies that have been pursued by successive Administrations are discussed below.

Iran has an interest section in Washington, DC, under the auspices of the Embassy of Pakistan, and staffed by Iranian Americans. The former Iranian Embassy closed in April 1980 when the two countries broke diplomatic relations, and remains under the control of the State Department. Iran’s Mission to the United Nations in New York runs most of Iran’s diplomacy inside the United States. The U.S. interests section in Tehran, under the auspices of the Embassy of Switzerland, has no American personnel. The former U.S. embassy is now a museum commemorating the revolution and a headquarters for the *Basij*.

U.S.-Iran Relations since the Hostage Crisis

- *Reagan Administration.* The Reagan Administration designated Iran a “state sponsor of terrorism” in January 1984, primarily because of Iran’s support for Lebanese Hezbollah. The designation reinforced a U.S. “tilt” toward Iraq in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, which included diplomatic efforts to block conventional arms sales to Iran.⁸ During 1987-1988, U.S. naval forces engaged in several skirmishes with Iranian naval elements in the course of U.S. efforts to protect oil shipments transiting the Persian Gulf from Iranian mines and other attacks. On April 18, 1988, Iran lost one-quarter of its larger naval ships in an engagement with the U.S. Navy (“Operation Praying Mantis”), including a frigate sunk. However, the Administration to some extent undermined its efforts to contain Iran by providing some arms to Iran (“TOW” antitank weapons and I-Hawk air defense batteries) in exchange for Iran’s help in the releasing of U.S. hostages in held in Lebanon. On July 3, 1988, U.S. forces in the Gulf mistakenly shot down Iran Air Flight 655 over the Gulf, killing all 290 on board.
- *George H. W. Bush Administration.* In his January 1989 inaugural speech, President George H.W. Bush stated that “goodwill begets goodwill” with respect

⁷ Those policies, such as its national security policies and its development of an extensive nuclear program, are assessed in detail in CRS Report R44017, *Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁸ Elaine Sciolino, *The Outlaw State: Saddam Hussein’s Quest for Power and the Gulf Crisis* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991), p. 168.

- to Iran—implying that U.S.-Iran relations could improve if Iran helped obtain the release of U.S. hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran apparently did assist in obtaining their release and all remaining U.S. hostages there were freed by the end of December 1991. However, no U.S.-Iran thaw followed, possibly because Iran continued to back terrorist groups in the Middle East and to oppose the U.S. push for Arab-Israeli peace that began after the 1991 U.S. liberation of Kuwait.
- *Clinton Administration.* Shortly after taking office, the Clinton Administration announced a strategy of “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq—attempting to keep both weak rather than alternately tilting to one or the other. In 1995 and 1996, the Clinton Administration and Congress banned U.S. trade and investment with Iran and imposed penalties on foreign investment in Iran’s energy sector, primarily in response to Iran’s support for terrorist groups seeking to undermine the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The election of the moderate Mohammad Khatemi as president in May 1997 precipitated a U.S. offer of direct dialogue without preconditions, but Khatemi ruled out such talks. In June 1998, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called for mutual confidence building measures that could lead to a “road map” for normalization. In a March 17, 2000, speech, she admitted there was past U.S. interference in Iran.
 - *George W. Bush Administration.* Even though the Administration conducted some cooperation with Iran on post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Iraq,⁹ President Bush included Iran as part of an “axis of evil” (along with Iraq and North Korea) in his January 2002 State of the Union message. The Administration rebuffed a reported May 2003 Iranian overture transmitted by the Swiss Ambassador to Iran—widely termed a “grand bargain” proposal—for a sweeping agreement on major issues of mutual concern.¹⁰ State Department officials disputed that the proposal was fully vetted within Iran’s leadership. But the Administration subsequently aided victims of the December 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran, including through U.S. military aircraft deliveries into Iran. As Iran’s nuclear program emerged as a contentious issue, the Administration began working with several European in an unsuccessful effort to use a combination of sanctions and diplomacy to persuade Iran to agree to limit its nuclear program. President Bush’s January 20, 2005, second inaugural address and his January 31, 2006, State of the Union message stated that the United States would be a close ally of a “free and democratic” Iran, appearing to support changing the regime.¹¹

Obama Administration: Pressure, Engagement, and the JCPOA

President Obama asserted that there was an opportunity to persuade Iran to limit its nuclear program through diplomacy and to potentially rebuild a U.S.-Iran relationship after decades of mutual animosity. The approach emerged in President Obama’s first message to the Iranian people on the occasion of Nowruz (Persian New Year) on March 21, 2009, in which he stated that the United States “is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran, and the international

⁹ Robin Wright, “U.S. In ‘Useful’ Talks With Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2003.

¹⁰ http://www.armscontrol.org/pdf/2003_Spring_Iran_Proposal.pdf.

¹¹ Helene Cooper and David Sanger, “Strategy on Iran Stirs New Debate at White House,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2007.

community.” He also referred to Iran as “The Islamic Republic of Iran,” a formulation generally signaling opposition to a policy of regime change. In addition

- President Obama’s exchanged several letters with Supreme Leader Khamene’i, reportedly expressing the Administration’s support for engagement with Iran.
- In a major speech to the “Muslim World” in Cairo on June 4, 2009, President Obama acknowledged that the United States had played a role in the overthrow of Mossadeq and said that Iran had a right to peaceful nuclear power.
- The Administration loosened restrictions on U.S. diplomats’ meeting with their Iranian counterparts at international meetings.

2009-2013: Emphasis on Economic Pressure

In 2009, Iran’s crackdown on the Green Movement uprising and its refusal to accept compromises to limit its nuclear program caused the Administration to shift to a “two track strategy”: stronger economic pressure coupled with nuclear negotiations that offered the prospect of sanctions relief. The sanctions imposed during 2010 and 2013 received broad international support and cooperation and caused economic difficulty in Iran. The Administration also altered U.S. trade regulations to help Iranians circumvent their government’s restrictions on Internet usage, and funded exchanges with civil society activists in Iran. The Administration repeatedly stated that a military option is “on the table” and it continued defense cooperation with the Persian Gulf states and other allies. In 2013, before the election of Rouhani, the Administration began direct but unpublicized talks with Iranian officials in the Sultanate of Oman to probe Iran’s willingness to reach a comprehensive nuclear accord.¹²

2013-2017: Rouhani Elected and JCPOA Reached

The election of Rouhani in June 2013 contributed to an Administration shift to emphasizing diplomacy. On September 20, 2013, on the eve of U.N. General Assembly meetings, the *Washington Post* published an op-ed by Rouhani stating a commitment to engage in constructive interaction with the world. President Obama, in his September 24, 2013, U.N. speech, confirmed that he had exchanged letters with Rouhani stating the U.S. willingness to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully and that the United States “[is] not seeking regime change.”¹³ An Obama-Rouhani meeting did not occur, but the two presidents spoke by phone on September 27, 2013—the first direct U.S.-Iran presidential level contact since the 1979 revolution. President Obama met Foreign Minister Zarif at the September 2015 General Assembly sessions, but no U.S.-Iran high level meetings were held during the September 2016 U.N. General Assembly sessions.

President Obama expressed hope that the JCPOA would “usher[] in a new era in U.S.-Iranian relations,”¹⁴ while at the same time asserting that the JCPOA would benefit U.S. national security even without such a broader rapprochement. After the JCPOA was finalized in July 2015, the United States and Iran held bilateral meetings at the margins of all nuclear talks and in other settings, covering regional as well as bilateral issues. However, subsequent actions by Iran and Iranian perceptions of some U.S. actions, prevented a broad warming of U.S.-Iran relations.

¹² <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-us-nuclear-khamenei-salehi-jcpoa-diplomacy.html#>.

¹³ Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2013.

¹⁴ Roger Cohen. “U.S. Embassy, Tehran.” *New York Times*, April 8, 2015.

- In December 2015, Iranian officials accused the United States of violating the JCPOA by imposing new visa requirements in the FY2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 114-113). Iranian officials argued that the provision would cause European businessmen to hesitate to travel to Iran and thereby limit reengagement in Iran’s economy. The provision gave the Secretary of Homeland Security waiver authority, and then-Secretary of State Kerry wrote a letter to Foreign Minister Zarif on December 19, 2015, stating that the United States would implement the provision in a manner that avoids interfering with “legitimate business interests of Iran.”
- In January 2016, then-Secretary Kerry worked with Foreign Minister Zarif to achieve the release by Iran within about one day of 10 U.S. Navy personnel who the IRGC took into custody when their two riverine crafts strayed into what Iran considers its territorial waters.
- Coinciding with Implementation Day of the JCPOA (January 16, 2016), and as a product of U.S.-Iran talks, most of the dual citizens held by Iran at that time were released and a long-standing Iranian claim for funds paid for undelivered military equipment from the Shah’s era was settled—resulting in \$1.7 billion in payments to Iran (\$400 million in foreign currency for the original DOD monies and \$1.3 billion in foreign currency for an agreed amount of interest). Administration officials asserted that the nuclear diplomacy provided an opportunity to resolve these outstanding issues simultaneously, but some Members of Congress criticized the simultaneity of the prisoner releases and the arms issue settlement as appearing as paying “ransom” to Iran. Administration officials asserted that it had long been assumed that the United States would need to return monies to Iran for the undelivered military equipment and that the amount of interest agreed was likely less than what Iran might have been awarded by the U.S.-Iran Claims Tribunal, had a judgment been rendered.
- In March 2016, the United States indicted seven Iranians, none of whom are in U.S. custody, on charges of organizing cyberattacks on critical U.S. infrastructure, including a dam in upstate New York.
- Iran conducted at least four ballistic missile tests from the time the JCPOA was finalized in 2015 until the end of the Obama Administration. The tests prompted additional U.S. designations for sanctions of entities that support Iran’s program and the Administration called the tests “defiant of” Resolution 2231.
- Throughout 2016, Obama Administration officials asserted that Iran’s regional behavior had not changed significantly after the JCPOA, although some experts suggested that Iran’s regional activities, such as its support for Houthi rebels in Yemen and underground Shiite opposition groups in Bahrain, had increased. In Yemen, Iran’s ally, the Houthi rebels, fired anti-ship missiles possibly supplied by Iran at U.S. and UAE ships in the Red Sea in October 2016, and the United States retaliated by striking radar units in Houthi-controlled territory.
- In 2016, Boeing Corporation and Iran Air finalized a sale to Iran Air of 80 passenger aircraft and leasing of another 29, at an estimated value of over \$16 billion.¹⁵ An additional, but smaller, sale to Iran’s Asseman Air was signed in

¹⁵ For more information, see CRS Insight IN10515, *Proposed Boeing Aircraft Sale to Iran*, by Kenneth Katzman, Shayerah Ilias Akhtar, and Dianne E. Rennack.

2017. However, there have been no open discussions of direct flights between Iran and the United States.

- Since mid-2016, Iranian naval vessels have been conducting occasional “high speed intercepts” of U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf. On a few of these occasions, a U.S. ship fired a warning shot, but no shots were fired in hostility by either side. Iran also reiterated threats to close the Strait of Hormuz if Iran were attacked.
- After releasing all remaining jailed dual nationals in connection with Implementation Day, Iran subsequently jailed several other dual nations throughout 2016, as shown below. The jailing raised questions over whether Iran might try to obtain additional U.S. sanctions relief in exchange for their release.

According to Obama Administration officials, there was no discussion of any enhancements of mutual diplomatic representation, the posting of U.S. nationals to staff the U.S. interests section in Tehran, or a visit to Iran by then-Secretary of State Kerry. However, in May 2015, the two governments granted each other permission to move their respective interests sections in Washington, DC, and in Tehran to more spacious locations.

As an example of the way in which long-standing injuries continue to affect the relationship, in early 2014, Iran appointed one of those involved in the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran—Hamid Aboutalebi—as ambassador to the United Nations. In April 2014, Congress passed S. 2195 (P.L. 113-100), which gave the Administration authority to deny him a visa to take up his duties. The United States subsequently announced he would not be admitted to the United States. Iran replaced him with Gholam Ali Khoshroo, who studied in the United States and served in the reformist government of President Khatemi.

Trump Administration Policy

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, then-candidate Donald Trump characterized Iran as an adversary of the United States and, at times, indicated he might end U.S. participation in the JCPOA if elected. In his September 19, 2017 speech before the U.N. General Assembly, President Trump called the JCPOA an “embarrassment.” At no time since taking office has President Trump articulated an aspiration or intent to normalize relations with Iran or to try to work with Iran to resolve regional conflicts. The Trump Administration’s Iran policy has manifested as follows.

- After a January 29, 2017, ballistic missile test by Iran, and citing Iran’s arming of the Houthis in Yemen, on February 1, 2017, then-National Security Adviser Michael Flynn stated that the Administration had placed Iran “officially on notice” about its provocative behavior and would seek to counter Iran on multiple fronts.
- On February 3, 2017 and on several occasions since, the Administration imposed sanctions, under existing Executive Orders or laws (including the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act), on many entities based in Iran, China, and the Persian Gulf that are allegedly involved in Iran’s missile program. in supplying the IRGC and Hezbollah, and in malicious cyber activity.
- March 29, 2017 testimony by the commander of U.S. Central Command, General Joseph Votel, indicated that the Administration perceives a threat from Iran’s establishment for the Houthis of coastal missile positions along the Bab el Mandeb Strait. General Votel indicated that the Iranian buildup of missile forces there poses a threat to freedom of navigation.

- On April 19 and again on July 17, the Administration certified to Congress, pursuant to the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, P.L. 114-17), that Iran is complying with the JCPOA. However, Secretary of State Tillerson has said that the JCPOA “only delays [Iran’s] goal of becoming a nuclear state” and has failed to curb Iran’s objectionable regional behavior, and that the United States’ Iran policy, including the JCPOA, is under review. Related to the certifications, the Administration has renewed waivers of key Iran sanctions laws to continue to implement the JCPOA.
- On May 11, the intelligence community’s “Worldwide Threat Assessment” asserted that a wide array of Iranian programs and activities - proliferation, regional activities, support for terrorism, cyberattacks, and conventional military acquisitions and actions - threaten U.S. interests.
- The Administration did not congratulate Rouhani or otherwise respond to his reelection in the May 19 vote in Iran.
- During his May 20-24 visit to Saudi Arabia and Israel, President Trump sought to solidify a regional coalition to counter Iran’s regional activities. In a May 21 speech to an “Arab Islamic American Summit” in Saudi Arabia, the President stated that “no discussion of stamping out [the terrorism] threat would be complete without mentioning the government that gives terrorists all three – safe harbor, financial backing, and the social standing needed for recruitment. It is a regime that is responsible for so much instability in the region. I am speaking of course of Iran ... Iran has a rich history and culture, but the people of Iran have endured hardship and despair under the leaders’ reckless pursuit of conflict and terror. Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve.”
- On two occasions in June 2017, Secretary of State Tillerson testified before Congress that the Administration would work to support elements in Iran that would lead to a “peaceful transition” of Iran’s government.¹⁶ However, the Administration has not specifically articulated a goal of changing Iran’s regime.
- On August 2, 2017, President Trump signed into law the “Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act” (P.L. 115-44) that mandates sanctions, authorized in various Executive Orders, on entities that support Iranian proliferation, terrorism, and human rights abuses.
- On September, 20, 2017, on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly meetings, Secretary of State Tillerson had his first direct interaction with Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif during a meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission. The Secretary described his interactions with Zarif as businesslike and devoid of any aggravated or adversarial tone.
- President Trump indicated in September 2017 that he might not certify Iranian compliance with the JCPOA at the next deadline on October 15, 2017, as is provided for in the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA, P.L. 114-17). Under that law, a lack of certification could trigger legislative action under the to re-impose those sanctions that were lifted. An alternate view is that the

¹⁶ <http://www.irannewsupdate.com/news/terrorism/3934-iran-u-s-policy-moving-toward-regime-change.html>.

Administration is attempting to build international support to negotiate an addendum to the JCPOA that might extend its nuclear restrictions on Iran further out in time; contain binding restrictions on Iran's missile program; or include new restrictions on Iran's materiel support for regional pro-Iranian governments or armed factions. Rouhani and Zarif have responded by declaring the JCPOA closed, but some European leaders, particularly French President Emmanuel Macron, have indicated some support for new bargaining with Iran on at least some of these issues.¹⁷

¹⁷ For analysis of U.S. options to cease implementing the JCPOA, see: CRS Report R44942, *Options to Cease Implementing the Iran Nuclear Agreement*, by Kenneth Katzman, Paul K. Kerr, and Valerie Heitshusen

Detentions of U.S. Nationals and Dual Nationals

Iran does not recognize any dual nationality and detained dual nationals are not given help from foreign consulates or embassies.

Recent Past Detentions

2007: Iranian-American academic Haleh Esfandiari was imprisoned for several months in 2007 for allegations that her employer, the Woodrow Wilson Center, was involved in democracy promotion efforts in Iran.

2009: Iranian-American journalist Roxanna Saberi was imprisoned for five months for expired press credentials.

2009-2011: Three American hikers (Sara Shourd, Shane Bauer, and Josh Fattal) were arrested in August 2009 after crossing into Iran from a hike in northern Iraq. They were released in 2010 and 2011 in releases brokered by Oman.

On January 16, 2016, in concert with “Implementation Day” of the JCPOA, the following were released by Iran: Former U.S. Marine Amir Hekmati, who was arrested in 2011 for spying for the United States; Reverend Saeed Abedini, a Christian convert of Iranian origin imprisoned since December 2012 for “undermining national security” for setting up orphanages in Iran in partnership with Iranian Christians; *Washington Post* journalist Jason Rezaian, who was detained in July 2014 along with his wife, an Iranian national, who was released in October 2014; Nosratollah “Fred” Khosravi-Roodsari, who remained in Iran; and U.S. citizen Matthew Trevithick, a student arrested in 2015. In exchange, the United States released 7 Iranian-Americans/Iranians imprisoned in the United States for violating Iran sanctions, and dropped outstanding charges against 14 others not in U.S. custody. The releases were negotiated separately and were not addressed in the JCPOA.

Still In Custody or Missing

Iran continues to detain U.S. and U.S.-Iran nationals. Iranian foreign ministry officials acknowledged unspecified discussions about the dual nationals with the Trump Administration on the sidelines of a late April 2017 multilateral meeting on the nuclear deal, but Iran has not outlined publicly any specific demands for their release.

- Nizar Zakka (permanent resident, Lebanon national): Iran detained information technology professional Nizar Zakka in September 2015. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison in October 2016.
- Siamak and Baquer Namazi: In November 2015, Iran arrested a U.S.-Iran dual national, business consultant Siamak Namazi, on unspecified charges. Iran detained his father, Baquer Namazi, in February 2016. In October 2016, the Namazis were sentenced to 10 years in prison.
- Reza “Robin” Shahini: In July 2016, Iran detained U.S.-Iran dual national Reza “Robin” Shahini, for crimes against the Islamic Republic and on October 25 he was sentenced to 18 years in prison. He was released on bail in late March 2017, pending appeal, but he is still apparently not permitted to leave Iran.
- Karan Vafadari: Vafadari, an Iranian American, was arrested in July 2016, along with his wife, U.S. permanent resident Afarin Niasari. The art gallery owners are being held for “engaging in corruption and depravity” an apparent reference to allegedly serving alcohol at their home.
- On July 16, 2017, Iranian judiciary officials announced that Xiyue Wang, a U.S. citizen and a graduate student at Princeton University, had been sentenced to ten years in prison for spying for the United States. Mr. Wang reportedly was arrested in the summer of 2016 while conducting research in Iran on that country’s Qajar dynasty. Princeton and the U.S. government reportedly sought to work quietly to achieve his release, explaining why his arrest and identity had not been previously announced.
- Robert Levinson: Former FBI agent Robert Levinson remains missing after a visit to Kish Island in March 2007 to meet Dawud Salahuddin, an Iranian allegedly responsible for the 1980 killing of an Iranian in the United States who was a diplomat of the Shah’s government. Iran denies knowing his status or location. In January 2013, his family released recent photos of him provided by captors through uncertain channels.

Non-U.S. Dual Nationals. British-Iranian dual national Kamal Foroughi, arrested in May 2011, was sentenced to eight years in prison in 2013 for unspecified charges. In early 2016, Iran detained British-Iranian dual national Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Canadian-Iranian dual national Homa Hoodfar, but Hoodfar was released in September 2016. In April 2016, French-Iranian Nazak Afshar, was arrested upon return to Iran, sentenced to six years in prison, and released on bail. She had been arrested in 2009 but was freed following French government intervention. A well-known Iranian-Canadian sculptor, Parviz Tanavoli, was barred from traveling to Britain in July 2016 and his passport was confiscated. In August 2016, Iran detained British-Iranian dual national Abdolrasoul Dorr Esfahani, a former member of Iran’s nuclear negotiating team focused on financial issues, for alleged spying for British intelligence.

Military Options

Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to back up diplomacy with Iran with a capability to exercise military options if necessary. Prior to the JCPOA, supporters of military action against Iran's nuclear program argued that such action could set back Iran's nuclear program substantially because there are a limited number of key nuclear targets.¹⁸ Some argue that there were U.S. military options that would not require hostilities, including a naval embargo or a "no-fly zone" to pressure the regime. A U.S. ground invasion to remove Iran's regime was not, at any time, apparently under serious consideration.

Prior to the JCPOA, President Obama repeatedly stated that "all options are on the table" to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, including military action against Iran's nuclear facilities.¹⁹ However, the Obama Administration argued that military action was not a preferable alternative to the JCPOA because military action would only set back Iran's nuclear advancement temporarily, and with far less certainty or duration than the JCPOA. U.S. and allied and other officials stressed the potential adverse consequences of military action, such as Iranian retaliation that might expand throughout the region, a reduction of Iran's regional isolation, a strengthening of Iran's regime domestically, and an escalation of world oil prices.²⁰

President Obama stated several times after the JCPOA was finalized that this option remained available should Iran violate the agreement or seek to develop nuclear weapons after JCPOA restrictions expire.²¹ Other Administration officials articulated that U.S. military action against Iran might also be used if Iran (1) attacks or prepares to attack U.S. allies; or (2) attempts to interrupt the free flow of oil or shipping in the Gulf or elsewhere. S.J.Res. 41, which passed the Senate on September 22, 2012, in the 112th Congress, rejects any U.S. policy that relies on "containment" of a potential nuclear Iran, but acknowledges that President Obama did not rule out a containment policy.

President Trump has taken a position similar to the Obama Administration in keeping "all options open," including potential military action. Experts assert that the Administration's characterizations of Iran indicate that the Administration might be inclined to take military action against Iran or against Iran's allies more readily than the Obama Administration might have. Altering the rules of engagement for U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf to respond to Iran's "high speed intercepts" of U.S. naval vessels with deadly force, rather than warning shots, is an example of one potential option.

A U.S. decision to take military action against Iran's nuclear facilities might raise the question of presidential authorities. No legislation has been passed by both chambers and signed into law limiting the President's authority to use military force against Iran. In the 109th and 110th congresses, H.Con.Res. 391 and H.Con.Res. 33, respectively, called on the President to not initiate military action against Iran without first obtaining authorization from Congress. An amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2008 (H.Amdt. 187 to H.R. 1585)

¹⁸ Joby Warrick, "Iran: Underground Sites Vulnerable, Experts Say," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2012. For an extended discussion of U.S. air strike options on Iran, see Rogers, Paul. *Iran: Consequences Of a War*. Oxford Research Group, February 2006.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff'," *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.

²⁰ <http://2scottmontgomery.blogspot.com/2011/12/panetta-brookings-speech.html>.

²¹ Speech by President Obama at American University. August 7, 2015. President Obama Interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria. Broadcast on August 9, 2015.

requiring authorization for force against Iran was defeated 136 to 288. A provision that sought to bar the Administration from taking military action against Iran without congressional authorization was taken out of an early draft of an FY2007 supplemental appropriation (H.R. 1591). The FY2011 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 111-383, signed January 7, 2011) contained a provision (§1243) requiring the Administration to develop a “National Military Strategy to Counter Iran.”

Iran’s foreign and defense policies are discussed in further detail in CRS Report R44017, *Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Economic Sanctions

The United States and its partners have employed economic sanctions to try to cause Iran to agree to limits on its nuclear program, to reassess the wisdom of supporting regional armed factions, and to limit Iranian power generally. In accordance with the JCPOA, U.S. secondary sanctions (sanctions on foreign companies that do business with Iran) on Iran’s major economic sectors have been waived or revoked, and the Trump Administration has continued these waivers, to date. The sanctions issue, including those sanctions that remain in place, is analyzed in considerable depth in CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman. The table below summarizes sanctions that were put into effect against Iran, but most of which have been suspended to implement the JCPOA.

Table 3. Summary of U.S. Sanctions Against Iran

Ban on U.S. Trade With and Investment in Iran. Executive Order 12959 (May 6, 1995) bans almost all U.S. trade with and investment in Iran. P.L. 111-195 (Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act, CISADA) codifies the trade ban, which generally does not apply to foreign subsidiaries of U.S. firms. Generally remains in force.

U.S. Sanctions Against Foreign Firms that Deal With Iran's Energy Sector. The Iran Sanctions Act (P.L. 104-172) has been amended several times and authorizes the imposition of 5 out of a menu of 12 sanctions on firms determined to have invested more than \$20 million to develop Iran's petroleum (oil and gas) sector; bought Iranian oil (unless such country has a sanctions exemption); sold Iran more than \$1 million worth of gasoline or equipment to import gasoline or refine oil into gasoline; sold \$1 million or more worth of energy equipment to Iran; provided shipping services to transport oil from Iran; engaged in an energy joint venture with Iran outside Iran; or bought Iran's sovereign debt. P.L. 112-239 sanctions most foreign dealings with Iran's energy, shipping, and shipbuilding sector, as well as the sale of certain items for Iranian industrial processes and the transfer to Iran of precious metals (often a form of payment for oil or gas). Waived in accordance with the JCPOA.

Sanctions On Iran's Central Bank. CISADA bans accounts with banks that do business with the IRGC and sanctioned entities, and the Department of the Treasury in November 2011 declared Iran's financial system an entity of primary money laundering concern. Section 1245 of the FY2012 National Defense Act (P.L. 112-81) prevents foreign banks that do business with Iran's Central Bank from opening U.S. accounts unless the parent countries of the banks earn an exemption by "significantly reducing" their purchases of Iranian oil. CISADA remains active but entities "delisted" for sanctions under the JCPOA are no longer subject to CISADA sanctions.

Terrorism List Designation Sanctions. Iran's designation by the Secretary of State as a "state sponsor of terrorism" triggers several sanctions: (1) a ban on the provision of U.S. foreign assistance to Iran under Section 620A of the Foreign Assistance Act; (2) a ban on arms exports to Iran under Section 40 of the Arms Export Control Act (P.L. 95-92, as amended); (3) under Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act (P.L. 96-72, as amended), a significant restriction—amended by other laws to a "presumption of denial"—on U.S. exports to Iran of items that could have military applications; (4) under Section 327 of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (P.L. 104-132), a requirement that U.S. representatives to international financial institutions vote against international loans to terrorism list states. Remains in force.

Sanctions Against Foreign Firms that Aid Iran's Weapons of Mass Destruction Programs. The Iran-Syria-North Korea Nonproliferation Act (P.L. 106-178, March 14, 2000, as amended) authorizes the Administration to impose sanctions on foreign persons or firms determined to have provided assistance to Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Sanctions include restrictions on U.S. trade with the sanctioned entity. Remains in force.

Sanctions Against Foreign Firms that Sell Advanced Arms to Iran. The Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act (P.L. 102-484, October 23, 1992, as amended) provides for U.S. sanctions against foreign firms that sell Iran "destabilizing numbers and types of conventional weapons" or WMD technology. Remains in force.

Ban on Transactions With Foreign Entities That Support International Terrorism. Executive Order 13324 (September 23, 2001) authorizes a ban on U.S. transactions with entities determined to be supporting international terrorism. The Order was not specific to Iran, but several Iranian entities have been designated. Remains in force.

Ban on Transactions With Foreign Entities that Support Proliferation. Executive Order 13382 (June 28, 2005) amended previous executive orders to provide for a ban on U.S. transactions with entities determined to be supporting international proliferation. Numerous Iranian entities, including the IRGC itself, have been designated. Remains in force.

Divestment. A Title in P.L. 111-195 authorizes and protects from lawsuits various investment managers who divest from shares of firms that conduct sanctionable business with Iran. Remains in force.

Sanctions Against Human Rights Abuses, Internet Monitoring, and Regional Activities. Various laws and Executive Orders impose sanctions on named Iranian human rights abusers, on firms that sell equipment Iran can use to monitor the Internet usage of citizens or employ against demonstrators and on Iranian persons or entities that suppress human rights in Syria or contribute to destabilizing Iraq. Remains in force.

Source: CRS. For analysis and extended discussion of U.S. and international sanctions against Iran, see CRS Report RS20871, *Iran Sanctions*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Regime Change Option

Many of Iran's leaders, particularly Supreme Leader Khamene'i, continue to articulate a perception that the United States has never accepted the 1979 Islamic revolution. Khamene'i and other Iranian figures note that the United States provided funding to anti-regime groups, mainly pro-monarchists, during the 1980s.²² Comments by the various U.S. administrations on the issue of Iran regime change have been noted above.

In a September 24, 2013, General Assembly speech, President Obama explicitly stated the United States does not seek to change Iran's regime. Some experts criticized the Obama Administration decision not to materially support the 2009 domestic uprising in Iran as a lost opportunity to change Iran's regime, but then-Secretary of State Clinton asserted that overt and extensive U.S. support for the opposition would have undermined the opposition's position in Iran. On December 28, 2009, President Obama stated that "Along with all free nations, the United States stands with those who seek their universal rights."²³ President Obama's 2011 Nowruz address was far more explicitly supportive of the Iranian opposition than in prior years, mentioning specific dissidents who have been jailed and saying to the "young people of Iran ... I want you to know that I am with you."²⁴ After that statement, the Obama Administration sanctioned Iranian officials for human rights abuses in Iran and for assisting Syria with its crackdown against demonstrations. Later, and after Iran's regime consolidated its grip on power following the 2009-2010 period of unrest, negotiations to achieve the JCPOA apparently contributed to the Administration's muting any discussion of its supporting Iran's opposition.

The Trump Administration has not adopted a policy of regime change, but there have been several Administration statements that indicate support for that outcome at least to some extent. In his speech on May 21 in Saudi Arabia, President Trump stated that his Administration is hoping that Iran's government will change to one that the Administration considers "just and righteous." In testimony before two congressional committees in June 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the Administration supports a "philosophy of regime change" for Iran (Senate Appropriations Committee) and that the Administration would "work toward support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government" (House Foreign Affairs Committee). The comments suggest the Administration might support a popular uprising in Iran.

At times, some in Congress have advocated that the United States adopt a formal policy of overthrow of the regime. In the 111th Congress, one bill said that it should be U.S. policy to promote the overthrow of the regime (the Iran Democratic Transition Act, S. 3008).

²² CRS conversations with U.S. officials responsible for Iran policy. 1980-1990. After a period of suspension of such assistance, in 1995, the Clinton Administration accepted a House-Senate conference agreement to include \$18-\$20 million in funding authority for covert operations against Iran in the FY1996 Intelligence Authorization Act (H.R. 1655.), according to a *Washington Post* report of December 22, 1995. The Clinton Administration reportedly focused the covert aid on changing the regime's behavior, rather than its overthrow.

²³ White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the President on the Attempted Attack on Christmas Day and Recent Violence in Iran," December 28, 2009.

²⁴ White House, "Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz," March 20, 2011.

The Shah's Son, Student Activists, and Other Prominent Dissidents

Some Iranians abroad, including in the United States, want to replace the regime with a constitutional monarchy led by Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-based son of the late former Shah and a U.S.-trained combat pilot. The Shah's son, born in 1960, has condemned the regime for the post-2009 election crackdown and called for the international community to withdraw representation in Tehran. He appears periodically in broadcasts in Iran through Iranian exile-run stations in California, as well as in other Iran-oriented media.

Pahlavi has always retained some support from the older generations in Iran, but he has tried to broaden his following by denying he seeks to restore the monarchy. Since March 2011, he has increasingly cooperated with—and possibly attempted to co-opt—younger leaders in a “National Council of Iran” (NCI), which was established with over 30 groups in April 2013. The Council drafted democratic principles for a post-Islamic republic Iran but it suffered defections and its activity level diminished to the point where it largely disbanded.

Student dissident groups composed of well-educated, Westernized urban youth have been the backbone of the Iranian opposition. The Office of Consolidation of Unity is the student group that led the 1999 riots but which later became controlled by regime loyalists. An offshoot, the Confederation of Iranian Students (CIS), led by U.S.-based Amir Abbas Fakhraei, believes in regime replacement and in 2013 formed a “National Iran Congress” to advocate that outcome. The group held a conference in Washington, DC, in May 2017. Cofounder Arzhang Davoodi has been in prison since 2002 and in July 2014 was sentenced to death. The sentence has not been implemented to date.

Other dissidents, some in Iran, others in exile (including in the United States), have criticized the regime for decades. Journalist Akbar Ganji left Iran in 2006 after serving 6 years in prison for alleging high-level involvement in the 100 murders of Iranian dissident intellectuals.

Religion scholar Abdolkarim Soroush left Iran in 2001 after challenging the doctrine of clerical rule.

Former Revolutionary Guard organizer Mohsen Sazegara broadcasts online to Iran from his base on the United States.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate (2003) and Iran human rights activist lawyer Shirin Abadi, who for many years represented clients persecuted or prosecuted by the regime, left Iran after the 2009 uprising.

Other significant dissidents in exile include former Culture Minister Ataollah Mohajerani, Mohsen Kadivar, and U.S.-based Fatemeh Haghighatjoo.

Some well-known dissidents have been incarcerated periodically or continuously since 2010, including filmmaker Jafar Panahi and famed blogger Hossein Derakshan, and journalist Abdolreza Tajik. The elderly leader of the Iran Freedom Movement, Ibrahim Yazdi, was released from prison in April 2011 after resigning as the movement's leader. Human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was released from prison in September 2013. In May 2015, the regime arrested Narges Mohammadi, a well-known activist against regime executions.

Democracy Promotion and Internet Freedom Efforts

While not pursuing outright regime change, successive Administrations and Congress have promoted political evolution in Iran through “democracy promotion” and sanctions on Iranian human rights abuses. Legislation authorizing democracy promotion in Iran was enacted in the 109th Congress. The Iran Freedom Support Act (P.L. 109-293, signed September 30, 2006) authorized funds (no specific dollar amount) for Iran democracy promotion.²⁵ Several laws and Executive Orders issued since 2010 are intended to promote Internet freedom, and the Administration has amended U.S.-Iran trade regulations to allow for the sale to Iranians of consumer electronics and software that help them communicate. Then-Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman testified on October 14, 2011, that some of the democracy promotion funding for Iran was used to train Iranians to use technologies that circumvent regime Internet censorship.

Many have argued that U.S. funding for such programs is counterproductive. Even before the post-2009 election crackdown, Iran was arresting civil society activists by alleging they are accepting the U.S. democracy promotion funds, while others have refused to participate in U.S.-

²⁵ This legislation was a modification of H.R. 282, which passed the House on April 26, 2006, by a vote of 397-21, and S. 333, which was introduced in the Senate.

funded programs, fearing arrest.²⁶ Perhaps to address these criticisms, the Obama Administration altered Iran democracy promotion programs somewhat toward working directly with Iranians inside Iran who are organized around apolitical issues such as health, education, science, and the environment.²⁷ The State Department, which often uses appropriated funds to support prodemocracy programs run by organizations based in the United States and in Europe, refuses to name grantees for security reasons. The funds shown below have been obligated through DRL and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in partnership with USAID. Some of the funds have also been used for cultural exchanges, public diplomacy, and broadcasting to Iran. A further indication of the sensitivity of specifying the use of the funds is that, since FY2010, the Obama Administration has requested funds for Iran democracy promotion as part of a broader “Near East regional democracy programs” rather than delineating a specific request for Iran programs.

Iran asserts that funding democracy promotion represents a violation of the 1981 “Algiers Accords” that settled the Iran hostage crisis and provide for noninterference in each other’s internal affairs. The George W. Bush Administration asserted that open funding of Iranian prodemocracy activists (see below) was a stated effort to change regime behavior, not to overthrow the regime, although some saw the Bush Administration’s efforts as a cover to achieve a regime change objective.

Broadcasting/Public Diplomacy Issues

Another part of the democracy promotion effort has been the development of Iran-specific U.S. broadcasting services to Iran. Radio *Farda* (“tomorrow,” in Farsi) began under Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), in partnership with the Voice of America (VOA), in 2002. The service was established as a successor to a smaller Iran broadcasting effort begun with an initial \$4 million from the FY1998 Commerce/State/Justice appropriation (P.L. 105-119). It was to be called Radio Free Iran but was never formally given that name by RFE/RL. Based in Prague, Radio *Farda* broadcasts 24 hours/day and has 59 full-time employees. Its budget is approximately \$11 million per year. No U.S. assistance has been provided to Iranian exile-run stations.²⁸

VOA Persian Service (Formerly called Persian News Network (PNN)). The VOA established a Persian-language service to Iran in July 2003. Prior to 2014, it was called Persian News Network (PNN), encompassing radio (1 hour a day of original programming); television (6 hours a day of primetime programming, rebroadcast throughout a 24-hour period); and Internet. The service had come under substantial criticism from observers for losing much of its audience among young, educated, anti-regime Iranians who are looking for signs of U.S. official support. VOA officials told CRS in August 2014 that they have successfully addressed these issues through the human resources office of the VOA. The costs for PNN are about \$20 million per year.

²⁶ Three other Iranian Americans were arrested and accused by the Intelligence Ministry of actions contrary to national security in May 2007: U.S. funded broadcast (Radio Farda) journalist Parnaz Azima (who was not in jail but was not allowed to leave Iran); Kian Tajbacksh of the Open Society Institute funded by George Soros; and businessman and peace activist Ali Shakeri. Several congressional resolutions called on Iran to release Esfandiari (S.Res. 214 agreed to by the Senate on May 24; H.Res. 430, passed by the House on June 5; and S.Res. 199). All were released by October 2007. Tajbacksh was rearrested in September 2009 and remains incarcerated.

²⁷ CRS conversation with U.S. officials of the “Iran Office” of the U.S. Consulate in Dubai, October 2009.

²⁸ The conference report on the FY2006 regular foreign aid appropriations stated the sense of Congress that such support should be considered.

Table 4. Iran Democracy Promotion Funding

FY2004	Foreign operations appropriation (P.L. 108-199) earmarked \$1.5 million for “educational, humanitarian and non-governmental organizations and individuals inside Iran to support the advancement of democracy and human rights in Iran.” The State Department Bureau of Democracy and Labor (DRL) gave \$1 million to a unit of Yale University, and \$500,000 to National Endowment for Democracy.
FY2005	\$3 million from FY2005 foreign aid appropriation (P.L. 108-447) for democracy promotion. Priority areas: political party development, media, labor rights, civil society promotion, and human rights.
FY2006	\$11.15 million for democracy promotion from regular FY2006 foreign aid appropriation (P.L. 109-102). \$4.15 million administered by DRL and \$7 million for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.
FY2006 supp.	Total of \$66.1 million (of \$75 million requested) from FY2006 supplemental (P.L. 109-234): \$20 million for democracy promotion; \$5 million for public diplomacy directed at the Iranian population; \$5 million for cultural exchanges; and \$36.1 million for Voice of America-TV and “Radio Farda” broadcasting. Broadcasting funds are provided through the Broadcasting Board of Governors.
FY2007	FY2007 continuing resolution provided \$6.55 million for Iran (and Syria) to be administered through DRL. \$3.04 million was used for Iran. No funds were requested.
FY2008	\$60 million (of \$75 million requested) is contained in Consolidated Appropriation (H.R. 2764, P.L. 110-161), of which, according to the conference report, \$21.6 million is ESF for prodemocracy programs, including nonviolent efforts to oppose Iran’s meddling in other countries. \$7.9 million is from a “Democracy Fund” for use by DRL. The appropriation also fully funded additional \$33.6 million requested for Iran broadcasting: \$20 million for VOA Persian service; \$8.1 million for Radio Farda; and \$5.5 million for exchanges with Iran.
FY2009	Request was for \$65 million in ESF “to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for a democratic and open society by promoting civil society, civic participation, media freedom, and freedom of information.” H.R. 1105 (P.L. 111-8) provides \$25 million for democracy promotion programs in the region, including in Iran.
FY2010	\$40 million requested and used for Near East Regional Democracy programming. Programs to promote human rights, civil society, and public diplomacy in Iran constitute a significant use of these region-wide funds.
FY2011	\$40 million requested and will be used for Near East Regional Democracy programs. Programming for Iran with these funds to be similar to FY2010.
FY2012	\$35 million for Near East Regional Democracy (NERD), and Iran-related use similar to FY2010 and FY2011.
FY2013	\$30 million for NERD, with Iran use similar to prior two fiscal years.
FY2014	\$30 million for NERD, with Iran use similar to prior fiscal years.
FY2015	\$30 million for Near East Regional Democracy, with Iran use similar to previous years. Request mentions funding to be used to help circumvent Internet censorship.
FY2016	\$32 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years.
FY2017	\$30 million for NERD, with Iran use likely similar to prior years.
FY2018	\$15 million requested, with Iran use likely similar to prior years.

Sources: Information provided by State Department and reviewed by Department’s Iran Office, February 1, 2010; State Department Congressional Budget Justifications; author conversation with Department of State Iran Office, April 21, 2011.

Ethnicity and Sect-based Armed Groups

Sunni Armed Opposition: Jundullah

Jundullah is composed of Sunni Muslims primarily from the Baluchistan region bordering Pakistan. The region is inhabited by members of the Baluch minority and is far less developed than other parts of Iran. On the grounds that *Jundullah* has attacked civilians in the course of violent attacks in Iran, the State Department formally named it an FTO on November 4, 2010. *Jundullah* has conducted several attacks on Iranian security and civilian officials, including a May 2009 bombing of a mosque in Zahedan and the October 2009 killing of five IRGC commanders in Sistan va Baluchistan Province. The regime claimed a victory against the group in February 2010 with the capture of its top leader, Abdolmalek Rigi. The regime executed him in June 2010, but the group retaliated in July 2010 with a Zahedan bombing that killed 28 persons, including some IRGC personnel. The group was responsible for a December 15, 2010, bombing at a mosque in Chahbahar that killed 38.

Kurdish Armed Groups

One armed Kurdish group operating out of Iraq is the Free Life Party, known by its acronym PJAK. Its leader is believed to be Abdul Rahman Hajji Ahmadi, born in 1941, who is a citizen of Germany and lives in that country. Many PJAK fighters reportedly are women. PJAK was designated by the Department of the Treasury in early February 2009 as a terrorism supporting entity under Executive Order 13224, although the designation statement indicated the decision was based mainly on PJAK's association with the Turkish Kurdish opposition group Kongra Gel, also known as the PKK. Five Kurds executed by Iran's regime in May 2010 were alleged members of PJAK. In July 2016, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) announced a resumption of "armed struggle" against the regime, which had been suspended for 25 years, following clashes with the IRGC that left several dead on both sides. KDP-I fighters involved in the clashes reportedly had entered Iran from Kurdish-controlled territory in Iraq. The Kurds who were recruited by the Islamic State for the June 2017 attacks in Tehran, discussed above, did not have clear affiliations with the established Kurdish armed groups discussed above.

Arab Oppositionists/Ahwazi Arabs

Another militant group, the *Ahwazi Arabs*, operates in the largely Arab-inhabited areas of southwest Iran. Relatively inactive over the past few years, and the regime continues to execute captured members of the organization.

State Department Public Diplomacy Efforts

The State Department has sought outreach to the Iranian population.

- In May 2003, the State Department added a Persian-language website to its list of foreign-language websites, under the authority of the Bureau of International Information Programs. The website was announced as a source of information about the United States and its policy toward Iran.
- In February 14, 2011, the State Department began Persian-language Twitter feeds in an effort to connect better with Internet users in Iran.
- In part to augment U.S. public diplomacy, the State Department announced in April 2011 that a Persian-speaking U.S. diplomat based at the U.S. Consulate in Dubai would make regular appearances on Iranian media.

Since 2006, the State Department has been increasing the presence of Persian-speaking U.S. diplomats in U.S. diplomatic missions around Iran, in part to help identify and facilitate Iranian participation in U.S. democracy-promotion programs. The Iran unit at the U.S. consulate in Dubai has been enlarged significantly into a "regional presence" office, and "Iran-watcher" positions have been added to U.S. diplomatic facilities in Baku, Azerbaijan; Istanbul, Turkey; Frankfurt, Germany; London; and Ashkabad, Turkmenistan, all of which have large expatriate Iranian populations and/or proximity to Iran.²⁹ An "Office of Iran Affairs" has been formed at the State Department, and it is reportedly engaged in contacts with U.S.-based exile groups such as those discussed earlier.

²⁹ Farah Stockman, "'Long Struggle' With Iran Seen Ahead," *Boston Globe*, March 9, 2006.

People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK, PMOI)

The best-known exiled opposition group is the Mojahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK), also known as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI). Secular and left-leaning, it was formed in the 1960s to try to overthrow the Shah of Iran and has been characterized by U.S. reports as attempting to blend several ideologies, including Marxism, feminism, and Islam, although the organization denies that it ever advocated Marxism. It allied with pro-Khomeini forces during the Islamic revolution and, according to State Department reports, supported the November 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. The group was driven into exile after it unsuccessfully rose up against the Khomeini regime in September 1981. It has been led for decades by spouses Maryam and Massoud Rajavi, but in 2011 Ms. Zohreh Akhyani was elected as MEK Secretary-General. Maryam Rajavi is based in France but the whereabouts of Massoud Rajavi are unknown.

The State Department designated the PMOI as an FTO in October 1997—during the presidency of the relatively moderate Mohammad Khatemi. The NCR was named as an alias of the PMOI in October 1999, and in August 2003, the Department of the Treasury ordered the groups' offices in the United States closed. State Department reports on international terrorism for the years until 2011 asserted that the members of the organization were responsible for the alleged killing of seven American military personnel and contract advisers to the former Shah during 1973-1976; bombings at U.S. government facilities in Tehran in 1972 as a protest of the visit to Iran of then-President Richard Nixon; and bombings of U.S. corporate offices in Iran to protest the visit of then-Secretary of State Kissinger. The reports also listed as terrorism several attacks by the group against regime targets (including 1981 bombings that killed high-ranking officials), attacks on Iranian government facilities, and attacks on Iranian security officials. However, the reports did not assert that any of these attacks purposely targeted civilians. The group's alliance with Saddam Hussein's regime contributed to the designation, even though Saddam was a U.S. ally during 1980-1990.

The PMOI challenged the FTO listing in the U.S. court system and, in June 2012, the Appeals Court gave the State Department until October 1, 2012, to decide on the FTO designation, without prescribing an outcome. On September 28, 2012, maintaining there had not been confirmed acts of PMOI terrorism for more than a decade and that it had cooperated on the Camp Ashraf issue (below), the group was removed from the FTO list as well as from the designation as a terrorism supporter under Executive Order 13224. However, State Department officials, in a background briefing that day, said "We do not see the [PMOI] as a viable or democratic opposition movement...." The NCR-I reopened its offices in Washington, DC, in April 2013. The State Department has been meeting with the MEK since its removal from the FTO list, including in Iraq.

Camp Ashraf Issue

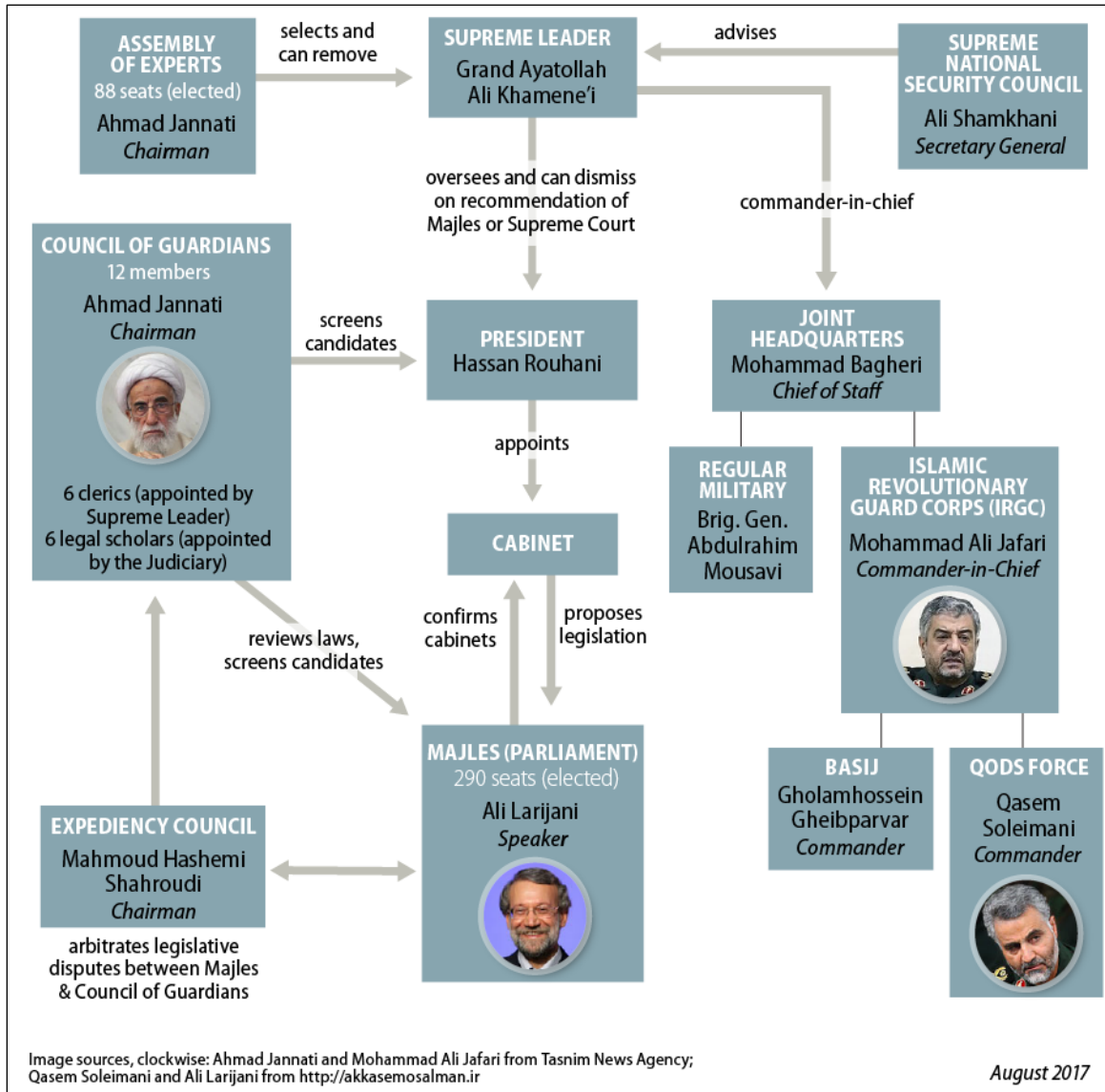
The de-listing of the group has not resolved the situation of PMOI members in Iraq. U.S. forces attacked PMOI military installations in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom (March 2003) and negotiated a ceasefire with PMOI elements in Iraq, according to which the approximately 3,400 PMOI members consolidated at Camp Ashraf, near the border with Iran. Its weaponry was placed in storage, guarded first by U.S. and now by Iraqi personnel. In July 2004, the United States granted the Ashraf detainees "protected persons" status under the 4th Geneva Convention, although that designation lapsed when Iraq resumed full sovereignty in June 2004. The Iraqi government's pledges to adhere to all international obligations with respect to the PMOI in Iraq have come into question on several occasions: on July 28, 2009, Iraq used force to overcome resident resistance to setting up a police post in the camp, killing 13 residents of the camp. On April 8, 2011, Iraq Security Forces killed 36 Ashraf residents; the State Department issued a statement attributing the deaths to the actions of Iraq and its military.

In December 2011, the Iraqi government and the United Nations agreed to relocate Ashraf residents to the former U.S. military base Camp Liberty, near Baghdad's main airport. The relocation was completed by September 17, 2012, leaving a residual group of 101 PMOI persons at Ashraf. The group asserted that conditions at Liberty are poor and the facility is unsafe. On February 9, 2013, the camp was attacked by rockets, killing eight PMOI members; the Shiite militia group Kata'ib Hezbollah (KAH) claimed responsibility. A rocket attack on the camp took place on June 15, 2013. On September 1, 2013, 52 of the residual Ashraf residents were killed by gunmen that appeared to have assistance from Iraqi forces. Seven went missing. All survivors of the attack were moved to Camp Liberty, and Ashraf has been taken over by Iran-backed Shiite militias. An October 29, 2015, rocket attack on the camp killed 24 residents and a rocket attack on July 4, 2016, did not kill any residents, but wounded some. The FY2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-92) calls for "prompt and appropriate steps" to promote the protection of camp residents.

Since 2011, the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has sought to resettle PMOI members outside Iraq. In September 2016, the 280 remaining residents of Camp Liberty were resettled in Albania and there are no more PMOI members there.

Sources: Various press, and CRS conversations with NCR-I representatives and experts.

Figure I. Structure of the Iranian Government



Source: CRS.

Figure 2. Map of Iran



Source: Map boundaries from Map Resources, 2005. Graphic: CRS.

Author Contact Information

Kenneth Katzman
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
kkatzman@crs.loc.gov, 7-7612

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to acknowledge the research contribution of Sarah Manning, Research Associate, CRS Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade Division, in the preparation of this report.