

# How the Islamic Republic of Iran Can Be Transformed

Written by Jamsheed K. Choksy and Carol E. B. Choksy

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JAMSHEED K. CHOKSY AND CAROL E. B. CHOKSY, JUL 18 2025

Fears of repeating the regime change mistakes made in Afghanistan and Iraq are understandable. But Iran is not Afghanistan or Iraq; invasion is not needed. Its people have risen up repeatedly for the past four decades but failed due to the government having brute force and weapons at its side. If the fundamentalist autocrats and their enforcers are weakened sufficiently from outside through martial means in addition to longstanding economic sanctions, Iran's people could boot out the ayatollahs and transform their country. Un-strategically there is a deep yet unfounded consensus among western observers that any and all foreign action either strengthens the regime in Iran or would cause catastrophe there. So, unwittingly serving the interests of Iran's leaders, analysts keep recommending and policymakers keep trying diplomatic overtures, economic pressures, and occasional limited military strikes to rein in the Islamic Republic's hostile actions and convince it to behave like other typical nations—all to no avail. Such actions are the geopolitical equivalent of the Whack-a-mole arcade game, demanding repeated expenses of energy with no durable, productive, result. Letting the leadership in Tehran repeatedly rebuild its capabilities is a mistake; it needs to go. Delaying the end only makes the task more difficult for Iranians and the world more dangerous for others.

### Recurring Problem

The twelve-day war during June 2025 between Israel and Iran ended after the United States of America intervened with bombardment to seriously damage—but failed to destroy—the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities and then work with Qatar to broker a ceasefire. That truce temporarily halted the battle between the Islamic Republic, Israel, and the United States of America, but it will not end more than four decades of ever-rising hostilities unleashed by those fundamentalist Shi'ite theocrats and epitomized by Iran's nuclear program. Indeed, "Iran does not trust the ceasefire," according to the Defense Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh. So, believing that Israeli and American bombings have stifled the ayatollahs and thereby set the stage for a post-Iranian regional order, is wishful thinking.

Since the war, Iran's hardliners are further entrenching themselves at home while rearming allies abroad. Domestic dissent is being excised through hundreds of arrests and executions. Weapons programs, including nuclear and ballistic ones, are undergoing damage evaluation, restoration, and production. Threats of blockading the Strait of Hormuz and fetwas or religious injunctions against leaders of other nations have resumed. Cyberattacks on western institutions are ramping up. Regional proxies are once again launching missiles at Israel and sinking merchant vessels in the Gulf of Oman.

Cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been suspended, its inspectors booted out, and, in the words of Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, the country "continues to insist that (uranium) enrichment must take place on its own soil." Negotiations with the U.S. have been placed on hold until Tehran is assured of no further military actions against it. Influential clerics and politicians even demand that Iran withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Their nuclear and missile programs having survived the best of American weapons, Tehran's leaders have come away from recent events with a reinforced conviction that their regime can continue to defy and undermine global order. They know that while Israel can set back their regional expansion, Jerusalem lacks the clout to prevail long term. They view the United States as lacking determination and capability to thwart let alone oust them. They fear European Union and British military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities even

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less. And they assess world opinion to be anti-interventionist.

After all, even catalyzing internally-led political transformation is warned off by western foreign policy pundits and publications. Some predict a hostile military leadership could take over—yet generals may well be less ideological and therefore more open to accommodations with Washington and Jerusalem. Others worry about territorial disintegration along ethnic lines that would spread across borders—but neighboring nations will not permit a pan-Kurdistan, pan-Azerbaijan, or pan-Baluchistan, differences divide those groups within and across borders, and groups like Iranian Arabs did not secede to Iraq during the 1980s war. Yet others fear an unstable Iran becoming a new launching pad for jihadists—even though Iranians do not share ideologies with such terrorist groups. Another segment worries that nuclear resources would fall into the wrong hands—despite the U.S. and IAEA having success in previous situations such as the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still others claim that the Israeli and U.S. attacks have unified Iranians behind their leaders—but, with their lives disrupted and filled with fear on a daily basis, external pressure is likelier to produce a sense of blame directed against their dictatorial high officials. Such excuses undercut attempts to assist Iranians in bringing about domestic change and making the world a safer place.

## Why Change Now

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is not hesitant in calling for the ayatollahs ouster: "(We are) clearing the path for you (the Iranian people) to achieve your objective which is freedom ... (from) the murderous Islamic regime that oppresses and impoverishes you." Israel decapitated Iran's military commanders, yet they are replaceable up the ranks despite not having the charisma of predecessors. But it failed in attempts to bomb clerical and other political elites, however, despite trying.

On June 22, just two days before the ceasefire, U.S. President Donald Trump had finally acknowledged the only lasting solution through a post on Truth Social: "It's not politically correct to use the term 'Regime Change,' but if the current Iranian Regime is unable to MAKE IRAN GREAT AGAIN, why wouldn't there be a Regime change???" Many observers disregarded the post thanks to their dislike for the messenger. Sensing limited appetite—apparently influenced and amplified by pro-Tehran regime groups in the U.S.—among the American public for his proposal, Trump pivoted back to the status quo though cessation of hostilities and yet another call for negotiations.

Regime change has become a dirty phrase because, especially since the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it denotes an invasion rather than an uprising even one externally assisted. But transforming the system by ousting the ayatollahs would end the multiple and constant problems posed by the Islamic Republic abroad and at home. Iran already has governmental institutions that can function well without clergymen and their radical supporters at the helm. And many Iranians want assistance ridding themselves of their meddlesome, self-serving, leaders—a non-boots on the ground helping hand that would come at a low cost and a high benefit for the United States, the world, and Iran.

Prior to 1979, Iran had a history of keeping religion apart from politics. Public anger against the last shah's excesses opened the gate for the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to make *velāyat-e faqih* or guardianship of (the Shi'ite Muslim) jurist politically acceptable in the early years of the Islamic Republic. At that time, fundamentalist theocrats moved quickly to consolidate sufficient force to suppress any potential overthrow. Thereafter they built up a regional network of violent counterparts. But since October 2023, Iran's axis of resistance has been laid waste in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria by Israel. Its Yemeni allies agreed to a short-lived deal after pounding by Washington, and the militias which Iran backs in Iraq are no longer effective outside the country. Current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other regime elites are fearful and naming successors to ensure regime continuity. Ordinary Iranians, meanwhile, are resentfully enduring daily suffering or fleeing the country.

The truth is that Iran's theocracy is not a cornerstone which, if pulled out, will bring the entire society crashing down. Like Iranian monarchies before it, the Islamic Republic is more like a capstone that directs longstanding secular institutions. In 1979, clerical leadership was imposed atop a largely functioning Iranian bureaucracy. As constant and increasingly widespread protests over the past few years have demonstrated, many Iranians have been asking the questions: Why doesn't the current political system work to our benefit? More than four decades after the ouster of the autocratic Shah, why must nearly 93 million people be controlled by a high clergyman and an ecclesiastical

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branch of government whose officials are not elected directly through universal franchise? Khamenei, who has ruled Iran since 1989 and is now 86, fears this storm of change and pleads with Iranians: “Going back to the pre-Revolution era is reactionary... the religious and revolutionary elites of the country have a lot of experience, claiming only they “can pave the way for change by producing ideas and initiatives, as well as dealing correctly with new issues.”

Yet events within Iran over the past forty-six years have repeatedly demonstrated that representative governance cannot thrive through a theocracy. Widespread public anger has erupted every few years since 1999 due to social, economic, and political discontent. Serious ones such as the 2009-2010 rigged presidential election violence, 2018-2019 general economic strikes, 2022 food shortage protests, and 2022-2023 Woman, Life, Freedom movement had to be bloodily suppressed by the incumbents as not merely anti-regime but allegedly anti-Islamic. As their military, political, and scientific elites are being terminated by foreign militaries assisted by domestic dissidents—who plant explosives, smuggle in drones and other weapons, and provide information from close proximity—the ayatollah’s regime has never been more vulnerable, despite Western assessments otherwise.

But Israeli and American actions so far have only weakened the Islamic Republic’s foreign allies and proxies and its own defenses against external attacks; the forces of internal repression remain largely intact. That’s why Iranians could not rise up recently while foreign bombs rained down on their country’s military. The next stage is for Washington and Jerusalem to focus on degrading Iran’s domestic surveillance and suppression mechanisms and personnel. Then, Iranians will be able to prevail against the fundamentalist, dictatorial, theocracy.

## What Should Stay or Go

The range of non-religious institutions essential for efficient functioning of the Iranian nation are already present and functional. Indeed, many of Iran’s ministries covering finance and economics, health, education, justice, interior, defense, domestic and foreign intelligence, and even foreign affairs have very ancient bureaucratic foundations all the way back to the emergence of the Persian Empire in the sixth century BC. The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 added modern democratic pillars, including an elected parliament, an elected chief executive second only to the ruler, and a written constitution with rights for all citizens including women and non-Muslims. Although the authority and functionality of Iran’s parliaments and ministries were subsequently undermined by authoritarian Qajar and Pahlavi shahs, those institutions have endured. Even the Islamic Republic’s leaders could only assimilate and manipulate them within the post-1979 state, not get rid of them.

Eliminating the Office of Supreme Leader would make the Assembly of Experts which elects new supreme leaders unnecessary. The Guardian Council which decides if candidates for public office are sufficiently loyal to the clerical regime and Expediency Discernment Council which mediates on behalf of the theocratic branch with other governmental institutions would not be needed either. The current direct elections for the Office of President and Members of Parliament should continue, no longer subject to sectarian vetting of candidates. The electoral infrastructure exists and is utilized nation-wide every four years; it has been the culling of candidates down to only pro-regime ones and manipulation of ballots that produce results favoring fundamentalists.

The present executive branch of government is headed by a President—currently Masoud Pezeshkian, a reformist, and the ninth executive to hold that office—elected by voters to a four-year term of office. The President appoints a cabinet of ministers, with approval of the legislature, and chairs Iran’s National Security Council. No former president has been successful in a third bid, making for regular turnover. Due to the country’s current Islamic constitution, the clerical Council of Guardians decides which nominees can be on the presidential ballot. When that Council is abolished, the established electoral process for chief executive will likely be fair. The elected legislative branch, meanwhile, comprises 290 representatives. At present, every potential candidate—even those five who represent the Armenian Christian (2), Assyrian Christian (1), Jewish (1), and Zoroastrian (1) minorities—is screened for conformity to Islamic norms by the Council of Guardians. So, once that Council is gone, the public will be able to exercise their free will in filling the seats of Iran’s largest elected institution.

The judicial branch of government was also co-opted by the theocrats. Its decisions are circumscribed by Shariah

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law and by the Shi'ite clerics who serve as justices. Again, highly qualified secular Iranian legal scholars and attorneys are present to take their place. Once judges begin to be nominated by the executive branch, and confirmed by the legislative one, irrespective of their faith, and the criminal and civil law codes are detached from religious jurisprudence, a more judicious, secular, legal system would prevail.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which provides regional muscle for the clerical establishment, does need to be disbanded. Already, Israel's successful culling of Iran's leadership ranks has seriously diminished the chance that a military junta could take over even if Khamenei dies. IRGC enterprises and Shi'ite foundations or bonyads are estimated to control over 30 percent of the economy, which would not serve the public good if permitted to continue. The Artesh or army, navy, and air force, as well as the Faraja or police, should be reconstructed by secular-oriented executive, legislative, and judicial officials to fairly maintain external security and internal law and order, and to put down secessionism which may arise during regime transition.

The current regime instills fear down to neighborhoods through its paramilitary Basijis. It rounds up dissidents, thereby holding a united front under potential new leaders at bay. Similar conditions ensued under the Qajar and Pahlavi monarchies too; but the Constitutional and Islamic Revolutions won out as opposition groups emerged, leaders came forth, and public protests prevailed over local repression. Now, again, opposition factions may lack an interconnected network but do share a clear, credible, narrative of the government's chronic failures, which can empower the population to prevail against clerical leadership. The present Islamic Constitution grants the theocratic branch, headed by the supreme leader, capacities to override all other branches and institutions of state. But given the high degree of dissatisfaction with that constitution, changes which would be proposed by non-sectarian executive, legislative, and judicial branches will easily pass a national referendum. Those individuals taking over national leadership in Iran can learn from and not repeat mistakes made by new governments in Afghanistan and Iraq as well.

## End Results

If they are convinced that the U.S. will support them with more than words, Iranians would take yet another shot at political change and this time have their best opportunity for success due to the government's multiple weaknesses. Previous domestic uprisings against the Islamic Republic have failed due to the regime's ability to draw upon military and paramilitary troops. Through a continuation of martial strikes from abroad, the regime's capability to counteract a domestically-led sociopolitical revolution can be mostly degraded. Once the people succeed, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, his inner circle of advisors and military commanders, and high-ranking officials of the current legislative and judicial branches, if they survive, could be given the option to go into permanent exile abroad or face justice at home for their crimes in office.

Among the Iranian diaspora, several political groups seeking change are active including the civic and activist Coalition of Committed for a Secular Democratic Iran and the Iran Transition Council. Iranians associate their history and polity with shahs so a constitutional monarchy along British lines, if that form of government were to find favor among the majority of citizens, could be headed by U.S. exiled Prince Reza Pahlavi. Pahlavi leads the National Council of Iran, an umbrella organization of exiled opposition figures, and has announced a one hundred day transition plan. However, none of those outside organizations have been able to demonstrate sufficient on the ground capabilities in Iran needed to establish a new government. The leftist Mojahedin-e Khalq, now based in Albania, is broadly unpopular inside the country due to its alliance with Saddam Hussein's forces during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 and its personality-based leadership.

Consequently, the final form for a new regime would need to be decided by Iranians inside Iran. Several possibilities exist. Nonclerical, experienced, politicians who hold or held national office could be included such as current President Masoud Pezeshkian, current Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, and former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Moderate clerics who served as presidents seeking to liberalize their society and build better relations with the West like Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Khatami would bring not only experience at the highest levels of national service but could serve as bridges to other moderates among the Shi'ite clergymen and to foreign governments. Political organizations inside Iran that can step into the breach include the pragmatic-centrist

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Moderation and Development Party led by Rouhani and the grassroots-oriented Democracy Party following the ideas of Khatami. Even among the more moderate of Iranian politicians and clergy, some will need to disavow past antisemitic comments to be fully accepted by other world leaders and publics. Rank and file government officials and bureaucrats—most at this point either anti-theocracy or apolitical—would transition into the new state system to ensure continuity of state affairs and services. Political change likely will not be smooth internally, political stabilization and economic reconstruction will require guidance and aid from outside, but a secular nation can emerge.

Although not mentioning the regime's failures directly, even Iranian President Pezeshkian told his shell-shocked cabinet on June 25, one day after the ceasefire, that "the recent conflict provides an opportunity for transformation ... abandoning narrow-minded approaches." Indeed, if implemented, whether from internal or external pressure or both, even Pezeshkian's carefully-crafted words would begin a process by which Iran's current unrepresentative theocratic domination could give way to a transparently elected, legally removable, representative system of public officials who would better serve their own people and the community of nations. Antiwesternism, antisemitism, terrorism, cyberattacks, and nuclear and other military threats would recede as well. Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Front forces would lose their main financial, munitions, and ideology provider. Russia, China, and North Korea would be deprived of a strategically located, tactical equipment and natural resource sharing, ally. And Iran and the world will be better off.

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