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Executive Summary Report

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran and the United States have quarreled and clashed without pause. The same can be said of Iran's neighbors, especially Israel, the Islamic Republic's number one target. Iran remains a problem.

As the U.S. and Iran sort out the Memorandum of Understanding and the possible follow-on agreements that will likely ebb and flow without definitive progress, the GEOIntel Group offers a report on one scenario with Iran – regime change in Iran. Amongst all the potential scenarios with Iran, this one offers the best chance for Iran to normalize relations with the U.S., Israel, its neighbors, and perhaps the world – a regime change with non-radicalized, pragmatic leadership.

For brevity, this report will not rehash the storied history between Iran and the United States, as there are many excellent sources that well document our shared and problematic history, including U.S. meddling in Iran's regime changes. A great source for clients interested in the long dance between the U.S. and Iran until recent times is Kenneth Pollack's *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*, published in 2004.

Rather, this report will focus on the current aspects surrounding the potential for regime change in Iran. Regime change could offer the best outcome not only between the U.S and Iran, but the world writ large, provided the change results in Iran breaking from its radicalized policies. Yet, as this report will highlight, even if regime change were to occur in Iran, there are other outcomes that could be as bad or worse than the current regime.

What is Regime Change?

There are several definitions of regime change. One definition is the change or replacement of one leader with another. Some, to include President Trump, highlight that in this vein, regime change occurred after the initial attacks in Operation Epic Fury that killed many Iranian leaders, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. After several weeks, his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, took the reins of power after an election by Iran's Assembly of Experts. The problem with this definition, while certainly a change of power took place, is that the successor retained the problematic policies and authoritarian form of government of his predecessor, the Islamic Republic. Several experts highlight that the new Supreme Leader is more radicalized than his father. If true, Iran could become more dangerous than before.

The second definition is more comprehensive, which is a change in the form of government. As alluded to in the beginning, nirvana would be a major change in the direction of Iran's pre-1979 past, with a form of government more akin to a democracy than its recent history of authoritarian and theocratic rule. And since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has remained the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism, among many other undesired problems, including its nuclear weapons program ([Bancroft GEOIntelligence Executive Summary on Iran's Nuclear Program and the Strategic Implications](#)).



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Regime change in Iran offers the potential of a dramatically improved Iran, yet this outcome is far from certain. This begs the question of how regime changes typically occur.

Methods of Regime Change:

In Iran's case, there are three means to change the form of government, in other words, not just cycling out the face of the Supreme Leader, but rather, a meaningful change in how Iran leads its people and conducts international trade and affairs.

First, externally imposed regime change is a frequent method used to compel an adversary to change its regime. The invasion and subsequent occupation of Germany and Japan at the end of World War II are two exemplars that resulted in long-term success, albeit with great costs in lives and treasury by all sides. Conversely, there are many other examples that achieved regime change through occupation, only for it to later slide into either anarchy (Iraq and Libya) or another version of what it once was (Afghanistan).

In Iran's case, the least practical method is to force a regime change. Iran is a highly populated nation with about 90 million people, and it is a large nation with difficult terrain. Further, Iran has a highly motivated, radicalized military and para-military forces – some believe up to 18 million Iranians may fit this category. While this is far from a majority, it is a sizable number, especially if you consider a theologically hard-right faction of this size would likely be armed and inspired for combat. For these reasons and more, Iran would be no pushover. If the U.S. were to invade Iran, losses in blood and treasure would be significant (or worse), it would involve a long war with a longer occupation (democracies are challenged fighting long wars), and involve an unknown outcome for a long-term change in the regime that would be friendly to the United States and Israel. This option is off the table.

The second method of regime change is a version of a coup d'état, be it from internal forces and/or with foreign assistance. History abounds with coups, where a minority palace faction replaces the ruling faction, normally with an insider with strong ties to the military, quickly killing or arresting the leaders and replacing them. Iran has a history with this type of regime change. We can look back to 1953, when Iran's military, assisted by the CIA and MI6, overthrew Iran's Prime Minister and reinstated the autocratic Shah, to enable the West to have more influence over Iran's vast oil supplies.

In today's Iran, this method of regime change is probably unlikely. While there is continued jockeying for power positions after the deaths of many leaders and layers of leadership as part of Operation Epic Fury, we've seen the powerful, ideologically driven Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) assume a strong leadership role, suggesting toppling from within the current power structure is unlikely. The policy objectives of the Islamic Republic will likely continue, possibly with variations of pragmatists, moderates, and radicals, but remaining largely the same. In other words, while leaders change out for slightly better or slightly worse, the government and its policies remain aggressive toward the West and not a part of the community of nations.

This takes us to the third method of regime change – by revolution or an uprising of the masses to overthrow the Islamic Republic. Though unlikely, this scenario offers the best potential for a dramatic improvement in Iran's government. Let's explore this method in more depth.

Revolution:

There are many forms of revolution, and as it relates to Iran, the pertinent type for this discussion is a change in the nation-state governmental institutions and policies.

Revolutions occur infrequently and are very unpredictable until it becomes clear that a massive shift is underway as its people increasingly and aggressively demonstrate their dissatisfaction with current state affairs, especially the plight of the people, and rise up. Successful revolutions gain momentum with a large minority or growing majority that overwhelms the state's internal control mechanisms and removes national leadership and their lieutenants, often with violence. It is also important to note that with most successful revolutions, military and para-military units either steadily or en masse join the revolt, further stymying the regime's ability to restore the status quo and its grip on power.

Revolutions can occur slowly or develop rapidly and dramatically. Iran has seen both speeds. The 1979 Islamic Revolution happened relatively quickly. Whereas the current momentum is slow but with episodic periods of mass protest, as seen from last December to January. Estimates vary from 50,000 to 100,000 total protesters in over 200 cities, a remarkable number given the harsh autocratic rule of the Islamic Republic and the likely consequences – we do not know exactly how many protesters the regime killed, but President Trump has stated several times that it was over 30,000.

The recent protests may have been the driving reason for President Trump to initiate Operation Epic Fury last February. While the reasons for Epic Fury and the timing vary, according to the President's statements and those of various administration officials, regime change has been mentioned frequently. Most comments are in the context of merely changing leaders after the many deaths, but on occasion, there were hints of an opportunity for the people to rise up during the bombing campaign, which shook the Islamic Republic. Case in point, here is a portion of the President's statement after kicking off the conflict:

"Finally, to the great proud people of Iran, I say tonight that the hour of your freedom is at hand. Stay sheltered. Don't leave your home. It's very dangerous outside. Bombs will be dropping everywhere. When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take. This will be, probably, your only chance for generations."

There are many challenges for the Iranian people to successfully revolt. One is the extreme methods that Iran's leaders impose on the population during periods of unrest, as mentioned earlier. While the majority of Iranians dislike and perhaps even hate the regime, few if any of the people have the weaponry to effectively confront their oppressors. As of now, those who wield power, to include para-military groups, are wedded to the Islamic Republic and are not prone to support a revolt, either through fanaticism or merely to retain their status of control and financing. There have been open-source discussions of external arming of the Kurds (who are a significant minority in and bordering Iran), but it is questionable if the Kurds would want to be a pawn in this chess match.

Furthermore, though Operation Epic Fury was a demonstration of incredible skill and might that

only the U.S. and Israel could execute; there are limits to what airpower can do. Airpower can enable and/or support efforts on the ground to replace a regime with an uprising, but airpower cannot do it in isolation. And as mentioned earlier, an occupation of Iran to force regime change is simply not practical, and this option is off the table.

Unfortunately, there are more challenges. In the interest of brevity, there is one more important point worth mentioning. If there is a revolt, it is far from certain that it would result in a positive change. It could turn into a long-term civil war, with many warring factions with different goals in mind, and with few of them interested in returning Iran to a responsible domestic and international nation-state. Hence, a revolt could result in anarchy and a continued hotbed of unrest that harbors and promotes terrorism. The outcome of a revolt could be worse for its people, its neighbors, the West, and the world in general.

Bottom line, Iran's Islamic Republic is vulnerable to a revolution. And its leaders know this, thus the extreme measures they have taken and will continue to take to maintain control. Therefore, regime change seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. But it is not impossible. Something unexpected could change the game, and if it happens, it could be dramatic and quick.

Implications:

The implications of the Islamic Revolution will continue to be the foundation of Iran's narrative to influence actions regionally and globally. Iran will remain an existential threat to Israel and problematic to free-market nations. These implications impact the supply chain, direct investment in the Middle East, increase defense spending, and, in a major way, disrupt the energy markets.

Though not the focus of this report, the Strait of Hormuz will continue to be a high-risk choke point due to Iran's ability to interdict the global energy supply, supply chain, agricultural commerce, and military maritime presence passing through the Strait and progressing through the Persian Gulf. Iran will continue to employ this strategic instrument to maintain an advantage in at least this aspect of the conflict. Time will tell if the U.S. (and others) can enable safe and toll-free freedom of navigation through the Strait as part of the Memorandum of Understanding with Iran, with potential subsequent improvements of Strait access, and so on. Stating the obvious, in the meantime, oil prices, supply chain disruptions, etc., will continue to be destabilized. And experts insist recovering from the disruptions seen thus far will take months to years.

Finally, let's not forget about Iran's nuclear weapons program, its ballistic missile and drone threats to the region, and its status as the world's largest sponsor of state terrorism. Many problems remain on the table despite the operational successes of Epic Fury.

Iran will continue to create uncertainty and volatility in the near- to medium-term, and an existential threat in the long-term for free-market nations for both national and economic security. The best outcome of all scenarios, albeit unlikely and not on the horizon, is one where Iran's people rise and change the form of government with human rights and sound internal governance, including a reduced threat to its neighbors, Israel, the U.S., and the West in general.

That said, the economic potential of a non-threatening (or even a less-threatening) Iran would be epic. It could stabilize the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf for the first time since the Islamic

Revolution of 1979. It could permanently end its nuclear weapons program, also reducing its regional threat across the Gulf States and the Middle East. Finally, it could end existential threats to Israel and stop supporting its proxy terror group.

But as the report highlights, revolutions occur infrequently, and they are hard to predict even when conditions are ripe. They are complex with possible or likely heavy consequences for those who attempt them.

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