



Overtaking on the Right: The Iranian Ultra-Conservative Challenge and its Implications for Regime Unity

Raz Zimmt

The Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University

Since the end of 2024 there has been growing criticism from ultra-conservative and revolutionary factions in the Islamic Republic on issues of domestic and foreign policy. Most of the criticism has focused on Iran's lack of response to the Israeli attack on October 26, 2024, Iranian failures in Syria in view of the collapse of the Assad regime, and the decision to postpone implementation of the hijab law, which is intended to increase the severity of penalties for breaches of the Islamic dress code. Although disagreements between the main political streams in Iran are a regular feature of the system, the protest by radical groups is a subject of intense public and political interest, mainly because it centers around decisions that are not the sole responsibility of the government and that were taken by political institutions directly subordinate to the supreme leader, particularly the Supreme National Security Council. Therefore, sections of the conservative camp have expressed concern that the challenges to government policy posed by the radicals could not only further undermine social cohesion but also damage the unity of the governing elite. Even if the radical elements' growing criticism of regime policy does not constitute an immediate and significant threat to the unity of the Iranian political and security elite, it could undermine the basis of the regime's ideological support and harm its long-term ability to deal with more important threats to its stability.

Key Words: Iran, politics, society, regime stability, foreign policy, Syria

Introduction

In mid-December 2024, dozens of citizens identified with ultra-conservative factions on the Iranian right wing held a non-violent protest in which voices were raised against government policy. The demonstrators demanded implementation of Operation True

Promise 3—a further Iranian attack on Israel in response to the Israeli attack on Iran on October 26, 2024. They also asked President Masoud Pezeshkian to dismiss his deputy for strategic affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif, who is considered relatively moderate, and to

declare the implementation of the hijab law, which had been passed by the parliament (Majlis). This law imposes severe penalties on women who fail to cover themselves as required, but in December 2024 the Supreme Council for National Security decided to freeze its implementation.

The demonstrators were not satisfied with making demands of the president, and threatened to take action to bring down his government if he failed to respond to them (Entekhab, 2024a). One demonstrator even threatened the president directly, saying that his fate could be like that of the first president of the Iranian Republic, Abolhassan Banisadr, who was impeached in 1981 after strong disagreements with the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini, and forced to flee to France. A few further demonstrations have taken place in recent months in a number of Iranian towns, involving dozens of citizens identified with the radical camp. In at least one case the protest descended into a violent confrontation with the police (Khabar Online, 2024c; Farhikhtegan, 2024). At the end of March 2025, clashes between the security forces and the ultra-conservative demonstrators reached a peak with the violent dispersal of a demonstration by citizens who were protesting the delay in implementing the hijab law (Times of Israel, 2025).

Internal disagreements are a regular and ongoing feature of the Iranian political system. Arguments between the various political camps—conservatives versus reformists, pragmatists versus radicals-revolutionaries—focus on issues affecting both domestic and foreign policy. The conservatives are more committed to maintaining the status quo regarding the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic, while the reformists are more prepared to accept some policy changes within the framework of the accepted rules of the Republic. While the pragmatists (in both main camps: the conservatives and the reformists) are prepared in certain circumstances to adapt their ideological beliefs to the constraints of

time and place, the radical revolutionaries are determined to uphold revolutionary dogmas.

All the presidents of Iran, including those identified with the conservative camp, such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Ibrahim Raisi (2021-2024), and others who were identified with the pragmatic-reformist camp, including Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), faced significant political challenges and strong criticism from the various centers of power and rival political factions. However, the recent protests by the ultra-conservative groups have aroused particular interest, because their complaints are not limited to government policy but are also directed at decisions taken by political institutions that are above the government and directly subordinate to the supreme leader Ali Khamenei, headed by the Supreme National Security Council. The radicals' objection to government policy on both domestic and foreign issues was so exceptional that it was even criticized by the president's critics in the conservative camp, who argued that it could damage social cohesion and national unity, and undermine the regime's stability.

The wave of demonstrations in Iran in recent years, which reached a peak in the years 2022-2023, when protests erupted following the death of the young woman Mahsa Amini, aroused renewed interest in the balance of power between the Iranian regime and its opponents, and in the conditions for political change in the Islamic Republic. Deep-seated social processes and escalating pressures both at home and abroad pose a heavy challenge to the regime, and could over time endanger its status as well as its stability. However, the regime continues to retain certain powers that enable it to survive the challenges for the time being. Firstly, it has the means to suppress protests violently and effectively. Secondly, it still enjoys considerable support among the security forces and law enforcement, above all the loyal Revolutionary Guards, who are dependent upon it. Change could ensue if some

part of the security forces began to refuse to participate in the oppression.

Moreover, at this stage the ruling political elite is managing to maintain internal cohesion in spite of political disagreements. Unlike the Shah's elite, that had close ties with the west and was able to find political and economic refuge outside Iran, the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic has no choice but to fight for power in order to survive. Thirdly, the regime still enjoys the active or passive support of various social groups, some for ideological reasons while others are economically dependent on it (Zimmt, 2025).

Several researchers have pointed to a weakening of cohesion among the mechanisms of the regime and the military-security elite that supports it as a necessary condition for political change. They estimate that the waves of protest will not lead to revolution as long as they remain without a solid organizational framework or a national leadership, if the ruling elites can maintain their cohesion and the security forces remain loyal (Azizi & van Veen, 2023).

The debate on the importance of cohesion in the ruling elite goes beyond the Iranian case and is also relevant for other authoritarian regimes, such as Russia (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2019). After the protests that erupted in Iran in the summer of 2009, following claims of fraud in the presidential election results, the Iranian political sociologist Hossein Bashiriyeh outlined some factors that could turn a protest movement into a revolutionary movement. Among other things, Bashiriyeh pointed to the cohesion of the ruling elite and the unity of the security elements responsible for suppressing protest, such as the Revolutionary Guards, the Basij militia, the internal security forces, intelligence-collecting mechanisms and the judiciary, as factors that help the regime to prevent the protests from developing into a serious and immediate threat to regime stability (Safaei, 2023).

This article examines the expressions of criticism heard in recent months among factions

identified with the ideological-revolutionary base of the Tehran regime around three central issues: the absence of an Iranian response to the Israeli attack, the Iranian failure in Syria, and the delay in implementing the hijab law, as well as the reactions in the pragmatic-reformist camp and in the conservative camp. The article discusses the question of whether criticism by radical elements is a sign of cracks in support for the regime. Deepening such internal rifts and undermining the cohesion of the ruling elite could weaken its ability to deal with the challenges it faces, in the long term and particularly in times of crisis. Heading these challenges are the deteriorating economic situation; the widening gap between the regime and the public; increasing external pressure following the entry of President Donald Trump to the White House; regional developments, particularly the weakening of the pro-Iranian axis; and the consequences of the Israeli attack on Iran.

Trends in the Iranian political system and the rise of the ultra-conservative stream

Since the Islamic Revolution all political power has been controlled by the revolutionary elite, who run a network of institutions that constitute the regime (Nazam). All political streams active under the regime accept its rules, do not seek to deviate from the basic principles of the system, and of course are not working to eliminate a system of government formulated on the concept of "The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist." (In spite of its efforts to preserve the appearance of national unity, the Iranian political elite has been divided since the early 1980s into two main ideological camps, which are defined in various ways (right and left, radicals and moderates, reformists and conservatives, and so on), each of which is split into further smaller factions.

Any simplistic division of Iranian political streams, as happens in the west, is problematical because it does not reflect the complexity of

the attitudes within each stream on social, economic and political issues. For example, in the 1980s, the Islamic left, that promoted left-wing economic and social concepts, supported the export of the revolution, but adopted positions advocating social openness in the domestic arena. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) was identified with the conservative camp, but his policies on economic, social and religious issues actually reflected populist and anticlerical trends (Khalaji, 2013), while his positions on foreign policy were radical. Moreover, certain figures have been moderate on specific topics but extremist on others, and often expressed moderate views on one occasion and more extremist attitudes on other occasions. Not only that, the usual divisions are not valid in the long run because the political system is dynamic, and over the years prominent figures have changed their views and created new political alliances and coalitions. For example, the faction that was usually defined as 'radical' in the 1980s gradually adopted more moderate positions, and in the second half of the 1990s, supported President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), considered the most outstanding symbol of the reformist movement (Zimmt, 2022a).

Since the 1990s, the political system has been characterized by power struggles, mainly between conservatives and reformists. The conservatives advocated continued loyalty to the values of the revolution and derived their strength mainly from conservative clerics and the traditional middle class. They expressed pragmatism on certain subjects such as economic issues, but radicalism on others, particularly matters of culture and the opposition to western influence. The reformists usually favored some retreat from revolutionary slogans, which they felt were irrelevant or unfeasible (Menashri, 1999).

The late 1990s and early 2000s marked the height of the reformists' power, when they succeeded in taking control of the executive branch with the election of Khatami as president

in May 1997, and the legislative branch, following their victory in the 2000 elections to the Majlis. The series of reformist victories were perceived by the conservative establishment as a serious threat to revolutionary values and the stability of the regime. The conservatives began to neutralize the power of the reformists, by legal means and using political and civil oppression. During Khatami's presidency, the activities of the ultra-conservative rightwing movement Ansar-e Hezbollah reached a peak. This movement, which was founded in the 1990s, was involved in violence against reformist activists and senior public figures, and even in attempts to assassinate political rivals. While restricting the actions of the reformists, the conservatives embarked on a process of reorganization after some political soul-searching due to their defeats, and at the end of the 1990s a new conservative stream emerged. Young men from the second generation of the revolution began to enter Iranian politics, most of them veterans of the Iran-Iraq war who had served in the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij. They wished to preserve the basic values of the Islamic Revolution, which as they saw it had been eroded under the presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami. The new conservatives, who were dubbed Osulgarayan ("Principlists"), sought to present themselves as a real alternative both to the older generation of conservatives, considered largely irrelevant by younger Iranians, and to the reformists, whose struggle for political reforms and civil rights were perceived to a large extent as a threat to the basic values of the revolution (Zimmt, 2022a).

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the two main political camps, the conservatives and the reformists, were engaged in discussions on their future directions. While some conservatives continued to support revolutionary attitudes and remained determined to counter any possibility of change, others in essence adopted attitudes that had formerly been the preserve of the reformists,

based on recognition of the need to adapt revolutionary ideology to current conditions and the reality of the time. Although they were still committed to the Islamic Revolution and a system of governance founded on Velayat-e Faqih, they did not rule out gradual and limited changes in certain areas, such as restricting government involvement in civilian life, easing the atmosphere of security, removing some discrimination against women, extending freedom of expression, and being more open to the West, including the United States. The increasing dominance of these pragmatic groups in the conservative camp, whose most prominent representative was President Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), paved the way for new coalitions and political alliances between the pragmatic center, known in Iran as E'tedalgaryan (moderates) and the reformists, against radical revolutionary elements, such as the Steadfast Front, identified with the radical wing of the conservative camp and opposed to any deviation from basic revolutionary principles in domestic and foreign policy (Zimmt, 2022a).

In spite of greater individualist tendencies, Iranian society is still characterized by a large degree of collectivism, expressed in strong commitment to the family framework and a shared national and cultural identity.

Alongside trends in the political system, over the years there has been a widening gap between government institutions and the younger generation, and many young people have started to turn their back on Islamic revolutionary values and the clerics. Nevertheless, even 46 years after the Iranian revolution, there are still young people who continue to demonstrate commitment to the regime, and some are characterized by an even greater degree of radicalism and loyalty to revolutionary values than the previous generation. Narges Bajoghli studied the

efforts of media producers who support the regime to recruit the support of the younger generation, and she highlights young members of the Revolutionary Guards, Basij, and Ansar-e Hezbollah who expressed concern regarding the future of the revolutionary project in Iran. Some of them showed even greater commitment to the principles of the Islamic Revolution than their parents (Bajoghli, 2019).

Sociologist Manata Hashemi has pointed out the gaps between the generations and the tendency to conformity among many young people of low social status, which could affect their attitude to the authorities. In spite of greater individualist tendencies, Iranian society is still characterized by a large degree of collectivism, expressed in strong commitment to the family framework and a shared national and cultural identity. Iranian society still attaches great importance to internal social classes (Khodi) and conforming to the norms and expectations of one's group. Hashemi's research showed that young people from weaker social strata do not generally rebel against conventions and prefer to follow the accepted codes of social behavior, in order to obtain economic opportunities and improve their chances for advancement (Hashemi, 2020).

The consequences of the rise of a revolutionary younger generation are also found in regime institutions, including the Revolutionary Guards. Kasra Aarabi pointed to growing criticism among young members of the Revolutionary Guards in the face of Iran's regional strategic failures, and inter-generational struggles in the organization. In an article published after the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, he quoted a young radical in the Revolutionary Guards, who claimed that devout youth would not forget the cowardice of the decision makers, and pointed to the widening cracks in the organization in view of Iran's failures in Syria and the abandonment of the Assad regime by the political and military leadership in Tehran. According to Aarabi, young Revolutionary Guards accuse their senior

commanders of delays in making decisions regarding developments in Syria and they are starting to doubt their commitment and fitness. In the eyes of these young people, the fall of the Syrian regime and the abandonment of Shia holy sites constitute a blow to the memory of the victims of the military campaign in the country. The younger Revolutionary Guards are more radical and “more Catholic than the Pope.” Not only that, they are gradually turning against the old guard and increasingly questioning their loyalty and readiness to take action against enemies of the regime (Aarabi, 2024). Although it is not clear at this stage if the criticism of the younger generation reflects a wider trend, these voices join other expressions of criticism against the regime coming from groups identified with its ideological base.

Lack of direct Iranian military response to the Israeli attack

On October 26, 2024 Israel attacked Iran in response to the Iranian attack on Israel on October 1 (Operation True Promise 3). The Israeli attack caused considerable damage to Iran’s air defense system and its ability to manufacture ballistic missiles. According to a report in the New York Times, Iranian leader Khamenei ordered the Supreme National Security Council to prepare for a further attack on Israel, after receiving a detailed report from senior military commanders on the scope of the damage caused by Israel (Stack, 2024). Nevertheless and despite issuing some threats, Iran has so far refrained from responding to this attack, apparently for fear of an even stronger Israeli response and perhaps even American involvement, particularly in view of the US presidential elections that took place just after the Israeli attack.

As time has passed with no response, expressions of disapproval have grown stronger. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in early December 2024 reinforced the criticisms of the radicals, who pointed to the direct link between the Iranian avoidance of a response

to the Israeli attack and its failure in Syria, with the fall of its ally in Damascus. Although most of the complaints were directed against President Pezeshkian, they could also be interpreted as criticism of the regime’s policy as a whole, because decisions on issues of national security are made by the Supreme National Security Council. Under the Iranian constitution, the council is authorized to determine the country’s defense policy and national security as part of overall policy determined by the leader. It is true that the president is head of the council, but its members also include the Foreign, Interior and Intelligence Ministers, commanders of the Revolutionary Guards and the regular army, heads of the legislative branch and the judiciary and two personal representatives of the supreme leader. Since the three aforementioned ministers are usually appointed by the president with the approval of the supreme leader, while the head of the judiciary and the military-security system are appointed directly by the leader, the president and chairman of the Majlis are the only members of the council who are not apparently dependent on Khamenei, who also appoints the council’s secretary and his two representatives. This gives him almost complete control of the council (Thaler et al., 2010).

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Condemnation of the lack of Iranian response to the Israeli attack was also voiced in the media and by politicians identified with the radical right. The online news site Raja News commented that not only did the delay in response put the “resistance” in a position of weakness, it also encouraged Israel to attack Iran again. The site claimed that the fall of Assad in Syria was a dangerous turning point for the Axis of Resistance, so Iran’s failure to respond to the attack could mean the loss of a golden

strategic opportunity to redefine the balance of regional power, and restore the initiative to the Axis. Moreover, any delay or hesitation by Iran would lead its enemies to estimate that its regional strength was fundamentally weakened and send a message that it had lost its ability to respond and its willingness to uphold “red lines” (Raja News, 2024b).

Under the headline “Essential Assurance,” the daily Vatan Emrooz also warned that if Iran failed to respond to the Israeli attack, it would face a more serious danger. According to the daily, Israel’s repeated threats to attack Iran prove that it could also attack important national infrastructures. Therefore any retreat from Iran’s intention to demonstrate its serious willingness to counter threats from Israel could lead to the implementation of such threats. Only a military response could change Israel’s calculations, remove the threats, restore Iranian deterrence, and protect its security and territorial unity (Vatan Emrooz, 2025a).

The declarations by radical Majlis members are of even more importance. Majlis member Ghazanfari, representing the Steadfast Front, which is identified with the radical right, put the responsibility for the absence of an Iranian response to the Israeli attack on the president and his government. He claimed that the president himself admitted that he had agreed to delay Iran’s response because he had faith in the American promise to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza and preferred not to act in a way that could put such a possible ceasefire at risk. Ghazanfari pointed out that the delay in the Iranian response to the killing of Hamas leader Ismayil Haniyeh in Tehran and Hezbollah chief of staff Fuad Shukr in Beirut at the end of July 2024 had severely damaged the Axis of Resistance led by Iran. He added that a number of senior Iranian officials (by implication, not only President Pezeshkian) were responsible for the delay in responding, and that if the Majlis concluded that they were indeed involved in this, it would take forceful action against them, irrespective of their status (Asr-e Iran, 2024a).

Sadegh Koushki, another member of the Steadfast Front, rejected concerns that an Iranian response against Israel would lead to war. “I ask the [Iranian] commanders if we are not already in a state of war with Israel,” he declared (Tabnak, 2024b). These statements from two Majlis members are evidence that even they do not see the president and members of his government as solely responsible for the lack of response. Although they do not directly criticize the supreme leader himself, something that is not tolerated in the Islamic Republic, their words could be interpreted as criticism of the higher military and security echelons that are both directly subordinate to the supreme leader.

Iran’s failure in Syria

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 significantly weakened Iran and the pro-Iranian axis. Senior Iranian officials expressed concern over future developments in Syria and admitted that the fall of Assad had harmed Tehran’s ability to help its regional proxies, led by Hezbollah. However, they tried to play down the importance of Syrian developments and stressed that the fall of the regime would have no real negative influence, because Hezbollah had the ability to make its own weapons and it was not dependent on Iran (Meir Amit Intelligence & Terror Information Center, 2025).

As distinct from the official Iranian line, after the fall of Assad other voices were heard acknowledging the severe blow suffered by Iran and its regional axis. On this matter, too, the criticism was not limited to the president alone, but was also directed at the regime’s policies as a whole. For example, Majlis member Mohammed Mannan Raisi referred to the developments in Syria as an expression of divine anger. He wondered how Iran had handed Syria over to the radical Sunni organizations, after sacrificing thousands of fighters and investing billions in its involvement in the country. Raisi described a short meeting with one of the senior commanders after the

collapse of the Assad regime, when he asked him about the attack on Israel. The commander wondered about the point of such an attack when half an hour later Israel would attack Iran and then the people would have to implement Operation True Promise 4. Raisi said he was astonished at this response. Referring to Khamenei's statements that they must show Israel it was mistaken in its calculations about Iran, he mockingly wondered if developments in Syria showed that some of their military commanders understood the leader's words quite differently and were working to adjust Iran's calculations instead of Israel's. He stressed that the only red line for him was the leader of Iran, and he would not refrain from criticizing anybody, even senior military or security figures, and if necessary, he would not hesitate to reveal the names of those who were negligent in complying with the leader's instructions (Khabar Online, 2024a).

The former chairman of the Iranian Broadcasting Authority Mohammed Sarafraz expressed a similar position. "From the goal of liberating Jerusalem in Operation Al-Aksa Flood (the Hamas attack of October 7) we have arrived at the capture of further areas in the Syrian Golan, in south Lebanon and the northern Gaza Strip by Israel. Hasn't the time come for you to learn from your mistaken calculations?" he wrote on his X account (Sarafraz, 2024).

Other expressions of recognition by groups close to the regime, of Iran's strategic failures in Syria, can be found in statements and commentaries published in the Iranian media after the fall of the Assad regime. In a speech in a Tehran mosque that aroused great interest in the Iranian media, Behrouz Esbati, a former senior officer in the Revolutionary Guards, admitted that Iran had suffered a severe defeat in Syria. He strongly condemned the conduct of Russia, that had acted against Iranian interests in Syria and even colluded with Israel, according to him, as well as the actions of President Assad, whose commitment to the Axis of Resistance was limited and who imposed restrictions on

the activities of Iran in Syria in the final days of his government (Didbaniran, 2025a).

The Jomhuri Eslami daily also took an approach that deviated from the regime's official narrative regarding political changes in Syria, and called for a clear vision of the regional reality in order to deal with the consequences of recent events. An article published after the fall of Assad stated that it was impossible to deny the fact that Israel, the United States and radical Islamic groups had managed to achieve many of their objectives in Syria. It added that "acceptance of this reality, followed by a review of the policy that led to the bitter developments in Lebanon and Syria, is the only way to atone for the defeat" (Jomhuri Eslami, 2025).

Ultra-conservative groups also expressed criticism of the failure of Iranian policy in Syria on social media. Some claimed that the demonstration of weakness in Iran's decision-making process and the absence of a response to the Israeli attack on Iran contributed to the collapse of the Assad regime. They also criticized the decision by the National Broadcasting Authority (which is subordinate to the supreme leader) to change its position on the Syrian rebel organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which took control of Syria. In the days prior to the fall of the Syrian regime, the Iranian national media stopped calling its members "terrorists" and began calling them "armed fighters" (Tabnak, 2024b).

Criticism on social media was also not limited to civilian institutions, including the government and the broadcasting authority, but also directed at the armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards. For example, there was criticism of the disastrous actions of the Quds Force commander Ismail Qaani and his contribution to the fall of the Syrian regime. Some posters justified this criticism by citing the fact that during the critical days when the Syrian rebels were approaching Damascus, Qaani was documented participating in religious mourning ceremonies in the supreme leader's office (Shahrekhabar, 2024).

Criticism of domestic policy issues

In December 2024 the Supreme National Security Council decided to freeze implementation of the hijab law, that had recently been approved by the Majlis. The law, which followed the wave of protests in 2022-2023, imposed severe sanctions on women who were not meticulous about wearing the hijab, including heavy fines and denial of social services (Gol, 2024). The decision to suspend the law was taken in view of growing criticism of it, including from President Pezeshkian, claiming it would increase public discontent and perhaps even lead to the renewal of protests.

Another Friday preacher in the Alborz district, Seyyed Mohammed Mehdi Hosseini Hamedani, also strongly condemned the decision to suspend the law, stressing that its implementation was the only way to protect the religious duty to wear the veil.

Suspension of the law was strongly condemned by radical factions, who put heavy pressure on the Majlis speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf to work for its implementation. In a press interview, the deputy head of the Majlis culture committee, Seyyed Ali Yazdikhan, stressed the need for the law, stating that if the government wished to put forward a new bill it could do so, but that could not prevent implementation of a law already approved by the Majlis (Khabar Online, 2025c). Other senior clerics echoed the criticism. A preacher at Friday prayers in Tehran, Seyyed Ahmad Khatami, criticized the president for failing to announce the official adoption of the law as required by the constitution. He argued that a woman's failure to wear the veil is contrary to both Islam and the law, and that senior members of the regime must promote the dissemination of the culture of righteousness (Khabar Online, 2025a). Another Friday preacher in the Alborz district, Seyyed Mohammed Mehdi Hosseini Hamedani, also strongly condemned the

decision to suspend the law, stressing that its implementation was the only way to protect the religious duty to wear the veil. He added that those who were delaying the law should be called to account (Khabar Online, 2025b).

Previous Iranian presidents have also been criticized for their policies, particularly on domestic affairs, over which the president has greater influence than foreign policy. For example, the initiatives of President Rouhani who tried to introduce internal changes, which basically meant restricting government interference in the lives of citizens, met with strong reactions from his conservative opponents. As his intentions to extend openness, ease the enforcement of the Islamic dress code and remove some of the restrictions on social media and the activities of cultural figures, became more evident, so too did the objections of the religious establishment, the political system and the Revolutionary Guards, who feared that they would undermine the values of the revolution (Zimmt, 2022a). Moreover, even presidents with a conservative outlook, such as Ibrahim Raisi, were not immune to criticism, including from conservative and radical circles. A few months after his election in 2021, there were strong disagreements between Raisi and his conservative opposition, due to growing discontent at his failure to improve the economic situation. The criticism was not limited to elements identified with the pragmatic-reformist camp but was also expressed by conservative politicians, media and clerics (Zimmt, 2022b).

What made the uproar over the issue of veiling relatively unusual was the fact that, like the criticism of foreign affairs issues, the complaints around the retreat from enforcement of the Islamic dress code were also directed at regime institutions that are directly subordinate to the supreme leader, including the Supreme National Security Council and the judiciary. A comment piece on the Raja News website, which is identified with the radical right, raised objections to the Supreme National Security

Council's interference on the subject of hijab. The article stated that the council's request to the Majlis to delay the official announcement of the law did not help to improve the situation in the country but only severely damaged public trust in the government and the ruling system (Raja News, 2024a).

Not only that, commentators identified with the radical right were not satisfied with condemning the postponement of the hijab law but also warned of its implications for the identity, stability and cohesion of the Islamic Republic. Conservative political commentator Fouad Izadi warned that Iran could lose the loyalty of religious young people and supporters of the regime if it was unable to preserve its Islamic identity. He noted that the willingness of young people to fight for the country depended on their continuing identification with it. If they felt it was no longer Islamic they would lose their motivation to fight. Izadi called on senior members of the regime to avoid creating the feeling among younger members of the Party of God (Hezbollah) that the Islamic Republic of Iran was similar to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In that case they would not be prepared to defend it, and Iran could become another Syria, in which the army stopped fighting for the regime (Asr-e Iran, 2024b).

Political activist Mohammad Sadegh Koushki, who is a researcher at Imam Sadegh University in Tehran, has drawn a comparison between developments in Syria and the situation in Iran. His claim is that the Iranian government is undergoing a process of hostile takeover by President Pezeshkian and his reformist supporters, whom he compared to the Syrian rebels who took over Damascus. He argued that by their opposition to the hijab law and their support for removing restrictions on social media, the president's supporters were capturing one stronghold after another in the Islamic Republic. Moreover, he blamed the Majlis and the judiciary for ignoring breaches of the law by the government, and compared them to the Syrian army which retreated from the

Islamist rebels and did nothing to stop them taking control of Damascus. "If the Majlis and the legal system fail to perform their duty to restrain the government and fight against repeated breaches of the law by the president and his cronies, it would not be wrong to compare these two institutions to the defeated Syrian army" he wrote (Khabar Online, 2024b).

Pragmatists versus Radicals

As expected, the attack on the president and his policies from radical circles aroused strong reactions from the president's supporters in the reformist-pragmatic camp. They warned that granting the demands of the extremists could undermine social cohesion and even renew the popular protests, while severely harming Iranian interests. Not only that, they stressed that the areas of policy under fire from the president's opponents were not solely his responsibility.

The reformist daily Shargh was strongly critical of the radical groups, claiming that their demands in the areas of domestic and foreign policy went against the wishes of citizens to limit enforcement of the Islamic dress code, to remove blocks from social networks, and to work for the removal of economic sanctions. According to Shargh, the extremist attack on the president could reinforce social polarization and reignite the protests. The paper recalled that the wave of demonstrations throughout Iran at the end of 2017 started in the city of Mashhad with political rivals of President Rouhani in the conservative camp, who wished to protest his economic policy, but they quickly spiraled and spread to dozens of other cities with slogans against the regime and supreme leader Khamenei (Shargh, 2024).

The news website Entekhab also warned against the return of protests like those of 2017. The determination of the radical groups to implement the hijab law, their pressure on the government and the armed forces to respond to the Israeli attack, their emphasis on the need to continue blocking social media, and the spread of rumors about the president's possible

resignation—according to Entekhab, all these were intended to bring down the Pezeshkian government and incite the people against the authorities while ignoring the position of the supreme leader and the government's attempts to recruit a broad national consensus. The site called on the radical groups to learn the lessons of the 2017 and 2019 waves of unrest (the fuel protests), that led to harsh crises for the regime and the citizens (Entekhab, 2024b).

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The main radical criticism focused on foreign affairs, and in particularly the lack of response to the Israeli attack. The website Asr-e Iran accused the radicals of conducting a psychological campaign designed to destroy the image of senior regime officials, both politicians and military commanders. In a comment piece, it mocked young people who had only recently reached adulthood, had a few days' growth of beard and heard a few words about war, resistance and rockets, and were now gathering in the streets and demanding that their leaders raze Tel Aviv and Haifa, as if Iran enjoyed absolute military superiority, the enemy was weak, and only their own fears kept the rockets in their storerooms, while the two Zionist cities remained standing. The website also accused the extremist groups of spreading fear among the public with their warnings of further Israeli attacks on Iran. If Iran was so strong that it could start a war against Israel and win, then it could also defend itself from further Israeli attacks. But if it was so weak that Israel could attack Tehran, what was the point of recommending an Iranian attack on Israel? Asr-e Iran stressed that a wise man who starts a journey, first considers its end, and if the Iranian chain of command

had concluded that this was not the right time for action against Israel, there was a logical and justified reason. Only elements opposed to Iran in the regime and among the people would push the country into hasty war, and those calling for an attack were helping the psychological warfare of Iran's enemies, by sowing fear in the public (Asr-e Iran, 2024c).

The reformist newspaper Hammihan, in its response to growing pressure from the radicals, stressed that in their efforts to undermine government stability by criticizing the delayed response to Israel and Iran's withdrawal from Syria, they ignored the fact that these issues are not the sole responsibility of the president. The daily said that strategic decisions, such as Iranian intervention in Syria in 2011 or the withdrawal in 2024 were not under the authority of the president, and that according to the constitution he was not the supreme commander of the armed forces. The decision to refrain from attacking Israel was also not in his power, although he was the head of the Supreme National Security Council. The paper wondered if extremist Majlis members, the hardline paper Kayhan and Friday preachers were unaware that important decisions on foreign affairs, such as negotiations with the United States, were taken at the most senior level of the regime and were not linked to any particular government (Hammihan, 2024a).

Another article in the same paper stated that the radical elements are blaming all the crises that have plagued Iran for many years, including air pollution, the foreign currency crisis, electricity power cuts and inflation, on the few months that have passed since the election of President Pezeshkian, and according to this logic, even the fall of President Assad was linked to Pezeshkian and his deputy Zarif (Hammihan, 2024b).

Conservatives versus radicals

While the responses of the president's supporters in the reformist-pragmatic camp to criticisms from radical circles were expected,

the conservative responses expressed growing concern over their recognition of the potential harm implicit in the unusual criticisms of the political and security elite and their fears of undermining government cohesion. Although some of the conservatives have shown understanding of the radical arguments, particularly over the need to enforce the Islamic dress code, they warned against excessive extremism that could endanger Iran's internal stability, especially in view of the challenges it currently faces. It is clear that even within the conservative camp there is greater recognition that the actions of radical groups could be interpreted as a challenge to government institutions and the supreme leader himself.

For example, the conservative newspaper Farhikhtegan had reservations about the protests of revolutionary circles against the government, claiming that when criticism spreads into threats to depose the president, its influence becomes as negative as a fatal poison, and it creates a radical atmosphere and rifts in society. This is particularly serious when the people responsible define themselves as part of the regime, rather than its opponents. The paper warned that at a time when external threats to Iran are increasing, and Israel and the United States seek to intensify social rifts in the country and create chaos, the tendency to polarization in the sociopolitical sphere is very dangerous (Farhikhtegan, 2024).

The newspaper Sobh-e-No warned against the appearance of "super-revolutionism" in the conservative stream, that adopts radical interpretations and challenges state institutions. This conservative daily was responding to the statement by Fouad Izadi that Iran could lose the loyalty of religious youth if it did not preserve its Islamic identity, stressing that these young people were prepared to sacrifice themselves first and foremost to defend their homeland, and that they were not only loyal to their religious faith and Islam, but also to the principles of independence and national unity. They would fight not only to defend the Islamic

dress code but also to defend national interests and the territorial integrity of their country. According to this paper, the super-revolutionary approach seeks to appropriate the revolution for itself, to define it in an extreme way, and to use it as a means of granting legitimacy to strict and uncompromising attitudes. This kind of thinking widens the gap between generations and is designed to create a radical atmosphere contrary to the social reality and the interests of the people and the country. The paper warns that extremist trends cause severe damage to national cohesion, weaken social solidarity and increase internal rifts (Mashregh News, 2024).

Reservations about the extreme attitude of some revolutionary youth were also heard on media identified with the radical right, such as the daily Vatan Emrooz. An opinion piece published by the paper stated that membership of the Party of God (Hezbollah) meant being loyal to the Islamic regime and supporting the Islamic Republic. A Hezbollah member is someone who works for the interests of the regime. Therefore, when Iran's enemies are trying to reignite the flames of protest via the debate over the hijab, the most important mission for the religious-revolutionary stream is to defend the regime and its supreme leader, and avoid any moves that could weaken it and encourage hostile conspiracies. According to Vatan Emrooz, the Iranian regime defended hijab during the protests of 2022-2023, and religious supporters of the regime must give it their full trust and rely on it to know how to handle this issue, even if the public interest is to prevent implementation of the law at this time. They must employ a greater degree of understanding and patience, and avoid any actions that could undermine state stability, however pure and humane their motives (Vatan Emrooz, 2025b).

Some clerics have also been critical of public protest by the radical stream. Ayatollah Mohsen Gharavian warned against extremist activity, claiming that it damaged social solidarity and weakened national unity. In response to radical

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demonstrations against the removal of blocks on social media and the delay in implementing the hijab law, the cleric said that in recent years Iranian society had shown that it was tired of extremism, and it wanted gradual change in the direction of economic and cultural development. The activity of extremist groups operating without a license against the overall policies of the state was damaging to stability and national unity, and did not help to solve the problems in society. He stressed that most important decisions in the country were made by state institutions subordinate to the leader, such as the Supreme National Security Council and the Council for Defining Regime Interests. Therefore opposition to policies dealing with issues under the authority of these bodies ignored the legal mechanisms of the state (Didbaniran, 2025b).

A member of the Council of Experts, Ayatollah Mohammad Mehdi Mir-Baqheri, considered one of the most extreme clerics, disagreed with the radical complaints regarding the strategic failures of Iran and the “Resistance Front” in Syria, claiming that they were serving the enemies of Iran. He stressed that Iran and its regional allies have the ability to overcome the loss of Syria following the collapse of the Assad regime, and noted that unfortunately some revolutionaries are echoing the narrative of enemies who are waging war on Iran’s image (Rasa News, 2025).

A similar complaint was also raised by the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali-Akbar Ahmadian. In an interview with the official website of the supreme

leader, Ahmadian expressed his regret that the accusation that Iran was weakened by recent events in the region was also being heard within Iran, although it was part of the psychological campaign being waged by the enemies of the Islamic Republic. Referring to the delay in the Iranian response to the Israeli attack, he said that the response would come at a time that best served national interests, and that military actions had to be based on military logic and not emotions. He stressed that anyone who questioned this was playing into the hands of enemies who wanted to sow fear in Iran (Iranian Supreme Leader’s website, 2024).

Summary and significance

In a lecture at Tel Aviv University, Uriah Shavit referred to the affair of the East German politician Gunter Schabowski, who gained most of his fame from a press conference on November 9, 1989, which was followed by the opening of the border between east and west Germany and the fall of the [Berlin Wall](#). At the end of the press conference, in which he referred to new regulations that were intended to allow east Germans to cross the border, Schabowski was asked when they would come into force, and although he did not know the answer, he replied: immediately. This statement led citizens to storm the wall and destroy it (Novotna, 2015). Shavit stated that soldiers stationed along the border between east and west Germany did not fire a shot at the citizens that night, even though their orders had not yet changed. That was because they understood that the price of following the orders could be greater than the price of disobedience. He claimed that regimes collapse when their supporters and defenders decide that they have lost their determination to defend themselves (TAUVOD, 2016).

Shavit’s approach can be used to explain the significant concern in the Islamic Republic, including in the conservative camp, in view of the reservations, doubts and criticisms expressed by radical groups for what they identify as a display of weakness by state institutions in the conduct

of domestic and foreign policy. Commentator and regime critic Shahn Tahmasebi, who lives outside Iran, recently estimated that doubts about Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards could also become stronger among regime supporters, and that one additional shock, such as the failure of a third Iranian strike on Israel or another Israeli attack on Iran, could be enough to finally shatter the image of the leader and the illusion of strength of the Revolutionary Guards (Tahmasebi, 2024).

This does not necessarily mean that the Islamic Republic is facing an immediate and significant threat to the cohesion of its political and security elite. Moreover, we can assume that in the scenarios of more severe internal and external challenges that could put the stability of the regime at risk, regime supporters are likely to close ranks and support it even if some of them believe that the government's policies are deviating from its ideological roots and its commitment to the fundamental values of the Islamic revolution. However, the prominent responses to the activities of radical circles could indicate that the Iranian political system itself is increasingly aware that it cannot simply treat the voices heard in the political and public spheres in recent months as part of the traditional and familiar power struggles between conservatives and reformists, or between radicals and pragmatists, and that there is an element of potential challenge to the cohesion of the ruling elite.

It appears that the need to defend themselves against rising doubts about the ideological foundation of the regime and its commitment to revolutionary principles has recently intensified, more so in view of the lessons learned from the collapse of the Assad regime, and particularly the unopposed retreat of the Syrian army as the rebels advanced, and the growing pressures faced by the Islamic Republic at present. Even if these doubts would not threaten the survival of the regime in normal times, they act as a force multiplier to other

threats to its stability. This trend could leave the Iranian leadership facing a difficult dilemma: whether to try and please the wider public by adopting a more conciliatory foreign policy and willingness to extend civilian freedoms, even at the price of possible further erosion of its ideological support base, or to satisfy the demands of its revolutionary supporters with a more radical domestic and foreign policy, at the price of risking greater public dissatisfaction and widening the gaps between the regime and the public, as well as the possibility of a renewal of protests and clashes with the west. Khamenei is already facing such a dilemma, as he approaches the test of negotiations with the United States on the nuclear issue, and he could soon be forced to agree to far-reaching compromises on the future of his country's nuclear program.

Moreover, the ability of the Iranian regime to permit a certain degree of criticism of its policies has helped it to preserve at least the appearance of ideological and political pluralism and expressions of popular representation. It is actually the possibility of criticizing government elements (excluding the Supreme Leader) that has helped the regime in its efforts to reinforce its stability and survive. Therefore, if the regime does not allow criticism even from circles identified with its ideological base, tensions could be diverted to other channels that would be even more threatening to its ideological home ground and endanger its survival.

Dr. Raz Zimmt is director of the Iran & Shi'ite Axis Program and co-editor of the *Strategic Assessment* journal at the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), a senior researcher at the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University, and holds a master's degree and a doctorate in the History of the Middle East from Tel Aviv University. His main areas of research are the politics, society and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. His book, *Iran from Inside: State and Society in the Islamic Republic*, was published by Resling in 2022. razz@inss.org.il

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