Insight

Regime Change in Iran: A Desirable Goal, but Not Necessarily Attainable

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The limited outcomes of the two recent wars with Iran in terms of eliminating nuclear and missile threats have reinforced the perception in Israel that regime change in Tehran is the ultimate solution to the Iranian threat. However, while the Islamic Republic is facing a series of severe crises, its collapse is not necessarily imminent. The wars, external pressure, and the brutal suppression of the latest wave of protests have generated fatigue and despair among the Iranian public, alongside a rally around feelings of solidarity, nationalism, and an increasing dependence on the regime's aid and welfare networks. At the same time, the security apparatuses remain cohesive and are preparing for renewed suppression of protests, while opponents of the regime continue to suffer from divisions and the lack of an agreed-upon leadership. Israel can and should act over time to weaken the regime. Nevertheless, regime change depends first and foremost on the citizens of Iran, on the internal balance of power between the regime and its opponents, and on the ability to produce a viable alternative to the current rule. Therefore, strategic planning for addressing the urgent nuclear and missile threats should not be based on regime change.

At an officer commissioning ceremony on October 21, 2026, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that there is only one way to eliminate the Iranian threat once and for all: to topple the regime. He added that this was his directive to the IDF, the Mossad, and the defense establishment. Approximately two months earlier, former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett declared that the clock for regime change in Iran would start ticking the moment the government in Israel is replaced. He made the remarks while criticizing the government's failure to bring about regime change during Operation "Roaring Lion." These statements can be understood given the limited results of the two campaigns against Iran. Despite significant operational achievements, the United States and Israel did not succeed in eliminating the Iranian nuclear program or depriving Iran of its ability to continue possessing and manufacturing missiles and UAVs, which pose a significant threat to its neighbors.

Although the two wars dealt severe blows to the leadership of the Islamic Republic and its military capabilities, the regime survived, its nuclear and missile programs were not eradicated, and the new leadership in Tehran appears, at this stage, to be even more hardliner and more willing to take risks. Operation "Rising Lion" deprived Iran of a significant portion of the industrial nuclear capability it had built over the years, but left in its possession hundreds of kilograms of enriched uranium, advanced centrifuges, know-how, personnel, and underground infrastructure. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that the two wars have strengthened Iran's motivation to pursue nuclear weapons as a guarantee of the regime's survival and as a deterrent against future attacks, although it remains unclear whether the debate within Iran on this issue has been settled. At the same time, Iran continues to retain

a significant arsenal of missiles and UAVs. The severe damage to its missile production capabilities is unlikely to prevent it from trying to rebuild them, despite the constraints.

In this reality, it is hardly surprising that Israel increasingly views regime change in Iran as the ultimate solution for removing Iranian threats—whether in the nuclear realm, in terms of strategic military capabilities (led by the ballistic missile array), or regarding Iran's continued support for its regional proxies. Regime change could indeed fundamentally resolve a significant portion of these threats, although it can be argued that the consequences of political change cannot be predicted in advance. Such was the case in Egypt, for example, when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power following the Tahrir revolution in 2011. Prime Minister Netanyahu himself miscalculated the situation when he claimed in an address to the U.S. Congress in September 2002, as part of his efforts to persuade the United States to go to war in Iraq, that eliminating Saddam Hussein and his regime would have "enormous positive effects on the region." It could be argued, for example, that the collapse of the current Iranian regime might be exploited by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to seize control of state institutions and establish a military regime. It could also lead to internal disintegration, chaos, and a loss of stability, potentially undermining the security and stability of neighboring countries. Moreover, the regime's collapse would not necessarily ensure the establishment of a democratic government, as there is no guarantee that democratic forces—whether inside Iran or among the Iranian opposition in exile—have the capability and the means necessary to achieve this.

Nevertheless, it is difficult today to convince decision-makers in Israel that a scenario worse than the current reality in Iran is possible. Even a military regime led by the IRGC would not necessarily be worse from Israel's perspective than the current regime led by Mojtaba Khamenei, in which the IRGC enjoys considerable dominance. It could be argued, for example, that active-duty or retired IRGC officers might place greater weight on their personal and organizational interests than on ideological considerations and revolutionary ideals. Furthermore, the IRGC is not a monolith and may therefore be more susceptible to power struggles and internal conflicts than the current regime, which generally enjoys a relatively high degree of internal cohesion. The central question, then, is whether Israel's strategy toward Iran—which should be reassessed in light of the lessons of the two recent wars—can be based on the working assumption that the collapse of the Iranian regime, whether as a result of foreign intervention or internal developments, is only a matter of when, not if. Developments in the "Third Islamic Republic," established in Iran following the latest war, warrant at the very least a sober and skeptical look at the likelihood of political change in Iran in the foreseeable future.

There is no doubt that the Iranian regime is facing a severe economic crisis that is pushing more and more Iranian citizens into poverty. The war and the ongoing naval blockade have inflicted unprecedented economic damage, including inflation of around 90 percent, an economic contraction of at least six percent, a sharp drop in oil revenues, a significant increase in poverty, rising unemployment, and the continued collapse of the local currency, the rial. The crisis of legitimacy that the Islamic Republic has confronted for years also remains unresolved. Furthermore, Mojtaba Khamenei's appointment as successor to his father, Ali Khamenei, is likely to deepen this crisis over time. The Iranian regime's efforts to provide explanations for the new leader's prolonged absence from the public eye reflect the authorities' growing concern over the difficulty of establishing his legitimacy: a leader who assumed office without significant formal public experience, whose religious standing is

limited, and whose appointment draws criticism due to the dynastic succession from father to son, as well as doubts regarding his condition and his decision-making capacity.

However, this series of crises does not guarantee a revolution or regime change. Two wars within a single year, the brutal suppression of the wave of protests that erupted in December 2025, and the resulting public trauma have also generated fatigue, despair, and fear of renewed conflict. Alongside hostility toward the regime, a certain degree of rallying has emerged, encouraged by the authorities, around the banner of Iranian nationalism and opposition to external attacks. Iranian authorities recently signaled their intention to facilitate the return of artists, cultural figures, and emigrants to the country. In late August, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Abbas Salehi announced that lists containing more than one hundred Iranian figures residing abroad had been sent to the relevant authorities to remove obstacles to their visiting or returning to Iran. Even if this can be seen as a cynical propaganda move by the regime, it reflects an effort to bring even its critics to its side, by cultivating feelings of patriotism and solidarity in the wake of the war.

These measures came against the backdrop of numerous factors that triggered fierce reactions in Iran, even beyond the circle of regime supporters, as an expression of national and patriotic sentiment. These include damage to national infrastructure, universities, and civilians during the war; reports of efforts by Israel and the United States to encourage subversive activity among ethnic and linguistic minorities, particularly the Kurds, which were seen as an attempt to undermine Iran's territorial integrity; and President Trump's threats to "bring Iran back to the Stone Age" and destroy Iranian civilization. The regime used these statements to reinforce, with some measure of success, the narrative that the U.S. administration is not merely seeking to topple the Iranian regime or block Iran's path to nuclear weapons, but also to harm its identity, civilization, and territorial integrity. Therefore, according to the regime's rationale, this is an existential war that requires the mobilization of the entire public, including its critics.

At the same time, the security and repressive apparatuses are preparing for a possible resurgence of protests. The war accelerated the process of securitization in Iran, and the authorities appear to be making a concerted effort to increase surveillance of society, deepen intelligence penetration, and expand the presence of security forces in public spaces. The appointment of Hossein Taeb as commander of the Basij, after years at the helm of the IRGC Intelligence Organization, is a clear expression of the regime's growing efforts to prepare for a possible resurgence of protests. His appointment decree emphasizes expanding the "popular intelligence network," utilizing new technologies, and deepening the Basij's activity in neighborhoods, mosques, and among various social groups. However, suppression efforts are currently focused primarily on thwarting potential threats from regime opponents and less on enforcing the Islamic dress code, for fear of intensifying internal tensions surrounding the issue of the hijab. Even within the religious establishment, reservations have been voiced against calls to resume stringent enforcement of the dress code. For example, the Supreme Leader's representative in Isfahan Province, Ayatollah Yousef Tabatabai-Nejad, recently stated that the campaign encouraging women to wear the hijab should be carried out gradually, persistently, and with patience, while avoiding coercive measures.

Furthermore, regime opponents, both inside and outside Iran, continue to face organizational difficulties and the absence of an agreed-upon leadership. Therefore, even if popular protests resume,

they alone will not necessarily bring about the desired political change or establish a viable alternative to the current government. Moreover, the ruling elite, particularly the repressive and enforcement apparatuses, appear to remain cohesive and ready to suppress any potential threat to the regime's stability. This cohesion can be expected to hold at least as long as Iran remains in a sensitive security situation marked by the possibility of renewed hostilities.

At the same time, the authorities are seeking interim solutions to the worsening economic crisis. These include updating the value of food vouchers for citizens; local efforts to increase oversight of the prices of basic goods, for example through municipal retail networks to soften the blow for lower-income groups; reducing fuel consumption; and continuing to draw on the foreign currency reserves accumulated in recent years. These measures, alongside households' customary preparedness for emergencies, a cultural tradition of mutual aid, and a welfare network of charitable and relief institutions, are helping to prevent, at least for now, severe shortages of basic goods or famine. Moreover, government assistance is becoming more essential than ever for many citizens. Their dependence on the regime's relief and support mechanisms—at both the national and municipal levels—limits their ability to openly oppose the regime.

In a recent interview with the reformist newspaper *Etemad*, sociologist Taghi Azadarmaki addressed the resilience of Iranian society in the face of the deepening economic crisis. He argued that Iranian society has long prepared itself to live under harsh conditions and in states of emergency. This preparedness is rooted in a culture of "emergency reserves": Iranian families tend to keep significant amounts of gold, foreign currency, essential goods, and foodstuffs at home.

Ultimately, while regime change could indeed help remove a significant portion of Iranian threats, it depends first and foremost on the citizens of Iran and on the internal dynamics between the regime and its supporters, on the one hand, and its opponents, on the other. Such change will only be possible following a shift in the balance of power between those seeking a revolutionary change to the political status quo and those determined to preserve it at all costs. This process could lead to the gradual erosion of the regime until its collapse, once the circles surrounding it lose faith in its viability and its ability to continue using its repressive apparatus to ensure its long-term survival. A shift in the balance of power could occur through fracturing the cohesion of the regime's apparatus and the military-security elite backing it, or through the quantitative growth (increasing the number of protesters) and qualitative advancement (establishing a broad, cross-sector coalition) of the protest movement. The desired political change is to be hoped for, but there is no way to predict when it will occur. Attacks on national infrastructure do not guarantee the regime's collapse, either. They could turn Iran into an even more failed state, but failed states can survive for a long time and continue to pose significant threats.

This does not mean that Israel should adopt a passive approach and refrain from taking proactive steps to undermine the Iranian regime's stability over time. It can and should work steadily toward weakening it, and prepare for a crisis ruling or revolutionary transition using a range of diplomatic, economic, and covert tools. These include advancing initiatives that grant Iranian citizens access to free media and information; publicly voicing support for protesters, which could encourage them to continue their struggle; and preparing, through various means and channels, for the day when millions of Iranians take to the streets and need every form of assistance available. Nevertheless, strategic planning regarding

Iran should not be based on the prospect of regime change, particularly given the continued progress of its nuclear program and the reconstitution of its missile array.

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