Prospect of a Revolutionary Change in Iran post-JCPOA: The Crucial Role of the MEK
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To estimate the chances of success for the current wave of nationwide protests and the possibility of regime change, we need, first, to understand the domestic, regional, and international context in which the protests are developing. The interaction of players at those three levels is going to determine the chances of success for current nation-wide protests and its apparent goal of regime change.

At the domestic level, we have three major players: the people of Iran, the organized resistance movement against the regime, and the Iranian regime. Regarding the Iranian regime, we need to know its type and primary decision-making mechanism. It is commonly assumed that Iran is ruled by a dictatorship or an authoritarian regime. Certain experts, scholars, and activists qualify the description as a religious dictatorship. While one of the main characteristics of an authoritarian or dictatorial regime is the existence of limited pluralism within the power structure, the mullahs’ regime apparently lacks that diversity. One might object by mentioning the existence of at least two main factions, i.e., “hardliners” and “moderates,” as evidence of plurality. However, when one considers objective domestic and foreign policy criteria, the distinction between “moderates” and “hardliners” fades away. Instead, the appearance of any dichotomy or power struggle between the factions is the result of a deceptive political game played by the regime.
The earliest indications of the assumption by US policymakers of a power struggle and “hardliner-moderate” dichotomy within the Iranian regime goes back to the early 1980s. At the time, US and European officials tried to find and reach out to “moderates” inside Iran for help releasing hostages taken by Iran’s Lebanese and Palestinian proxies. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of the majlis (parliament), was deemed to be the highest ranking “moderate.” Establishing direct contact with a “faction” within the Iranian regime was expected to produce two main benefits: At the domestic level, the United States and Europeans could help the “moderates” get the upper hand over the “hardliners,” and in the long run improve the regime’s behavior. That was the rationale behind providing American arms to Iran during the “Iran-Contra” scandal. Since Iran badly needed the arms and achieving them would be considered a success, the argument goes, the “moderates” would be credited for the accomplishment and become stronger in Iran’s power structure. At the foreign policy level, the “moderates” could improve Iran’s regional behavior and, for example, exert their influence over Iran’s proxies to help release the hostages.

The actual outcome of the engagement with the “moderates” did not go as expected. The incentives the Iranians received for their role in helping to release the hostages only encouraged their support for the terrorist groups and hostage-taking, because it clearly proved profitable. More hostages taken by Iran’s proxies meant more incentives by the US and Europeans for Iran’s help in releasing them. The concrete results of the engagement policy of the United States and
European were more incentives, along with a scandal at the international level for the United States, and acquisition of the American arms needed by the Iranian regime to prolong the war with Iraq.

A prominent example of how widely the “hardliner-moderate” dichotomy was accepted and shaped U.S. policy towards Iran is the case of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. It was assumed that his rival, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, was the Supreme Leader’s and the “hardliners’” favorite. It was also assumed that Khatami’s presidency was the result of a serious power struggle between the “reformists” (the revised version of “moderates”) and the “hardliners” who held almost all power positions in Iran’s legislature and judiciary. These assumptions were the rationale for the policy of engagement with the “moderate” Khatami. In a “gesture of goodwill” launching the approach, the main Iranian opposition groups, the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), were designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO). Meanwhile, the mullahs in Tehran were clandestinely developing their nuclear program.

After the National Council of Resistance released revelations about Iran’s secret nuclear sites in 2002, Khatami was no longer a good fit for the regime. A “moderate” president who claimed to be open to dialogue with the world could not justify and defend the exposed nuclear program. To be able to continue their strategically important program, the mullahs needed to change gears from the “moderate” to the “hardliner” mode. In reality, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
was not Khatami’s rival; he was a close ally seeking to accomplish for the regime what Khatami, thanks to the revelations of the Iranian resistance group, was no longer able to.

As another example, an important assumption underpinning the nuclear talks resulting in the Iran deal, or JCPOA, was that “moderates” are controlling the government and, despite the opposition of the powerful “hardliners,” want to achieve a nuclear agreement with the world powers. Therefore, there was a perceived overlap between the interests of the world community and the “moderates” in crafting a nuclear deal. The concessions made by the United States, including the retreat from anywhere, anytime inspections, were deemed necessary to enable the “moderate” Iranian negotiators to sell the deal to the “hardliners” at home. The Obama administration’s optimism about the deal and its impact on the Middle East was based on the assumption that achieving the deal with world powers would strengthen the “moderates” inside Iran.

The question then arises: what is the nature of the mullahs’ regime? There are two elements central to any concept of a political system of state/government, besides the requisites of population, geography, and power: law and order. At a minimum, a political unit requires a set of rules and laws to bring about order in the social life of a population in a particular land. The distinctive feature of modern states is the existence of laws directed at the goal of putting the social life into order and regularity. As a result, if an entity lacks these two crucial elements, it cannot be called a government in the modern sense.
By this definition, what is commonly called the “Iranian regime” lacks both elements and is not a political regime in the technical sense. Firstly, there is no system of laws and regulations in place in Iran. While at a superficial level, there are legislative and judiciary branches of government, their decisions and verdicts are neither consistent with nor rooted in any religious or secular law. Instead, the guiding principle behind all government decisions is “the interests of the establishment” (maslahat-e nezam). The conceptual basis is that in every instance, the Supreme Leader is allowed to do whatever he deems to be in the interest of the establishment and its survival. Neither profane nor legal rules, including the “laws” and “rules” previously ratified by the establishment, nor even the Islamic rules and norms, can withstand the force of “the interests of the establishment.” According to this view, the Supreme Leader is justified even in banning the performance of Islamic rituals, if that becomes necessary for the preservation of power. The interests of the “regime” trump any “law” or “rule,” even those ratified by a branch of that government. There is, in fact, no rule of law, and hence no essential difference between the “Iranian regime” and such terrorists as ISIS in terms of lawlessness and disregard for any legal or moral constraint, not even their own professed “rules.”

The goal of the ratification and implementation of laws and rules by a government is the establishment of order in the society. In a society in which the advocate and guardian of orderliness, in theory, is itself the greatest source of violence in the technical sense of violating laws, rules and rights, social order cannot be established and there will be chaos. The result of
the lawless rule of the mullahs in Iran has been a disordered society. High rates of crime, especially involving family members, record levels of drug addiction, and systematic corruption at various levels of the government are only some of the indicators of the social disorder. As the Arabic proverb says, “People follow the religion/ways of their kings.” Since there is in fact no law, there is no order. In the absence of the two main elements which distinguish a political system of state/government from a lawless state of affairs, Iran, in fact, is not ruled by a government.

Therefore, in that the Tehran regime respects no law or rule, nor has there been any real hardliner-moderate power struggle that could impact the regime’s policies, at the first level of analysis, i.e., within the regime, there is no major variable that can explain the emergence since December 2017 of relentless nationwide protests or impact their outcome.

At that same level of analysis, we have the people of Iran. The recent outbreak of anti-regime protests reaffirmed that the mullahs are standing on very shaky ground, ruling a dissident majority. However, this was not the first time that Iranians had taken to the streets. In 2009, millions of Iranians expressed their rejection of the regime in what was later called the “Green Movement.” In addition, Iranians have regularly been expressing their anti-regime sentiments since the mullahs’ rise to power in 1979. Hence, Iranians’ dissatisfaction with the regime, as a variable, has not recently changed significantly in a way that could explain the developments or impact the outcome of the current wave of anti-regime protests.
The next player at the domestic level is the Iranian resistance movement. So far, the regime has been able to suppress unorganized popular unrest. While the existence of a dissident majority in and of itself is important, it is an organized resistance movement that can pose a threat to the regime and materialize the majority’s wish. Although the people of Iran have consistently shown dissatisfaction with the regime over the past four decades, Iran’s organized resistance movement has recently undergone a remarkable change. In late 2016, when the process of relocating members of the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), the main resistance group, from Iraq to Europe was completed, the movement shifted gears from the defensive to the offensive mode. Although many factors contributed to the recent outbreak of protests in Iran, one in particular cannot be overemphasized: the crucial organizational role of the MEK transformed the protests into a nationwide show of opposition. One year after its members were freed from Iraq and settled in Europe, in December 2017 the MEK flexed its muscles. It also means that as an independent variable, the addition of the MEK to the equation has substantially changed the balance of power between the regime and the Iranian dissident majority vis-a-vis current protests.

At the regional level, there are several factors that are relevant to any assessment of future developments in Iran. Such factors include how the crisis plays out in Yemen, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, domestic conflicts in Lebanon, and the tension between the Iranian regime and the Arab countries and Israel. However, the most important regional variable impacting the
developments in Iran is the outcome of the war in Syria. Despite the tensions brewing between Iran and many regional powers, if the regime succeeds in establishing itself as a winner in the Syrian war, the mullahs will potentially be able to suppress the popular unrest, for the reason that so far, and despite all the financial, political, and military burdens of the war in Syria, Iran has been able to portray itself as the key member of the winning side, i.e., Assad, Russia, Iran, Hezbollah. Such a win is crucial to securing the loyalty of the military, the police, and the repressive forces such as the Bassij and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Collectively, these forces comprise the pillars of the regime’s assets in containing the dissident majority and, as a result, withstanding current wave of protests. As long as the regime’s repressive forces are intact and functional, the mullahs might be able to suppress dissent.

However, if Iran is unable to keep up its winning face in Syria, and the Quds Force and Hezbollah are forced to withdraw their forces, or are defeated in a military confrontation with Israel, current levels of popular unrest in conjunction with the organizing capacity of the MEK can bring down the mullahs’ regime. The regime’s repressive forces are not going to stand with the losing side. Instead, they most likely will either simply desert or jump on the bandwagon and join the uprising. This explains why the regime is spending astronomical levels of financial, military, and political resources in Syria in order to keep its forces and prevent Assad’s downfall.

The most important variable at the international level that affects the developments in Iran is the fate of the nuclear deal. As long as the nuclear deal with the P5+1 was in place, it was
highly improbable that any party would act militarily to target Iran’s nuclear facilities. In fact, achieving that security assurance was the key motive for Iran’s about-face on the nuclear issue, and return to the talks in 2011. But counterintuitive to Western optimism, these circumstances did not bolster regional peace or stability. Reassured of the improbability of any military option, Iran was emboldened and went on the offensive, stepping up its destabilizing regional interventions. Therefore, scrapping the nuclear deal, thereby denying Iran the undeserved security reassurance, has already motivated the regime to give up its offensive mode in favor of a defensive posture.

Iran’s inaction in the face of massive Israeli operations against its bases in Syria which tellingly started less than twenty-four hours after President Trump scrapped the nuclear deal, and an end to Iran’s harassment of American Navy ships in the Persian Gulf are clear signs of Iran’s defensive mode after the U.S. exited the JCPOA. A defensive regional mode means, most importantly, a fundamentally changed risk/benefit balance of active Iranian involvement in regional conflicts. Iran will need to recalculate the benefits of fueling the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, for example, in light of the potential risk of inciting a military confrontation with regional powers. Iran, most probably, will need to surrender its policy of export of crises, while trying to rally its base in Tehran and avoid direct military confrontation. For a regime standing on very shaky ground at home, this represents an existential threat. Such a regional retreat will
probably hearten the dissident majority at home and, in conjunction with the organizing power of the MEK, most probably bring down the regime.

In addition, reimplemention of sanctions in November 2018 adversely affects the mullahs’ financial and economic resources. Iran gained a vast amount of money as a result of the nuclear deal. Contrary to the dealmakers’ assumption, those resources were not used to improve the economic or industrial infrastructure or quality of life for the people of Iran. Instead, the regime used essentially all the money to fuel the regional conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. This explains the slogan heard nationwide during the recent protests in Iran: “Let Syria alone, take care of the [Iranian] people!” In other words, denying the regime financial and economic incentives and reimplementing the sanctions, especially in conjunction with the lack of security assurances, have dramatically affected the regime’s ability to destabilize the region, and increased the potential of popular unrest capable of bringing down the regime.

Ending the nuclear deal also deprives the regime of the unwarranted legitimacy and prestige offered by the P5+1 during the nuclear talks and afterwards. The international community under the leadership of the Obama administration treated the Iranian regime as a “normal” player with legitimate interests, who should be viewed as a partner in efforts to achieve regional peace and stability. That false picture abandoned dissidents in Iran and facilitated the regime’s repression of the people by removing concerns about any Western reaction. Denying Iran’s rulers any unwarranted legitimacy changes the regime’s balance of power with the
dissident majority and their organized resistance movement. Successive waves of nationwide protests since December 2017 have removed all doubt that Iranians want nothing less than regime change. The uprising also reaffirmed the pivotal role of the MEK in transforming popular dissidence into an organized movement directed at the goals of freedom and democracy. Iran’s people and popular resistance movement have demonstrated their commitment to the sort of legitimate change that deserves recognition by the United States. Assurance of the moral and political support of the U.S. and the free world, will improve the potential of Iran’s people and organized resistance movement to bring down the current regime in favor of a democratic, secular government. Hence, ending the nuclear deal could prove the most important international variable facilitating the success of the current popular uprising in Iran.

Concluding Remarks

Iranians have never accepted the extreme interpretation of Islam advocated by the ruling regime. The dissident majority is fighting for freedom and democracy. Hence, it is safe to predict that massive protests are not going to subside. However, the ultimate success of the protests in achieving the goal of regime change depends on a number of variables, the most important of which is the MEK. The relocation of Iranian freedom fighters to Europe changed the balance of power between the regime and the people of Iran by adding the organizing power of the MEK to the equation, putting the mullahs’ regime in precarious circumstances, as evident in the successive waves of nationwide protests. The rule of the mullahs will be ended by an organized
resistance movement, not a mere dissident majority, which is why supporting the MEK is so crucial to bringing about real change in Iran.

At the regional level, the main variable affecting the possibility and potential gains of current protests is the outcome of crisis in Syria. If Iran is allowed to portray itself as a key winner, the mullahs will likely be able to secure the loyalty of their repressive forces in the face of the protests. At the international level, ending the nuclear deal has been the main variable determining the possibility and the chances of success of current protests in Iran. President Trump’s decision to end the JCPOA, depriving Iran of the unwarranted legitimacy and prestige offered by the P5+1, and of the security assurances implicit in the deal; coupled with the regime’s lack of financial and economic resources and the increasingly obvious popular unrest at home, will undoubtedly compel the regime to shift to the defensive mode, despite any pretensions to the contrary. For this reason, the consequences of ending the nuclear deal will likely facilitate the success of the current uprising in Iran by empowering the dissident majority and, at the same time, disheartening the regime’s repressive forces.