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Will Iran's political system experience a wave of "change" in the near future?

Attempt of a forecast



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The year 2020 will, through the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, write history. Some states, undoubtedly, will be worse impacted than others, as their internal political system may not be able or stable enough to respond to the emerging crisis appropriately. Among these is the Iran. Until 19th September 2020, the Iranian health minister reported 21,000 fatalities from Covid-19.¹ Although the pandemic hit the country forcefully and elicited new distress – enormous tensions as well as political and social unrest existed already before the pandemic.² An assessment of current developments.

1 – The Status Quo

On the 8th of January 2020, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) shot down a passenger plane shortly after take-off from Teheran airport with destination Kiev (Ukraine). In response, protests broke out against the IRGC and the Iranian government.³ In September 2020, international protests arose after the execution of the popular Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari, who the government accused of having killed a police officer during protests in 2018. Among other responses, international organisations called on

banning Iran from international sports competitions.⁴

From 16th July 2020 onwards, the military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan about the region Nagorno-Karabakh – until then a frozen conflict – broke out again. For the Iranian government, this conflict is of critical concern as Azeri form the second largest ethnic group in Iran after the Persian population.⁵

Recognising the weakened position of Iran in 2020, propositions arose (particularly from Western experts with Iranian roots) that the West should support “Regime Change”.⁶

Former United States of America (USA) CIA-analyst and current resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute Kenneth M. Pollak, however, cautioned that irrespective of the Coronavirus pandemic and pressure from in- and outside Iran, it would be improbable that the Iranian regime would immediately collapse and "Regime Change" would be successful.⁷

On 30th May 2020, Michael McFaul (former special assistant of the National Security Council under US-President Barack Obama) and Abbas Milani (co-director of the Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution) had pointed in an opinion piece for the Washington Post that the "working poor" – for many years base and supporters of the Islamic Republic and its current political system – were going to the streets against the government, in unrest from economic pressure due to the coronavirus pandemic and economic sanctions.⁸ Interestingly, the domestic democratic forces in Iran that support change are concurrently proponents of the Iran Nuclear Deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) that recently had been

terminated unilaterally by the US-government under president Donald Trump. The authors conclude that regime change would be only a matter of time, the concurrent pressure exerted by the United States of America however would rather bring Iran closer to authoritarian Russia and China.

The election of Joe Biden as 46th President of the United States of America brought new opportunities to Iran's foreign policy. In exchange for diplomatic proceedings, Iran demanded a return to the JCPOA. After the presidency of Donald Trump, the Iran had the chance to return to the negotiation table with the USA, without raising the impression of having submitted to pressure from the Trump government. This is crucial, as for Iranian politics the concept of "nafs" is paramount.⁹ In brief, this concept implies that any Iranian government that submits voluntarily to external pressure would lose its legitimacy towards its domestic population and elites.¹⁰ This is reminiscent of the Chinese "Mandate of Heaven". Since the beginning of the 20th century, China – as Iran and the wider culture

area of “Greater Iran” – has been working to identify a response to the dynamics of external actors.¹¹ On 9th January 2020, Benjamin Denison (scholar at the Center for Strategic Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University) explained that an externally forced regime change may seem attractive for actors in the United States of America, but that unintended consequences of such action could be dramatic.¹² A look into the recent history of Iran shows this remarkably.

Having the external pressure relaxed by the new US presidency though, first negotiations already started in February 2021.



Reza Shah Pahlavi was Shah of Iran from 1925 to 1941.

During the Cold War, when the USA and the Soviet Union (SU) competed for global supremacy, Iran was a central region of competition due to its strategically important location. The “Cold War fear” and focus on Iran at the time rooted back to the collaboration between the SU and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) in occupying Iran during World War II. In August 1941, British and Soviet military entered into Iran and forced Reza Shah, who had only in 1925 laid the foundation to the Pahlavi dynasty, to step down on the 16th September 1941 and exit the country. (Reza Shah died in his South African exile in 1944.¹³) On 29th January 1942 the UK, SU and the Iranian government of Mohammed Reza Shah agreed in the “Tripartite Treaty Alliance” that the allied forces would leave Iran at latest six months after the end of the war. Furthermore, the USA, UK and SU agreed during the Teheran Conference in 1943 that the territorial integrity and independence of Iran shall be guaranteed, and reassured that the withdrawal of troops after ending the war should proceed as agreed. However, the

Sovjet Union under Joseph Stalin refused to withdraw their troops from North Iran in 1945. Instead, the SU attempted to extend its influence in Iran during the “Iran Crisis”.

Stalin ordered in 1945 to support separatist forces in Iran, aiming for a secession of the northern Iranian provinces.¹⁴ In consequence, the “Autonomous Republic Azerbaijan” emerged, as well as the “Kurdish Republic Mahabad”. When the Sovjet Union in 1946 had eventually withdrawn its troops in response to pressure from the USA, these satellite states mostly collapsed. This was one of the starting points of the Cold War that ensued between the two superpowers. The Iran had been forced during the UK-SU occupation to lift the ban on the Communist Party (banned in 1937), and on 2nd October 1941 the communist “Tudeh Party of Iran” formed in the Iranian capital. Soon, Tudeh became part of the opposition against the Iranian monarchy. In 1979, the Tudeh Party played a role in the Iranian overthrow eventually leading to the Iranian (Islamic) Revolution.

In 1949 the Shah succeeded with a constitutional change to receive the

power to dissolve the parliament. In the same year, an “Upper House” was established of whose 60 members half were selected by the Shah himself. But soon, a political confrontation between the Shah and Mohammed Mossadegh, the leader of the party alliance “National Front” and recently elected prime minister, arose. On 1st May 1951, Mossadegh announced the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry which until then had been controlled by the UK. The consequence was a boycott of Iran by virtually all international oil companies and a domestic financial crisis in Iran. Nevertheless, the Shah granted his prime minister Mossadegh special executive powers to respond to the situation for a period of 12 months.¹² Equipped with these special powers, the Mossadegh government attempted – among other actions – a land reform that also affected lands owned by the Shah himself. Furthermore, the Shah was prohibited to maintain his own foreign diplomatic contacts for representing the country. The foreign policy should instead fall entirely into the responsibility of the ministry of foreign affairs.¹⁴

The UK saw in this power struggle and the ongoing change in Iran a threat to its influence in the region. The nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company resembled a notable loss of influence in the country. The UK thus turned to the USA to lobby for support against the Mossadegh government. In 1953, the US intelligence service CIA organised a successful *coup d'état* against the nationalist Iranian government and Mossadegh was placed under house arrest. This coup, however, united major parts of the Iranian opposition against the USA. Both the increasing political and cultural influence of the USA in Iran in the years following the coup, and the hostility of the Iranian opposition against the USA were drivers towards the 1979 Islamic Revolution that united very different groups to topple the Shah.¹⁵

There are various elites and groups of power in Iran, beyond the clerics whose influence is the most visible. A group which, as a side note, has been particularly hit by fatalities from the coronavirus pandemic. For instance, Ayatollah Hashem Bathayie Golpayegani, member of the Iranian "Assembly of Experts of the Leadership", died in March 2020.

Until his death, at least 12 politicians (by the time in, or retired from office) deceased from Covid-19.¹⁶

In recent years, increasing criticism of the clerical Shia elite of Iran arose. The erosion of the ideological fundament of the Islamic Republic emerges as a younger generation of Iranians increasingly sources from the cultural heritage of pre-islamic Iran. This of course is a threat to the current Status Quo of power distribution.¹⁷ However, the cleric leaders can do little against these emerging ideas that are already so deeply engrained in the minds of the people in Iran and beyond in the cultural area of "Greater Iran".

The cleric elite has been challenged from the beginning of the Islamic Republic by criticism of the domestic social situation, and claims of a "betrayal of the social ideals of the revolution". Looking deeper, the "revolution" has been much rather a gradual change. Often ignored is the fact that particularly the Iraqi aggression against Iran (First Gulf War), supported by the West, stabilised the power of the current political system in Iran, and fostered radicalisation of the regime. After the

blow-back during the height of the Islamic Revolution 1979, the USA gave a dynamic to the revolutionary proceedings that stabilised the Iranian power structures until this day, against the expectations of contemporary observers.

formed in 2009 as a protest against the then newly-elected government. This changed during the 2020 demonstrations.¹⁸ The current Iranian government attempts to respond to the social unrest by following the concept of “balance”



*Protest at the Grand Bazaar in Teheran on 25th June 2018.
Image: Omid Vahabzadeh / Fars News Agency, CC-BY-4.0*

The Iranian middle class had for long profited from the Islamic Republic system, but had already gotten under social and economical pressure before the Coronavirus pandemic hit. However, it stayed aback when the “Green Movement”

that is deeply rooted as a political concept in Iranian history. By including various groups of power or interest into the power structure, this concept supports - as it has in the past - the preservation of power.^{10,19}

2 – Change in Iran

The Middle East is currently characterised by instability, accelerated by the Coronavirus pandemic. Change in Iran is therefore, also because of the historical experiences of the Iranian population, a stress test reminiscent of the 1979 revolution and the ensuing war with Iraq.²⁰

The biggest external threat to change in Iran is certainly Turkey under its president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The Turkish president is in a difficult political situation domestically. Undoubtedly, he is attempting to distract from his domestic problems by challenging regional competitors through a variety of small-scale conflicts, becoming therefore however an unpredictable foreign policy actor. The Turkish engagements in Syria and Lybia as much as the gas dispute in the mediterranean²¹ are causing confrontations with Iran on multiple levels.^{5,22}

Iran responds to the multiple conflicts in its vicinity by attempting to establish military superiority, as it has already been attempting during

the reign of the Shah.²³ However, from the experience of the war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic these days follows rather asymmetric strategies and tactics. Opposite to common assumptions, the strategy applied by Iranian security authorities has been shown long-term continuity, uninterrupted by the Iranian Revolution. See for instance the transition of the former SAVAK, the intelligence service at the time of the Shah, to the current intelligence service of the Islamic Republic VEVAK.²⁴ Hussein Fardust was before the revolution a close ally of the Shah and deputy director of the SAVAK. The Revolutionary Council tasked Fardust to build the successor organisation VEVAK, of which he became the first director. In consequence, established networks and strategies from the times of the Shah persisted and formed the doctrines of the young Islamic Republic. This is reminiscent of the formation of the “Organisation Gehlen” in post-World War II Germany, the predecessor of today's German federal intelligence service BND, formed at the time with lead personel of the nazi military (“Wehrmacht”) and members of the

nazi party (NSDAP) under the direction of the USA CIA.

Currently, notable change, though often overlooked, is visible in Iranian legitimacy and communication. For instance, the Iranian Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance issued a decree on the 24th October 2019 that the birthday of the prophet Zarathustra would be taken into the official Iranian calendar.²⁵

Important indicators for which may be to come in Iran are the uncommon protests of 2017/18. Unexpectedly, these protests started in conservative strongholds²⁶ and were initially regarded as attempts of conservative forces to impede economical reforms planned by the Iranian government. It should not be ignored that the Islamic Revolution from the beginning comprised central components of social justice, not least because of the experiences of the reign of the Shah. In fact, the early revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini focussed his criticism of the Shah around the social question.²⁷ The Shah tried to defuse social tensions with his “White Revolution”, a 6-point reform plan aiming to rapidly modernise Iran.

However, as he failed to involve the different interest groups into decision making, his reform attempt essentially resulted ten years later, after the Mossadegh-government had been toppled by the CIA, in the 1963 popular uprising against the “US-installed” Shah.²⁸ In the ensuing years, Iran saw a large number of construction projects which were particularly welcomed by the West-oriented (educated) Iranian elites.

The push to modernised construction, however, threatened to make the historically grown appearances of cities vanish, as it had happened in other states around the Persian gulf before. This push to construction was only abandoned in 1968.²⁹ During the modernisation efforts, other groups that were left exempted from profiting from the wealth of the country (stemming from the oil industries) were civil servants and the police force.³⁰

A major question in those days related to the international integration of the Iranian economy. Should Iran pursue a rapid opening strategy, or would a rather cautious opening be advisable to prevent political dependencies from

international economic relations?³¹ Today, Iran is in a similar situation in the context of dearly needed economic reform.³² The current inner-Iranian debate as to how the economy should be modernised and oriented thus needs to be analysed in the context of the past developments that eventually escalated into the Islamic Revolution.³³ This legacy and the surrounding conflict will still persist after any other potential wave of change in Iran in the future. Through its economic influence and power the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)³⁴ has after all succeeded to maintain the Iranian economy mostly self-sufficient (autarkic) and resilient in the face of international economic sanctioning regimens.¹⁰

During the “White Revolution”, Iran had to inquire in 1961 to the USA for wheat deliveries to secure its food supplies. The then US-government under president John F. Kennedy provided assistance, but only in exchange for Iranian reforms to smash the structure of individual owners of large estates as landowners.³⁵ The Shah agreed, but a hastily executed land reform to

dispossess owners of large estates caused massive political and social ramifications. Eventually, in the ten years before the Islamic Revolution, Iran turned from a food-exporting into an -importing country. Iranian critics confronted this development stating that “the farmers lost their soul”. Had the Iran a well-established irrigation system before, the enforced modernisation, during which the rural population by far and large left for the cities, left behind an unmaintained and degrading irrigation system that increasingly lost functionality.³⁶

Though these experiences lie in the past, their legacies last to this day. They are the roots for the persistent mistrust of Iranian elites against free trade and concessions in international agreements that may strike back and harm the country. A repercussion of such developments could again be observed during the 2017/18 protests.³⁷ For instance, the recent currency reform intended to replace the Rial with the Toman, a former Persian currency unit that was revived, and currently is used in parallel to the Rial.³⁸ The use of a historic currency name on its own

sends a message about the sentiments of a state and its population.

Because of the experiences during the reign of the Shah and the war with Iraq, the strive for economic and military modernisation is a constant in Iranian politics. This constant will also persist by far and large after any wave of political change. And it will also lead to future conflicts and tensions in regards to prioritisation of political aims. Exemplary, the struggle during modernisation efforts was visible in China's modernisation, where economical considerations in military modernisation were contained in favour of maintaining conventional striking capability.³⁹

The cultural heritage of Iran and the “Greater Iran” cultural area remains important political capital.⁴⁰ The threat by former US-president Donald Trump to attack cultural heritage sites⁴¹ thus was perceived as major cause of concern by Iranians in- and outside Iran. Attacking the heritage sites could have rallied support behind the Iranian government, also from Iranians living abroad or in exile that are normally critically or hostile against the Iranian government, such as the son in law of the last Shah, Ardeshir Zaehdi, who is living in exile in London (UK).

History and culture still today have a major impact on Iranian domestic power structures and political actors,



which are well aware of their importance. Analyses conducted by Western observers way to often ignore these relationships, giving way to belief and/or confirmation bias and eventually “turkey illusions” (i.e. making incorrect conclusions by extrapolating from observed past trends because of misunderstanding the root causes of the trends, thus becoming blind to anticipate coming turns of the trend). The same happened in the phase right before the wave of change in the communist states of the Soviet Union in 1989 started, where most western analysts were caught by surprise⁴³ although the indications for coming change had already been there. David Engermann describes in a 2004 essay the interesting interplay of human factors in analysts’ perspectives on the example of the history of “sovietology” in US-American academic studies of the Soviet world during Cold War times.⁴⁴ The political and generational conflicts of the 1960’s in the Western world as well were factors that biased analyses and perceptions within and beyond that academic discipline.⁴⁵

Similar patterns can be observed currently in analyses on Iran. For instance, Mark Silinsky recently compared the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) with the Nazi Germany “Schutzstaffel” (SS, paramilitary organisation serving as elite squadron for Nazi power execution) and the Soviet Union intelligence service KGB,⁴⁶ both serving highly ideologised political regimes. These kind of comparisons, however, distort the perception and conclusion regarding Iran and its activities. Iran for instance thoroughly and critically observed the activities from Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaida, two fundamentalist and ideological Islamist organisations that are hostile against any pre-Islamic monuments and heritage. Also the Afghan Taliban, early coalitioners of Al-Qaida, were initially very critical towards Al-Qaida’s plan to destroy e.g. the Buddha-statues at the heritage site of Bamiyan, although they submitted to Al-Qaida’s plan eventually in 2001. Mullah Omar, then leader of the Taliban, explained in a 2004 interview that the Taliban had accepted the destruction only following pressure from Islamists

abroad.⁴⁷ These proceedings however demonstrate not only the importance of cultural heritage and history for Middle Eastern societies, but also that rationality in decision making in historical and cultural awareness remains a stronger driver than ideology.

After the conclusion of the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2015 (JCPOA), Iran attempted to open up economically and to focus on modernisation. Conservative forces were strong critics of this path. Opposite to the assumptions of many Western analysts, however, criticism did not stem from a perceived threat to their own power and influence, but rather from the Iranian society's experience from pre-revolutionary times.

The Iranian youth called the name of the long-deceased Reza Shah,⁴⁸ the first Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty and the father of the toppled last Shah, who at the beginning of the 20th century had led the country towards modernisation, against all odds and resistances, guided by the example of Kemal Atatürk and his modernisation of Turkey. Reza Shah wanted to make Iran independent from the hegemony of UK and Russia

(later the Soviet Union) which had dominated Iran until then. For this aim, he also engaged German experts, which led to increasingly close ties between then-Germany and Iran. This effort again demonstrates the earlier mentioned concept of “nafs”, though eventually the ties to Germany caused the later occupation of Iran until the end of World War II.

3 – Foreign Policy Conclusion

Donald Trump early on in his presidency criticised the deal with Iran (JCPOA), and eventually in 2018 translated this criticism into the unilateral withdrawal of the USA from its JCPOA commitments. The major competitor of the USA meanwhile is the People's Republic of China. In 1994, long-term presidential National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in fact wrote in his book *“The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives”* that the US should ally with Iran to contain the influence of the Russian Federation, and that the USA and Iran had shared strategic interests in

the region.⁴⁹ The Chinese “Belt and Road” Initiative, a major infrastructure project to build trade lines from East Asia to Europe, depends on Iran and the cultural area “Greater Iran” (in which Iran has a major influence) as a transit connection.² Therefore, the major competitor of the USA may have changed – but the political significance of the Iran for US foreign policy persisted.

The former US government under president Trump signalled early that it would withdraw from the Middle East.⁵⁰ In fact, Trump fired his then National Security Advisor John Bolton, claiming that Bolton desired war against Iran, which Trump would have prevented. Furthermore, he claimed that Bolton “didn’t get along with other people”.⁵¹ Iran’s religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei commented on 9th January 2019 on Twitter that (supposedly) Bolton would be a “first-class idiot”,⁵² and Ali Rabiei, spokesperson of the Iranian government, commented later in 2019 that the Iranian political system against all of Bolton’s efforts to undermine it would be still in power.⁵³

As part of the change in geopolitical focus of the Trump government, the USA in autumn 2020 withdrew from Afghanistan. Before the withdrawal (and since 2019) the US had negotiated with the Afghan Taliban.⁵⁴ As the Washington Post reports, even though the negotiations overall failed, the US and Taliban agreed cooperation against the Islamic State (IS) group.⁵⁵ Similarly, the US had before agreed with Iran to cooperate in fighting back the IS in Iraq. Already in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, Iran had sent a diplomatic note to the USA via the Swiss embassy offering an agreement about different fields of conflicts between the countries. The USA, however, rejected the offer.⁵⁶

In advance of the official negotiations that eventually led to the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), Oman arranged secret direct negotiations between the USA and Iran.⁵⁷ The JCPOA, however, was only addressing Iran’s nuclear programme. It is remarkable to consider that two years after the US had indicated to withdraw from the JCPOA, it according to a Business Insider

report offered a credit line of 15 Billion USD as an emergency credit to Iran,⁵⁸ while simultaneously imposing sanctions. Under Trump, the USA also relaxed the containment on North Korea, leading eventually to a meeting between North Korea's Kim Yong Un and Donald Trump at the Korean demarcation line. The withdrawal of US troops also from South Korea forced the two Koreas to enter into closer exchanges. A cooperating, or even reunified Korean peninsula, equipped with nuclear bombs, would thereby have resembled a major strategic challenge for the People's Republic of China.⁵⁹

The Trump-administration had indicated plans for withdrawal from both Iraq and Afghanistan, plans that materialised in autumn 2020.⁶⁰ Alongside, the Trump government in September 2020 announced a new deal with Iran.⁶¹ The succeeding US-government under president Joe Biden continued both the resumption of talks with Iran, and the troop withdrawal from the Middle East. This offers opportunities for Iran, similarly as the Korean states experienced an opening of opportunities.

However, the Iranian leadership is still facing considerable challenges. The murder of the nuclear scientist Fachrisadeh in November 2020, as well as an incident at the nuclear production site Natans both were attributed to a potential Israelian intervention, and calls for retaliation against Israel were raised. However, any overreaction or retaliatory action by Iran would undoubtedly damage the emerging relations to the Biden administration. So the Iran will wait and observe.⁶²

Irrespective of Iran's criticism of a recent peace deal between several gulf states and Israel (Abraham Accords),⁶³ there are indications that also Iran is changing its perspective on Israel.⁶⁴ Even the Shia islamist group Hezbollah (a political party with a paramilitary arm) has recently signalled that it does not entirely close itself from a peace deal between Lebanon and Israel. So against all skepticism, talks between Lebanon and Israel have been launched, which would not have been possible without at least toleration by Hezbollah.⁶⁵

It is afterall remarkable that Donald Trump during his presidency realised

all announcements made during his electoral campaign with regards to US foreign policy in the Middle East. The current developments are visible to an open-minded observer, though seem to be ignored by many analysts that may submit to their personal biases. Wouldn't it be hilarious if deals emerge whose proceedings are publicly traceable via Social Media such as Twitter, but got overlooked by subject matter experts?

The United Arab Emirates, another major player in the Persian gulf region, were a leading force behind the "Abraham Accords" that normalised the relations between Israel and several Arab states. The German political scientist Volker Perthes described these accords, negotiated with involvement of the Trump presidency, in January 2021 as part of the "significant geopolitical changes of the four recent years".⁶⁶ He elaborates further that an intensified cooperation between Arab gulf states and Israel could shift the balance of powers in the Middle East to the disfavour of Iran, and would represent a reinsurance should the United States disengage further in the Middle East. It thus also depends on the Biden-administration whether

the Abraham Accords can ascend to veritably constructive policy changes in this conflict region, and whether they will also impact the policy inside Iran. Biden's plans for the Middle East have not yet clearly emerged. On the one hand, a relaxation of economic sanctions imposed on Iran appears possible, as an outcome of the resumption of talks regarding the nuclear treaty. On the other hand, the Biden administration has authorised attacks on pro-Iranian militias in Syria. Irrespective of the exact proceedings, a new order in the Middle East is in the making.



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