

Future Scenarios for Iran

By
Dr. Gina Lennox

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So what are the future scenarios for Iran?

Iran has always travelled its own path. 2,500 years ago, the Mede-Persian Empire became the first multi-ethnic confederation, its structure influencing the US constitution. Iran was one of the few places that did not Arabise after converting to Islam, and is the only country that adopted Shia Islam as its state religion. Iran did not become a European colony or protectorate, although Britain, Russia and the US certainly interfered in its politics and oil, and in 1979, Iran became the first semi democratic Shia theocracy. Forty years later, Iran is at another crossroad. Its people face three scenarios: Regime survival, if not expansion, war or regime change. But change to what?

In the near future the regime is likely to survive. The ruling clerics are masters in the Art, having outlasted decades of war, crippling sanctions and isolation. Their survival is backed by 13 centuries of theology and six centuries of Shia Islam, yet it was Khomeini's revolutionary creed that broke the tradition of keeping religion and state matters separate since the tenth century.¹

When the exiled Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979 he announced that all those who had spent 15 months calling for the Shah to abdicate would be included in a new Islamic Republic. He would be the republic's Imam, answerable to no-one but God, helped by 12 guardian jurists that he appointed.²

To this day, the Supreme Leader and Guardian Council have final say over all laws, who can run for election, and the appointment of judges, provincial governors and military commanders.

¹ This was when the twelfth imam disappeared. In Shia tradition he went into a state of occultation until the time was right for his return.

² They are not even beholden to Sharia Law. In 1988, Khomeini ordered the Guardian Council to disregard Sharia when 'interests of state order' were at [stake](#).



Khomeini did not need the notorious SAVAK to remove rivals and enemies. Instead, he established a parallel judicial system of secret Revolutionary Courts for political and security cases, a disproportionate number involving Kurds.

To further protect the Islamic Republic, in May '79, Khomeini formed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, hereon called the Revolutionary Guard. They played a vital role in the war with Iraq and reconstruction, their business interests, including making [weapons](#), now comprising 20 percent of the [economy](#). They also have political clout. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a former Revolutionary Guard.

To further ensure regime survival, in November 1979 Khomeini took out a 444-day insurance policy when he backed students who took 52 Americans hostage after storming the American consulate in Tehran. Only after the US signed the Algiers Accord that had the US promise not to interfere with the Islamic Republic, were the hostages released.

Khomeini ruthlessly squashed minority uprisings including that of the Kurds that were inconveniently demanding an autonomous region within a federation, as articulated by Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou. After Kurds ambushed Revolutionary Guards outside Paveh in August 1980, Khomeini declared a Holy War on Kurds that lasted until 1983 and killed 10,000 people. Every one had to answer to Khomeini's revolutionary creed. Forty years on, reformers like President Rouhani don't want clerical rule to end. Those that do, escape or end up in prison or dead.

Ironically, the eight-year war with Iraq and decades of international sanctions contributed to regime survival and expansion. The war united Iranians, and led the Revolutionary Guard to develop a forward defence strategy. Decades of sanctions have meant that the Islamic Republic is largely independent of the global financial system and is self sufficient in many industries, including agriculture. An unencumbered Iran is well placed to navigate this multipolar world.

Then there are the regime's devoted supporters: recipients of government stipends,³ water, electricity, health and education in rural areas, those in an [expanded middle class](#) and those fighting for their own political rights outside Iran, but supported by Iran.⁴ All share the regime's rejection of Judeo-Christian imperialism.⁵

³ After the US unilaterally re-introduced sanctions in May 2018, the regime tripled welfare payments to 10 million [people](#).

⁴ Iran would support a militias' struggle for [independence](#) and expected loyalty and service in return.

⁵ An IranPoll of 1,004 Iranians carried out for the University of Maryland in 2017 found that 66 percent of those polled supported Iran not recognising the state of Israel, 58 to 59 percent thought Iran should continue supporting Hezbollah and



Iran's first and second Supreme Leaders have claimed their revolution has much to offer the region and the world. Iran's expansion is seen in the Quds force support for parallel military structures; Iran building roads, railways and power stations, and establishing religious and cultural organisations in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

In March, Ayatollah Khamenei issued a manifesto outlining a new global Islamic Civilisation. Revolutionary Guard Media regularly claim Iran will become one of four world powers controlling land and sea highways from China to the [Mediterranean](#).

Favouring expansion is Iran's geopolitical position in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caspian, and multiple events - the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the rise of ISIS and the Syrian civil war, this enabling Iran's proxies to locate near the Israeli border, Hezbollah's electoral success in Lebanon, Saudi's Yemeni war, Trump's pro-Israel policies, Turkey's president wanting to be Sultan-of-the-Muslim-World and difficulties in forming a Sunni Arab [NATO](#). A nuclear Iran would be even stronger.

Of course there are the factors jeopardising the Islamic Republic's survival and expansion, like who will succeed an ailing Supreme Leader, Iran's economic mismanagement, Erdogan's neo-Ottoman ambitions, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's opposition to the Guardianship of the Jurist; and the actions of the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Advocates for the US withdrawing from the nuclear deal and imposition of harsh sanctions claim that when sanctions were eased from January 2016 to May 2018 Iran used revenue to expand its influence. But Iran was doing this long before sanctions were lifted. Advocates say that US sanctions are causing Iran's worst economic crisis since 1979, yet the projected contraction of six percent is far less than the economic contractions of Greece, Italy and Spain during the GFC. Advocates say sanctions are curbing Iran's means of paying foreign proxies and maintaining its line of credit to the Assad Regime. This is so. In fact, one scenario is that sanctions will bring down the Islamic Republic and the Assad Regime.⁶

Critics of US sanctions say that they will not succeed in curbing Iran's regional ambitions because they are not tied to achievable [outcomes](#). The cost of compliance is too great to bring the regime to the negotiating [table](#). Instead, sanctions [impede diplomacy](#), [empower Iran's hardliners](#), curb [coordination in fighting ISIS](#), endanger US troops and [could inadvertently precipitate war](#).

Hamas, and 55 percent supported Iran restarting aspects of its nuclear program if the US violated the nuclear [deal](#).

⁶ Syria relies on Iran for 75 percent of its fuel needs.



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When sanctions were re-introduced President Rouhani stopped criticising the Revolutionary Guard and threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz through which at least 20 percent of the world's oil is [exported](#). When Rouhani warned the US, 'Don't play with the lion's tail—you will regret it [forever](#),' Trump tweeted, 'Never, ever threaten the United States again or you will suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history ever suffered [before](#).' Quds force commander, Qassem Soleimani duly replied, 'We are near you, where you can't even imagine.' ... 'You will start this war, but we will be the ones to impose its end.'

So War is another scenario, but what kind of war? Will it be a continuation of the current games of brinkmanship, both sides potentially using electronic warfare and proxies to provoke or retaliate or a civil war brought on by leadership rivalries or people uprising? Whatever its cause, Iran's leaders would respond with force, knowing a [civil war](#) could get as messy as Iraq's and as complex as Syria's.

Or will it be a hot war caused by Iran disregarding the nuclear deal, closing the Strait of Hormuz, using proxies to attack oil tankers, oil wells and US interests, or the US conducting surgical strikes or its military build up and the proximity of forces causing an inadvertent exchange of fire?

Iranian officials say they are open to [negotiations](#), but not unilateral demands. In May's round of tweets, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammed Zarif said, 'Try respect — it works!' ⁷

Both Iran and the US know a hot war would be catastrophic. It could easily become a regional war if Iran attacks the Gulf States, Israel and US interests, and Russia and Israel get involved. It could lead to civil war in Iraq and an ISIS resurgence. Few want this scenario. Theoretically the US needs congressional [approval](#) to go to war with Iran, with many US officials questioning why Iran is the focus when the real threats to the US are China and [Russia](#). The American public has no stomach for another war. Nor does Europe or [Turkey](#).

And Iran's leaders are not suicidal. They have too many well-armed enemies. Even Russia and the US agree on Israel's security. The clerics would prefer to play the long game and work through proxies to get the US kicked out of Iraq, and wait for the US to withdraw from Syria. Yet one cannot discount the effects of hawks, profiteers or misjudgement. If a war starts most Iranians would fight for their country. Since March, Iran has been bringing home foreign proxies ostensibly to help flood [victims](#). In May, tensions escalated so much that Russia, Israel, France, Germany, Oman, and Jordan rushed to mediate. If de-escalation fails, Iran's clerics would not survive a hot

⁷ This was after Zarif offered to discuss an exchange of [prisoners](#). Qassem Soleimani quickly squashed the offer saying negotiating with the US under so much pressure would be an act of [surrender](#).



war. Yet US rhetoric and actions are not conducive to negotiations. They seem more designed for regime change. The problem is, change does not guarantee a good outcome.

Iran may travel its own path, but it's influenced by world trends: 20th century imperialism, the rise of communism and political Islam. Today, there are more 'democratic' countries than at any time in history, but there's also more distrust in all forms of government. The democratic Superpower regularly defies international agreements it helped create, and its current president has no interest in exporting [democracy](#).

Iran is equally influenced by what happens in neighbouring countries, none known for their democratic credentials. So what are the possibilities?

One is that the Revolutionary Guard, or a faction thereof, declare a state of emergency and take over. A military junta replaces the Shia theocracy. What could prevent this are divisions and rivalries within the Revolutionary Guard.

Another scenario is that Iran's leaders voluntarily undertake reform. Reformist Presidents Khatami and Rouhani have overseen incremental changes⁸ and some parliamentarians are pushing for constitutional reforms to give more power to the [parliament](#), but the ruling clerics will resist major restructuring like dissolving parallel institutions ... unless the Revolutionary Guard becomes a threat. Nor is a vulnerable regime likely to give people more freedoms.

In 2009 a Game Theorist⁹ predicted that Iran's bankers, bazaaries and oil merchants would grow in power. Thus, regime change could involve a post-Soviet-like oligarchy perpetuating Iran's historical disparities in wealth and ownership.

Possibly in tandem with an oligarchy, a fourth scenario is that Iran becomes a constitutional monarchy with the triumphant return of Reza Pahlavi capitalising on growing Persian nationalism and the romanticising of the Pahlavi era, often by those who have no experience of SAVAK and other [persecutions](#). It will be up to those who lived through those times to inform them of the hardships.

A fifth possibility is that a grass roots movement succeeds in establishing a democratic government not ruled by clerics, monarchs, Revolutionary Guard or oligarchs. I challenge you by saying this is the least likely scenario, if the past is any guide.

⁸ Changes include loosening the dress code for women and raising the amount of drugs a person is caught with for the person to receive the death penalty. In February 2019 the Majlis passed a law insisting cleric-run foundations pay tax, but it is unlikely to pass the Guardian [Council](#).

⁹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita



In the twentieth century, Iranians made three attempts at establishing democracy. The first between 1905 and 1911 introduced a Constitution, which monarchs disregarded.

The second ended in 1953 when the CIA overthrew the elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstated the Pahlavi dynasty.

The third was 40 years ago, with many Iranians pushing for an Islamic democracy based on socialist principles. Few imagined they would end up with a cleric as Supreme Leader.

Each time Iranians pushed for democracy, conservatives won, largely because of their power and networks, helped by Britain, Russia or the US. Yes, even Khomeini. The Cold War was at its height, and Islamists were thought to be less dangerous than Communists.

Forty years on, fractures and mismanagement has led to at least [40](#) percent of Iranians living in poverty. In 2017, youth unemployment is 30 percent. Unemployment among male tertiary graduates is 45 percent. At that time, 35,000 rials purchased one US dollar. Today [154,000](#) rials buy one US dollar. In the past year, inflation for food and beverages has averaged [83 percent](#). Iranians are not getting paid their salaries and environmental mismanagement is causing water shortages and floods.

The Europeans are struggling to help. The much-hyped alternative monetary transfer system is not yet in use, and companies are pulling out of Iran despite an EU statute designed to protect companies from court rulings associated with US sanctions.

Unrest among Iranians is seen in the Green Movement of 2009, protests in [2011](#), and the widespread demonstrations that started in December 2017, initially over economic conditions but quickly evolving into a call for an end to clerical [rule](#). Then there is the multitude of strikes over salary and work conditions, and protests over water shortages.

This has led some observers to suggest Iran is ripe for a people's uprising. This is a leap of faith. Iranians are more cautious than they were in the late 70s. Back then protesters did not have to face a Revolutionary Guard, and since then, Iranians have witnessed too many failures in regime change.

The sheer kaleidoscopic nature of Iranian society is the greatest challenge for any grass roots movement. Iran has always been a battleground for ideas and aspirations



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- between Persians and minorities¹⁰, liberals and conservatives, secular communists and followers of one religion or another. Within each segment, there are divisions between generations, socio-economic classes, urban and rural populations, the 57 percent who voted for Rouhani and re-engagement with the world, and the rest who did [not](#).

Even if a grass roots movement succeeded in replacing the Islamic Regime, the outcome would not necessarily be a pro West secular democracy. Many Iranians who oppose clerical rule, also [oppose Western interference](#), distrustful of both Britain and the [US](#), with the possible exception of Iranian Kurds. For this reason, Kurds and other pro-West secularists should tread carefully, or they will be branded puppets. [Susan Maloney](#) says 'there is no precedent for an externally-driven economic implosion to trigger a successful transition away from an authoritarian regime toward a durable democracy.'

Yet there is no precedent for a well-educated population – 39 percent under the age of [25](#) – having access to social media that connects them to each other and the world.

From successful uprisings in Africa,¹¹ six ingredients for a beneficial transition can be identified. One is a history of rebellion, to which the Kurds can contribute their experience.

A second is the capacity to mobilise people from all walks of life, inspiring and uniting them, spreading the word through youth, women, workers and merchants, environmental and cultural movements and up to 50,000 Qom [clerics](#) that oppose [Khomeini's](#) revolutionary [creed](#).¹² Amir Taheri suggests Iranians could unite behind dismantling Iran's parallel legal, military and economic [structures](#), but does not suggest what would replace the current regime. For decades Iranian Kurds and some Iranian Arabs have asked for autonomous regions within a democratic [federation](#).

In 2018, minority, opposition and labour groups [formed](#) the Council of Iranian Democrats. The Council included the:

- Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI/PDKI0 founded in 1945)
- Kurdish Democratic Party – Iran (Split from KDPI in 2006)
- Komala Parties (both wings)
- Democratic Party of Al-Ahvaz (Ahvaz [Arabs](#) having long called for [autonomy](#))
- Azerbaijan's Democratic Alliance

¹⁰ About [50](#) to 60 percent of Iranians are Persian. The rest are 16 percent Azeri, 16 percent Kurd (if one counts Lur), with Arabs, Turkmen, and Baluch each making up 2 percent of the people.

¹¹ Africa is the continent with the most number of uprisings in the last 10 years and the greatest success in overthrowing dictatorships in the last 50 years.

¹² *Wilayat-I Faqih*



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- [Azerbaijani Cultural and Political Centre](#) (Azeri having long called to be educated in their mother tongue)
- Baluchistan People's Party
- United Front of Baluchistan
- Bakhtiari and Luristan Federation
- Turkmen Political Cultural Centre
- Democratic Republic of Iran
- People's Democratic Union of the People's Republic of Iran
- Provisional Council of the Socialist Left of Iran

Joined by trade unions, civil society activists and independents

Notably missing are the [Kurdistan Free Life Party \(PJAK\)](#) and its offshoot, the Organisation of Free and Democratic Society for East Kurdistan ([KODAR](#)) which also advocate democratic (con)-federalism but are often ostracised because of their affiliations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The Council calls for a non-violent transition to a democratic secular federation by way of protest and co-ordination with groups in and outside Iran. If this movement is to gain support it needs to overcome Persian resistance by appealing to Persian pride in the first confederation, and by explaining that successful federations allow diversity within a unified state and a more competitive economy. A federation could enshrine [minority rights](#), and appeal to the secular and deeply religious if autonomous regions could choose different paths regarding Sharia. Would it be a geographic federation or a confederation of interests, or both? A bicameral parliament would allow a Lower House to represent regions and an Upper House to represent different ethnic, religious and other interest groups.

A third ingredient is women's participation and leadership. In Iran, an increasing number of women are tertiary educated. Women were at the forefront of protests in December 2017 and there are [17](#) women in the Majlis, only one considered 'conservative'. After 40 years of restrictions, Iranian women are challenging the patriarchy.

For change to be non-violent, Iranians need to co-opt the military and police. Some Revolutionary Guard show signs they want a more flexible approach to social, cultural and political matters, while the ruling clerics are growing distrustful of the very institution meant to protect them. This was demonstrated during this year's floods when Qassem Soleimani and Khamenei decided to call in their Iraqi proxies to help flood victims. The head of the Revolutionary Courts gloated that Iran has many outsiders to call upon if Iranians are unwilling to defend the [revolution](#).



A fifth ingredient is gaining support from regional and international organisations. The Crisis Group suggests that the international community facilitates:

- Visas for students and entrepreneurs;
- Energy partnerships;
- Joint Chambers of commerce and
- Joint nuclear endeavours.

The international community could also:

- Expand initiatives like the Australia - Iran Human Rights Dialogue;¹³
- Provide Iranians free internet and the technology to circumvent censorship;
- Develop multi language media; and
- Encourage Think Tanks, international organisations and civil society to support Iranian [organisations](#) and provide them forums so voices are amplified and views exchanged.
- The Iranian diaspora could contribute to these initiatives, and lobby their respective governments and international institutions;
- And Human Rights organisations could take critical cases to an international court.
- Iranians and others also need to convince the US to establish conditional relations with all countries in the [Middle East](#), given no country is so virtuous or vital that it deserves unconditional support.

The sixth ingredient is having respected leaders that can replace the current leadership. The challenge is that significant individuals who oppose the regime are dead, in prison or in exile. Of those in exile, the most strident voice is that of a cult with a violent track record that includes assassinations and treason in choosing to fight alongside Saddam Hussein against Iran in 1983. Here I am referring to the People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran, and its National Council of Resistance.¹⁴

¹³ Such initiatives afford the opportunity to acknowledge Iran's contribution to the fight against ISIS, its right to self determination and security, and its critical role in shaping the region's future, at the same time providing feedback on Iran's non-adherence to its own constitution, and the weaknesses of having parallel institutions, and a concentration of power.

¹⁴ Six students with the aim of integrating Islamic and socialist principles established the People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran (MEK) in 1965. In the 1970s they carried out targeted assassinations, and in 1979 supported Khomeini, but resumed assassinating opponents after Khomeini rejected MEK candidates for the 1980 election. With so many members being imprisoned, executed or assassinated, the members escaped to Iraq, where they formed a close relationship with the notorious *Mukhabarat* (Iraqi intelligence). Others went to France and established the National Council of Resistance of Iran, which initially included parties like the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran. What killed off support for MEK and its Council, and



Classified as terrorists between 1997 and 2012, they revealed Iran's secret nuclear program in 2002 and in recent years, the Council has benefitted from Saudi funding and connections in Congress. While many Iranians distrust MEK and its Council, if these organisations and Reza Pahlavi were willing to cooperate with an expanded Council of Iranian Democrats, their connections could prove useful.

If one million Iranians took action in and outside Iran, who knows what could be achieved. No one imagined that the Soviet Union would collapse so suddenly, or that Nazi Germany would become a stable democracy after WWII. Many observers claim that the Arab Spring has failed. They are wrong on two accounts. The spring is not an Arab Spring. It is the spring of men and women across MENA who want democracy, justice and jobs. Observers are also wrong in saying the Spring has failed. It is only just beginning.

Dr Gina Lennox

Dr Gina Lennox is an author of five published books (e.g. *Fire, Snow & Honey – Voices from Kurdistan*, Halstead Press, 2001), a freelance researcher and report writer, and co-chair of Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA), a non-partisan voluntary group that advocates for the Kurdistan Regions and does some humanitarian work. For instance, KLA has attended the annual consultations for the Australia-Iran Human Rights Dialogue and has raised \$13,000 for earthquake victims in Kermanshah, directly distributing money to those in need.

100,000 of its members, was MEK deciding to fight on the side of Saddam Hussein against Iran in 1983, then not allowing members to leave the organisation, even killing their own members, and other unsavoury features of the leadership. Since her husband died, Maryam Rajavi has become the Council's figurehead.