

Chaos, Conflict, or Reform: Iran's Potential Future Scenarios

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Introduction

Iran is at a critical juncture, though this may not be immediately apparent. The government effectively suppressed the Women, Life, Freedom movement in 2022/23. On the international stage, Iran has emerged as a significant player, supporting Russia with drones, instigating conflicts in the MENA region, and menacing maritime traffic in the Red Sea by backing pirates. The seamless transition to a new president following the death of former President Ebrahim Raisi also suggests stability.

However, beneath the surface, Iran faces significant unrest. Societal anger is fueled by rapidly worsening socio-economic conditions amidst widespread corruption and cronyism among the country's oligarchic elite. This has led to a growing 'legitimacy crisis' for the government, starkly evident when only 41% of the electorate participated in the presidential elections—a historically low turnout—following calls for a boycott. There is also an 'ideological crisis,' as women and the younger generation especially crave a more secular direction and greater political freedoms.

The government's international actions, while projecting strength, could also become its Achilles' heel. Many Iranians oppose their government's foreign policies, citing their financial costs. Involvement in regional conflicts risks dragging Iran into a war with Israel and increases the likelihood of foreign interference in its politics. Meanwhile, its nuclear program continues to cause great tensions with Western powers, alongside its support for Russia.

Despite the united front shown to the world, significant ideological and power struggles persist within the Iranian regime, particularly between Principlists and Reformists. Ongoing skyrocketing inflation rates, heightened debates over the compulsory hijab and differences of opinion regarding Iran's foreign policy, deepens these divisions.

Altogether, the current situation in Iran is far from stable. This makes it imperative for the international community to gain deeper insights into the country's possible directions. Iran's future trajectories will profoundly impact its already impoverished and oppressed population. International donors and other parties can only offer effective support to Iran's civil society, ensuring its survival and ability to function as a springboard for democracy, by understanding the possible paths Iran might take in the short run, i.e., the current decade.

To this end, Volunteer Activists (VA) outlines possible scenarios for Iran up to 2030 in this policy paper.

The following section details these seven scenarios, followed by an assessment of their likelihood. The final section of this policy analysis will summarize the key findings as well as offering recommendations for the international community.

Forecasting Methods

Predicting the future is inherently challenging, particularly when it comes to Iran, where key political developments hinge on a complex interplay of domestic and international actors' beliefs and actions. Continuous monitoring of societal and political developments, insights from local contacts, and anticipation of significant future events, such as the impending death of 85-year-old Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have informed this forecast.

1. Conceivable Scenarios for Iran

When examining potential future trajectories for Iran, the scenarios outlined below emerge as plausible possibilities.

Scenario One: Status Quo

In this scenario, the current regime remains firmly in control, even as the gap between the government and the people deepens. Intermittent uprisings and riots similar to the protests of December 2017, November 2019, and September 2022 may occur. However, due to the government's repressive measures and a lack of widespread popular support, these uprisings will be suppressed, preserving the status quo. This scenario is essentially a repetition of what we have seen before.

Scenario Two: Governmental Reforms

Following Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's death, a reform-minded successor comes to power. By implementing policies that target widespread poverty and achieve greater socio-economic equality, the new government improves the regime's image and reconnects with society, potentially expanding individual freedoms. Changes within the power hierarchy, including the judiciary, favor a more progressive course. The government adopts a flexible, rational approach and promotes national reconciliation by bringing various societal groups closer together.

Foreign policy shifts to improve relations with the West, abandoning plans for nuclear weapons and adopting a more moderate stance in regional affairs, including Israel. The UN sanctions are terminated, leading to Iran's reintegration into the global economy, stabilizing the economy. While Khamenei's death is a key instigator, other events could also trigger this chain of events.

Scenario Three: Transition to Democracy

In this scenario, the Islamic Republic regime continues to fail to meet the demands of marginalized social groups, leading to a growing unpopularity of its religious and revolutionary discourse. Unlike in Scenario One, the regime cannot withstand a subsequent popular uprising or revolution, leading to (free) elections or a referendum on the Islamic Republic's continued existence versus a transition to a liberal democracy. Thanks to strong democratic opposition forces and a robust civil society, Iran becomes a democracy.

Scenario Four: Secular Authoritarianism

In this scenario, the Iranian government's continued inability to meet the demands of ordinary Iranians instigates another type of regime change. Authoritarian, secular forces, including nationalistic far-right groups with foreign backing¹, or new populist leaders riding the wave of public protests, seize power.

Scenario Five: State Collapse

In this course of events, a government neglecting basic social and political needs once more faces widespread social protests by an impoverished population, tacitly supported by foreign powers. The resulting power vacuum is, however, not filled by democratic forces or another authoritarian regime, but leads to widespread anarchy, with various groups based on religious, ethnic, or political affiliation engaging in armed conflict. The government may still control parts of the country, but other areas experience alternating leadership due to loose coalitions and foreign arms deliveries. In short, Iran faces a fate similar to Libya, Iraq, Sudan, and Syria.

Scenario Six: Coup d'état by IRGC

In this scenario, the passing of Khamenei could lead to dictatorship through a coup d'état by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). A continued succession crisis and widespread social protests create significant unrest. The IRGC, as the regime's military wing and the only cohesive force, stages a coup under the pretext of protecting the revolution and countering external threats. Declaring a state of emergency, the military suppress dissent, fully seize power, and adopt an even more hostile stance towards the West, increasing the likelihood of war with Israel.

Scenario Seven: Military Dictatorship Following Escalating Regional Tensions

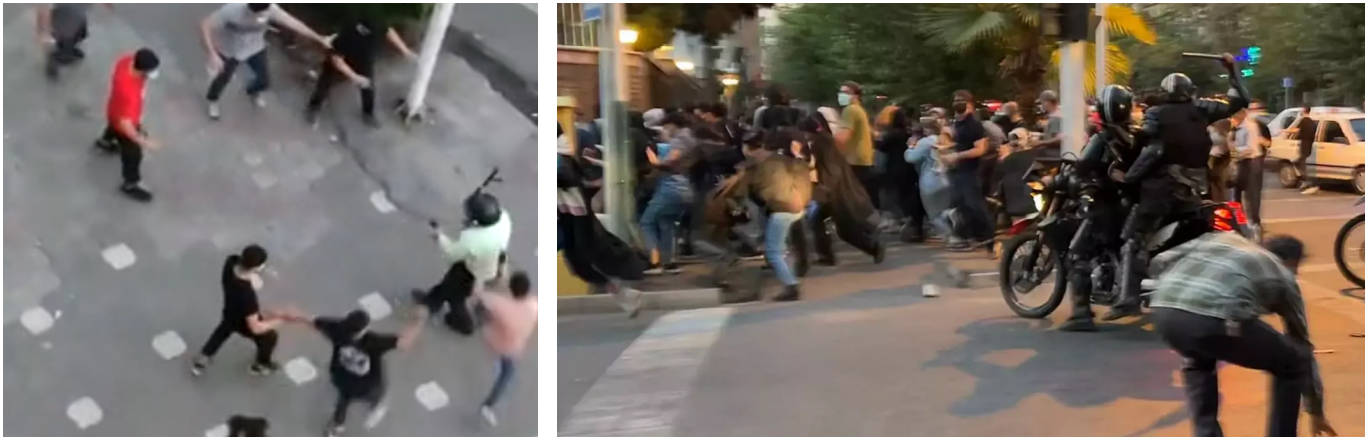
In this scenario, escalating conflicts between Israel and Iran-affiliated forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Ansar Allah in Yemen transform from limited skirmishes to widespread regional conflict. Iran is forced to directly confront Israel to support its proxy forces. This conflict escalates to an international level with the involvement of

1 E.g. by western countries or Israel.

Israel’s allies, such as the United States and European countries. Wartime conditions empower authoritarian, violent forces such as the military, making these the sole actors in the public sphere and further restricting civil spaces.

2. Outlook

Predicting which scenario might prevail may at the first glance seem a nearly impossible task., Aided by the data from our monitoring efforts, our knowledge of the development of social movements and insight knowledge from our contacts in Iran, it is nevertheless possible to arrive at a rough categorization, in which two scenarios are identified as highly unlikely, three as not that likely but also not entirely unlikely and two as most likely. The section below offers now more details on this, starting off with the least likely scenarios.



According to official government sources, 24 individuals belonging to either the police or security forces were killed, while 2000 got injured as a result of conflicts with demonstrators belonging to the Women, Life, Freedom movement during the first month of the protest. Conversely, 481 protestors were killed in the first 82 days of the protests alone.

Scenario	Description	Probability
Status Quo	Current regime remains in control with intermittent uprisings suppressed.	High
Governmental Reforms	Reform-minded successor implements policies improving socio-economic equality.	Medium
Transition to Democracy	Regime fails, leading to free elections or a referendum, transitioning to a democracy.	Low
Secular Authoritarianism	Authoritarian, secular forces seize power, leading to a secular authoritarian regime.	Medium
State Collapse	Widespread anarchy with armed conflict among various groups due to government neglect.	Low
Coup d’état by IRGC	IRGC stages a coup, fully seizing power and adopting a hostile stance towards the West.	Medium
Military Dictatorship	Escalating regional conflicts lead to military dictatorship and restricted civil spaces.	High

Low probability scenarios

Both Scenario Three (Transition to Democracy) and Scenario Five (State Collapse) can be identified as relatively unlikely.

As illustrated by the fate of the “Women, Life, Freedom” protest movement, it is not easy for protest movements to topple the Iranian government, who does not hold back when it comes to repressing (initially) peaceful protests. Coupled with a highly divided Iranian opposition and an overall weak Iranian civil society, the rise of democracy remains for now an unattainable dream.

The collapse of the Iranian state (Scenario Five) is likewise unlikely. This is because Iranian society is highly

averse to violence. The fate of the “Women, Life, Freedom” protest movement illustrates this. When (some of) the movement’s supporters started to embrace violence and radical discourse, the protest movement quickly lost popular support. In fact, the changing attitude of these supporters can be identified as a prime reason for the movement’s failure.

Furthermore, there is a deep-seated fear among Iranians that the country may end up in civil war like Syria and become a playground for foreign powers. For that reason, many Iranians, even those who do not favor the government, are unlikely to want to support militant antigovernment groups over the government.

Medium probability scenarios

Scenarios that verge on the brink of likely to not that likely are the earlier-outlined pathways of governmental reforms (Scenario Two), the rise of a secular dictatorship (Scenario Four) and the coup d’etat pathway (Scenario Six). In of these scenarios events following the passing of Ali Khamenei take central stage.

Scenario Two is likely, where the government, during the leadership transition, initiates reforms to change the political-social atmosphere, brings in fresh air, and responds to citizens’ demands. This is intended to ease tensions and public uprisings, facilitating the leadership transition. These reforms will primarily be in the social sphere but also to some extent in the political one, leading to some openness in the social space and the emergence of social and civil freedoms.

In addition, Scenario Four (Secular Authoritarianism) Regime collapse) could occur. This is the scenario of regime collapse and the rise of populist and authoritarian forces. The government might collapse due to internal conflicts, especially after Khamenei’s death results in a succession crisis, or due to its inability to manage economic-social and political-cultural crises, coupled with foreign intervention². In such conditions, due to the weakness of democratic social-political forces, right-wing and authoritarian forces, with foreign support and intervention, could seize power, resulting in a mere transition from a religious authoritarian regime to a secular authoritarian one.

In recent years, the emergence of radical and extremist groups among conservatives and hardliners – in a context in which reformists just won the presidential election – has made this scenario more plausible. In such conditions, the military, particularly the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), could seize power under the guise of safeguarding revolutionary values and appoint the new leader. To ensure a smooth transition of leadership, they will then take control of all power centers and declare a state of emergency.

At the same time, Iran’s political elite has a vested interest in keeping its power, and is likely to be aware of this scenario, which may ultimately help to smooth over differences. Also, depending on their strength, civil society actors and democratic forces could help tip the balance in favor of reformist powers.

The other two remaining scenarios with medium probability center are likewise on the passing of Iran’s current Supreme leader and Ayatollah, namely Scenario Four: Secular authoritarianism and Scenario Two: Governmental reforms.

High probability scenarios

Overall, a continuation of the current political system in Iran, as outlined in Scenario One seems likely. Although the regime’s power myths have significantly eroded, it has managed to largely preserve its repressive capabilities, and there is no significant defection among its supporters. Moreover, as mentioned, the current Iranian opposition lacks cohesion and, partially as a result, a popular social base. At times its actions are even counterproductive to the social movement in Iran, leading some researchers to refer to it as an “oppositional force against the social movement.”

Finally, the structure of the international system and the regional situation in West Asia and the Middle East, along with the formation of new power blocs like BRICS, support the regime’s persistence. As such, while the regime will most likely face uprisings and riots in the coming years due to economic and social crises and poor governance, it will have the ability to suppress and manage these periodic uprisings and riots.

2 For instance, by the EU, US or Israel

Alongside Scenario One, the seventh scenario (wartime dictatorship) appears to be a real possibility. So far, the disputing parties have shown considerable constraint, sometimes under the influence of external actors, but (armed) conflict between Iran's proxy forces and Israel is growing by the day. Should the conflict between Iran's proxy forces and Israel, especially in Lebanon and Syria, escalate, Iran will most likely directly enter the battlefield. Iran's entry into the battlefield will in turn lead to the involvement of the U.S. military and European countries, more precisely the NATO coalition, turning the conflict into a widespread war. This is because Israel alone, without Western support, cannot withstand a front opened from Iran to Syria, from Iraq to Yemen and Lebanon on its own. With the expansion of the war in the region and the dominance of anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric, any hope for change towards democracy and peace will be obliterated for many years. Moreover, such expansion of the war may lead to Iran developing nuclear weapons as a form of deterrence. But that's not all. This will militarize the Iranian society and complicate all international diplomacy and developments towards democratic change. Ultimately, it will greatly facilitate a move towards a regime that will be even more authoritarian than the current one with the military essentially ruling the country.

Conclusion & Way Forward

Altogether Iran's future does not look promising; the prospects for democracy look bleak. Only when a more reformist leader will succeed the current one, will there be at least more stepping stones towards democracy. In all the other scenario's things either stay the same or there will be even more authoritarianism or even outright dictatorship. This has severe consequences for an already impoverished and suppressed population. But the consequences of which future path Iran will take may well go beyond Iran, with consequences for regional stability and world peace.

For ethical reasons it is therefore imperative for the international community and international civil society to strengthen Iran's civil society and democratic forces to promote non-violent action and democratic values, build strong coalitions, and provide an alternative to the government's ideology.

Possible ways to do so include:

Domestically

- Invest in programs helping (democracy minded) activists and CSOs to develop conflict resolution skills to promote increased collaboration to strengthen civil society
- Inform the public on democratic values and empower activists to do so through educational programmes
- Assist activists and CSOs with needs they identified themselves: from targeted IT security support to programmes that support activists mentally and legally.
- Provide a neutral (online) platform for Iran's opposition to meet and talk
- Promote (online) exchanges between international civil society and Iran's civil society to lessen isolation and promote fresh ideas

Internationally

- Promote peace in the region in order to prevent further militarization, which can lead to an increase of hatred towards the West and Western democratic values.
- Provide an economic alternative to Iran's coalitions with authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, China and Zimbabwe
- Expand international controls and oversight into Iran's nuclear program, to prevent the Iranian regime from secretly developing nuclear weapons risking the elimination of Israel or other states.
- Monitor developments in Iran regarding reform and trends in civil society and stimulate positive trends.

VolunteerActivists

Volunteer Activists is a non-profit civil society organization based in the Netherlands. We envision dynamic, inclusive, and democratic civil societies in Iran and the MENA region, representing all citizens in their efforts to build pluralistic and diverse societies and establish accountable governments.

Our mission is to expand and strengthen the civic space in Iran and the MENA region, to reflect and amplify the marginalized voices, and to accelerate the transformation of civil society to a stronger position to become an influential right holder and duty bearer.

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