

Advisory Panel on the Question of Iran (APQI)

The political crisis



Forum	Advisory Panel on the Question of Iran (APQI)
Issue:	The political crisis
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Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a nation that straddles the crossroad of culture, history and geopolitics. The country has also faced many crises ranging from sociopolitical to humanitarian. One of the most prominent categories of crises in Iran has been the political turbulence. This research report dives into the multifaceted dimensions of the crisis, analyzing its origins, major parties, domestic and international implications, and potential solutions.

Iran's political crisis is the result of a combination of factors including power struggles, external pressures, socio-economic challenges and conflicting visions for the country's future. Founded in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran introduced a unique system of government that strongly upholds their religious principles. The Iranian political system, led by the Supreme Leader and guided by the principles of the Islamic Revolution, combines theocratic and republican elements, setting the stage for a complex power dynamic.

A key part of the problem is the constant conflict between conservative and reformist groups in the Iranian political system. These internal divisions have manifested themselves in many ways, such as contentious elections, protests, and debates about sociopolitical and economic reform. Understanding the nuances of these divisions is of great importance in comprehending(?) the ongoing developments and possible future trajectories of this nation.

Meanwhile, the economic challenges facing Iran have only worsened exacerbating the political crisis. The economic policies imposed by the international community culminated in inflation, unemployment and a struggling economy that led to widespread public frustration with social and economic grievances. This resulted in nationwide protests and demands for change in leadership.



This is one of the three Advisory Panel on the Question of Iran (APQI) Research Reports that aims to lay the foundation for the debate on the Islamic Republic of Iran. This report seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of Iran's political crisis, examining its historical roots, current manifestations, and potential implications for regional stability. By increasing our understanding of this important issue, we can advance nuanced dialogue and develop effective strategies that can contribute to a stable and prosperous future for Iran and its people.

Definition of Key Terms

Theocratic Republic

Describes the political system in Iran, combining theocratic and republican elements. This means that religious principles and rights play an important role in government with elected representatives.¹

Conservative and reformist parties

Identify the two main political parties in Iran. Conservatives generally align with traditional religious values, while reformists advocate political and social change that seeks to modernize state institutions and practices.

Guardian Council

A constitutional body in Iran composed of six theologians appointed by the Supreme Leader and six jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the parliament. The Guardian Council has the power to vet and approve parliament candidates. They also hold the power to reject laws that are considered un-Islamic in the eyes of the Council.

Nuclear Program

Relates to the pursuit of Iranian nuclear capabilities, including the development of nuclear power and possible nuclear weapons. The project has been highly controversial and has raised concern from the international community, leading to sanctions and international tensions.

¹ "Theocratic." Cambridge Dictionary, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/theocratic.



Economic Sanctions

Refers to measures imposed by the international community to restrict trade, investment, or diplomatic relations with Iran. These sanctions are often used to pressure Iran to change its behavior on its nuclear program or other controversial issues.

Socio-economic grievances

This represents the economic challenges faced by Iranians, such as inflation, unemployment, income inequality, and poverty. These grievances have generated public frustration and play an important role in politics in the midst of the crisis.

The Expediency Discernant Council of the System

This Council is an administrative assembly created by the Supreme Leader. It was originally established to resolve differences between the Majlis and the Guardian Council, but its true power lays in its advisory role to the Supreme Leader. They have supervisory power over all branches of the government. The seats are filled by the Supreme Leader every five years.²

General Overview

Iran's political predicament has deep historical roots and continues to shape the country's course in the present. This Research Report provides a comprehensive overview of the crisis, examining its historical context, key actors, socio-economic factors, politics, protests, government responses and international ramifications.

Historical and Political Context

Iranian politics has undergone dramatic changes throughout history. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, formerly known as Persia until 1935, marked a shift toward a theocratic system that mixed religious authority with republican elements. Motivated by widespread dissatisfaction with the ruling monarchy led by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iranians from a variety

² "The Expediency Council." *Iran Data Portal*, irandataportal.syr.edu/political-institutions/the-expediency-council.



of social, political and religious backgrounds called for a reform in the political landscape. The revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Iran.³ It reshaped the landscape and challenged its relationship with the international community. The effects of this revolution can still be seen in the political institutions nowadays.

Later on, power struggles between conservative and reformist groups shaped political developments, while socio-economic challenges, international relations and protests influenced the course of Iran. The current political situation is characterized by power struggles and changes appearing in domestic and international complexities.

The Supreme Leader

With his enormous power and influence, the Supreme Leader plays an important role in Iranian politics. The current Supreme Leader is Ali Khamenei and has been in office since 1989, he will stay in office for the duration of his life. The Supreme Leader is chosen by the Assembly of Experts, and he serves as the head of the three government branches: the Judiciary, the Legislature and the Executive. He is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the official Head of State.



The Supreme Leader, "Ali Khamenei." Wikipedia, 8 July 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Khamenei#/media/File:Khamenei_2023.jpeg.

Alongside him, government institutions, political parties, and parties define the dynamics of power and decision-making in the country. These institutions are sometimes labelled as corrupt or undemocratic by media outlets. This is reflected in the 2020 Democracy Matrix where Iran was placed 147th.⁴

Socioeconomic factors and complaints

The Iranian government faces significant economic challenges, including sanctions, inflation, unemployment and social inequality. These factors generate public frustration and anger, fueling dissatisfaction and social unrest. Corruption scandals regarding the sitting government also fuel this unrest.

³ RR, EB. "Iranian Revolution." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 29 May 2023, www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution.

⁴ U, W. "Ranking of Countries by Quality of Democracy." *Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg*, www.democracymatrix.com/ranking.



Political situation and power struggle

Iran's political environment is characterized by complex interactions between conservative and reformist groups. The Guardian Council is responsible for vetting candidates and laws and influencing electoral processes and political outcomes. Political dynamics are shaped by citizens and activists. Sadly, these activists are often silenced by authorities.

Iranian foreign policy and regional engagement

Iran's foreign policy choices, especially its nuclear program and regional engagement, have large international implications. The pursuit of nuclear power has led to sanctions and diplomatic tensions, while Iran's involvement in regional disputes has heightened geopolitical competition.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)⁵ is an international plan that lifts part of the economic sanctions on Iran, by the five Permanent Members of the Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) and the European Union, if Iran meets the nuclear requirements of the agreement. Iran's compliance with the JCPOA is monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In 2018 President Trump announced the withdrawal of the US and reinstated wide-ranging sanctions on Tehran. Iran responded by violating the terms of the agreement, increasing its quantities of uranium and enriching it to extremely high levels.

In July 2023, the UK, Germany, France and the European Union have declared that they are refusing to lift sanctions on Tehran's missile usage in October as initially specified in the agreement. The European Union and the UK justified this action by naming Iran's violation of the JCPOA, including its drone sales to Russian Federation for use in its war against Ukraine.⁶

Protest and Government Response

⁵ "Fact Sheets & Briefs." The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance | Arms Control Association, July 2023, www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance.

⁶ Khalid, Tuqa. "UK, France, Germany to Breach Iran Nuclear Deal over Drone Supplies to Russia: Report." *Al Arabiya English*, 2 July 2023, english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/07/02/UK-France-Germany-to-breach-Iran-nuclear-deal-over-drone-supplies-to-Russia-Report.



The political crisis in Iran has led to massive protests. The motives behind the protests range from socio-economic grievances to political unrest and human rights violations. The government has responded to dissent with measures aimed at maintaining power, including repression and coercion.

One of the largest anti-government protests of the last century were the Mahsa Amini protests. The outbreak of the Mahsa Amini protests in September 2022 marked a turning point in the Iranian political crisis. The demonstrations were sparked by the tragic death of Mahsa Amini, a young woman detained by the police for dressing immodestly. What began as a local outcry quickly turned into a nationwide movement and called for change with widespread uncertainty. The protests extended beyond the specific incident with Mahsa Amini and evolved into broader demands for the Supreme Leader's ouster and the end of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thousands of Iranians took to the streets, expressing their frustration in the context of the government's repressive policies, social restrictions and declining economy.

The Iranian government responded to the protests with force and repression. Security forces were deployed to quell the demonstrations, leading to clashes with protesters and several arrests. Internet censorship and restrictions have been imposed on social media to control the flow of information. As of May 2023, Iranian forces have killed at least 552 Iranian demonstrators, including 73 minors, and arrested some 21,100 civilians.⁷

Mahsa Amini's protests highlighted deep-seated Iranian grievances such as political oppression and lack of civil liberties, economic hardship and social inequality. The movement represented a growing dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and a desire for radical political and social change. Iran continues its efforts to enforce its mandatory hijab laws, arresting numerous women who defy them during these protests.



Protests in Iran, Wikipedia, 8 July 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Khamenei#/media/File:Khamenei_2023.jpeg.

The government's harsh response to the protests highlights the widening gulf between the will of the people and that of the authoritarian regime. The ongoing political crisis in Iran, sparked by

⁷ Wahba, Mariam. "Protests in Iran Persist Eight Months after Death of Mahsa Amini." *FDD*, 17 May 2023, www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/05/17/protests-in-iran-persist-eight-months-after-death-of-mahsa-amini/.

events such as the Mahsa Amini protests, continues to shape the country's future as Iranians strive for greater freedom and social issues.

Current situation

Iranian politics is a dynamic and complex terrain, shaped by factors such as power struggles, socio-economic challenges, and international developments. In recent years, political crises have continued to manifest in Iran, leading to opportunities and challenges to the country's future. At the heart of Iranian politics is the struggle between conservative and reformist groups. These groups have a different vision for the country, with conservatives advocating the preservation of traditional values and religious principles, while reformers seek to modernize institutions and promote social and political change so this ideological divide has always been a source of tension and has affected political developments in Iran.

In the most recent presidential election in 2021, Ebrahim Raisi, a prime ministerial candidate, emerged victorious, solidifying opposition dominance in the country's politics Raisi's victory marked a major shift in power. The election results have raised questions about Iran's future, as conservatives consolidate their influence in key decision-making institutions. President Raisi presented himself as a principled defender against government corruption during his election. Simultaneously, he voiced support for discussing an international nuclear agreement that would take into account Iranian interests.⁸

The government's response to the Mahsa Amini protests has become central to Iran's current political landscape. Authorities used a variety of tools including coercion, surveillance and restrictions on civil liberties to suppress dissent and maintain power. Suppression of oppositional voices created a climate of fear with limited political freedom and restricted forms of peaceful political expression.

Iran's foreign policy choices and regional engagement continue to influence its political environment and international relations. The country's pursuit of nuclear power has faced scrutiny and led to international sanctions. Negotiations over Iran's nuclear program have been the focus of diplomacy, reflecting regional stability and global security. The international community has reacted differently to Iran's political crisis. Some countries seek engagement and diplomatic dialogue to

⁸ EB. "Ebrahim Raisi." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 13 June 2023, www.britannica.com/biography/Ebrahim-Raisi.



address concerns and promote political change, while others have taken a more confrontational approach, imposing and taking sanctions a very dubious position.

In conclusion, Iran's current political situation is characterized by a delicate balance between conservative and reformist groups, socioeconomic challenges, and international pressures. The results of the recent elections paved the way for a possible change in governmental direction. The government's response to the protests highlights the need for effective governance and meaningful reforms, as well as economic grievances. As Iran navigates its political landscape, both domestic and international factors will continue to shape its trajectory, impacting the country's stability and role in the Middle East.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America (USA)

Historically, the United States has taken a tough stance on the Iranian political crisis. In a case filed by the U.S. In a statement, the State Department said it supports the right of Iranians to protest peacefully and called on the Iranian government to respect its citizens' freedom of expression and assembly. Additionally, the Biden administration attempted to revive the 2015 Iran Deal, but there has been little progress.⁹ The U.S. also highlighted concerns about human rights violations and urged Iranian officials to engage in dialogue with the opposition to address underlying grievances.

The Russian Federation

Russia has taken a more cautious approach to the political crisis in Iran, emphasizing the importance of non-interference in the country's internal affairs. Moscow stressed the need for stability and dialogue to resolve the situation rather than outrage. *"We believe that Iran's political crisis should be resolved through peaceful means and internal dialogue while respecting Iran's sovereignty and independence,"*¹⁰ the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Leonidovich said.

⁹ Afzal, Madiha. "America and Iran: From Containment to Coexistence." *Brookings*, 28 July 2016, www.brookings.edu/articles/america-and-iran-from-containment-to-coexistence/.

¹⁰ RCS. "Министерство Иностранных Дел Российской Федерации." *RUS*, www.mid.ru/tv/?id=1561429&lang=en.



France

France has expressed concern about the ongoing political crisis in Iran, particularly in relation to human rights abuses and suppression of opposition voices. Additionally, France has called on the Iranian authorities to respect woman's rights and allow peaceful demonstrations. They also demand that the Iranian repression ends immediately. France has been particularly shocked by the violence committed against protestors, namely at the Sharif University where Iranian forces reportedly used teargas on university students.¹¹

In March 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made a statement where he addressed the ongoing protests in France saying: *"We call on the French government to respect human rights and refrain from using force against the people of the country who are peacefully pursuing their claims,"*¹²

European Union (EU)

The EU has consistently urged Iran to uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms amid the political crisis. In a joint statement, the EU foreign ministers expressed their deep concern over the violent crackdown on protests and stressed the need to respect Iranian citizens' freedom of expression.

In 2022 the EU also introduced new measures in response to the use of Iranian UAVs in the Russian-Ukraine war. Four new individuals are subject to an asset freeze and EU citizens and companies are forbidden from making funds available. They are sanctioned by a travel ban, which prevents them from transiting through EU territories. There is a total of 216 Iranian individuals sanctioned by the EU as of July 2023.¹³ These individual sanctions are implemented alongside a wide

¹¹ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "Iran - France Condemns in the Strongest Possible Terms the Continued Brutal Repression of Protests (10.3.22)." *France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs*, www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/news/article/iran-france-condemns-in-the-strongest-possible-terms-the-continued-brutal.

¹² France-Presse, Agence. "Iran Condemns France for 'repression' of Protests." *VOA*, 24 Mar. 2023, www.voanews.com/a/iran-condemns-france-for-repression-of-protests-/7020694.html.

¹³ EU, Council. "Iran: Eu Restrictive Measures - Consilium." *EU Council*, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/iran/.



range of autonomous economic and financial EU sanctions that were already imposed on Iran. These EU Council sanctions have contributed to the economic crisis facing Iran.

Timeline of Key Events

Iran has always had a turbulent political landscape involving internal power struggles, international pressure and corruption scandals. It is therefore extremely important to understand the history of Iran's political landscape in order to fully comprehend the ongoing crisis.

Date	Description of event
July 14 th 2015	The JCPOA was reached by the P5+1, EU and Iran, the deal was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).
January 16 th 2016	The JCPOA was implemented, and sanctions were lifted.
April 16 th 2016	Female reformist candidate Minoo Khaleghi was disqualified in a controversial decision by the Guardian Council. The Council did not give an official statement regarding her disqualification, although some speculated that a photo of her shaking hands with a man and not wearing a hijab might have triggered the decision.
May 19 th 2017	Rouhani is reelected as the President. His presidency is seen as a moderate and reformist voice within the Iranian government.
December 28 th 2017	Protests broke out in Mashhad over economic hardships, governmental corruption, and rising food and fuel prices. These protests were also fueled by the 29% youth unemployment rate in Iran. The protests lasted a total of two weeks.
May 8 th 2018	The Trump administration announces its withdrawal from the JCPOA and reinstates all sanctions on Iran. This decision creates a major rift between the United States and its European allies who remain committed to the deal.
January 5 th 2019	The Iranian Expediency Discernment Council approved an anti-money laundering bill that was one of four reforms required to keep Iran off the blacklist of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international monitoring organization.



February 25 th 2019	Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif officially announced his resignation on Instagram, stating: <i>"I sincerely apologize for my inability to continue my service and for all of the shortcomings during the period of my service,"</i> ¹⁴ His critics believed Zarif made too many concessions during the JCPOA talks. President Rouhani would not accept this resignation stating that it would be against Iran's interest.
May 23 rd 2019	Supreme Leader Khamenei publicly criticized President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif for the way they handled the JCPOA negotiations, he said he warned them several times.
November 2019	Protests erupt across Iran after the government announces a steep hike in fuel prices. The demonstrations turn into widespread anti-government protests, with people expressing dissatisfaction with economic hardship, corruption and political oppression.
June 18 th 2021	Ebrahim Raisi, an Iranian conservative judge, wins his presidential election in Iran. His victory raises concerns about human rights and political freedoms in the country.
Augustus 1 st 2021	Outgoing President Rouhani officially apologized to Iranians for their suffering during his eight years as President saying: <i>"If we had any shortcoming and flaws, we ask people's forgiveness and mercy,"</i>
January 2022	Protests erupt across Iran following the government's decision to raise the prices of essential commodities, adding to the economic strain on the population.
September 16 th 2022	Mahsa Amini died in Tehran triggering nationwide protests.
April 2023	Massive anti-government protests break out in major cities across Iran, fueled by frustrations over the deteriorating economic situation, political repression, and lack of progress on governmental reform. The protests are met with a heavy crackdown by security forces, resulting in numerous arrests and casualties.

¹⁴ LL, IP. "Timeline of Iran's Political Events." *The Iran Primer*, 11 Aug. 2021, iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-political-events.



May 2023	The Iranian government faces increasing international pressure to address the ongoing political crisis and human rights concerns raised by the EU.
June 2023	The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) holds a special session to discuss the situation in Iran, with several countries calling for diplomatic intervention and dialogue to resolve the political crisis.
July 2023	The UK, EU, Germany and France announced their plans to stop their commitment in the JCPOA.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, July 20, 2015 (Resolution 2231)¹⁵
- United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, December 19, 2019 (Resolution A/RES/74/166)¹⁶
- United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Iran, December 22, 2020 (Resolution A/RES/75/176)¹⁷
- United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, December 21, 2021 (Resolution A/RES/76/177)¹⁸

¹⁵ UN, SC. "Resolution 2231 (2015) on Iran Nuclear Issue Security Council." *United Nations*, www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/2231/background.

¹⁶ "UN Official Documents." *United Nations*, www.un.org/en/delegate/page/un-official-documents.

¹⁷ "United Nations, Main Body, Main Organs, General Assembly, Resolutions, Official Documents." *United Nations*, www.un.org/en/ga/74/resolutions.shtml.

¹⁸ "United Nations, Main Body, Main Organs, General Assembly, Resolutions, Official Documents." *United Nations*, www.un.org/en/ga/75/resolutions.shtml.



- United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Iran, December 20, 2022 (Resolution A/RES/77/176)¹⁹
- European Parliament Resolution on Iran, July 6, 2022 - This resolution by the European Union Parliament addresses the human rights situation in Iran, condemning the government's repression of dissent and calling for the release of political prisoners.
- Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) - This treaty, which entered into force in 1970, aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and promote disarmament. Iran is a signatory to the NPT.
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) - This treaty, established by the UNGA in 1966, creates fundamental human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and a fair trial. Iran has signed the ICCPR but has not ratified it.

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Previous attempts to resolve the political crisis in Iran have led to mixed results. One important example is the 2015 JCPOA, which aims to limit Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief together with the P5+1 and EU. Although it initially showed promise, the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 complicated international efforts. There have also been attempts to address human rights concerns through UN resolutions



Officials announce the JCPOA, Wikipedia, 8 July 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Khamenei#/media/File:Khamenei_2023.jpeg.

¹⁹ "United Nations, Main Body, Main Organs, General Assembly, Resolutions, Official Documents." *United Nations*, www.un.org/en/ga/76/resolutions.shtml.

condemning human rights violations and attempting to force Iran to comply with its international obligations. Attempts from nations to discuss the political instability with Tehran has often proved unsuccessful. Therefore, the political crisis remains, and happens emphasizing the complexity and challenge of finding comprehensive and sustainable solutions to Iran's domestic challenges.

Possible Solutions

Iran's political crisis requires critical thinking in order to create feasible solution. International actors can engage in diplomacy to promote dialogue between the Iranian government and opposition groups. Access to information can address grievances, promote political change, and ensure human rights are protected. Nations should also consider reviving JCPOA talks in the spirit of diplomacy.

The grievances that fueled the crisis could also be reduced by implementing comprehensive economic reforms. This includes tackling corruption, improving transparency, diversifying the economy and improving living standards. International organizations and governments could provide financial assistance to support these reforms.

Continued pressure on Iran to comply with human rights standards is essential. Governments, civil society organizations and international organizations should continue to raise concerns, advocate for the release of political prisoners, and support policies to protect freedom of expression, assembly and association. Organizations like Amnesty International has been a longstanding advocate for human rights in Iran.

Promoting inclusive national reconciliation policies can help bridge political divisions and foster unity in Iran. This could include establishing truth and reconciliation commissions, promoting transitional justice mechanisms, and encouraging intergroup dialogue to address historical grievances. Governmental transparency is essential in these scenarios.

The political crisis in Iran is a multifaceted issue influenced by numerous factors. Delegates must conduct comprehensive studies to gain a thorough understanding of the political crisis. They should prioritize engaging in diplomacy while remaining mindful of their respective countries' ideals and principles. By doing so, they can foster constructive dialogue and work towards a resolution that respects the complexities of the crisis and aligns with their nations' values.



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