Containing Tehran

Understanding Iran’s Power and Exploiting Its Vulnerabilities

Author
Seth G. Jones

A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project
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Executive Summary

**The United States and Iran are** hurtling toward an escalating war that will likely expand beyond the Middle East. Even before the January 2020 U.S. killing of Qasem Soleimani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Iran had engaged in numerous provocative actions. On September 14, 2019, for example, Iran struck two Saudi oil processing facilities, Abqaiq and Khurais, with cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, temporarily shutting down half of Saudi Arabia’s oil production and 5 percent of world production. While the United States enacted crippling sanctions against Tehran, the Iranian regime conducted sabotage operations against commercial ships off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, perpetrated attacks using limpet mines against Japanese and Norwegian tankers in the Gulf of Oman, and shot down a U.S. Global Hawk remotely-piloted surveillance aircraft. Both sides have engaged in offensive cyber operations. More broadly, the United States, Iran, and their state and non-state partners have conducted attacks in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and other locations in a conflict that already spans multiple countries.

What is badly needed now is a clear and coherent long-term U.S. strategy to deal with Iran in ways that protect U.S. national security and leverage U.S. partners. Unfortunately, the United States’ “maximum pressure” campaign has not led to a change in Iran’s behavior, although U.S. sanctions have severely damaged Iran’s economy.

As this report highlights with new data and analysis, the IRGC-QF has supported a growing number of non-state fighters in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—including nearly a 50 percent increase since 2016. Thanks to Iran, these forces are better equipped with more sophisticated weapons and systems. This report also uses satellite imagery to identify an expansion of IRGC-QF-linked bases in countries like Iran and Lebanon to train non-state fighters. In Syria, the IRGC-QF has increased the size and geographic scope of its militia forces and materiel—from missiles and missile parts to radar and electronic warfare systems—which threaten Israel and other countries. Iran has also constructed more sophisticated and longer-range ballistic and cruise missiles, and conducted missile attacks against countries like Saudi Arabia. In addition, Iran has developed offensive cyber capabilities and used them against the United States and its partners. In the nuclear arena, Iran has ended commitments it made to limit uranium enrichment, production, research, and expansion—raising the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons. Finally, the maximum pressure campaign has not deterred Iran from taking escalatory actions. In fact, the killing of Qasem Soleimani will likely increase Iran’s irregular activities, including terrorist attacks orchestrated by the IRGC-QF and its partners.

In short, the United States has not offered sufficient inducements to cajole Iran back to the negotiating table, and Washington has failed to gain the support of its European allies. The U.S.’s strategy has been undermined by conflicting and confusing statements and actions about decreasing—and even increasing—U.S. military forces in the region to end the U.S.’s involvement in “forever wars.”

Moving forward, the United States should implement a long-term containment strategy against Iran that shifts the focus away from conventional military conflict and toward diplomatic, economic, informational, and limited irregular military tools that better leverage U.S. allies in Europe and the Middle East. It will require a long-term commitment to the Middle East. The U.S.’s containment strategy should include several goals:

- **Prevent Iran from becoming a regional hegemon capable of dominating other states in the Middle East.**
- **Stop nuclear proliferation in the region and prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, including thwarting Iran from pursuing weapons-grade uranium enrichment, warhead development, and plutonium reprocessing.**
- **Curb significant Iranian military, political, and ideological expansion in the region, including the export of Iran’s revolutionary ideology.**
- **Encourage a process of change inside Iran toward justice and accountability.**
a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the clerical establishment is gradually reduced.

To implement containment, the United States must convey to Iran that unacceptable behavior will incur costs that outweigh any gains. At the same time, the United States should make it clear to Iranian leaders that genuine restraint will increase the likelihood of a more productive relationship. Doing this effectively requires a U.S.-led multilateral approach that involves working closely with partners in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. A successful containment strategy also needs to be bipartisan, with support from key Republican and Democratic leaders.

As this report highlights, Iran has numerous weaknesses that make it vulnerable to a containment strategy. Among the most significant weaknesses are those in the information, political, and economic spheres. Iranian leaders are deeply worried about Western and other information on social media, the internet, radio, and television that undermine state control. The large-scale demonstrations in Lebanon, Iraq, and even Iran itself highlight the unpopularity of the Iranian regime and its meddling in the region. The Iranian economy remains fragile because of a mix of sanctions, corruption, and economic inefficiencies. Recently leaked Iranian intelligence documents indicate that Iranian government officials are acutely aware of these problems. These weaknesses present opportunities for the United States and its partners.

There are four major components of a containment strategy: political, military, economic, and informational.

**Political**

The United States needs to clearly signal to Tehran a way out of the current conflict, in coordination with Washington’s allies in Europe. Iran is unlikely to give up its missile program, but it may eventually agree to a revised version of the 2015 nuclear agreement in exchange for sanctions relief. Possible changes could include revisiting the “sunset provisions” on when restrictions imposed on Iran’s nuclear program expire. In addition, Tehran may be willing to help seek a political solution to the Yemen conflict and curb its support to the Houthis.

Iran has few close state allies. Iranian activism and the proliferation of Iranian-backed groups have alarmed numerous governments and populations in the region, as highlighted by the protests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran. The United States should continue to exploit anti-Iranian fissures abroad. For example, there is wide variation in Iraqi views of Iran, including among the Shia community. These fissures create opportunities for the United States and its partners to continue to engage with Iraq’s Shia communities. Saudi Arabia, for example, has established a political and economic relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi Shia cleric. There may be further opportunities for Iraq to work with Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to expand economic and commercial ties with southern Iraqi cities such as Basra, including by improving rail, road, and electricity links.

**Military**

The U.S. killing of Qasem Soleimani with an MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicle escalated the conflict with Iran. The challenge for Washington will be to find a way to de-escalate the military conflict and shift the focus to political, informational, and economic instruments.

Still, the United States should continue to improve the military and intelligence capabilities of partners in the Middle East to compete with, deter, and respond to Iranian attacks if necessary. This includes, for example, improving the capabilities of partners in the Gulf to counter Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles, UAVs, and cyber defenses with the help of U.S. defense companies. The United States should also help partners in the Middle East harden their critical infrastructure—such as oil facilities, desalination plants, electricity grids, and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems—from missile, rocket, and UAV strikes by Iran and its partners.

Since Iran’s military strategy involves using irregular military power to work through partner forces in the region, a U.S. containment strategy needs to be based, in part, on the U.S. use of irregular warfare and covert action. Examples of U.S. actions include
continuing— and perhaps increasing— the amount and type of military and intelligence support to organizations such as: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Iraqi security forces, and Afghan national and local forces. U.S. assistance can improve partner capabilities, build relationships, and provide greater insight into local conditions. At the moment, however, most of these partnerships are in jeopardy, including support to the LAF, Iraqi forces, SDF, and even Afghan forces.

**Economic**

Over the past decade, U.S. and multilateral sanctions have been used to punish Iran for bad behavior, and sanctions relief has been a way to reward Iran for cooperation on issues such as curbing its nuclear program. Until there is a revised nuclear deal with Iran, however, the United States should continue to impose sanctions on Iran— particularly sectors that weaken Iran’s military. Iran’s inefficient state-run economy and rampant corruption will also continue to be problematic for Iran’s leaders. The regime’s ethos, which prioritizes political control and rewarding its supporters over economic efficiency, undermines the prospects for growth, as does the dominant role in the economy of state actors, such as the IRGC and bonyads (or Islamic charitable foundations).

**Informational**

The final component of containment is competing with Iran in the information arena, both covertly and overtly. Iran’s internal fissures represent a vulnerability to the regime. Between January 2018 and October 2019, for example, there were over 4,200 protests across Iran, fueled by anger at the government’s economic policies, opposition to Khamenei’s theocratic regime, and concerns about issues such as corruption, environmental devastation, and the repression of women. In November 2019, there were large-scale protests across Iran in response to the regime’s increase in fuel prices and broader economic and political grievances. The Iranian regime responded by killing hundreds of demonstrators, arresting thousands more, and temporarily shutting down the internet.

The United States’ greatest strengths— its support of democratic principles, open markets, and press freedom— are also Iran’s most significant weaknesses. The U.S. State Department’s Internet Freedom program—which seeks to counter the efforts of authoritarian regimes to censor, monitor, and control the internet— has had some success in helping individuals bypass firewalls by using tools and software, such as Tor, which enables anonymous communication. These types of programs should be augmented.

In addition, the United States needs to increase aid to legitimate Iranian diaspora television, radio, print, internet, and social media programs that reach Iranians inside and outside the country. The United States could also provide funding—or encourage others to provide funding—to Iran’s peaceful protesters. More broadly, the U.S. government needs to increase its funding for public diplomacy and other information efforts. During the Cold War, for example, the U.S. information campaign against the Soviet Union—which included such platforms as Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the U.S. Information Agency— was helpful in undermining Soviet power and influence around the globe and inside the Soviet Union itself. The goal of overt and covert U.S. information efforts should be to provide more balanced information to an Iranian population at home and abroad that is often force-fed propaganda through Iranian state-run media outlets.

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The Iranian regime may eventually collapse, or it could gradually evolve over time. But political and economic change has to be driven by Iranians themselves. The goal of containment should not be regime change. Iran’s authoritarian and theocratic political system, inefficient state-run economy, and attempts to control information have generated—and will continue to produce— opposition inside and outside Iran from those who support democracy, a free market, and free speech. The United States needs to credibly demonstrate that its policy toward Iran is not a blueprint for an endless struggle with Iran but rather an effort to encourage Iran to be more democratic and open. This is a policy in line with core U.S. values and one which the U.S. population can understand and support.
The United States and Iran—as well as their partners—are engaged in a significant struggle in the Middle East and other regions. They have been engaged in economic warfare, including the U.S. use of sanctions; ideological warfare, including the conduct of what Iran calls “soft war,” or jang-e narm; and military warfare, which has generally been limited to irregular operations. In January 2020, the United States killed Qasem Soleimani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), in a targeted assassination at Baghdad International Airport. A few days earlier, an Iraqi mob nearly overran the U.S. embassy in Baghdad after the U.S. military carried out air strikes against the Iranian-backed Kata’ib Hezbollah militia.

The Iranian attack was another in a string of contentious points of engagement with Iran. In May 2018, the United States announced that it was pulling out of the 2015 nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) and was reimposing sanctions as part of a “maximum pressure” campaign. As U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained, the goals of U.S. sanctions included eliminating—or at least curbing—Iran’s support to militant organizations; dismantling its ballistic missile program and ending its missile support to militant groups; stopping its nuclear weapons program,
Iran has attempted to maintain—and potentially expand—its military, economic, political, and ideological power in direct conflict with the United States and its partners. While Iran’s conventional military capabilities are weak, it maintains a large and diverse arsenal of missiles and submarines. Tehran also utilizes a growing network of non-state partners to project power and influence, particularly through the IRGC-QF. The IRGC-QF supports such organizations as some of the Popular Mobilization Forces (or hashd al-shaabi) in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime and Shia militias (including Hezbollah) in Syria, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and non-state groups, such as the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun in Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively. Iran’s attempts to expand its power and influence have been aided by several developments: the Assad regime’s military successes in Syria, the collapse of the Islamic State’s caliphate in Iraq and Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah’s growing military capabilities and political advancements, and Tehran’s rising influence in Baghdad after the U.S. invasion.

Because of the tension between the United States and Iran, a systematic analysis of Iranian weaknesses and vulnerabilities is important. But there has been little consensus about what a competitive strategy might consist of, such as identifying military and economic vulnerabilities, devising a strategy to impose costs on Iran, and even encouraging Tehran to overreach.

Research Design

Consequently, this report asks three general questions. First, what are Iran’s major instruments of power, and how does it use these instruments to maintain and expand power? Second, what are Iran’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities? And third, what opportunities does the United States have to exploit these weaknesses and vulnerabilities?

In examining Iranian power, this study focuses on five elements of national power. These elements of power do not guarantee success in war or other aspects of international and domestic relations, but they do help states achieve their policy goals. As the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye wrote, “power is the capacity to do things in social situations to affect others to get the outcomes we want.” Power is generally conveyed through resources, which is why states attempt to amass military, economic, and other material assets to secure preferred outcomes. The five elements of Iranian power examined in this report include:

- Irregular military power: Iranian irregular capabilities, including from special operations and intelligence forces, such as the IRGC-QF.
- Regular military power: Conventional capabilities, such as air, ground, and maritime.
- Economic power: The Iranian economy, including the implications of economic sanctions.
- Soft power: Diplomatic activities and other components of “soft power,” which include the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without military force or coercion.
- Domestic power: Internal stability in Iran, including the impact of protests and the competence of internal security forces. In defining the state as the institution that monopolizes force within a given territory, the German sociologist Max Weber argued that “the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one.”

In examining these areas, this report gathers quantitative and qualitative information to better understand Iranian power. For example, it compiles data on such aspects as: irregular military power, through the number of Iranian-supported fighters in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen; regular military power, through defense spending and ground, air, and maritime capabilities; economic power, through indicators such as growth in gross domestic product (GDP) and inflation rates; soft power, through the location and global activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), Iranian international universities, and charitable foundations; and domestic power, through the capabilities of Iran’s security agencies and the extent and scope of protests. This
report compiles and assesses data from such sources as Jane’s IHS, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Finally, it conducts satellite imagery analysis of Iranian-linked training bases, missile facilities, and other locations.

Outline of the Report

The rest of this report is divided into the following chapters. Chapter 2 examines Iran’s irregular military power, particularly the role of the IRGC-QF. Chapter 3 focuses on Iranian regular military power. Chapter 4 analyzes Iran’s economic power, including the implications of U.S. sanctions. Chapter 5 assesses Iran’s soft power. Chapter 6 examines domestic power, including social, economic, political, and other unrest. And Chapter 7 concludes by outlining a containment strategy.
The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) was a major turning point in Iran’s military doctrine, since Iranian conventional units performed poorly against a much smaller Iraqi force. Iranian leaders also realized that they had few allies. Iran’s comparative advantage became its ability to leverage state and particularly non-state actors abroad, led by organizations such as the IRGC-QF. As used in this report, “irregular” refers to military power and activities short of regular and nuclear war which are designed to influence foreign adversaries and populations. As one study concludes, irregular military power is designed “to subvert, coerce, attrite, and exhaust an adversary rather than defeat him through direct conventional military confrontation.” Irregular warfare generally accomplishes these objectives by operating through other state and non-state actors.

Consequently, this chapter asks two main questions. What are Iran’s primary irregular military capabilities? And what are Iran’s weaknesses and vulnerabilities when it comes to irregular military power? To answer these questions, this chapter focuses mainly on the IRGC-QF. Chapter 3 examines Iran’s regular forces, along with other components of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This chapter
compiles quantitative and qualitative information on Iran’s irregular military capabilities. It compiles a database of Iranian proxy groups over time—including their capabilities and size—in order to gauge historical trends. It also analyzes satellite imagery of bases used by groups that have a relationship with the IRGC-QF in countries such as Iran and Lebanon. Finally, it compiles and analyzes a database of Israeli attacks against targets in Syria, which provides useful information on Iranian activities.

The analysis in this chapter finds that despite such developments as U.S. economic sanctions and the killing of IRGC-QF head Qasem Soleimani, Iranian leaders appear just as committed as ever to the use of irregular military power in the region. There has been an increase in the overall size and capability of forces partnered with the IRGC-QF, Iran’s paramilitary organization responsible for foreign operations. The IRGC-QF’s partners are in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan. In addition, Iran’s expanding presence in Syria led to concerns among Israeli leaders, whose forces struck over a thousand Iranian-linked targets in Syria from 2013 to 2019. Finally, based in part on analysis of satellite imagery of structures used by the IRGC-QF, Iran is attempting to establish land corridors across the region and build infrastructure that will allow it to retain a presence in key countries of the Middle East. Despite these trends, Iran—and the IRGC-QF in particular—have vulnerabilities that may be exploited, such as possible overextension with an already weak economy and continuing divisions among Iraqi’s Shia community regarding Iran and its doctrine of velayat-e faqih (the Islamic system of clerical rule).

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of the IRGC-QF’s creation, activities, and organizational structure. It also highlights other Iranian irregular capabilities, such as offensive cyber operations and UAVs. The second section analyzes trends in IRGC-QF activity, and the third assesses IRGC-QF actions in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. The final section analyzes the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Iranian irregular capabilities.

**Born of the Revolution**

The IRGC, or sepah-e pasdaran-e enqelab-e eslami, was founded in 1979 shortly after the Islamic Revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini envisioned the IRGC as a force to protect the revolution against internal and external threats. As Khomeini remarked, IRGC soldiers were to be “the guardians of the revolution and the fighting sons of Islam.” Since Khomeini was suspicious of the loyalty of some officers in Iran’s regular military, which he worried still had ties with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, he created the IRGC to defend Iran and—more importantly—safeguard Iran’s theocratic system.

The IRGC’s link to the supreme leader was critical, since Khomeini’s conception of velayat-e faqih emphasized the importance of the clergy (ulama) in national decisionmaking. In Khomeini’s view, a legitimate Islamic government needs to be run by a senior cleric (marja al-taqlid) or by a body of high-ranking clergy (fuqaha). Pro-clerical militants had been helpful in bringing down the Pahlavi regime, and Khomeini pulled them together under a single banner in the IRGC. This integration of forces helped improve discipline and organizational efficiency, an asset as the regime attempted to balance against the Artesh (Iran’s conventional military). The IRGC’s proximity and devotion to Khomeini gave it immense power and legitimacy. The IRGC, then, would be the vanguard of the revolution.

Establishing the IRGC was also motivated by a desire to counter the conventional military superiority of the United States and Iran’s other enemies in the region. Iran could not win a conventional war with them, but it could wage an unconventional war for a prolonged period and deter an invasion.

The IRGC eventually included an air force, land force, navy, the IRGC-QF, and the Basij. The Basij is an auxiliary militia engaged in internal activities, such as conducting internal security, enforcing state control over society, policing morals, and suppressing dissidents. The IRGC manages large domestic commercial companies and, along with the Office of the Supreme Leader, controls a substantial portion of the Iranian economy. IRGC veterans are prevalent throughout Iranian businesses, the parliament (or Majlis), and the cabinet.
Shortly after the IRGC’s creation, its leaders established a paramilitary organization, which became the IRGC-QF (sepah-e quds). The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) was a major turning point in Iran’s military doctrine, since Iranian conventional units did not perform well. Instead, Iran’s comparative advantage became its ability to work with non-state actors—an irregular approach led by the IRGC-QF rather than conventional Iranian military forces. During the Iran-Iraq War, for example, Iran aided Iraqi Shia militant groups. Some of this training was done inside Iran, which allowed Tehran to develop within its borders a system and infrastructure to train and equip foreign fighters. Among the most important was the Badr Brigade, the armed wing of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Hakim’s Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Overall, nearly 5,000 foreign Shia militants wearing IRGC uniforms were killed in the war.\(^9\)

Outside of Iraq, the IRGC established a relationship with the Amal Movement in Lebanon and then Lebanese Hezbollah, to which Iran provided money, equipment, training, and ideological inspiration. As the IRGC commander in Lebanon noted in 1985, “The Muslims of Lebanon, especially the Shiites of Lebanese Hezbollah, consider themselves the offspring of the Islamic revolution and therefore know that they have a duty to imitate [taba’iyyat kardan] the Islamic revolution.”\(^{10}\) Over the next several decades, the IRGC-QF and other Iranian agencies, such as the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), established relationships with non-state actors in countries from Afghanistan to Yemen.\(^{11}\) Not all were Shia groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hamas in Palestinian territory.\(^{12}\)

Over time, the IRGC-QF, which reports directly to the supreme leader of Iran, became active in supporting state and sub-state partners outside of the country through units such as Department 400 (or the Misaq Unit), which is in charge of external special operations.\(^{13}\) The IRGC-QF engages in a wide range of activity, such as gathering intelligence; training, equipping, and funding state and non-state partner forces; conducting assassinations and bombings; and providing humanitarian and economic aid to Islamic causes.\(^{14}\) Today, it includes roughly 5,000 soldiers, much smaller than other components of the IRGC.\(^{15}\) The IRGC-QF includes sections devoted to specific countries and regions, such as the Ramazan Corps (Iraq), Levant Corps (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel), the Rasulallah Corps (Arabian Peninsula), and Ansar Corps (Afghanistan).\(^{16}\) These forces help Iran counter its state adversaries in a broad “Axis of Resistance” that extends from the Persian Gulf through Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq to the eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea.\(^{17}\) While the IRGC as a whole has over 125,000 total personnel, there are between 5,000 and 20,000 IRGC-QF soldiers.\(^{18}\) Other Iranian organizations, such as the MOIS, provide support to the IRGC.

Figure 2.1 (on the following page) shows satellite imagery of the Imam Ali facility west of Tehran, which has been used by the IRGC-QF for training.\(^{19}\) A review of satellite imagery of the facility over time indicates that it was a minor facility from 2000 to 2003 and then went through a major infrastructure development phase beginning around 2003. The approximately 222-acre facility includes: a 100-meter firing range; a second 100-meter open range that could be used for training with rocket launchers, improvised explosives, and other weapons; a driver training course; an obstacle course; and a combat course consisting of a dispersed collection of small walls, miscellaneous objects, and likely small vehicles used to train troops for combat in urban areas. Locations such as Imam Ali have allowed Iran to train and advise partner forces from across the region, representing a key element of Iranian efforts to strengthen irregular capabilities.\(^{20}\)

Iran has developed other irregular military capabilities. Cyber tools offer virtually unlimited range and low attribution, which is attractive for the Iranians because it allows them to conduct sabotage and other operations while maintaining plausible deniability. Iran has significantly improved its offensive cyber capabilities over the past several years. At least four organizations play a role in these operations: the IRGC, the Basij, Iran’s Passive Defense Organization, and the MOIS.\(^{21}\) Iran also established a Joint Chiefs of Staff Cyber Command to protect critical infrastructure, such as nuclear facilities, from cyber-attacks, as well as to better coordinate cyber oper-
Like Russia, China, and other states, Iran also leverages hacktivist organizations to conduct cyber operations. In 2018, for example, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted nine Iranian employees of the Mabna Institute for hacking into hundreds of universities and companies to steal sensitive research, proprietary data, and intellectual property. According to the U.S. government, they perpetrated many of the attacks on behalf of the IRGC. As the former U.S. director of national intelligence Dan Coats concluded in 2019, Iran “is capable of causing localized, temporary disruptive effects—such as disrupting a large company’s corporate networks for days to weeks—similar to its data deletion attacks against dozens of Saudi governmental and private-sector networks in late 2016 and early 2017.” Iran is also improving its ability to conduct more destructive and lasting cyberattacks. The destructive malware Shamoon, which has been linked to Iran through the state-sponsored hacking group APT33 (or Elfin), involves a wiper malware (Trojan. Filerase) that deletes files from an infected computer and then wipes the computer’s master boot record, making it unusable. Shamoon has been used successfully to target oil and gas infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Iran operates a variety of UAVs to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions, as well as to execute irregular operations such as the September 2019 strike against Saudi oil facilities. Tehran began a UAV development program in the 1980s and, despite sanctions, has developed an array of UAVs, such as the Shahed-129 and the Hamaseh. For example, the Shahed-129 is a medium-altitude, long-endurance UAV designed by Shahed Aviation Industries for the IRGC. It is similar in size, shape, and utility to the American MQ-1 Predator. Iran has also provided weapons, parts, and training for other systems—such as explosively formed penetrators, explosive boats, anti-ship cruise missiles, land attack cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles—to non-state partners to project power.

**Iranian Expansion**

The IRGC-QF is active in building, funding, training, and partnering with a growing number of actors in the region—a testament to Iran’s commitment to irregular warfare. The IRGC-QF’s relationship...
with these actors varies considerably and in many cases is more of a partnership than a malleable patron-client relationship.\textsuperscript{29}

To get an estimate of the number of fighters in IRGC-QF partner forces, CSIS analysts compiled a data set of fighters from 2011 to 2019 and then totaled the number operating each year. We did not attempt to estimate the broader number of supporters since we could not find reliable estimates of individuals that provided part-time logistical help, funding, intelligence, or other aid. Calculating the number of fighters is still challenging. Groups generally do not provide public estimates of their numbers, and their numbers can vary considerably over the course of a group’s existence. Consequently, this chapter included high and low estimates for the number of fighters by year. It attempted to reconcile differences in estimates by examining the sources of data and interviewing government and non-government experts. It used high and low estimates with the assumption that the actual numbers each year were somewhere between the extremes.

The data and figure suggest several trends. First, there has been an increase in the number of Shia fighters. The war in Syria contributed to a significant rise, particularly by 2014, as Lebanese Hezbollah deployed fighters and Iran trained, equipped, and funded Shia militia from across the region to support the struggling Assad regime. Today, examples of forces supported by the IRGC-QF include Lebanese Hezbollah; the \textit{hashd al-sha’abi} in Iraq (including groups such as the Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq); militia forces in Syria, including Lebanese Hezbollah; the Houthis in Yemen; Liwa Fatemiyoun in Afghanistan; Liwa Zainebiyoun in Pakistan; and several groups in Palestinian territory, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Second, there has been an expansion in locations where IRGC-QF forces have been active. The IRGC-QF has worked to broaden its areas of operation from traditional partner countries, such as Lebanon and Iraq (where the IRGC-QF has long had connections), to countries such as Yemen and Syria.\textsuperscript{30}

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the failure of the United States and its partners to prevent Iran from filling the vacuum, and the establishment of a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad contributed to a rise in Iranian influence and an increase in IRGC-QF-supported militias. By 2011, the Arab Spring created opportunities for Iran with the weakening of regimes and the onset of

\textbf{FIGURE 2.2 Size of IRGC-QF Partner Forces, 2011–2019}

\textbf{SOURCE} CSIS.
Irregular Military Power

expansion of insurgencies in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In Iraq, for example, the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces was helpful to Iran, particularly with an Iraqi government that welcomed Iranian help and did not effectively counter Iran’s ideological expansion. In Syria, the Assad regime was in dire need of help following the outbreak of the civil war that began in 2011. Iran supported Syrian military advances and Russian air strikes by aiding local militias and Lebanese Hezbollah forces deployed to Syria. In Yemen, Houthi security forces seized the capital, Sana’a, in 2014. In addition, the IRGC-QF took advantage of these opportunities to provide money, weapons, and other assistance to partners in the absence of significant balancing by the United States and other countries.

Iran has used its partners and activities in an attempt to establish a land bridge across the region, as highlighted in Figure 2.3. Some Lebanese Hezbollah fighters have referred to this land bridge as Wilayat Imam Ali (the state or province of Imam Ali) in honor of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. These routes, which remain partly aspirational, include: a northern route, through Iran, central Iraq, the Iraqi border town of Al-Qaim, Syria’s Abu Kamal and Dayr az Zawr, and into Lebanon; and a southern route, through Iran, the Iraqi border town of Al-Walid, Al-Tanf and Damascus in Syria, and into Lebanon. These corridors resemble the Royal Road, the ancient land bridge built by the Persian King Darius the Great in the fifth century BC. A U.S. withdrawal from Syria could facilitate the expansion of these corridors, particularly a departure of U.S. troops from bases such as Al-Tanf in southeastern Syria.

**Proxy Wars**

The IRGC-QF—headed by Esmail Ghaani, who replaced Qasem Soleimani after his death in January 2020—is particularly active in such countries as Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. It has provided military and non-military aid to partners, boosting their capabilities and increasing Tehran’s influence.

**Lebanon:** The IRGC-QF’s chief partner in Lebanon, Hezbollah, has improved its military capabilities and become more involved in the government. Among the most important activities undertaken by Hezbollah is the “Precision Project”: the effort to expand and upgrade Hezbollah’s inventory of rockets, missiles, and drones. With Iran’s help, Hezbollah has amassed a range of weapons and systems, such as the Fateh-110/M-600 short-range ballistic missile, Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 short-range ballistic missiles, Toophan anti-tank guided missiles, Kornet man-portable anti-tank guided missiles, Mi13 armored personnel carriers, T-72 main battle tanks, Karrar UAVs, and Katyuasha rocket launchers. Hezbollah’s armed UAV capabilities are among the most advanced of any terrorist group in the world, and it has destroyed Islamic State targets in Syria using Karrar armed UAVs. In addition, Hezbollah may...
FIGURE 2.4 Satellite Imagery of Training Facility Near El Boqaa, Lebanon

**SOURCE** CSIS.

FIGURE 2.5 Satellite Imagery of Training Facility Near El Yazate, Lebanon

**SOURCE** CSIS.
have stockpiled chemical weapons in Syria, including chlorine.\textsuperscript{36}

The IRGC-QF has been critical to these developments. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary general, said in June 2016: “Hezbollah’s budget, salaries, expenses, arms and missiles are coming from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Is this clear? This is no one’s business. As long as Iran has money, we have money. Can we be any more frank about that?”\textsuperscript{37} Hezbollah also became more directly involved in Lebanese politics after the group and its allies expanded their share of seats in Lebanon’s May 2018 parliamentary elections. In 2019, Hezbollah continued to increase its influence in the government, including through positions in the Ministry of Health. The U.S. government warned Hezbollah that if it tried to “exploit these ministries to funnel money or undertake other activities in support of their terrorist agenda, then we will have significant concerns.”\textsuperscript{38}

Figure 2.4 (on the previous page) highlights satellite imagery of a training camp in southern Lebanon located southeast of the town of Beit Moubarak, on the eastern and southern slopes of El Boqaa.\textsuperscript{39} The El Boqaa facility is dispersed within an area encompassing approximately 4.5 square kilometers and consists of at least six general components: firing ranges, housing and storage areas, driver training facilities, urban combat facilities, quarries used for exploding improvised explosives and firing rockets, and headquarters and support areas. The El Boqaa facility allows Iranian-linked groups to improve their combat proficiency and irregular tactics, techniques, and procedures.\textsuperscript{40}

Figure 2.5 (on the previous page) shows another training area located on the western edge of the Beqaa Valley near El Yazate, roughly 30 miles east of Beirut and close to the Lebanese town of Chmistar. The facility, which has been active since 2012, occupies nearly three square miles. It consists of over 140 small structures that are partially hidden among trees and deliberately dispersed, making them difficult to attack from the air using fighter aircraft, UAVs, or missiles. Additionally, there are firing ranges for small arms that vary in length from 60 meters to 100 meters, as well as a series of training areas surrounded by high berms that are likely used for explosives or heavy weapons training.\textsuperscript{41} These types of facilities allow Iranian-linked groups to train for irregular operations.

\textbf{Yemen:} The IRGC-QF also has provided weapons, funding, and training to the Houthis (officially called Ansar Allah), which has significantly improved the group’s capabilities and reach. Of particular concern are Iranian weapons and parts—including for ballistic missiles, land attack cruise missiles, and UAVs—that have been used by the Houthis to threaten shipping near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, conduct attacks against land-based targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and threaten U.S. military forces deployed to the region.\textsuperscript{42} The Bab el-Mandeb Strait, located at the southern end of the Red Sea between Yemen and Djibouti, is important because of the significant volume of trade that passes through it, including roughly 5 million barrels of oil every day.\textsuperscript{43} Iran’s objectives in Yemen include retaining—and perhaps increasing—Iran’s influence along the Red Sea and weakening Saudi Arabia and the UAE.\textsuperscript{44}

Around 2014, as the war in Yemen intensified with the growing involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Iran began increasing its aid to the Houthis. It provided anti-tank guided missiles, sea mines, UAVs, 122-millimeter Katyusha rockets, Misagh-2 man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), RDX high explosives, ballistic missiles, unmanned explosive boats, radar systems, and mining equipment.\textsuperscript{45} The IRGC-QF and Lebanese Hezbollah also provided training in Yemen and Iran.\textsuperscript{46}

The proliferation of missiles, missile technology, and missile parts has enabled Iran to significantly increase the strategic threat of the Houthis. One example is the use of Borkan-2H mobile, short-range ballistic missiles, which the Houthis used to strike Riyadh and other targets in Saudi Arabia, also threatening foreign businesses in the country. A United Nations panel of experts concluded that the missiles were “a derived lighter version” of Iran’s Qiam-1 missile and that Iran provided key missile parts to the Houthis.\textsuperscript{47} Analysis from the wreckage of 10 Borkan-2H missiles indicates that they were likely smuggled into Yemen in parts and then assembled. Iranian components were also integrated into Yemeni SA-2 surface-to-air missiles to construct the Qaher series of surface-to-surface rockets.\textsuperscript{48} Iran may have used a number of routes to transport the material to Yemen, including ship-to-shore transfers through
Oman and the Yemen ports of Nishtun and Al-Ghaydah in Al-Mahrah governorate.49 One example of Iran’s irregular approach in Yemen is the targeting of Saudi Arabia. Figure 2.6 highlights over 250 attacks from missiles, UAVs, and other projectiles against critical infrastructure and other targets in Saudi Arabia between July 2016 and July 2019. These attacks included direct fire, explosives (including from UAVs), guided missiles, and indirect fire (including mortars, rockets, ballistic missiles, and unidentified projectiles). The vast majority of attacks were indirect fire (71 percent), and the most-frequently targeted provinces in Saudi Arabia were Jazan (107 attacks), Najran (79 attacks), and Asir (39) — all near the Saudi Arabia-Yemen border. An improvement in the effectiveness of Saudi operations and increased Omani crackdowns on smuggling may have contributed to the decline in attacks by mid-2019.

Iraq: The IRGC-QF remains active in Iraq and has enhanced Iran’s political, military, and economic power. In fact, Iraq may become the most active battlefield between Iran, the United States, and their partners after the death of Qasem Soleimani and Kata’ib Hezbollah head Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, as well as a series of increasingly violent protests. Leaked Iranian intelligence documents indicate that Iran has spent considerable time and money attempting to covertly influence Iraqi politics, including by paying off Iraqi government officials and attempting to recruit former CIA informants.50 Iran has helped Shia militia forces in Iraq build their missile production capabilities. According to some reporting, factories in Iraqi locations such as Jurf Sahkar (north of Kerbala) and al-Zafaraniya (east of Baghdad) have been used to develop missiles.51 Iranian activities in Iraq threaten the United States and its partners, such as Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.

There are three main groups that comprise the hashd al-sha’abi, an umbrella organization of Shia militias. First are those groups loyal to Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which have a particularly close relationship with the IRGC-QF. Examples include the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, Kataeb Sayed al-Shuhada, and Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba. Second are the groups loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, such as Saraya al-Ataba al-Abbasiya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Huseiniya, Saraya al-Ataba al-Alawiya, and Liwa Ali al-Akbar. Sistani urged fighters to join the Iraqi government’s security organizations—not paramilitary groups tied to Iran—in his June 2014 fatwa (or legal ruling).52 Third
are groups loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. The primary organization is Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades), which includes two Hashd brigades (Brigades 313 and 314). The IRGC-QF has provided some Iraqi militias with short-range ballistic missiles, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, UAVs, and MANPADS. In addition, several Iraqi militias worked with the IRGC-QF and Iraqi forces to help liberate Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Mosul, and other Iraqi cities from Islamic State control. As one assessment of the 2017 Mosul campaign concluded, “The Quds Force-led Shia militia forces had some 10,000 troops in the battlespace,” with some of the fighters working closely with the Iraqi Security Forces and police. During its September 2019 attack against Saudi oil infrastructure targets, Iran launched some UAVs from Iraqi territory controlled by Iranian-linked Shia militias.

**Syria:** Iran has provided substantial assistance to the Assad regime by helping organize, train, and fund over 100,000 Shia fighters across the region. Following the onset of Syria’s civil war in 2011 and the potential collapse of one of Tehran’s few regional allies, Iranian leaders became alarmed at the rise of Sunni extremist groups such as the Islamic State and U.S., European, and Gulf support to rebel groups. In addition to providing light and heavy weapons to the Syrian regime and militias, up to 3,000 IRGC-QF fighters helped plan and execute campaigns, such as the 2016 Battle of Aleppo (or Operation Dawn of Victory). The IRGC-QF worked closely with the Assad regime and the Russian military, which conducted strikes from Russian combat aircraft and naval vessels in the Mediterranean Sea. Syrian forces and militias supported by the IRGC-QF shelled rebel positions in Aleppo, and Russian close air support and Kalibr cruise missile strikes reduced entire neighborhoods to rubble. By December 2016, ground forces routed rebel forces, who departed under an agreement brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Iran also deployed the Artesh, its conventional military, to Syria. With IRGC-QF support and encouragement, Lebanese Hezbollah deployed up to 8,000 fighters to Syria and increased its arsenal with greater numbers and ranges of rockets and missiles from Syrian territory. Hezbollah also trained, advised, and assisted Shia and other non-state groups in Syria. Collective-
ly known as Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suria (the Islamic Resistance in Syria), examples included: Quwat al Ridha (or Ridha Forces), which have operated in such Syrian governorates as Homs; Al-Ghaliboun: Saraya al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suria (or The Victors: The Companies of the Islamic Resistance in Syria), which have been active in governorates such as Daraa and Quneitra; and Liwa al-imam al-Baqir (or Baqir Brigade), which has deployed to such governorates as Aleppo. The IRGC-QF trained and equipped roughly 2,000 Pakistani fighters under the Zaiebiyoun Brigade (named after Zaynab, Fatima’s daughter). Iran also funded and trained fighters from Bahrain in Syria. The IRGC-QF has aided other forces, such as the Afghan Taliban, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas.

Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities in Iranian Irregular Capabilities

There are several potential Iranian weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Risk of Overextension: The Iranian regime’s willingness to continue to resource the IRGC-QF at significant levels and remain heavily engaged across the region may increase political costs at home—especially with a poorly-performing economy. In an effort to mitigate overreach, Iran has reduced payments when money was tight and decreased the exposure of personnel when losses were high. But the costs of Iran’s continuing involvement in regional wars will likely continue to add up. The IRGC is also vulnerable to an economic slowdown because it owns a vast empire of businesses and foundations, from construction companies to petrochemical and cement companies.

According to some estimates, Iran spent up to $16 billion in Syria between 2012 and 2018. The Lebanese Hezbollah presence in Syria was controversial among some of its supporters because of the high number of casualties, risk of overextension, and distraction from fighting Israel and expanding power in Lebanon. “We are a resistance [movement], and you don’t do resistance by going to war in Syria,” said one former Hezbollah fighter. “I will gladly go to fight Israel. But I won’t send my sons to die in Syria.” Some protesters in Iran also expressed outrage at Iran’s interventions abroad, including in Syria. Iranian media periodically announced memorial services for fallen IRGC-QF officers and

Other Countries: The IRGC-QF has aided other non-state actors across the region and used them in battlefields like Syria. For example, the IRGC-QF organized roughly 10,000 Afghan militants under the Fatemiyoun Brigade (named after Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad) and deployed them to Syria to fight alongside pro-Assad forces. Fatemiyoun fighters were used in such battles as Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Homs, Latakia, Palmyra, and Dayr az Zawr. The IRGC-QF trained and equipped roughly 2,000 Pakistani fighters under the Zaiebiyoun Brigade (named after Zaynab, Fatima’s daughter). Iran also funded and trained fighters from Bahrain in Syria. The IRGC-QF has aided other forces, such as the Afghan Taliban, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas.

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other military personnel in Syria, including in newspaper obituaries. Iran suffered substantial casualties during offensive operations in cities such as Aleppo. According to some accounts, over 30 IRGC-QF operatives were killed in the first two weeks of the Aleppo campaign alone, including Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani, a former commander of Iranian forces in Syria. IRGC-QF personnel of virtually all ranks were killed in action, from general officers to colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors. Iran’s state-backed Martyrs Foundation financially supported thousands of families of Iran-backed forces killed in Syria.

While the Assad regime has recaptured much of its territory with the help of Russia and Iran, the war is not over. Syria is a fractured country with an unpopular regime, massive economic problems, large-scale infrastructure destruction, and lingering ethnic and religious animosities. Iranian-backed Shia militias have also proliferated in areas such as southwestern Syria, risking overextension.

**Sectarian Tensions:** There is wide variation in Iraqi views of Iran, including among the Shia community. Najaf’s Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his branch of Iraqi Shiism reject direct clerical participation in politics. Sistani’s stance is an implicit rebuke of Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, which emphasizes the role of the clergy in decisionmaking. In addition, Iraqi nationalism and anti-Iranian sentiments among Iraqis still linger from the Iran-Iraq War. Some public opinion polls indicate that many Iraqis are highly critical of Iran’s role in the country. In Sunni areas such as Al-Anbar Province, locals have bitterly complained about the proliferation of Shia militias, feel alienated from a government in Baghdad they believe is too closely aligned with Shia, and protest the slow pace of reconstruction following the collapse of the Islamic State’s caliphate. As one Iraqi intelligence official acknowledged, “This is not just revenge on ISIS. This is revenge on Sunnis.”

Muqtada al-Sadr’s relations with the IRGC-QF have been tense. His father was an ardent Shia Arab activist, and his teachings on the importance of Arabism run counter to Khomeini’s pan-Shia, anti-nationalist ideology. Muqtada also does not believe in Khomeini’s *velayat-e faqih*. Iran is now stuck attempting to mediate between the fractious Iraqi Shia groups in an environment where a single Lebanese Hezbollah-style structure is impossible. In September 2018, Iraqi protesters stormed the Iranian consulate in the southern Iraqi city of Basra and set it on fire.

These fissures create opportunities for the United States and its partners—including Gulf countries—to continue to engage with Iraq’s Shia communities. Riyadh, for example, has established a political and economic relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr. There may be opportunities for Iraq to work with Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to further develop economic ties with southern Iraqi cities such as Basra, including by expanding rail, road, and electricity links.

**Iranian Isolation:** Iran is largely isolated in the region. Iranian activism and the proliferation of Iranian-backed non-state actors has alarmed most governments in the region, such as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco. Some public opinion polls suggest that support for Iran across the Middle East—including in Iraq—has declined. In addition, some Iranian government officials have even worried that Iran’s reliance on Shia militias could backfire. One leaked Iranian intelligence cable warned that there was growing “bitterness” against Iranian proxies because of their involvement in “destroying villages and houses” and “looting the Sunnis’ property and livestock.” Another leaked cable warned: “In all areas where the Popular Mobilization Forces go into action, the Sunnis flee, abandoning their homes and property, and prefer to live in tents as refugees or reside in camps.” These assessments suggest that Iranian government officials are acutely aware of their vulnerabilities.
This chapter examines Iran’s regular—or conventional—military power and explores its nuclear program. It asks several questions. What are Iran’s main regular military capabilities? And what are its relevant weaknesses and vulnerabilities? To answer these questions, this chapter compiles quantitative and qualitative information, such as Iran’s defense spending as a percentage of GDP and the capabilities of its ground, maritime, air, and missile forces.

This chapter argues that Iran’s regular military capabilities are relatively weak, particularly compared to major U.S. competitors such as China and Russia that have significantly more advanced ground, maritime, air, space, cyber, and nuclear capabilities. Iran is also a mid-level power in the Middle East. Its defense spending as a percentage of GDP is smaller than a number of countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. And its aging inventory of conventional ground, air, and maritime capabilities also lags well behind Saudi Arabia, Israel, and others. Indeed, Iran’s preferred way of war is generally to deter major conflicts while shaping the regional environment using proxies and information warfare. Although most of Iran’s regular military capabilities are not on par with others in the region, its investments in selected anti-access/area
denial (A2/AD) capabilities give Iran a reasonable deterrent against conventional attacks. Iran’s combination of missiles, submarines, mines, and swarming tactics make Iran a formidable adversary in the Persian Gulf.

The chapter is divided into several sections. First, it analyzes Iran’s army, air force, and maritime capabilities. Then, it assesses Iran’s missile program before examining Iran’s nuclear program. To close, it discusses weaknesses and vulnerabilities in Iran’s regular military capabilities.

Ground, Maritime, and Air Force Capabilities

Iran is a mid-level regional power at best. Iran’s military is comprised of two separate entities: the regular armed forces and the IRGC. As Figure 3.1 highlights, Iran’s defense spending as a percentage of its GDP lags behind a number of countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Iran’s overall defense spending is also notably lower than several of its competitors in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Israel. Iran has roughly 610,000 active military personnel, of which approximately 195,000 are in the IRGC. Its forces include roughly 350,000 soldiers from the regular army (220,000 of whom are conscripts), 18,000 from the regular navy, 37,000 from the regular air force, and 15,000 from air defense force. Iran has relatively high numbers of soldiers, tanks, and aircraft compared to many of its regional competitors. As discussed below, however, its ground forces face combat readiness problems, and much of its equipment—including tanks and aircraft—are antiquated and lack sufficient spare parts. The rest of this section examines Iran’s ground, maritime, and air forces.

Ground Forces: Iran has two main ground components: the Islamic Republic of Iran Ground Forces (IRIGF) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Forces (IRGC-GF). The IRIGF includes six infantry divisions, four armor divisions, six artillery divisions, two commando divisions, one airborne brigade, and one special forces brigade. Iran’s army is relatively weak. Though Iran does not possess a robust arsenal of modern tanks or armored vehicles, it has rebuilt its armored strength since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. Iran has steadily procured a large number of legacy sys-
Regular Military Power

Iran has two navies: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN). Both have missions to defend Iran's littoral territories, though they have different areas of operation. The IRGCN possesses a lighter fleet of ships and has the vital close-in mission to provide coastal defense and protect the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, while the IRIN has the standard “blue water” mission that includes force projection. Still, the IRIN and IRGCN are relatively weak. After Operation Praying Mantis during the Iran-Iraq War, a sea battle in which the IRIN suffered substantial losses from American air and missile attacks, Tehran shifted its efforts away from strengthening regular naval capabilities and toward developing irregular capabilities. Iran's maritime capabilities primarily focus on the use of fast-attack vessels, submarines, mines, and missiles to threaten maritime assets traversing near Iran's territorial waters and provide an A2/AD capability.

As part of its irregular naval doctrine, Iran employs smaller vessels that emphasize speed and mobility. Iran could employ these fast-attack vessels to fire on tankers, lay mines, or conduct swarming tactics to isolate and overwhelm targets. Iranian acquisition of the Houdong-class missile boats, C 14-class missile boats, and MK 13-class patrol craft—all from China—highlights Iran's focus on irregular capabilities and its ability to fire precision missiles from mobile maritime platforms. Iran produces domestic variants, such as the Peykaap I-/II-class patrol craft and missile boats. Mines are similarly used by Iran as an area denial tool. Late in the Iran-Iraq “tanker war” in the 1980s, Iran utilized mine warfare against commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf, planting mines through the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and the Strait of Hormuz. In 1988, Iran deposited roughly 150 mines in the Strait of Hormuz, one of which succeeded in severely damaging the U.S. guided-missile frigate USS Roberts.

The IRGCN has trained to conduct “swarming” tactics that involve light, mobile naval forces capable of fast-moving hit-and-run attacks on an opponent from multiple directions. Iran has constructed a large number of fast boats armed with accurate, short-range anti-ship weapons. Figure 3.2 provides a hypothetical example of an Iranian swarming attack against a U.S. aircraft carrier and support vessels from Iranian fast attack boats and a helicopter with cruise missiles. In short, Iran's swarming tactics and irregular capabilities suggest that it will
continue to threaten critical infrastructure targets transiting through strategic waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

In order to offset some of the weaknesses of its major surface forces, the IRIN also maintains three Russian-made kilo-class submarines capable of laying smart mines and launching long-range homing torpedoes, as well as 18 midget submarines that also have mine-laying capabilities. Iran is the only Persian Gulf country that possesses submarines, and the anti-sub capacity of regional countries is limited. Still, as one military assessment concludes, “Iran does face significant operational problems in using its submarines in local waters . . . Even smaller coastal submarines have maneuver and bottom suction problems, and cannot hide in thermoclines or take advantage of diving for concealment or self-protection.”

**Air Force:** Iran’s military possesses two air force organizational structures: the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force (IRGC-AF). The IRIAF maintains Iran’s fixed-wing aircraft. The IRGC-AF has control of the controversial ballistic missile program, a UAV program, a large number of rotary-wing aircraft, and a small number of fixed-wing aircraft.

The primary mission of both the IRGC-AF and IRIAF is to protect and defend Iran’s airspace and sovereignty. The IRIAF’s air inventory consists of aircraft from a range of different ages and countries. However, the majority of the aging Iranian inventory consists of U.S.-supplied aircraft predating the 1979 revolution. Major procurements included the F-5A/B Freedom Fighter, the F-4D/e Phantom II, and the Grumman F-14A Tomcat. Since 1980, Iran has received few deliveries of new combat aircraft. These include early export versions of the MiG-29A/U/UB Soviet combat aircraft and the Su-24MK, Su-25, and J-7 (a Chinese variant of the MiG-21).

But Iran’s air forces are not a formidable threat to a technologically advanced air force. Iran’s combat aircraft systems face serious issues competing with more modern aircraft in other Gulf country air forces. For example, the Royal Saudi Air Force inventory includes modern F-15 variants. Overall, Iran’s air capabilities face several challenges. First, Iran has struggled to obtain replacement aircraft parts because of economic sanctions. The IRGC clandestine elements have attempted to purchase parts from the black market using wit-
ting and unwitting sources. But operational readiness, sustainment, and training have suffered. Second, nearly two-thirds of the aircraft in Iran’s fighter fleet in the IRIAF are at least 40 years old. To supplement the aging fleet of foreign-built aircraft, Iran has embarked on modest indigenous aircraft production efforts, finding some success in producing light attack and training aircraft. For example, Iran has built several indigenous fighters, all largely based on—or modified version of—the F-5. These include the Simorgh, the Saegheh-1/-2, and the Azaraksh. Despite Iran’s efforts, readiness and force quality remain major issues.

**Missile Capabilities**

While most of its regular military capabilities are weak, Iran maintains the largest ballistic and cruise missile force in the Middle East, capable of striking targets as far as 2,500 kilometers from its borders. Iran’s missile force acts as a deterrent against adversary aggression, provides a key warfighting capability, and gives Iran a potential nuclear weapons delivery capability. Iran has devoted significant resources and time to amass a credible missile force. Iranian missiles continue to improve in terms of range, speed, flight profile, and destructiveness. Still, most of Iran’s ballistic missiles are not highly accurate, making them best suited to attacks on large soft targets, such as urban concentrations and economic infrastructure.

Iran’s ballistic missile inventory has been aided by China, Russia, and North Korea. Iran possesses a family of liquid-fueled propellant missiles (the Shahab series) based on former Soviet Scud technology. The Shahab series, which can hit targets from 300 to 2,000 km away, constitutes the core of Iran’s missile force. Examples include the Shahab-1/-2/-3 variants. Iran also possesses the Qiam-1 (Shahab-2 variant), Ghadr-1 (Shahab-3 variant), and Emad-1 (Shahab-3 variant), which feature improved navigation and guidance components, lethality, and range. Iran has deployed some of its missiles to neighboring countries, such as Syria.

Figures 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 (next page) highlight an Iranian Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) base near the town of Tabriz, Iran. The satellite imagery shows that the base was constructed in a narrow valley and sheltered by surrounding mountains. It also illustrates hardened tunnels, fuel storage, and other facilities.
and oxidizer trucks, and maintenance and storage facilities for the Shahab-3. With a range of up to 2,000 kilometers, the Shahab-3 can be effective in targeting large soft targets such as cities—and is capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

Iran has also produced indigenously designed solid-propellant missiles (the Fateh series), based on Chinese technology, with ranges of 200 to 2,000 kilometers. Fateh A-110 variants have undergone many capability enhancements since its debut in 2003. Notable variants include: the Khalij Fars (a supersonic anti-ship ballistic missile), the Hormuz-1 (Fateh-110 with anti-radiation capabilities to target radar systems), the Mobin (Fateh-110 with an electro-optical seeker), and the Zolfighar (extended range to 700 km). In addition, Iran possesses land-attack cruise missiles such as the Soumar and the Meshkat with ranges of approximately 2,000 km. Figure 3.4 illustrates the ranges of key Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles. Iranian missiles—especially longer-range missiles such as the Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile—can reach critical infrastructure, population centers, and U.S. bases in the region.

Iran’s missile capabilities are notably weaker than major U.S. competitors such as China. However, salvo attacks can inflict serious damage on some types of military targets, including aircraft in the open and unhardened structures and airfields. More recently, Iran has used ballistic missiles in a warfighting capacity. In September 2018, for example, Iran launched seven short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) in an attack on northern Iraq-based Iranian Kurdish dissidents. In June 2017, Iran launched a Qiam-1 (Shahab-2 variant) SRBM within a salvo that included five Zolfagharr SRBMs, targeting Islamic State militants in Syria’s Dayr az Zawr region, though some sources dispute the success of these strikes. And in September 2019, Iran launched a combination of cruise missiles and UAVs against Saudi Arabia’s Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities.

Iran’s missiles allow it to threaten navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian mobile coastal-defense cruise missile launchers can readily be deployed along the Iranian coast, on Irani-
an-claimed islands in the Persian Gulf, and potentially even on oil platforms.\(^4\) Iran has expanded its inventory of coastal-defense cruise missiles from Chinese C802- and C700-series cruise missiles to domestically-produced variants, such as the Noor, Ghader, and Ghadir.\(^5\) The coastal-defense cruise missile threat is also extraterritorial.\(^6\) While Iran has thus far armed its missiles with conventional warheads, it could potentially deliver biological, chemical, and nuclear payloads via its long-range missiles. Should Tehran decide to acquire a nuclear warhead, its missiles can be adapted to deliver them.\(^7\)

Finally, Iran has developed limited space and counterspace capabilities, including satellite launch vehicles like the two-stage Safr and communications and remote sensing satellites.\(^8\)

### Nuclear Capabilities

Iran’s nuclear program became a major issue in 2002 when U.S. officials confirmed that Iran was building a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production plant at Arak. The situation further escalated in 2010 when Iran began enriching uranium to 20 percent purity. In addition, a nuclear weapon also requires a detonation mechanism. The International Atomic Energy Agency concluded that Iran researched such a mechanism until 2009.\(^9\)

But in 2015, Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) signed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, widely known as the JCPOA. The United States, European Union, and United Nations reduced sanctions following Iran’s commitment to comply with the nuclear-related provisions of the agreement. Iran agreed to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium, decrease its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98 percent to 300

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**Figure 3.4** Map of Iranian Missile Ranges

**Source** Missile Defense Project, “Missiles of Iran,” Missile Threat, CSIS.
FIGURE 3.5.1 Alleged Iranian Nuclear Research Site Near Abadeh, March 2019

SOURCE CSIS.

FIGURE 3.5.2 Razed Area of Alleged Iranian Nuclear Research Site Near Abadeh, October 2019

SOURCE CSIS.
kilograms, cut the number of its gas centrifuges by about two-thirds for 13 years, and redesign the Arak reactor so it could not produce any weapons-grade plutonium. Another means of acquiring fissile material for a nuclear weapon is to reprocess plutonium, a material that could be produced by Iran’s heavy water plant at Arak. In accordance with the JCPOA, Iran rendered inactive the core of the reactor and has limited its stockpile of heavy water. The JCPOA did not prohibit civilian nuclear plants such as the one Russia built for Iran at Bushehr.

Still, Iran has likely continued to look at options to develop its nuclear weapons program. As highlighted in Figures 3.5.1 and 3.5.2, Iran allegedly constructed a nuclear weapons research and development facility south of Isfahan in a remote, mountainous valley near the town of Abadeh. The facility had existed since roughly 2012 but was destroyed by Iran in September 2019 after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly disclosed the site. Israel and other governments became aware of the facility after Mossad assets stole a large collection of Iranian government documents (sometimes referred to as the “atomic archives”) about Iran’s nuclear program from a warehouse in Tehran, including 55,000 printed pages and 183 compact discs.

### Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities in Iranian Regular Military Capabilities

Iran has several weaknesses that can be exploited.

**Weak Regular Military:** Most of Iran’s regular air, land, and maritime weapons and equipment is antiquated, poorly-maintained, and short of spare parts—undermining mission readiness. In addition, the Iranian military has primitive command-and-control capabilities; a lack of highly-trained regular soldiers; insufficient replacement parts for equipment, especially air assets; limited logistical capabilities for long-term operations; and a defense industry that is unable to meet the country’s needs for modern weapons systems. U.S. economic sanctions have had a significant impact on Iran’s regular military, including by limiting technology and parts that could be used for Iran’s missile, regular military, and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. These weaknesses make Iran vulnerable in a conventional war. Iranian political and military leaders are likely aware of their vulnerabilities, which likely makes them cautious and eager to prevent significant military escalation.

**Limited Air Defense Systems:** While Iran has developed more sophisticated and longer-range missiles, its air defense system is still vulnerable to attack by U.S. and partner aircraft and missiles. Many of Iran’s surface-to-air missiles were acquired during the Shah’s time and are based, in part, on Russian and Chinese designs established during the Vietnam War. Since Iran acquired these weapons, it has tried to develop more integrated land-based air defense systems and harden air defense command and control centers. Despite these changes, however, Iran’s air defense system is still vulnerable to strikes by U.S. and other technologically-sophisticated militaries and particularly to radar-homing missiles, electronic warfare systems, and other advanced weapons. More recently, Iran has imported roughly 32 Russian-made S-300 surface-to-air missile systems—including the S-300PMU2 (SA-20 Gargoyle)—which have improved Iran’s air defense where they are deployed. But Iran’s air defense system is still vulnerable to attacks from stealthy aircraft and ballistic and cruise missiles—including hypersonic missiles.

These vulnerabilities indicate that Iran would have difficulty prosecuting a conventional war outside its territory, including seizing and holding territory. But the Iranian military would present a more formidable threat in response to a foreign invasion of Iran, where it would likely utilize irregular strategies, operations, and tactics.
His chapter examines Iran's economy, including the impact of U.S. sanctions as part of the “maximum pressure” campaign. It asks several questions. What are the primary characteristics of Iran’s economy? What has been the impact of U.S. economic sanctions? And what are Iran’s economic weaknesses and vulnerabilities? To answer these questions, this chapter compiles economic data from such sources as the IMF and World Bank, as well as the Central Bank of Iran. In addition, it reviews the extensive literature on sanctions to provide insight into the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions against Iran. In discussing sanctions, it refers to the “sender” as the principal author (or authors) of the sanctions and the “target” as the recipient.1

The chapter argues that the Iranian economy has long possessed weaknesses caused, in part, by an inefficient state-run economy and international isolation. Recent U.S. sanctions have further crippled Iran’s economy and contributed to declines in GDP growth in 2018 and 2019, as well as high inflation rates. The Iranian economy has also suffered from high unemployment and a collapse in the value of the rial, Iran’s currency. In 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani acknowledged that U.S. sanctions were having a significant impact on Iran’s economy. He noted that sanctions affected Iran’s
banking industry, imports, and exports, all of which had a second-order impact in “the areas of oil, petrochemical [sic], steel, and agriculture.”

Despite Iran’s economic challenges, however, U.S. sanctions have not succeeded in coercing the regime to change its behavior on a range of issues—at least not yet. Sanctions have not stopped Iran from enriching uranium, ending the export of missile parts and technology to militant groups, halting the development of nuclear-capable missiles, and terminating broad support to groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah. A large body of research suggests that while sanctions may cause economic damage, they are generally ineffective in changing the behavior of target states. Sanctions are particularly unlikely to be effective when the target is an adversary, the sanctions are largely unilateral rather than multilateral, and the target state’s vital interests are threatened. In addition, many Iranians blame the United States—not just the regime—for the current economic crisis. This situation may be partly caused by a “rally around the flag” effect, in which Iranian citizens partly support their government in the face international coercion.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first provides a brief overview of Iran’s economy. The second section assesses the impact of U.S. and other sanctions against Iran. The third section ends by highlighting Iranian economic weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

**Iran’s Economy**

With a population of over 80 million and a 2018 real GDP of $452 billion, Iran has the second-largest population and second-largest economy in the Middle East and North Africa. Its economy relies primarily on the oil, agricultural, industrial, and service (such as transportation, wholesaling, and communication) sectors. The Iranian economy is state run and subject to distortions, such as corruption and subsidies, that weaken the prospects for private sector-led growth. The Iranian government owns and operates hundreds of state-owned enterprises and para-statals organizations, such as the bonyads (or Islamic charitable foundations). As highlighted in Chapter 5, it also owns numerous companies affiliated with Iran’s security forces, especially the IRGC. Together, the IRGC and bonyads control up to 70 percent of the economy, and they often obtain favorable contracts, subsidies, and cheap loans from the Iranian government. The IRGC oversees more than 100 commercial enterprises, which account for a large proportion of domestic production, as well as banks, airports, and seaports. The bonyads are involved in manufacturing, agriculture, and industry. They have received significant subsidies, including subsidized loans and access to subsidized imports, and their economic losses have imposed significant costs on Iran’s budget.

Since the 1979 revolution, the Iranian economy has evolved through several phases. The new Khomeini regime adopted a nationalization policy, acquiring ownership of banks, insurance companies, large-scale manufacturers, communications firms, and transportation companies. During the Iran-Iraq War, the state continued to consolidate control over the country’s industrial sector to facilitate production of spare parts and other military materiel. The regime adopted restrictive policies, such as price controls and subsidies, for its population and focused on import substitution. It established a multiple exchange system to channel foreign currency for purchases of military equipment and other materiel. But gross domestic investments fell by an average of 6.6 percent per year during this period. Material and parts shortages reduced productivity, with some industries working at only 30 percent capacity. A decline in oil prices in the 1980s also hampered economic growth, increased the government budget deficit, and led to a reduction in government expenditures. The government also spent between $43 billion and $45 billion in just the first five years of the war, an amount that one Iranian official acknowledged could have allowed Iran to become “one of the most powerful industrial countries in the world” had it been used for more productive purposes.

When the Iran-Iraq war ended, successive leaders focused on postwar economic recovery—but with
mixed results. President Hashemi Rafsanjani instituted the country’s first Five Year Development Plan (1989–1994), which focused on government spending. But Iran’s economy struggled. The rial rapidly depreciated following a failed effort to unify exchange rates. Rafsanjani’s second Five Year Development Plan (1994–1999) did little to improve the economy, and he and other high-ranking government officials were accused of corruption (including nepotism) that contributed to broader governance woes. As one analysis of the Iranian economy concluded, by the end of the 1990s, the “economy, with a rapidly expanding population, has experienced a marked decline in investment, low labour productivity, a widening trade gap, a fast accumulation of debt and, above all, a sharp decline in the standard of living.”

Rafsanjani’s successor, Mohammad Khatami, attempted to improve and accelerate economic growth. The third Five Year Development Plan (2000–2005) focused on liberalizing trade restrictions, unifying the exchange rate, and reforming the tax system. Under Khatami, Iran unified the exchange rate so that all international transactions were conducted at one unified rate. The government also cut marginal corporate and personal income tax rates in 2002 from 64 to 25 percent. GDP grew by an average of 6 percent between 2000 and 2005, with a particularly impressive 10.3 percent growth rate in 2002. Despite these successes, Khatami was unable to overcome domestic opposition and cut consumer price subsidies in such areas as energy, wheat, rice, sugar, milk, and cheese.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who took over as president in 2005 on a populist mantra, promised to redistribute wealth to all Iranians—particularly the mosta’zafin (the “have nots” or the downtrodden). During the fourth Five Year Development Plan (2005–2010), Ahmadinejad reversed Khatami’s economic liberalization policies and promised to enlarge economic opportunities and fight corruption. But his economic program was undermined by growing international sanctions in response to concerns about advancements in Iran’s nuclear weapons program. In June 2010, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1929, which tightened proliferation-related sanctions on Iran and imposed an embargo on the supply or transfer to Iran of major weapons systems, such as battle tanks and combat aircraft. The United States also adopted the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act in 2010. The act sanctioned individuals and firms investing in Iran’s energy sector or selling refined petroleum to Iran, cut off access to international financial markets for the IRGC, and penalized foreign banks doing business with designated Iranian banks. The European Union also enacted sanctions that targeted individuals and companies that were directly involved in Iran’s nuclear program and other areas, such as the oil industry. (For an overview of these and other sanctions, see Appendix B.)

While these sanctions severely impacted Iran’s economy, a mixture of structural weaknesses, resource misallocations, and a worsening business climate helped produce stagflation (a simultaneous state of low growth and high inflation). Under Ahmadinejad, growth in GDP fell from 5.1 percent in 2005 to -7.7 percent in 2012 and -0.3 percent in 2013. Sanctions also contributed to a 60 percent decline in the value of the rial on unofficial foreign exchange markets from January 2012 to 2013, when the election of Rouhani stabilized the rial at about 35,000 to the dollar.

When Hassan Rouhani became president in 2013, the country was amid its fifth Five-Year Development Plan (2010–2015) and faced severe economic sanctions. Rouhani attempted to stabilize macroeconomic indicators and encourage growth through a more disciplined fiscal policy, structural reform, and anti-corruption initiatives. The government then passed a sixth Five Year Development Plan (2015–2020) comprised of three pillars: developing an economy more resilient to outside pressure, accelerating advances in science and technology, and promoting cultural excellence. But Iran’s economy continued to struggle under Rouhani. The temporary lifting of most nuclear-related sanctions under the 2015 nuclear deal led to a brief restoration of Iran’s oil production and revenue that drove GDP...
growth to 12.5 percent in 2016 and a more modest 3.7 percent in 2017.31 But as Figure 4.1 highlights, GDP growth collapsed to -3.9 percent in 2018 and an estimated -9.5 percent in 2019 following the reimposition of U.S. sanctions as part of the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign.34 Most growth outside of the oil sector was attributed to improvements in services (such as transportation, storage, and communication), while manufacturing output declined. Investment also shrank because of growing uncertainty about the future direction of the economy.35

Inflation skyrocketed from 8.3 percent in 2017 to 51.1 percent in 2018 and an estimated 31.2 percent in 2019.36 Rising prices negatively impacted the cost of living and the cost of doing business. Food prices increased by 62.8 percent from February 2018 to February 2019.37 Figure 4.2 highlights the inflation rate for Iran and several other countries in the region—including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the UAE—between 2005 and 2019. Inflation in Iran is significantly higher than other countries in the region, severely impacting Iranian consumers. As World Bank economists assessed, the Iranian “economy is expected to undergo a period of stagflation until April 2020 as oil output continues to decline along with other mounting external challenges.”38 Inflationary expectations and uncertainty have led to a significant decline in the value of the rial, driving up input costs and imported consumer goods. Iran’s poverty level is expected to rise from 11.6 percent in 2016 to 12.8 percent in 2021.39

Iranian leaders have been frank about their country’s economic challenges. As Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei acknowledged, “the main problem of our country is the economic problem and the issue of the livelihood of underprivileged classes.
Part of this problem is related to the sanctions imposed by western powers—the U.S. and Europe.”
Public opinion polls suggest that Iranians believe the country’s economic situation is worsening.
According to one poll, for example, 57 percent of Iranians polled said that economic conditions were deteriorating in their local communities.
Interviews with Iranians also show a blunt recognition of the country’s economic difficulties.
Despite these challenges, however, Iran’s economy has defied many predictions of its imminent collapse. The country still possesses a large and well-educated young labor force and middle class, a relatively diverse economy, and a strong endowment of natural resources.
Iran’s middle class includes newly-educated professionals, technicians, business managers, and entrepreneurs.
Iran’s labor force is also large and fairly well educated, and literacy is high.
Without sanctions relief, however, the Iranian economy will continue to suffer from high inflation and low—perhaps negative—growth.

Economic Sanctions
Sanctions have long been an instrument of U.S. policy toward Iran, particularly since 1979. In November 1979, Iranian students took over the U.S. embassy in Tehran and detained more than 50 American hostages.
In response, the United States terminated diplomatic relations with Tehran, froze Iranian assets, and banned most exports and financial dealings with Iran.
The United States applied additional sanctions in 1984 during the Iran-Iraq War, prohibiting weapons sales and all U.S. assistance to Iran. In 1996, the United Nations again imposed sanctions against Iran in an effort to undermine Tehran’s ability to acquire weapons of mass destruction and punish Iran for its support for groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah.
The Iran Sanctions Act of 1996, as it was called, targeted Iran’s energy sector—particularly its petroleum resources. However, Washington did not strictly enforce these provisions.
In 2010, the United States adopted the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (or CISADA) in response to growing U.S. and international concerns that Iran continued to develop more accurate and longer-range ballistic missiles, support international terrorism, and potentially develop nuclear weapons.
As a U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iran recently concluded, while Iran had at least temporarily halted its nuclear weapons program, “we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.”
These sanctions contributed to a fall in GDP and high inflation. But following the 2015 nuclear agreement, the United States, European Union, and United Nations withdrew some sanctions.
Sanctions on non-nuclear issues remained in place, but they did little to stop Iran’s regional activism and missile program.

In May 2018, President Trump announced that he was pulling out of the nuclear deal and reimposing sanctions as part of a “maximum pressure” campaign. As Trump remarked, “we will be instituting the highest level of economic sanction” in order to “to eliminate the threat of Iran’s ballistic missile program; to stop its terrorist activities worldwide; and to block its menacing activity across the Middle East.” As U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained in more detail, the goal of sanctions was to eliminate or at least curb Iran’s support to militant organizations; dismantle its ballistic missile program and end its missile support to militant groups; stop its nuclear weapons program, (including nuclear weapons research, uranium enrichment, and plutonium reprocessing); and release all U.S. and allied detainees.
Implemented by the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control, these sanctions were the most onerous ever placed on Iran by the United States. They targeted Iran’s energy, shipping, arms, and financial sectors, including hundreds of individuals, entities, aircraft, and vessels.
U.S. sanctions against Iran can be divided into several functional areas, which are explained in more detail in Appendix 1. Examples include:

• **Property and assets:** Blocks the U.S.-based assets of entities determined to be owned or controlled by the Iranian government.

• **Paramilitary and militant groups:** Designates as foreign terrorist organizations paramilitary or-
ganizations within the Iranian government and militant groups that work with Iran, such as the IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah, Kata’ib Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

- **Trade and investment:** Bans U.S. trade with, and investment in, Iran. Also prohibits U.S. companies from knowingly exporting goods to a third country for incorporation into products destined for Iran.

- **Energy sector:** Sanctions companies that invest in or otherwise support Iran’s energy sector, such as developing Iran’s oil and gas fields, transporting Iranian crude oil, or providing equipment or services for oil, gas, and petrochemical production.

- **Auto production, minerals, and metals sectors:** Imposes sanctions on firms that supply goods or services to Iran’s automotive sector. Also sanctions entities that engage in transactions with Iran’s mineral and metal sectors, including iron, steel, aluminum, and copper.

- **Weapons of mass destruction (WMD), missiles, and conventional arms transfers:** Sanctions foreign entities that supply Iran with WMD technology or advanced conventional weapons or weapons parts, including for Iran’s missile program, tanks, armored vehicles, warships, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters.

- **Financial and banking sectors:** Prohibits direct access for Iran to the U.S. financial system.

- **Democracy and human rights:** Prohibits U.S. government contracts with foreign companies that sell technology which Iran could use to monitor or control the internet. Bans U.S. entry and bans any U.S. trade with persons and entities determined to be operating any technology that allows the Iranian government to disrupt, monitor, or track computer usage by citizens of those countries or assisting Tehran in such disruptions or monitoring. Also sanctions the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and Iranian leaders such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

- **Cross-cutting secondary sanctions:** Penalizes entities for a range of activities, such as providing financial and other support to Iran’s shipbuilding and shipping sectors. Also sanctions entities engaged in malign cyber-enabled actions.

What has been the impact of renewed U.S. sanctions? Answering this question depends, in part, on how effectiveness is measured. First, economic sanctions have severely undermined Iran’s economy, as noted in the previous section. The reimplementation of U.S. sanctions triggered negative GDP growth (an estimated decline of -9.5 percent in GDP in 2019) and caused the value of the rial to plummet from 32,000 to the dollar at the time of the nuclear deal to 154,000 to the dollar on the unofficial foreign exchange market by May 7, 2019.

By August 2019, the rial was trading at 116,500 to the dollar, the monthly inflation rate was 40 percent, the national unemployment rate was around 12 percent, and youth unemployment was approximately 25 percent. As Figure 4.3 highlights, Iran’s oil production decreased dramatically because of U.S. sanctions. The downturn has made it difficult for Iranian merchants to import goods or properly price merchandise, and the Iranian government has banned the importation of 1,400 goods to preserve hard currency. Even before the reimplementation of U.S. sanctions in 2018, most international banks had left the Iranian market and hesitated to return. Many were concerned that the United States might renew sanctions on transactions with Iran, while others were worried about corruption and the lack of transparency in Iran’s financial sector.

Iran tried to mitigate the effect of these sanctions in several ways. China and other countries continued to receive oil shipments from Iran. Iran exported non-oil products, such as cement, urea fertilizer, and other agricultural and industrial goods, as well as electricity, to many of its neighbors. Such non-oil exports generated much of the revenue that financed Iran’s imports. Sanctions caused some Iranian manufacturers to increase domestic production of goods as substitutes for imports. This trend has been hailed by Iranian economists and Supreme Leader Khame-
nei, who supports building a “resistance economy” that is less dependent on imports and foreign investment.53

Second, U.S. sanctions have not led to a change in Iranian behavior on the primary issues the United States cares about—at least not yet.64 Iran did not end its support to militant organizations (though it did temporarily reduce payments to Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and the Houthis in Yemen), dismantle its ballistic missile program, end its missile support to militant groups, or release most U.S. and allied detainees. In addition, Iran enriched uranium above the 300-kilogram limit negotiated as part of the 2015 nuclear agreement.65 In this sense, the sanctions have thus far failed to change Iranian behavior.

The challenge for the United States is that a significant amount of empirical evidence suggests that sanctions generally fail to achieve international political goals and change state behavior—particularly the behavior of adversaries. As one analysis of over 100 cases concluded, “economic sanctions have little independent usefulness for pursuit of non-economic goals.”66 Sanctions can generate support among domestic audiences by signaling that leaders are doing something, and sanctions have occasionally been helpful in achieving limited economic and policy goals.67 But sanctions are generally ineffective because target states—and their populations—are able to endure substantial punishment rather than succumb to the demands of foreigners. Instead of coercing states into changing their behavior, sanctions often have the opposite result: they create a “rally around the flag” effect among populations.68 Leaders are also able to shift the costs of sanctions away from key political supporters and elites necessary to remain in power.69 Finally, sanctions generally fail to work against adversaries because their leaders worry about the long-run implication of acquiescing. As Daniel Drezner argues in his analysis of sanctions, sender states may be more interested in sanctioning enemies than friends, but their enemies are less likely to comply:

*Between adversaries, senders will be more willing to sanction, even if a target’s costs of deadlock are only slightly greater than the sender’s own costs.*
Despite these preferences, it will not be able to extract significant concessions from the coercion attempt. Because the target is also concerned with the future implications of backing down, any concession is a double blow; not only does it lose in the short run, it grants the sender great leverage in future disputes.\textsuperscript{70}

Based on these challenges, it is unlikely that the United States will be able to coerce a notable change in the behavior of Iran regarding such issues as missiles, militant groups, and nuclear weapons.

**Iran’s Economic Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities**

Despite these challenges, Iran’s economy has several economic weaknesses and vulnerabilities that can be exploited.

**Inefficiencies and Corruption:** Iran’s state-run economy, which prioritizes rewarding supporters over efficiency, will continue to undermine Iran’s economic prospects. Corruption remains rampant. Transparency International ranks Iran as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (138 of 180 countries).\textsuperscript{71} As highlighted in Figure 4.4, the World Bank ranks Iran in the bottom 20 percent of governments worldwide in “control of corruption,” which refers to the extent to which elites and private interests exercise public power for private gain.\textsuperscript{72}

In addition, the private sector will likely continue to suffer because of the nationalization of major industries (the state provides these enterprises with inputs at subsidized prices and grants subsidized loans) and discriminatory policies favoring large businesses owned by political elites.\textsuperscript{73} In 2019, the World Bank ranked Iran 128 out of 190 countries in ease of doing business. It takes 73 days to start a business and 130 days to acquire construction permits in Iran—compared to, for example, 18 days and 92 days, respectively, in Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{74} In short, the economic hardships suffered by the Iranian people are, to a significant extent, a result of the regime’s own actions.

**Oil Dependence:** Iran remains highly dependent on the extraction of oil and natural gas for export, which makes its economy vulnerable to economic sanctions on sales of its oil. Iran has the world’s fourth largest reserves of oil and the second largest reserves of natural gas. Before the current sanctions, it ranked among the world’s top 10 oil producers and top 5 natural gas producers.\textsuperscript{75} Despite these economic weaknesses, there is substantial evidence that economic sanctions generally fail
in coercing target states to change their behavior. This is especially true when sanctions target an adversary and when they are largely unilateral, as is the case with Iran. U.S. sanctions have punished—and will continue to punish—the Iranian economy. But success in changing Iran’s behavior will likely require securing broader multilateral support for sanctions and reinvigorated political negotiations, which will be discussed more in Chapter 7.76
This chapter examines Iranian soft power. As used here, “soft power” refers to the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants through attraction—not through coercion, which can be characterized as hard power. Power is the capability to impact the decisions and actions of others to obtain the outcome a country, group, or individual wants. Soft power, then, is about shaping the preferences of others by co-option, not coercion. The soft power of a country might come from one of several sources: its culture, political values, or foreign policy. Culture, for example, is the set of practices that creates meaning for a society. It can include literature, art, and higher education for elites, as well as mass entertainment—such as movies, television, and music—for the general public. Soft power is a descriptive concept, not a normative one, and countries can use it for good or ill purposes.

As Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye explained in the context of U.S.-Iranian relations, states can compete with each other using soft power. “Consider Iran,” writes Nye. “Western music and videos are anathema to the ruling mullahs, but attractive to many of the younger generation to whom they transmit ideas of freedom and choice. American culture produces soft power among some Iranians, but not others.”
This chapter asks several questions: How do Iranian leaders view soft power? How does Iran export soft power? And what are Iran’s vulnerabilities and weaknesses regarding soft power? To answer these questions, this chapter attempts to gauge Iranian soft power using indicators such as opinion polls; data on viewers, listeners, and followers; and data on the global reach of Iranian institutions.

This chapter makes two broad arguments. First, Iran is explicitly engaged in a “soft war,” or jang-e narm, with the West. As a former Iranian intelligence chief remarked, “We do not have a physical war with the enemy, but we are engaged in heavy information warfare with the enemy.” Iran uses several instruments of power, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and Iranian cultural centers, to wage jang-e narm. Second, Iran has weaknesses that stem, in part, from its top-down authoritarian system and self-perception as the vanguard of Shia Islam, which have undermined the legitimacy of its message and increased inefficiency and corruption. Its efforts to attract supporters across the globe have had little success, based on polling and other data. And Iranian leaders have expressed alarm at the impact of Western culture and political values on Iranians.

The rest of this chapter is divided into six sections. The first provides an overview of Iranian soft power and jang-e narm. The second section focuses on the IRIB, particularly its international efforts. The third examines the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), including Iranian cultural centers. The fourth and fifth sections analyze universities and Tehran’s use of charitable foundations, respectively. The sixth section closes with a discussion of Iranian weaknesses and vulnerabilities in the realm of soft power.

**Soft Power and Soft War**

The Iranian regime takes the traditional concept of soft power a step further. Iranian leaders have not been willing simply to persuade others through attraction but have also sought to influence populations and governments through manipulation and even disinformation. Iranian soft power is inextricably linked to the country’s revolutionary ideology. It is deeply shaped by Ayatollah Khomeini’s interpretation of Twelver Shia Islam, the dominant sect in Iran, which he believed was the most effective way to create an Islamic government that could give full expression to the will of God. Khomeini’s concept of the Islamic revolution was not confined to Iran and included exporting the ideology abroad. In addition, Khomeini’s maxim “neither East nor West but Islamic republic” highlighted the juxtaposition of Iran’s culture with those of the East and West. The government’s “Twenty Year National Vision” (or Sanad-e Cheshm Andaz-e Bist Saleh), for example, provided a strategic overview of Iranian power, including soft power. It noted that power should stem, in part, from the country’s “Islamic and revolutionary identity,” which was “an inspiration for the world” and “developed in proportion to its cultural, geographical, and historic requirements.”

Because of the preeminence of the Islamic jurist, or faqih, soft power in Iran is top-down and concentrated in the hands of the supreme leader and other government officials. This hierarchical approach contrasts with Western countries such as the United States, where soft power is decentralized and partially in the hands of the entertainment industry, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations—not the government. Consequently, Iranian officials have attempted to control the spread of Iranian culture and political values throughout the Middle East and other regions, including Persian-speaking populations in Central Asia; Shia minorities in the Middle East and South Asia; and Shia and non-Shia in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. One of the most influential religious institutions is the Qom seminary, the largest Islamic seminary (hawza) in Iran, which trains Shia clerics from around the world.

Iran’s soft power can also be understood by what it is opposed to: Western culture, political values, and foreign policy. This reality makes competition an integral part of soft power. Iranian leaders have regularly remarked that they are engaged in jang-e narm with the West. In 2009, several months after Iran’s disputed presidential elections and the subsequent Green Movement protests, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei addressed a crowd of Basij
members (from Iran’s paramilitary volunteer militia) and warned them that Iran was engaged in a spiraling soft war. He later argued that the West’s soft power was potentially more dangerous than its hard power. “Now, their hard power is a visible type of power,” Khamenei remarked. “However, in international confrontations, it is the soft power which is the main criterion.”

To better wage jang-e narm, Iran created a Permanent Bureau for Soft War in December 2012, along with organizations such as a Special Center for Soft War, a Center for Soft War and Psychological Operations, and a Center for Information Dominance and Strategic Insight—in addition to the offensive cyber capabilities highlighted in Chapter 2. The regime also established a cyber-police division to monitor online content and crack down on online activists and banned content. Institutions such as the Islamic Development Organization, which promotes Islamic revolution values at home and abroad, are also involved in jang-e narm. More broadly, the Iranian regime has conducted extensive media censorship inside the country and attempted to create a relatively closed system of information. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance oversees the censorship of art, cinema, print, music, theater, and other aspects of culture. The government has jammed satellite television stations and blocked websites and some social media platforms. During the 2013 presidential elections, the government jammed satellite channels such as BBC Persian and Voice of America, particularly on election day.

Tehran also uses firewalls and other preventive technologies to block domestic access to specific sites in an effort to eventually move all Iranian traffic to a “National Information Network” or “halal internet” that can be more easily censored, monitored, and defended from foreign cyberattacks and foreign culture. The government prevents public access to tens of thousands of websites, including those run by international news sources, the opposition, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. The government blocks access to Facebook and Twitter inside the country, for example, though Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is active on Twitter using @JZarif, President Hassan Rouhani uses the Twitter handle @HassanRouhani, and Ayatollah Khamenei has an official Facebook page at @www.Khamenei.ir.

Iran’s main instruments for waging jang-e narm are agencies such as the IRIB, ICRO, and charitable foundations and universities. Through these organizations, Iran has confronted the soft power threat from the West by creating cultural trenches (sangarha-ye farangi) to defend the country.

Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting

Iran’s state-run media organization is officially known as Seda va Sima-ye Jonkuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran, which translates to “The Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” but it is more frequently referred to as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. The IRIB was established shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Its logo shows two intertwined depictions of the Arabic word “laa,” meaning “no,” which symbolizes Iran saying “no” to the West and the East. The IRIB’s charter emphasized the nascent Khomeini government’s goal of self-sufficiency, with principles that reference “the majesty and supremacy of Islam,” “the maj-
Today, the state maintains a monopoly over all television and radio broadcasting, as mandated by Article 44 of Iran’s constitution. As a result, the IRIB is responsible for all of Iran’s domestic and external programming. It began international television broadcasts in 1997 with the launch of its Jaam-e-Jam service, which broadcasts Persian-language programming to a largely expatriate audience.

The IRIB then began to diversify its international reach with channels and programming in different languages. As highlighted in Figure 5.2, the IRIB established the multilingual Sahar TV and expanded to Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Press TV, HispanTV, and iFilm TV.

Because Iran sees the global media arena as a critical “battlefield” in jang-e narm, there are both offensive and defensive elements within the IRIB’s mission: promoting Iran’s worldview and exporting the revolutionary ideology and also defending the Islamic Republic from what it sees as “hostile” Western media organizations such as Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation. The supreme leader appoints the IRIB’s director general, who is responsible for carrying out these missions. In May 2018, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Director General Abdulali Ali-Asgari for “restricting or denying the free flow of information to or from the Iranian people.”

The designation authorized the United States to block Ali-Asgari’s property in the United States or in possession by a U.S. person, and it prohibited U.S. persons from engaging in transactions with Ali-Asgari.

The IRIB’s main components include:

- Al-Alam, or “The World,” was Iran’s first 24-hour foreign language news channel, which launched in March 2003 to coincide with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It-Alam views itself as a competitor to the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera and Saudi-backed Al Arbiya and broadcasts terrestrially and by satellite across the Arab world.

- Sahar TV is a religious channel for non-Persian speakers which began broadcasting in 1997 and aims to both export the Iranian revolution abroad and support Islamic education. In 2010, Sahar TV split into two separate satellite channels: Sahar 1, which broadcasts 20 hours per day in Azeri, French, and Bosnian; and Sahar 2, which broadcasts 24 hours per day in Kurdish, English, and Urdu.

- Al-Kawthar, or “Fount of Abundance,” is a 24-hour religious channel which split off from Sahar TV in 2006. It broadcasts in Arabic with the aim of raising “human values in harmony with the Holy Quran and Sunnah” and supporting the “resistance” against “global arrogance.” In recent years, Al-Kawthar has expanded beyond religious and
cultural programming and now includes four news bulletins per day.\textsuperscript{37}

- Press TV, launched in July 2007, is the IRIB’s 24-hour English-language news channel and aims to offer a different perspective to mainstream Western news outlets such as CNN and the BBC.\textsuperscript{38} Press TV is frequently critical of the United States and other Western countries.\textsuperscript{39} Press TV has international studios in Beirut, Damascus, Washington, and London, and it transmits across the world through satellites and live-streaming from its website.\textsuperscript{40}

- HispanTV, the IRIB’s Spanish-language news channel, launched in December 2011.\textsuperscript{41}

- iFilm TV, the IRIB’s Arabic-language entertainment channel, was introduced in September 2010. It broadcasts Iranian films and television shows dubbed into both Arabic and English.\textsuperscript{42}

The Jaam-e-Jam (or “Cup of Jamshid,” a Persian mythological figure) network offers Persian-language programming aimed at Iranian expatriates and those interested in Persian culture and civilization.\textsuperscript{43} Jaam-e-Jam was established in December 1997 and has expanded into three separate channels: Channel 1 broadcasts to Europe and the Middle East; Channel 2 primarily broadcasts to North America; and Channel 3 serves the Asia-Pacific region.\textsuperscript{44} In addition, some of Iran’s partners, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, have established television stations. In 1991, Hezbollah created its own television station, Al-Manar (the Lighthouse), to supplement its newspapers and radio stations. In 2000, Hezbollah began broadcasting Al-Manar via satellite from its base of operations in the Shia-controlled neighborhood of Harat Hurayk in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

The IRIB’s role as the “soldiers of the soft war” has traditionally been reflected in its high levels of funding from the Iranian government.\textsuperscript{45} The IRIB received between $900 million and $1 billion annually between 2009 and 2012, though funding was cut dramatically following increased U.S. sanctions.\textsuperscript{46} The IRIB was only allotted $409.91 million, less than half of its 2012 budget, according to Iran’s publicly-released budget for the year 1396, which spanned from March 2017 through March 2018.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{Islamic Culture and Relations Organization}\textsuperscript{48}

The Iranian government established the ICRO in an attempt to streamline Iran’s cultural and religious outreach. Like other aspects of Iran’s soft power, it is heavily centralized.\textsuperscript{49} The ICRO is nominally under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance but is funded by and reports to the office of the supreme leader.\textsuperscript{50} The ICRO’s mission is to strengthen ties with countries and populations overseas through educational, religious, and artistic events and exhibitions.\textsuperscript{51} It attempts to export the ideals of the Islamic revolution, foster Islamic unity, and strengthen relations with other Muslim countries. The ICRO varies its messages according to local cultures and conditions. For example, it emphasizes Persian commonalities in parts of Afghanistan and Tajikistan but targets Shia communities in Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Syria.\textsuperscript{52} Figure 5.3 shows the ICRO’s organizational structure. It highlights the diverse subjects the ICRO covers to propagate soft power, such as the media, scientific and academic cooperation, and cultural exchanges.

The ICRO organizes Iranian cultural exhibitions in foreign countries, hosts cultural and religious events for Iranian expatriates, and promotes Persian language and literature. It also has an in-house international publishing shop, known as Al-Hoda, which prints and distributes literature on Iran and Persian culture in 25 languages.\textsuperscript{53} The ICRO has at least 72 official locations across the globe, as highlighted in Figure 5.4. It is most active in neighboring countries. For example, there are seven ICRO offices in Pakistan, three in Afghanistan, and two each in Turkey, Russia, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan.\textsuperscript{54} However, there are numerous unofficial cultural centers directly or indirectly affiliated with Iran which attempt to expand Iran’s influence in areas where it seeks to maintain a lower profile. For example, while the ICRO lacks a significant official presence in the Western Hemisphere—with only two offices in North America (New York City and Ottawa) and one in South America (Caracas)—it maintains a growing number of informal cultural centers in the region. There are over 100 centers in Latin America alone, according to one estimate.\textsuperscript{55} It is difficult to assess the impact
of these centers, though there is little evidence they have significantly improved Iran’s image overseas.

The ICRO is responsible for appointing cultural attachés in Iranian embassies abroad who help promote Iranian culture and political values. They frequently interact with social elites from host countries. The attachés can also provide cover for Iranian intelligence operations. For instance, Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian cultural attaché in Argentina, was indicted for his role in the bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires in 1994.66

Outside of its official locations and unofficial cultural centers abroad, the ICRO also relies on other groups operating under its umbrella to fulfill its cultural diplomacy mission, including:

- The Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, which oversees relations with global Shia populations;
- The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, which oversees relations with non-Shia Muslims;
- The Islamic Development Organization, which publishes religious and other material and sends missionaries abroad;
- The Qom Seminary Office of Islamic Propaganda, which also sends missionaries and clerics abroad; and
- The Center for Interreligious Dialogue and Civilization, which engages in dialogue with religious figures and institutions inside and outside Iran.57
Iranian International Universities

The primary educational institution used to export Iranian values internationally is Al-Mustafa International University (MIU), which was established in 2008 as a merger between Iran’s Global Center for Islamic Knowledge and the Organization of Overseas Religious Seminaries. According to Article 9 of the MIU’s founding statute, its goals include promoting “pure Mohammedan Islam” and training jurisprudents, clergy, researchers, experts, trainers, propagandists, translators, tutors, and managers. Its teachings reflect its conservative Shia ideology.
and the political goals of Iran’s top leadership. The MIU, like the ICRO and IRIB, falls under the direct control of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei directly appoints and removes the MIU’s president and trustees’ committee and holds an advisory position with the power to dissolve the MIU at any point.⁵¹

The MIU’s international presence is significant, with 60 overseas branches across the world.⁶² It is unclear how many of these are direct affiliates, as the MIU is structured to incorporate four types of educational units: direct subsidiaries; affiliated units, which follow the MIU’s administrative rules and requirements; connected (often community-based) units, which receive support from Al-Mustafa; and cooperative units, which are contracted to perform specific educational and research tasks.⁶³ Additionally, the MIU offers online educational services for those unable to travel to its branches and in 2014 opened 360 Qur’anic centers (called Dar-ol-Qur’an) outside of its regular university branches to increase its reach.⁶⁴ Figure 5.5 shows the location of 58 MIU subsidiaries and affiliates. Most are outside of Iran, including the Islamic College of London and an increasing number of branches in West Africa.

Charitable Foundations

Islamic charitable foundations, or bonyads, have also been an important instrument of Iranian soft power. Some foundations existed prior to the 1979 revolution, including in the form of waqfs (or religious endowments). They provided humanitarian aid to the poor and other populations in need, though they also served as slush funds for some elites.⁶⁵ After the 1979 revolution, there was a major increase in the scale and scope of bonyads. The supreme leader appoints the directors of the bonyads, which are ostensibly non-profit organizations that provide social and public services, and they are legally exempt from taxation and some government regulations. Yet many also engage in commercial and financial activities, such as banking, trade, and manufacturing.⁶⁶ Overall, the bonyads remain a cornerstone of clerical power, accounting for an estimated 10 to 20 percent of Iran’s GDP.⁶⁷

Among the first bonyads established after the revolution was the Bonyad-e Shahid (or Martyrs’ Foundation), which provides aid to the surviving relatives of dead or wounded soldiers. Now known as the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans, it gives specialized services, such as in-kind transfers, educational support, and housing services, to widows, orphans, and victims of Iranian wars.⁶⁸ The Bonyad-e Mostaza’an va Janbazan (or Oppressed and Disabled Foundation) provides assistance to disabled individuals but also owns hotels, a shipping line, petrochemical companies, and a substantial amount of real estate.⁶⁹ In addition, the Komiteh-ye Emdad-e Imam (or Imam Khomeini Relief Committee) collects donations and distributes funding for welfare, cultural, and educational purposes in countries such as Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Tajikistan.⁷⁰ In culture and the arts, the Farabi Cinema Foundation promotes cinema and is a powerful vehicle for disseminating Islamic ideology. Similarly, the Astan-e Quds-e Razavi bonyad in Mashhad, Iran oversees the Imam Reza shrine and other institutions that belong to the organization. Astan-e Quds-e Razavi includes several libraries and museums, and it publishes Islamic materials in English, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish.⁷¹

Iranian Soft Power Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities

Iran continues to have influence among Shia communities in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as in pockets of West Africa and Latin America. However, its jang-e-narm strategy has several weaknesses.

Limited Credibility: Iran’s top-down approach and authoritarian system have fueled corruption, undermining the credibility and attractiveness of its message.⁷² Iranian programming is dominated by official statements, weakening its objectivity because such statements are divorced from reality.⁷³ In addition, the bonyads have been accused of substantial waste, inefficiency, mismanagement, and corruption. Bonyad companies compete with Iran’s private sector, though they have a significant advantage over private businesses because of their better political connections and favorable access to capital and tax exemptions.⁷⁴
Iran’s activity has also made targeting and removing its internet-based content possible for social media companies. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other companies and platforms have removed hundreds of fake accounts and pages linked to the IRIB that used anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and anti-U.S. narratives as part of a global influence campaign. In May 2019, for example, the cyber security firm FireEye released a report exposing an Iranian information campaign that involved social media accounts posing as Americans. The accounts supported the Iran nuclear deal, opposed the U.S.’s recent designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization, and condemned President Trump’s decision to continue supporting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states involved in Yemen. In addition, Google took down IRIB-linked channels on YouTube and accounts on Google Plus and Blogger that engaged in phishing and hacking attempts, conducted influence operations, and engaged in digital attacks against political campaigns. Google analysts identified technical data linked to the official IRIB IP address space, domain ownership linked to IRIB account information, and account metadata and subscriber information associated with the IRIB.

Negative Views in Much of the Muslim World: Iranian efforts to attract others—a key goal of soft power—have had limited success. Views of Iran are negative in much of the Middle East and North Africa, according to polling data. As one poll concluded, between 74 and 88 percent of respondents in Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE believed that Iran does not contribute to peace and stability in the region. Another poll concluded that Iran (along with the United States) is the most unpopular government in the Middle East in a list that also included Russia, China, the European Union, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Outside of the Middle East and North Africa, some polling indicates that views of Iran have declined or remained low in North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America—including in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

One notable exception is Lebanon, where a sizable share of the population remains sympathetic to Iran and where Lebanese Hezbollah remains part of the government. Another exception is Iraq, where there is a majority Shia population and substantial Iranian influence. Still, between 2015 and 2018, Iraqi Shia with favorable opinions toward Iran dropped by over 30 percentage points. Meanwhile, Iraqi Shia who believe that Iran is a threat to Iraqi sovereignty jumped from 25 percent to 58 percent.

In addition, the IRIB has limited reach. Because there is little reliable publicly available data on IRIB viewers, the IRIB’s social media accounts provide one facet of the organization’s reach. As illustrated in Figure 5.6, IRIB stations are generally the most...
active on Facebook, with a total of 16.5 million page “likes” between Press TV, Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Sahar TV, HispanTV, and iFilm TV.\textsuperscript{83} Other platforms perform less well: the IRIB maintains only around 1.5 million total Twitter and Instagram followers across all of its branches.

The IRIB’s global influence appears to be limited when compared to other media outlets. Figure 5.7 compares the reach of IRIB international stations (Press TV, Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Sahar TV, HispanTV, and iFilm TV) and the international stations of several of its main competitors, such as Al Jazeera (Qatar), RT (Russia), France 24 (France), DW (Germany), BBC (United Kingdom), and CNN (United States). IRIB stations have fewer total Twitter followers, Facebook likes, YouTube subscribers, Instagram followers, and Telegram members than any of the others, suggesting it has less social media reach around the world.

\textbf{Successes of U.S. and Western Soft Power:} Iranian leaders have expressed alarm that the Iranian population is increasingly attracted to Western culture and political values. As Ayatollah Khamenei lamented:

\begin{quote}
\textit{The issue of engineering information and the new means of mass communication that have entered the arena are all tools for dominating the culture of a country . . . The same is true of the internet, of cyberspace, and of information services and tools. These things cannot be in the hands of the enemy. Yet, today they are in his hands. Today, [the media networks] are tools and instruments for cultural infiltration. Today, they are the enemy’s tools for cultural domination.}\textsuperscript{84}
\end{quote}

Khamenei has voiced particular concern about the vulnerability of Iran’s younger generation, which he warned may be more attracted to Western culture than their predecessors. “There are so many ‘misguiding troubles’ in cyberspace, on satellite channels, and other such media,” he complained in a 2018 speech. “Youth are subject to all of this.”\textsuperscript{85}

Khamenei’s concern is understandable. While satellite dishes are illegal within Iran, at least 70 percent of the population owns them and uses them to stream satellite channels from abroad.\textsuperscript{86} Historically, this content has been created and broadcast by large Western media corporations, such as BBC Persian and Voice of America’s Persian News Network. In recent years, however, their popularity has been outstripped by smaller, highly targeted networks,
often established by Iranians in exile. The most popular of these is Manoto TV, a London-based network with creative programming designed to appeal to younger generations which claimed 40 million viewers in 2018. For many within Iran, the ability to receive some news unfiltered by the state has had the effect that Khamenei feared.

There now exists a bottom-up movement of Iranians that seek to counter the regime’s messaging from within. The degree to which foreign media has fomented this opposition is a matter of debate, but Iran’s internal fissures represent a vulnerability to the regime. Between 2017 and 2019, there have been thousands of protests across Iran fueled by anger at the government’s economic policies, opposition to Khamenei’s theocratic regime, and concerns about issues such as corruption, environmental devastation, and the repression of women. These protests have involved labor unions, truck drivers, teachers, students, and others, though they have not coalesced into a unified protest movement—at least not yet. Iran’s vulnerabilities suggest that a major component of U.S. competition with Iran should be ideological.
This chapter examines domestic stability in Iran, particularly Iran’s history of protests. It asks several sets of questions. First, what is Iran’s history of protests? Second, how has Iran responded to recent protests? And third, what are Iran’s domestic weaknesses and vulnerabilities? These questions are important since the strength of a state depends, in part, on the government’s ability to monopolize violence. The German sociologist Max Weber defined the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” The strength of a state also depends on its ability to deliver public services, maintain the economy, and limit corruption. Iran’s history of protests suggests a lively struggle between top-down attempts to assert state power and bottom-up social, political, and other movements that have demanded reforms. Some social scientists have referred to this general struggle as the “dynamics of contention.”

Based on a review of historical and recent developments in Iran, this chapter makes several arguments about domestic stability in Iran. First, while protests in Iran are not new, the number and breadth of protests today are significantly greater compared to previous years. Since late 2017, there have been hundreds of small protests...
per month, led by a range of networks, from shopkeepers to students to truckers. They have protested about economic conditions, environmental degradation, political grievances, and cultural issues. Second, the Iranian protest movement does not currently threaten to overthrow the regime—at least not at the moment. The protest movement is too fractured and lacks central leadership, and the regime’s security and intelligence forces are strong. The capabilities of Iran’s police forces have likely improved since the 2009 Green Movement. The IRGC and Basij can act as surge forces if protests intensify and spread, such as during the large-scale demonstrations in November 2019. Third, despite not posing an existential threat, there are still weaknesses and vulnerabilities in Iran’s domestic situation which will likely create significant pressure on the regime.

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first examines Iran’s history of protests and domestic unrest, including in the context of broader research on revolutions. The second section analyzes recent protests, and the third assesses the Iranian regime’s response. The final section highlights weaknesses and vulnerabilities in Iran’s domestic power.

**Historical Patterns of Unrest**

Iran has a robust history of protests that have tested the state. As Nikki Keddie concluded in her study of Iranian movements, “The topics of revolution and resistance are central to the history of the modern Muslim world, and especially to Iran.” As Figure 6.1 highlights, there have been a wide range of protests in Iran’s history.

Iran’s protests have historically arisen from several factors, including economic, political, environmental, and other grievances. In virtually all of these cases, more than one factor fueled the protests.

First, economic grievances have triggered some protests in Iran. These grievances frequently include rising unemployment, increasing prices of basic commodities, growing inflation, or a recession. For example, the tobacco protests in 1890 occurred in part because Nasir al-Din Shah granted a monopoly over the purchase, sale, and export of tobacco in Iran to a British subject. Nationalism and a resentment of British domination also fueled the protests. Demonstrations erupted in Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz, and other locations. Over a decade later, riots broke out in Tehran when merchants raised the price of sugar during the constitutional revolution, leading merchants and mullahs to push for reforms.

More recently, riots engulfed the cities of Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Ghazvin, Tabriz, and Khorramabad between 1991 and 1994. Many of the protests were sparked by urban squatters who were angry when municipal authorities attempted to evict them and destroy their dwellings. But protesters with other grievances joined the demonstrations, such as disabled war veterans angry at the mismanagement of the government-run Bonyad-e Mostazafan va Janbazan (Oppressed and Disabled Foundation). The 2017 Dey Protests were sparked, at least initially, by issues such as frustration with poor economic conditions. The protests then expanded to include opposition to the regime and concerns about corruption, environmental degradation, and other issues.

Second, some protests also occur because of political grievances, such as the passage of unpopular policies or programs, arrests of political leaders, anger at government corruption, or real or perceived fraudulent elections. The Khordad uprising occurred following the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1963 after his denouncement of the Shah and Israel. In 1999, students protested the closure of the reformist newspaper Salam and a subsequent police raid against a student dormitory in what became known as the 18th of Tir and Kuye Daneshgah Disaster.

In 2009, the Green Movement was initially triggered by concerns about election rigging following the disputed victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the defeat of Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Early election returns by the Mousavi campaign indicated that he was in the lead, but the Ministry of Interior announced a landslide victory for Ahmadinejad on election night. Iranians poured into the streets in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, and other locations to press for regime change. While the demonstrations were
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protest</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco Protests (1890–1892)</td>
<td>In 1890, Nasir al-Din Shah granted a monopoly over the purchase, sale, and export of tobacco grown in Iran to a British subject. But merchants and others whose livelihoods depended on the tobacco business were furious. Protests erupted across cities in an alliance that encompassed the bazaaris (merchant class) and ulema (Muslim leaders).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911)</td>
<td>Riots initially broke out when merchants raised the price of sugar in the face of rising international prices. Mullahs and merchants then demanded reforms. The revolution led to the establishment of a parliament during the Qajar dynasty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mossadeq Protests and Overthrow (1953)</td>
<td>Protests broke out across Iran against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was overthrown in a coup with support from the United Kingdom and the United States. General Fazlollah Zahedi became prime minister and the Shah returned from temporary exile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khordad Uprising (1963)</td>
<td>Protests in Iran erupted in June following the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini after his denouncement of Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Israel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qum Protests (1975)</td>
<td>Protests led by conservative Shia occurred in the shrine city of Qum against the government and its progressive policies. They shouted anti-government slogans as they smashed windows and doors and used sticks, stones, and clubs to attack policemen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Revolution (1978–1979)</td>
<td>A popular uprising, with massive protests, that led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the replacement of his government with an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Khomeini.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squatter Protests (1991–1994)</td>
<td>From August 1991 to August 1994, several protests occurred in cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Ghazvin, and Tabriz. Many of the protests were sparked by urban squatters who were angered when municipal authorities attempted to evict them and destroy their dwellings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Protests (1999)</td>
<td>Protests erupted in July following the regime’s closure of the reformist newspaper Salam. Police raids sparked six days of demonstrations and rioting throughout the country, during which police killed several people, wounded hundreds of others, and arrested over a thousand individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Movement (2009–2010)</td>
<td>Protests occurred following the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential election results (a disputed victory by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and in support of opposition candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab Spring Protests (2011–2012)</td>
<td>Following a groundswell of protests across the Arab world during the “Arab Spring,” the Green Movement organized protests beginning in February 2011. Sporadic protests continue into 2012 but are eventually crushed by the regime.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dey Protests (2017–2018)</td>
<td>Protests arose in cities throughout Iran beginning in December 2017 and continuing into 2018. The first one took place in Mashhad, Iran’s second-largest city, by protesters initially focused on economic grievances. As the protests spread, however, their scope expanded to include opposition to the regime and concerns about corruption, environmental degradation, and other issues.</td>
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\[\text{FIGURE 6.1 Example of Historical Iranian Protests}\]

\[\text{SOURCE CSIS.}\]

initially a response to perceived fraudulent elections, protesters embraced a litany of political, economic, and social grievances, such as demands for democratization and more egalitarian access to social and economic resources. The Green Movement used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to coordinate loose coalitions of reformers into large protest rallies that called for new elections. But the regime eventually crushed the uprising, arresting over 10,000
people, killing over 100 others, and shutting down the reformist media. The IRGC took control of the capital city for two months.\textsuperscript{11} Protests continued after the regime squashed the Green Movement and arrested many of its key personnel, such as Saeed Hajjarian, Mohammad-Ali Abtahi and Mohsen Mir-damadi, and Behzad Nabavi.

As noted above, the Dey Protests were fueled, in part, over political opposition to the Iranian regime. While these demonstrations ended by early January 2018, the Dey Protests acted as a catalyst for more recent demonstrations.\textsuperscript{13} They were even more anti-regime than their reform-minded predecessor, the 2009 Green Movement, with chants of “death to the dictator” and “we will die, we will die, we will take back Iran” becoming common.\textsuperscript{13} Still, like the Green Movement, the Dey Protests lacked significant organization, making them less immediately threatening to the regime.

Third, some protests were motivated in part by environmental grievances, including water and food shortages. Since the mid-2000s, these grievances have been largely water-related, as major rivers and lakes in Isfahan, East Azerbaijan, and Ahvaz have dried up due to a combination of climate change and wasteful irrigation practices. The shrinking of Lake Urmia in particular sparked a series of violent protests in the city of Tabriz between 2010 and 2011.\textsuperscript{14} Meanwhile, when Tehran imposed water use bans on the agricultural sector in 2013 as a result of water shortages, farmers took to the streets to complain about unequal water distribution practices.\textsuperscript{15} Not all environmental protests have been water-specific, however. In early 2017 and during the Dey Protests, some individuals protested about poor infrastructure planning that caused marshes to dry up, as well as higher levels of air pollution—including in Ahvaz, designated by the World Health Organization as the most polluted city in the world.\textsuperscript{16}

Fourth, there were a range of other protests motivated in part by religious, cultural, and other grievances. The 1979 revolution was a popular uprising that led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the replacement of his government with an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Khomei-

ni. Religious leaders were deeply involved in several other demonstrations, such as the Tobacco Protests and the Constitutional Revolution. While protests have occurred with some frequency, revolutions that lead to regime change are rare. One of the challenges in starting a revolution is what economist Mancur Olson termed the “collective action problem.”\textsuperscript{17} Individuals—including would-be revolutionaries—value numerous goods that can be produced only through collective action. Collective goods are non-excludable; everyone can take advantage of them, regardless of whether they play a role in securing the good. If a group or network overthrows an oppressive government, for example, many people may benefit. Yet individuals also value purely personal goods, such as the time, opportunity cost, and risk involved in acting collectively. In other words, the benefits of collective action are often public, while the costs are private. Under these circumstances, every person’s best move is to stay home and let someone else work for the public benefit. The injury or death of participants (and sometimes their friends, family members, and neighbors), financial difficulties, unpleasantness of living a clandestine lifestyle, and forced relocation dissuade many people from participating in the initial stages of a revolution. After violence has started, however, this paradox may change, and it may be more dangerous for individuals to refrain from supporting revolutionaries in some areas.\textsuperscript{18} The central implication of the collective action paradigm is that activists face tremendous obstacles in launching revolutions—let alone successfully overthrowing a regime.

In addition to the collective action problem, research on revolutions indicates that several conditions need to be in place for a revolution to occur: a weak and economically uncompetitive state, poor or co-optable security forces, a divided internal elite, popular social groups that are mobilized to protest the regime, and ideology that justifies rebellion against the state.\textsuperscript{19} The absence of many of these factors helps explain why most protests in Iran have not led to revolutions.
The Contours of Recent Protests

This section examines the over 4,200 protests that took place from January 2018 through October 2019. The data used here were drawn primarily from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED), corroborated and updated as necessary using primary sources, as well as Iranian and Western media reporting on individual protest events.

Recent protests occurred in nearly every province of the country, as illustrated in Figure 6.2. Many of the geographic areas in Figure 6.2 that fall outside of the heat area have little population, further highlighting the pervasiveness of the protests. Though generally more diffuse and rural than the Green Movement, current demonstrations have been particularly intense in Tehran and cities such as Isfahan and Ahvaz. Motivations for current protests have nearly always fallen into one or more of the categories highlighted in the previous section: economic, which includes labor-related protests and comprises the majority of cases studied here; political, including both anti-regime and anti-West demonstrations; environmental; and religious, cultural, and other grievances. As noted in the previous section, a combination of these factors fueled most protests. However, the protests generally erupted because of local issues and lacked a centralized leadership and cohesion.

Economic Grievances: The Dey Protests served as a catalyst for many Iranians dissatisfied with their economic situation. As a result, roughly three-quarters of the demonstrations between January 2018 and October 2019 were fueled by economic grievances. Significant motivations include labor concerns (such as unpaid wages, factory closures, job insecurity, and poor working conditions), the devaluation of the rial (Iran’s currency), high rates of inflation, and Iranian companies defrauding their investors. Figure 6.3 depicts a timeline of these protests.

The largest non-labor-related protest movement during this time period was the so-called “bazaari protests,” which took place in Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz in late June 2018. These protests were carried out by urban merchants (or bazaaris) who closed their shops and took to the streets after the value of the rial reached a new low of 90,000 rials to one dollar on June 24, 2018. The bazaari protests comprised one of the largest protests in Tehran since 2012, when sanctions crippled the Iranian economy. Though the police clamped down on the 2018 bazaari demonstrations, hard-liners within the Iranian government used them as an opportunity to attack the moderate Rouhani regime for failing to adequately address Iran’s economic situation. As a result, the parliament removed several senior officials, including Economic Affairs and Finance Minister Masoud
Karbasian and Governor of the Central Bank Valiollah Seif.24

On the labor front, there were nearly 2,500 protests from January 2018 to October 2019.25 Several notable protests included:

- On May 1, 2018 (International Labor Day), protesters marched in Tehran, Kordestan, Alborz, Isfahan, Khuzestan, Yazd, Gilan, Razavi Khorasan, and Qazvin provinces to demand higher wages, better working conditions, and more protection after retirement.26 News outlets indicated that hundreds of people protested in Tehran alone, and the police arrested dozens of demonstrators across the country.27

- In May and September 2018, thousands of Iranian truck drivers went on strike in over 240 towns and cities across Iran.28 Protesters were motivated by the high costs of fuel and spare parts, which compounded problems already caused by low wages and poor insurance benefits.29

- On four separate occasions over the 2018–2019 period—in May 2018, November 2018, March 2019, and May 2019—the Coordinating Council of Teachers Syndicates in Iran encouraged protests, which resulted in sweeping teachers demonstrations across the country.30 These protests occurred in at least 55 cities and 16 provinces, as teachers decried low salaries, poor health insurance, and a lack of job security. Some also demanded the right to unionize and insisted that the Iranian regime release teachers detained in previous strikes.31

The final economic protests of note were those related to fraud, of which there were 409 in three dozen different cities between January 2018 and October 2019. The primary target of these protests were Iran’s private financial firms, which are owned and managed by individuals with links to religious institutions and the IRGC and controlled 25 percent of the country’s cash flow prior to 2017.32 These firms—including the Caspian Credit Institution and Samen al-Hujaj—operated under limited regulation and accountability, and their investments in unprofitable real-estate development ventures, as well as a culture of corruption, caused millions of Iranians to lose their savings.33 In April-May 2018 and January-February 2019, defrauded consumers took to the streets en masse to demand repayment.

Political Grievances: In examining Iran’s demonstrations since the Dey Protests, at least 450 protests were in part political in nature. Some involved political grievances with the regime, including concerns about corruption. The majority of protesters
in this category demanded the release of political prisoners, including journalists and activists who were arrested in previous protests. Others demonstrations were against the United States and Israel or in support of the regime against its domestic opponents. On Quds Day (May 31, 2019), for example, Iranians in at least 220 cities across the country protested in support of Palestine and in opposition to the U.S.-led Middle East peace plan. Several high-ranking government officials attended the rally in Tehran, where protesters set fire to American and Israeli flags and effigies of President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Previous anti-Western protests were smaller and reactive, including in response to U.S. government actions such as its withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018 and President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2017.

**Environmental Grievances:** There were nearly 261 environmental protests between January 2018 and October 2019, the majority of which were water-related. Figure 6.4 shows the ebb and flow of protests over water-related issues. While there were not nearly as many environmental protests as economic ones, they were widespread and took place in over 90 cities and towns.

There were several spikes in the data. The first took place in April 2018 when farmers across Iran protested against the Iranian government’s inability to provide water for its citizens during a period of sustained drought. Another wave of protests was centered in Khuzestan and Bushehr provinces in June and July of 2018, with demonstrations against water shortages, pollution, and low water quality. There were other protests concentrated in Isfahan Province in November 2018 when Isfahan farmers protested government mismanagement of water pipelines for irrigation that led to water shortages across the province. While these protests were ongoing, the Iranian government cancelled funding for all water projects in Isfahan in the following year’s budget because of “financial limitations,” leading to an increase in protest activity, as well as the resignation of all 18 members of parliament from Isfahan Province. In April 2019, devastating flooding in southwestern Iran—particularly in Khuzestan Province—resulted in another wide-ranging series of protests against government mismanagement of the crisis. Finally, farmers across multiple provinces again protested against continuing water shortages in June and July 2019. As discussed above, water-related protests are by no means unprecedented in Iran. However, the combination of severe drought

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**FIGURE 6.4 Number of Water-Related Protests by Month**

**SOURCE** Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2019.
conditions (with 2017 being the country’s driest year in over 67 years) and excessive dam construction by the IRGC exacerbated tensions.\textsuperscript{41}

**Other Grievances:** Finally, some Iranians protested in part because of cultural, religious, and other concerns. While there were only around 55 unique events between January 2018 and October 2019 caused by cultural and religious grievances, there were two case studies that represent potential flashpoints.

One was the so-called “headscarf protests,” often referred to as White Wednesdays. Led by individuals such as Masih Alinejad and Vida Movahedi, these individuals opposed Iran’s religiously-driven laws requiring women to wear the *hijab* (or modest dress, including headscarves). Though protests against the *hijab* have taken place sporadically across Iran since the 1979 revolution, the latest wave began in December 2017. The second cycle of protests took place in Khuzestan Province, and Iran saw over 112 female demonstrators arrested or detained in 2018 alone.\textsuperscript{42} Iranian Arabs demonstrated in March 2018 against an IRIB television show for children which failed to include Arabs in a segment about Iran’s ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{43} Ethnic discontent in Khuzestan has been growing for some time, with Arabs in the region increasingly vocal about the Iranian government’s “policies of poverty, marginalization, exclusion, unemployment, and deprivation.”\textsuperscript{44} The protests in Ahvaz reflected these sentiments, moving beyond their initial IRIB target to include complaints of inadequate Arabic-language education and media more broadly, as well as high rates of Arab unemployment in the region.\textsuperscript{45}

### State Response

Iran responded to these protests by trying to strengthen its security forces and developing more effective technological capabilities. Regimes have historically used a range of tools to prevent or respond to protests, from coercion (such as arresting individuals) to cooption (such as buying citizen loyalty).\textsuperscript{46} While President Rouhani attempted some cooption after the Dey Protests by acknowledging the legitimacy of certain protestor grievances, Iranian leaders have also resorted to coercive instruments to defuse unrest.\textsuperscript{47}

**Strengthening the Security Forces:** The regime took concrete steps to improve the capabilities of the police and other security forces following the Green Movement in 2009 and subsequent protests. As the first line of defense against protesters, the police—officially called the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (or NAJA)—play an important role in regime stability. The regime expanded the number of police stations and provided additional capabilities such as armored vehicles, water spray for crowd control, and heavy weapons to deter or respond to riots. The regime also constructed new police headquarters, offices, and stations throughout the country. In Tehran alone, the government created more than 400 patrolling units in 375 municipal neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{48} In addition, the regime dramatically expanded the Intelligence and Public Security Police (*polis-e ettelaat va amniyat-e omumi*; or PAVA). It gathers intelligence in cities, towns, and neighborhoods through local informant networks (known as *mokhber-e mahhali*); identifies and penetrates protest movements; and arrests those that threaten the regime.\textsuperscript{49}

The regime also provided more resources to the police to deal with domestic instability. In 2018, the Iranian Parliament increased the NAJA’s budget by over 200 percent, including a 400 percent increase for weapons and armaments following the 2018 Dey Protests.\textsuperscript{50} In addition, Iranian police today are better organized, trained, and equipped than they were a decade ago. They also have more robust human and signals intelligence collection capabilities. The increased capabilities appear to have improved police performance. The regime has generally not deployed militarized Basij units or IRGC forces in most recent protests, although the Iranian government did utilize the IRGC and Basij during the November 2019 protests. The absence of the Basij and the IRGC might also suggest that most of the protests have been relatively small, contained, and disorganized and that Iranian leaders do not feel threatened. Limited opinion polling in Iran indicates that the public believes the police have been relatively fair in dealing with protesters. About 66 percent thought that the police handled the 2017-2018 protests “very well” or “somewhat well,” according to one poll.\textsuperscript{51}
Improving Technology and Cyber Capabilities: The 2009 protesters were able to leverage social media to communicate, organize, and criticize the regime. But the Iranian government studied the communication methods of protesters after the Green Movement dispersed and cracked down on the use of the internet and social media in subsequent protests. The NAJA established the Cyberspace Police (polis-e faza-ye towlid va tabadol-e etelaat, or FATA) in 2011 to monitor online content, investigate cybercrimes such as financial scams and violations of privacy, and crack down on online activists and banned content. In October 2012, for example, FATA officers arrested Sattar Beheshti, who had written critical articles about the regime in his blog Magalh 91. FATA had been monitoring his internet and social media activity, including his criticism of Ayatollah Khamenei and other senior government officials for corruption, human rights abuses, and poor policy decisions. On November 3, 2012, Beheshti was killed while in police custody.

More broadly, the Iranian regime has increased its use of cameras, improved facial recognition technology to identify protesters, conducted extensive media censorship inside the country, and attempted to create a relatively closed system of information. The regime banned Viber, the messaging app Telegram, and the photo-sharing platform Instagram in an effort to undermine the ability of protesters to communicate, organize, and distribute information. Regime security forces also periodically cut off mobile lines and temporarily banned other popular social media applications during protests in some areas. In early 2018, at the height of anti-government protests, the Iranian regime occasionally blocked access to foreign data and servers. The government has also jammed satellite television stations. During the 2013 presidential elections, the government jammed satellite channels such as BBC Persian and Voice of America, particularly on election day. The police and the Basij militia have additionally combated the use of satellite television by confiscating satellite equipment and arresting those caught in possession of it.

The Iranian regime also blocks websites internally if they diverge from official doctrine regarding Islam, encourage protests, or differ from major domestic or international policies. The government has completely blocked Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Google within Iran, in addition to major blog-hosting platforms such as WordPress, Blogspot, and Blogger. As noted in Chapter 5, however, Iran uses many of these same social media platforms to expand its soft power.

Iran’s Domestic Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities

If the strength of the state is measured at least partly by its ability to successfully monopolize violence, as Max Weber argues, then the Iranian regime has so far adequately managed the situation. Revolutions often occur because of an economically weak state, co-optable security forces, a divided internal elite, popular social groups mobilized to protest the regime, and an ideology that justifies rebellion against the state. Some of these conditions—such as weak or coopted security forces—do not yet exist. In addition, some of the popular anger is directed at elected individuals, such as Rouhani, rather than the supreme leader. While many ordinary citizens assembled in the streets, they mostly watched as events unfolded. Finally, while Iran’s political elites are divided—tending to blame one another for the outbreak of the protests—they remain firmly united in preserving the fundamentals of the system. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

Persistent Grievances: Several of the factors that have caused protests in the past—such as economic, political, environmental, and cultural grievances—are significant and unlikely to improve in the near future. Economic conditions remain bleak because of the U.S.-impacted economic sanctions and regime mismanagement. There are also deep political and social divisions in the country. According to one poll, there is significant frustration with current conditions. Approximately 95 percent of Iranian respondents said that “the government should do more to keep the price of food products from increasing.” Four in five (81 percent) agree that “the government should compensate people who lost money when some financial institutions failed.” More generally, almost three-quarters believed that
“the government is not doing enough” to help either the poor or “farmers who are suffering due to the drought.” In addition, 96 percent believed that the government should do more to fight corruption.

**Limits to Government Control:** There are holes in Iran’s information crackdown. While the regime blocks Telegram, for example, many Iranians use virtual private networks (VPNs) to regain access. These holes make Iran vulnerable to information campaigns, whether by overt public diplomacy efforts or covert, state-sponsored political warfare. Overall, while revolution and regime change may not be imminent in Iran, the regime faces significant internal challenges that are likely to persist. The United States and its allies can take advantage of these conditions in ways that support democratic development, freedom of the press, and economic reforms.
The Iranian threat to the United States needs to be put into perspective. Iran does not present the same threat to the United States as China or even Russia. China’s economy is roughly 15 times the size of Iran’s economy, and Russia’s economy is nearly three times as large. Moreover, China spends roughly 20 times as much as Iran on defense, and Russia spends 5 times as much. Iran’s conventional army, air force, and navy are weak—as highlighted in Chapter 3—with dated equipment, a lack of spare parts, and combat readiness problems. Iran also could not seize and hold the territory of countries in the Middle East or defeat the United States in a conventional war.

Nevertheless, the United States and Iran are—and will likely continue to be—adversaries with antithetical political and economic systems. Iran is undemocratic, and its population has no say in choosing its supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. Its economy is to a great extent state-run, not a free market. And the government seeks to control the media by building a “halal” internet. Iran is also explicitly engaged in a “soft war,” or jang-e narm, with the West—especially the United States. Iran uses several instruments of power, such as the IRIB and Iranian cultural centers, to wage jang-e narm and export its revolutionary ideology. Finally, Iran and other countries, such as China and Russia, are challenging a

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U.S.-led international system that has been committed since World War II to free market international economic institutions, bilateral and regional security organizations, and democratic political norms. The Iranian threat is primarily an irregular one. The IRGC-QF has increased the size and improved the capabilities of its partner forces in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Iran is attempting to establish land corridors across the region and build infrastructure that will allow it to retain influence in the Middle East. Finally, Iran has significantly improved its offensive cyber capabilities. As one U.S. intelligence assessment summarized, “Iran uses increasingly sophisticated cyber techniques to conduct espionage; it is also attempting to deploy cyberattack capabilities that would enable attacks against critical infrastructure in the United States and allied countries.”

**Strategic Options**

Based on the Iranian threat, there are several strategic options available to the United States and its partners. First is the current U.S. “maximum pressure” strategy. The goal is to coerce Iran to negotiate a broader deal by reimposing sanctions and raising the level of economic pain. As highlighted by its proponents, key parts of a renegotiated deal might include forcing Iran to curb its support to militant organizations, dismantle its ballistic missile program, end its missile support to militant groups, stop its nuclear weapons program, and release U.S. detainees.

Yet the maximum pressure strategy has several flaws. To begin with, it is largely unilateral, not multilateral. Major European powers—including France, the United Kingdom, and Germany—still support the 2015 nuclear deal and have not reimposed sanctions after the U.S. withdrawal in 2018. As noted in Chapter 4, unilateral sanctions are much less effective than multilateral ones in changing the behavior of target states. In addition, while U.S. sanctions have caused significant damage to Iran’s economy, the regime continues to support groups like Lebanese Hezbollah, build more sophisticated and longer-range missiles like the Shahab-3, and lift the limits on its development of centrifuges used to enrich uranium. As noted in Chapter 2, the number of Iranian-linked militia fighters has grown to nearly 280,000 in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other countries. In short, maximum pressure has not been particularly effective. Its focus on punitive action has not led to a meaningful change in Iranian behavior, but has led to an escalation in conflict. In addition, the United States has not offered sufficient political or economic inducements to cajole Iran back to the negotiating table.

A second option is restraint. It seeks to minimize U.S. efforts in the region and encourage others to balance against Iran, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. This strategy assumes a narrow definition of U.S. national interests that renders international engagement unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive, wasting vital U.S. resources that are better spent at home. Homeland defense—the protection of “the security, liberty, and property of the American people”—is the only vital U.S. interest. The United States is not responsible for, and cannot afford the costs of, order in the Middle East. Restraint, its proponents argue, might actually increase U.S. security by keeping the United States out of foreign conflicts.

A variant of this strategy is called offshore balancing. It involves leveraging allies and local governments to counter Iran while avoiding direct engagement. Offshore balancing relies on offshore air, naval, and rapidly deployable ground forces rather than onshore combat power. It might resemble America’s military commitment to the Persian Gulf from the end of World War II to before the first Iraq War in 1990-1991, when the United States pursued its interests in the region without stationing tanks or fighter aircraft units. This variant seeks to minimize foreign entanglements. In the Middle East today, for instance, an offshore balancing strategy might involve relying on local allies to counter Iran in some countries, as well as deploying naval vessels—such as a carrier battle group—to the Persian Gulf and utilizing sea-based standoff weapons if there was an imminent threat to the U.S. homeland. As one proponent concluded: “By setting clear priorities and emphasizing reliance on regional allies, it reduces the danger of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts and encourages other states to do more to help us.”

But restraint has several risks which make it a sub-optimal choice. As the 2019 U.S. intelligence communi-
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...Worldwide Threat Assessment concluded, “Iran’s regional ambitions and improved military capabilities” will continue to threaten the United States and its partners. Iran has conducted offensive cyber operations against U.S. corporate and government targets; waged a disinformation campaign against the United States on social media platforms; expanded its cruise missile and ballistic missile program, threatening U.S. and partner forces in the Middle East; and aided terrorist organizations, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, that have perpetrated attacks around the globe. Restraint understates these risks. In addition, restraint severely limits U.S. action and influence overseas by outsourcing U.S. security to other state and non-state actors, many of which do not share U.S. interests or have sufficient capabilities.

A third option is containment. A containment strategy should have several main goals:

- Prevent Iran from becoming a regional hegemon capable of dominating other states in the Middle East.
- Stop nuclear proliferation in the region and prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, including pursuing weapons-grade uranium, warhead development, and enrichment and plutonium reprocessing.
- Curb Iranian military, political, and propaganda expansion, including the export of Iran’s revolutionary ideology. This involves limiting Iran’s ability to increase its power and influence in the Middle East and other regions through actors such as the IRGC-QF and IRIB.
- Encourage a process of change inside Iran toward a more pluralistic political and economic system in which the power of the clerical establishment is gradually reduced.

Containment involves hindering a state’s ability to expand its influence. During the Cold War, for instance, the United States’ containment strategy involved preventing Soviet expansionism. It took inspiration from George Kennan’s writings from the 1940s and was initially implemented by the Truman administration. The strategy evolved with the publication of NSC-68, which was put into effect between 1950 and 1953. The goal was not to overthrow the Soviet Union but rather, as Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis summarized, “to limit Soviet expansionism” on the grounds that “communism posed a threat only to the extent that it was the instrument of that expansion.”

A containment strategy assumes that it is not practical nor feasible for the United States to overthrow Iran’s regime, and it focuses U.S. strategy on limiting Iran’s expansion and revolutionary ideology.

To implement containment, the United States must unambiguously convey to Iran that unacceptable behavior will incur costs that would outweigh any gains. At the same time, the United States should make it clear to Iranian leaders that genuine restraint will increase the likelihood of a more productive relationship, including economic relations.

Doing this effectively requires working closely with partners in the Middle East and other regions, including NATO allies. The United States must exercise strong leadership with its partners to develop and implement an effective containment strategy, as well as develop a bipartisan consensus among Republicans and Democrats about Iran.

There are four major components of a containment strategy: political, military, economic, and informational.

Political

Iran has few close state allies. Tehran’s activism and the proliferation of Iranian-backed non-state actors have alarmed most governments in the region—such as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain—making it possible to conduct broader balancing. Some public opinion polls suggest that support for Iran across the Middle East—including in Iraq—has declined. Yet the United States’ maximum pressure campaign has failed to shore up U.S. partners in the region and in Europe. The United States should consider several political steps as part of its containment strategy.

Diplomatic Actions: One challenge with the current maximum pressure approach is that it is too reliant on economic sanctions. While sanctions may severely weaken Iran’s economy, they are unlikely to dissuade Iran from developing its missile program or aiding...
partner forces in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon if they are detached from a broader political process. The United States needs to clearly signal to Tehran a way out of the escalating conflict. The most significant step should be to negotiate a revised version of the 2015 nuclear agreement in exchange for some sanctions relief. Possible changes could include revisiting the “sunset provisions,” which specify when the restrictions imposed on Iran’s nuclear program expire—such as when Iran could enrich uranium beyond the 3.67 percent threshold, the number of Iran’s first-generation centrifuges allowed, and Iran’s total enrichment capacity. But it will be virtually impossible to broaden the contours of an agreement to include curbing Iran’s support to militant groups or ending its ballistic missile program, which Iran will likely be unwilling to negotiate.

In addition, Tehran and other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, appear willing to seek a political solution to the Yemen conflict. The United States should help facilitate a settlement that provides sufficient guarantees that Iran will not have the same access it has enjoyed in Lebanon following the 1989 Taif Agreement, minimizes the humanitarian crisis, and curbs outside (including Iranian) proliferation of missiles and missile parts.

**Political Divisions Abroad:** The United States should continue to exploit anti-Iranian fissures abroad, as highlighted by anti-Iranian protests in Iraq and Lebanon. As noted earlier in Chapter 2, there is wide variation in Iraqi views of Iran, including among the Shia community. Najaf’s Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his “quietist” school of Iraqi Shiism eschew direct participation in politics—a tacit rebuke of *velayat-e faqih*. These fissures create opportunities for the United States and its partners—including Gulf countries—to continue to engage with Iraq’s Shia communities. Riyadh, for example, has established a political and economic relationship with Muqtada al-Sadr. There may be further opportunities for Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to further develop economic ties—including expanding rail, road, and electricity links—with Iraq, especially southern Iraqi cities such as Basra.

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**Military**

Since Iran’s military strategy involves using irregular military power to work through partner forces in the region, a U.S. containment strategy needs to be based, in part, on the use of irregular activity. The United States should also improve the military capabilities of its regional partners to deter and defend against Iranian aggression. An effective containment strategy should include proportionate actions to deter Iranian escalation and help the United States achieve its main goals.

**Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Activity:** Containment should include continuing to provide U.S. military aid—including training and equipment—to state and non-state partners in the region. Examples include continuing U.S. military and intelligence support to the LAF in Lebanon, the SDF in eastern Syria, Iraqi security forces, and Afghan national and local forces. But the Trump administration has put most of these partnerships in jeopardy, including support to the LAF (the United States withheld security assistance to the LAF), SDF (the United States withdrew from Syria some military forces, which partnered with the SDF), and even Afghan forces (the United States is withdrawing some military forces from Afghanistan, which partnered with Afghan security forces). U.S. assistance can improve partner capabilities, build relationships, and provide greater insight into what Iran and its partners are doing at a local level. In U.S. military doctrine, this type of activity falls under unconventional warfare and foreign internal defense.

In addition, the United States should provide aid to partner countries conducting military operations against Iran and Iranian-backed groups. In Syria, for example, Israeli strikes have decreased the arsenal of Iranian missiles and rockets. But this pressure needs to continue, and the United States should continue working with Israel and other countries to collect intelligence and conduct limited military action to curb Iran’s arms buildup in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. In Yemen, Houthi expansion has stalled because of Saudi and UAE support to local actors and aggressive interdiction.
The United States should also respond to Iranian military activity with proportionate actions, which maximum pressure has failed to do. As Thomas Schelling argued in his influential study *Arms and Influence*, “it is the threat of damage, or of more damage to come, that can make someone yield or comply. It is latent violence that can influence someone’s choice—violence that can still be withheld or inflicted, or that a victim believes can be withheld or inflicted.”

A measured U.S. response to Iranian aggression will depend on the specific scenario. But the United States should generally aim to respond in ways that do not escalate the conflict. The United States does not always need to respond directly to Iranian activity but can operate by, with, and through partners in the region. Examples of U.S. or partner actions in response to Iranian hostility might include targeting of Iranian UAVs; seizing Iranian ships that are transporting prohibited material such as arms and oil; targeting Iranian partner forces in countries such as Yemen and Syria; and conducting offensive cyber operations against Iranian air defense, military command and control, or other locations. Any U.S. or partner action should be accompanied by clear messages to Iran’s leadership about further responses—what Schelling referred to as the threat of “latent violence”—if Iran continues to act aggressively.

Finally, the United States should consider options to tie Tehran down in protracted conflicts and force the Iranian regime, which is already impacted by sanctions, to spend precious money and commit personnel. Perhaps the mostly likely area to tie down Iran is Syria. While the Russians and Iranians have helped the Assad regime retake most of the country, Syria is far from stable. It is a fractured country with an unpopular regime, herculean economic problems, large-scale infrastructure destruction, lingering animosities, and little or no control of territory in parts of the north, east, and south. The presence of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters in Syria has been controversial among some of its members and supporters because of the high number of casualties and limited support for fighting—and dying—for the Assad regime.

Today, there has been an increase in the overall size and geographic scope of Iranian-supported Shia militias in Syria, including in the southwest. These Shia forces are likely to be unpopular among many locals, especially Syria’s majority Sunni population. The United States and its partners should examine the pros and cons of supporting anti-Iranian networks in Syria that organize protests and harass Iranian-aided militias. After all, large anti-Iranian protests occurred in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019, highlighting concerns about Iranian activism in the region. As protesters in Iraqi shouted in late 2019: “Free, free Iraq. Iran get out, get out.” These protests could spread to other countries.

**Conventional Deterrence and Defense:** The United States should also continue to improve the military capabilities of its partners in the Middle East to deter and, if necessary, respond to an Iranian conventional attack. There have been numerous debates within the Trump administration (much like the Obama and earlier administrations) about shifting U.S. military resources away from the Middle East to Asia and Europe to balance against China and Russia. But based on the heightened tensions between the United States and Iran, it would be a mistake to decrease the current U.S. military posture in the Middle East. The partial U.S. military withdrawal from northern Syria only aided Iran (and Russia) and weakened deterrence. So did the U.S. failure to respond to repeated incidents in the Persian Gulf, including the September 2019 Iranian attack against Saudi oil infrastructure.

Forward base infrastructure, for example, is an important component of regional posture. Assuming that Iran continues to build more and increasingly effective long-range missiles, the United States and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners will likely want to invest in capabilities to reduce their vulnerability to these weapons. This means improving a dispersed network of airbases and command centers that are better hardened against attack. Military planners should also ensure that adequate stocks of air-delivered munitions are stored in survivable ways in the region. Developing an effective active defense and counterforce capacity against Iran’s long-range precision strike capability will require additional investments in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveil-
lance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities and advanced munitions.\textsuperscript{33}

To help deter Iranian escalation, the United States should ensure that it keeps sufficient numbers and types of mine countermeasure vessels; land-based fighter aircraft; Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) surface-to-air missile batteries; high-end intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance orbits; and attack submarines.\textsuperscript{34} Restraint would be a mistake. Saudi Arabia needs additional missile capabilities in response to Iran’s improving ballistic missile arsenal, and it could seek systems such as the Dongfeng 5 ballistic missile from China if the United States and its partners are unwilling to help.\textsuperscript{35}

Iran’s September 2019 attack against Saudi Arabia’s oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais highlighted additional defensive gaps from cruise missiles and UAVs, particularly from the north. The Saudis have focused their air defenses on threats from the south, as the Houthis have launched their short-range missile, rocket, and UAV attacks from Yemen. But the Saudis are less prepared to contend with land-attack cruise missile and UAV threats from the north. The United States should ensure there are sufficient surface-to-air missile batteries, such as the MIM-104 Patriot, and advanced radars, such as the AN/MPQ-64 Sentinel, in Gulf countries that can track UAVs and missiles coming from multiple locations, including from the north. Finally, the United States should help Gulf countries harden their critical civilian infrastructure—such as oil facilities, desalination facilities, electricity grids, and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems—from Iranian and partner missile, rocket, and UAV strikes.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Economic}

The economic component is critical for containment. U.S. and multilateral sanctions have been a tool to punish Iran for bad behavior and limit its access to conventional military and missile components. Sanctions relief has been a way to reward Iran for cooperation on issues such as curbing its nuclear program. Until there is a broader resolution of issues such as Iran’s nuclear weapons program, the United States should continue to impose sanctions on Iran—especially in areas that weaken Iran’s military. As long as Iran continues to build a ballistic missile program and aid groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen, the United States should enact or keep several types of measures in place:

- Designate Iranian-supported groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Kata’ib Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as foreign terrorist organizations.
- Sanction foreign entities that supply Iran with weapons of mass destruction technology or advanced conventional weapons or weapons parts, including Iran’s missile program, tanks, armored vehicles, warships, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters.
- Sanction foreign companies that sell technology that Iran could use to monitor or control the internet.

In order to maximize the impact of sanctions against Iran and to effectively use sanctions relief as leverage in diplomatic negotiations, the United States will need to secure broader multilateral support for sanctions—particularly from European allies. Unilateral sanctions are rarely effective in changing the behavior of target states.\textsuperscript{37} This means better synchronizing the political and economic components of containment with U.S. partners.

\textbf{Informational}

The final component of containment is competing with Iran in the information arena. Iranian leaders are well aware of the importance of information. As Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remarked, the struggle between the United States and Iran is to a great extent ideological: “What is that war?” he asked. “That war is a media war, a war of public provocation, and a war of propaganda: it is very important.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Iranian Opposition:} Iran’s authoritarian political system and attempt to control access to information, including through state-run media, make it vulnerable to a U.S. and Western information campaign. A major component of U.S. competition with Iran should be ideological. The greatest U.S. strengths—its support of democratic principles, open markets, and press freedom—are also Iran’s most significant weaknesses. There are holes in Iran’s information
crackdown and its “halal” internet. While the regime blocked Telegram, for example, many Iranians have used virtual private networks (VPNs) to regain access to the internet. The U.S. State Department’s Internet Freedom program—which seeks to counter the efforts of authoritarian regimes such as Iran to censor, monitor, and control the internet—has had some success in helping individuals bypass firewalls by using tools and software such as Tor. These types of programs need to be augmented.

The United States needs to continue highlighting the regime’s shortfalls, particularly by increasing funding to diaspora television, radio, internet, and social media programs that reach Iranians inside and outside of the country. There exists a bottom-up movement of Iranians—inside and outside Iran—that seeks to counter the regime’s messaging and protest against the government. Between January 2018 and October 2019, for example, there were over 4,200 demonstrations across Iran fueled by anger at the government’s economic policies, opposition to Khamenei’s theocratic regime, and concerns about issues such as corruption, environmental devastation, and the repression of women. These protests have involved labor unions, truck drivers, teachers, students, and others, though they have not coalesced into a unified protest movement—at least not yet.

In November 2019, large-scale protests erupted across Iran after the regime increased fuel prices. In addition, Iranian leaders have expressed alarm that the Iranian population is attracted to Western culture and political values.

The United States should also encourage foreign aid to peaceful protesters, much like it did during the Cold War. Labor unions such as the AFL-CIO provided aid to organizations such as Solidarity in Poland. After all, Iran’s inefficient state-run economy will continue to undermine Iran’s prospects for economic growth. The regime prioritizes full employment and social welfare over efficiency, which undermines economic growth, as does the disproportionate power of state actors in the economy, such as the IRGC and bonyads. The close links between political officials and economic organizations results in the subordination of economic policy to political whims. Moreover, corruption is rampant. More broadly, the U.S. government needs to increase its funding for public diplomacy and other information efforts. During the Cold War, for example, the U.S. information campaign against the Soviet Union—which included such platforms as Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the U.S. Information Agency—was critical. The United States drastically increased its resources for information campaigns in the 1980s. The budget for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty more than doubled from $82 million in 1981 to $170 million in 1988. The U.S. Information Agency’s budget jumped from $458 million in 1981 to $820 million in 1988. And the U.S. government’s entire public diplomacy budget also nearly doubled from 1981 to 1988. The Reagan administration also conducted CIA covert actions programs to undermine Marxist-Leninist ideology. One of the most successful CIA programs, codenamed QRHELPFUL, involved funding Poland’s opposition movement, Solidarity. The goal was to improve Solidarity’s information campaign, and the CIA funded key components of Solidarity’s underground media enterprise, including by providing leaflets, posters, offset presses, xerox machines, duplicators, typewriters, paper, and technical help in running clandestine radio broadcasts and breaking into television programs.

One difference—and challenge—in Iran is that the opposition movement is much more fractured and decentralized. This reality suggests that while the United States can help improve the information campaign of anti-regime networks, regime change is unlikely. Consequently, the United States needs to make sure it has achievable goals, such as providing more balanced information to the Iranian population—within Iran but also throughout the world—to counter the force-fed propaganda from Tehran’s state-run media outlets.

**Disinformation:** The United States, including the private sector, needs to continue targeting and removing Iran’s internet and social media disinformation. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other companies and platforms have removed hundreds of fake accounts and pages linked to the IRIB that used anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and anti-U.S. narratives as part of a global influence campaign.

In May 2019, the
cybersecurity firm FireEye released a report exposing an Iranian information campaign that involved social media accounts posing as Americans. The accounts supported the Iran nuclear deal, opposed the recent U.S. designation of Iran’s IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization, and condemned President Trump’s decision to continue supporting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states involved in Yemen. In addition, Google took down IRIB-linked channels on YouTube and accounts on Google Plus and Blogger that engaged in phishing and hacking attempts, conducted influence operations, and engaged in digital attacks against political campaigns. Google analysts identified technical data linked to the official IRIB IP address space, domain ownership linked to IRIB account information, and account metadata and subscriber information associated with the IRIB. These efforts need to continue, and members of Congress can be helpful in calling attention to Iranian disinformation through hearings and special investigations.

In the end, the goals of containment should be to reverse Iranian expansionism, including the spread of its revolutionary ideology; weaken the sources of Iranian extremism through military, diplomatic, economic, and informational means; and engage in political dialogue where feasible. U.S. allies and partners are essential to containment. But the U.S. goal should not be regime change. Successive U.S. administrations sought to contain the Soviet Union in the expectation, or at least the hope, that the Communist system would ultimately collapse of its own contradictions and inefficiencies. “Soviet power, like the capitalist world of its own conception, bears within it the seeds of its own decay,” George Kennan wrote in 1947, adding that “the sprouting of those seeds is well advanced.” The current Iranian regime may eventually collapse, or it may gradually evolve over time through political and economic transformation. But change will have to come largely from Iran’s authoritarian and theocratic political system, inefficient state-run economy, and attempt to control information have generated—and will continue to cause—opposition inside and outside Iran from those who support democracy, free markets, and free speech. The United States needs to credibly demonstrate that its policy toward Iran is not a blueprint for endless conflict, but rather an effort to encourage Iran to be more democratic and open. This is a policy in line with core U.S. values and one which the U.S. population can understand and support.
Appendix A

Satellite Imagery of Israeli Strikes in Syria

The satellite images in Appendix A underline the types of activities that Iran is undertaking in Syria. On June 2, 2019, Israel conducted an airstrike on the T-4 Airbase. As highlighted in Figure A.1, satellite imagery taken before and after the Israeli airstrike indicates that a UAV control vehicle, a launch ramp, and ground equipment were likely targeted.

**FIGURE A.1** Before and after satellite imagery of Israeli Strike at T-4 Airbase in Syria, 2019
Figure A.2 shows the results of an Israeli strike against a munitions storage area at a Syrian military base in Haqlat aş Şafrah, Syria, which had been allegedly utilized by the IRGC-QF. The precise nature of the Israeli attack strongly suggests accurate intelligence and a desire to limit damage to both infrastructure and personnel.
Israel struck a Syrian military facility at Al-Kiswah in southern Damascus four times in 2017 and 2018. Figure A.3 begins with an overview image of the military site at Al-Kiswah where Israel conducted airstrikes in December 2017 and May 2018 on alleged Iranian targets. The subsequent images show the specific targets before and after Israeli strikes. The satellite imagery suggests several noteworthy issues. First, while the Israeli strikes were precise and destroyed all or parts of specific buildings or trucks, they left undamaged infrastructure or trucks only a few feet away. Second, the imagery suggests that Iran and Hezbollah have utilized both fixed (e.g., buildings) and mobile (e.g., vehicles) sites to store or transport missiles and missile parts.

**FIGURE A.3** Overview of Alleged Missile-related Storage Facilities at Al-Kiswah in Syria, 2017 and 2018

**FIGURE A.3.1** Before and after satellite imagery of the December 2017 Israeli Airstrikes on Alleged Missile-related Storage Facilities at Al-Kiswah
FIGURE A.3.2 Before and after satellite imagery of the December 2017 Israeli Airstrikes on Alleged Missile-related Storage Facilities at Al-Kiswah

FIGURE A.3.3 Before and after satellite imagery of May 2018, Israeli Airstrikes on Alleged Missile-related Transportation Targets at Al-Kiswah

FIGURE A.3.4 Before and after satellite imagery of May 2018, Israeli Airstrikes on Alleged Missile-related Storage Facilities at Al-Kiswah
Appendix B

Major Sanctions against Iran

This appendix highlights key sanctions against Iran from the United States, United Nations, and European Union. It does not provide a comprehensive list of all sanctions previously or currently in place against Iran or Iran-related entities.

U.S. Sanctions

For more on U.S. sanctions on Iran, see the U.S. Department of Treasury’s website at: www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/programs/pages/iran.aspx.

Blocked Iranian Property and Assets

Executive Order 13599 – Blocking Property of the Government of Iran and Iranian Financial Institutions

**DATE ENACTED** February 6, 2012.
**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.
**OVERVIEW** Requires any U.S.-based assets of Iranian government-controlled or -owned entities, such as the Central Bank of Iran, to be blocked and disallows any transfers, payments, or other dealings.

Sanctions for Iran’s Support for Armed Factions and Terrorist Groups

Sanctions Triggered by Terrorism List Designation (Section 6(j) of the Export Administration Act of 1979 (P.L. 97–72, as amended))

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.
**OVERVIEW** By naming Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism, several sanctions were triggered: restriction on sales of U.S. dual-use items; ban on direct U.S. financial assistance and arms sales to Iran; requirement to oppose multilateral lending; withholding of U.S. assistance to countries that assist or sell arms to terrorism list countries; and withholding of U.S. aid to organizations that assist Iran.

Executive Order 13224 – Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions With Persons Who Commit, Threaten To Commit, or Support Terrorism Notice of September 24, 2001 – Continuation of Emergency With Respect to UNITA

**DATE ENACTED** September 23, 2001.
**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.
**OVERVIEW** Designates and blocks assets of and transactions by entities determined by the president to be supporting terrorism and terrorist organizations.
Major Sanctions Against Iran


DATE ENACTED Various dates (see below)
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Designates organizations for acts of terrorism. The following organizations were assessed as aided by Iran: IRGC (April 2019); Lebanese Hezbollah (October 1997); Kata’ib Hezbollah (July 2009); Hamas (October 1997); Palestinian Islamic Jihad (October 1997); Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades (March 2002); Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PLFP-GC) (October 1997); and Al Ashtar Brigades (July 2018).

Executive Order 13438 on Threats to Iraq’s Stability

CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Aimed to curtail Iran’s influence in Iraq. The order sanctions entities who have committed, or pose a risk of committing, violent acts that threaten reconstruction and reform efforts in Iraq. The order also sanctions entities providing material support to such designees. Sanctioned entities include the IRGC-QF and Iraqi Shiite militia figures. Any U.S.-based property of persons designated is blocked.

Executive Order 13572 on Repression of the Syrian People

DATE ENACTED April 29, 2011.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Blocks U.S.-based assets of entities complicit in the commission of human rights abuses in Syria, including acts of repression against the Syrian people.

The Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act (PL 114-102) and Hizballah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 (HIFPA II) (S 1595, PL 115-272)

DATE October 23, 2018 (HIFPA II).
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Excludes from the U.S. financial system any institutions that engage in certain transactions with Hezbollah or its affiliates or partners. HIFPA II (2018) expands the authority of the original law by authorizing the blocking of U.S.-based property of and U.S. transactions with any foreign government agency that provides financial support or arms to Lebanese Hezbollah.

Ban on U.S. Trade and Investment with Iran

Executive Order 12959 – Prohibiting Certain Transactions With Respect to Iran

DATE ENACTED May 6, 1995.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Bans imports of Iranian-origin goods into the United States and bans U.S. exports to and investment in Iran.
Executive Order 13059 – Prohibiting Certain Transactions With Respect to Iran

**DATE ENACTED** August 19, 1997.

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.

**OVERVIEW** Expanded on E.O. 12959 by prohibiting U.S. companies from knowingly exporting goods to a third country in which the good would be incorporated into a product destined for Iran.

Section 103 of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA)

**DATE ENACTED** July 1, 2010.

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.

**OVERVIEW** Codified the 1995 trade ban and reinstated the full ban on imports that had been relaxed by previous regulations.

Sanctions on Iran’s Energy Sector

The Iran Sanctions Act (ISA) (and triggers added by other laws)

**DATE ENACTED** August 5, 1996; last amended December 15, 2016.

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.

**OVERVIEWS** Requires the president to impose at minimum two of seven sanctions on foreign entities that make certain investments in Iran’s energy sector.

**AMENDMENTS** The ISA consists of a number of transactions with Iran that would be considered violations. These types of transactions include investment to develop Iran’s petroleum products; transfer or sale of WMD technologies and weaponry and participation in uranium mining activities; sales of gasoline to Iran; provision of equipment or services for oil, gas, and petrochemicals production; and transporting Iranian crude oil.

Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (ITRSHRA)

**DATE ENACTED** August 10, 2012.

**CURRENT STATUS** Some sections waived to implement the JCPOA but went back into effect on August 6, 2018. Entities were relisted again on November 5, 2018.

**OVERVIEW** Enacts ISA sanctions for entities insuring Iranian oil, purchasing Iranian bonds, or engaging in transactions with the IRGC. The ITRSHRA requires the application of 5 of 12 sanctions on the ISA menu.

Executive Order 13622/13846 – Sanctions on the Purchase of Iranian Crude Oil and Petrochemical Products, and Dealings in Iranian Bank Notes

**DATE ENACTED** July 30, 2012.

**CURRENT STATUS** Revoked by E.O. 13716 but was put back into effect by E.O. 13846 of August 6, 2018.

**OVERVIEW** Imposed specified sanctions drawn from the ISA sanctions menu and bars institutions from the U.S. financial system for energy-related transactions with Iran, assisting certain financial institutions in Iran, and dealing in Iranian bank notes.
Major Sanctions Against Iran

Iran Oil Export Reduction Sanctions: Section 1245 of the FY2012 NDAA

**DATE ENACTED** December 31, 2011.

**CURRENT STATUS** Back into effect November 5, 2018.

**OVERVIEW** Prevented foreign banks from operating in the United States if they have engaged in significant financial transactions with the Central Bank of Iran or other sanctioned Iranian banks. Exceptions were originally provided for any country that significantly reduced its purchases of Iranian oil. These granted exceptions expired on May 2, 2019.

Iran Foreign Bank Account “Restriction” Provision (Section 504 of the IRTRSHRA amended Section 1245 of the FY2012 NDAA)

**DATE ENACTED** February 6, 2013.

**CURRENT STATUS** Back into effect November 5, 2018.

**OVERVIEW** Prevented Iran from repatriating any hard currency Iran held in foreign banks.

Sanctions on Auto Production and Minerals Sectors

Executive Order 13645/13846 – Authorizing the Implementation of Certain Sanctions Set Forth in the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012 and Additional Sanctions With Respect To Iran; Reimposing Certain Sanctions With Respect to Iran

**DATE ENACTED** July 1, 2013, went back into effect under E.O. on August 6, 2018.

**CURRENT STATUS** Revoked by the JCPOA; went back into effect August 6, 2018.

**OVERVIEW** Imposed ISA sanctions on firms supplying goods or services to Iran’s automotive sector; prohibited U.S. bank accounts and U.S.-based property for foreign banks that conduct transactions in Iran’s currency or hold rial accounts; blocked U.S.-based property of a person that conducts transactions with an Iranian entity listed as a Specially Designated National (SDN).

Executive Order 13871 – Imposing Sanctions With Respect to the Iron, Steel, Aluminum, and Copper Sectors of Iran

**DATE ENACTED** May 8, 2019.

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.

**OVERVIEW** Sanctioned transactions with Iran's key minerals and industrial commodities. Barred any foreign bank conducting or facilitating such transactions from the U.S. financial system.

Sanctions on Weapons of Mass Destruction, Missiles, and Conventional Arms Transfers

Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act and Iraq Sanctions Act

**DATE ENACTED** October 23, 1992.

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.

**OVERVIEW** Imposed numerous sanctions on foreign entities that supply
Iran with WMD technology or certain quantities or types of advanced conventional weaponry.

**Banning Aid to Countries that Aid or Arm Terrorism List States: Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996**

**DATE ENACTED** April 24, 1996.
**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.
**OVERVIEW** Sanctioned any country that provides financial assistance or arms to a terrorism list country.

**Proliferation-Related Provision of the Iran Sanctions Act (Section 5(b)(1) of ISA)**

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect. Section 5(b)(1) Section 5(b)(2) were the only provisions of the ISA that were not waived to implement the JCPOA.
**OVERVIEW** Section 5(b)(1) of the ISA subjects to ISA sanctions firms or persons determined to have sold to Iran (1) technology useful for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) or (2) destabilizing numbers and types of advanced conventional weapons.

**Iran-North Korea-Syria Nonproliferation Act (now INKSNA)**

**DATE ENACTED** March 14, 2000.
**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.
**OVERVIEW** Authorized sanctions on foreign persons determined to have assisted Iran's WMD programs.

**Executive Order 13382 – Blocking Property of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferators and Their Supporters**

**DATE ENACTED** June 28, 2005.
**CURRENT STATUS** Order remained in force, but numerous entities “delisted.” Virtually all entities delisted to implement the JCPOA were relisted on November 5, 2018.
**OVERVIEW** Authorized the president to block the assets of WMD proliferators and their supporters.

**Arms Transfer and Missile Sanctions: The Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, PL 115-44)**

**DATE ENACTED** August 2, 2017.
**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.
**OVERVIEW** Mandated sanctions on arms sales to Iran and on entities that materially contribute to Iran's ballistic missile program.

**Sanctions on “Countries of Diversion Concern” (Title III of CISADA)**

**DATE ENACTED** July 1, 2010.
**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect; remained in force after the JCPOA.
**OVERVIEW** Established authorities to sanction countries that allow U.S. technology that could aid Iran's nuclear and WMD programs to be re-exported or diverted to Iran.
Financial/Banking Sanctions

Targeted Financial Measures/ ban on Iranian access to the US Financial System/ Use of Dollars

NOTE There is no blanket ban on foreign banks or persons paying Iran for goods using U.S. dollars. Restrictions broadened November 6, 2008 by the Department of the Treasury.

CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.

OVERVIEW Barred U.S. banks from handling transactions with foreign entities handling transactions on Iran's behalf. Foreign banks were therefore no longer allowed to access the U.S financial system if they paid Iran for goods in U.S. dollars.

CISADA: Sanctioning Foreign Banks That Conduct Transactions with Sanctioned Iranian Entities

DATE ENACTED July 1, 2010.

CURRENT STATUS Still in effect; remained in force after the JCPOA.

OVERVIEW Imposed limits on foreign financial institutions' access to the U.S. financial system if they engaged in certain transactions with or involving Iran.

Iran Designated a Money-Laundering Jurisdiction/FATF

DATE ENACTED November 21, 2011.

CURRENT STATUS The Central Bank of Iran remained designated under this section during the JCPOA and afterwards.

OVERVIEW Identified Iran as a jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern. Imposed additional requirements on U.S. banks to ensure against improper Iranian access to the U.S. financial system.

Financial Action Task Force (FATF)

DATE ENACTED October 21, 2016.

CURRENT STATUS Countermeasures against Iran currently suspended.

OVERVIEW The FATF is a multilateral standard-setting body for combatting terrorist financing and anti-money laundering. In June 2019, the FATF announced that Iran still had not adequately criminalized terrorist financing.

Use of the SWIFT System (Section 220 of the ITRSHRA)

DATE ENACTED August 10, 2012.

CURRENT STATUS Some sections waived to implement the JCPOA but went back into effect on August 6, 2018. Entities were relisted again on November 5, 2018.

OVERVIEW Authorizes sanctions against SWIFT or other electronic payment systems that do business with Iran. Though authorization is given, no sanctions are mandated.
Cross-Cutting Secondary Sanctions

The Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act (IFCA)

DATE ENACTED January 2, 2013.

CURRENT STATUS Waived to implement the JCPOA; back into effect in 2018.

OVERVIEW Sanctions a wide swath of Iran’s economy, touching several sectors, including materials related to Iran’s missile, nuclear, and military programs; precious metals; certain insurance activities; and shipbuilding and port operations.

Executive Order 13608 – Prohibiting Certain Transactions With and Suspending Entry Into the United States of Foreign Sanctions Evaders With Respect to Iran and Syria

DATE ENACTED May 1, 2012.

CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.

OVERVIEW Sanctions foreign persons who help Iran evade U.S. and other sanctions.

Sanctions on Iran’s Cyber and Transnational Criminal Activities

Executive Order 13694 – Blocking the Property of Certain Persons Engaging in Significant Malicious Cyber-Enabled Activities

DATE ENACTED April 1, 2015.

CURRENT STATUS Still in force, including during JCPOA period.

OVERVIEW Blocks U.S.-based property of entities determined to have engaged in certain cyber activities that: harm or compromise the provision of services by computers or computer networks supporting the critical infrastructure sector; compromise critical infrastructure; disrupt computers or computer networks; or cause misappropriation of funds, trade secrets, personal identifiers, or financial information for financial advantage or gain.

Executive Order 13581 – Blocking Property of Transnational Criminal Organizations

DATE ENACTED July 25, 2011.

CURRENT STATUS Still in force, including during JCPOA period.

OVERVIEW Blocks the U.S.-based property of entities determined to be a member of or assisting a significant transnational criminal organization.

Sanctions to Support Democracy and Human Rights in Iran

Countering Censorship of the Internet: CISADA Section 106

DATE ENACTED July 1, 2010.

CURRENT STATUS Still in effect; remained in force after the JCPOA.

OVERVIEW Prohibits U.S. government contracts with foreign companies that sell censorship and monitoring technology that Iran could use to control Iranian usage of the internet. The provisions were directed, in
part, against two European companies. The provision was derived from the Reduce Iranian Cyber-Suppression Act (111th Congress, S. 1475 and H.R. 3284).

Executive Order 13606 – Countering Censorship of the Internet

DATE ENACTED April 23, 2012.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Blocks the U.S.-based property, essentially bars U.S. entry, and bans any U.S. trade with persons determined to be committing information technology human rights abuses. This includes activities such as operating any technology that allows the Iranian government to disrupt, monitor, or track computer usage by citizens or selling to Iran any technology that enables it to carry out such actions.

Executive Order 13628 – Countering Censorship of the Internet

DATE ENACTED October 9, 2012.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Implemented Section 403 of the ITRSHRA sanctions by blocking the property of persons/firms determined to have committed censorship, limited free expression, or assisted Iran in jamming communications.

Executive Order 13553 – Blocking Property of Certain Persons With Respect to Serious Human Rights Abuses by the Government of Iran and Taking Certain Other Actions

DATE ENACTED September 29, 2010.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Provided for CISADA sanctions against Iranians determined to be responsible for or complicit in post-2009 Iran election human rights abuses.

Sanctions on Sales of Anti-Riot Equipment: Section 402 of the ITRSHA

DATE ENACTED August 10, 2012.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Sanctions any person or company that sells the Iranian government goods or technologies that it can use to commit human rights abuses against its people.

Sanctions Against Iranian Government Broadcasters/IRIB: Section 1248 of the IFCA

DATE ENACTED January 2, 2013.
CURRENT STATUS Still in effect.
OVERVIEW Mandates inclusion of the IRIB, the state broadcasting umbrella group, as a human rights abuser.
Major Sanctions Against Iran

Sanctions on Iran’s Leadership: Executive Order 13876 on Imposing Sanctions with Respect to Iran

**DATE ENACTED** June 24, 2019.

**CURRENT STATUS** Still in effect.

**OVERVIEW** Imposed sanctions targeting the assets of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his top associates, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

UN Sanctions

For more on UN sanctions on Iran, please see, United Nations, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/information.

Resolution 1696

**DATE ENACTED** July 31, 2006.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable. Terminated on implementation day of the JCPOA, January 16, 2016.

**OVERVIEW** Demanded that Iran implement steps required by the IAEA to reestablish confidence in the peaceful nature of its nuclear program and, in this context, suspend uranium enrichment activities.

Resolution 1737

**DATE ENACTED** December 23, 2006.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable. Terminated on implementation day of the JCPOA, January 16, 2016.

**OVERVIEW** Required Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, suspend construction of the heavy-water reactor at Arak, and ratify the "Additional Protocol" to Iran's IAEA Safeguards Agreement.

Resolution 1747

**DATE ENACTED** March 24, 2007.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable. Terminated on implementation day of the JCPOA, January 16, 2016.

**OVERVIEW** Prohibited member states from procuring combat equipment or weapons systems from Iran. Resolution 1747 also added additional entities associated with Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile program. Also strengthened Resolution 1737’s travel ban provision.

Resolution 1803

**DATE ENACTED** March 3, 2008.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable. Terminated on implementation day of the JCPOA, January 16, 2016.

**OVERVIEW** Authorized inspections of air and sea cargo traveling to or from Iran if reasonable grounds suggested the vessel was transporting illicit materials.
Resolution 1835

**DATE ENACTED** September 27, 2008.

**CURRENT STATUS** No enforceable sanctions provided.

**OVERVIEW** Imposed no new sanctions and reaffirmed the earlier resolutions.

Resolution 1929

**DATE ENACTED** June 9, 2010.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable. Terminated on implementation day of the JCPOA, January 16, 2016.

**OVERVIEW** Required UN member states to prevent the transfer of missile-related technology to Iran. Prohibited Iran from acquiring commercial interest in uranium mining or producing nuclear materials in other countries. Enhanced previous travel sanctions by requiring states to prevent designated individuals from entering their territories and called on states to inspect ships bound to or from Iran if they suspect banned cargo is aboard.

Resolution 1984

**DATE ENACTED** June 9, 2011.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable.

**OVERVIEW** Extended the mandate of the expert panel monitoring the Iranian sanctions until June 9, 2012.

Resolution 2049

**DATE ENACTED** June 7, 2012.

**CURRENT STATUS** No longer applicable.

**OVERVIEW** Extended the mandate of the expert panel monitoring the Iranian sanctions until June 9, 2013.

**EU Sanctions**

For more on EU sanctions on Iran, see: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/iran/.

**Arms and Military Equipment**

**Council Common Decision 2007/140/CFSP**

**DATE ENACTED** February 27, 2007.

**CURRENT STATUS** Scheduled to remain in place until October 18, 2023 or when the IAEA concludes that all nuclear material in Iran involves only peaceful activities.

**OVERVIEW** Prohibited the supply of missile-related material, components, and technologies to Iran.
**Major Sanctions Against Iran**

Council Common Decision 2007/246/CFSP – Amending Common Position 2007/140/CFSP Concerning Restrictive Measures Against Iran

**DATE ENACTED** April 23, 2007.

**STATUS** Scheduled to remain in place until October 18, 2023 or when the IAEA concludes that all nuclear material in Iran involves only peaceful activities.

**OVERVIEW** Provided a full arms embargo on Iran, including weapons, ammunition, military vehicles, and equipment.

**Human Rights Violations**

Council Decision 2011/235/CFSP – Concerning Restrictive Measures Directed Against Certain Persons and Entities in View of the Situation in Iran

**DATE ENACTED** April 12, 2011.


**OVERVIEW** Enacted a ban on exports to Iran of material that might be used for internal repression and monitoring telecommunications. The measure also includes a travel ban and asset freeze on people and entities involved in serious human rights violations in Iran.
About the Author

Seth G. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, is director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a senior adviser to the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He is also an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Prior to joining CSIS, Dr. Jones was the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation. He also served as representative for the commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, to the assistant secretary of defense for special operations. Before that, he was a plans officer and adviser to the commanding general, U.S. Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan). In 2014, Dr. Jones served on a congressionally mandated panel that reviewed the FBI’s implementation of counterterrorism recommendations contained in the 9/11 Commission Report. Dr. Jones specializes in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and covert action, including a focus on al Qaeda and ISIS. He is the author of A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland (W.W. Norton, 2018), Waging Insurgent Warfare (Oxford University Press, 2016), Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qa’ida after 9/11 (W.W. Norton, 2012), and In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan (W.W. Norton, 2009). Dr. Jones has published articles in a range of journals, such as Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, and International Security, as well as newspapers and magazines like the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal. Dr. Jones is a graduate of Bowdoin College and received his MA and PhD from the University of Chicago.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION


CHAPTER TWO: IRREGULAR MILITARY POWER


6. On the history of the IRGC see, for example, ibid.; Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).

7. Some sources have estimated that the IRGC and Office of the Supreme Leader have controlled up to 50 percent of the Iranian economy. See Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*, 154.


20. Thanks to Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr. for help with the imagery analysis.


22. Ibid., 343.

24 Lewis, “Iran and Cyber Power.”


31 On Iranian efforts to improve its rocket and missile inventory see, for example, International Crisis Group, Iran’s Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East (Brussels: April 2018), https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/184-irans-priorities-turbulent-middle-east; Uskowi, Temperature Rising, 88.


33 See the alleged video footage of a Hezbollah drone strike in “Hezbollah Uses Drones against Islamic State in Syria: Hezbollah-run Media,” Reuters, August 21, 2017, https://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKCN1B1H4-OCATP.


35 Soufan, “Qassem Soleimani and Iran’s Unique Regional Strategy”; Uskowi, Temperature Rising, 61.


40 Thanks to Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr. for help with the imagery analysis.

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37 Ibid.
38 Thanks to Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr. for help with the imagery analysis.
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