Resilience and Resistance Post-Raisi: A Data-Centric Approach to Iran

Description

The sudden death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024, may provide an opportunity to usher in a new destiny for the Iranian people. Many considered the hard-liner to be the Supreme Leader Khamenei's enforcer in consolidating the clerics' power through the executions of dissidents and the jailing of political prisoners. He mobilized America's rivals by pursuing a military alliance with Russia and economic ties with China to weaken the grip of Western political and commercial dominance in the region. The former president was the mastermind of a proxy-based militarization campaign to make a Western presence in the Middle East so costly that the United States and its allies would withdraw. Despite the recent escalation of hostilities against Israel and the West, the United States remains committed to maintaining a forward presence to strengthen regional partnerships and protect vital trade routes.

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The Islamic Republic of Iran will choose a new President on June 28, 2024. Iran's Guardian Council, a conservative 12-member oversight board, chose six candidates: 5 far-right hardliners and one moderate, Masoud Pezeshkian, who is open to renewed diplomacy with the United States. The high popularity of Pezeshkian is a sign of the Iran people's desire to seek less stringent Islamic codes and friendlier relations with the West. The election outcome is uncertain. The Supreme Council's biased support toward and election of a far-right candidate may widen the prevalent trust gap and ignite widespread protest. Still, the successful election of the moderate may present a renewed opportunity to reduce historical tensions and establish a pro-Western partnership. This election presents an excellent opportunity to review our foreign policy stance and strategize our approach no matter the election's direction.

Considering the considerable sea change in Iranian politics, we advise the DoD to take a fresh look at its analysis of one of America's long-standing adversaries. Since 2021, two events have dramatically shifted the subject of irregular warfare within the Department of Defense. The first was House Resolution 5130, Consortium to Study Irregular Warfare Act of 2021. Congress mandated a more data-centric (not theoretical) analysis of irregular war. The second was the change of the irregular warfare definition released in Joint Publication 1: Volume 1, *Joint Warfighting* in August 2023,

which expanded irregular warfare to encompass activities taken before conflict and during competition. The upcoming election and forming of a new government present an opportune time to design and implement a comprehensive operational plan to advance our national interests. We recommend utilizing a fact-based methodology (leveraging analytical data from top universities, financial institutions, governmental agencies, and nongovernmental organizations) to analyze the resilience of and resistance to current Iranian governance systems. Such an assessment can better inform DoD activities, force posture, and interagency collaboration to achieve U.S. national objectives, not just in the case of war but in competition.

The Islamic Republic has been a destabilizing force in the Middle East since its ascension to power after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The Iranian leadership has provoked violent conflict and destructive activities to assert its hegemonic aspirations. Iranâ??s government is a complex blending of theocratic and political elements that pursues expanding Islamification in conformity with â??Khomeinism,â?• a radicalized ideology to reassert Shiâ??ism as the dominant Islamic moral authority. Tehran views the United States and Israel as their main threats and focuses their foreign policy on eliminating their regional influence. With a relatively small regular military, the regime relies on specialized forces to lead a network of proxies that engage in surrogate terrorism, political agitation, and paramilitary violence as the main instruments of power projection. The best strategic approach to stabilize the political situation and curtail Iranian hostilities needs reconsideration.

The 2022 National Security Strategy delineates the current U.S.-Iranian policy initiatives. The U.S. is presently pursuing diplomacy backed by limited sanctions to dissuade Iran from threatening U.S. personnel and developing a nuclear weapon but stands prepared to use other means should diplomacy fail. The policy provides a commitment to stand with the Iranian people, striving for human rights and dignity. Strategic decision-makers should assess the resilience of the Islamic Republic by examining its perceived legitimacy by the Iranian people, who have demonstrated a significant measure of resistance against the abuses and corruption of the Tehran regime.

Given their ethnic, cultural, and, to a lesser extent, religious diversity, the Iranian people and the Muslim Shiâ??a community at large have mixed views on the regimeâ??s strategic goals. The clerics profess that the Islamic Republic is the only righteous governance path within the Islamic world. Theocratic truth-seekers advocated a sociopolitical sect based upon traditional Shiâ??a jurisprudence, believing that global liberation movements against colonialist oppressors were a justified obligation. Many Iranians are skeptical of the regimeâ??s professed commitment to jihad against the West because the policy has degenerated the countryâ??s social conditions and heightened fears of unleashing external aggression. The Muslim World generally views Iran negatively, believing that a Shiâ??a worldview is not a legitimate moral authority and that Tehranâ??s strategic approach does not

contribute to peace and stability in the region.

The following chart utilizes governance metrics from the World Bank (accountability, stability, effectiveness, regulation controls, rule of law, and controlling corruption), along with fragility metrics from the Fund For Peace, to illustrate the Islamic Republicâ??s resiliency in comparison with Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The illustration provides a relative governance scale where a higher level of governance indicators represents a more capable, less corrupt, and more stable government. Lower governance metrics imply the regime is fragile and susceptible to violent or nonviolent social movements.

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Illustration 1: Comparison of Governance in the Middle East (illustration by authors)

Contributing to the Islamic Republicâ??s perceived illegitimacy includes significant human rights abuses, lack of religious freedom, corrupt judiciary, and poor social conditions. Governance indicators improve to the right on this comparison with countries that espouse transparency, combat corruption, and enforce the rule of law, which is more apparent in the regimes of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Erdogan government remains effective and enforces regulations, but nearly all its metrics remain lower than those of Saudi Arabia. Both Saudi Arabiaâ??s and Egyptâ??s regimes remain unaccountable to their people, yet the House of Saud wields considerable strength in regulation control and the establishment of law and order. Compared with its near competitors, the Islamic Republicâ??s governance indicators demonstrate that it is dramatically unsuccessful on all fronts, causing instability and fragility that a unified social movement or violent rebellion may exploit.

A lack of public confidence undermines the strength of the Islamic Republic. Iranâ??s resiliency emanates from the peopleâ??s perceptions and motivations, and poor governance performance erodes public trust. Iranâ??s authoritarian system failed to produce meaningful political reform or social development. Severe restrictions on personal freedoms and a violent suppression of dissenting views diminish popular support for Tehran. These abuses foster resentment within the population and significantly degrade national morale and confidence in Iranian leadership. In a globalized world where information travels at the speed of the internet, social media exposes many Iranians to alternate political views and alluring social policies that make them question the efficacy of the clericâ??s hard-line approach to the West.

Tehranâ??s low governance ratings and high fragility assessment pose a significant dilemma for the Islamic Republic and a considerable opportunity for the United States. The Iranian election process

and new government formation may yield some valuable insights to steer our Iranian foreign policy. Should the United States promote: (1) a more resilient Iranian theocracy, (2) support external and internal resistance activities to collapse the regime, or (3) actively shape the strategic environment and defer to a future opportunity? A comprehensive assessment of the resilience metrics and exploring resistance strategies may lead U.S. policymakers to a more effective approach.

In conclusion, a fact-based methodology for analyzing the resilience and resistance of the Islamic Republic of Iran may inform U.S.-Iranian foreign policy decisions. The U.S. joint operational planning process and conventional war plans have not adequately addressed the competition domain in the Middle East. Current DoD force posture and activities appear merely reactive to current events. Utilizing a data-centric analysis, the DoD can measure the potential resistance within Iran, as well as identify the many nonviolent and violent groups opposing the Islamic Republic. The United States wields many instruments of national power â?? diplomatic, information, military, and economic â?? that can influence Iranâ??s resilience or support resistance to inspire and lead governance reforms. Making such choices requires an interdisciplinary approach and a thorough understanding of the operational environment.

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