



The Cambridge Security Initiative

IRAN: EXPECTING A TUMULTUOUS 2020

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As the Islamic Republic celebrates the 41st anniversary of its founding, the regime is facing enormous pressure from a combination of factors, including: [sanctions](#); [a growing regime legitimacy crisis](#); anti-Iranian [backlash](#) in Iraq and Lebanon; and the killing of Qods Force Commander Qassim [Suleimani](#), who was instrumental to advancing Iran’s regional strategy. Iran will continue to publicly tout its “resistance economy” but conditions will only worsen as the year progresses. New protests are almost certain to arise and probably with increasing frequency; they will be met by intimidation and violence, the response of a regime with no solutions and that appears to be losing its grip. For the near term, the regime will focus on regional diplomacy aimed at sowing division between the U.S. and its Gulf allies to eventually to force the U.S. out of the region. Tehran also will continue to use the nuclear issue to pressure Europe but will be cautious to avoid a U.S. military response; the regime has consistently claimed all measures are reversible if the E3—the UK, Germany, France—find a way to sidestep U.S. sanctions.

Fuel protests broke out across over 100 cities and towns in November 2019, quickly morphing into an anti-regime uprising. The regime cracked down harshly, [killing 1500 of its own citizens](#). Then, in December, a series of escalating events led the U.S. to kill Suleimani, arguably the second most powerful man in Iran who was personally close to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Suleimani’s death has shaken the regime to its core, forcing it to recalibrate its resistance to the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign that is crippling the Iranian economy.

In the nuclear arena, Iran has gradually reduced its compliance with provisions outlined in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the Iran nuclear deal. Iranian leaders are now threatening to fully withdraw from the agreement and the [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#) if the E3 take the case to the United Nations Security Council, a move that could result in UN “snap-back” sanctions. While somewhat sympathetic to Iran’s difficulties, the [Europeans](#) are both unwilling and incapable of providing substantial sanctions relief.

OUTLOOK

Iran’s ability to employ violence to ratchet up tensions has been circumscribed by Suleimani’s death and the restoration of American deterrence. Tehran now needs to calibrate any action against the potential reaction of a U.S. president who has demonstrated a willingness to use force against a high value target. Iran retains military, proxy, and terrorist options, to be sure, and may probe for weakness, most likely in Iraq, but it is unlikely to engage in serious provocations while

the threat of U.S. retaliation remains viable. Indeed, Tehran has few options to counter the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign and no answers for its dismal economic conditions. For its part, the U.S. almost certainly will remain unwilling to offer sanctions relief prior to negotiations, a key Iranian demand.

Growing opposition to the clerical regime and simmering unrest almost certainly will lead to periodic, widespread protests in coming months. A potentially regime threatening uprising probably will force Tehran to consider returning to the negotiating table to gain sanctions relief; survival of the system (nezam) is paramount. This was Khamenei’s calculus in 2012. That said, it is more likely to attempt to muddle through, tout its [“resistance economy”](#), and hope for a new U.S. president in January 2021 who would be willing to re-enter the JCPOA and ease sanctions.