CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Islamic Republic of Iran: Continuity or Change?

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Political Elite Formulation and Circulation

Mehrzad Boroujerdi

Dr. Boroujerdi’s interest in collecting data on the Iranian elite began when he discovered an article by a former Iranian Member of Parliament who claimed that Iran has been ruled by only 200 individuals since 1979. By contrast, others have claimed that Iran is only ruled by around 25 clerical elite. To determine how large Iran’s current ruling elite is, Dr. Boroujerdi compiled biographical information on 2,323 individuals, the largest database on a political elite anywhere in the Middle East. He mapped out different characteristics of the current regime, including complicated interactions between the judiciary, parliament, different councils, and the Supreme Leader.

This data set allowed Dr. Boroujerdi several major insights into Iran’s ruling elite, some of which are included below. First, he observed that clerics hold only 27% of top positions in the government, with the rest held by lay individuals. Whereas the number of clerics in parliament was 50% directly after the revolution, it is now 6%. Meanwhile, the number of Revolutionary Guards in the elite has gradually increased. Dr. Boroujerdi surmised that this is because clerics have drifted towards non-elected positions of power. Second, Dr. Boroujerdi found that only two individuals in the study had served in the parliament before the revolution, meaning that almost 100 members of the government are totally new. Third, while the median age of the elite dropped right after the revolution, the average age has gone up in recent times. This indicates that the same individuals have stayed in power over time.

Fourth, the percentage of individuals in the government who have served prison time has dropped. Right after the revolution, 43% of the assembly had spent time in prison, but now, the number is 26%. Having served a prison term bolstered one’s legitimacy in the governments directly after the revolution, but over time, this has mattered less. Fifth, of Iran’s 36 provinces, Dr. Boroujerdi found that the most cosmopolitan provinces, Tehran, Isfahan, and Fars, produce members of the elite at the highest numbers. Finally, Dr. Boroujerdi reported very limited representation of women and minorities in the ruling elite. Women represent only 3.2% of the elite, and Sunni Muslims have only 1.9% representation in the Assembly of Experts.

Ultimately, Dr. Boroujerdi concluded that about 25 individuals in Iran are the major purveyors of power. This small circle includes many household names like Rouhani, Mousavi, Larijani, and Rafsanjani. Because of the high rate of incumbency of these individuals, change in Iran is more likely to stem from elected bodies, like the parliament, which have a much higher rate of turnover.

Mehrzad Boroujerdi is a professor of Political Science at Syracuse University and visiting scholar at UCLA’s Center for Near Eastern Studies. He is a past president of the International Society for Iranian Studies and co-author of Political Institutions and Ruling Elites in Post-Revolutionary Iran: A Political Handbook (forthcoming, Syracuse University Press, 2018), and editor of Mirror for the Muslim Prince: Islam and Theory of Statecraft (Syracuse University Press, 2013).
Iran after Ayatollah Khamenei: Regime Dynamics and Prospects for Political Change
Saied Golkar

Dr. Golkar’s presentation focused on the possibilities for change after Ayatollah Khamenei’s death. Dr. Golkar began by explaining the inner workings of the Assembly of Experts, the body that will select the next Supreme Leader. The Assembly of Experts consists of 88 clergy who hold their position for eight years. The Assembly includes six internal commissions, with the two most important being the Commission of 111, which supposedly monitors and controls the Supreme Leader, and the Commission of 107, which is tasked with finding a successor to Khamenei. A small internal committee of the Commission of 107 will draw up a secret list of potential candidates and give it to the leadership.

From 1979 to today, Iran has had five different Assemblies of Experts. In 1985, the Commission of 107 selected Ayatollah Montazeri as the successor to Ayatollah Khomeini, but when Khomeini died, they picked Khamenei instead. The Commission has become more conservative and hard line over time, discounting candidates from the Reformist camp. The fifth Assembly of Experts will likely be the one to pick the successor to Khamenei. According to Dr. Golkar, there are contradictory views about whether the moderates or the hardliners currently have the upper hand in the Assembly of Experts. The optimists hold that the moderates, who have won 59% of the seats in the Assembly, currently have the upper hand and will be able to remove hardline clerics like Mesbah and Yazdi. The pessimists argue that the hardliners have the upper hand, as evidenced by the fact that Ayatollah Jannati was selected as chairman with 51 votes.

Next, Dr. Golkar identified three main centers of power in Iran: the clergy/seminary, the technocrat/bureaucracy, and the security/military sphere. The Assembly of Experts will have to pick a candidate who has allegiances with one or more of these power blocks. With regard to the first power bloc, Dr. Golkar identified two splits between the clergy. The first is the divide between the activist and the quietest clergy, and the second is the divide between those who think the government should fund the seminaries and those who think they should be independent. Rouhani, for example, is an activist cleric but believes seminaries should be independent.

Within the military and security sphere, the most powerful force is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Like the clergy, the IRGC does not have a monolithic culture. The IRGC intelligence is more hardline, while the commanders are more pragmatic. The younger Revolutionary Guards are more practical and less ideologically motivated than their predecessors. Under Rouhani, the third power block, the technocrats, have gained power, as the government has followed a steady trend toward bureaucratization.

Finally, Dr. Golkar outlined three scenarios for the future. In the first, Ayatollah Raisi will be appointed Supreme Leader and the alliance of the clergy and the military will reign supreme. In this first scenario, the status quo will be maintained. In the second scenario, Rouhani will be appointed Supreme Leader, and the nexus of the clergy and the technocrats will take power. Under the clergy-technocrat alliance, there could be a gradual transition to pragmatism and the possibility for social and cultural reform. Third, someone like Ahmadinejad or Larijani could be appointed, in which case the nexus between the military and the technocrats would control the country. In this case, the military and the technocrats could unite to lead a coup and install a puppet as the next Supreme Leader.

Saied Golkar is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Service at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is also currently a non-resident Senior Fellow on Iran Policy at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He is the author of Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran (Columbia University Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015).
What Befell the Democracy Movement in Iran?
Ladan Baroumand

Although there is much enthusiasm for a more open society among the general public in Iran, this sentiment does not necessarily translate into a vigorous pro-democracy movement.

In her talk, Ms. Baroumand assessed the state of the pro-democracy movement in Iran by comparing the state of the pro-democracy movement in 2009 and 2017.

In 2009, the pro-democracy forces in Iran were able to successfully organize and mold the agenda of the reformist candidate. In protest of the rigged election results, the movement was able to mobilize large numbers of citizens. By contrast, in 2017, the regime’s brutal persecution of activists had made it much more difficult to organize than before. Many activists were either in prison or in exile.

Even on college campuses, the usual hotspots for activism, the fear of state violence led to silence among pro-democracy advocates. Before the 2017 election, 35 student associations complained to Rouhani about brutality facing student activists and inquired about journalists and dissidents in prison. The editors of student newspapers met with regime officials privately, but no action came from these meetings. The same restraint characterized women’s activists, who published a summary of their appeals against discriminatory laws but took no actions beyond this.

Although recent activism has been significantly tempered, the pro-democracy movement in Iran was once a powerful force. During the Khatami years, from 1997-2005, a symbiotic relationship existed between pro-democracy activists and reformist candidates. Right before elections, the security forces would allow NGOs and students to protest and bring people to the polls. The reformists would benefit from this activism, because they would receive votes from previously untapped, left-leaning, sections of the electorate. The conservatives came to accept short periods of activist freedom as a necessary measure to achieve high voter turnout and provide the appearance of popular legitimacy.

This would change after the Khatami era. Bolstered by the global trend of authoritarian suppression of civil society, the regime deployed a major attack on activists, including mass arrests, fines, beatings, and executions. After the Green Revolution in 2009, the activist community in Iran was shattered and disorganized. Pro-democracy forces in Iran had to either obey the boundaries put in place by the regime or face imminent persecution.

In the 2017 elections, student activists, NGOs, and women’s groups failed to influence the electoral process. According to Ms. Baroumand, this is because of Telegram, the popular messaging application. Thanks to Telegram, Rouhani no longer needs activists to gain access to large constituencies of Iranians. Rouhani made a few statements via Telegram denouncing state violence and supporting women’s rights, bringing reluctant voters to the polls. Because of the effectiveness of Telegram, Rouhani took more measures to keep the application open than he did to help student activists or imprisoned journalists. This new dynamic can help explain why activists have downsized their goals so significantly.

Ladan Boroumand is a historian and the co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran, a nongovernmental organization that promotes human rights awareness through education and the dissemination of information as a necessary basis for the eventual establishment of a stable democracy in Iran. Boroumand is the author of articles on the French Revolution, the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the nature of Islamist terrorism. She is also the author of La Guerre des Principes (1999), an extensive study of the tensions throughout the French Revolution between human rights and the sovereignty of the nation.
How Technology has Helped Transform the Society of Iran: What is at Stake?
Ali Akbar Mousavi

Iran has high “internet readiness,” due to its high literacy rates and high demand for information technology from civil society and business sectors. Mr. Mousavi identified several factors that have aided the proliferation of internet technology in Iran. First, in 2010, the Obama administration opted to remove Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sanctions, allowing software, telephone networks, and internet networks to flow into Iran un-penalized. As a result, Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Twitter opened in Iran. Second, the U.S. State Department created an Internet Freedom program under Hillary Clinton that worked to protect the accessibility of the internet in authoritarian countries like Iran. Third, the Rouhani administration implemented an ICT expansion plan in 2013 and extended broadband and mobile infrastructure. Rouhani has worked to ensure that applications like Telegram and WhatsApp become available to as many people as possible. Finally, Rouhani passed regulation that makes the internet more affordable to low income and rural communities.

Next, Mr. Mousavi assessed the state of ICT infrastructure in Iran. He noted that 70% of people use satellites to access the internet, and there have been no recent government efforts to collect dishes from rooftops. The application Telegram has 45 million users, and the regime has been forced to keep Telegram open and unfiltered, because so many Iranians are using it as a platform for business. 4G LTE has been established in Iran for the first time, and an Internet speed limit has been phased out. Iran is even working towards starting 5G after signing an agreement with Nokia. Incredibly, there is almost no gender gap in internet use, but there are large age gaps in technology use. Of the 50-89 age group, about 27% use the internet, but almost 75% of the 20-29 age group use the Internet.

In the future, the freedom of the internet in Iran could be threatened. Net neutrality in Iran does not truly exist, as the regime can meddle with the content of the internet to enable it to reflect their own agenda. With Trump undermining the JCPOA, the U.S. may re-implement technology-based sanctions.

Ali-Akbar Mousavi is currently a senior advisor at George Mason University related to technology for peace and conflict resolution. He has been a visiting fellow at Stanford University, University of Maryland, Telecom Ecole de Management (France), and Virginia Tech. His focus is on the development of information and communication technology (ICT) in Iran (and other economically sanctioned countries like Cuba and Sudan, among others) in order to exempt ICT items from the U.S. sanctions. From 2000 to 2004, he was a member of the 6th Parliament in Iran, where he held several positions. Mousavi is a Ph.D. candidate in ICT management and holds a bachelor and master degree in electrical engineering and in IT Management.
Women, Gender, and the Status Quo in Iran: Challenges and Prospects

Nayereh Tohidi

Dr. Tohidi presented on the status of women’s rights in Iran and the prospects for improving them. Despite legal segregation against women in Iran, women have showed extraordinary educational attainment. Currently, there is almost no gender gap between literacy levels, and women are outperforming their male counterparts at university; 62% of those enrolled at Iranian universities are women. Yet these highly educated women account for only 14-15% of labor force participation in Iran. The rate of unemployment for Iranian women is twice that of men.

Iran has some of the lowest rates of female political participation in the world, even by Middle East standards. Women represent only 8% of the Iranian parliament, while the Middle East average is 12%. Against the backdrop of all of economic and political exclusion, the women’s fertility rate in Iran has decreased markedly. In the 1970s, there was an average of 6.6 births per woman, but in 2015, that number had dropped to about 1.6 births per woman. This drop in fertility rate has nettled many conservatives, who have tried to encourage population growth unsuccessfully.

The fight for women’s rights in Iran has been complicated by anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist sentiment. Conservatives argue that the desire for women’s equality is Western and exogenous, and they mock women for trying to imitate Western feminists. As a result of these pressures, there are two schools of feminism in Iran. The first group tries to argue for equal rights under an Islamic framework. The second group is the secular feminists who believe that it is impossible to come to terms with equal rights under a Sharia legal system. Although these two groups have sometimes worked together, the women’s movement in Iran overall is fragmented and decentralized.

Dr. Tohidi concluded by arguing that the latest protests against compulsory hijab have been quite successful. The violent police attacks on women peacefully demonstrating for human rights make the regime look bad on the international stage. The result is a loss of legitimacy.

Nayereh Tohidi is a professor and former chair of the department of Gender & Women Studies at California State University, Northridge. She is the founding Director of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at CSUN and a Research Associate at the Iranian Studies and the Center for Near Eastern Studies of UCLA. Tohidi earned her MA and Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a BS from the University of Tehran in Psychology and Sociology. She has completed post-doctoral fellowships at Harvard, Stanford’s Hoover Institute, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center, and has held visiting positions at several universities including: Iowa, Minnesota, Harvard, UCLA, USC, and University of Paris, Diderot. She has also served as a consultant to the United Nations (UNICEF, UNDP and WIDER) on projects concerning gender, development, and civil society building in the Middle East and post-Soviet Eurasia.
How the Iranian Government Lost Its Monopoly on Media

Mehdi Yahyanejad

Dr. Yahyanejad discussed how the Iranian government lost its monopoly on the media. In the 1980s, the Iranian government had full control of the media. With only three channels available, broadcasting could be interrupted for regime announcements and propaganda. Friday prayers were another venue the government could use to spread its message. The only media people could use to get news outside of propaganda was from the British Broadcasting Service (BBC).

In the early 1990s, the VCR allowed Iranians to watch American TV shows. The VCR embodied nostalgia for life before the revolution, when the arts, music, and entertainment were readily available. VCRs were not used for activism or political entertainment, since people would obtain the tapes long after they were recorded. Although the VCR was banned by the regime, people could easily attain them. Still the regime controlled newspapers, TV channels, and the Friday prayers.

By the mid-1990s, satellite TV burst onto the scene in Iran. The proliferation of satellite TV was the first time a technology challenged the Iranian government’s hold on the media. With Khatami’s election in 1997, the media opened up a bit. Dr. Yahyanejad marked 1997 as the last year the government had full control of the media. The early 2000s saw an explosion of blogs, reformist media outlets, and websites.

The 2009 Green Movement’s use of media platforms caught the IRGC by surprise. Since then, the Iranian government has developed its understanding of social media and has been much more vigilant in its censorship of the media. Russia and China have helped the regime enhance its internet surveillance techniques, enabling the IRGC cyber command to block websites and slow down the internet when it desires. To target political dissidents, the regime harasses and blackmails them online and launches DDOS (distributed denial of service) attacks against them. Taking a cue from Russia, the regime is increasingly using bots, trolls, and fake news to spread its agenda.

Dr. Yahyanejad concludes that social media can speed up the pace of change in Iran. In the 1980s, the regime killed thousands of prisoners, and many Iranians did not learn of this for years; now, Iranians learned about the latest protests against compulsory hijab immediately, thanks to their smartphones. An anonymous poll Dr. Yahyanejad administered to Iranians indicated widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of the country and a willingness to take part in future protests. The lack of legitimacy of the current regime and its loss of control over social media could increase the likelihood of change in the near future.

Mehdi Yahyanejad earned a Ph.D. in Physics from MIT in 2004. He has worked on internet technology and software product development for the past decade. He is currently a senior researcher in computer science at University of Southern California and executive director of NetFreedom Pioneers, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing about social change using technology. Yahyanejad initiated Balavision: Dialogue for Democracy in 2012. He has also led the development of the Toosheh project, which provides access to internet-based data for Iranians via satellite, thereby circumventing government and infrastructure restrictions that limit access to digital content in Iran and beyond.
Overview of Recent Trends in the Iranian Economy

Pooya Azadi

Dr. Azadi began his presentation by identifying two changes in Iran at the highest level of cultural abstraction. The first is the rise in materialism. As money has more bearing over social status, people’s dissatisfaction with the current economic performance in Iran has increased. The second trend has to do with a rise in individualism and an increasing demand for social freedom, especially among the younger generation. As a result of these two trends, there is an increasing gap between the lifestyle most Iranians hold and the lifestyle they hope to one day attain. This dissatisfaction was a major driver of the mass protests in 2009 and those staged this December and January of 2017.

Next, Dr. Azadi explored several fundamental challenges facing Iran’s economy. The first is population. Although Iran’s fertility rate has dropped from six births per woman to less than two, the population continues to increase by one million people per year. Additionally, Iran’s high fertility rate from previous decades will add momentum to the population growth, straining the economy. The second fundamental problem has to do with the lack of opportunities available to the educated citizenry. By 2026, over half of Iran’s population, ages 25-34, will hold a bachelor’s degree or higher. Yet whether Iran will use this highly educated population to fuel economic growth depends on improvements in the woeful job market. Iran faces major problems in its labor force participation rate and unemployment rate. The unemployment rate is 12%, with women facing double the unemployment of men, rural areas facing double the unemployment of urban areas, and those with a university degree facing double the unemployment of those without a degree. The majority of future unemployment will come from new university graduates.

Third, Iran’s Central Bank is deficient in serious ways. Iran has a chronically high inflation rate of 20% that causes the value of the currency to fluctuate, scaring away potential investors. Fourth, Iran’s pension system faces major obstacles. As pension funds default, their liability is transferred to the Iranian government. As more Iranians hit retirement age, they face a “pension time bomb” as a result of this unstable system. Fifth, crude oil production in Iran has declined annually by 6 percent. Iran requires new technology to grow its underdeveloped oil sector. After the nuclear deal, the government intended to make 50 new oil and gas deals with international companies. However, two years out from the nuclear deal, as a result of low investor confidence, only one international contract has been signed in the gas sector and no contracts have been signed for oil.

Sixth, Iran is facing a major water scarcity problem. Iran has managed to double its agricultural production through massive increases in irrigation. Iran’s maximum water usage should be below 33 billion cubic meters, but it is currently at 100. As water scarcity grows more severe, agricultural production will decrease, and this could create a food shortage or an economic crisis. Finally, since 2009, the incidents of robbery have increased markedly, a sign of hopelessness and inequality in Iranian society.

Pooya Azadi is the manager of the Stanford Iran 2040 Project. His multidisciplinary research interests include energy, environment, and economics. Particularly, he is interested in the development of mathematical models to tackle complex problems at different scales. Prior to joining Stanford, he worked as a researcher at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and MIT for several years. Azadi received his bachelor’s in chemical engineering from the University of Tehran and his M.A.Sc and Ph.D. from the University of Toronto.
In his presentation, Dr. Biglari argued that the Iranian economy has a high potential for growth, but that several forces have hindered its progress. He began by outlining five of Iran’s fundamental economic strengths. First, Iran has the largest combined oil and gas reserves in the world. Compared to other oil-dependent economies, Iran’s economy is highly diversified; hydrocarbons account for 23% of the GDP, which is much more diversified than Saudi Arabia or Russia. Second, Iran has abundant human capital. Iran is fifth in the world for STEM graduates, and its number of STEM graduates is comparable to that of the United States, despite the fact that Iran’s population is one fourth the U.S. population. Third, Iran has a significant middle class that accounts for over half of Iranian households. Fourth, Iran is a highly urbanized society, which is important given that half of economic growth stems from urban areas due to network effects. Finally, Iran is a highly entrepreneurial culture as a result of Iran’s location as a center for trade between East and West and as the birthplace of bazaars.

McKinsey estimates that Iran has the potential to create nine million jobs and increase its GDP by one trillion dollars, but there are a lot of barriers to economic growth. Iran is one of the least productive countries in the world, and Dr. Biglari argues that this is largely due to Iran’s poor financial system that discourages foreign investment. Iran’s Islamic legal structure and lack of effective banking make it unappealing to foreign investors. Since Western banks will not provide financing in Iran, Chinese banks have stepped in, raising the concern that Iran could become a Chinese client state.

Additionally, Iran has ignored three main imbalances in its economy. First, Iran’s banking system is ineffective. Iran’s interest rates are set by the government based on the political climate instead of supply and demand. Massive loans are consistently given to state-owned enterprises with little expectation that they will be paid back. Second, the economy is controlled by the state, with little room for the private sector. The regime is suspicious of capitalism, and as a result, the economy is inefficient. Third, Iran suffers from endemic corruption, worse than even Saudi Arabia’s. As a result of all of this, Iran is ranked 124th out of 190 countries on the “ease of doing business” ratings.

Youth and women may be the groups that suffer the most from the failures of Iran’s economy. A quarter of Iranian youth are unemployed, and since many of these youths are highly educated, a major brain drain has ensued. Iran has failed to take advantage of its educated female labor force. Indeed, Iran’s GDP would increase by 40% if there were fewer barriers to female employment.

Hamid Biglari is currently a Managing Director at Point72 Asset Management, one of the largest hedge funds in the world. Previously, he was Vice Chairman and Global Head of Emerging markets at Citigroup and prior to that, a Partner at McKinsey & Company. He is a member of the Council of Foreign Relations and a Trustee of Asia Society. An Iranian-American, Biglari was awarded the Ellis Island Medal of Honor in 2009, given for outstanding contributions to the United States by immigrants. He holds a Ph.D. in astrophysical sciences from Princeton University.
Dr. Ansari began his talk by discussing common narratives about the JCPOA that shaped the European and Iranian approach to the negotiations. One narrative was that President Rouhani symbolized a new opportunity for the Europeans to make up for inaction during the Khatami years. Many Europeans believed they had missed the opportunity to engage with Iran under President Khatami and were anxious to correct their mistakes. On the Iranian side, the 1953 coup was propagandized as an example of why the United States should not be trusted. Moderates in Iran depicted the minister of foreign affairs, Javad Zarif, as a leader who had succeeded where Mohammad Mossadeq had failed, but hardliners criticized Zarif for his handling of the negotiations.

The European Union wanted to use the nuclear negotiations to highlight the differences between it and the United States. Europe has held the view that the United States was too quick to use force, and that it had handled the negotiations clumsily in the past. The EU hoped to show Iran that it valued the primacy of diplomacy. However, during the Bush and Obama years, the Iranians would not approve steps in the negotiations unless the Americans were on board. Now that Trump has come onto the scene, the Iranians have switched tactics and hope to rely on the Europeans alone without the Americans.

Iran now hopes that Europe can save the nuclear deal, and Europe wants to rise to the occasion. However, EU-Iranian cooperation is fraught with challenges, especially surrounding financing. Iran wants to gain access to the Euro, and Brussels views this positively, hoping the EU will be able to price oil in the Euro and that this will enhance the prestige of the currency. Yet Dr. Ansari argued that Iran will most likely be unable to gain access to the Euro. During the nuclear negotiations, Iran was unable to attain access to the dollar, yet most of the banks in Iran have some relationship with U.S. financial markets that remain sanctioned to Iran. Therefore, it would be very complicated for Europe to work with these Iranian banks. Iran has also refused to comply with the Financial Access Task Force; hardliners in the regime equate submitting to international financial regulations with regime change. As a result, many of the opportunities European companies assumed would open up in Iran have not presented themselves.

If the Trump Whitehouse tries to kill the nuclear deal, Europe may be unwilling to take them on. Currently, 27 nations of the EU hail from Eastern Europe, and their most pressing national security concern has to do with Russia. These countries will be afraid to take any measure that will upset the Trump administration, because they worry that the EU will not defend their territorial sovereignty if Russia invades. And many of the Western European countries will be so preoccupied with Brexit that saving the nuclear deal may not be a top priority.

Dr. Kahl spoke about the possibility that the United States and Iran might find themselves in an escalating confrontation. He identified two potential pathways to a U.S.-Iran clash: a dispute over the nuclear deal and a skirmish at a number of different flashpoints across the region.

First, Dr. Kahl discussed the possibility of friction over the JCPOA. In 2015, Congress passed the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INAR), which requires the President to confirm that Iran is adhering to the nuclear deal every 90 days, and to waive the nuclear sanctions against Iran every 120 days. Trump dislikes ANAR, because every 90 to 120 days he has to endorse one of President Obama’s crowning achievements. In October, Trump de-certified the Iran deal, activating a 60 day period during which Congress could have implemented new sanctions, but Congress chose not to.

In a new effort to dismantle the deal, Trump announced that this January was the last time he would waive sanctions unless Congress and the European Union fix what he calls three major flaws in the nuclear deal. The first is the sunset clause, which enables constraints on Iran, especially with regard to uranium enrichment, to disappear 10 and 15 years out from the deal. Second, Trump wants to pass a deal with Iran on ballistic missiles. Third, Trump wants the IAEA to be able to implement “anytime, anywhere” inspections on nuclear facilities.

If Trump scraps the Iran deal, and Iran starts to experience economic hardship as a result of uncertainty or re-imposed sanctions, Iran could restart its nuclear program. This could renew the danger of a military confrontation between the U.S. and Iran, which Dr. Kahl argued would be much more likely now under the Trump administration than it was under the Obama administration, because Trump would be unlikely to restrain the Israelis.

Second, Dr. Kahl discussed four different regional points of friction where the U.S. and Iran are backing partners on opposite sides of the conflicts. The first potential flashpoint is in the mid-Euphrates river valley, where the U.S. and the Syrian Democratic Forces control the territory east of the Euphrates, and Assad and his allies dominate the territory on the other side. In the last year, Americans shot down Iranian drones that were tailing American-backed forces there. Three weeks ago, Americans killed 200 pro-Assad militias when they tried to capture a Western facility. Dr. Kahl argues that there is a possibility a similar confrontation could happen except with Iranian forces involved.

Third, Dr. Kahl argued that the Golan frontier is a potential flashpoint between Iran and Israel. If Iran builds weapons manufacturing facilities inside Syria, Dr. Kahl argues that a “first Northern war” could occur between Israel and Iran in Syria. In this case, it would be difficult for Americans to stay out of the conflict. Third, Dr. Kahl discussed the possibility that Iran-backed Shiite militias might attack American troops in Iraq to retaliate for American actions elsewhere in the region. Fourth, Dr. Kahl argued that Yemen might become a potential flashpoint if the Iran-backed Houthis strikes a populated area in Saudi Arabia, in which case the United States could become embroiled in a conflict.

Finally, Dr. Kahl concluded his presentation by arguing that two factors make a conflict with Iran much more likely under the Trump administration than it was under Obama. First, Obama took every measure possible to avoid a war with Iran, but the Trump administration is universally hawkish towards Iran. Second, the Trump administration has no high-level contacts with the Iranian regime that could help to defuse a crisis before it escalates.

Colin H. Kahl is the inaugural Steven C. Hazy Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford. From October 2014 – January 2017, he was Deputy Assistant to President Obama and National Security Advisor to Vice President Biden. From February 2009 – December 2011, he was the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East. He was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service by Secretary Robert Gates. He previously taught at Georgetown University and the University of Minnesota. He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University and his B.A. from the University of Michigan.
Toward Democracy in Iran: Reform or Revolution?

Misagh Parsa

In his talk, Dr. Parsa argued that Iran’s Islamic government is incompatible with democracy, and that several features of the regime can be fixed only with a revolution. The first fundamentally flawed feature of the regime is the exclusive nature of the state. The state granted an exclusive monopoly on power to the clergy, who imposed the velayat-e-faqih against the will of the majority of the Iranian people. Mass violence erupted after the revolution. Between 1981-1985, the regime murdered 12,000 people, who were mostly members of the opposition. In 1988, Khomeini ordered the execution of 5,000 young people in prisons.

The second feature of the regime that is incompatible with democracy is that state ideology in Iran was founded on absolutist terms. Since the power of the ruler is based in God, the government rejects compromise. As a result, this ideology polarizes political discourse and radicalizes opposing factions. Importantly, state ideology in Iran evolved over time. In Iraq and Paris, Khomeini promised democracy and independence. Once he took power, he began to argue that the Islamic government should serve the poor and downtrodden. Then the focus of the state power became the clergy and the Supreme Leader himself. After the Green Movement, the regimes’ ideology morphed once again. Khamenei argued that the regime’s legitimacy comes from God, the prophet, and the Qur’an, instead of the Iranian people. This statement actually contradicted the Iranian constitution, which enumerated the rights of the people to a government that represents them.

Finally, the state’s intervention in the socio-cultural realm and the economy shows that the regime is incompatible with democracy. The regime has transformed private decision making about what to wear, listen to, and drink into political questions, undermining civil rights. State intervention in the economy has also weakened the private sector and muffled capitalist forces in the country. High levels of corruption are signs of failed economic policies and a lack of faith in the system.

**Misagh Parsa** is a professor of sociology at Dartmouth College. He holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Michigan. He is a macro-sociologist interested in studying large-scale social transformations and economic and political development. He employs the comparative/historical method in his research. Parsa has published work on the United States, Russia, Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. His books include: *Social Origins of the Iranian Revolution* (Rutgers University Press, 1989); *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Study of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); and *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Harvard University Press, 2016).
Abbas Milani, Larry Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, Michael McFaul

Professor Abbas Milani opened the concluding discussion by summarizing some of the main takeaways from the conference. He noted that Iran has an economy in shambles, a society in rebellion, and an authoritarian regime that has lost control of the media. While elites in both Iran and the U.S. may be eager to spark a war for their own domestic interests, China and Russia wield increasing influence in Iran.

Chinese financing, has transitioned to a system even more repressive than the one that existed before. Currently, the Venezuelan regime is more dependent on its security forces and has discarded even the facade of legitimacy in order to remain in power. The same thing might happen in Iran if the regime faces mass resistance from the people and chooses to further empower the military and security bloc.

Professor Larry Diamond argued that the dire state of the economy and the instability of the financial system are important signs that the regime in its current state is unsustainable. While the transition from the current system to a different one seems inevitable at some point, Diamond cautioned against predictions that the outcome of such a transition will be a democracy. For example, Venezuela, another oil economy witnessing the growing influence of Chinese financing, has transitioned to a system even more repressive than the one that existed before. Currently, the Venezuelan regime is more dependent on its security forces and has discarded even the facade of legitimacy in order to remain in power. The same thing might happen in Iran if the regime faces mass resistance from the people and chooses to further empower the military and security bloc.

Diamond commented that a transition to democracy in Iran looks unlikely, because civil society in Iran has been thoroughly suppressed, and there is a paucity of strategizing from the pro-democracy forces. In order for a transition to occur, the Iranian people have to divide the regime and unite the opposition forces. The opposition must have the capacity to negotiate with moderate elites in the regime to shift their allegiance away from the hardliners. This sort of dialogue does not appear to be occurring.
Professor Francis Fukuyama noted that he was impressed by the social mobilization that is occurring in Iran in terms of rapid urbanization and the high numbers of women being educated. He emphasized that such social mobilization is an example of a phenomena called “modernization without development,” in which a society experiences all the hallmarks of modernization without the economic development needed to employ the population and increase the quality of life. Fukuyama mentioned that modernization without development is also occurring in Saudi Arabia, where a new middle class has emerged and women are attending university in increasingly large numbers. Since modernization without development can cause instability over time, Fukuyama described the Saudi-Iran rivalry as one of “competitive political decay” regarding which society will collapse first.

Fukuyama argued that the United States’ choice to align with Saudi Arabia instead of Iran has been a disastrous mistake, because Iran is much more likely to emerge from a political transition as an intact national entity. While Saudi Arabia has the appearance of a modern state, it is in actuality a tribal federation held together by a rentier economy. If Saudi Arabia collapses, a coherent state is unlikely to result. By contrast, Iran is home to one of the oldest and proudest national identities of any people in the world. This national identity exists apart from the Islamic regime. Therefore, in Iran, there is the potential for political continuity and future stability in the event of a regime collapse.

Professor Michael McFaul stated that his biggest takeaway from the conference was the existence of a rich archive of empirical data on Iran. He recalled sitting in the White House Situation Room in 2009, when the Green Revolution had taken the administration by surprise. Although revolutions seem unimaginable before they occur and imminent after they happen, these analytics and empirics can help policy makers make more accurate diagnostics. Since Iran is chronically understudied, such academic work is extremely important.
Abbas Milani is the Director of the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Program in Iranian Studies, co-director of the Iran Democracy Project, and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, and Adjunct Professor at the Center on Democracy, Development and Rule of Law at FSI. His expertise is U.S.-Iran relations as well as Iranian cultural, political, and security issues. Milani is the author of Modernity and Its Foes in Iran (Gardon Press, 1998); The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution (Mage, 2000); Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Persian Modernity in Iran in English (Mage 2004) and Persian (Ketob Corp. 2004); Tales of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir (Mage, 2006); The Myth of the Great Satan (Hoover Institution Press, 2010); The Shah (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), his own Persian version of the book has also been published inside and outside Iran. Culture and Politics in Contemporary Iran (Lynne Rienner, 2015) is his most recent book, co-edited with Larry Diamond. Milani has also translated numerous books and articles into Persian and English. He has published more than 200 essays and book reviews in journals and papers.

Larry Diamond is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, where he also directs the Center for Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. He is the founding co-editor of the Journal of Democracy and also serves as Senior Consultant (and previously was co-director) at the International Forum for Democratic Studies of the National Endowment for Democracy. During 2002 – 2003, he served as a consultant to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and was a contributing author of its report Foreign Aid in the National Interest. He has also advised and lectured to the World Bank, the United Nations, the State Department, and other governmental and nongovernmental agencies dealing with governance and development. His latest book, The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies throughout the World (Times Books, 2008), explores the sources of global democratic progress and stress and the prospects for future democratic expansion. Diamond has edited or co-edited some 36 books on democracy.

Francis Fukuyama is the Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI) and the Mosbacher Director of FSI’s Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law (CDDRL). He is also a professor by courtesy in the Department of Political Science. He was previously at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) of Johns Hopkins University, where he was the Bernard L. Schwartz Professor of International Political Economy and director of SAIS’ International Development program. Fukuyama has written widely on issues relating to questions concerning democratization and international political economy. His book, The End of History and the Last Man, was published by Free Press in 1992 and has appeared in over twenty foreign editions. His most recent book is Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy. Fukuyama received his B.A. from Cornell University in classics, and his Ph.D. from Harvard in Political Science. He was a member of the Political Science Department of the RAND Corporation, and twice a member of the Policy Planning Staff of the U.S. Department of State.

Michael McFaul is Professor of Political Science, Director and Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, and the Peter and Helen Bing Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He joined the Stanford faculty in 1995. He is also an analyst for NBC News and a contributing columnist to The Washington Post. McFaul served for five years in the Obama administration, first as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the National Security Council at the White House (2009 – 2012), and then as U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation (2012 – 2014). He was also the Distinguished Mingde Faculty Fellow at the Stanford Center at Peking University from June to August of 2015. He has authored several books, including Advancing Democracy Abroad: Why We Should, How We Can; with Kathryn Stoner, Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective; with James Goldgeier, Power and Purpose: American Policy toward Russia after the Cold War; and Russia’s Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin. His current research interests include American foreign policy, great power relations, and the relationship between democracy and development.