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# Inevitable and Unpredictable Regime Change in Iran

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May 14, 2011



I was in Los Angeles recently to speak at a conference at UCLA on Iran. There was sufficient disagreement about policy issues to keep most of the discussions lively. There was mostly consensus, however, on the prospects for change from the current regime. As Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment characterized the situation, the collapse of the regime is both inevitable and unpredictable. Sadjadpour noted that on each of the dimensions that underlay the ouster of leaders in Egypt and Tunisia—corruption, repression, and economic malaise—Iran is in even worse shape than those two Arab states were. Abbas Milani of Stanford observed that since the mid-nineteenth century, no Iranian head of state has survived the “wrath of the people.” He said that Supreme Leader Khamenei’s legitimacy as a spiritually based leader has been weakened the more that he has weighed in directly on practical affairs of state and become increasingly dependent on the Revolutionary Guard. Against a backdrop that makes change inevitable in the long run, the unpredictability comes from the lack of any

clear path to change. The regime still has potent assets in the near term, including the Revolutionary Guard, which—unlike the Egyptian military—identifies more with the regime than with the nation. It also has the financial cushion of oil. Moreover, the Iranian opposition lacks clear leadership and a clear goal.



Several implications follow. First, given that there will not be predictions any more precise or reliable than for the political changes associated with the Arab Spring, the United States will need a policy that is not based on any such prediction but instead will be sound regardless of the future of the current regime.

Second, because as far as we know the clerical regime may yet be around for a good while, it would be a mistake to put relations with Iran on ice in an effort to outlast that regime.

Third, because the Iranian regime eventually will fall because of its own internal weaknesses and contradictions, U.S. policy toward Iran should not be looked at primarily as an instrument of instigating regime change.

Fourth, we should be aware of how U.S. actions are at least as likely to extend the life of the Iranian regime as to shorten it, given how the hardliners who are dominant in the regime use confrontation with outsiders as a source of political strength.

*Image by Iranianrevolution*

