



Redefining US Policy on Iran:

Advocating Accountability and Backing Democratic Aspirations of Iranian People



SCAN ME

OIAC
POLICY PAPER



زن
مقاومت
آزادی

**Women
Resistance
Freedom**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran's Strategic Threat and U.S. Response:

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic (IR) in 1979, Iran has emerged as a significant strategic threat to the United States, its allies, and regional countries. This threat is characterized by Iran's consistent support for terrorism, destabilizing activities in the region, and pursuit of nuclear arms. In response, the United States has leveraged significant sanctions to counter these threats and influence Iran's policies.

History of U.S. Policy on Iran:

The history of U.S. policy on Iran, ranging from dual containment and economic sanctions to negotiations and maximum pressure, has revealed fundamental challenges and limited successes over the years. In 2015, the Obama Administration, along with key international allies, entered the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This agreement aimed to restrict Iran's nuclear capabilities in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. The JCPOA was lauded as a diplomatic achievement even though it failed to address Iran's regional activities, rights violations, and ballistic missile program.

Biden Administration's Diplomatic Efforts:

In 2018, a major shift occurred when the Trump Administration withdrew from the JCPOA, citing concerns that the agreement was insufficient in curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions and malign regional activities. The U.S. reimposed previous sanctions, introduced new ones, and increased sanctions enforcement, aiming to bring Iran back to the negotiating table for a more robust and comprehensive agreement through a 'maximum pressure' policy, albeit at the risk of alienating key European allies.

Complexity of Iran's Strategic Threat:

The Biden Administration, in 2021, aimed to restore diplomatic engagement with Iran. It initiated eight rounds of indirect negotiations in Vienna, Austria, with the other JCPOA signatories – China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom. These negotiations hoped to revive the JCPOA and address the original deal's shortcomings. Despite many incentives offered to Tehran, the talks fizzled out with no agreement. According to former UN weapons inspector David Albright, Iran "would need only about a week to produce enough [material] for its first nuclear weapon. It could have enough weapon-grade uranium for six weapons in one month, and after five months of producing weapon-grade uranium, it could have enough for 12."

Tehran's Escalating Threat and Regime Change Aspirations:

This alarming situation underscores the complexity of Iran's strategic threat. The country's pursuit of nuclear capability, despite international agreements and sanctions, demonstrates its determination to expand its influence and capabilities. The U.S.'s response, shifting across administrations, reflects the difficulties in crafting a cohesive

and effective strategy to counter Iran's ambitions. Sanctions, while significant, have not led to a decisive change in Iran's behavior. Diplomatic efforts, including the JCPOA and subsequent incentives and negotiations, have not yielded a comprehensive solution. The window for a diplomatic resolution has closed and Tehran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei's office, publicly announced in May 2024, that it will change its military doctrine to use nuclear weapons. The international community must come to terms with the reality that the regime in Tehran has waged an all-out war, beyond regional proxy wars, simultaneously with an escalating conflict with its own citizens.

The Iranian People's Call for Democratic Regime Change:

While the prevailing U.S. policy towards Iran seeks to change Iran's behavior, with repeated nationwide uprisings, the people have expressed their unequivocal desire for complete regime change in Iran and desire for a popular revolution against the IR. Meanwhile, the threat from Tehran continues to grow globally. To prevent a major military conflict in the region, the United States' Policy towards Iran must now seriously lean on the just aspirations and democratic potential of the people of Iran for a solution. Why?

The Iranian People's Call for Democratic Regime Change:

Firstly, the U.S. policy has failed to factor in the Iranian people's call for democratic regime change — a call that has come at a great cost with thousands killed, tortured, and imprisoned. The Iranian people's resilient struggle against the clerical regime has endured the massacres of political prisoners in 1988, the massacre of protesters in 2019 and 2022. Waves of recurring nationwide protests since the 1980s have consistently called for an end to single-party leadership of past and present dictatorships. With chants of "down with the dictators," "reformers, hardliners, the game is over," and "down with the despots, be it the shah or the mullahs," Iranian people have well-articulated their determination to establish a secular and democratic Iranian Republic. Regime officials now acknowledge that this movement for freedom in Iran has evolved and grown into a sophisticated nationwide network of Resistance Units.

Curbing Iranian Proxy Wars and Nuclear Threats:

Secondly, the United States and its international and regional allies face an escalating challenge: curbing Iranian proxy wars, terror, and regional activities, with the urgency of preventing Iran from acquiring and using nuclear weapons. This situation calls for a firm and robust approach to address the threat emanating from the 'head of the snake' in Tehran.

U.S. Policy Schism and the Iranian People's Aspirations

Thirdly, despite repeated calls by the overwhelming majority in the U.S. Congress for a course correction, there remains a schism between the stated U.S. Iran policy and the desire and aspirations of the Iranian people. Various administrations have failed to heed the bipartisan

Congressional call for the United States to recognize the Iranian people's resistance and desire for democratic regime change. The U.S. policy has thus failed to fully hold regime officials accountable for the brutal suppression of people in Iran or engage the people's resistance

**A Path Toward Vibrant
Democracy: Acknowledging the
Iranian People's Role:**

movement that stands for a non-nuclear, secular, republican Iran. Policy recommendations outlined in this paper advocate for a new U.S. policy that is aligned with the bipartisan calls in US Congress and acknowledges the significant role the Iranian people's resistance plays in ending the impasse and changing the current prospects in favor of vibrant democracy in Iran - A path forward that is realistic, sustainable, and in alignment with the values and interests of both the United States and that of the Iranian people.

**Countering Threats: Designating
the IRGC and Ensuring Stability**

Policy recommendations outlined in this paper encompass a multifaceted approach and advocate for a new bipartisan U.S. policy that acknowledges the significant role of the Iranian people's resistance. Such a new policy approach would advocate for human rights accountability through meaningful sanctions and international support, recognize the Iranian people's right to fight against brutal suppression, and argue for the necessity and immediate global designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization.

**A Multifaceted Approach:
Advocating for Human Rights
and Accountability:**

Our aim is to offer sound policy recommendations that not only help the Iranian people but to effectively counter the multifaceted threats from the 'head of the snake' in Tehran by laying the groundwork for a stable and peaceful Middle East.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aggressive regional activities of Tehran's regime, escalated by the events following the October 7th attacks, can be primarily understood as a desperate attempt by the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, to extend his survival and mask his inherent weaknesses at home. This strategy, involving projecting regional power abroad and instilling fear within its own borders, is a response to the significant internal challenges faced by the regime from a restive population yearning for democratic change. The West has largely failed to challenge this strategy, affording the Ayatollahs foreign policy leverage and the space to commit untold atrocities without any domestic legitimacy.

It is imperative that the correct U.S. policy on Iran factors in the Iranian people's call for regime change. Tehran's approach to regional aggression is twofold. First, it seeks to distract from its domestic shortcomings, including addressing economic mismanagement, widespread corruption, and oppressive political and social restrictions. By engaging in regional conflicts and supporting proxy wars, the regime attempts to shift the national narrative away from its failures and towards a perceived external threat. Second, the regime's international militancy is a display of strength intended to intimidate both internal and external opponents. By appearing strong on the international stage, the regime hopes to deter the public from rising against it. Considering successive nationwide protests, such a posture also helps it maintain the cohesiveness of its stressed IRGC.



Irrespective of regime violence, the Iranian people have been undeterred in their call for regime change. Years of living under an oppressive regime that prioritizes its survival over the wellbeing of the people have galvanized a widespread desire for democratic change. This call is not just a reaction to internal issues but is also informed by the regime's foreign policy, which many Iranians view as detrimental to their country's future. This sentiment is clearly seen in anti-regime slogans of, "leave Syria, leave Gaza, think of us," or "No to Gaza and not Lebanon, I give my life for Iran."¹

The U.S. policy towards Iran, therefore, needs to be more comprehensive. It should address not only Iran's regional aggression and nuclear ambitions but also the legitimate aspirations of the Iranian people for regime change as well as their inalienable right to fight against such a brutal regime. Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes people's right "as a last resort" to forge a "rebellion against tyranny and oppression."² This particularly applies in Iran where the IRGC and regime violent tactics have resulted

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=502482780338998>

² <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

in the highest per-capita execution rate in the world. IR's atrocities during and after repeated nationwide protests testify to the paucity of any other available recourse for the people of Iran. As such, supporting the Iranian people's call for regime change does not necessarily imply direct intervention by any foreign entity but rather, a strategic alignment of U.S. policies with its own values and support for freedom and democracy which has been a consistent part of U.S. foreign policy doctrine. To shape a new policy on Iran, the United States needs clarity on some key questions with Tehran's regime.

What is Tehran's End Game?

As a weak and unpopular regime, Tehran's end game is survival at any cost. The survival tactics of Tehran's regime hinge critically on two strategic pillars:

- I. Internal suppression**
- II. External aggression**

This dual approach is underscored by the regime's engagement in regional conflicts, which serves as a diversion from domestic discontent and projects strength beyond its borders. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's own words, "If we don't fight our enemies in Syria, we will face the fight in Iran," reveals a defensive-offensive strategy that aims to externalize internal threats, thereby maintaining a semblance of stability within the country. By actively participating in conflicts across the Middle East—in Gaza, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and by supporting groups like the Houthis in the Red Sea—Tehran seeks to establish regional distractions from domestic turmoil. This strategic extension is not just about influence but also about survival, creating a narrative to justify oppressive measures at home. This external aggression is intrinsically linked to the regime's relentless internal suppression. At home, the regime employs severe tactics such as widespread executions and crackdowns on dissent, as evidenced by the alarming trends in recent months.

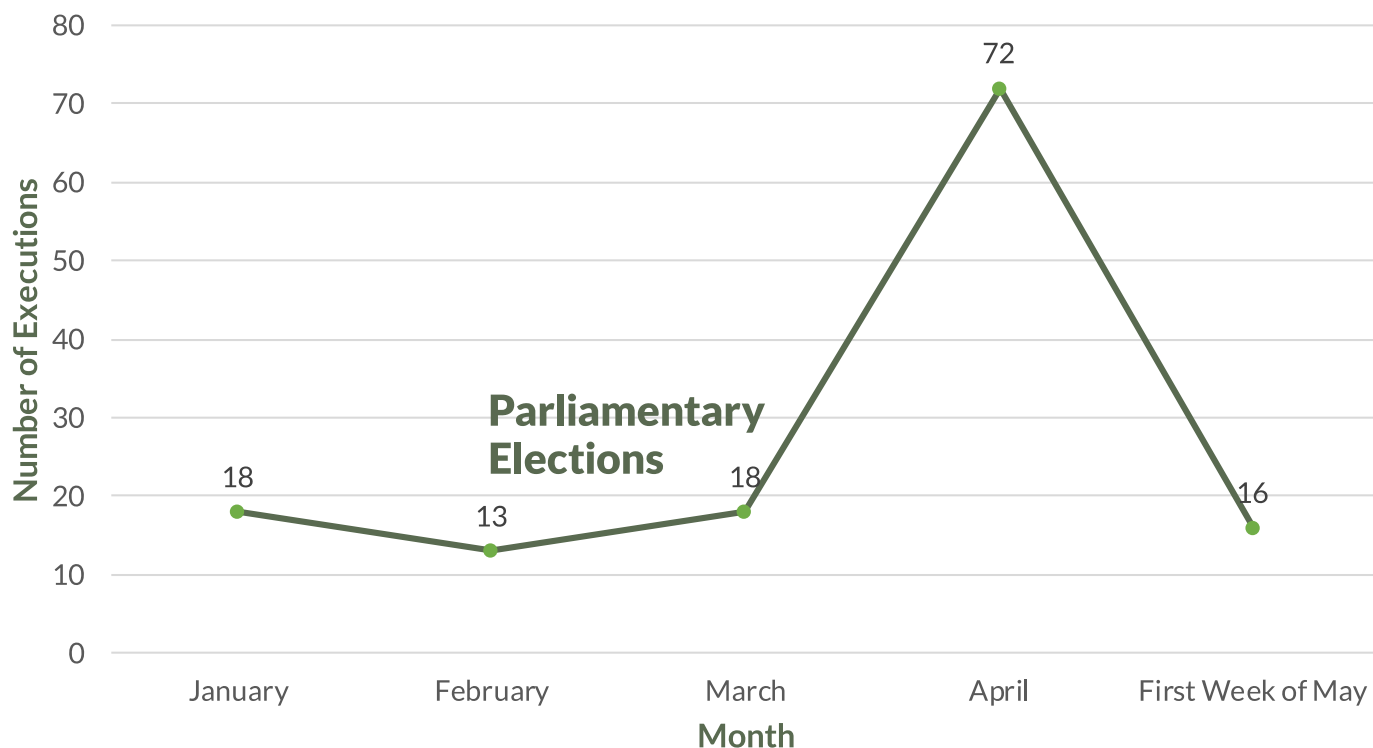
I. Internal Suppression: Rising Trends of Executions in Iran

The data on the recent surge in executions in Iran, particularly between October 2023 and December 2023, underscores the regime's ongoing use of capital punishment as a tool to suppress dissent and maintain control. The Iranian regime executed over 300 people during this period, highlighting a strategy to instill fear amidst rising regional instability and international criticism.³

The trend of executions from January to the first week of May 2024

³ OIAC research from various sources including Amnesty International, Iran Human Rights Monitor, Iran Human Rights Network

Trend of Executions in Iran, January to First Week of May 2024



shows fluctuating but significant numbers, with peaks suggesting strategic timing associated with stifling potential unrest or making political statements. The timing of 2024 executions correlates with the parliamentary elections held on March 1, 2024.⁴ In a last-ditch effort to encourage a high turnout, Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, said after casting his ballot that voting would "make the friends happy and ill-wishers disappointed." Despite all his efforts, the election was marked by historic boycotts and a notably low voter turnout of only 8.2%.⁵ This low engagement reflects profound public rejection and highlights the regime's struggle for legitimacy even among its own rank and file.

The continued high profile of these executions underlines the autocratic nature of the regime's leadership, which relies on fear and oppression to govern. Each execution, particularly those shrouded in ambiguity or for charges like "waging war against God," starkly illustrates the regime's disregard for human life and fundamental rights. For instance, the execution of Navid Afkari, an internationally

⁴ Associated Press, "Iranians vote in a parliamentary runoff election after hard-liners dominate initial balloting" (Associated Press, 2024)

⁵ In the 1,941 monitored stations, a total of 156,597 voters were counted, averaging 81 voters per station. Extrapolating this to the entire country's 59,000 stations, the estimated total number of voters is approximately 4,779,000, rounding up to 5 million. Therefore, given the 61,172,298 individuals eligible to vote as reported by the regime's election headquarters, the participation rate, including those who voted voluntarily or under compulsion, is calculated to be 8.2%.

recognized wrestler, in 2020, who became a symbol of resistance against the regime's oppressive tactics, was intentional to instill fear in Iran. Afkari's last words, "I realized they are looking for a neck for their noose," underscored the regime's appetite for political execution to quell dissent and prevent uprisings.⁶ Similarly in 2024, Toomaj Salehi, a rapper charged with "corruption on Earth," faces execution for using his music to challenge systemic injustices.

⁷ His case exemplifies how the regime uses vague legal charges to silence and intimidate voices of opposition.



These actions are indicative not of strength but of a regime's anxieties about its future. Officials have acknowledged the precariousness of their position, with admissions that the regime is merely one widespread uprising away from collapse. It is within this context that the regime's aggressive regional posturing and military actions can be understood: a weak regime who attempts to project strength and create distraction from its growing vulnerabilities at home.

Such dynamics underscore the urgent need for sustained international pressure through sanctions and effective strategies to promote human rights through accountability as outlined in H.R.8038 - 21st Century Peace through Strength Act. With the 21st Century Peace through Strength Act in place, the White House has more tools at its disposal for comprehensive sanctions against Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, Ebrahim Raisi, the president, and their affiliated offices for human rights violations and support for terrorism. The law also sanctions many institutions under Khamenei's control, including the Ministry of Intelligence, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the police force, the paramilitary forces of Basij and the Judiciary, citing Raisi's involvement in the 1988 Death Commission, which led to the execution of thousands of political prisoners. Therefore, it is not a question of capability but rather of political will to hold Tehran's regime accountable.

This critical moment calls for more than just condemnation by the United States; it demands a robust and concrete affirmation of support for the fundamental human rights of the Iranian people. What is needed is a comprehensive U.S. policy toward Iran that integrates human rights advocacy through actions, strategic deterrence and international pressure that presents a formidable framework as suggested through the bipartisan House resolution 1148. That measure condemns IR's terrorism, regional proxy war and internal suppression while recognizing "the rights of the Iranian people, the protesters, and the Resistance Units to confront the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and repressive forces to bring about change."⁶

⁶ <https://defenseopinion.com/biden-administrations-weak-stance-toward-iran-tested-by-salehis-death-sentence/592/>

⁷ Newsroom, Gerry Doyle, "Iran's Judiciary confirms rapper Toomaj Salehi death sentence" (Reuters, 2024)

II. External Aggression

In the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, the ‘Head of the Snake’ theory has emerged as a crucial framework for understanding Tehran’s role in regional terrorism and conflicts. This phrase is also mainly referenced in the social and political discourse among the Iranian people and their resistance movement for democracy. This theory posits Tehran’s regime as the primary instigator and supporter of destabilizing activities in the region, likening it to the ‘head’ of a malicious entity that drives and coordinates various forms of aggression. This metaphorical snake represents a network of proxy groups, sectarian militias, and terrorist organizations, all of which the IRGC manipulates to project power and influence beyond its borders on behalf of Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.

Tehran’s strategic ambitions in the Middle East are realized through a sophisticated mafia style web of proxies and allies, including notorious groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza, and various Shiite and Sunni militias in Iraq and Syria. By providing these groups with financial support, weapons, training, guidance and political backing, Iran effectively extends its reach, challenging regional stability and blackmailing policy makers across the world. The consistent increase in the military budget for the IRGC by Tehran’s regime, juxtaposed against the backdrop of widespread poverty in Iran, presents a stark and troubling contrast. Ebrahim Raisi’s government has allocated \$2.65 billion to enhance defense infrastructure.⁸ Yet, a significant portion of the Iranian population grapples with economic hardship. According to the official figures released by Iran’s interior ministry, around 60 percent of Iran’s 84 million citizens live under the relative poverty line, with 20 to 30 million of these individuals existing in conditions of “absolute poverty.”⁹ This disparity highlights an irreconcilable disconnect between the regime’s priorities and the pressing needs of the people. Rather than focusing on the deteriorating economic situation inside Iran, the regime has allocated billions of dollars to stoke violence, chaos, and instability in the region.

Iran’s involvement in Syria is a particularly illustrative example. In May 2020, Iranian parliament member, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, announced that Iran had invested \$30 billion in Syria.¹⁰ By supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime, Iran has not only secured a crucial ally but has also gained a strategic foothold in the Levant. This presence directly counters the influence of Western and Gulf nations and allows Iran to open a direct corridor of influence stretching from Tehran to

⁸<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-new-budget-perpetuates-economic-challenges>

⁹<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202301025682>

¹⁰ <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202305120655>

Ultimately, Tehran's external aggression and internal suppression are two sides of the same coin, designed to prolong the regime's rule.

the Mediterranean. Similarly in Yemen, Iran's support for the Houthi rebels, both financially and militarily, has been seen as part of a broader strategy to gain leverage in the strategically vital Red Sea corridor which has seen an escalation of conflict since November 2023. Since October 7, 2023, there have been over 160 terrorist attacks carried out by Tehran's proxies.¹¹ According to Jeremy Bash, a former top official at the CIA and Pentagon in the Obama administration, "While we do not want a wider conflict with Iran, Iran seems to want a wider conflict with us."¹²

On a broader scale, the 'Head of the Snake' theory has significant implications for international policy and accountability. It suggests that effectively countering Tehran's influence requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses the root of the problem - the regime itself. This approach necessitates a departure from merely managing the symptoms, such as addressing localized conflicts and terrorist activities, and instead focuses on curbing Tehran's capacity to project power through proxies. Inherently, the theory suggests that the juxtaposition of diplomacy with intermittent military strikes presents a mixed message, potentially undermining the credibility of U.S. threats and overtures alike.

Today, Western nations, particularly the United States and European Union members, have recognized the need to hold Tehran accountable for its actions. This recognition has manifested in various forms, including military confrontation with Tehran's regime and its proxies across the region, enlisting IRGC, its officials and Tehran's proxy groups as terrorist organizations, and tightening and enforcing economic sanctions - all of which are important elements of a firm policy but are also insufficient. While these actions pressure Tehran, the "head of the snake" in Tehran remains largely unaffected, continuing its long-term strategy, because the US and its allies fail to recognize the regime's inherent weakness - its illegitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian people and the palpable reality of its inevitable downfall by the people.

The international community, while grappling with Iran's regional destabilization efforts, must not lose sight of the oppressive domestic policies that drive these external conflicts. Addressing one without the other would only allow the regime to continue exploiting this dual strategy unchallenged. The path forward, therefore, requires a firm approach that balances the need to maintain the pressure on Tehran's regime and policy efforts to engage with the people of Iran who are yearning for freedom.

¹¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/us-intelligence-iran-nervous-escalating-proxy-attacks/index.html>

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/01/29/biden-attacks-iran-mideast/>

2. TEHRAN'S ACHILLES HEEL

The aftermath of Mahsa Amini's tragic death in September 2022, underscores a deep-seated vulnerability of the regime and its fear of the Iranian people. Amini's brutal murder became a catalyst for widespread protests across the country, uniting a cross-section of Iranian society—including women, the youth, professionals, various Iranian nationalities, and religious minorities—in a collective outcry against the regime's authoritarian rule. This unified call for the regime's downfall has only intensified the state's use of violence and threats against the protesters, a tactic that paradoxically fuels further dissent rather than quelling it.

Why Tehran Fears Its Own People?

Since 2022, the regime's fear stems from several factors:

Broad-based Opposition:

The diversity of groups participating in the protests represents a significant threat to the regime's stability. Protesters' grievances are not merely social and economic; they are also political, as evidenced by slogans like "death to dictators," and "death to Khamenei and Raisi." The protests are not confined to urban areas; they are spread across towns, villages, and major metropolitan cities. Women, youth, professionals, various Iranian nationalities (e.g., Balouchis, Kurds), and religious minorities are challenging the regime's legitimacy on multiple fronts. The popular rejection of the regime was publicly confirmed by the massive boycott of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Historical Context:

Iran has a history of revolution and political upheaval. The regime is acutely aware how widespread public dissatisfaction can lead to substantial change, as evidenced by the 1979 revolution. This historical precedent contributes to the government's fear of mass protests, hence their focus on arrests and high-profile executions in recent months.

Demand for Regime Change:

The protests signify a rejection not just of specific policies, but of the regime in its entirety. On more than one occasion, high-profile political prisoners, both collectively and individually, have published messages and declared support for the ongoing protests. The call for a change of regime, in the form of a revolution, continues to resonate across all social sectors. The key slogan from the 2018 nationwide uprising, "Reformers, hardliners, the game is over," continues to be a compass for meaningful change in Iran.

Emergence of Resistance Units:

The people have responded to the regime's unforgiving violent tactics by forming Resistance Units across the country. While mass protests are met with violence, these units have played a crucial role in organizing and mobilizing protests and safeguarding the integrity and uniformity

of protest messages nationwide. By coordinating demonstrations and disseminating information, these groups have ensured Tehran's regime is challenged beyond mass protests. Their message is to keep the flame of resistance lit across different strata of Iranian society, despite internet blackouts and surveillance. Their evolving actions have been central in transforming isolated incidents of dissent into nationwide movements calling for systemic change. The Resistance Units inside Iran, along with the organized Iranian diaspora, have been effective in amplifying the voices of those who suffer under the regime's policies. Through various platforms, including satellite programming into Iran or social media, they highlight individual cases of abuse and injustice and the ongoing executions of political prisoners. This amplification serves not only to galvanize further opposition but also to memorialize the regime's victims, ensuring their stories resonate internationally. The latter has been an important component of the Iranian resistance's international campaign calling for human rights accountability in Iran.

Growing International Support for the Alternative:

Perhaps most significantly, Iran's organized resistance movement, led by Maryam Rajavi, presents an alternative vision for Iran's future — the 10-point plan for a future Iran based on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This vision challenges the regime's narrative and legitimacy, offering hope and a tangible goal for protesters and the wider Iranian nations. In the summer of 2023, more than 3600 lawmakers from 61 parliaments in 40 countries, including 29 parliament majorities in France, Italy, U.S., UK, Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland, and others declared support for Maryam Rajavi's 10-point Plan for a democratic, secular republic and called for the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization.¹³ In the United States, 240 bipartisan members of the US House of Representatives Co-sponsored House Resolution 100, "Expressing support for the Iranian people's desire for a democratic, secular, and nonnuclear Republic of Iran, and condemning violations of human rights and state-sponsored terrorism by the Iranian Government."

The growing global legislative consensus points towards a rejection of policies that have historically attempted to placate Tehran's regime through diplomatic or economic concessions. The legislators' stance suggests a shift towards a more assertive policy that prioritizes human rights, democratic values, and the empowerment of the Iranian people's organized resistance as the foundation for an effective policy. The growing calls for a policy which supports the Iranian people, and their resistance underscores the belief that genuine change in Iran must come from within, driven by the Iranian people themselves. The international community's role, therefore, is to provide moral, political, and diplomatic support to those fighting for democracy and human rights in Iran. This approach aims to isolate the regime

¹³ <https://isjcommittee.com/2023/07/3600-lawmakers-in-40-countries-support-maryam-rajavis-ten-point-plan-for-a-democratic-republic-in-iran/>

internationally, cut off its support networks from Russia and China, and shine a spotlight on its human rights abuses, thereby increasing the pressure on the regime while politically empowering dissidents inside Iran. The emphasis on supporting the people's resistance aligns with a broader strategy to ensure that any transition towards democracy in Iran is inclusive, sustainable, and leans on the will and capabilities of the Iranian people. It recognizes the resistance's role not just in opposing the current regime, but in laying the groundwork for a future democratic governance structure that respects human rights, promotes equality, and ensures Iran's peaceful coexistence with its neighbors and the international community at large.

3. IS REGIME CHANGE POSSIBLE IN IRAN?



Yes, and for Iran, regime change is only possible and inevitable by the people of Iran. The necessary step, however, is to remove the obstacles. One of the major slogans of the 2022 uprising which continues to resonate to this day is “this is a revolution; this is a war.”¹⁴ Given the resiliency and creativity of the Iranian people in their struggle for freedom and democracy, the presence of the organized resistance movement, coupled with the willingness of the international community to effectively remove external obstacles, Iran could have a democratic revolution.

The Obstacles

The policy of **appeasement towards Tehran** is the primary obstacle. Despite international concessions aimed at moderating the regime’s behavior, Tehran has persisted in its aggressive policies, as evidenced by escalating terrorism in the region and continued human rights abuses, including the 1988 massacre and violent crackdowns on protests.

The election of Ebrahim Raisi, who is implicated in mass execution of dissidents, to the presidency, and a sharp increase in executions since Oct. 7, 2023, further demonstrate the regime’s hardline approach. Factors such as sanctions, accountability for rights violations, political support for the organized opposition, and global diplomatic pressures, play a role in shaping Tehran’s ability to maintain power. Key factors to consider in shifting the policy and removing the obstacles for democratic change in Iran include:

Break the Policy Stalemate:

For too long, Washington’s approach on dealing with Tehran has been entrenched in a binary choice between military confrontation and diplomatic negotiations. This rigid perspective, which associates regime change solely with scenarios reminiscent of Iraq or Afghanistan, has inadvertently funneled U.S. policy into a cycle of unproductive negotiations with a regime whose main objective is to gain political legitimacy from such talks. For Tehran, such legitimacy is sought not to engage constructively on the global stage, but rather as a tool to further entrench its authority and suppress dissent within its own borders.

Therefore, dialogue and appeasement of Tehran has overlooked and in fact undermined the potential for alternative strategies that could more effectively address the challenges posed by the regime, both domestically and internationally.

Neutralize Tehran’s Influence Operation:

In 2023, Semafor reported that Iranian-backed operatives, including Ariane Tabatabai, had significant access to sensitive U.S. information

¹⁴ OIAC research via social media and media monitoring from September 2022- January 2024



while working in the State Department. Tabatabai was involved in influencing policy from within, participating in JCPOA negotiations as part of former State Department Iran Envoy Rob Malley's team. She is currently employed at the Department of Defense.¹⁵ Such direct manipulation and infiltration pose serious national security concerns regarding Tehran's espionage and influence within the U.S. government. Additionally, Tehran has been engaged in persistent demonization and disinformation against its main opposition groups, like the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK).¹⁶ The impact of such influence operations, whether through the direct nesting of operatives or information warfare, has created a policy quagmire vis-à-vis Tehran. An unbiased and fact-based comprehensive review of U.S. policies toward Iran by policymakers is essential to break the cycle of appeasement.

End Hostage Diplomacy with Tehran:

The Iranian regime has detained numerous foreigners or dual nationals in recent years as means to secure political leverage or financial ransom. The use of hostage diplomacy has been evident in various situations, including the most notable case of Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat arrested in Germany in 2018. Assadi was found guilty of a bomb plot against the gathering of Free Iran event in Paris, an event attended by thousands, including distinguished political leaders from the US and Europe. In February 2021, Assadi received a 20-year prison sentence for his involvement in the plot. Subsequently, Iran released three Europeans in exchange for Assadi, in a diplomatic prisoner swap.¹⁷ Such engagements with Iran beget more hostage taking and only invite more terrorism to Europe and the US.

Past Policy Mistakes:

Many in Washington discourage a different course of policy with Iran, citing failed U.S. policies in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Washington has long overlooked a crucial distinction: Iran is fundamentally different, especially in terms of its geopolitical standing and roles in regional dynamics. For example, in the case of Syria, this oversight includes a failure to acknowledge Tehran's significant support for the Assad regime. Without Tehran's assistance, the Assad regime could have been toppled by the Syrian opposition. Recognizing this fact is essential, as it highlights Iran's influence on the region's instability and underscores the importance of acknowledging the organized opposition within Iran itself. An example of the wrong approach towards Iranian opposition was evident for years in Washington's blacklisting of Iran's main opposition group, the MEK, along with its broader coalition, the NCRI, to curry favor with Tehran.¹⁸ This unsubstantiated designation was contested in U.S. high courts and ultimately removed, but unfortunately, it served to bolster Tehran's standing while stifling dissidents inside Iran. Learning from past failures is important, but correcting the course is even more crucial.

¹⁵ <https://www.semafor.com/article/09/25/2023/inside-irans-influence-operation>

¹⁶ <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/aug/25/unshackle-irans-main-opposition/>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/three-other-europeans-exchanged-irans-assadi-iran-belgium-prisoner-swap-2023-06-02/>

4. WHAT IS THE PATH TO REGIME CHANGE?

For more than four decades, the people of Iran have pursued the path of peaceful protests or reforms. However, the regime in Tehran has consistently shown itself to be incapable of reform and unwilling to respond to calls for change through peaceful means. This situation is somewhat analogous to the movement to end apartheid in South Africa, suggesting that for the Iranian people, armed struggle and resistance may be the only remaining path to change. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has experienced several significant waves of protests, leading to brutal crackdowns by the regime in years such as 1988, 1999, 2009, 2019, and 2022. The 1988 massacre is particularly notorious, with over 30,000 political prisoners, mostly from the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK), executed following a fatwa issued by then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini.¹⁹ These prisoners, already detained for their political beliefs, were victims of a massive human rights violation. Iran's current president, Ebrahim Raisi, was part of the "Death Committee" that oversaw these executions, and in 2019, as head of Iran's judiciary, he was implicated in the massacre of over 1500 people in November of that year.

With Raisi at the helm, the regime's inherent violent posture clearly signals to the Iranian people that any form of protest will be met with arrests, torture, executions, and massacres. Since September 2022, the rate of executions has continued to increase. In 2023, executions rose by approximately 34% over the previous year, totaling 864. During April and first two weeks of May 2024, the regime executed one person every six hours, highlighting the extreme measures the regime is willing to employ to suppress dissent.³ Therefore, the question of Iranians' right to self-defense continues to emerge for the brave protesters in Iran. Other nations and countries who face the threat of Tehran's regime have the right to defend themselves. The time has come to fully understand how we can support the Iranian rights to self-defense against 'the head of snake' in Tehran.

Iranians' Right to Self-Defense

The justification for the Iranian people's right to self-defense is grounded in the persistent pattern of state violence, repression of dissent, and denial of basic human rights, as evidenced by:

Systematic Repression:

The Iranian government's long history of using lethal force against peaceful protesters, executing political prisoners, and suppressing freedom of expression establishes a context where individuals and groups are pushed to defend their lives, liberties, and dignity.

¹⁹ <https://iran1988.org/>

Denied Avenues for Peaceful Change:

The consistent closure of peaceful avenues for expressing dissent and seeking political reform, such as the censorship of media, banning of opposition groups, and rigged electoral processes, underscores the justification for self-defense as a means of protecting fundamental rights.

International Human Rights Law:

While international law emphasizes the importance of peaceful assembly and expression, it also recognizes the right of individuals to self-defense in the face of imminent harm. The repeated cycles of violence against civilians without recourse to justice or international intervention amplify the moral and ethical arguments for self-defense.

Moral and Ethical Grounds:

The principle of self-preservation and the defense of one's community against unjust aggression is a widely accepted moral and ethical stance. Given the documented atrocities and the state's unwillingness to reform, the argument for self-defense is framed not just in terms of survival but as a struggle for justice and human dignity.

Struggle of a Nation

The freedom movement in Iran, considering the prevailing socio-political and economic crises, should be contextualized within the framework of the Just Cause War theory. This theory, rooted in the principles of moral philosophy and international law, posits that fighting can be morally justified under certain conditions, primarily when it is waged to confront gross injustices or protect fundamental human rights. The plight of the Iranian people in the last four decades, facing oppressive governance, systemic human rights abuses, and dire economic conditions, as evidenced by the staggering poverty levels and the state's prioritization of military expenditure over public welfare, aligns with the criteria of a just cause for resistance.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo in 2009 offers a relevant perspective that resonates with Iran's current situation. In his speech, Obama emphasized the importance of governments reflecting the will of the people and the necessity of upholding human rights, including the right to freedom of speech and assembly. He articulated a vision where governments are responsive and accountable to their citizens, a vision starkly at odds with the reality in Iran.

²⁰ The Iranian regime's persistent suppression of dissent, disregard for basic human freedoms, and prioritization of militaristic agendas over addressing severe internal poverty and economic disparities, starkly contrast with the principles President Obama highlighted. The movement for freedom in Iran, thus, finds its moral underpinning in the struggle against tyranny and oppression, as outlined in the Just Cause War theory. The Iranian people's resistance is not merely a response to economic hardship or political repression; it is a fight

for fundamental human rights and dignity. It embodies a struggle for a government that embodies the values of democracy, respect for human rights, and economic justice – principles that were echoed in Obama’s Cairo speech. Furthermore, the Just Cause War theory advocates for the legitimacy of taking up arms in **self-defense** (See Table 1) against an oppressive regime that systematically violates human rights and denies its citizens the basic freedoms of expression, assembly, and political participation. In Iran, where peaceful protests have been met with lethal force and where the state machinery is often mobilized to suppress any form of dissent, the theory provides a moral and philosophical justification for the Iranian people’s struggle for liberation.

Role of the International Community

The role of the international community, courts and the application of universal jurisdiction is critical to hold Tehran accountable for its egregious crimes against the people of Iran. In particular, the international community bears a responsibility towards the protection of political refugees and witnesses whose testimonials are critical for the sake of justice. This responsibility is particularly pertinent for Iranian political refugees and witnesses from the MEK residing in Ashraf 3, Albania, who have been pivotal in bringing to light the atrocities committed by the Iranian regime. Residents of Ashraf 3 have provided crucial testimonies and evidence against the Iranian regime’s human rights abuses, including their eyewitness accounts and experiences during the 1988 massacre and subsequent acts of repression. The international community, therefore, faces a critical challenge in ensuring their protection from potential reprisals by Tehran. A notable initiative addressing this concern is the collective call from international legal experts, former United Nations experts, and Nobel Laureates. Through an open letter, they have underscored the necessity of safeguarding these refugees and witnesses. The letter articulates the importance of international protection mechanisms and calls for concerted efforts to prevent any harm that might befall these individuals due to their bravery in speaking out against the Iranian regime’s crimes. Given these considerations, the United States, alongside its international partners, should reinforce their commitment to human rights and justice by:

Implementing Human Rights Sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act:

Actively working with the Executive and Legislative branches to identify and implement human rights sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act against those in the Iranian regime responsible for severe human rights violations.

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>

Overcoming Challenges in Applying Global Magnitsky Sanctions to Iran:

Protecting Iranian Political Refugees and Witnesses in Ashraf 3, Albania:

Addressing the specific challenges associated with applying Global Magnitsky sanctions to Iran, by providing detailed analyses and overcoming obstacles to ensure the sanctions' effectiveness.

Heeding the calls from international legal experts, former UN officials, and Nobel Laureates to protect Iranian political refugees and witnesses, particularly those in Ashraf 3, Albania. This includes adopting measures that guarantee their safety and uphold the principles of international asylum and refugee protection.

“With the 21st Century Peace Through Strength Act in place as a law, the alignment of US sanctions with those of major allies, as outlined in H.R. 815, could significantly impact the political landscape in Iran by intensifying the economic and diplomatic pressure on Tehran’s regime.”

~ Signed into law by President Biden on April 17, 2024

By synchronizing sanctions globally, the United States can create a more cohesive and robust international stance against human rights violations and aggressive behaviors by the Iranian regime. This consolidated approach may limit the regime's financial and operational capabilities, whereby it empowers the Resistance Units at home. As external pressures mount, the regime may find it increasingly difficult to suppress public dissent and maintain control similar to the case of South Africa where the regime collapsed from within.

5. IRAN AS A NON-NUCLEAR, SECULAR REPUBLIC

The growing support for the Iranian people's desire for regime change in Iran has been notably articulated through resolutions in the U.S. House of Representatives, along with international endorsements that echo the Iranian people's aspirations for a secular, democratic, and non-nuclear republic. H.Res.100, H.Res.627, and H. Res 1148 are significant in this context, as they explicitly support the Iranian people's desire for a government that upholds these principles and calls for accountability for the Iranian regime's human rights abuses. These resolutions underscore the international community's recognition of the need for change in Iran, advocating for a future where human rights, democracy, and peace are prioritized.

The 2022 protests in Iran and the activities of Resistance Units against the IRGC and Basij forces highlight the growing domestic and organized opposition to the regime's authoritarian rule. These protests signify a critical evolution in Iranian people's ongoing struggle for freedom and democracy. The resistance activities, particularly those targeting the IRGC and Basij forces, underscore the courage and resilience of the Iranian people in their quest to dismantle structures of repression and lay the foundations for a new era of governance in Iran that aligns with their democratic aspirations. The international support, as reflected in the U.S. House of Representatives Resolutions further amplifies the call for change, marking a pivotal moment in Iran's history as it moves towards realizing the vision of a secular, democratic republic (*See Table 2*).

Iran's New Revolution

Maryam Rajavi's 10-point plan, supported by OIAC, presents a comprehensive framework for transforming Iran into a secular, democratic, and non-nuclear republic, emphasizing fundamental rights, the separation of religion and state, gender equality, and a foreign policy based on peaceful coexistence. This vision starkly contrasts with the current theocratic regime, proposing a future where democratic principles and human rights are paramount.

The plan advocates for the abolition of the death penalty, the establishment of a legal system based on equality and justice for all citizens regardless of their beliefs or ethnicity, and a commitment to non-proliferation, including a definitive rejection of nuclear weapons.²¹

²¹ Maryam Rajavi, "Maryam Rajavi's Ten-Point Plan for the Future of Iran" (Washington Times, 2021)

Maryam Rajavi's Ten-Point Plan for the Future of Iran

5. We believe in complete gender equality in political, social and economic arenas

4. We are committed to the separation of Religion and State...

3. We are committed to the abolition of death penalty.

2. We want a pluralist system, freedom of parties and assembly. We respect all individual freedoms...

1. In our view, the ballot box is the only criterion for legitimacy...

Maryam Rajavi is the President-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a coalition of nearly 500 Iranian opposition groups and personalities,

6. We believe in the rule of law and justice...

7. We are committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international covenants and conventions...

8. We recognize private property, private investment and the market economy...

9. Our foreign policy will be based on peaceful coexistence, international and regional peace and cooperation...

10. We want a non-nuclear Iran...



FREE IRAN

The path to realizing Rajavi's vision for Iran involves understanding the socio-political dynamics that can lead to revolutionary change. Professor Jack Goldstone of George Mason University, through extensive research and academic work, identifies factors such as state weakness, economic pressures, and popular mobilization as catalysts for revolution (*see Table 3*).²² Applying these research-based insights that consider historical revolutions across the world, the transition to a non-nuclear secular republic in Iran could be precipitated by amplifying internal discontent, as discussed above. Coupled with a cohesive and organized movement that can articulate and rally support for an alternative vision of governance, democratic regime change becomes not only possible but increasingly inevitable. We believe that Maryam Rajavi's 10-point plan and organized movement has emerged as the formidable alternative to the regime in Tehran.

²² Goldstone, Jack A. "Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies." *Foreign Affairs*, 90 (May/June 2011): 8-16. Available at Foreign Affairs.

Goldstone, Jack A. *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*. University of California Press, 1991.

Of all the opposition groups claiming to change the regime in Iran, the movement inspired by Rajavi stands out due to its organizational capabilities, leadership vision, and global recognition of her commitment to a secular, non-nuclear republic in Iran. For Iranians, the emphasis on a non-nuclear stance and peaceful foreign relations in Rajavi's plan aligns with global non-proliferation goals and would foster economic development and stability after the downfall of the current regime. Her plan focuses on secular governance and human rights, addressing the root causes of discontent highlighted by Goldstone, suggesting that addressing social inequalities and political repression is crucial for sustainable change in a free Iran.

Thus, the realization of a secular, democratic, and non-nuclear Iran, as envisioned by Rajavi, necessitates a strategic approach that combines internal mobilization with international diplomacy. This vision is guided by an understanding of revolutionary dynamics, also articulated by Goldstone.²² This approach not only aims to dismantle the current theocratic regime but also lays the foundations for a governance model that ensures peace, prosperity, and freedom for all Iranians.

Since the 2022 uprising in Iran, Tehran has been busy propping up fake opposition to dilute the decades of work by the authentic movement for change. Among them are former regime officials from both hardliner and reformist factions, various celebrities both from inside and outside of Iran, pro-monarchy groups, and various popular personalities whose sole agenda has been based on self-promotion and opportunistic timing to hijack the real agenda for change on the streets of Iran. Nonetheless, the ability of Rajavi's organization to power through and forge an all-encompassing plan for a future Iran that resonates internally and has support from the international community stands above all others. Her plan, introduced in 2006, considers the century-long struggle of the Iranian people for self-determination, independence, and liberation. More importantly, as a Muslim woman advocating for a secular republic in Iran, she is considered Tehran's number one enemy. It is for this reason that her movement has remained immune to the regime's infiltration, exploitation, or manipulation. The Resistance Units inside Iran focus on spreading her message for future Iran through banners and postings across major bridges and city centers. The 24x7 exiled broadcasting, funded by the diaspora, connects Rajavi's events across the US and Europe, including major rallies in Western capitals and visits with lawmakers around the globe, with those inside the country. Rajavi's leadership of an organized opposition is also very appealing to the women of Iran and the broader women's movement globally.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the multifaceted challenges posed by Tehran's regime, the United States must adopt a comprehensive policy strategy based on:

1. Accountability for Human Rights Violations:

- > Implement targeted sanctions enforcement against Iranian officials responsible for human rights abuses, including the arrest, torture, and execution of political prisoners and demonstrators. With the Maximum Pressure Act, and the 21st Century Peace through Strength Act in place, the White House has more tools at its disposal for comprehensive sanctions against Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, Ebrahim Raisi, the president, and their affiliated offices for human rights violations and support for terrorism.
- > Support international efforts to investigate and prosecute these abuses, engaging with bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court. Such accountability should, as US Congress has called for, include regime officials' role in the 1988 Massacre and massacres of pro-democracy protesters since 2017. Back initiatives aimed at safeguarding 1988 witnesses to Tehran's crimes against humanity, particularly those residing in Ashraf-3 in Albania, and ensuring that their testimonies and voices are heard by the free world.

2. Support for the Iranian People's Rights:

- > Recognize the rights of the Iranian people and their struggle to establish a democratic, secular, and nonnuclear Republic of Iran.
- > Publicly recognize the right to self-defense of the Iranian people and resistance movements to fight for their freedom in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).
- > Recognize the right of the Iranian people, the protesters, and the Resistance Units to confront the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and repressive forces to bring about change, within the framework of international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- > Increase public political and moral support for Iranian people, including the efforts of their organized resistance advocating for human rights and democracy.
- > Ensure the protection and safety of Iranian political dissidents, including Iranian dissidents in Ashraf-3 in Albania many of whom are former political prisoners and witnesses to crimes against humanity in Iran.

3. Forge a United Front Against Tehran and the IRGC:

- > Urge European and Canadian allies to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization, coordinating multilateral sanctions and diplomatic actions to curb its global terror operations and proxy wars.
- > Foster international consensus on the IRGC's destabilizing role in the region and its involvement in terrorism and human rights violations.
- > Work with international partners to issue joint condemnations and resolutions against Tehran's actions, diplomatically isolating the regime.

By prioritizing accountability, supporting the Iranian people's rights to self-defense, and fostering international collaboration against the IRGC, the United States can contribute to regional stability, uphold human rights, and deter Iranian aggression effectively. This approach aligns with American values and strategic interests, offering a sustainable path to confronting the challenges posed by Iran.

7. CONCLUSION

In summary, this analysis has highlighted the deeply troubling human rights situation in Iran, marked by the regime's systematic suppression and brutal treatment of women and youth. The ongoing executions, the massacre of tens of thousands of political prisoners over the past four decades, the killing of 1500 protesters in November 2019, and the killing of 750 protesters by the IRGC in the 2022 uprising underscore the regime's relentless crackdown on dissent.

These actions, combined with Iran's role as a central figure in regional instability and terrorism, have led to an ever-maturing global consensus on the urgent need to address the IR's destructive policies. The international community's recognition of the irreformable nature of the regime on the one hand, the Iranian people's democratic potentials on the other, as well as the growing support for the organized opposition's 10-point plan for a secular democratic republic; signify a pivotal shift in global Iran policy trajectory. It is imperative that international efforts continue to support the Iranian people's rights to self-determination, self-defense, and ongoing struggle against the regime's absolute tyranny.

TABLE 1

The international laws and frameworks recognizing a nation's right to self-defense and people's right to self-defense against authoritarian regimes:

	Legal Framework	Scope	Description
1	United Nations Charter, Article 51	Nation's Right to Self-Defense	Allows individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a UN member.
2	Customary International Law	Nation's Right to Self-Defense	Recognizes self-defense as a principle accepted as a legal requirement by states.
3	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 1	People's Right against Authoritarian Regimes	Supports the right to resist oppressive rule, recognizing self-determination.
4	Right to Rebel	People's Right against Authoritarian Regimes	Suggests people have a right to overthrow governments that deny fundamental human rights.
5	Responsibility to Protect (R2P)	People's Right against Authoritarian Regimes	Implied people have the right to defend themselves against regimes committing atrocities.
6	Geneva Conventions	Conduct of Armed Conflict & Protection of Civilians	Provides a legal framework for armed conflict and protection of non-combatants.
7	Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Article 3	Right of Indigenous Peoples to Self-Determination	Recognizes the right to freely determine political status and pursue development.
8	Soft Law Instruments and Regional Treaties	Various Rights to Resist Oppression	May recognize rights to resist oppression, not universally binding like the UN Charter.

TABLE 2

This table highlights the diverse pathways through which countries have achieved or advanced toward democratic governance, from revolutionary upheavals to a republic.

	Country	Year	Outcome
1	United States	1776	Establishment of a democratic republic .
2	France	1789	End of absolute monarchy, setting the stage for future republic and democratic developments.
3	Germany	1918-1919	Fall of the German Empire and establishment of the Weimar Republic .
4	India	1947	Independence from British rule and establishment of a republic based on democratic constitution.
5	Eastern European countries (1989-1991)	1989-1991	Fall of communist regimes and establishment or restoration of republics in many countries (i.e. Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Baltic States, etc.)
6	Indonesia	1998	Transition towards republic and establishment of a more democratic government.
7	South Africa	1994	End of apartheid and establishment of a democratic republic .

TABLE 3

Jack A. Goldstone's views on revolutions, including the key factors he identifies as contributing to their emergence, along with descriptions and historical examples:

Key Factors	Description	Examples
Role of State Weakness and Fiscal Crisisw	Violent revolutions are more likely when states cannot meet population demands due to fiscal crises or lack enforcement capacity.	French Revolution, American Revolution
Social Inequalities and Demographic Pressures	Rapid industrialization, war strains, and demographic pressures can exacerbate social tensions leading to violent revolution.	Russian Revolution of 1917, American Revolution
External Shocks and Global Trends	Wars or global economic crises can precipitate violent revolutions by exacerbating state vulnerabilities.	Iranian Revolution of 1979, American Revolution
Elite Divisions and Popular Mobilization	Conflicts among elites, combined with popular grievances, can escalate into violent revolution.	English Civil War, American Revolution
Transnational Influences	The spread of revolutionary ideas and the role of diaspora can influence revolutions, with modern examples showing the impact of digital media and transnational networks.	Arab Spring, American Revolution

The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, particularly during its struggle against apartheid, provides an illustrative case of a liberation movement using the rhetoric of self-defense to justify its transition from primarily nonviolent protest to armed struggle.²³ Founded in 1912, the ANC initially pursued non-violent resistance against the racial segregation policies of the South African government. However, the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, where 69 peaceful protesters were killed by police, marked a turning point. In response to the increasing brutality of the apartheid regime and the closing off of all avenues for peaceful protest (including the banning of the ANC and other anti-apartheid organizations), the ANC concluded that armed resistance was a necessary form of self-defense against state oppression.

Transition to Armed Struggle

In 1961, Nelson Mandela, along with other ANC leaders, founded Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, to fight against the apartheid government. Mandela and others argued that the turn to armed struggle was a last resort, taken in self-defense against a regime that had violently suppressed peaceful protests and denied basic human rights to the majority of South Africa's population. The ANC and MK justified their armed actions, including sabotage against government infrastructure, as acts of self-defense aimed at protecting the oppressed black majority and compelling the apartheid regime to negotiate. They sought to minimize civilian casualties and focused on government installations, infrastructure, and symbols of apartheid.

International Context

The ANC's struggle, including its armed component, gained significant international support, with many viewing it as a legitimate liberation movement fighting a just war against an illegitimate and morally repugnant system. The language of self-defense and liberation was crucial in garnering this support, emphasizing the ANC's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the face of systemic violence and oppression.

Outcome

The struggle against apartheid, which combined armed resistance with international pressure, internal protest, and economic sanctions, eventually led to the negotiation process in the early 1990s. This process culminated in the end of apartheid, the establishment of a democratic South Africa, and the election of Nelson Mandela as President in 1994.

In summary, while the ANC's turn to armed struggle was a controversial and complex decision, it was framed within the context of self-defense against an oppressive regime that had systematically denied peaceful avenues for change and used violence against its citizens.

²³ <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/african-national-congress-anc>



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