

The Tehran Trinity: Driver of Change?¹

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Key Points

- The Gaza conflict has disrupted Middle East stability and strained U.S. deterrence posture amid U.S. policy uncertainty during administration transition.
- Iran's stability hinges on the interplay of its trinity, a rigid theocratic government, a dominant IRGC ensuring regime security, and a youthful, discontented populace, with shifts in any element potentially destabilizing the system.
- Potential future scenarios for Iran include economic fallout, succession debates, U.S./Israeli strikes on nuclear sites, protests, and IRGC crackdowns.
- Kinetic action on Iran could have grave repercussions for the region. A unified approach may be the best option to control Iran's nuclear ambition.

Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has demonstrated remarkable resilience in navigating domestic and international challenges and maintaining a theocratic system under the Supreme Leader's unchallenged authority. Iran balances regional dominance with internal stability amid Israel's strikes on its proxies, nuclear brinkmanship, and a shifting U.S. policy landscape going into a new administration in 2025. Yet, recent developments, such as the collapse of parts of Iran's "Shia Crescent," their weakened currency, and escalating regional tensions, signal potential shifts.²

This paper applies Carl von Clausewitz's trinity concept, government, military, and people, to examine the potential for change in Iran, with a focus on implications for USCENTCOM.³

The Iranian government, led by the Supreme Leader and elected officials, sets ideological and policy direction. The military, dominated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), ensures regime security and wields economic power. The people, fueled by economic grievances and youthful energy, represent a latent force for upheaval. Shifts in this triad could reshape Iran's trajectory, challenging USCENTCOM's mission to deter Iran, counter its proxies, and improve regional stability. This analysis explores the strategic context, key actors, potential drivers of change, and scenarios to inform USCENTCOM's strategy.

Change in Strategic Context

The Middle East's strategic landscape has shifted dramatically since October 7, 2023, when the Gaza conflict erupted, shattering a period of relative calm. Before this, the Abraham Accords and Syria's reintegration signaled de-escalation. The then U.S. National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan noted the region was "quieter than it has been for decades."⁴ The U.S., having scaled back its military footprint, relied on deterrence, and partners and allies, with threats like ISIS contained and Iran's proxy network apparently manageable.

The Gaza war upended this paradigm. U.S. support for Israel, particularly in the face of a reported over 50,000 Palestinian deaths since 7 October 2023, has strained credibility with Arab partners, who decry the humanitarian toll, complicating USCENTCOM's alliances. Iran-backed Houthis have escalated attacks on Red Sea shipping, defying U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and restricting naval freedom of navigation. Iran, exploiting this chaos, is reconstituting its air defenses after Israel's strikes and is threatening retaliatory strikes.

The new Administration's definitive shift away from traditional allies, exemplified by clear messaging to Europe to shoulder more responsibility for their own security, coupled with clear messaging on minimizing the U.S. footprint in the Middle East and declared intent to re-posture and close Operation Inherent Resolve in the next two years, may weaken USCENTCOM's ability to deter, creating space for Iran to expand its influence.

Iran's Trinity

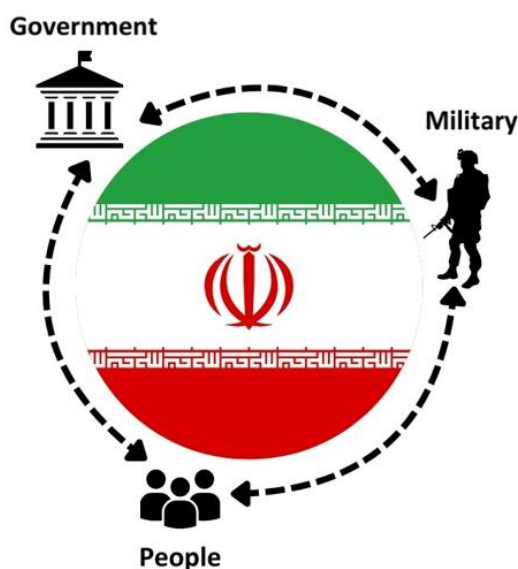


Figure 1. Iran's Trinity, Government, Military, and the People. Theory from Carl von Clausewitz,⁵ Model Developed by Author.

Government

Iran's Islamic Republic blends theocracy and presidential democracy under the velāyat-e faqīh system.⁶ Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (85) holds ultimate authority, controlling the military, judiciary, and major policy decisions, making him the government center of gravity (COG). President Masoud Pezeshkian (70), elected in 2024, manages daily governance but is subordinate to Khamenei. The Guardian Council and Assembly of Experts reinforce

clerical dominance, while the IRGC exerts influence across institutions. Reformists push for liberalization, but hardliners aligned with Khamenei prevail, prioritizing regime stability over economic relief or political openness.

In foreign policy, Iran prioritizes regional influence through its network of proxies, nuclear program negotiations, and efforts to normalize relations with neighboring countries, as evidenced by diplomatic initiatives with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.⁷

Economic sanctions have significantly impacted Iran's economy. However, Iran found multiple ways to circumvent these sanctions (e.g., producing goods domestically, "looking to the East Policy").⁸

Military

Iran's military comprises the regular armed forces or *Artesh* (400,000) and the IRGC (190,000), with the latter's Quds Force projecting power abroad.⁹ The IRGC, answering directly to Khamenei, serves as the military COG while dominating politically and economically, controlling sectors like energy and construction via affiliated companies and foundations (Bonyads).¹⁰

Operating under the IRGC, the Basij (600,000 on mobilization) is Iran's paramilitary volunteer militia, primarily tasked with internal security, law enforcement, and upholding the ideological principles of the Islamic Republic. The Basij is known for its widespread presence in society, including schools, universities, and workplaces, and has been involved in suppressing dissent, and enforcing moral codes.¹¹

Iran's military budget stands at \$7.5 billion, however, in response to a combination of internal priorities and external pressures, Iran plans to significantly bolster its 2025 military spending by increasing its military budget by 200 percent.¹²

People

Iran's 85 million citizens, of which 60% are under 30, face high unemployment and inflation. This is driving recurring protests like the 2022 Mahsa Amini uprising, where grassroots movements emerge as the people's COG. Urbanized (77%) and diverse (Persian, Azeri, Kurd), the populace blends vibrant civil society with repression-induced caution.¹³ The regime's tight control over information, and crackdowns limit grassroots momentum.

Potential Interplay Between Iran's Trinity

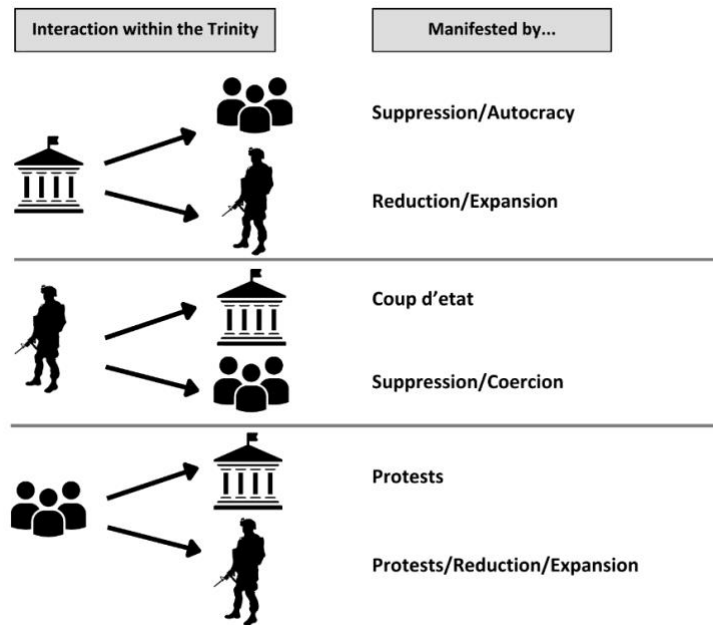


Figure 2. Potential Interplay Between Iran's Trinity. Created by Author.

Iran's trinity reveals a delicate balance. The people see the government's ideological rigidity as the cause of international sanctions and economic despair, while the IRGC's dominance ensures regime survival but stifles reform. A shift in one element—Khamenei's death, military overreach, or mass protests—could ripple across the others, challenging the ability to predict and counter Iran's next moves.

Options for Change: Challenges and Opportunities



Figure 3. Iran's Trinity and Potential Drivers of Change. Created by Author.

Government-Led Change

Policy reform faces steep hurdles. Economic liberalization might ease sanctions and public discontent, but hardliners and the IRGC resist threats to their power. Since his swearing-in, President Pezeshkian has expressed support for nuclear diplomacy and constructive engagement, signaling a potential shift in Iran's approach. However, as of March 2025, the Trump administration has restored its “maximum pressure” strategy on Iran, with both President Trump and Iran's Supreme Leader escalating their narratives.¹⁴ Proxy networks (e.g., Hezbollah, Houthis) and alliances with Russia and China bolster Iran's leverage. Succession also looms large. Mojtaba Khamenei could succeed the elder Khamenei, but an IRGC-backed figurehead or leadership council might emerge.¹⁵ Opportunities for the U.S. lie in exploiting factionalism, though entrenched interests cap the scope of potential reform.

Military-Initiated Change

The chance of a military coup is unlikely given the IRGC's alignment with the regime, but severe crises—economic collapse or a failed defense against Israel—could spur domestic intervention. The Artesh might challenge IRGC overreach, though cohesion persists. Any military move would preserve the Islamic Republic's core, sidelining civilians temporarily. The U.S. could benefit from a distracted IRGC, but a more aggressive military-led Iran would heighten regional threats.

People-Driven Change

The 2022 protests, sparked by Mahsa Amini's death, showcased public passion, with predominately youth and women demanding freedom. However, lacking organization and broad coalitions, they faltered under IRGC and Basij repression. A future trigger such as political violence or economic ruin, could escalate unrest, potentially fracturing

regime unity if defections occur. The U.S. might exploit such chaos, but Iran's repressive capacity suggests limited short-term gains.

Change Caused by External Factors or Black Swan Events

External pressures and unpredictable events could catalyze change in Iran. Israel's October 2024 strike on the Parchin facility, targeting nuclear weapons research, underscores its willingness to act—echoing the 1981 Osirak bombing.¹⁶ A broader campaign against Natanz or Fordow could disrupt Iran's nuclear program, but risks abound: incomplete targeting, an environmental disaster, Iranian retaliation via proxies, or a nationalist surge bolstering the regime.¹⁷ The snapback of UN sanctions under Resolution 2231, could crash Iran's economy, fueling unrest but also hardliner resolve.

Black swan events, rare, high-impact occurrences, could also alter the landscape. An oil market collapse could devastate Iran's budget, while a viral social movement akin to the Arab Spring, might ignite its discontented youth. Such events could exploit existing tensions—public frustration, regional rivalries, and international pressure—destabilizing the regime. For the U.S. these scenarios could mean preparing for a nuclear-armed Iran and intensified proxy wars.

Scenarios

Best-Case Scenario

The fall of Syria's Assad regime weakens Iran's Shia Crescent, reducing proxy threats and easing USCENTCOM's counter-VEO mission. Iran, distracted by succession and economic woes, scales back regional ambitions, offering a window for U.S. influence via allies like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and EU, resulting in an agreement regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Worst-Case Scenario

The increasing anti-American sentiment in the region fueled by unwavering support to Israel in the Gaza conflict bolsters Iran's resolve. Some countries in the region deny the U.S. their airspace or territory to launch attacks against Iran. North Korea (induced by China/Russia) enables an Iranian nuclear breakthrough. Amid this shift, Supreme Leader Khamenei's declining health ignites succession debates. The IRGC pushes Mojtaba Khamenei as heir, but reformists resist, causing political gridlock. Escalating tensions prompt the European powers (under pressure of the U.S.) to enforce the snapback mechanism, intensifying economic pressure. By the end 2025, Israel strikes Natanz and Fordow, damaging Iran's nuclear sites. Iran retaliates directly, worsening economic fallout from the sanctions. Meanwhile, Russia and China deepen ties with Iran.

Youth protests erupt against the regime, met with IRGC crackdowns, though defections hint at fractures. By 2026, a transitional council blending moderates and hardliners forms, enacting limited reforms to stabilize the nation. USCENTCOM faces a resilient yet fractured Iran, requiring adaptive strategies.

*Absolute War-Scenario*¹⁸

Shortly after Iran tests a nuclear bomb, Israel and the U.S. strike Iran's nuclear sites and infrastructure with airstrikes and cyber-attacks, while Iran fires ballistic missiles at Israeli cities and U.S. bases, activating its proxies. Entire societies are mobilizing, economies are shifting to war, and the conflict spreads across the Middle East, ensnaring millions of civilians. Israel and Iran now are pursuing total annihilation of the other's resistance.

Conclusion

Iran's future hinges on the interplay of government, military, and people, with the IRGC as the linchpin of stability. While generational shifts may eventually challenge the status quo, forced regime change risks repeating debacles seen in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While existing sanctions fail to curb Iran's regional ambitions, a U.S./Israeli strike on nuclear facilities would likely strengthen hardline factions rather than dismantle the regime and curb Iran's nuclear ambition. Moreover, addressing the Iranian-backed Houthis already strains finite U.S. capabilities apportioned to the Central Region; direct conflict with Iran would escalate risks significantly and could incentivize China and Russia to closer collaboration with Iran.

Though U.S.-Europe-Middle East divisions persist over threat perceptions, cooperation remains essential to avoid unilateral miscalculations. Sustainable solutions require a "whole-of-alliance approach" rather than military escalation, recognizing that Tehran's Trinity stability—or collapse—carries global repercussions.

Recommendations*Support The Next Generation of Iranians*

1. Succession Planning: Build intelligence on IRGC factionalism and engage reformists. In case of an uprising exploit openings via backchannels.

Whole-of-Alliance Approach

1. Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA 2.0): Explore options for an (broader than P5+1) agreement to limit Iran's nuclear program.
2. Set Red Lines: Define thresholds for further nuclear development, ballistic missile tests, and proxy attacks, with clear consequences.
3. Engage Allies: Align U.S. political-military efforts with partners and formulate a clear intent, end state, and posture regarding Iran and its proxies—alone we move quickly, together we go far.
4. Counter Russia/China:
 - a. Redouble efforts to dissuade Russia from sharing nuclear technological knowledge with Iran to design a nuclear weapon.

- b. Redouble efforts to dissuade China from sharing ballistic missile technological knowledge with Iran to design a hypersonic/intercontinental capability.
- c. Research the effects of waiving Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act (1992) to Azerbaijan (military assistance).¹⁹
- d. Disrupt (logistical supply chain) network of oil export to China by restraining Iran's ghost tanker fleet.

Kinetic Strike on Iran's Nuclear Facilities

If Israel/U.S. attacked Iranian facilities unilaterally.

1. Partners and Allies: Since there are different threat perceptions regarding Iran, be prepared for unforeseen consequences in the relationship with partners and allies.
2. Access-Basing-Overflight (ABO): Prepare for possible restriction of ABO.
3. Prepare to counter VEO resurgence campaign in the AOR.
4. Prepare for a nuclear Iran as a "new normal." Or exploit the catastrophic success and envision the "day after."

¹ The title "The Tehran Trinity" refers to Clausewitz's trinity concept and the world's first nuclear explosion on July 16, 1945. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89; U.S. Department of Energy, "The Manhattan Project, An Interactive History," <https://www.osti.gov/opennet/manhattan-project-history/Events/1945/trinity.htm> (accessed March 10, 2025).

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⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

⁶ Peter William Avery and Janet Afary, "Government and Society in Iran," *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Government-and-society> (accessed March 18, 2025).

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¹⁸ Carl von Clausewitz discusses the concept of “absolute war” as an analytical tool to understand the nature of war. According to Clausewitz, the abstraction of absolute war serves as a conceptual benchmark. He contrasts this concept with “real war” where political objects shape the outcome. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 579-581.

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