



# THE IRAN ENIGMA



NAVIGATING STRATEGY AND SECURITY

APRIL 10, 2024 CONFERENCE REPORT

**GLOBAL &  
NATIONAL  
SECURITY  
INSTITUTE**  
POLICY DIALOGUES

  
**UNIVERSITY of  
SOUTH FLORIDA**  
Global and National Security Institute





# The 4-Star Review

*Insights and observations from General McKenzie, who served from 2019 - 2022 as Commander of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM)*

I've spent a good portion of my life and most of my professional career studying the Middle East. I've spent time in nearly all the countries in the region and have a lot of experience in it. As a military historian, I recognize the extreme volatility that has plagued the region for hundreds of years, dating back to the Ottoman Empire's war with the Iranian Safavid Dynasty.

Bluntly, I believe now is the most dangerous period of time in the Greater Middle East that I can recall. And, just as bluntly, I believe Iran is the greatest danger and greatest threat in the region.

In *"The Iran Enigma: Navigating Security and Strategy,"* we explored the geopolitical chaos cultivated and exported by Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary government, led by Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The country is ruled by a thuggish, theocratic regime that is bad news for everyone. It's a regime that America has consistently underestimated and frequently overlooked because of wishful thinking "that it will just sort of go away."

It's not going to go away. It's an Imperial culture that is thousands of years old and will continue to be a dominant country in the region for a long time.

The current Iranian government considers itself a *revolutionary regime*. They are determined for their revolution to outlive their generation without changing. That's a rare occurrence. Seldom do revolutions outlive the revolutionary generation.

The current regime in Iran knows this and they are determined to guarantee the survival of their revolution by whatever means necessary and to export it throughout the region.

Despite this and the inconsistent messaging and policies from the United States about our role and responsibilities in the Middle East, I believe there is a path forward for us and it is centered on air and missile defense. The primary and growing threat from Iran is that of ballistic missile,

land attack cruise missile, and drone attack. Nations in the region need modern, capable air and missile defenses to confront this threat. We saw this in full display on April 14, when Israel and its allies, including the U.S and other regional forces, repulsed a massive Iranian attack against Israel, which included 300 drones, missiles and other aerial weapons.

Fostering any environment of cooperation between the U.S. and the Arab nations in the region is a positive step forward. It's something we envisioned when I convened a summit of top regional defense officials from Israel and the Arab countries in the Spring of 2022. A common threat creates opportunity and I'm hopeful what we began that March in Egypt will continue to be that sliver of commonality and hope for the region.

A simple question persisted at the conference: "What should we expect from the region? What are reasonable goals?"

Here's what I would like to see happen:

- 1) a stable order among states, where international norms are observed.
- 2) the free flow of commerce through the region.
- 3) preventing Iran from possessing a nuclear weapon.
- 4) preventing the development of terror attacks against our homeland from the region.

These are attainable goals. They may not be broad enough for some, but we have very clearly seen the limits of maximalist approaches in the region.

*"The Iran Enigma: Navigating Strategy and Security"* gave us insight into the theocratic regime in Iran but also put forth valuable ideas about the future. I encourage you to watch the conference videos, which are available on the [GNSI YouTube channel](#). They're well worth the watch.



General (Ret) Frank McKenzie,  
Executive Director, GNSI

June 5, 2024

## The Iran Enigma: Navigating Strategy and Security

*GNSI Policy Dialogues Conference, April 10, 2024*

### Introduction

On April 10th, 2024, the Global and National Security Institute (GNSI), hosted its second Policy Dialogues, “The Iran Enigma: Navigating Strategy and Security” at the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa campus. The event brought together academic experts, journalists, and military personnel for a day filled with thought-provoking discussions exploring the complexities of Iran’s regional policies, social movements, and the nation’s relations with the United States in the nuclear age.

### Current US Foreign Policy toward Iran

[Vali Nasr](#) provided a comprehensive overview of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran, focusing on its ineffectiveness in de-escalating regional conflicts and its current relationship with Israel. [He argued](#) the U.S. failed to significantly influence the outcomes of regional conflicts since the United States’ “tail is tied to Israel’s tail in the region, and it’s proven itself to be completely ineffective in this war,” implying that the U.S. lacks independent strategic flexibility in the region and that its actions are bound to Israel, undermining U.S. capability to play the role of mediator between parties in the current conflict. Nasr also discussed the lack of negotiated boundaries in the Iran-Israel relationship, describing the situation as “extremely dangerous” and prone to escalation. He referenced strategic U.S.-Iran dialogues, where temporary agreements maintained status quo, particularly since President Biden wanted to negotiate a red line because he was looking at elections in November 2024.

Further, Nasr explored Iran’s foreign policy motives, emphasizing how Iran’s actions lean more toward deterrence than aggression. [He highlighted](#) a significant moment in May 2022, where “Iran was interested in arriving at a secret sort of ceasefire with the United States,” which involved agreements on non-interference in exchange for eased sanctions and normalized relations with neighboring countries. However, such potential has been diminished by the dispute between Iran and the West,

exacerbated by Tehran’s military support for Russia in the war against Ukraine and the Hamas-Israel conflict.

These discussions included limits on Iran’s uranium enrichment in exchange for cooperation on regional stability. Additionally, [Mohsen Milani](#) examined past U.S. policies for overlooking Iran’s strategic importance and influence in the Middle East. Constructive engagement rather than political and financial isolation could improve the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. The withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, was followed by the reimplementing of the maximum pressure sanctions. Nasr noted a key moment when the U.S. resumed negotiations only after Iran escalated its uranium enrichment to 84%, a critical milestone since 90% uranium enrichment is widely considered weapons-grade. This suggests a dynamic where harsher actions seem necessary to gain negotiating leverage. He then criticized U.S. policy decisions and highlighted the counterproductive nature of indefinite sanctions, which he argued removes any incentive for Iran to amend its behavior.

### Iran’s Involvement in Regional Affairs

[Arman Mahmoudian](#) recalled how Ayatollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader of Iran’s revolutionary government, called for the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam Hussein. This inflammatory rhetoric marked the early stages of escalating conflict. The situation intensified in 1982 with the deployment of the Mohammad Ola division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) to Syria, culminating in the establishment of Hezbollah.

[Mahmoudian](#) highlighted how recent developments signal a new phase in the ongoing conflict, “We are entering a new stage of intensity with Iran in the Middle East,” referencing the recent Israeli attack on the Iranian Embassy as a critical moment that further escalated tensions, caused significant casualties and underscored Iran’s entrenched military presence in the region.

[Mahmoudian](#) continued his remarks on the advancement of Iran’s military presence in Syria by referring to Israeli sources that “Iran has dispersed around five divisions of its IRGC forces across approximately 12 to 13 military bases in Syria.” In addition to expanding its direct military presence, Syrian sources have claimed that as of 2021 Iran is working to establish a new proxy militia in Syria, known as the Alam Hussein division. Iran has various motives for expanding its military presence in Syria, including securing its land bridge to Lebanon to supply Hezbollah with weaponry, establishing a naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea, and opening a new front against Israel alongside Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Echoing Mahmoudian’s statement on Iran’s extensive engagement in the Middle East through proxies and interactions with Arab states, [Alex Vatanka](#), provided a detailed analysis delving into the motivations and limitations of Iranian policies in the region which are aimed at both exporting its revolutionary ideals and safeguarding its geopolitical interests.

Vatanka placed Iran’s regional actions within a framework of ideological and national defense imperatives. He argued that the Islamic Republic’s strategies are not merely reactive but are deeply rooted in an ideology of resistance against perceived Western threats, particularly from the United States. [Vatanka explained](#) that “Iran’s proxies are often presented as defensive measures . . . suggest[ing] it’s better to confront threats in Iraq and Syria rather than on Iranian soil.”

[Sanam Vakil](#) focused on how Iran capitalizes on regional instability. Vakil suggested that Iran’s self-perception of isolation drives the regime to adopt an “offensive defense” strategy through the Axis of Resistance—a network designed to deter threats by projecting power beyond its borders. Vatanka highlighted that the creation of the “axis of resistance” was largely a response to perceived American threats following President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech. This perspective underscores how deeply historical rhetoric has influenced Iran’s regional engagements over the last two decades.

Iran leverages regional instability by taking advantage of power vacuums to bolster its own geopolitical standing. “Iran builds these relationships gradually, consistently

opportunistically, reactively, and it fills vacuums,” [Vakil reiterated](#). Moreover, she described Iran as a state that sees itself under continuous external threat, justifying its defensive strategies abroad through the Axis of Resistance.

Adding to the discussion, [Major General Sean Salene](#), provided a military-focused analysis of Iran’s regional ambitions and the U.S.’s strategic countermeasures. [He pointed out](#) that it’s the regime’s actions we are examining, not the will of the Iranian people, especially considering recent protests that suggest a significant disconnect. He explained how Iran’s military strategy involves asserting dominance in the Middle East through proxies, advancements in nuclear capabilities, and expanding missile technology. Major General Salene noted the critical implications of Iran pursuing a threshold nuclear state status, referencing an [International Atomic Energy Agency \(IAEA\)](#) report that Iran has amassed a significant stockpile of highly enriched uranium.<sup>1</sup>

The use of proxies, according to Major General Salene, not only establishes Iranian influence but simultaneously produces significant instability across the region. [He observed](#) that diversity within these proxy groups and their sometimes-autonomous agendas add layers of complexity and unpredictability to the regional security environment.

Echoing Major General Salene’s concerns Vatanka questioned the sustainability of relying on proxy groups, especially given the potential loss of control over these groups. Vatanka suggested a shift in Iran’s foreign policy strategy toward direct dialogues with regional adversaries rather than their reliance on proxies as this could offer a more sustainable framework for security.

### Future Strategies for Iran’s Involvement in Regional Affairs

Vatanka critiqued the current U.S. strategies toward Iran, arguing they lack depth and fail to address the fundamental issues at play. Despite the U. S’s policy efforts, [he claimed](#) “I don’t think the US has a strategy” that adequately counters or engages with the complexities of Iranian maneuvers in the region. Vatanka called for a recalibration of U.S. policy to counteract Iranian influence and address the broader security vacuums enabling proxy wars to flourish. He stressed the importance of addressing security vacuums and economic disparities instead of implementing punitive measures. By promoting economic development

and integration, the U.S. could lessen the appeal of radical solutions among disenfranchised populations, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of the proxy model.

Building on this perspective, [Vakil](#) suggested that due to Iran's deep embedding within the political and military infrastructures of nations like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the U.S. requires a holistic and multifaceted approach targeting accountability, governance, and "structural vacuums" existing in these regions. She pointed out that simple military solutions or sanctions are inadequate as Iran and its proxies adapt and thrive under pressure. Additionally, Vakil's use of the "hydra" metaphor suggests that merely decapitating leadership within Iranian-backed networks can lead to unintended consequences, such as the emergence of new, potentially more radical leaders. Therefore, U.S. policies should emphasize not just containment or disruption but also the promotion of robust civil institutions and economic development to undercut the appeal of Iranian influence.

On the practical military aspects of U.S. strategy, Major General Salene outlined the goal of creating a stable and secure global environment, contrasting sharply with the instability perpetuated by Iran. Major General Salene advocated for a strategy to enhance economic capabilities, defend democratic values, and strengthen international partnerships. He highlighted innovations like Task Force 59, which integrates unmanned and manned naval assets to improve maritime domain awareness and counter security threats like illegal arms transfers. Additionally, Salene called for increased cooperation with regional and global partners to ensure a coordinated and unified response to Iran, emphasizing that stability in the Middle East is vital not only for regional security but also for global economic stability.

### Iran's Nuclear Ambition

There is a long history of the United States' involvement and opposition regarding Iran's nuclear program. [Sina Azodi](#) highlighted the fraught relationship between the two countries by stating "Iran and the United States have been on loggerheads over Tehran's decades-long nuclear aspirations. By the early 2000s, Iran substantially expanded its nuclear program and technical capacity, [and] the U.S. imposed crippling economic sanctions, sabotaged the nuclear program, and issued threats of military action."

Then in 2015, JCPOA was signed by the UN Security Council's five permanent members (the P5); China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany (P5+1). The JCPOA was put in place to offer Iran sanction relief in exchange for their cooperation in opening its facilities for inspection and reducing aspects of its nuclear program.<sup>2</sup>

Since the U.S.'s withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran has become a nuclear threshold state, meaning it now possesses the technical capacity for manufacturing nuclear weapons. Azodi highlighted that Iran is the only non-nuclear weapons state enriching uranium to 60% and its breakout time is now less than 10 days. [Kelsey Davenport](#), stated "in response to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has invested in new nuclear capabilities that have fundamentally altered the nuclear program and Iran's ability to ratchet it up quickly."

Davenport also discussed the advancements made to Iran's uranium enrichment processes and nuclear centrifuges and the weaponization timeline. [She explained](#), "if you want to reliably disrupt a country's drive to a bomb, it really is in that fissile material production window where you have the best chance to do so because once Iran has produced the first material for a nuclear weapon, it's going to do that weaponization process at covert sites."

[Barbara Slavin](#) built upon Davenport's points and centered her comments around The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 which provided a removal date for the sanctions against Iran.<sup>3</sup> This resolution also implemented the "snapback" mechanism, a clause in the JCPOA that allows for the re-imposition, or "snapback," of all sanctions if Iran fails to comply with the agreement. Per Resolution 2231, any state "participating" in the agreement can lodge a complaint with the Security Council if they deem another participant has significantly failed to respect the accord.<sup>4</sup>

Slavin highlighted that a UN Security Council member could not veto the resolution and various sunset clauses were contained within the JCPOA. One such sunset clause was the ban on Iran transferring ballistic missile technology. This ban expired in October of 2023 and Resolution 2231 itself is set to expire in October 2025. [Slavin](#) illustrated what would happen after the resolution expired by quoting directly from the resolution saying "the

security council will have concluded its consideration of the Iranian nuclear issue, and the item non-proliferation will be removed from the list of matters of which the council is seized . . . So, we have essentially from now until October of 2025 to still operate within what is left of resolution 2231.”

There are calls to invoke the snapback before the resolution expires and discussions over which countries of the P5+1 would be willing to invoke it. [Slavin pondered](#), “Will they do it? I rather doubt it. I think the only thing that would get them to invoke snapback is if Iran actually went ahead and built a nuclear weapon between now and October of 2025.”

Slavin claimed Iran was not willing to cross that line yet as they are getting benefits from being a nuclear threshold power. In his remarks, [General \(Ret.\) Kenneth F. McKenzie](#) believes “the Iranians value the ability to build a nuclear weapon, and it seems to me, they value the idea more than the actual physical act of building one by holding some degree of ambiguity in this process. They can leverage the United States . . . always playing for more concessions while staying coyly just below the threshold of breakout.” [Azodi agreed](#) with General McKenzie, remarking, “Iran wants to maintain a nuclear option while using its capacity to extract concessions in other fields.”

[Dario Teicher](#) stated “it seems the Iranians, what they’re looking for is to be treated like we treat Israel. Everyone assumes they have it [nuclear weapons]. So, I don’t think you’ll ever see breakout . . . but you will see Iran gather all the pieces.”

[Davenport](#) added another consideration, “Iran’s nuclear leverage really has increased, and the proliferation risk has increased, and as a result, if we were to engage again in negotiations with Iran, Iran has more cards.” [McKenzie plainly said](#), “It remains my opinion today that the best way to keep Iranians from possessing a nuclear weapon remains some form of a diplomatic agreement.”

Davenport highlighted the challenges with negotiations as the United States faces a credibility deficit when negotiating with Iran as the United States withdrew from the JCPOA while at the same time acknowledging that Iran had stayed within the compliance obligations. Any future deal the United States should address the credibility deficit and fact that even when fully implemented, the

JCPOA sanctions relief did not meet Iran’s’ expectations. [Davenport wondered](#) “can the US credibly lift sanctions in an agreement? I think that’s an open question that I think the US is going to have to prove if we want to come back to this type of transactional bargain.”

Davenport also highlighted the pathways for Iran to pursue nuclear weapons has shifted since the JCPOA was negotiated. [She stated](#), “So our assumptions about how Iran would build a bomb, the technical steps it would take now are different than in 2015.” Slavin added to this by saying, “this is not a good environment for large multilateral or P5 efforts to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons.”

Davenport discussed new challenges the IAEA would face and was quick to point out that Iran has a history of trying to covertly develop nuclear weapons capabilities and declaring its nuclear activities after the fact. She was concerned that we have not had access to these facilities since 2021, so we may not know. This throws into question whether any future deal would enable the IAEA to monitor all existing material and re-establish baseline inventories.

On a final note, [Davenport stated](#) “we would be so much better off if the IAEA was in these facilities asking questions, . . . it’s so crucial to ensuring that if Iran breaks, that we know about it and in trying to deter Iran from diverting anything for a covert program.”

### Policy Ambitions in the Nuclear Age

Teicher highlighted that Iran capabilities have evolved over the years and that policymakers need to find new solutions. [He said](#), “Policy gives you strategy, strategy, you get some objectives and then you get to the tasks,” implying in the context of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, this hierarchical flow from policy to strategy to objectives, and finally to tasks, often appears disjointed or incomplete. Despite having policies aimed at promoting regional stability and security, the strategies and objectives may not always be clearly defined or effectively implemented, leading to inconsistencies in achieving the desired outcomes. This disconnect can manifest as reactive measures rather than a comprehensive, well-executed plan, thereby limiting the effectiveness of U.S. influence in regional conflicts.

Teicher briefly touched on the importance of building and maintaining relationships with partner nations. He also

spoke to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a global effort between partner nations, meant to stop the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>5</sup> [Teicher stated](#), “The problem with PSI is that it is limited. We only have one delegation put together in Washington. They like keeping control up there. So, trying to hit these countries several times to maintain that relationship takes time.”

[Davenport](#) spoke to the volatility of the situation. “I don’t think that at this moment Iran wants a nuclear weapon, but the risk of miscalculation is very high . . . The risk of us misinterpreting an Iranian move, the risk of Iran misinterpreting how much room it has to maneuver. All of that again sort of increases the risk of miscalculation.” She also considered what a new agreement might look like. “In the short term, I still think we need to think about some type of stabilizing transactional deal that provides Iran with some limited benefit in exchange for enhancing the monitoring of Iran’s nuclear program.”

[Slavin](#) asserted “we can propose various measures in return for various concessions that do not have to be brought before the U.S. Congress and scrutinized under the legislation that was passed when the JCPOA went into effect. It’s probably the best we can do.” She went on to state, “I think Iran is still a rational actor that can be influenced with pragmatic incentives and that we should exhaust every other option before we talk about the military option.”

## Iran’s Social Movements

[Rahel Dayerizadeh](#) started the panel discussion by highlighting Iran’s rich history of social movements and its culture of activism. The panel discussion focused on the past and current circumstances of women in Iran and the regime’s response to recent protests. [Dayerizadeh stated](#), “You see women in Iran front and center of these movements. Iranian women put their bodies on the line every day.”

[Commander Nicole Cale](#) put into context the courage and determination of the Iranian population as they have suffered over many years. She dove into the history of Iran’s resistance movements and made it very clear, “when you talk about Iran, you must take care to distinguish between the regime and the Iranian population. We live in a country with a government that is representative, so we don’t automatically make that separation.” [She explained](#)

that the Regime does not represent the beliefs of most of the Iranian population and said, “Elections in Iran are not free, fair, and representative.”

Commander Cale went on to say that the regime is headed by a supreme leader whose main objective is to stay in power. Her remarks echoed [McKenzie’s earlier comments](#) as he believed the recent 2022 and 2023 protests were not capable of moving the center of gravity of the Iranian state.

In September 2022, the Women, Life, Freedom movement started after the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini. Amini died after her detainment by Iran’s morality police under allegations that she had violated the hijab law which requires women and girls to keep their hair and bodies covered.<sup>6</sup> As news of the circumstances of her death spread, the traditional 40 days of mourning morphed into protests. These protests first started in her hometown and then spread throughout the country. [Negar Mortazavi](#) explained she viewed the protests as a feminist uprising led by women and girls within the country demanding a fundamental change from the regime—not limited to the Women, Life, Freedom movement. [Mortazavi said](#), “I saw it as a feminist uprising, but also with allies and intersectional community of protesters, each bringing their own grievances, political, economic, social, even cultural to the streets.”

The Women, Life, Freedom movement didn’t occur separate from outside civil resistance instances. [Commander Cale](#) was quick to point out “Women have been protesting the hijab and their treatment since the regime’s beginning. The population has protested for reform in the past, and instead of addressing their ever-growing grievances, the regime doubles down with increased degradation.” Mortazavi also illustrated that before Masha Amini’s death, there had been other instances of violence against women. This generated anger and became a watershed moment as women have been fighting this dress code for decades. Mortazavi said many people saw themselves in Amini, especially those in the religious community. “To the majority of the Iranian society, she looked very normal. In fact, a lot of religious women do dress like that,” [Mortazavi said](#).

The Women, Life, Freedom protests were led primarily by women and Gen Z girls, with social media also greatly impacting the movement. “Gen Z girls in particular did



a phenomenal job uploading content on platforms like TikTok so that their words, deeds, images would go viral,” [Commander Cale said](#). “Protests played out on the world stage in near real-time.” Dayerizadeh also made the point that the younger generations are not watching the traditional media sources such as television, newspapers or online media outlets, rather, they are getting their information from their peers or social media. [Dayerizadeh said](#), “So the Gen Z that is very active part of this most recent movement are communicating in mediums that the people abroad are communicating outside of Iran as well. And their network is much wider than we think.”

The internet has greatly changed the information and media landscape, allowing for faster, more diverse information to reach a broader audience. It has also allowed for the spread of information online without attracting the regime’s attention “A famous political figure said something on a YouTube channel that if he had been saying it on Voice of America or BBC, he would be arrested,” [Mortazavi said](#), “He certainly wouldn’t be able to say it on national television.”

### Regime Legitimacy

Some of the regimes’ attempts to suppress protestors included mass arrests, brute force, and internet disruptions. As stated earlier in the panel, the Women, Life, Freedom movement is not the first protest in Iran. Emily Blout walked through the 2009, 2018, and 2019 protests, along with the Women, Life, Freedom protests and put into context the internet and infrastructure capabilities. As she did, [she wondered](#) “the regime right now lacks key pillars of legitimacy. It lacks legitimacy through the rule of law. It lacks legitimacy through religion. So what else is standing up this regime?”

The 2009 Green Movement protests centered around that year’s presidential election.<sup>7</sup> “They just wanted to see the government respond to and give a good response to what they saw as fraud and their own disenfranchisement,” [Blout explained](#). The protests lasted about a week before the regime violently subdued the protestors and many of these crackdowns were recorded and posted online for the international community to see. “And so this was really a point of learning and point of informing the regime . . . they started to understand that we need to be able to control the narrative and we need to instigate more repressive measures,” Blout said.

Blout also described the regime’s attempt to revise the historical record online to hide what really happened. They tried to make the protests look like the work of outside actors, rather than a response to the regime’s actions. [Blout explained](#), “So this started informing this thinking of, look, we need a way to contain this. We need a way to suppress dissent, suppress these protests, but also to contain information going out. We need to control this. And so, this is where this idea for a national internet comes into play.” To help control the narrative and provide better internet connectivity to citizens, the regime started a program called the National Information Network (NIM).<sup>8</sup>

The 2018 protests were in response to rising food and fuel prices,<sup>9</sup> and in 2019 the economic protests due to rising fuel prices started again.<sup>10</sup> [Blout stated](#) these protests were more violent than before. “Now we’re seeing violence. We’re seeing open calls for the demise of the regime, open calls for the demise of the supreme leader . . . all of this news is getting circulated through social media and specifically telegram and Instagram.” The regime used these protests to call for Ahmed News’ shutdown on Telegram. “But the regime always capitalizing on opportunities here used this as an opportunity to declare the ban on Telegram and Instagram completely,” [Blout went on to say](#). “As you can imagine, nearly half the population was on Telegram using it every day for business for your life. And so people were obviously mad, disenfranchised and actually suffered, but still the government enacted this ban.”

The regime had the objective of enabling a national intranet, but a functioning intranet requires content, so the regime forced Iranians to migrate. Having all its citizens use their national intranet allowed for better speech surveillance. In 2019 the Iranian government shut down the international internet, cutting off communication between Iranian people and the rest of the world. This functioning intranet allowed for government services, banking, and internal communications within the country.

Just as protestors adapted to fighting against the regime by way of new technologies, after each protest the Iranian government also learned from the tactics it used and improved its cyber capabilities. [Blout said](#), “So in the last 2022 [protest], VPNs didn’t even work. That’s the kind of control that the Iranian government has.”

## Failed movement or a way to move forward

[General McKenzie](#) stated the main priority of Iranian leadership is the preservation of the theocratic regime. “In many ways, there are false hopes, and we draw much more hope from them here than people actually do in Iran,” he said. “We need to remember they see themselves as a revolutionary regime and they’re determined that their revolution is going to outlive the revolutionary generation without significant change.”

[Mortazavi](#) had her own thoughts about the protest, “I don’t think the protests failed. Yes, some thought back then that this was going to bring an imminent fall of the regime. There were many activists who referred to it as a revolution.” She described the 2022 protests as being “essentially a genie came out of the bottle during those protests” and that it’s impossible to put it back in and that the protests brought a massive cultural change that might have taken decades to accomplish before.

[Commander Cale](#) also thought that just because the protests died down without regime change, these protests could act as a pivot point to help influence the next movement,

which she said, “is no doubt coming.” However, image is key for the regime. “It’s learning how to better weaken the population. It’s learning how to better survive,” [Blout explained](#). “But we are learning too, and there’s lessons we shouldn’t take from these protests. And the lesson, I would say the big lesson here is we see this through the span of 15-year history, is that digitally networked media is a soft spot for this regime.”

Hundreds of protesters were killed, injured, and punished for their public demonstrations. [Mortazavi said](#), “The state has increasingly been showing that they’re willing and capable to use more violence, more sort of repressive methods to crack down on these protests or wrap them up as they say, as soon as possible.”

Emily Blout emphasized that the leadership in Iran is very concerned with its image on the world stage and how it is presented. [She said](#), “So we should do everything possible to exploit that weakness, that soft spot, because you need to do this to allow the people of Iran to realize freedom.”

## The Big 3 Takeaways:

- **Diversifying U.S. Strategies with Iran:** To effectively navigate the complexities of Iran’s regional influence and nuclear ambitions, the U.S. must develop a multifaceted strategy that extends beyond the reliance on sanctions. A diversified approach should include diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, and support for non-military solutions that address underlying socio-economic and political issues. Such strategies would be more apt to manage the nuanced challenges posed by Iran, fostering stability and promoting constructive dialogue.
- **Iran’s Calculated Nuclear Strategy:** Iran continues to enhance its nuclear capabilities, strategically positioning itself as a nuclear threshold state rather than pursuing the acquisition of nuclear weapons. This approach allows Iran to strengthen its bargaining power internationally while maintaining a stance that stops short of full nuclear armament. The international community must recognize this nuanced posture in their diplomatic negotiations, focusing on de-escalation and preventive diplomacy to manage Iran’s ambitions effectively.
- **Increasing Challenges to Regime Legitimacy in Iran:** The Iranian government faces mounting challenges in maintaining its legitimacy amid widespread civil unrest and economic turmoil. The harsh suppression of protests, coupled with an inability to manage escalating economic issues such as inflation and unemployment, has exacerbated public dissent. This growing legitimacy crisis suggests that Iran might continue experiencing significant internal strife, which could impact its regional and international strategies. Addressing these domestic issues through policy reforms and genuine engagement with public grievances is crucial for the stability of the regime.

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**General (Ret) General Kenneth F. McKenzie**, Executive Director of GNSI and former Commander of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)

*Fireside Chat:*

**Mohsen Milani, PhD**, Executive Director of the Center for Strategic & Diplomatic Studies, at the University of South Florida

**Vali Nasr, PhD**, the Majid Khadduri Professor of Middle East Studies and International Affairs at Johns Hopkins University

*Panel 1:*

**Arman Mahmoudian, PhD**, (Moderator) Resident Research Fellow, GNSI and Adjunct Faculty of USF Judy Genshaft Honors College at the University of South Florida

**Sanam Vakil, PhD**, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

**Major General Sean Salene**, Director for Strategy, Plans and Policy (J5), USCENTCOM

**Alex Vatanka**, Director of Iran Program and Senior Fellow, Black Sea Program at the Middle East Institute

*Panel 2:*

**Sina Azodi, PhD** (Moderator) Visiting Scholar and Professorial Lecturer at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs

**Barbara Slavin**, Journalist and Distinguished Fellow at the Stimson Center

**Dario Teicher**, Arms Control and Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) Programs Manager, USCENTCOM

**Kelsey Davenport**, Director for Nonproliferation Policy at the Arms Control Association

*Panel 3:*

**Raheleh Dayerizadeh, PhD**, (Moderator) Assistant Director for the Education Abroad Office and Adjunct Faculty at USF

**Commander Nicole Cale**, Iran Strategist, J51, U.S. Special Operations Command

**Emily Blout, PhD**, Senior Visiting Research Fellow, International Institute for Counterterrorism, Reichman University

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Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> "Resolution 2231 (2015) on Iran Nuclear Issue." United Nations Security Council, accessed May 5, 2024, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/2231/background>
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