

# A 2024 Guide to Assessing Resiliency and Resistance in Iran



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# A 2024 GUIDE TO ASSESSING RESILIENCY AND RESISTANCE IN IRAN

## ABSTRACT

This essay applies a data-driven and human-centric methodology to examine resiliency and resistance aspects in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It applies a four-phase process to analyze state resiliency, assess resistance to governance, identify various resistance movements, and provide possible options for an external actor to influence Iran’s stability or to support resistance to the Islamic Republic. The methodologies utilized in this essay were previously published by *Small Wars and Insurgencies* and *Expeditions with the Marine Corps University Press*.<sup>1</sup> In analyzing Iran, the data finds the Islamic Republic is a fragile regime governing a state with multiple and deep societal divisions. Resistance in Iran has great potential but external support to the Islamic State also has potential. Support for a reform movement akin to the Green Path of Hope could prove decisive.

## KEYWORDS

resistance, resilience, irregular warfare, Iran, Islamic Republic

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Burrell and John Collision, “A Guide for Measuring Resiliency and Resistance,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 14 Dec. 2023; Robert S. Burrell and John Collision, “Assessing Resistance for the Purpose of Informing International Policy,” *Expeditions with Marine Corps University Press*, 9 Jan. 2024.



Illustration 1: Protesters chant slogans during a demonstration over the death of Mahsa Amini who was detained by the morality police, in Tehran, Iran, on Sept. 21, 2022<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The sudden death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024 may provide an opportunity to usher in a new destiny for the Iranian people. Many considered the hard-liner to be the Supreme Leader Khamenei's enforcer in consolidating the clerics' power through the executions of dissidents and the jailing of political prisoners. Raisi mobilized America's rivals by pursuing a military alliance with Russia and economic ties with China to weaken the grip of Western political and commercial dominance in the region. The former president was the mastermind of a proxy-based militarization campaign to make a Western presence in the Middle East so costly that the United States and its allies would withdraw. Despite the recent escalation of hostilities, the United States remains steadfast in maintaining a forward presence to strengthen regional partnerships and protect vital trade routes.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been a destabilizing force in the Middle East since its ascension to power after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Iranian leadership has provoked violent conflict and destructive activities to assert its hegemonic aspirations.<sup>3</sup> Iran's government is a complex blending of theocratic and political elements that pursues expanding Islamification in conformity with "Khomeinism," a radicalized ideology to reassert Shi'ism as the dominant Islamic moral authority.<sup>4</sup> Tehran views the United States and Israel as their main threats and focuses their foreign policy on eliminating their regional influence.<sup>5</sup> With a relatively small regular military,

2 Photo by Voice of America, published by the U.S. Government, and free of copyright. Found at <https://www.voanews.com/a/injured-iranian-protester-believes-freedom-democracy-will-prevail/7260934.html>, and accessed on 2 April 2024.

3 U.S. Department of State, "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," Iran Action Group Report, pp. 11-18. Found at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Outlaw-Regime-2020-A-Chronicle-of-Irans-Destabilizing-Activity.pdf> and accessed 23 May 2024.

4 Ali Parchami, "An Iranian Worldview: The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies: Special Issue on Strategic Culture* (2022): 9-15.

5 U.S. Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Background and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report R47321, Washington, DC,

the regime relies on specialized forces to lead a network of proxies that engage in surrogate terrorism, political agitation, and paramilitary violence as the main instruments of power projection.<sup>6</sup>

The Islamic Republic's June 2024 presidential elections are a clear sign of the underlying resentment harbored by a dissatisfied Iranian electorate. The Republic's Guardian Council (a conservative 12-member oversight board staunchly dedicated to the Supreme leader) hand-picked the candidates. Of the six selected, five were hard-line proteges of the Supreme leader, with only one moderate capable of policy reforms. The Supreme Leader urged the people to vote in a symbolic gesture to strengthen his mandate, but frustrated with the lack of choice and previous electoral fraud, voter turnout was the lowest ever recorded since the republic's formation (40%).<sup>7</sup> Iranians striving for meaningful governmental change supported the moderate Masoud Pezeshkian, while others desiring the status quo supported the conservative Saeed Jalili. The first phase of the election narrowed the field to these two candidates who will compete in a run-off election.

Tehran's low governance performance and public skepticism pose a significant dilemma for the Islamic Republic. Strategic decision-makers should assess the resilience of the Islamic Republic of Iran by examining its governance performance, perceived legitimacy, and resistance potential. Pezeshkian is open to a renewed dialogue with the West to improve relations, ease sanctions, and generate a new nuclear deal. Jalili considers Western nations untrustworthy and looks to China and Russia for partnerships and assistance. Considering the potential sea change in Iranian politics, now poses an opportune moment to review Western foreign policies. Should the West promote: (1) a more resilient Islamic Republic if Pezeshkian is elected, (2) support resistance to the Islamic Republic in favor of governmental reforms irrespective of the election results, or (3) actively shape the strategic environment and defer to a future opportunity? A comprehensive assessment of the resilience metrics and exploring resistance strategies may lead U.S. policymakers to a more effective approach.

Determining the resilience of, and resistance to, Iran's governance system warrants a comprehensive analysis supported by a fact-based methodology (resiliency deals with the Islamic Republic's ability to overcome adversity imposed from internal or external subversion, coercion and/or aggression; resistance deals with Iranian society's, the population's, or a subgroup's opposition to malign indigenous power structures or to external occupation). Such an analysis and assessment can better inform DoD activities, force posture, and interagency collaboration to achieve U.S. national objectives, not just in the case of war but in competition. It leverages analytical data from top universities, financial institutions, governmental agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to inform a four-phase process. Phase one measures state resiliency, resistance to the same, and assesses the likely success of external support to either resilience or resistance. Phase two identifies prevalent or influential resistance organizations within the state, and then categorizes these organizations across a continuum to classify their general nature. Phase three assesses one of those resistance movements, the Green Path of Hope, by taking a deeper look at leadership, motivation, operating environment, organization, and activities. Phase four analytically assesses the information gathered to make recommendations concerning potential external support in another state's intrastate conflict.<sup>8</sup>

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April 22, 2024: 11-13. Found at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47321>, accessed May 30, 2024.

6 Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, and Becca Wasser, "The Iran Threat Network (ITN): Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships," Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021: 7.

Found at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4231.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4231.html), accessed on September 7, 2023.

7 Maziar Motamedi "Iran heads to presidential run-off on July 5 amid record low turnout," Ajazeera News, June 29, 2024. Found at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/29/iran-poised-for-presidential-run-off-in-tight-race>

8 This resistance and resilience methodology developed by Robert S. Burrell and John Collison. The foundational publications of this approach are found in Robert S. Burrell and John Collison "Assessing Resistance for the Purpose of Informing Inter-

## PHASE ONE: MEASURING IRAN'S RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

In this assessment, we present percentages based on internationally recognized and publicly available statistics. At its heart, Iran's significance as a case study for measuring resiliency and resistance lies in its potential for: (a) possible uses of external support to increase the Islamic Republic's resiliency and (b) possibilities for subversion and destabilization of the Islamic Republic by a competitor.<sup>9</sup>

### *Measuring Iran's Resilience*

Historical geopolitical, ideological, and demographic factors govern Iran's resilience and resistance posture. The Islamic Republic originated following Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's overthrow of the monarchy during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 – a reaction to perceived immoral westernization and secularization efforts. Iran shifted to a spiritual, social order with an autocratic rule of the clerics that fused politics and religion.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, conservative Shi'a clerics established a theocratic republic. The ultimate political authority remains in the form of a religious scholar referred to as the Supreme Leader, who remains accountable to a popularly elected 88-member body of clerics.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Iranian government is a complex blending of theocratic and political elements to protect the regime, advance the Islamic Shi'a worldview, and exert regional influence to supplant Western influence.<sup>12</sup> The people of Iran and the Muslim Shi'a community at large have mixed views on the regime's strategic goals and professed legitimacy.<sup>13</sup> The clerics profess that the Islamic Republic is the only righteous governance path within the Islamic world. Theocratic truth-seekers advocated a sociopolitical sect based upon traditional Shi'a jurisprudence, believing that global liberation movements against colonialist oppressors were a justified obligation.<sup>14</sup>

While the Islamic State attempts to maintain the image of a homogeneous and monolithic culture to validate its ambitions for religious, political, and military hegemony in the Middle East, it remains quite fractious in terms of demographics, the United States Institute for Peace estimates that 61% of the population is Persian, Azeri 16%, Kurd 10%, and other minorities making up 13%.<sup>15</sup> Languages are even more diverse. A census of the country in 1991 reported an estimated 46.2% speaking Persian (or Farsi), 20.6% Azerbaijani, 10% Kurdish, 8.9% Luri, 7.2% Gilaki and Mazandarani, and 7% others.<sup>16</sup> In terms of religion, however, the population

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national Policy," *Expeditions with Marine Corps University Press*, 9 Jan. 2024; as well as Robert S. Burrell and John Collison, "A Guide for Measuring Resiliency and Resistance," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 14 December 2023. For a quick look, see Robert S. Burrell, "A Guide for Measuring Resiliency," *Irregular Warfare Initiative*, 16 January 2024, found at <https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/a-guide-for-measuring-resiliency/>.

9 We have decided not to include measuring the Islamic Republic's potential to implement a state-sponsored resistance strategy to foreign occupation, as occupation of Iranian territory remains likely.

10 Diane Zorri, Houman Sadri, and David Ellis, "Iranian Proxy Groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen: A Principal-Agent Comparative Analysis," Joint Special Operations University Report 20-5, (2020): 15-16.

11 See the CIA World Factbook at <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/#introduction>, accessed on 2 April 2023.

12 Zorri et al., 16-18.

13 Seth G. Jones, "Containing Iran," Center for Strategic and International Studies (January 2020): 44-47; found at [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200110\\_Jones\\_ContainingIran\\_WEB\\_v2.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200110_Jones_ContainingIran_WEB_v2.pdf), accessed on May 26, 2024.

14 Ibid.

15 "Iran Minorities 2: Ethnic Diversity," *The Iran Primer*, 3 September 2013, found at <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-2-ethnic-diversity> accessed on 2 April 2024.

16 "Languages of Iran," Wikipedia, found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_Iran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Iran), accessed on 2 April 2024.

remains fairly unified with 90-95% Shi'a, 5-10% Sunni, and 1% others.<sup>17</sup>



Illustration 2: Map of Iran<sup>18</sup>

Governance indicators demonstrate that the Islamic State is ineffective and fragile, causing instability that a resistance movement may exploit. The following percentiles rank Iran in comparison to other countries in the world, with 0% as the lowest and 100% as the highest. Iran ranks poorly in most respects: 8.7% in government accountability; 8.49% in political stability; 18.4% in government effectiveness; 4.25% in regulation efficiency; 17.45% in rule of law; and 14.15% in control of corruption. These indicators have worsened from 2017 to 2022 (implying that the resiliency of the Islamic Republic is worsening).<sup>19</sup> On a similar note, the *Fund for Peace's* state fragility index, ranks Iran in the bottom third of stable nations at 40 of 179 (or 22.35% in comparison with others) and just in-between that of Angola and Bangladesh.<sup>20</sup>

17 *Iran 2022 International Religious Freedom Report*, (Department of State, 2022) found at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>, accessed on 2 April 2022.

18 Map from CIA World Factbook and free of copyright.

19 Data derived from The World Bank at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/worldwide-governance-indicators>, accessed on 2 April 2024.

20 See Fragile States Index, found at <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>, accessed on 2 April 2024. All following percentiles are indicated as percentages in comparison with other nations.

The following chart illustrates Iran’s governance factors in comparison with Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia

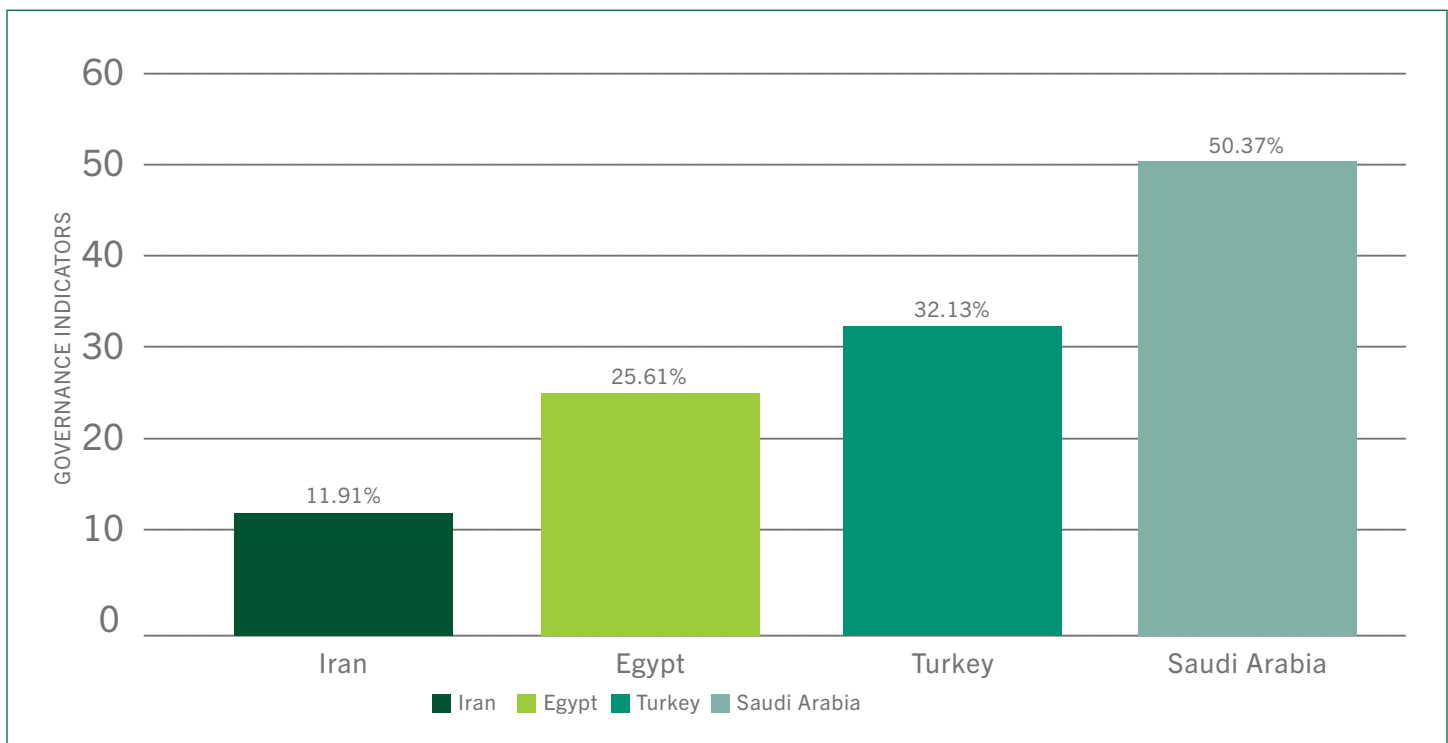


Illustration 3: Comparison of Governance in the Middle East<sup>21</sup>

The governance data exposes the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the Iranian government, but evaluating the national will to fight for and retain current systems of authority and governance proves more subjective. Popular support for Tehran is marred by human rights abuses, severe restrictions on personal freedoms, a corrupt judiciary, and violent suppression of dissenting views.<sup>22</sup> These abuses foster resentment within the population and significantly degrades national morale and confidence in Iranian leadership.

To measure national morale, we lean on the work of Delbert C. Miller.<sup>23</sup> The following table utilizes Miller’s analysis methods and his five categories (as closely as possible in line with available polling) to determine the national morale of the Islamic State. (1) We consider Shi’a Persian as the ingroup of Iran, in which when polled, 85% of the Iranian population appears to support its cultural, religious, and linguistic dominance.<sup>24</sup> (2) In the

21 Illustration by authors. All states measured utilizing the same indicators. For more information on the method, see Robert S. Burrell and John Collision, “A Guide for Measuring Resiliency and Resistance.”

22 *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iran*, (Department of State, 2023) See Executive Summary at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/iran/>, accessed on 25 May 2024.

23 Several of scholars have attempted to create rubrics for analyzing the will of military units and the nation as a whole. One study by RAND in 2018 shows promise as a method but remains overly oriented on particular military units, and not the population itself. Another in the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* in 2022 expands upon the former study, which focused on military units, and takes a more strategic look at national militaries as a whole. See Ben Connable, et. al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, (RAND Corporation: Santa Monica, CA, 2018), as well as Ben Connable, “Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will-to-Fight Models,” *Journal of Advanced Military Studies: Special Issue on Strategic Culture* (2022): 153-167. We have chosen to use the work by Delbert C. Miller, “The Measurement of National Morale,” *American Sociological Review* 6, no. 4 (1 August 1941): 487–498.

24 “Iranians’ Attitudes toward Political Systems: A 2022 Survey Report,” *GAMAAN: The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran*, 31 March 2022, found at <https://gamaan.org/2022/03/31/political-systems-survey-english/>, accessed on 3 April 2024.



same study, most respondents wanted a change in governance, with 65% of the population supporting some type of resistance (either nonviolent protest or violent opposition) to change the current form of governance.<sup>25</sup> (3) In the third category concerning the competency of national leaders, an opinion poll in Iran in 2023 demonstrated that 80% of respondents prefer a democracy over the Islamic Republic.<sup>26</sup> (4) In terms of Iranian confidence in current resources to defend the interests of Persians, only 21% have limited trust in the Islamic Republic of Iranian Army and only 23% have limited trust for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, implying that trust in these national organizations remains relatively high, averaging 78%.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, (5) nearly 73% of those polled believe “religion must be separated from the state,” which directly opposes the current constitution upheld by the Islamic Republic and specifically identified as the national goal therein.<sup>28</sup> This data implies that only 27% of the population support the theocratic form of governance. Table 1 outlines all five factors used to assess national morale.

<b>FIVE FACTORS</b>	<b>RATING</b>	<b>%</b>
1. Belief in the Superiority of the Social Structure in the Ingroup	High	85%
2. Degree and Manner by Which Personal Goals Are Identified with National Goals	Low	35%
3. Judgements of the Competence of National Leaders	Low	20%
4. Belief that Resources Are Available to Hurl Back Any Threats to the Ingroup	High	78%
5. Confidence in the Permanence of the National Goal	Low	27%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>49%</b>

Table 1: Basic Factors of National Morale in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Tallying the six factors of governance (accountability, stability, effectiveness, regulation controls, rule of law and controlling corruption) and adding two other aspects of national morale and state fragility equally (eight metrics in total), the resiliency of the Islamic Republic of Iran is estimated at 17.85%.

### *Measuring the Potential for External Support to Iran’s Resiliency.*

To measure the potential of external support to the Islamic Republic, we subjectively examine: (1) its relations with nearby regional states, (2) its broader international relations, and (3) its relations with nonstate groups.

25 We have taken the inverse of this number to determine the populations support for, and personal identification with, the goals of the Islamic Republic. Ibid.

26 “Opinion Survey Reveals Overwhelming Majority Rejecting Iran’s Regime,” *Iran International*, 2 April 2023, found at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302036145>, accessed on 3 April 2024.

27 See Ali Alfoneh, “Iran: Trust in Family, Distrust in Government,” *Iran Media Review*, 1 March 2024, found at <https://agsiv.org/iran-trust-in-family-distrust-in-government/>, accessed on 3 April 2024. We have taken the inverse of these polls and averaged them to determine the opinion of the ingroup that national resource (the military) can hurl back enemies, equating to 78%

28 Ali Alfoneh, “Official Government Poll: 72.9% of Iranians Favor Separation of Religion and State,” *Iran Media Review*, 1 March 2024, found at <https://agsiv.org/iran-trust-in-family-distrust-in-government/>, accessed on 27 February 2024. Also see the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, found at <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/1979/en/72964>, accessed on 5 April 2024. Again, we have taken the inverse of this poll, which implies that 27% of Iranians agree with the principles of the Iranian Republic as a religious state.

The Middle East is locked in a historical struggle for influence and legitimacy between four formidable powers – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey.<sup>29</sup> Tehran’s grand strategy appears to currently focus on their proxy militancy campaign against the West while nurturing diplomatic ties to ease sectarian tensions with Sunni neighbors. However, a fractured hegemonic competition in the Middle East among Iran, Turkey, and an Arab coalition is likely to endure.<sup>30</sup> Iran has a formal alliance with Syria. Syria is the key to commercial and military access across the fertile crescent and has potential of providing direct and/or indirect support to enhance the Islamic Republic’s resilience. However, Syria’s current government has serious issues of internal unrest and is unlikely to offer much external support to the Islamic Republic. A continued U.S. presence in the region backed by a NATO alliance, particularly Turkey, is expected to challenge Iranian hegemonic intentions. Iran’s goals for an Islamic religious unification could solicit regional sponsors, but it remains equally likely that it will stand alone. Consequently, Iran’s bilateral relations in the Islamic world make the chances of receiving external support for the resiliency of the Islamic Republic at 50%.

The Islamic Republic’s resiliency is also directly linked to international geopolitics. A direct and protracted military confrontation with the United States and its allies remains the greatest threat to the regime’s resilience. Tehran’s proxy strategy is primarily focused on eliminating Western influence by driving out Israel and the United States, with their allies.<sup>31</sup> The stratagem is to inspire a withdrawal of Western forces to generate political space for pro-Iranian factions.<sup>32</sup> Simultaneously, Tehran is strengthening relationships with China and Russia to open trade channels, share military resources, and enhance collective defense measures to openly challenge the U.S. military presence and mitigate the impact of Western economic sanctions.<sup>33</sup> China has a friendly relationship with Iran and signed a cooperation agreement in 2021.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Russia has military cooperation with Iran and strategic interests in the region.<sup>35</sup> Pursuing these neoteric political ties to these global powers may provide Iran with more substantial resilience against Western influence.

Iranian resilience is linked to global commerce in addition to its growing ties with Russia and China. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Forces (QF) – with their proxy allies have postured to either protect or hinder key global lines of communication. Many trade partners desire a stable Iran to access

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29 Zorri et al.,16.

30 Jones, 18.

31 Kenneth Pollack, “Iran’s Grand Strategy Has Fundamentally Shifted,” *Foreign Policy*, August 15, 2023, 1. Found at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/15/irans-grand-strategy-has-fundamentally-shifted/>, accessed September 22, 2023.

32 Michael Eisenstadt, “Deterring Iran in the Gray Zone: Insights from Four Decades of Conflict,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy/Policy Notes* 103, 2021: 18. Found at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deterring-iran-gray-zone-insights-four-decades-conflict>, accessed on August 18, 2023.

33 Congressional Research Service, “Iran’s Foreign Defense Policies,” 2.

34 Maziar Motamedi, “Iran Says 25-Year China Agreement Enters Implementation Stage,” *Aljazeera*, 15 January 2022, found at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/15/iran-says-25-year-china-agreement-enters-implementation-stage>, accessed on 3 April 2024.

35 Emil Avdaliani, “Iran and Russia Enter A New Level of Military Cooperation,” *Stimson Center*, 6 March 2024. Found at <https://www.stimson.org/2024/iran-and-russia-enter-a-new-level-of-military-cooperation/> and accessed on 3 April 2024.

the nation's energy resources, leverage its important geostrategic position, and advance the Shi'a religious movement with the subsequent windfall. Iran belongs to several organizations, including the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). OPEC may have an interest in supporting the Islamic Republic in times of need, but the ultimate Iranian strategic goal is to control energy access in the Persian Gulf rather than share it with other OPEC members. This strategic objective is shared with China which views Iran as a key strategic partner in their Belt and Road Initiative. Yemen offers crucial access to maritime lines of communication via the Red Sea and provides a Shi'a bulwark on the theater's Saudi-Wahabbist southern flank. In summation, Iran's relationships with powerful external states, like China and Russia, as well as its geostrategic position and economic resources, make it a strong candidate for securing external support for resiliency, assessed as 75%.<sup>36</sup>

Several non-state groups have vested interests in the Islamic Republic, with the potential to support its resiliency. Some have described these pro-Iranian proxies as the Iranian Threat Network (ITN), an alliance of surrogates and partners that conduct activities to destabilize, disrupt, or destroy anti-Iranian entities throughout the Middle East.<sup>37</sup> The IRGC-QF recruits, trains, equips, advises, and often controls the ITN at the behest of Tehran and is integral to the Islamic Republic's formal decision-making process.<sup>38</sup> The organization has been traditionally covert, but Iran is increasingly becoming more open in acknowledging these groups publicly.<sup>39</sup> The IRGC is skilled in leveraging common grievances to foster rapport and bring groups into the fold, especially during global social movements like the Arab Spring. Tehran endeavors to appeal to ethnic and religious minorities in the region whose disenfranchisement allows Tehran to recruit fighters.<sup>40</sup> Iran considers the ITN a cost-effective force multiplier to complement other asymmetric capabilities, such as ballistic missiles and drones, to compensate for conventional shortfalls.<sup>41</sup> The IRGC-QF directly or indirectly supports the ITN and operates in several countries and all domains—air, sea, land, and cyber.<sup>42</sup> The ITN includes a dozen major organizations: Al-Astar Brigades in Bahrain; Kataib Hezbollah, Badr Organization, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq in Iraq; Hezbollah in Lebanon; Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Palestinian Territories; Famiyoun Brigade, Zainabiyoun Brigade, Quwat al-Ridha, and Baqir Brigade in Syria; and the Houthi movement in Yemen.<sup>43</sup> While these violent resistance movements currently receive support from Tehran, relationships within the ITN can be volatile and shifts in allegiances or support fluctuate (see illustration). However, this network of established allegiances enhances the potential for nonstate support to Iran's resiliency, assessed at 75%.

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36 Pollack, "Iran's Grand Strategy Has Fundamentally Shifted," 2.

37 Ariane M. Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, and Becca Wasser, *The Iran Threat Network (ITN): Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships*, (RAND Corporation, 14 April 2021), 2.

38 Tabatabai et. al., 8.

39 Ibid., 5.

40 Ibid., 6.

41 Ibid., 5.

42 Ibid., 3.

43 Kali Robinson and Will Merrow, "Iran's Regional Armed Network," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 31 January 2024, found at <https://www.cfr.org/article/irans-regional-armed-network>, accessed on 3 April 2024.



Illustration 4: Notable Iran-Backed Militias, as of October 2023<sup>44</sup>

In summary, the geo-political situation in the region is volatile and precarious making external support to resiliency unpredictable. While Iran is generally self-sufficient and without the need for foreign aid to enhance resiliency, Tehran has a network of potential partners that could be leveraged in times of crisis; these include the possibility of regional, international, and nonstate sponsors. We average these three metrics to find the potential of external sponsorship to the Islamic Republic at 66.7%.

### *Measuring the Potential for Domestic Resistance in the Islamic Republic*

In the past two decades, nonviolent and violent resistance in Iran has proven endemic. Extensive data exists to measure the potential for internal resistance to the authority of the Islamic Republic. This data ranks Iran in comparison with other nations, with 0% indicating little to no intrastate resistance to authority and 100% indicating the highest. Using this dataset, the potential for resistance to the Islamic State of Iran is quite high: (a) in terms of current governance not adhering to the rule of law, 82.38%; (b) in political instability, 91.19%; (c) in the perception of the Republic not controlling corruption, 83.05%; (d) in a dismal record of political rights, 79.26%; (e) in not respecting civil liberties, 88.60%, and (f) in its inability to regulate the shadow economy, 22.15%.<sup>45</sup>

44 Ibid. Per the Council of Foreign Relations policy, it grants free-of-charge access to content.

45 *The Global Economy*, found at <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/>, accessed on 24 June 2024.

In addition to this, over the past two decades, nonviolent and violent resistance in Iran has proven endemic. Between 2019 and 2024, over 23,000 acts of violence have occurred in Iran with 11,324 fatalities.<sup>46</sup> Further, twelve major nonviolent protests occurred between the years 2017-2023 in Tehran, five of which garnered a violent response from the regime.<sup>47</sup> Between the years 2017 and 2020, 39 acts of violent terrorism occurred in Iran by numerous non-state groups.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, in 2024, the *Global Peace Index* places Iran as 133 out of 163 (or 81.60% unpeaceful in comparison with others).<sup>49</sup> As well, *Freedom House* ranks Iran categorically as “unfree” and one of the worst at 89% in comparison with others.<sup>50</sup> Lastly, the CIA routinely assesses nations in terms of food insecurity, but Iran is not on the list; making the threat of food insecurity only a 25% factor in potential resistance.<sup>51</sup> Averaging nine of the preceding data figures equally, the Islamic Republic scores 71.36% in resistance potential to current authority, implying it is ripe for regime change. The following figure illustrates Iran’s resistance potential in comparison with other Middle Eastern states

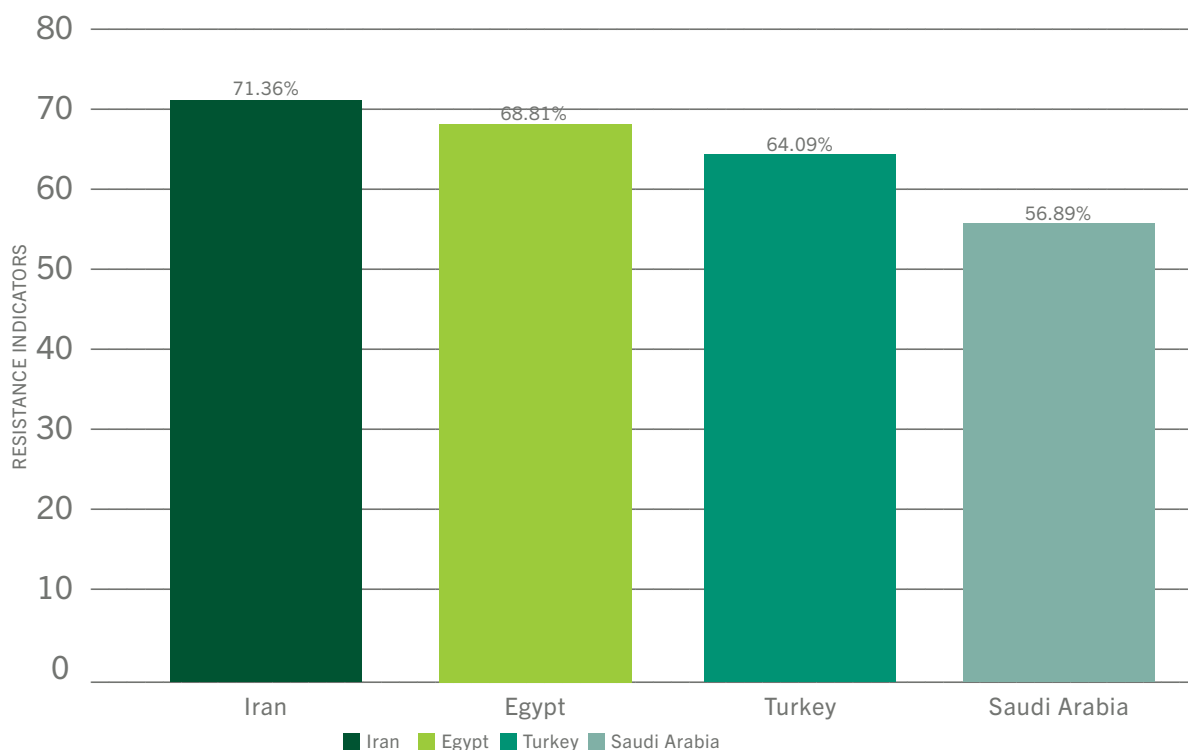


Illustration 5: Comparison of Resistance Potential in the Middle East<sup>52</sup>

*Measuring the Potential for External Support to Resistance in Iran*

The United States severed official relations with the Islamic Republic in 1979, following the attack on the U.S.

46 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, found at <https://acleddata.com>, accessed on 10 June 2024  
 47 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, found at <https://carnegieendowment.org/features/global-protest-tracker>, accessed on 14 June 2024.  
 48 Global Terrorism Database, found at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>, accessed on 3 April 2024.  
 49 Vision of Humanity’s Global Peach Index, found at <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>, accessed on 3 April 2024.  
 50 Freedom House, found at <https://freedomhouse.org/>, accessed on 3 April 2024.  
 51 In subjectively assessing the population’s access to food as a measure of resistance, We consider that if the country is on the CIA list, then = 75%, as food insecurity exists. If not, then = 25%, as the potential for food insecurity remains.  
 52 Illustration by authors. All states measured utilizing the same indicators. For more information on the method, see Robert S. Burrell and John Collision, “A Guide for Measuring Resiliency and Resistance.”

Embassy in Tehran.<sup>53</sup> It is safe to say that the United States could include subversion as a strategy for regime change and that other Western nations may support such a strategy as well. Additionally, the United States has referred to Iran as a threat in its *National Security Strategy*.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, we rank the Islamic Republic as a possible target of external support to resistance from an adversary as plausible due to adversarial diplomatic relations – making subversion an amenable foreign policy option (100%).<sup>55</sup>

The historical case study analysis completed by the Study of Internal Conflict at the Army War College poses four important indicators of possible success or failure of an insurgency in Iran.<sup>56</sup> (1) First, more than 15% or more of the Iranian population does not identify as citizen of the state. In the current environment, a scenario in which 15% of the population do not identify as a citizen of the Islamic Republic remains foreseeable, in which case the success of violent opposition could be as high as 96%.<sup>57</sup> (2) Second, more than 15% of the population does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the regime. It is fair to say more than 15% or more of the population does not believe current governance is legitimate, implying the success of resistance as high as 94%.<sup>58</sup> (3) Third, more than 15% of the population has meaningful communication with a resistance movement. This is possible and has certainly happened in the past with the Green Path of Hope discussed later. If such communication could be sustained to 15% of the population, the success of resistance is 96%. (4) Fourth, could a sanctuary exist for an armed component of resistance in a neighboring state. The answer here is likely yes. States that could provide sanctuary include Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and possibly others. The geography of Iran's isolated mountainous regions also supports insurgency potential. In either case, a sanctuary for armed resistance could equate to the definitive success of an insurgency.

Considering the preceding, we include three data points regarding external support to resistance potential: (1) plausibility of subversion by another nation state – 100%, (2) 15% of the population does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic – a 96% historical success rate of insurgency, and (3) the chance of one or multiple border states providing a resistance sanctuary – 75%.<sup>59</sup> Averaging these three metrics, we assess that external support to an Iranian-based resistance movement in the Islamic Republic has a possible success rate of 90.33%.

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53 Department of State, found at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-iran/>, accessed on 3 April 2020.

54 White House, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington D.C.: 2022), 11-12.

55 For this metric, we assess the following: (a) if strategic rival of the U.S. then 100%, (b) if not on good diplomatic terms with the U.S but not a declared rival then = 50%, (c) if on good diplomatic terms with the U.S. then = 25%, and (d) if U.S. ally then = 0%.

56 Robert S. Burrell and John Collision, "A Guide for Measuring Resiliency and Resistance." For more detailed information on this methodology, see chapter by Chris Mason, "Measuring and Quantifying State Fragility: Why Governments Lose Internal Conflicts and What That Means for Counterinsurgency," *Resilience and Resistance: Interdisciplinary Lessons in Competition, Deterrence, and Irregular Warfare*, edited by Robert S. Burrell (Joint Special Operations University Press: Tampa, FL, expected release in 2024).

57 One scholar made this assessment in 1993, "the formation of the Islamic Republic with ambiguous national and ethnic policies – which has coincided with the fall of the Soviet empire and rising national aspirations among numerous ethnic groups throughout the world – has exacerbated the ethnic tensions and ideological conflicts among the advocates of various modes of national and ethnic identities in Iran." See Ahmad Ashraf, "The Crisis of National and Ethnic Identities in Contemporary Iran." *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1993): 159–164. 163. Also see, Kian Sharifi "Iran's Clerical Ruler, Face 'Legitimacy Crisis' Ahead of Elections," *Radio Free Europe*, 22 February 2024. Found at <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-s-clerical-rulers-face-legitimacy-crisis-ahead-of-elections/32829440.html>, accessed on 3 April 2022.

58 Sanam Vakil, "Iran's Crisis of Legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs*, 28 September 2022.

59 We use multiple points of reference to analyze the relationship of neighboring countries Iran and look for the potential geographic regions for possible sanctuary inside the national boundaries or with a neighboring country. If (a) Iran has strong regional partnerships and resistance sanctuary from a neighbor appears unlikely = 0%; if (b) Iran has poor regional international relations but no resistance sanctuary appears possible = 25%; if (c) at least one regional partner might potentially offer a resistance sanctuary = 50%; if (d) multiple regional states could possibly offer resistance sanctuary = 75%.

### *Phase One: Summary*

In summation of phase one, based on the quantitative survey information and qualitative analysis presented, the Tehran regime has poor resiliency to indigenous threats (17.85%). Meanwhile, China, Russia and/or non-state actors have an above average chance to reinforce the resiliency of the Islamic Republic should they desire to do so (66.67%). At present, the prospect for internal resistance to the Islamic Republic has unrealized potential (71.36%), particularly due to the population's high desire for a change in governance. Due to historical, geographic, and political factors, the overall probability of external support to Iranian resistance is 90.33%.<sup>60</sup>

### **PHASE TWO: IDENTIFYING IRAN'S RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS**

Both nonviolent protest and violent revolution in Iran have a mixed record of success in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.<sup>61</sup> In short, Iranians have executed twelve major resistance campaigns from 1905 to 2023, three of which were successful in instilling governmental change (one violent and two nonviolent movements), a rate of 25%.

Currently, Tehran is dealing with several contemporary nonviolent resistance movements. Between 1990 and 2020, over 500,000 people mobilized on over a hundred occasions in the Islamic Republic, utilizing non-violent protest.<sup>62</sup> The vast majority of the protests desired political change, social change, and police reforms. In 2017, another two million people mobilized for Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's funeral procession, which also witnessed large numbers of protesters for governmental reform.<sup>63</sup> A key leader opposing the current governance is Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a member of the Green Path of Hope (also called Green Party or Green Movement). Mousavi, the former Prime Minister of Iran from 1981-1989, desires the end of clerical rule.<sup>64</sup> The mobilization concerning compulsory hijab laws is another consideration.<sup>65</sup> Following the death of Kurdish woman Jina Mahsa Amini, who was arrested over her wearing of the hijab and died in police custody in 2022, the group

60 Outside support would likely need to maintain secrecy however to protect the legitimacy of the resistance.

61 Harvard's Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) lists eleven major campaigns since 1905. (1) The nonviolent Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1906 successfully made changes to the monarchist regime of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah. (2) This reform was followed by a civil war from 1908-1909, in which Constitutionals forced Mohammad Ali Shah to abdicate in favor of his son. (3) From 1945-1946, the Azerbaijan People's Government, backed by the Soviet Union, unsuccessfully attempted to secede from Iran. (4) From 1977-1979, the generally nonviolent Iranian Revolution occurred which ousted Shah Reza Pahlavi from power. (5) Starting in 1979, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) conducted an insurgency with the goal of secession which officially ended in 1996 and NAVCO assesses as a failure. (6) From 1981 through 2001, Mujahidin-e-Khalig (MEK) carried out a Marxist insurgency which steadily lost popularity and failed. (7) In 1999, students from Tehran University, called the Tir 18 Riot for Democracy, attempted to bring about reforms in favor of more freedom, which President Mohammad Khatami suppressed with law enforcement and possibly militias. (8) Since 2005, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) has conducted an insurgency for Kurdish independence. Both Iran and Turkey have used military force against PJAK, but the conflict remains unresolved. (9) From 2009-2013, the aforementioned Green Path of Hope sought reforms to the Islamic Republic through nonviolent protest. NAVCO lists these efforts as achieving limited success. (10) From 2017-2018, the Dey protests occurred in the city of Mashad, opposing the Islamic Republic's theocratic system of governance, but failed to bring about change. (11) Another wave of nonviolent protests occurred called Bloody November between 2019-2020, again favoring more democratic rule failed. See <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/navco>. (12) Not listed by NAVCO due to its recency, the twelfth major campaign of resistance in Iran occurred in 2022-2023 following the death of the Kurdish woman Jina Mahsa Amini, which was suppressed without changes to governance. See, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Global Protest Tracker assesses over 10,000 Mahsa Amini protestors (the previously discussed Women, Life, Freedom movement). See Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Global Protest Tracker with location, dates, size, and duration of mass protests around the world at <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker>.

62 Harvard Dataverse, *Mass Mobilization Protest Data*, found at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/MMdata>, accessed on 13 Sep. 2023. Also see the Global Nonviolent Action Database by Swarthmore College <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.

63 Richard Spencer, "As Protest Flare, Iran Bids Farewell to Rafsanjani," *New York Times*, 10 January 2017.

64 Maryam Sinaiee, "Hundreds of Activists Support Mousavi's Call to End Clerical Rule," *Iran International*, 13 February 2023. Found online at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302132030>, accessed on 4 April 2024.

65 Thomas Erdbrink and Richard Pérez-Peña, "Iran Arrests 20 Tied to Protests Against Compulsory Islamic Veil," *New York Times*, 3 February 2018.

Women, Life, Freedom (including support from students of University of Tehran) has garnered widespread support and significant protester turnout both in Iran and abroad, winning the Freedom House Award in 2023.<sup>66</sup>

Several resistance organizations contest the Islamic Republic through violence, further alienating the Iranian people from their government and security establishment. Between 1989-2023, one-sided acts of violence have occurred throughout Iran resulting in 636 civilian deaths.<sup>67</sup> Violence between the Islamic Republic and armed groups has resulted in another 1,949 deaths.<sup>68</sup> Armed groups in Iran include: (1) the Islamic State, which Iran opposed in favor of its alliance with Syria; (2) Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni militant group of Baloch ethnicity in Iran’s south-eastern Sistan and Baluchestan Provinces; (3) Jondullah, another Sunni/Baloch militant group from which Jaish al-Adl derived; (4) Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), a Kurdish underground and militant group; (5) Mujahideen e Khalq (MEK), which started as an insurgency but essentially operates in the Iranian diaspora today and advocates change in Iran through nonviolent methods; (6) Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), a Kurdish militant group; and (7) Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), another Kurdish militant and politically-socialist group.

### Phase Two: Summary

In summary, several active resistance movements undermine the stability and legitimacy of the Iranian governance system. The following illustration organizes the various Iranian resistance organizations across a continuum, including nonviolent ones preferring legal forms of protest, nonviolent ones amenable to illegal forms of protest, and the insurgent groups. In the middle of the scale, the threat of rebellion, extended or limited in size and duration, persists in Iran but not currently realized. Additionally, on the far right of the scale, the known insurgent groups have yet to rise to the level of belligerency by exhibiting the functions of an opposing state.<sup>69</sup>

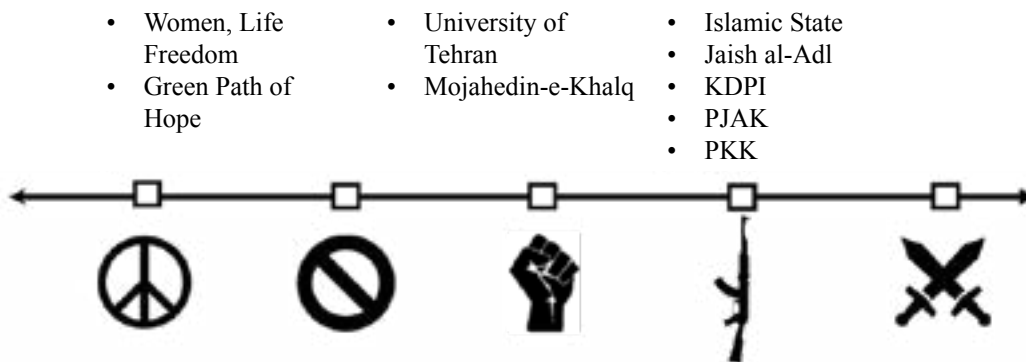


Illustration 6: Diagram of Iran’s Resistance Continuum

66 “Women, Life, Freedom’ Movement Wins 2023 Freedom House Award,” *Iran International*, 5 November 2023. Found online at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202305102647>, accessed on 4 April 2024.

67 Uppsala Conflict Data Program, found at <https://ucdp.uu.se/exploratory>, accessed 24 June 2024.

68 Ibid.

69 The figure illustrates significant Iranian resistance movements across a resistance continuum including nonviolent legal ones as Women, Life, Freedom and the Green Path of Hope. The epicenter for nonviolent but illegal forms of protest might derive from the University of Tehran. Another group that has changed its methods from violence to nonviolence but remains illegal includes the Marxist Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), which both Iraq and Iran have designated as a terrorist group. The threat of rebellion as a means of violent opposition but limited due to size and duration still endures in Iran; however, no groups currently fit that typology. Insurgent groups include the Islamic State, (6) Jaish al-Adl, (7) KDPI, (8) PJAK, and (9) the Marxist PKK. None of the insurgent groups have risen to the level of belligerency yet.



### PHASE THREE: ASSESSING IRAN’S RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

After identifying resistance movements along a resistance continuum, we have chosen to assess the potential of the Green Path of Hope.<sup>70</sup> In assessing the Green Path of Hope, we examine five attributes: (1) actors, (2) causes, (3) environment, (4) organization, and (5) actions.<sup>71</sup>

#### *Actors in the Green Path of Hope.*

The Green Path of Hope has a few influential leaders, most notably Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi (a Shi’a cleric, reformist and founder of the National Trust Party). The Green Path of Hope arose



Illustration 7: Green Path of Hope Campaign Rally in Tehran, 2009<sup>72</sup>

out of opposition to the 2009 election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. Opponents believed Ahmedinejad “suppressed civil liberties and political freedoms and politicized numerous social, cultural, and economic

70 Several studies and theories attempt to define ways of deconstructing and assessing political movements, insurgencies, or resistance organizations in general. See, David Collier, Jody LaPorte, and Jason Seawright, “Putting Typologies to Work: Concept Formation, Measurement, and Analytic Rigor,” *Political Research Quarterly*. 2012;(1).

71 We use the resistance methodology developed by the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and Johns Hopkins University, published by Jonathon Cosgrove and Erin Hahn, *Conceptual Typology of Resistance*, (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, circa 2018). For the definitions of each, see Jonathon Cosgrove and Erin Hahn, 6. The primary sources to complete this assessment include Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*, (Harvard University Press, 2016); Marco Rubio, “Why Protests Matter: The Battle between Authoritarianism and Democracy, a War We Must Win,” *Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (July 2020): 251–60; Faegheh Shirazi and Karin Wilkins. “Mapping the Political Discourse of the Iranian Green Movement,” *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East & Central Eurasia* 4 (1): 2016, 32–55.

72 Photo by mongostar available from wiki commons, found at [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4f/Iran\\_election\\_%282009%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4f/Iran_election_%282009%29.jpg), accessed pm 16 June 2024.

issues.”<sup>73</sup> A member of the Persian/Shi’a ingroup, Mousavi served as the Prime Minister from 1981-1989 and the senior advisor to the President from 1997-2005. Viewed as a dire threat to the Islamic Republic, Mousavi and Karroubi have been under house arrest since 2011.

Since the Iranian Revolution, Mir Hossein Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, have played active roles in both domestic politics and international diplomacy. Mousavi’s ally, Mehdi Karroubi, equally has strong relationships in politics domestically and internationally. Mousavi acts as a reformer who has sought to change the Islamic Republic from within.<sup>74</sup> Following the 2009 Presidential election, he disputed the results. He believes that the ideals of the Iranian Revolution were not achieved, and instead resulted in dictatorship. Mousavi has stated that “dictatorships in the name of religion are the worst kind of dictatorships.”<sup>75</sup> Due to their advanced ages (both are in their 80s), Mousavi and Karroubi’s ability to lead in a revived movement remains questionable. Meanwhile, Zahra Rahnavard is a bit younger (in her 70’s), charismatic, and committed. Highly educated, Rahnavard is the former Chancellor of Alzahra University and the author of 15 books.<sup>76</sup>

Determining membership of the Green Path of Hope remains elusive. During the protests in June of 2009, more than 100,000 protestors mobilized (some sources say millions were mobilized).<sup>77</sup> The Islamic Republic violently suppressed the Green Path of Hope in 2009 and 2010, placing 65 journalists in prison, conducted a trial on 250 activists, and sentenced some of these to death.<sup>78</sup> Due to inactivity, the commitment of the organizational members remains questionable today. Still, this organization derives significant support from the Persian/Shi’a community, including the Iranian diaspora and prominent exiles.<sup>79</sup>

Mir-Hossein Mousavi accepted partnerships with reformers and even conservatives alike, forming a broad coalition that made change possible. The Green Path of Hope cooperated with other resistance organizations, including the National Trust Party. Activists from the University of Tehran were appealing partners as well, and many students did support the 2009 protests.<sup>80</sup> However, the nature of the Green Path of Hope is nonviolence, which would make a partnership with any of Iran’s insurgent groups unlikely. Also, the base of Green Path of Hope is Persian/Shi’a, so cooperation with outgroups like the Kurds or Baloch populations is equally unlikely. The most potential might include cooperation with the Women, Life, Freedom movement.

Thus far, neither international organizations nor foreign nations have offered recognition or support for the Green Path of Hope. However, many Iranians in the diaspora have (and would likely continue) to support the movement. The Iranian diaspora can act as a spokesperson for the movement to the outside world. This includes traditional media, Iranian social media, and artists.<sup>81</sup> In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama denounced the regime’s violent repression of the Green Movement’s resistance. Other U.S. politicians wanted more American

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73 Parsa, 206

74 Shirazi and Wilkins, 51.

75 Parsa, 233.

76 Hamid Dabashi, “What happened to the Green Movement in Iran?,” Al Jazeera, 12 June 2013, found at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/6/12/what-happened-to-the-green-movement-in-iran>, accessed on 11 April 2023.

77 *Harvard Dataverse, Mass Mobilization Protest Data*, found at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/MMdata>, accessed on 9 April 2024. For a source stating millions, see Shirazi and Wilkins.

78 Parsa, 233-234.

79 Hamid Dabashi, “What happened to the Green Movement in Iran?,” Al Jazeera, 12 June 2013, found at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/6/12/what-happened-to-the-green-movement-in-iran>, accessed on 11 April 2023.

80 See Parsa, 215.

81 Shirazi and Wilkins.

overt support for the movement.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, however, external support, if offered, might best be accomplished through low visibility means, as a method of protecting the Green Path of Hope's domestic legitimacy.<sup>83</sup>

It remains difficult to assess how many Iranians would support the Green Path of Hope or similar movement today. However, a recent poll of Iranians inside the country taken in 2023 shows that 80% prefer democracy to the Islamic Republic.<sup>84</sup> This proves an enticing figure as anything over 15% of the population can prove decisive. However, how many Iranians would accept the potential risks of resistance activities remains undetermined.

### *Cause of the Green Path of Hope.*

Mir-Hossein Mousavi framed key grievances into a coherent narrative that leveraged shared emotions into a unified resistance effort. Democratic rule in Iran remains the population's prevailing desire. Mousavi ran for the presidential election in 2009 as a reformer and in direct opposition to Islamic conservatives retaining power. When the elections proved fraudulent, he sought mass protest to ensure voting mattered. To produce this, the Green Path of Hope coordinated several nonviolent activities. These included: (1) mass mobilization of protestors, (2) media attention, (3) graffiti on buses, street curbs, and public walls, and (4) stamping currency with antiregime slogans.<sup>85</sup> Following the repression from 2009-2011, the Green Path of Hope's resistance activities have faltered and have yet to reemerge under the same banner. However, democracy remains the predominant desire for most Iranians.

In the case of the Green Path of Hope, it desires a change in governance from an Islamic theocracy to a democracy.<sup>86</sup> In 2010, Mir-Hossein Mousavi stated three goals for the Green Movement: (1) a return to the original ideas of the Islamic Revolution for justice, independence, and freedom; (2) reexamine the Constitution to ensure protection of human, religious, moral, and national values; (3) and reforms which embody a continuation of the Iranian revolutionary spirit from the past, including the Constitutional Revolution, the Oil Nationalization Movement, and the Islamic Revolution.<sup>87</sup>

### *The Resistance Environment in Iran.*

Assessing the environment's influence or constraints on the Green Path of Hope's activities includes an evaluation of: (a) environmental, (b) governmental, (c) socio-political, (d) technological, and (e) relationship factors. In 2009, the leaders of the Green Movement had significant support from the Iranian people. Most of the protestors included women, students, urban-based residents, and those with access to the internet and social media. While large in numbers, the vast majority of these protestors were unorganized, untrained, but successfully assembled for six months. The protest momentum could not be sustained and the Islamic Republic suppressed the movement through force. Subsequently, other groups mobilized twelve significant protests

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82 Rubio, 251-252.

83 International support for the Green Path of Hope could erode its domestic legitimacy, particularly in light of U.S. interference in Iran's past domestic politics. Hooman Majd, "Think Again: Iran's Green Movement," *Foreign Policy*, 6 January 2024. Found online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/06/think-again-irans-green-movement/>, accessed on 9 April 2024.

84 "Opinion Survey Reveals Overwhelming Majority Rejecting Iran's Regime."

85 Shirazi and Wilkins, 33.

86 Resistance supports a cause that represents the collectively expressed rationales for opposition to authority, as well as the individual motivations for participating in such a group. The rationale for resistance consists of either a desire for sweeping changes in authority, transformation in society, or specified changes for individual groups and communities. Cosgrove and Hahn, 17-24.

87 Mir-Hossein Mousavi, "Outline of a New Program for the Green Movement," 15 June 2010. Found at <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/outline-of-a-new-program-for-the-green-movement-15-june-2010>, accessed on 9 April 2024.

occurring in years 2017-2020 with 5,000 or more persons mobilized each time.<sup>88</sup> Dissatisfaction with the regime explosively erupted during the Women, Life, Freedom protests in 2022 – implying a subsurface of Iranian nonviolent resistance remains.

As mobilization in Tehran akin to the Green Path of Hope will likely continue with nonviolent resistance, the physical geography of Iran has less impact on its potential success, making the space and information domains the most influential. As summarized by Shirazi and Wilkins, “contemporary media industries and technologies in Iran comprise a variety of communication possibilities through which protest participants have potential to engage and mobilize, but also risk surveillance and threat.”<sup>89</sup>

The Islamic Republic has several information tools to address the resistance narrative. The Supreme Leader can effectively use the religious pulpit to spread his message. In 2009, Tehran had little ability to limit or monitor internet and social media use. After the crackdown on the Green Path of Hope, it expended many resources to monitor and control Iranian citizens. Iran established the Iranian Cyber Police (FATA) in 2011 to monitor the internet. With the advice and assistance of the Chinese Communist Party, Tehran finished its National Information Network in 2019, which acts as a censorship apparatus. Western social media platforms (like Twitter) were replaced with Iranian ones to further government control. Virtual private networks (VPN) are now outlawed.<sup>90</sup> The government also has access to state-run media sources. It can monitor and block conventional forms of communications and has developed abilities to monitor and censor the internet. Nevertheless, the information environment retains opportunities for resistance to recruit, communicate, and organize, but it requires the use of modern tradecraft to succeed.

Tehran has an extensive and capable security network to suppress activists exposed by social media or other intelligence means. The Supreme Leader controls a national police force of about 260,000 personnel directly under the command of the Supreme Leader, which has aggressively exercised its authority to arrest, put on trial, and execute resistance members. It also has a morality police (or religious police) called Guidance Patrol to carry out extralegal acts. It can call out a paramilitary militia called Basij of 90,000 members to intimidate, bully, or attack opponents. Finally, it has the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of 250,000, well-trained in irregular methods of warfare. While all these capabilities combined appear somewhat intimidating, the loyalties of members within each organization in a domestic struggle, particularly within the ingroup, are not predetermined.<sup>91</sup>

The strength of nonviolent resistance, as demonstrated by the Green Path of Hope, lies in achieving change through popular support, which, ironically, the Islamic Republic’s repressive policies strengthen. Misagh Parsa, a professor at Dartmouth College, explored the possibilities of increased democratization in Iran; he assessed that “democratic force, currently demobilized, are certain to resurface and press for democratization as internal social, economic, and political contradictions converge.”<sup>92</sup> An organization like the Green Path of Hope may

88 For 2017-2020 protests see, Harvard Dataverse, *Mass Mobilization Protest Data*.

89 Shirazi and Wilkins, 39.

90 Blout.

91 Parsa, 206-243. Also see Majd’s “Think Again: Iran’s Green Movement.” Also see, paper delivered by Emily Blout, “Society in Flux: Exploring Iran’s Social Movements and Women’s Rights,” Paper presented at *The Iran Enigma*, University of South Florida, Global and National Security Institute, 10 April 2010 <https://www.usf.edu/gnsi/events/policy-dialogues-gnsi/>. Information presented by Blout derives from her book, *Media and Power in Modern Iran*, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2023). Personnel numbers of Iranian organizations taken from Wikipedia, 10 April 2024.

92 Parsa, 320.

achieve successful reforms when an opportune environment for governmental change presents itself.

### *Organization of the Green Path of Hope.*

Resistance can be generally categorized into two bins: (1) mass organization and (2) elite organizations.<sup>93</sup> Each has advantages and disadvantages. Mass organizations have few bars to entry for recruiting and take advantage of size to compete with authority. Mass proves an excellent archetype for non-violent protest, like social movements. However, a mass organization is difficult to train and control, easier for authorities to infiltrate, and members can prove undisciplined. In contrast, elite organizations take advantage of extensive vetting, selective recruiting, superior training, and a high degree of motivation. These types of movements are normally secretive, operating with undergrounds or, when overt, maintaining covert or clandestine activities. An elite organization can influence mass organizations and even hijack or influence their behaviors. Elite organizations designed to blossom into a mass organization given the right circumstances are called elite-fronts.<sup>94</sup>

The Green Path of Hope is a mass organization, with all the advantages and disadvantages of this typology. Mass organizations have more success in democracies than in totalitarian regimes. So, despite its success in 2009, the Green Movement failed to achieve reforms and subsequently has been contained. It might consider incorporating some of the aspects of an elite front model, which better leverages aspects of an underground but can still harness popular mass support when required.

Resistance movements can be sub-organized in a myriad of ways. In special operations doctrine, these can include (a) an underground, (b) an armed component, (c) an auxiliary, and (d) a public component.<sup>95</sup> The Green Path of Hope utilizes two of these, an underground and a public component. The underground organized protestors, it coordinated green attire and used graffiti with ingenious means of spreading the message. The question is how active or effective this underground is today. The public component within Iran consisted of the leadership: Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and Zahra Rahnavard. However, the Iranian diaspora also served as spokespersons abroad for the movement.

The Green Path of Hope generally lacks both an armed component and an auxiliary. As a reformist organization, it has opted for nonviolence, so an armed component might never manifest itself. However, nonviolent resistance can equally benefit from a healthy auxiliary. Auxiliary are distinctively different from part-time and overt supporters. Auxiliary examples (covert supporters hiding in plain sight) might include software engineers, communications specialists, journalists, doctors, educators, transportation employees, engineers, judges, industrial workers, policemen, and soldiers. These professionals would seek not to compromise their overt loyalty to the Islamic Republic while secretly supporting resistance activities. This type of subversion can prove quite powerful but requires a well-established and functioning underground for its recruitment, employment, and coordination.

### *Actions of the Green Path of Hope.*

The Green Movement seeks nonviolent but legal forms of resistance, particularly freedom of assembly which

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93 Paul J. Tompkins Jr., and Robert R. Leonhard, *Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare*, (North Carolina: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2012), 10-12.

94 Tompkins Jr. and Leonhard.

95 Army Technical Publication 3-05.1: *Unconventional Warfare at the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Level*, (Fort Bragg, N.C.: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Apr. 2021).

the United Nations has identified as a human right and applies in Iran, as it is a member.<sup>96</sup> From 2009-2011, there were 27 mass protests against the regime connected with the Green Path of Hope. These occurred mostly in Tehran but also included Isfahan, Tabriz, Yazd, Shiraz, and Mashhad.<sup>97</sup> Numbers varied but included outbreaks of over 100,000 activists. The Islamic Republic ignored only three of these and reacted to the rest with beatings, shootings, and arrests. The Green Movement created a charter in 2010, which identified its goals with an attempt at a coalition. It also encouraged grass-roots social networks of supporters, but these appear more ad hoc and without central organization.



Illustration 8: Burning Bus During Green Movement Protests in Tehran, 13 June 2009<sup>98</sup>

### *Phase Three: Summary*

In summary, the Green Path of Hope demonstrated incredible potential in 2009-2010 and “shook the foundation of the Islamic Republic like no other event in the thirty years since the revolution.”<sup>99</sup> Its leader, Mir Hossein Mousavi, seeks nonviolent governance reforms, particularly in terms of adherence to electoral freedoms. He formed a coherent message that articulated shared grievances to rally the masses, but Tehran successfully weaponized information tools to counter the narrative. The movement experienced broad support from activists that mobilized in the hundreds of thousands. The base mainly included urban-based youth, students, and women but was comprised of a loose coalition. The primary domains in which it competed included urban areas, space-based media, traditional media, and social media platforms. Movement leaders remain under house arrest, and the Iranian security forces have forced most activists underground. Although currently dormant, the movement has significant potential given the persistent weakness and corruption of Iranian governance, the existence of

96 See “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” General Assembly Resolution 217A, *United Nations*, 10 December 1948.

97 *Harvard Dataverse, Mass Mobilization Protest Data*.

98 Photo by Lapost from wiki commons, found at [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9e/Burning\\_bus%2C\\_Iranian\\_presidential\\_election\\_2009.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9e/Burning_bus%2C_Iranian_presidential_election_2009.jpg), accessed on 16 June 2024.

99 Parsa, 247.

an organizational framework capable of leveraging the internet, the support of like-minded movements, and the possibility of receiving significant international support.

#### PHASE FOUR: OPTIONS IN SUPPORT OF RESILIENCE OR RESISTANCE

In phase four, we utilize the data gathered in the previous three phases to better inform foreign policies regarding the Islamic Republic. We explore three possible options: (a) support the resilience of the Islamic State, (b) support domestic resistance to the Islamic State, or (c) choose to support neither, but prepare the environment for adoption of a future policy to support resilience or resistance.

##### *Supporting Islamic State's Resilience.*

Some U.S. strategic analysts suggest more restraint towards Iranian aggression by reducing military forward presence and minimizing activities in the region. The approach would shift to leverage Saudi, Israeli or other regional efforts to counter Iranian influence rather than placing United States resources and personnel at risk. Part of this strategy is to “offshore balance” military assets to sea or basing in neutral countries.<sup>100</sup> This approach would theoretically reduce tensions and release the U.S. from current foreign entanglements. Disengagement is popular domestically and may appear to be attractive but would likely strengthen the Iranian regime as a result.<sup>101</sup> However, the perceived illegitimacy of the Islamic Republic by its people makes long-term stabilization of Iran through this approach unlikely.

##### *Supporting Iranian Resistance.*

The currently identified violent paramilitary groups actively opposing the Islamic Republic do not appear promising. These organizations are outside the Persian/Shi'a ingroup and do not have the domestic popularity in terms of numbers normally required to implement change. Additionally, violence creates more fragility in a region already in need of stability, making this a risky policy option.

In contrast, supporting a nonviolent resistance comprised of the ingroup, one akin to the Green Path of Hope, has promise and a real chance of success. At least one U.S. senator, Marco Rubio, has advocated for support to Iranian resistance.<sup>102</sup> Current nonviolent resistance movements in Iran have demonstrated potential but thus far exhibited some weakness. The Green Movement failed in three major ways: (1) it followed events versus leading them; (2) the movement's leadership sought reform of current governance while other opposition groups wanted more radical change; and (3) the movement proved unable to appeal to a large coalition of activists which limited its potential.<sup>103</sup>

Learning from the past, a future Iranian nonviolent movement could organize and operate more effectively. It might establish an underground, designed in a cellular network to decrease the risk of compromise by the regime. It might leverage secrecy to organize, communicate, and compete in resistance activities, sustained over an extended period. It must understand how to operate clandestinely in digital and urban space, perhaps taking note of the Umbrella Movement lessons learned in Hong Kong versus the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>104</sup>

100 Jones, 58-60.

101 William Walldorf, “The U.S. Public Has Never Been More Anti-War. Biden Isn't Taking Note,” *Time* Vol. 203, 26 February 2024, 5-6.

102 Rubio.

103 Parsa, 255-275.

104 Colin Agur and Nicholas Frisch. “Digital Disobedience and the Limits of Persuasion: Social Media Activism in Hong Kong's

It should methodically organize and train in advance, rather than spontaneously and haphazardly.<sup>105</sup> As well, it must better organize, train, and equip for nonviolent action.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, a future movement might attempt to create larger appeal, not only to the energetic efforts of women and youth, but to clergy, small business owners, and industrial workers.<sup>107</sup>

If Western foreign policies desire a popular and democratic system of Iranian governance, a resistance movement seeking these goals must maintain domestic legitimacy. External support for Iranian resistance (either from nation-states, corporations, religious groups, nongovernmental organizations, etc.) might best be offered with low visibility or no visibility, as outside influence may erode the legitimacy of the resistance. The narrative of a domestic, internal movement is essential to its success. However, space and cyberspace are key battlegrounds in which an external supporter might assist with, as well as resistance training, material assistance, or legitimization efforts.

### *Choose Neither but Prepare the Environment for Future Policy.*

Preparing the environment for future policy requires building relationships with influential Iranians of many ideological perspectives and understanding the domestic environment of Iran to foresee possible opportunities – either in support of resilience or resistance depending on the prospects of what the future situation offers. However, by breaking diplomatic relations and imposing sanctions on Iran, many Western nations have restricted their ability to conduct these bond-building activities.<sup>108</sup> Imposing sanctions as the primary means of hampering the Islamic Republic has proven an anemic method of coercion.<sup>109</sup> Damage has been done to the Iranian economy, but the effects tend to hurt the population and do little to stem the military resourcing of the proxy militias.<sup>110</sup> One might argue that sanctions increase Iranian resistance and decrease the Islamic Republic’s resilience, but without an accompanying strategy to support change, this has accomplished little in over 50 years.

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2014 Umbrella Movement.” *Social Media + Society* 5 (February 1, 2019).

105 Paul J. Tompkins Jr., and Robert R. Leonhard, *Undergrounds in Insurgent, Revolutionary, and Resistance Warfare*, (North Carolina: U.S. Army Special Operations Command, 2012), 10-12.

106 Gene Sharp’s doctrine and his 198 methods of nonviolent action also provide a sound basis for understanding possible tactics. See, Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals* (The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004).

107 Parsa, 259-263.

108 Notably, Israel, the United States, and Canada remain the only major Western nations without diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic.

109 The international array of sanctions to raise the level of economic pain has made little progress to change Iranian behavior. Jones, 59.

110 Jones, 59.



## CONCLUSION

Understanding Iran in terms of its resilience and resistance can provide a starting point for contemplating current or future foreign policy options for the United States, Western nations, and regional partners. This data-centric analysis demonstrates that while resiliency in the Islamic Republic remains low, the ability of external support to the regime's resiliency has above average potential. Meanwhile, Iran retains high potential for resistance, as well as strong indicators for successful external support to resistance. Of the many resistance movements identified, a nonviolent organization may provide the best chance at implementing changes in governance and increasing regional stability. However, taking advantage of such opportunities will take more than the sudden death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to realize. Unless Western nations prepare the environment, a dedicated and comprehensive effort that could take several years or more, they will remain unprepared to take advantage of these sudden and fleeting opportunities.







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