

The Fatal Illusion of Negotiating with Tehran

A normative policy analysis examining the strategic implications of Western engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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ABSTRACT: This normative policy analysis argues that continued diplomatic engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes a strategic miscalculation in light of the regime's deepening legitimacy crisis and systematic repression. It contends that recent nationwide protests, initially triggered by economic collapse, have evolved into a coherent political movement demanding structural transformation. The study challenges prevailing Western assumptions about regime rationality and the stabilizing potential of negotiations, conceptualizing Tehran's approach as "attritional diplomacy" designed to prolong survival rather than resolve disputes. By analyzing patterns of repression, negotiation cycles, and Western policy responses, the paper maintains that engagement under current conditions reinforces coercive structures and undermines popular democratic aspirations. It concludes that policymakers face a strategic and moral crossroads, requiring a reassessment of existing diplomatic frameworks and consideration of alternative policy options.

Keywords: *negotiations, Political Repression, Attritional Diplomacy, Western Foreign Policy*

The Structural Collapse of Legitimacy

Iran is now in its forty-seventh year under the Islamic Republic, and the crisis gripping the nation has reached a

critical juncture. The situation, previously characterized by isolated outbreaks of unrest, has escalated into a comprehensive national breakdown. For millions of Iranians, existing in a continuous state of quiet emergency, the simple act of daily survival represents defiance against a regime whose authority rests on fear, not popular will; this gradual collapse is a result of systematic action-reaction sets of events that range from supporting the proxies (Dehnavi & Safavipour, 2024) and wasting the national funds to deliberately shaking the discords in the Middle East and beyond (Fiedler & Dehnavi, 2024)

From Economic Protest to Political Movement

The protests that surged in early 2026 were triggered by a familiar cause: economic collapse. Inflation hollowed out wages, the rial lost its remaining value, and families were forced into stark choices between food, fuel, and medicine. However, the economic crisis did more than spark demonstrations. It erased the last belief, across generations, that the current system could be fixed.

Workers, teachers, students, and pensioners reached the same conclusion independently: the social contract had collapsed. What separates the 2026 uprising from previous protest cycles is not only its scale, but its coherence. This time, widespread anger did not remain politically undefined. It found direction in Reza Pahlavi's advocacy, whose calls for a secular, democratic transition provided a framework for collective action.

Leadership, Coherence, and the End of the “Leaderless” Narrative

For years, Western governments described Iranian dissent as “leaderless,” a term that often justified diplomatic caution. That framing no longer reflects reality. Pahlavi has not presented himself as a monarch-in-waiting, but as a unifying national figure and international representative for the Iranian people’s stated demands. In doing so, he has helped convert spontaneous economic protests into a sustained political movement with clear objectives; he has presented a new form of national-oriented positive exceptionalism, as the one witnessed in the foreign policy of the United States (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2024), to advance the newly formed socio-political movements; this once more shows how language and the formation of discourses are

determinable in directing domestic and then international movements (Dehnavi & Foroughi, 2024)

Western Miscalculation and the Illusion of Stability

This shift carries significant implications for Western policy. The Iranian crisis is no longer a question of managing unrest inside a stable state. It is a legitimacy crisis confronting a regime that has lost public consent across all 31 provinces. However, many Western capitals continue to rely on the language of restraint and dialogue. To Iranians risking their lives in Tehran, Rasht, Mashhad, and dozens of smaller cities, this posture feels increasingly disconnected from reality; to understand this phenomenon, one should go through historical cases to understand the roots of current readings, specifically speaking, the recent historical relations between Iran and the United States (Dehnavi, 2024)

Repression as State Doctrine

The regime has long used diplomatic pauses as tactical windows. Financial relief from unfrozen assets does not ease civilian suffering. It strengthens the state's coercive core. Funds are redirected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij, reinforcing domestic repression rather than alleviating economic hardship. Between December 2025 and January 2026 alone, estimates suggest that between 12,000 and 30,000 protesters were killed. In late 2025, more than 2,200 executions were carried out in what human rights groups describe as the most extensive execution campaign in decades. These are not excesses of a system under strain but the operating logic of the Islamic Republic. For more about the *Factors of the Prevalence of Authoritarianism and the Push for Democratization in the Middle East*, read (Dehnavi & Nourmohammadi, 2023)

Attritional Negotiations as a Survival Strategy

Central to this logic is the regime's strategy of attritional negotiations. This approach treats diplomacy not as a means of resolution, but as a tool of survival. Negotiations are pursued for their own sake, with no intention of reaching durable agreements. Instead, they are designed to exhaust international pressure, divide foreign

governments, and buy time. Each round of talks delays accountability, weakens sanctions enforcement, and allows the regime to rebuild its security apparatus while projecting an image of engagement. Attritional negotiations are not failures of diplomacy from Tehran's perspective. They are successes precisely because they postpone consequences while repression continues at home (Dehghani Firooz Abadi et al., 2023)

The Myth of Regime Rationality

Western policymakers must also confront the persistent myth of regime rationality. The Islamic Republic does not seek long-term stability. It survives through permanent confrontation, both internally and externally. Its nuclear program is not a bargaining chip designed to reach equilibrium, but a survival mechanism intended to deter accountability while the regime exports instability through regional proxies.

Engagement as Legitimization

Engagement under these conditions does not moderate behavior. It grants legitimacy to a system that has already lost it at home. For Iranians who have taken to the streets nationwide, international silence or procedural neutrality is not interpreted as balance. It is understood as complicity.

Beyond the False Binary: Rethinking Policy Options

Western governments often frame the current dilemma as a binary choice between restraint and war, diplomacy and escalation. That framing no longer reflects the reality on the ground. Large segments of Iranian society are no longer merely asking the outside world to apply pressure or issue statements. They are calling, explicitly, for international intervention and protective military support to prevent further mass killing.

The Internal Demand for External Protection

This demand is not abstract. It emerges from lived experience. Decades of sanctions, negotiations, and diplomatic engagement have failed to curb repression. Peaceful protests have been met with live ammunition, mass executions, and systematic terror.

For many Iranians, the conclusion is no longer ideological but empirical: without external force to constrain the regime's security apparatus, domestic resistance alone cannot prevail (Fiedler & Dehnavi, 2024)

Targeted Intervention and the Question of Responsibility

Intervention, as articulated by Iranian activists and opposition figures, does not necessarily mean occupation or regime imposition. It means targeted military measures to neutralize the regime's capacity for mass violence, protect civilian populations, and deny the Islamic Republic the ability to crush dissent with impunity. In this context, continued Western insistence on non-intervention is not perceived as prudence, but as abandonment; in that regard, one should learn more about militarism in Trump's foreign policy as the leading actor in the January-February chain of events in Iran (Hadj Zargarbashi & Aghili Dehnavi, 2023)

The Strategic and Moral Crossroads

The question facing policymakers, then, is not whether intervention is risky. It is whether inaction in the face of systematic slaughter remains defensible when the population under threat is asking for help. History will not judge today's policymakers by how carefully they managed relations with a collapsing system. It will judge whether they recognized a historic opening when it appeared, and whether they stood with a people who have made clear, at extraordinary cost, that the era of reform is over. What follows is not chaos. It is a national demand for a secular, democratic Iran (DEHNAVI & FIEDLER, 2024)

Conclusion

This analysis contends that continued engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran is grounded in misplaced assumptions about regime rationality and the stabilizing power of negotiations. By framing Tehran's approach as attritional diplomacy, the analysis shows that talks function primarily as instruments of regime survival, reinforcing coercive structures while diffusing external pressure. At the same time, the emergence of a politically coherent protest movement signals a profound legitimacy crisis that challenges the viability of incremental reform. Under these

conditions, policymakers must reassess existing diplomatic frameworks and align strategy with the structural realities of repression and the articulated aspirations of Iranian society

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