
POLITICS / HUMAN RIGHTS / ECONOMICS

The Illusion of Stability

Iran, democratic legitimacy and the world's fear of change

A philosophical, political and economic essay

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THE ARGUMENT

Forty-seven years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran presents a fundamental challenge to international politics: how can engagement with those exercising coercive control remain compatible with the rights of those they govern? This essay distinguishes diplomatic standing from democratic legitimacy and examines the January 2026 killings, economic distress and the limits of security-centred negotiations. It applies PESTEL, SWOT and Kurt Lewin's force-field analysis to the prospects for an inclusive secular democratic transition. Written from a constitutional-monarchist perspective, it supports Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi while insisting that leadership, constitutional choice and electoral consent remain distinct. Its conclusion is conditional: democratic change is possible, but deprivation, war and regime weakness do not guarantee it. Credible institutions, civilian protection, public-service continuity and equal citizenship must turn aspiration into a sustainable political alternative.

Evidence checked on 16 October 2026. This is an interpretive essay and a set of policy proposals, not an opinion survey, legal judgment or quantitative forecast. Each source retains its own date and limitations. The frameworks and scenario judgements are the author's; source institutions do not endorse this essay. Personal political views are expressed in the author's own capacity.

1. The question that diplomacy must answer

How can a government repeatedly turn its weapons against its own population and still appear internationally as the normal representative of that population? For many Iranians, the persistence of this arrangement creates a profound sense of unreality. They encounter violence, bereavement and insecurity, while foreign policy continues to speak the familiar language of meetings, concessions and strategic stability. The distance between these two experiences is the subject of this essay.

I use the illusion of stability as a political description, not a psychiatric diagnosis. The illusion arises when the survival of a ruling apparatus is treated as evidence that a country has a sustainable political order. An institution may survive while destroying the trust, prosperity and consent on which a healthy society depends. The absence of a successful revolution does not prove the presence of legitimate government.

My argument is that Iran's democratic future must become an explicit concern of international policy. Nuclear restraint, maritime security and the avoidance of war are necessary objectives. They are incomplete when the people living beneath the negotiating parties' authority remain politically invisible. The question is whether diplomacy reduces their exposure to violence and expands their ability to determine their own future.

I write as an Iranian constitutional monarchist who supports Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi and the Lion and Sun movement. My preferred destination is a secular, democratic and sovereign Iran, with equality before the law and a constitutional settlement freely chosen by its people. That preference is an argument to be offered to citizens, not a substitute for their consent. This continues the distinction between national leadership and popular sovereignty developed in my earlier work. [1, 2]

2. From revolutionary justice to entrenched authority

The Islamic Republic emerged in 1979 within the Cold War, when Soviet power, Western strategic interests, anti-imperialist movements and regional rivalries shaped political imagination. Yet a simple opposition between a democratic West and an authoritarian East obscures important contradictions. Western governments also supported authoritarian allies, including the Shah. The revolutionary coalition contained competing aspirations; its eventual clerical settlement should not be projected backwards as the intention of every participant. Declassified US records reveal uncertainty, analytical failures and misplaced expectations, rather than a single omniscient foreign design. [3]

Political Islam could appeal to people who associated it with justice, solidarity and protection of the poor. Iran's constitution itself presents an economic and moral mission. But claims about an early religious society without poverty or crime should be examined as legitimating narratives, not accepted as established social history. Severe punishment is not proof of effective justice. A just order needs fair procedures, proportionate laws, protection against error and institutions capable of addressing the conditions in which crime and deprivation arise.

Iran's specific governing doctrine is guardianship of the Islamic jurist, or *velayat-e faqih*, rather than simply a caliphate. Article 4 subjects law to Islamic criteria; Article 5 assigns guardianship during the occultation of the Twelfth Imam; Article 177 entrenches the system's Islamic character and guardianship. These provisions expose the central constitutional obstacle: citizens cannot use ordinary constitutional revision to remove the theological basis of supreme authority. [4]

This is a criticism of an institutional claim to rule. It does not require attributing a single violent belief to all Muslims, Shia believers or religious citizens. Freedom of conscience protects them too. The decisive democratic question is whether any citizen, including a believer, may peacefully reject the rulers' interpretation without losing equal civic standing. A promise of eventual sacred fulfilment cannot answer a present demand for accountable government.

Political systems change over forty-seven years. It would be inaccurate to claim that nothing in Iranian society has improved in any field since 1979. The stronger charge concerns the continuing subordination of political equality and peaceful replacement to a protected ruling ideology. Tactical negotiation abroad and limited policy adjustment at home do not themselves remove that constitutional barrier.

3. January 2026: evidence, dignity and accountability

The killings of 8 and 9 January must remain central to this debate. Amnesty International's statement of 8 July 2026 describes the unlawful killing of thousands of protesters and bystanders over those two days. It places the protests' beginning on 28 December 2025 and describes economic grievances developing into demands for freedom and an end to the Islamic Republic system. [5]

The UN Fact-Finding Mission's September report documents lethal force, mass detention and extensive repression. It concludes that many violations amount to crimes against humanity. It also records Reza Pahlavi's encouragement of protests. These findings

support recognition of the violence and his mobilisation role; they do not establish that every protester followed him or shared one constitutional preference. [6]

A complete casualty total remains unresolved. The Mission could not determine a total satisfying its methodology and considered the real toll likely substantially above official figures. A minimum, an estimate and a final verified count are different kinds of evidence. Acknowledging that distinction respects the victims: their claim to justice does not depend on exaggeration, and uncertainty about the full number cannot erase documented killings. [6]

The annual execution record supplies a further measure of the punitive state. Amnesty recorded at least 2,159 executions in Iran in 2025. Its global recorded total excludes the thousands believed executed in China and incomplete secret totals elsewhere. The measured Iranian figure is sufficiently grave; an unqualified assertion of a complete worldwide per-capita ranking adds uncertainty rather than force. [7]

My concern is therefore the gap between knowledge and consequence. Investigations, public acknowledgement, protection of survivors, preservation of evidence and lawful accountability must remain active obligations when negotiations move to other subjects. The memory of January should belong to the whole nation, including families whose political views differ from mine.

4. Recognition, contact and legitimacy are different

The existence of an embassy does not certify that a government is democratic or morally justified. Diplomatic relations allow states to communicate across profound political disagreement. The Vienna Convention gives diplomatic privileges a functional purpose, provides for relations by mutual consent and permits a receiving state to declare a diplomat persona non grata. These protections are not awards for good government or a blanket moral absolution. [8]

Britain's longstanding policy is to recognise states rather than governments. A September 2026 parliamentary statement reiterated that principle in the context of Venezuela. It clarifies the general distinction; it does not establish that British policy towards Iran is adequate. The relevant challenge is more exact: when engagement is defended as influence, what observable improvement follows, and what consequences follow repeated failure? [9]

Embassy closure is one possible diplomatic response, but it is not a theory of democratic transition. It can communicate condemnation while also reducing consular access, observation and crisis communication. Downgrading relations, restricting abusive officials and maintaining tightly defined working channels may sometimes serve different purposes. Each choice should be assessed against civilian protection, rights and practical effects.

Table 1. Four different questions about authority

Dimension	Question	What it cannot establish
Effective control	Who commands institutions and coercive resources?	Control alone does not establish a right to govern.
Diplomatic standing	Whom do states deal with for official purposes?	Contact does not certify democratic consent.
Social acceptance	Who is regarded as entitled to exercise authority?	Compliance under fear is not reliable evidence of support.
Democratic legitimacy	Can equal citizens choose, scrutinise and replace rulers?	A historic referendum or inherited title cannot settle the will of future generations.

Analytical distinctions used in this essay; the legal account of diplomacy draws on [8, 9].

5. The philosophical failure: an unequal valuation of risk

Several concepts help explain the dilemma. Instrumental rationality asks whether a policy efficiently achieves a chosen objective. Moral reasoning also asks whether that objective is sufficient. A bargain can reduce the risk of a shipping crisis while leaving a population exposed to imprisonment and execution. Efficiency within a narrow agenda does not make the agenda ethically complete.

Status quo bias describes a preference for familiar arrangements even when alternatives deserve serious consideration. In foreign policy, this can become an authoritarian stability trap: officials know the existing counterpart, distrust uncertain successors and treat continued dealings as the safest available course. I use that phrase as an analytical description. It is a hypothesis about incentives and institutional habits, not proof of the private motives of every diplomat.

Moral compartmentalisation occurs when a state condemns repression in one forum while evaluating commercial or security cooperation in another, without allowing the first judgement to constrain the second. The problem is not that diplomacy involves compromise. It is that victims' rights can become a permanently deferred consideration while measurable benefits to foreign governments receive immediate attention.

Max Weber's discussion of conviction and responsibility helps frame a better standard. Ethical commitment must face the foreseeable consequences of action; attention to consequences must also retain moral direction. In my application, this rejects both accommodation that abandons citizens and intervention that invokes liberation without preparing for civilian protection and institutional continuity. [10]

Hannah Arendt's distinction between collective political power and instrumental violence helps explain why forced obedience cannot simply be read as consent. Yet it would be a mistake to turn that distinction into a timetable for collapse. Coercion can remain effective for a long time when institutions retain cohesion and society is prevented from organising. Moral illegitimacy and immediate political weakness are not identical. [11]

The most serious asymmetry concerns whose risks count. Foreign officials may fear disruption next month; an Iranian family may face another generation of restricted opportunity. A responsible policy must consider both horizons. Stability should mean a sustainable public order in which people can live, participate and obtain redress, rather than merely the continued availability of a familiar negotiating partner.

6. Europe has spoken; the test is what follows

It would be wrong to say that Europe has never condemned the killings or taken action. On 1 October 2026, Britain's UN representative explicitly acknowledged the killing of thousands of peaceful protesters in January and demanded an end to violent suppression and cooperation with accountability mechanisms. A parliamentary answer on 14 October reaffirmed support for documenting violations. [12, 13] The EU has imposed human-rights sanctions and, on 19 February 2026, designated the IRGC a terrorist organisation. [14]

These actions matter. They also make the remaining gap more visible. Public condemnation has not itself produced secure rights, accountability or a freely chosen political order. The question for Britain, Germany, France and their partners is what connects their stated principles to measurable improvements. A foreign policy can be active and still be insufficient.

Current diplomacy must also be described accurately. The White House records a US-Iran memorandum signing on 18 June 2026. Reuters reporting of 12 October describes the breakdown of the June interim ceasefire and continuing mediated exchanges over Hormuz and nuclear questions. A signing, implementation and lasting peace are separate achievements. [15, 16] Britain's September sanctions statement likewise combines additional restrictions with commitment to a negotiated nuclear outcome. [17]

Nuclear and maritime issues are real security concerns. The criticism is that political participation and protection from repression should possess an equally visible diplomatic route. An agreement may reduce one danger while leaving another intact. Iranian welfare cannot be assessed only by whether uranium or oil moves according to an international arrangement.

7. Political economy: a country cannot live on permanent emergency

A governing order that promises justice must answer for the material conditions of ordinary life. The World Bank's October 2026 outlook describes an economy under severe structural and conflict-related stress. Its population benchmark is 92.4 million for 2025; around 93 million is a reasonable rounded description of the nation's scale, not a count of support for any party. The report supports a diagnosis of acute economic crisis, not a legal finding of sovereign bankruptcy. [18]

These conditions have several causes and channels. Poor governance can deter investment and direct resources towards privilege. Sanctions can constrain finance and trade. Conflict destroys productive assets and raises uncertainty. Water and energy failures reduce what firms and households can accomplish even when money is available.

Assigning every loss to one cause prevents useful judgement about which policies might actually improve life.

The distribution of hardship matters as much as the aggregate. A privileged network may retain access to foreign currency or scarce imports while ordinary wages lose purchasing power. Scarcity can create profitable gatekeeping. Consequently, national economic weakness does not automatically mean that the institutions responsible for repression lose resources in the same proportion.

Recovery requires credible public finance, functioning banks, predictable regulation, transparent procurement, competitive enterprise and protection for vulnerable households. Oil and gas can help finance recovery, but resource income cannot replace accountable institutions. A democratic transition must show how it will pay essential salaries, maintain hospitals and utilities, and prevent a distressed sale of national assets to insiders.

Table 2. Economic stress: estimates and forecasts

World Bank indicator	2025/26 estimate	2026/27 forecast
Real GDP growth	-0.9%	-7.7%
Consumer price inflation	49.1%	74.2%
Poverty at \$8.30 a day, 2021 PPP	35.5%	38.4%

Source: October 2026 Macro Poverty Outlook [18]. These are Iranian reporting years, not calendar-year observations. The poverty threshold is a purchasing-power measure, not US dollars converted at the market exchange rate. Forecasts depend on uncertain conflict and policy assumptions.

8. PESTEL: the environment confronting democratic transition

The unit of analysis here is the proposed transition to durable secular democracy. PESTEL examines the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal environment confronting that project, including the incumbent state's constraints. It is a structured interpretation of the evidence, not a statistical forecasting model. Conditions can push in different directions at the same time.

The most important interaction is between political confidence and material continuity. A persuasive promise of freedom becomes more credible when people can also envisage pensions, food, medical care and electricity continuing. Conversely, an economic plan cannot acquire durable legitimacy if citizens cannot question its distribution of costs. Environmental recovery and digital rights belong within this relationship, rather than waiting until politics is supposedly finished.

Table 3. PESTEL assessment

Factor	Pressure and opportunity	Constraint and practical response
Political	Demands for accountable government; possible benefits of regional reconciliation.	Coercive institutions, divided opposition and rival foreign interests. Build inclusive transition rules and civilian oversight.
Economic	Demand for dependable livelihoods; potential investment, trade and diaspora expertise.	Inflation, damaged assets, sanctions and concentrated rents. Protect essentials and publish a costed recovery programme.
Social	Women's equality, civic experience, professional skills and shared national identity.	Trauma, distrust, exclusion and emigration. Make equal citizenship and reconciliation practical commitments.
Technological	Communication, education, independent documentation and knowledge exchange.	Shutdowns, surveillance, disinformation and vulnerable infrastructure. Protect connectivity, privacy and reliable public information.
Environmental	Shared need for water security, clean air and resilient energy systems.	Drought, resource mismanagement and ecological damage. Fund restoration and transparent local participation from the outset.
Legal	International rights standards and an opportunity for constitutional renewal.	Entrenched theological authority and insecure remedies. Establish interim rights, independent review and a credible constitutional process.

Author's qualitative synthesis. Documentary anchors: constitution [4], UN findings [6], economic outlook [18], ICCPR [19]. No numerical weights or probabilities are implied.

9. SWOT: the democratic alternative must become credible

SWOT asks a different question: what capabilities and vulnerabilities does an inclusive Iranian democratic movement bring to this environment? Strengths and weaknesses concern its present capacity; opportunities and threats concern conditions it encounters. The exercise must not quietly convert every Iranian achievement into an asset already controlled by the opposition.

A widely recognised leader can reduce uncertainty and help coordinate support. Published plans can make an alternative more concrete. Neither provides automatic administrative capacity, representative authority or immunity from criticism. A democratic movement strengthens itself when it welcomes independent scrutiny of leadership, finance, appointments and constitutional promises.

The practical strategy follows from the matrix: turn skills into tested public-service preparations; turn national symbols into inclusive citizenship; and turn international interest into transparent assistance. Address fragmentation through agreement on procedures before demanding agreement on the final constitution. A republican and a

monarchist can cooperate to secure a free choice without pretending their preferences are identical.

Table 4. SWOT of an inclusive democratic transition movement

Category	Assessment
Strengths	A compelling claim to dignity and equality; national cultural continuity; domestic professional experience; diaspora networks; recognisable leadership and published proposals.
Weaknesses	Restricted domestic organisation; contested representation; mistrust between factions; uneven operational preparation; uncertain independent measurement of support; possible dependence on personalities.
Opportunities	Regional peace, educational and commercial reconnection, reconstruction partnerships, constitutional renewal, and international support tied to rights and transparent administration.
Threats	Renewed war, humanitarian exhaustion, state fragmentation, coercive capture of succession, revenge, foreign domination, asset capture and replacement authoritarianism.

Author's strategic assessment, not an opinion poll. Published proposals [20, 21] establish stated intentions, not an electoral mandate or demonstrated delivery capacity.

10. Lewin: reduce the forces that hold people in fear

Kurt Lewin's force-field approach treats a situation as sustained by opposing forces. Applied cautiously to Iran, it directs attention to both pressure for change and the restraints that make change difficult. This is an adaptation of a social-change framework, not a claim that a nation behaves like a simple organisation. [22]

The evidence suggests intense pressure for change alongside powerful mechanisms of restraint. It does not support adding invented scores and announcing that democracy has won by a numerical margin. Grievance is widespread enough to be politically consequential; its conversion into durable public authority remains the uncertain step.

The strategic insight is that increasing suffering may strengthen several restraints. A household struggling for food has less capacity to sustain civic activity. Fear of unpaid pensions or collapsed healthcare can make even dissatisfied people hesitate. Uncertain promises about the day after change can preserve a system that has already lost their confidence.

A democratic alternative should therefore reduce reasonable fears: protect lawful public employment, preserve essential administration, reject collective punishment, and distinguish individual criminal responsibility from religious identity or ordinary state service. Accountability requires evidence and fair proceedings. Reassurance must not become an offer of impunity for grave crimes, but justice must not be presented as an indiscriminate purge.

Table 5. Qualitative force-field map

Forces favouring democratic change	Forces sustaining the present order
Accumulated grievance and demands for dignity	Organised coercion, surveillance and the costs of dissent
Desire for reliable livelihoods and an ordinary life	Dependence on patronage, scarce resources and state income
Women's equality and wider civic aspirations	Fear of disorder, war, exclusion and revenge
Professional and diaspora capacity for reconstruction	Weak coordination and mistrust within the opposition
A credible programme of secular government and rights	Uncertainty about who would govern and how power would be limited
Potential gains from regional peace and reintegration	Foreign preference for familiar counterparts and competing interests

The balance is conditional and cannot be measured from the evidence reviewed. The highest-value intervention may be to reduce restraints through credible guarantees, rather than intensify distress.

11. Hunger, war and catastrophe are not democratic programmes

A hunger revolution is a possibility people may fear or predict; it should never become a policy objective. Starvation attacks the very society a democratic movement wishes to liberate. Economic pressure must be judged by who bears it, what behaviour it can realistically change and whether humanitarian exemptions actually work in practice. The presence of an exemption in legal text is not enough if banks, suppliers or transport providers cannot use it.

Targeted restrictions on perpetrators and instruments of repression can pursue a different purpose from broad measures that deepen household deprivation. Even targeted sanctions require review for effectiveness and unintended effects. A credible policy should state its objective, publish relevant evidence, protect essential civilian transactions and provide an intelligible route for changing measures when conditions change.

War may damage the regime's military capabilities while simultaneously damaging the institutions needed for a democratic future. It can intensify emergency rule, displacement and fear. Nor does the stated intention of an external belligerent establish that its actions protect civilians. The UN Mission's September report also found reasonable grounds to believe that examined US strikes constituted war crimes. These are investigative findings, not criminal convictions. The same standards must govern every actor. [6]

The allegation that rulers deliberately seek civilian casualties or use human shields requires evidence about particular acts and intent. It cannot be assumed from the existence of casualties. Equally, opposition to a war does not prove support for the Islamic Republic. Lawful defence, the legality of using force, and compliance with humanitarian

rules are distinct questions. Self-determination does not create a general licence for unilateral military regime change. [23]

Waiting for a catastrophic mistake that finally turns the entire world against Tehran is no substitute for preparation. The scale of a disaster does not determine the constitutional quality of what follows. A rights-based movement should work to make civilian survival, political choice and institutional continuity compatible before the next crisis arrives.

12. Reza Pahlavi and the promise of a strong, peaceful Iran

I support Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi because I see a potential focal point for national cooperation and a route towards a sovereign, modern Iran at peace with its neighbours. His January 2026 foreign-policy vision proposes ending military nuclear activity and support for terrorist groups, normalising relations with the United States, recognising Israel and developing Cyrus Accords linking Iran, Israel and the Arab world. These are stated political commitments, not existing treaties or decisions already authorised by a free Iranian electorate. [20]

The February 2026 Iran Prosperity Project emergency booklet addresses an initial 180-day period and outlines a route involving constitutional choice and elections. Its existence helps answer the fear that no alternative has been considered. It must still be tested for fiscal realism, inclusion, limits on interim authority and enforceable transfer of power. Preparation deserves support; scrutiny is part of that support. [21]

My support cannot replace the self-determination it seeks to secure. A transitional mandate, a referendum on monarchy or republic, and the election of a government are separate decisions. Citizens must have a real opportunity to oppose my preferred outcome, organise peacefully and win. A parliamentary monarchy gains democratic legitimacy through a free constitutional choice and binding limits on authority.

A strong Iran should be measured by its capacity to educate, produce, innovate, protect rights and keep agreements. It should possess lawful defensive capacity under civilian control, without nuclear weapons, coercive proxy relationships or a policy of intimidating neighbours. Respect for Arab societies is part of this vision. Iran's civilisation needs no claim of their inferiority to express its own dignity.

A future Iran can seek friendship with America, Europe and Israel while maintaining mutually respectful relations throughout the Persian Gulf. Cooperation in energy, water, research, transport and health could create tangible shared interests. Peace agreements should remain consistent with the rights and security of all peoples affected, including Palestinians. Historical symbolism becomes constructive when it is translated into reciprocal obligations and lawful cooperation.

There is a credible economic opportunity here, but it must not become another miraculous promise. Lower regional risk and reliable Iranian supply could support energy security; they cannot guarantee a particular global oil or gas price. Investment, infrastructure, domestic demand, environmental constraints and international markets still matter. National confidence becomes more persuasive when it speaks honestly about the work required.

13. Fear of change, or fear of a stronger Iran?

The question deserves investigation rather than a predetermined answer. Foreign governments may fear disorder, interrupted energy supply, uncontrolled weapons or a regional conflict. Some actors may benefit from restricted Iranian competition or privileged bargains with a weakened state. These are different interests, held by different institutions, and their relative importance can change. No single hidden preference should be attributed to all European or Gulf countries without evidence.

The strongest democratic response is to make the alternative more credible and cooperation more concrete. Neighbours need assurances about sovereignty, borders and non-interference. Investors need predictable law and protection against arbitrary confiscation. Iranian citizens need confidence that international agreements will be transparent and serve public welfare. A transition that answers these concerns weakens the argument that permanent repression is the price of regional order.

The progressive and reactionary distinction should therefore concern conduct and institutions. Progressive politics expands equal citizenship, public learning and peaceful accountability. Reactionary politics protects unanswerable power against those demands. A religious citizen may support democratic progress; a secular opposition figure may reproduce authoritarian habits. The test is whether political actors accept that people may question them and lawfully remove them.

A new Iran should invite the world to cooperate with its capabilities, not ask permission to possess them. At the same time, national strength must be made trustworthy through institutions. The most persuasive reassurance is a government constrained by law at home and capable of honouring obligations abroad.

14. A diplomacy that includes the Iranian people

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights links self-determination to political participation, genuine elections and equality. It also protects conscience, expression, association and minority rights. These principles provide a language in which foreign governments can discuss Iranian political freedom without appointing a ruler on Iran's behalf. [19]

I propose a public diplomatic agenda with three connected tracks: immediate civilian protection, accountability for abuses, and conditions for a freely chosen constitutional future. Security negotiations can continue where they reduce danger, but their existence should not cancel the other tracks. Humanitarian access should not be withheld as a reward for political concessions.

Iranian participation requires a plural and transparent consultation process. Women, workers, professional associations, minority communities, victims' representatives, republicans and monarchists all have relevant knowledge. Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi should be heard as a significant proponent of transition; hearing him need not exclude others or imply that external governments have conferred a national mandate. Participation by people inside Iran must respect their consent and safety.

Any interim authority should publish its powers, appointments, funding, timetable and review mechanisms. It should preserve essential services, protect peaceful opposition and prepare independent electoral administration. A credible referendum requires fair campaigning, meaningful alternatives, secret voting, observation and remedies for irregularities. Emergency authority needs a defined expiry and independent control over any extension.

Table 6. What progress should look like

Objective	Observable test
Civilian protection	Documented cessation of unlawful lethal force; access to medical care; protection of peaceful assembly and detainees.
Accountability	Independent investigative access, preserved records, protected witnesses and lawful proceedings without collective punishment.
Economic relief reaching people	Functioning food and medicine transactions, transparent spending and published distributional effects of sanctions or relief.
Political agency	Protected civic organisation, plural consultation and an independently administered path to genuine constitutional choice.
Limits on transitional power	Public mandates and accounts, independent judicial review, a credible timetable, and leaders accepting lawful replacement.

Author's proposed policy tests. They are standards for evaluating conduct, not a claim that these conditions currently exist.

15. Is a democratic change realistically possible?

Yes, there are credible sources of democratic possibility. There is also no evidence sufficient to promise its timing, assign it a numerical probability or declare it inevitable. PESTEL identifies severe pressures and openings. SWOT identifies the distance between a compelling aspiration and adequate governing capacity. Lewin explains why the reduction of fear and uncertainty can be as important as the growth of grievance.

The decisive combination would be broader civic coordination, credible and inclusive transitional institutions, reduced capacity or willingness to carry out repression, continued essential services, and international support that reinforces Iranian choice. None is guaranteed to appear simultaneously. Elite disagreements alone may produce a new authoritarian arrangement; economic deterioration alone may produce exhaustion; foreign intervention alone may produce devastation.

The evidence should be reviewed against observable changes: whether peaceful organisation becomes possible; whether institutions cease abusive practices; whether opposition agreements protect real disagreement; whether transition plans can sustain services; and whether international negotiations contain verifiable rights commitments. Changes in slogans or personalities are weaker evidence than changes in these rules and capacities.

Table 7. Conditional pathways, not predictions

Possible pathway	Conditions that make it more plausible	Democratic implication
Managed democratic transition	Inclusive coordination, bounded interim authority, public-service continuity and effective rights guarantees.	Creates a route to genuine constitutional choice; still requires sustained oversight.
Authoritarian reorganisation	Elite bargaining changes leadership while preserving coercive monopoly and exclusion.	A change of rulers may leave the central legitimacy problem intact.
Prolonged repression	Security cohesion, opposition fragmentation, fear and household exhaustion remain strong.	Suffering persists without a reliable transition mechanism.
War or fragmentation	Escalation, institutional breakdown and competition between armed actors overwhelm civic capacity.	Urgent protection and recovery take priority; democratic prospects may deteriorate.

Scenarios can overlap or succeed one another. The evidence reviewed does not justify ranking them with numerical probabilities.

16. A future that need not be feared

Iranian people should not have to choose between permanent repression and the destruction of their country. Nor should they be expected to wait for hunger, another war or a spectacular atrocity to make their rights politically relevant. The demand for a normal life is already a sufficient moral claim: safety, work, education, family life, freedom of conscience and a government answerable to citizens.

The world need not fear an Iran made stronger by democratic institutions. It should examine and support the conditions under which that strength becomes peaceful, productive and reliable. The Iranian democratic movement, in turn, must make its promises credible through equal rights, institutional preparation, national reconciliation and acceptance of the ballot box.

For me, the Lion and Sun represents the possibility of national renewal. Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi can help give that possibility a recognisable political centre. Its legitimacy will ultimately rest on the freedom of Iranians to choose, including the freedom to choose differently from those who lead them through a transition.

The illusion of stability ends when diplomacy recognises that a country's rulers and its people are not interchangeable. Talking to those who hold power may be necessary. Making their continued monopoly the limit of political imagination is a choice. A better choice is to protect life now, preserve the possibility of justice and help create the conditions in which Iran can govern itself freely.

The measure of a successful policy is whether Iranians become safer, freer and better able to decide their own future.

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