



What Is “Regime Change From Within?” Unpacking the Concept in the Context of Iran

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Abstract

The use of the phrase “regime change from within” has surged in recent years in media, policy, and opposition discourse, especially in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran. But what does “regime change from within” actually mean? Is it just a script to encourage the aspirations of a people, or can it be defined with more specificity? This article argues that to be of value as a concept and the basis for articulate policy, “regime change from within” needs to be better defined. To bring greater clarity to the term, the article tries to unpack the concept by disaggregating it into three analytically separable problem components: the “regime,” “change,” and “from within.” Drawing on the case of Iran, I argue that although most of the current debate around the concept is on the “from within” component, the definitional choices that need more discussion are the “regime” and “change” aspects of the phrase.

Introduction

In the last decade, the phrase “regime change from within” has become increasingly popular in media, policy, and opposition discourse, especially in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran. But what does “regime change from within” actually mean? Is it just a script or cue to encourage the aspirations of a people, or can it be defined with more precision?

To date, few if any efforts, to the author’s knowledge, have been directed at defining “regime change from within.” This may be because the use of the term is still relatively recent, and we are in what Paul Hirsch and Daniel Levin have described as the “emerging excitement” phase of an umbrella concept (Hirsch & Levin, 1999, p. 199). Or it may be more deliberate. As Giovanni Sartori observed more than 40 years ago, when a political term is undefined it has more potential to “travel” and can be “stretched” to fit a broad range of uses and agendas (Sartori, 1970, p. 1033). The flipside, however, is that a term like this can have so many meanings that it no longer means anything at all.

In fact “regime change from within” has been employed for an array of very disparate processes — as a holder for democracy promotion efforts from outside a country as well as indigenous efforts that exclude outside intervention, to highlight the need for radical change and more vaguely to call for continuous reform. But to be of value as a concept and the basis for articulate policy, a term needs to have some



degree of specificity of meaning, some shared consensus. Otherwise, it just becomes a proverbial “you know it when you see it” concept that is difficult to distinguish from other types of political phenomena.

To address this gap and bring greater clarity to the concept, this article looks at some of the definitional choices that need to be addressed to come to a consensus on the meaning of “regime change from within.” Using the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I show how different decisions about what constitutes “regime change from within” could lead to very different conceptualizations in empirical cases.

The article is divided into three parts. I begin by tracing the evolution of the concept and ask whether it is a single concept. Then, guided by Sartori’s method of concept analysis, I unpack its components.¹ What is a regime? What is “regime change?” How does the qualifier “from within” modify the concept? Finally, I look at what I consider to be red herrings versus real issues in terms of pinning down the concept of “regime change from within” in relation to the case of Iran.

Evolution of the Term

As an “umbrella concept,” “regime change from within” is not new. Filed under other umbrella categories (“revolution,” “coup,” “reform”), regime change from inside a polity, whether mounted by the elite or the masses, has been a perennial concern for political thinkers since the time of Thucydides.

Nor is the idea of regime change from within particularly new as a referent to the U.S. approach toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, much of U.S. policy, including sanctions enacted since the 1979 Iranian revolution, although presented as “containment,” can be construed as an effort to promote “regime change from within.” This point was conceded by John Bolton, former U.S. Ambassador to the UN, in an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2006.² It has also been made repeatedly by Iran’s leaders, including the Ayatollah Khomeini as well as his replacement, the Ayatollah Khamenei (Ganji, 2013),³ and it was candidly admitted by U.S. senators as late as April of 2013 when considering a new round of sanctions (Lakshamanan, 2013).⁴

What is new is the extent to which references to “regime change from within” have mushroomed in media and policy discourse, especially in relation to Iran, over the last five years. As shown in Fig. 1, the phrase “regime change from within” was rarely employed in the press or policy discourse in 2001 or 2002. There were two significant policy instances of its use in 2003.

Notably, Raymond Tanter, a professor emeritus at the University of Michigan and a Reagan-era senior staffer on the National Security Council, made a case for adopting a policy of “regime change from within” with respect to Iran in a paper in the *Baghdad Bulletin* in June of 2003 (Tanter, 2003). In addition, Ali Ansari of the University of Durham in the United Kingdom addressed “regime change from

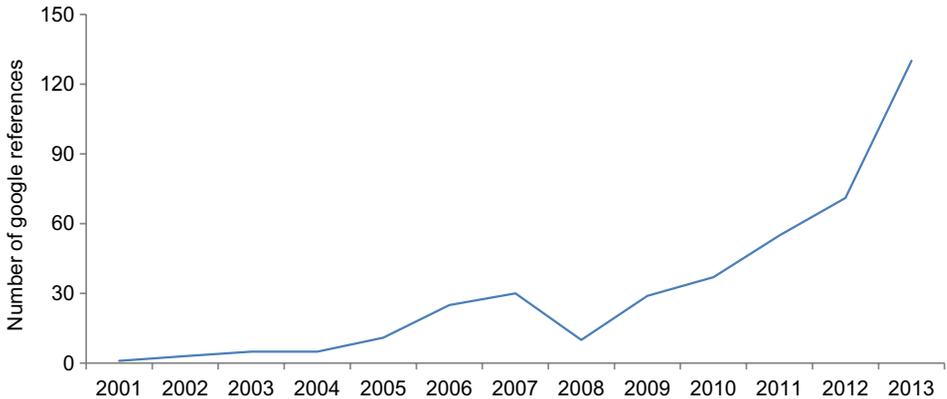


Figure 1: Growth in the use of “regime change from within,” Google references 2001–2013.

within” in relation to Iran in an article in the *Washington Quarterly* in August of the same year (Ansari, 2003). This was a time when the United States had begun an overt effort at regime change from without in Iraq, and evidence disclosed by Alireza Jafarzadeh, that Iran was acquiring nuclear weapons, was circulating in Washington’s corridors of power (Iran Watch, 2003). It was also a time when hardliners were rolling back civil reforms and student protests were erupting in Tehran (Keshavarzian, 2007, p. 268; MacFarquhar, 2003). Some elements in the Bush administration had begun calling for military strikes against Iran, although others cast their lot with diplomacy. Tanter made the case that “regime change from within” offered a “third” option — between military force and negotiation — that involved support of the Iranian regime’s primary political opposition.

There was a clear uptick in the frequency of use of the concept in relation to Iran in the period after mid-2005, a timing that coincided with the election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over reform candidate Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. European-led efforts at negotiation were then stalling, and there was concern, later confirmed by Iran’s top national security official, Hassan Rouhani (now Iran’s president), that even as talks with the Europeans were ongoing in Teheran, the Iranians were installing new nuclear equipment in places such as Isfahan (Vick, 2012).

There was a steeper climb in the use of the term, again mostly in relation to Iran, after the disputed presidential elections of 2009, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was returned to power amid wide protests that the election was rigged and fraudulent. In the last five years, references to “regime change from within” have continued to escalate in the context of broad evidence of the regime’s brutal suppression of dissidents, suppression that has included detention, torture, and executions, and has continued despite promises from Iran’s new president Hassan Rouhani that it would stop (International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 2013). Although most of the references to “regime change from within” are



in the general press, there has also been an increase in references in academic articles. Indeed, as of March 2014, a Google Scholar search indicates as many as 82 references to “regime change from within” in books, journal articles, and theses, with at least two thirds of these references relating to Iran in the past 10 years.

A Single Concept?

Whether “regime change from within” represents a single concept is an important question. Today, there are two rather disparate uses of the term. At one pole, is Raymond Tanter, backed by the Iran Policy Committee and former officials from the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and intelligence agencies, and experts from think tanks and universities.⁵ Tanter has long argued for “regime change from within” as a third option (between military force and diplomacy) to deal with the Iranian regime’s export of terrorism, its acquisition of nuclear weapons, and its denial of basic human rights to its citizenry (Salhani, 2006; Tanter, 2012). For Tanter, “regime change from within” is a foreign policy option. As such, it has U.S. national and international interests, as well as the interests of the global community, in mind. In keeping with a long tradition of democracy promotion as the best hope for securing peace and stability, this policy explicitly endorses material assistance, even “covert assistance,” to the democratic opposition inside Iran and support for exiled Iranian opposition groups, such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a group that fought for the removal of the Shah in 1979 but was driven underground and then into exile when it had the temerity to disagree with Ayatollah Khomeini over theocratic rule.⁶

At another pole is Ali Ansari, as well as scholars and activists such as Adib-Moghaddam (2006), who believe that “regime change from within” can only be accomplished from *inside* Iran, without external support and without preconceived notions of the eventual outcome which could be a secular democracy or some other form of post-Islamist state (Ansari, 2003).

Today, both versions of “regime change from within” continue to appear side by side in media and policy discourse, and while there has been a good deal of conversation about the merits and demerits of external intervention in Iran, relatively little attention has been paid to the definitional issue — pinning down what is meant by “regime change from within.”

Unpacking the Concept

When one tries to define “regime change from within,” the most challenging question may be: “What counts?” Unfortunately, trying to pin down the overall concept raises thorny questions about its constituent parts. What is a regime? What is regime change? And how does “from within” modify the concept?



What Is “From Within”?

Most of the discussion in relation to Iran has centered on the meaning of the “from within” component of the concept. Broadly, there have been two sides to the conversation.

At one end of the spectrum, security analysts and U.S. officials have argued that to bring about “regime change from within,” the United States and its allies need to provide funding and material assistance to opposition groups *inside* and *outside* Iran. As early as 2003, Raymond Tanter made a case for the United States lending support to demonstrators in Teheran *and* to the exiled MEK (Tanter, 2003). Subsequently, Condoleezza Rice asked Congress for as much as \$85 million in funds to support pro-democracy groups inside Iran. In making the request, Rice said the United States “will work to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom and democracy in their country” (Rice, 2006). Congress appropriated \$75 million for the 2006 fiscal year. As reported in the *Guardian*, the money “was to be used” to broadcast U.S. radio and television programs into Iran, help pay for Iranians to study in America, and support pro-democracy groups inside the country (MacAskill & Borger, 2006). (This funding was not renewed under the Obama administration [Kalbasi, 2009]).

At the other end of the spectrum, scholars such as Ali Ansari (2003) and Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2006), put forward a very different idea — that to be truly “from within,” any effort at regime change in Iran had to be “indigenous,” that is, homegrown, and *not* “align itself with overseas opposition groups.” Evoking memories of the United States-led coup against Iran’s popularly elected prime minister, Mossadeq in the 1950s, Ansari argues that in a proudly nationalistic society, acutely aware of its historical relationship to the United States, “regime change from within,” to have widespread support, needs to be free of outside help, including help from overseas opposition groups. Further, to be relevant, it needs to be conceived as a “continuous” process, one that must grow organically out of and build on Iran’s past.

But what is “indigenous” and what is “home?” In other words, what counts? Importantly, what rights do those who were once at home and were then displaced and now in exile have to claim a home as *their* home when it comes to regime change from within? Most of us associate “indigenous” with notions of being “native,” “local,” and the “opposite of foreign.” However, in a world in which “home” itself is intimately linked to concepts of identity and memory, as much as territory and space (Black, 2002), it is not as straightforward a concept as it might seem. As Mindy Fullilove (1996), p. 1519 observes, “home” is more than the physical place in which someone lives. It also represents “the accumulation of many relationships and much history.”

This point was driven home to the author personally when, after a lecture on the subject, a student approached the podium and asked in a worried voice: “Does Ansari’s articulation of *from within* mean I don’t count? That I can’t be a part of



‘regime change from within?’” Her parents had fled Iran in the 1990s and settled in Canada. She had Canadian citizenship. But “I feel Iranian . . . and I want to see change,” she said.

The problem, as Jonathan Fox (2005, p. 173) points out, is not simply that globalization “from above” has undermined once taken-for-granted concepts of national and local identity. Nor is it that “the rise of transnational civil society . . . is extending claims to membership in cross-border civic and political communities grounded in rights-based worldviews, such as feminism, environmentalism, indigenous rights.” Other trends (the proliferation of “transnational migrant communities,” “long distance nationalism,” and the rise of “dual national identities”) have all provoked what Fox calls a sustained debate “from below” about what it means to claim nationality and transnationality, in a word to be “indigenous.”

How do we reconcile the national identity rights of people who are “deterritorialized,” either because they voluntarily leave their own borders or are forced into exile? As Fox observes, many view their place of origin as their “home” even though they are officially “settled” elsewhere. Are they only visitors? “Can one be a ‘citizen’ while abroad but not at home?” (Fox, 2005, p. 176). And what about those who aspire to return to fight for freedoms in a land that forced them out or one that, because of ancestral loyalties, they consider their homeland but have never visited? These are important questions as increasing numbers of Iranian exiles try to negotiate being both “here” and “there,” trying to forge a politics of what Staeheli and Nagel (2006) call “transnational citizenship.”

Ansari (2003) and others such as Adib-Moghaddam (2006) clearly place the concept of “regime change from within” in the context of a long history of nationalist movements (“Iran for Iranians”). This history stretches back as far as the constitutional movement of 1906. It also encompasses the nationalization movement of the 1950s, the 1979 revolution, and more recent efforts at reform “from above” (such as those by President Khatami) and “from below” (the momentum, e.g., that surrounded the candidacy of reform candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, and morphed into the Green Movement). But many national liberation movements, as Fox (2005) observes, have been “porous,” allowing “fellow travelers” not only from a diaspora but also from activists who share a cause within a transnational community. Whether the “from within” component of “regime change from within” can accommodate these fellow travelers is still a question, at least as far as Iran is concerned. This question, however, is not the only one that matters in trying to pin down the concept of “regime change from within.” There is also the thorny question of what constitutes a regime.

What Is a Regime?

In common parlance, the word “regime” is often used pejoratively — to describe a political arrangement that is undesirable — the opposite of what the user condones (Donnelly, 1986; Lawson, 1993). In the scholarly literature, a variety of



definitions for regime exist.⁷ At the most basic level, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye define regimes as “sets of governing arrangements” that include “networks of rules, norms and procedures that regularize behavior and control its effects” (Keohane & Nye, 1977, p. 19). Similarly, Ernst Haas describes regimes as encompassing a mutually coherent set of procedures, rules, and norms (Haas, 1980, p. 553). These definitions, focusing on a *procedural* dimension of the concept, reflect the Latin root *regimen* meaning “rule, guidance, government, command,” although they also incorporate the concept of norms or standards. In many cases, they have been used to make broad distinctions between democratic and nondemocratic (authoritarian or totalitarian) regimes.

Others have argued that the concept of regime is not complete without a *behavioral* dimension. For example, Gerardo Munck, building on earlier work (Linz, Stepan, & Gunther, 1995), makes what he calls “a simple but extremely consequential point: that procedural rules structure and shape the conduct of politics *only inasmuch as actors accept or comply with these rules*” (Munck, 1996, p. 5). Munck points out that when the rules are not accepted or important actors do not comply with them, this affects the very nature of a regime and the ways in which it can be properly classified.

Still, others have put forward the idea that *principles* or norms are the most important factors in defining what a regime is. Extending the regime concept from the national to the international arena, Stephen Krasner, for example, argues that more than rules and procedures, which he defines as only prescriptions for action, “principles” (defined as “beliefs of fact, causation and rectitude”), and norms (characterized as “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations”) provide the basic defining characteristics of regime (Krasner, 1982, p. 186).

These distinctions have implications for the concept of “regime change.” According to Krasner:

Changes in rules and decision-making procedures are changes within regimes, provided that principles and norms are unaltered . . . Changes in principles and norms are changes of the regime itself. (Krasner, 1982, pp. 187–188)

In other words, changes in rules or procedures (e.g., extension of voting rights or civil liberties) do not create a new regime. Rather, there must be a more *fundamental* shift in the principles that underlie the polity. These observations lead us to the next question: What, actually, is regime change?

What Is Regime Change?

In trying to pin down the concept of regime change, one runs up almost immediately against two other problems. First is the now taken-for-granted association of the term with forcible efforts by external actors to topple an existing set of political



arrangements, as occurred in Afghanistan and Iraq (Litwak, 2008). Second is the growing belief that such efforts are, in Michael Reisman's words, "almost always a bad idea" (Reisman, 2004, p. 516). In fact, regime change may include forcible efforts by external actors, but as a concept it is not limited to shifts that are forcible or only directed from outside. Indeed, filed under different scripts (e.g., "reform," "revolution," "coup d'état") going back as far as Thucydides' work on the Revolution at Corcyra, the concept encompasses a wide range of potential shifts that include violent and nonviolent revolutions originating inside a polity, either from above (the elites) or from below (the masses), and may or may not be encouraged or directed from outside the polity. Nor is regime change, even forcible regime change from without always a "bad idea." As Reisman himself, quoting UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, points out, there are times, "dark days and hours . . . when an individual state should undertake to use force to change the regime of another state, because the regime is both hideous and dangerous, both pathological and pathogenic, and because the formal decision structures of the international legal system prove inoperable" (Reisman, 2004, p. 524). In such cases, an overriding principle, such as "right to protect" or "responsible sovereignty," may apply (Deng, 1996; Etzioni, 2006; Krasner, 2010).

At the same time, to avoid what Sartori (1970) calls conceptual stretching, it is important to decide what regime change per se is and is not. To what extent is Stephen Krasner's distinction between "change *in* regime" and "change *of* regime" an important one? In other words, what counts?

As a linking word, *change* clearly implies a shift or transition, and that shift in turn implies a process with starting and ending points. But is regime change only a *process*? Or does it also connote an identifiable *outcome*? This is a question regime analysts have struggled with for some time. The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed democratizing trends in as many as seven regions of the world. These trends, including the fall of authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe, the overthrow of military dictatorships in South America, the decline of authoritarian rule in some parts of Asia, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the end of one-party systems in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, and liberalizing trends in the Middle East, led to a growing belief that the world was witnessing a new *process* of political change, one that officials in the Reagan administration would regularly call a "world-wide democratic revolution" (Diamond, Plattner, & Costopoulos, 2010, p. 78), and Samuel Huntington would refer to as the "third wave of democratization" (Huntington, 1991). One result from a theoretical perspective was that democracy promotion advocates and indeed a range of regime analysts began conceptualizing regime change in terms of "transition."⁸

A key assumption behind the "transition" model of change, as Thomas Carothers observes, was that countries that were moving away from dictatorial rule were becoming or at least "on the way" to becoming democracies. There was an additional



assumption that change unfolds in an identifiable set of stages. First comes an “opening” in which cracks appear in the dictatorial regime (e.g., hardliners and softliners come into conflict). Next, there is a “breakthrough” involving the collapse of the previous regime and the emergence of a new democratic polity. Finally, there is “consolidation” when the “new rules of the game” are accepted (Carothers, 2002, p. 7). But was this the case? As the twenty-first century dawned, the record of results was disappointing. In fact, only a minority of regimes that started on the way to democracy actually developed into stable democracies by the start of the millennium (Geddes, 1999). In many cases, dictatorial regimes just reconsolidated or entered what Carothers (2002, p. 9) calls a “gray zone,” in which change either stalled or stopped altogether.

These developments led to two approaches to characterizing regime change. First, quantitative scholars began tracking democratization by measuring “degrees of democracy”⁹ using scaled indices, such as *Freedom House* and the *Polity* scheme developed by Ted Robert Gurr.^{10,11} Second, qualitative scholars, in an effort to keep up with the burgeoning number of new types of political arrangements, many falling between the poles of democracy and nondemocracy, began coining a host of new terms to capture the nuances of these new end points (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). These terms have included “semi-democracy” (Diamond, Linz, & Lipset, 1989), “façade democracy” (Lipset, 1994), “limited democracy” (Archer, 1995, p. 166), “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria, 1997, p. 23), “diminished democracy,” (Levitsky & Way, 2002), “quasi democracy” (Finer, 1970), “elective” and “competitive” authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Way, 2002), and “defective democracy” (Merkel, 2004), to name only a few. Reportedly, Collier and Levitsky stopped counting at 550 when they were reviewing the number of new terms in the 1990s. Over time, as recognition dawned that many of these new regimes were here to stay, the concept of “mixed” or “hybrid” regimes, that is, polities with a mixture of authoritarian and democratic features, began to emerge — placing the whole framework of “transition” into disarray. In many cases, these regimes contained procedural characteristics of democracy, but the principles were missing or distorted (Bunce & Wolchik, 2008; Eckman, 2009; Karl, 1995; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The point here is a cautionary one. The experience of the last three decades has shown that what counts as regime change is contested. Is it regime change if there is only a procedural change “in” the regime, for example, the extension of new civil liberties? Is it regime change if there are a few points of change on an index of freedom, such as *Freedom House* or *Polity*? If so, how many points count? And what if the change is one “of” regime (Krasner’s wording) because a dictator has been ousted, but the outcome, while constituting a new political arrangement, is less than complete, for example, a diminished democracy or one that has to be qualified, as Collier and Levitsky (1997) put it “with adjectives”? These are critical questions when one considers the “change” component of the term “regime change from within.” To date, almost all of the debate around the concept “regime change from



within” has focused on the “from within” component, but perhaps too little attention has focused on the point of the exercise, that is, the end point or outcome of regime change.

The Case of Iran

In the case of Iran, the problem is complicated by the nature and structure of the regime. At one level, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocracy. As Sharam Akbarzadeh (2005, p. 25) points out, “[i]t derives its legitimacy from Islam and the implementation of Islamic law (the shari’a). The state’s divine source of legitimacy is enshrined in the constitution which acknowledges the ‘sovereignty of Qur’anic justice.’” All decisions must align with the teachings of Islam. This is underscored in the 1979 constitution as the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* (governance of the most learned scholar). Accordingly, ultimate power resides in the Supreme Leader who effectively controls the courts, the police, the military, as well as other important institutions of the state, including the ministries of oil and foreign affairs, and through his Council of Guardians (a committee chosen by the Supreme Leader) can veto candidates for office and veto parliamentary legislation.

At the same time, the Islamic Republic of Iran has elements of a republic. The principle of “sovereignty for the people” was integral to the 1979 revolution. It was also central to two earlier uprisings in Iran (the constitutional movement of 1906 and the movement to nationalize oil under Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1952–1953). It is enshrined in the name that the new regime took — Islamic *Republic* of Iran, a name that pays homage to the people — and it is central to the offices the new constitution created (an elected president and an elected parliament).¹² These considerations have led to the notion that Iran constitutes a particular kind of “hybrid” or mixed regime (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011).¹³

Others, however, have argued that the extent to which the current Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei, has centralized power into his own personage has converted the regime into more of a “sultanate” in which *he* (the Supreme Leader) is effectively the state (Ansari, 2013). In addition, the notion that Iran has become a “military dictatorship” in which civilian leaders, including even the Supreme Leader, “find themselves hostages in the hands of the regime’s own praetorian guard,” is growing in some circles (Alfoneh, 2013, p. 17).

Given these conflicting aspects and interpretations of the Iranian regime, a relevant question is which regime or *part* of the regime or *principle* behind the regime is the object of discussion when people call for “regime change from within” in Iran. And what kind of regime do proponents of “regime change from within” want to see? A fully secular democracy? A regime that retains at least some Islamic features? One that continues to centralize power in the personage of a Supreme Leader while granting more freedoms? Something else? A few opposition groups have put their cards on the table. The MEK, under the banner of the



National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), for example, has called for a full-fledged secular democracy (Rajavi, 2006). Most opposition groups, however, have been more circumspect. For the most part, the Green Movement focused on extending civil liberties. Indeed, as late as 2010, Mousavi, whose 2009 candidacy produced the Green wave of protest, made it clear that he had little more than an extension of civil rights in mind: the release of political prisoners, extensions in media freedoms, allowing public demonstrations, and the formation of political parties (Wright, 2010).

The issue of ends or objectives is important since ends, as the venerable military strategist Carl von Clausewitz (1976), observed, define “ways” (strategy) and “means” (including the will and resources of those supporting such an effort). For Clausewitz, ends, ways, and means constituted a “remarkable trinity” in which the ways had to be adjusted to support the ends or objectives, not the other way around. In the case of Iran, a pivotal question is whether the object of “regime change” in “regime change from within” is *absolute* change (a new kind of polity) or more *limited* change (the continuation of the same, albeit with reforms). The former, of course, would dictate different strategies than the latter. In particular, given strength of the state’s coercive apparatus in the form of the Revolutionary Guards Corps and its capacity to defend the regime against mass-based threats, the likelihood of successful revolution without equivalent or greater force (be it violent or nonviolent) is low (Bellin, 2004; Lachappelle, Way, & Levitsky, 2012). Charles Kurzman (2004) points out that in the case of the 1979 revolution, mass protest outstripped the regime’s reserves of coercion.

Reform, on the other hand, requires a lower level of force and organization. In the case of Iran, the reform movement initiated under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) was predicated, at least initially, on the notion that reform could be achieved through negotiation and bargaining within the legal and institutional framework of the state rather than direct confrontation (Kadivar, 2013). The problem was that reformists made so many compromises with anti-reformists that they began losing control of the very reform movement they championed (Mir-Hosseini & Tapper, 2006).

Contested Issues

One line that has been drawn between different advocates of “regime change from within” in relation to Iran is between “inside” and “outside.” I believe that this red line may be exaggerated. Obviously, a coup mounted entirely from “without” does not belong in the category of “regime change from within.” But the history of revolution indicates that most of the successful efforts at “regime change from within,” including those that toppled three governments in the Middle East in the spring of 2011, have had outside help. Cottle (2011), for example, has drawn attention to the role of exiles in building media support and “transnationalizing”



(the Arab uprisings) across the Middle East, North Africa, and to the wider world (Cottle, 2011, p. 658). More recently, Anden-Papadopoulos and Pantto (2013) have shown how activists in the Syrian diaspora are playing a key role in supporting and shaping the world's view of the Syrian uprising. The main argument against the inclusion of any "outsiders" in the *concept* of "regime change from within in Iran" is that it will provoke further repression. But as the well-known Iranian journalist and dissident, Akbar Ganji (2013), observes the Ayatollah Khamenei has gone on record to assert that he views any efforts at reform as foreign-instigated, whether or not this is the case. Further, as Ansari has recently conceded, repression has continued and if anything worsened in the years since the United States, under President Obama, began taking a more hands-off anti-intervention approach (Ansari, 2013).

A more critical issue in terms of the concept may be the *target* of the effort and how different opposition groups formulate the *end point*. In the case of Iran, is the target the clerical apparatus that has now centralized command and control? If so, what is the goal? Is it the dismantling of the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* that underpins clerical rule or something more limited — a series of procedural changes, such as those promoted by Reformists to "tilt the Islamic Republic in the direction of greater republicanism while preserving its Islamic nature?" (Hernandez, 2013, p. 3).

For the MEK, the group supported by the officials and academics that make up the Iran Policy Committee, the target has consistently been the principles that lie at the heart of the regime. In particular, the MEK has targeted the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih* as a violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all human rights conventions over many years (Rajavi, 2013). In contrast, the Reformist agenda, first under President Khatami, later under the Green Movement, focused on working *within* the framework of the current constitution to ensure greater protection of civil liberties — freedom of the press and freedom of speech — the promotion of the legal, economic, and sociopolitical rights of women, and to some extent the devolution of powers held by the Supreme Leader to the office of the president (Sadegi, 2012; Wright, 2010). The reform movement did not seek to overturn the basic principles behind the regime. Indeed, activists have been careful to portray the effort more as one of "evolution" than "revolution," clearly distinguishing it from the color revolutions of Eastern Europe (Esfandiari, 2009). This is not to say that all of the activists associated with the movement speak with one voice. But the overall effort was toward *change in regime, not change of regime*.

Conclusion

"Language," wrote John Locke, "is the great instrument and common tie of society" (Locke, 1690). By this he meant that language is what binds communities together,



but as Terrence Ball points out a lesson since the biblical tale of Babel is that without shared consensus, language can become “worn and frayed” and communities too can lose their way (Ball, Farr, & Hanson, 1989, p. 3).

The increasing use of the phrase “regime change from within” presents scholars and policy analysts with a unique opportunity to come to a meaningful consensus on the concept that underpins the phrase. To build on such an opportunity and begin to develop relevant theory, there is a need to examine the varied manifestations of the meaning of “regime change from within,” and study new and existing cases without falling into conceptual stretching.

This article has tried to contribute to the process by disaggregating the concept and showing how, when used as a script, it can refer to very disparate processes from reform to revolution. Future work is needed to better define the necessary and defining attributes of the concept of “regime change from within” not only as a process but also as an outcome.

Notes

1. To unpack a concept, according to Sartori, is to decompose “mental compounds into orderly and manageable sets of component units” (see Sartori, 1970, p. 1038).
2. In imposing sanctions, successive U.S. administrations have couched sanctions as efforts to change the behavior of the Iranian regime. In particular, sanctions have been imposed against the regime for sponsoring terrorism worldwide, for opposing Middle East peace efforts, and for pursuing weapons of mass destruction (Fayazmanesh, 2008, p. 3). However, Dinmore and Dombey (2006) report that, in an interview for the *Financial Times*, John Bolton conceded that regime change was the “ultimate objective” of U.S. sanctions policy, adding that it “puts pressure on them internally” and “helps democratic forces” within the country and among those in exile.
3. The existence of foreign threats and intent to overturn the regime has been a persistent theme for the current Supreme Leader. According to Akbar Ganji, as early as 2000 at a meeting of Iranian government officials, the Ayatollah Khamenei described U.S. intentions as follows: “An all-encompassing American plan has been arranged to collapse the Islamic Republican system, and all its aspects have been weighed. This plan is reconstructed from the collapse of the Soviet Union.” In another speech in 2010, he is reported to have claimed of the Western block: “They want to bring the revolution down. One of the important means they have employed has been these economic sanctions . . . The sanctions are meant to cripple the Iranian nation. They are designed to exhaust the Iranian people and make them say, ‘We are under the pressure of the sanctions because of the [policies of] the Islamic Republican sat.’ They want sever the ties between the people and the Islamic Republican system” (see Akbar Ganji, 2013).
4. A draft measure of new sanctions, some of the harshest to date, was crafted in April 2013 with the explicit goal of moving the regime toward “a free and democratically elected government” (see Indira A. R. Lakshamanan, 2013).
5. The Iran Policy Committee was established in Washington DC in 2005 to provide work on an alternative to diplomatic and military options vis-à-vis Iran. According to its website, some of its members include R. Bruce McColm; Lt. General Thomas McInerney USAF (ret.); Captain Charles T. “Chuck” Nash, USN (ret.); Lt. General Edward Rowney, USA



- (ret.); Professor Raymond Tanter; and Major General Paul E. Vallely, USA (ret.). For more information, see Iran Policy Committee. Available at <http://www.iranpolicy.org/mission.php>
6. Over the last three decades, under the umbrella group, the NCRI, the MEK has fought against the clerical apparatus at the heart of the Iranian regime and advocated for “regime change from within” on a platform of modern secular democracy in a non-nuclear Iran. Its hands, however, were shackled for many years by a “terrorist tag” applied by the United States under the Clinton administration, and subsequently by the United Kingdom and the E.U. in an effort to “appease” Iran’s clerical rulers. These tags were later deemed unlawful and have all been officially lifted. For detailed information on the history of the MEK, see Bloomfield (2013). For an analysis of the MEK’s challenge to the terrorist tag, see Sheehan (2013). For the NCRI/MEK platform for democratic change in Iran, see Rajavi (2006).
 7. Munck (1996) provides at least 16 definitions in an appendix.
 8. For early sources of the transition model of political change, see O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986).
 9. Kenneth Bollen and Robert Jackman were among the first to propose that democracy could be viewed and measured as a matter of “degrees” (see Bollen and Jackman, 1989). But even qualitative scholars such as David Collier conceded that democracy could be considered a “graded concept” (see Collier and Adcock, 1999).
 10. The *Freedom House* measure of democracy uses two 7-point scales: political rights and civil liberties. Countries are assigned a score on each of these scales by experts who use a checklist of factors. Checklists include questions such as the following: Are there *fair* electoral laws? Is the vote count *transparent* and reported *honestly*? Are the people *free from domination* by the military, foreign powers, totalitarian parties, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group? Are there *free and independent* media? Are there *free* trade unions and other professional organizations, and is there *effective* collective bargaining? Is there personal *autonomy*? Is there *equality of opportunity*? (see Freedom House, 2012).
 11. The *Polity* scheme, originally formulated under the direction of Ted Robert Gurr, in collaboration with Harry Eckstein, uses a 21-point scale ranging from –10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy) to capture a spectrum of governing authority from *fully institutionalized autocracies* through *mixed* or *incoherent, authority regimes* to *fully institutionalized democracies* (see Marshall and Gurr, 2014, *Polity IV project*).
 12. For a discussion of the complicated nature of the regime, see Chehabi (2001); see also Chehabi and Keshavarzin (2008).
 13. Gilbert and Mohseni categorize Iran as an “illiberal tutelary hybrid regime.” They argue that it is illiberal and tutelary for two reasons. “First, clerical authorities ban secular parties and veto policies deemed un-Islamic. Second, civil liberties are poorly enforced, as some opposition figures are jailed and the freedom of expression is limited by state censorship.” They view it as still hybrid since political parties compete.

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