

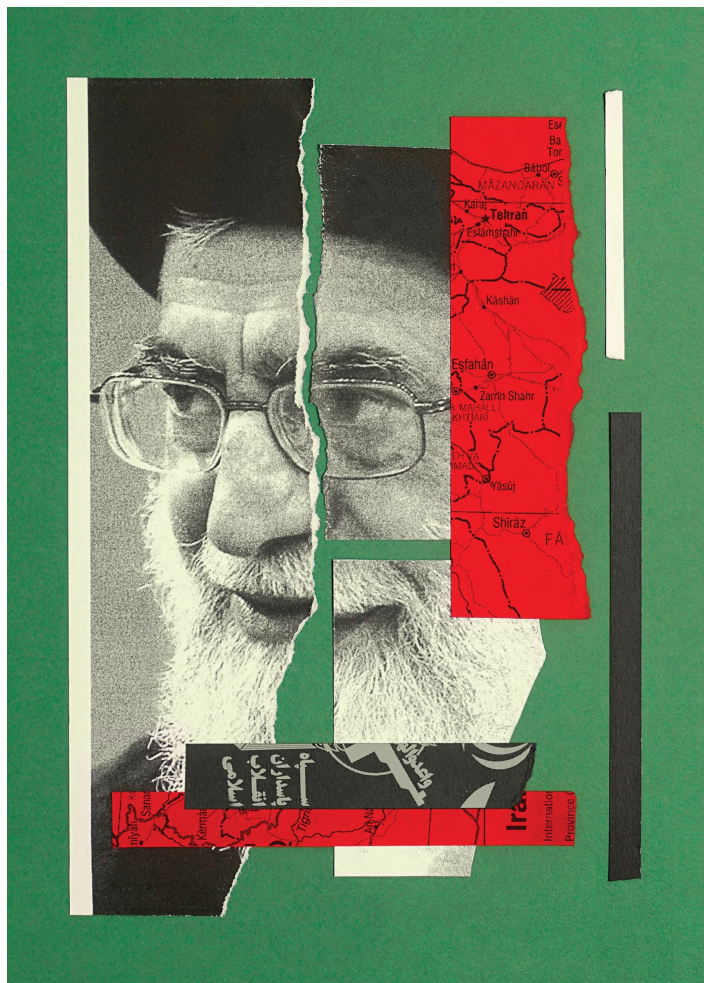
LETTER FROM IRAN MAY 25, 2020 ISSUE

# THE TWILIGHT OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

*For decades, Ayatollah Khamenei has professed enmity with America. Now his regime is threatened from within the country.*

**By Dexter Filkins**

May 18, 2020



*Khamenei, at eighty, is beset by unrest. But, a dissident said, "this regime will do whatever it takes to*

*hold on to power.”* Illustration by Tyler Comrie. Photograph by Probst / ullstein bild / Getty

0:00 / 1:04:03

One night last December, the chief resident physician at a hospital in the Iranian city of Gorgan was asked to consult on a baffling case: a patient was racked with a mysterious virus, which was advancing rapidly through his body. The doctor, who asked to be identified only as Azad, for fear of retribution by authorities, performed a CT scan and a series of chest X-rays, but the virus overwhelmed the patient before he could decide on a treatment. After reading reports from China, Azad determined that the cause of death was the coronavirus. “I’d never seen anything like it before,” he told me.

More patients started coming in, first a few at a time, then in droves, many of them dying. When Azad and his colleagues alerted hospital officials that they were treating cases of the coronavirus, they were told to keep quiet. “We were given special instructions not to release any statistics on infection and death rates,” a second doctor told me. The medical staff was ordered not to wear masks or protective clothing. “The aim was to prevent fear in the society, even if it meant high casualties among the medical staff,” Azad said.

As the weeks went on, and the epidemic exploded in China, the Iranian media remained nearly silent. Two reporters who work at a news outlet in Tehran told me that they could see accounts of the virus on social media, but their editors made it clear they should not pursue them; nationwide parliamentary elections were scheduled for February 21st, and news about the virus could discourage voters. “Everyone knows what stories can get you in trouble,” one reporter told me. “It was understood that anything that helped to lower turnout would be helping the counter-revolutionaries, and no one wanted to be accused of supporting foreign-based opposition groups.”

Officials were also worried about relations with China—one of the few countries that has continued to buy Iranian oil since the imposition of American-backed sanctions. For weeks after the outbreak was reported in Wuhan, Iran’s Mahan Air continued direct flights there. Mahan is controlled by the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the powerful security force that increasingly acts as a shadow government in Iran.

Two days before the election, on February 19th, the Iranian government finally announced that two citizens had died of the coronavirus. In the Tehran newsroom, bitter laughter broke out. “We reported deaths before we even reported any infections,” the reporter told me. “But that’s life in the Islamic Republic.” By then, hundreds of sick patients were crowding the hospital in Gorgan. So many bodies piled up that a local cemetery hired a backhoe to dig graves. “It was worse than treating soldiers on a battlefield,” the second doctor said.

Soon, Iran became a global center of the coronavirus, with nearly seventy thousand reported cases and four thousand deaths. But the government maintained tight control over information; according to a leaked official document, the Revolutionary Guard ordered hospitals to hand over death tallies before releasing them to the public. “We were burying three to four to five times as many people as the Ministry of Health was reporting,” Azad said. “We could have dealt with this—we could have quarantined earlier, we could have taken precautions like the ones the Chinese did in Wuhan—if we had not been kept in the dark.” On February 24th, Iraj Harirchi, the deputy health minister, appeared at a press conference and denied covering up the scale of infections. He looked pale and flustered, and he repeatedly wiped sweat from his brow. The next day, he, too, tested positive.

In mid-March, the *Washington Post* published satellite photos of newly dug mass graves. A few weeks later, inmates rioted at prisons across the country, terrified that they were trapped with the virus, and guards opened fire, killing at least thirty-five. As the pandemic devastated an economy already weakened by sanctions, Iran asked the International Monetary Fund for an emergency loan of five billion dollars. It was the first time in nearly sixty years that the government had appealed to the I.M.F., which it has historically described as a tool of U.S. hegemony.

With the country spasming, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran’s theocratic system, suggested that the United States and its allies had deployed a biological weapon. “Americans are being accused of creating this virus,” he said, during a speech in March. “There are enemies who are demons, and there are enemies who are humans, and they help one another. The intelligence services of many countries coöperate with one another against us.”

Even as Khamenei spoke, the virus was spreading to the highest levels of the regime, which is heavily populated by elderly men. At least fifty clerics and political figures were infected, and at least twenty died. The Supreme Leader was said to be closed off from most human contact, but his inner circle was still susceptible; two vice-presidents and three of his closest advisers fell ill. The virus, which seemed able to reach anyone, sharpened a sense of crisis among ordinary Iranians. Khamenei, who has led the country since 1989, is eighty years old and a prostate-cancer survivor, rumored to be in poor health. What will become of the country when he dies?

In February, I paid a clandestine visit to the home of a reformist leader in Tehran, who spent several years in prison but remains connected with like-minded officials in the regime. Concerned that he might be at risk by talking to me, I took a circuitous route to his apartment; midway through the trip, I got out of my taxi, walked to the next block, and hailed another.

My host told me that the country has reached a decisive phase. Public confidence in the theocratic system—installed after the Iranian Revolution, in 1979—has collapsed. Soon after Khamenei took power, he promised Iranians that the revolution would “lead the country on the path of material growth and progress.” Instead, Iran’s ruling clerics have left the country economically hobbled and largely cut off from the rest of the world. The sanctions imposed by the United States in 2018, after President Trump abrogated the nuclear agreement between the two countries, have aggravated those failures and intensified the corruption of the governing élite. “I would say eighty-five per cent of the population hates the current system,” my host said. “But the system is incapable of reforming itself.”

Speculation about Khamenei’s longevity is rampant in the senior levels of government and the military. “The struggle to succeed him has already begun,” my host said. But Khamenei has spent decades placing loyalists throughout the country’s major institutions, building a system that serves and protects him. “Khamenei is like the sun, and the solar system orbits around him,” he told me. “This is my worry: What happens when you take the sun out of the solar system? Chaos.”

Before the revolution remade Iran, Khamenei was a young cleric in the city of Mashhad. He had grown up modestly, the son of a cleric; a slender man, he had a long, thin face adorned by large round glasses that gave him an owlish demeanor. He was a devotee of Persian poetry and literature, and also came to admire Tolstoy, Steinbeck, and especially Victor Hugo, whose “*Les Misérables*” he



described as “a miracle . . . a book of sociology, a book of history, a book of criticism, a divine book, a book of love and feeling.” Khamenei was influenced by the radical Islamist thinkers of his time, particularly Sayyid Qutb, who extolled the use of violence against enemies of the religion. But, at family gatherings, he kept his harsher ideas to himself. “He hugs people, he kisses the children, he talks very well with children,” a relative who grew up with Khamenei told me. “When he wears the political dress, that’s when he becomes bad. That’s when he becomes aggressive.”

As Khamenei was forming his views, the country was in tumult. In 1953, an American-backed coup had displaced Mohammad Mossadegh, the democratically elected Prime Minister. He was replaced by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, who dominated the country, with help from the U.S. and from a ruthless force of secret police. In the years that followed, an exiled ayatollah named Ruhollah Khomeini raised an increasingly fervid opposition, built around the idea that a state led by clerics, answerable only to God and set against Western notions of modernity, could lift up the country after decades of humiliation.

Khamenei embraced this revolutionary world view and began travelling the country, urging clerics to rouse their congregants. Soon after, he got married, and his wife, Mansoureh, was struck by his intense conviction. “In the first months of our marriage, my husband asked me, ‘How would you feel if I was arrested?’ ” she said, in a 1993 interview with an Iranian women’s magazine. “I was very upset at first. But he spoke about the clashes, the risks and problems, and how this is the duty of all people, and that convinced me completely.”

Khamenei was imprisoned six times by the Shah’s secret police, including a stint, in 1974, at a Tehran prison euphemistically named the Joint Anti-Sabotage Committee. Houshang Asadi, a cellmate there, remembers him as a kindly if austere man, gentle enough to feed one of his fellow-prisoners after a session of torture. Khamenei would read the Quran aloud and sob, lost in the words of the Prophet, or simply peer at the sky through the bars of his cell. Asadi, an atheist, preferred to pass the time by entertaining his cellmates with a large repertoire of jokes. “Whenever I told a sex joke, Khamenei didn’t like it,” Asadi said when I met him in Paris, where he lives in exile. “I told them anyway, because everyone else liked them. He would plead with me to stop.”

After the Shah fled, in 1979, and Khomeini became the country’s Supreme Leader, Khamenei was named the deputy defense minister, and the Friday prayer leader for the city of Tehran. He started

amid a crisis. Not long before, a group of young zealots had stormed the American Embassy and taken fifty-two hostages, most of them diplomats, whom they accused of being spies. The siege lasted four hundred and forty-four days and destroyed any hope of an early American-Iranian rapprochement.

Khamenei opposed the seizure at first, but endorsed it when it became impossible to undo. John Limbert, a political officer who was among those held at the Embassy, recalled that, several months into the ordeal, Khamenei visited with a camera crew, intending to show that the hostages were well treated. Limbert tried to turn the tables, pretending that he was hosting Khamenei in his home. “I apologized for not being able to offer him anything to eat or drink, and for the really bad conditions,” Limbert told me. “He didn’t apologize, but he was confused and embarrassed. He knew I was taunting him.”

The revolutionary government had established itself, but it was not fully in control. In 1980, Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq, sent his army across the border, beginning a catastrophic war that lasted eight years and killed as many as a million people. Within Iran, the leftist groups that had once fought alongside the Islamists were excluded from power; when Khomeini led a crackdown on his former allies, some of them fought back. Among them was the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, an extremist group bolstered by funding from Saddam. The M.E.K. established a vast camp in Iraq, where a cultish atmosphere prevailed, with spouses banned and members required to record their sexual thoughts in special notebooks. From across the border, the group launched a campaign of assassination and terror attacks.

In June, 1981, as Khamenei prepared to give a sermon at Tehran’s Abouzar Mosque, a bomb, planted in a tape recorder and placed in front of him, exploded. He was gravely wounded; according to his own account of the incident, his pulse stopped. He lost his hearing in one ear and the use of his right arm. Afterward, he gave a bluff assessment of the injury’s effects: “I won’t need the hand; it would suffice if my brain and tongue work.” But people who knew him said that he seemed changed. The relative who grew up with him noted that he shakes hands only with his left hand. “For forty years, he’s had a piece of meat hanging from his body, and it still causes him pain,” he said. “This personal experience made him deeply angry inside—it gave him a grudge against people.” A few months after the attack, Khamenei was elected President.

Eight years later, Khomeini died, leaving the revolution without a unifying figure. According to Iran's constitution, the Supreme Leader would be chosen by a group of senior clerics known as the Assembly of Experts. Khamenei was a member of the assembly, but not a highly placed one and not a favorite for the job. His selection was engineered by Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the dominant political leaders of his time, who replaced Khamenei as President; many believe that he saw Khamenei as easy to manipulate. When the choice was announced, Khamenei made a show of proclaiming his lack of expertise in Islamic theology. "I am truly not worthy of this title," he told the assembly. "My nomination should make us all cry tears of blood." Skeptics regarded this as a classic display of *taarof*, a Persian tradition of overweening, even insincere politeness.

The job gave Khamenei nearly absolute power: control of every branch of the government, command of the armed forces, and supervision of the judiciary. He proved to be a nimble and energetic autocrat, creating a parallel structure for each institution. "This is how he kept everyone weak," Mehdi Khalaji, a former Shiite cleric in Iran who is now a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. Khamenei also oversaw the country's largest concentrations of wealth: an array of institutional funds, built on property seized from the Shah's élite, which came to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

By this time, Khamenei and Mansoureh had four sons and two daughters; he moved the family into a house in central Tehran, at the end of Palestine Street, and walled it off from the public. The compound eventually grew to contain some fifty buildings, but Khamenei presented himself as an ascetic, dressing and eating simply. "We do not have decorations, in the usual sense," Mansoureh told the women's magazine. "Years ago, we freed ourselves from these things." (There were no pictures of her accompanying the interview. In four decades, she has never been seen in a photograph.)

In office, though, Khamenei moved fiercely against his enemies. He continued the regime's efforts to assassinate turncoat exiles, killing as many as a hundred and sixty people worldwide. He also helped preside over a murderous campaign against the M.E.K., in which tens of thousands of members were executed. Khamenei, still convinced of the power of literature, made dissident writers and intellectuals a special target, banning books, closing newspapers, and imprisoning artists. "Poetry must be the vanguard of the caravan of the revolution," he decreed.

Over the years, reformers in and out of the government pushed to strengthen the rule of law, to allow the press greater freedom, and to curtail abuses by security forces. Time and again, Khamenei sabotaged any serious effort at liberalization. One of the most notable moments came in 1997, when a reformist candidate named Mohammad Khatami won the Presidency in a landslide. As Khatami began to pursue his agenda, he encountered immediate resistance from inside the regime. Early in his term, the country was shaken by what became known as the Chain Murders: the killing of about eighty artists and dissident intellectuals, some of whom were mutilated, stabbed, or given lethal injections. The press, seizing on the new freedom that Khatami allowed, produced a series of exposés, revealing that the murders had been carried out by operatives from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, largely to terrorize Khatami's most articulate supporters.

In response, the Iranian government closed the newspaper *Salam*, which had reported vigorously on the scandal. Protests began at Tehran University, and quickly spread to colleges around the country. Khamenei had initially expressed revulsion at the murders, but, when it became clear that the protesters threatened his power, he turned on them. Security forces attacked a dormitory at Tehran University, killing four students, wounding three hundred, and arresting four hundred more. Khamenei was unmoved. "Officials in the government, especially those in charge of public security, have been emphatically instructed to put down the corrupt and warring elements with insight and power," he said. Khatami, rendered virtually powerless, left office in 2005.

This February 11th, the forty-first anniversary of the revolution, a celebration was scheduled for downtown Tehran. I was at a restaurant in the city that morning, when a waitress overheard me discussing plans to attend. "You're going?" she asked with a sneer. "They force people to be there—they blackmail them. They tell people that if they don't go they will lose their jobs."

A parade wound down Independence Boulevard for more than two miles. Along the way, placards proclaimed the victory of the revolution, and on every block hung portraits of Khomeini and Khamenei. The festivities seemed subdued, though, with small bands of marchers shepherding kids bundled against the cold. Some of the attendees dutifully cried "Death to America" and "Death to Israel." But when Hassan Rouhani, the country's President, came to the lectern in Freedom Square there was barely a murmur. Most people carried on talking to one another. "Rouhani promised that

after the nuclear deal most of our problems would be solved,” a woman named Majideh told me. “We decided to believe in a miracle. Look what happened.”

The sense of unreality didn’t stop at the parade; it accompanied me throughout my time in Iran. Even the circumstances of my arrival seemed cynically managed. I’d been asking for years for permission to visit, only to be refused. Then, in February, I got an unanticipated call from the Iranian Interests Section, in Washington, informing me that a visa had been approved. (Some Iranians suggested that, with international tensions high and the pandemic still in its early stages, the regime wanted to make a show of confidence.) The visa, I was told, took effect immediately and would expire in six days. I ran for the airport.

In Tehran, I was met by a pleasant, capable woman, assigned by a government contractor to be my guide. The arrangement was designed to limit my contact to people approved by the government. It meant that the most revealing conversations were those I set up on my own, with Iranians willing to risk meeting me after my minder had gone home for the evening. There weren’t many takers. Early in my visit, a Tehran lawyer, who quietly supports women’s-rights initiatives, offered to bring together activists from four separate organizations. They all refused. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s too dangerous.”

The dissidents who agreed to meet me spoke of surviving waves of reform and repression. One night, I met Bahman Ahmadi Amouee, a journalist and an activist, at a quiet restaurant, where we shared a meal of *kebab koobideh*, an Iranian specialty of minced lamb and spices. In the late nineties, when Khatami loosened constraints on the press, Amouee made the most of it. As a reporter for a newspaper called *Hamsabari*, he wrote a series detailing how businessmen and senior government officials exploited the country’s closed market to enrich themselves. One memorable article asked why nearly all of Iran’s chadors—the head-to-toe cloaks worn by most women—were imported. “The reason for this,” he told me, “is that powerful people, in the government and out, get rich from the imports and by blocking competition.” Amouee’s pieces were read and discussed all over Tehran; criticizing the government was an exhilarating novelty. Khatami wasn’t thrilled, Amouee said, but “he tolerated it.”

Amouee also covered the Presidential election of 2009, which turned out to be the starkest test of Khamenei’s commitment to popular rule. The election pitted a conservative incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, against a well-liked challenger, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Almost immediately after the

polls closed, the authorities declared Ahmadinejad the winner—seemingly too soon for the votes to have been counted. Iranians, especially those from the educated middle class, poured into the streets to protest that the outcome had been rigged. It was the beginning of what came to be called the Green Movement.

Amouee and his wife, Jila Baniyaghoob, a journalist and a women's-rights activist, joined the protests. "The regime stole the election," he said. "The people wanted their dignity." But, as the demonstrations gained strength, the security forces swept in, arresting, beating, and killing protesters. Khamenei expressed regret for the violence, but also made it clear that the protesters were going too far. "They are not related to the candidates," he said. "They are related to the vandals, to the rioters." On the ninth day of protests, police came to Amouee's home and arrested him and Baniyaghoob for spreading anti-government propaganda. She was sentenced to a year in prison; he was sentenced to five. For the first three months, he was confined to a closet-size solitary cell, where the lights were always on—"white torture," he called it. "I couldn't feel anything, I couldn't smell anything. I just wanted to talk to someone, but there was no one. I talk in my mind, sometimes I lose my mind."

By the time the demonstrations subsided, ten months later, Mousavi was under arrest, and some four thousand demonstrators had been detained; at least seventy had been killed, and many others raped and tortured in prison. But the election and the protests marked a turning point for the Islamic Republic. Months later, a leaked video of a meeting of Revolutionary Guard commanders spread to the Internet. In the video, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, who was then the leader of the Guard, said that the problem was not that a reformist was prevented from capturing the Presidency—it was that the reformers had challenged the tenets of the revolution. "It was a blow that weakened the fundamental pillars of the regime," he said. The protests had presented the ruling class with a "new paradigm," in which it could no longer count on popular support, he said. "Anyone who refuses to understand these new conditions will not be successful."

Amouee was released in 2014. Since then, he's been bouncing from job to job, working as an editor and sometimes writing without a byline. (His memoir, "Life in Prison," was published last month in the United States.) I asked if he felt safe talking to me, and whether he wanted his name published. He didn't hesitate. "It is my right," he said. After dinner, as Amouee and I drove to my hotel, we

passed a darkened intersection, where armed officers were pulling over cars and searching them. “It’s all about maintaining fear,” he said.

**K**hamenei did not always project menace. When he was first chosen to be the Supreme Leader, he was seen as weak, lacking the respect of his fellow-clergymen. So he turned to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. To build support, he reached far down into the ranks and appointed new colonels and brigadiers. “Khamenei micromanages the whole system, so everyone is loyal to him,” Khalaji, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said. “He is hyperactive. He knows every low-ranking commander and even the names of their children.” The I.R.G.C. became the principal basis of Khamenei’s power. In turn, he made it the country’s preëminent security institution.

During the Green Movement, the Guard and its plainclothes militia, known as the Basij, were instrumental in crushing dissent. According to Abbas Milani, the director of the Iranian Studies program at Stanford and a former political prisoner in Iran, the uprising amounted to a political anointment. “Clearly, the regime believed it was going to lose control, and the I.R.G.C. and the Basij saved the day,” Milani said. “The result is that the I.R.G.C. now has the upper hand. Khamenei knows that without the I.R.G.C. he’d be out of a job in twenty-four hours.”

The most visible symbol of the I.R.G.C.’s strength is the Basij, whose members can be seen on street corners in every Iranian city. A less visible measure is its manipulation of the economy. When the clerics took hold, after the revolution, they secured control of large sectors of the economy, including oil production, factories, and ports. During the next two decades, an array of state-owned enterprises were privatized—but, rather than going to skilled businesspeople, many of them were acquired by the I.R.G.C. and its associates. Today, elements of the Guard are thought to own construction companies, oil refineries, and mines, along with a nineteen-story luxury mall in a posh neighborhood of Tehran. No one is entirely sure how much of the economy the group controls; credible estimates range from ten per cent to more than fifty. One indication of its wealth came in 2009, when its investment arm paid \$7.8 billion for a majority stake in the Telecommunication Company of Iran; the I.R.G.C.’s total budget, on paper, was only five billion. In Iranian society, the Guard has grown into an untouchable élite. “They have their own schools, their own markets, their own neighborhoods, their own resorts,” a former senior Middle Eastern intelligence officer told me. “The neighborhoods look like a carbon copy of Beverly Hills.”



Since taking office, Trump has made a series of efforts to strangle the I.R.G.C. In 2017, the Treasury Department designated the Guard as a terrorist organization, and Secretary Steven Mnuchin pledged to “disrupt the I.R.G.C.’s destructive activities.” But sanctions imposed by the West had a perverse effect. Because few countries could trade with Iran, the businesses that the I.R.G.C. controlled came to exercise near-monopolies within the country. As the U.S. and its allies policed international shipping, the I.R.G.C. tightened its hold on the sea-lanes and the airports, where oil smuggling and drug trafficking were flourishing.

When Rouhani became President, in 2013, he started working to restrain the I.R.G.C.’s power. He moved to take away some of its business holdings, encouraging the idea that “all soldiers must return to the barracks.” He also led negotiations with the West over the country’s nuclear program, which the Guard oversees. But both initiatives ultimately foundered, and the I.R.G.C. pushed back with a campaign of its own. In 2017, prosecutors, many of them loyal to the Guard, began a series of criminal investigations of people close to Rouhani, imprisoning his brother on corruption charges.

Tensions became so acute that officials publicly discussed efforts to neutralize Rouhani. In a speech in August, 2018, Khamenei complained of usurpers who were “working on the enemy’s plan.” Two months later, Ezzatollah Zarghami, a former I.R.G.C. general and head of Iranian state broadcasting, said in an interview that the chiefs of several leading state enterprises had been preparing to “take over in many of those areas and manage them instead of the government.”

The effort was thwarted, but there may have been another. Masoud Bastani, an Iranian journalist whose reporting has landed him in prison three times, told me that, late last year, the I.R.G.C. was moving to strip Rouhani of much of his power. A source who is familiar with the inner workings of the Guard told me that officers were planning to arrest roughly a hundred people close to the President.

But, before anything could happen, Rouhani’s administration threw the country into chaos. On November 15th, the government announced that it was raising the price of gasoline by fifty per cent. The news was released quietly—in the middle of the night, on a national holiday—but it was still met with outrage; Iranians drive everywhere, and rely on government-subsidized gasoline. Ordinary citizens began swarming into the streets to protest, touching off the largest and most disruptive riots since the revolution.

On the second day of the protests, Pouya Shirpisheh, a twenty-seven-year-old electrical engineer, was driving home from work, in the Tehran suburb of Karaj, when he passed a crowd gathering to demonstrate; social media had been pulsing all day with talk of the protests. At home, he shared a lunch of okra stew with his mother, Nahid. Afterward, he told her that he was heading into the streets, and asked if she wanted to come along. She agreed, on one condition: “Only if you hold my hand.” Pouya’s sister, Mona, decided to join him, too.

The Shirpishehs were sick of the revolution, even though Pouya’s father had fought in the Revolutionary Guard for five years during the Iran-Iraq War. Pouya, who was hoping to marry soon and build a life, loathed it most. “Pouya loved poetry and nature—he saw beauty in everything,” Nahid told me. “He also loved history, and he used to say these clerics have ruined our country. He used to say, ‘We’ve never had such a terrible time, ever, in our history.’” The protests quickly became an outlet for broader frustrations. “We can see that the government is spending our money on other countries, sending it to Hamas, to Syria and Hezbollah,” Nahid said. “The protests weren’t about gasoline. They were about protesting the same bunch of people in charge for forty years, deliberately seeking a fight with the U.S. It is these people who have turned Iran into a pariah state. We cannot have any fun—Iran is a joyless religious dictatorship. We are forced into fake identities.”

As the family joined the demonstration, Nahid experienced a rush of euphoria. The crowd was angry, but not violent. “America is not the enemy!” the marchers roared. “The enemy is here!” The police fired tear gas, but the marchers kept surging forward. Nahid felt suddenly free: “I turned to Mona and said, ‘This is the best night of my life.’”

Pouya told his mother that he’d torn his shoe and was heading back to the car, and then he disappeared into the crowd. Nahid heard the sound of gunfire, sporadic at first and then sustained. She pushed through the throng, seeing people fall around her, bleeding from gunshot wounds. “How horrible it will be for the mothers of these sons,” she told herself. Then she spotted Pouya in the arms of a group of protesters. He had been shot in the head. “That’s my son!” she screamed. Nahid and Mona pulled Pouya into the car and raced him to a hospital. He was dead before they arrived.

The following days brought no relief to the family. “I was crazy with grief,” Nahid said. At first, the security forces refused to turn over Pouya’s body. Then they dragged Nahid and her husband to the police station for questioning. Plainclothes officers lingered outside the family’s home. Men called on

the phone and threatened them, she said: “When we asked who killed Pouya, the agent said it must be the M.E.K.,” the opposition group. When they finally received Pouya’s body, two thousand sympathizers turned out for a ceremony to mourn his death; policemen lurked at the periphery. In the months after her son’s death, Nahid began to visit the mothers of other slain Iranians. “The crackdown showed us that this regime will do whatever it takes to hold on to power,” she said.

The November demonstrations were remarkably distinct from those in 2009. The earlier protests were led by the middle class and by university students, and took place largely in major cities. The more recent demonstrations were begun by workers, the regime’s traditional base, and spread rapidly throughout the country. They also turned violent; in many cities, demonstrators burned stores and trashed police stations. “The 2009 protests showed that the regime had lost the middle class,” a shop owner who witnessed protests in his Tehran suburb told me. “The protests in November show that they’ve lost the working class, too.”

The regime struck back brutally. “It happened very fast,” a Western diplomat in Tehran told me. “The government switched off the phones and the Internet and responded massively—and the whole thing was over in three days. I think the regime was genuinely afraid.” Iranian authorities confirmed that some seven thousand people had been arrested, but they have not disclosed the number of civilians killed. Amnesty International estimated the death toll at three hundred; Reuters, citing unnamed officials close to Khamenei, put the number at fifteen hundred. One dissident politician I spoke to endorsed the higher number, saying that she had been told two hundred people were buried in one area in a single night. “Then there is the second phase by the police, which few people talk about,” she added. “They examine photographs of license plates to identify leaders and speak to informants to identify more. They arrest these people, too.”

In a nearly unprecedented sign of unrest, the demonstrators began to fight back. According to Iranian news accounts, at least six police officers and soldiers were killed, apparently by protesters. Four of them were shot to death, even though civilians are largely forbidden to have guns; others were stabbed. Security forces encountered resistance in such areas as Kurdistan and Khuzestan, which border neighboring countries. A YouTube video, purportedly taken in Khuzestan, shows security forces shooting civilians as they flee into a marsh. “That suggests there is some kind of organized

resistance,” Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute, in Washington, said. “Ordinary civilians don’t hide in a marsh.”

A few politicians tried to raise an outcry. Parvaneh Salahshouri, a member of parliament, made a speech from the floor of the legislature, in which she denounced the military’s influence on the government’s decisions. “How can I, as a representative of the people, watch the murder of my country’s young?” she said. She told me that she was accosted and harassed for days afterward.

Khamenei attempted to shift the blame, maintaining that the decision to use force had not been his. But he showed no pity toward those killed, saying that the security forces had fired on “hooligans” and dupes of foreign agents. “Such actions are not carried out by ordinary people,” he said of the protests. “They are thugs.” Khamenei warned that he would not stand in the way of the security forces in the future.

President Rouhani did not appear in public for several days. During my visit, though, he held a press conference, and I asked him how many civilians the government had killed. He gave a rambling response before concluding, “You’re going to have to ask the medical examiner’s office.” (Iranian reporters later reached out to the medical examiner in Tehran. The office demurred, saying, “The Ministry of Interior is responsible for announcing these statistics.”)

When I returned to my seat, an Iranian reporter, her face surrounded by a chador, turned to me and spoke loudly enough for much of the room to hear. “I noticed the President didn’t answer your question,” she said, in flawless English. “We hate him.”

A way from direct confrontation with the Islamic Republic, Iranians carry on a parallel existence. It is a crime for women to leave the house without a hijab, but, in the well-off sections of northern Tehran, it is not uncommon to spot women walking down the street with their hair defiantly exposed. So many areas of private life fall under the state’s purview that flouting the law is hard to avoid. In 2014, six Iranian men and women recorded themselves dancing to Pharrell Williams’s song “Happy,” and posted the video on YouTube, with the title “Happy We Are from Tehran.” The authorities arrested them for violating laws that prohibit dancing with the opposite sex. They were sentenced to a year in prison and ninety-one lashes apiece.

At times during my visit, Tehran reminded me of Eastern Europe in the eighties, when ordinary people, constrained by a sclerotic communist system, coped by living as if the state did not exist. One night, I attended a dinner party in a middle-class neighborhood of Tehran. Iranian music drifted from the stereo. Women wore skirts and leather boots, their hair uncovered. Bottles of arrack and wine, homemade but delicious, were arrayed on a table. One of the men told me that illicit parties were so common that he had been making a living as a d.j. Almost every party received a visit from a police officer, who said, usually with a wink, that the music was too loud. “I give him some money, and he goes away,” the man told me. Another man complained about the daily struggle of making his business work in an unpredictable and corrupt system, with chronic shortages of material and unruly inspectors pushing for bribes. “Plan for the next quarter?” he said. “I can’t plan for tomorrow morning.”

In Iran, some of the most intense unrest comes from frustration with the regime’s intrusions into private life. One evening, I met a young woman, who went by Sara, who was involved in a recent protest movement to open soccer games to women. The protests gained prominence in 2018, when thirty-five women—many of them Sara’s friends—gathered outside a match between two Tehran soccer clubs and demanded to be allowed in. They were attempting to do openly what other young women had been doing in secret, by flattening their breasts, painting on mustaches, dressing up in boys’ clothes, and sneaking inside. All thirty-five were arrested.

The Iranian regime has repressed the women’s movement with particular ferocity. In 2017, a woman named Vida Movahed climbed onto a utility box in downtown Tehran, removed her hijab, and waved it around on a stick. More women followed, and became known as the Girls of Revolution Street. The authorities arrested not only them and Movahed but also her lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was sentenced to thirty-eight years in prison and a hundred and forty-eight lashes.

Sara was nervous about meeting me in public. “It is really dangerous,” she said. “Me sitting here talking to you might get me in deep trouble.” Still, she was poised and determined, insisting that she be granted her rights. “If you want to know how we live, you have to watch ‘The Handmaid’s Tale,’ ” she said. “This is the real Gilead. Margaret Atwood, she wrote our story before we were born.”

Last year, a twenty-nine-year-old woman named Sahar Khodayari was arrested while trying to sneak into a soccer match and charged with “appearing in public without a hijab.” She set herself on fire and

died. Afterward, the authorities finally conceded—a little. Under pressure from FIFA, the international soccer authority, the Iranian government agreed to allow women to attend matches of the national team, as long as it was playing foreign opponents. Sara described the thrill of entering Tehran's stadium for a match between the Iranian and Cambodian teams. "The soccer field is really green when you see it," she told me. Even though the women were relegated to a roped-off area behind a goal, "everyone was screaming and crying," she said. "It was the dream."

I asked Sara why the authorities were concerned about something as trivial as a soccer match. "They know that if they open the doors to the stadium they should open other doors, too," she said. "But the women of this country are not going to stop. I am absolutely prepared to go to prison." All her friends felt the same way about the authorities, she said. "The problem they have with us is that, if women get power, they're going to take them down. That is the fact. They are going to overthrow the government."

**O**n April 9th, Khamenei appeared on Iran's Channel 1 to talk about the coronavirus. Since the outbreak began, Iran has been devastated by the virus, with a hundred and fourteen thousand confirmed cases, nearly seven thousand dead, and no reasonable prospect of containment. Instead of acknowledging the government's failures, Khamenei declared a triumph. "The Iranian nation had a brilliant performance in this test," he said. "The people's coöperation has also created beautiful, fascinating, and astonishing scenes, and they can be seen everywhere." Iran's example shone in contrast to that of the West, he said, where crazed residents had emptied store shelves, committed suicide, and "fought with one another over toilet paper." He added, "The Wild West has been revived. That is what they say."

From the start of his time in government, Khamenei has proclaimed his loathing of the United States. In 1987, he told the U.N., "The history of our nation is in a black, bitter, and bloody chapter, mixed with varieties of hostility and spite from the American regime." He seems to take pleasure in recounting America's sins; during one meeting with government officials, he gave a discourse on "Uncle Tom's Cabin" as a depiction of "the realities of America and the American government."

The sense of enmity goes both ways. Ever since the revolution, the U.S. has pressed the Iranian regime over its sponsorship of terror and its nuclear program. But Khamenei has used the

confrontation to justify crushing domestic opponents and to explain away economic mismanagement. Rising tensions with the U.S. have nearly always coincided with crackdowns on dissidents and intellectuals, and with the exclusion of reformers from ballots. In 2010, Mohammad Khatami told Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment, that the Supreme Leader had once confided, “We need the United States as an enemy.”

The Iranians’ ultimate gamesmanship has involved the nuclear accord. For years, Khamenei opposed direct talks with the United States but periodically made concessions, even occasionally agreeing to halt the program altogether; all the while, he led his country closer to a usable weapon. Finally, in 2013, with the country crippled by sanctions, he began signalling that he was open to talks, calling on Iranians to demonstrate “heroic flexibility.” The country’s leaders hoped that a deal would produce a surge in the economy. That prospect collapsed when Trump cancelled the deal and imposed even harsher sanctions.

Several Iran experts in the U.S. told me that they believed the regime might resume negotiations after the Presidential elections this fall. Their reasons for optimism varied. Some argued that, if Trump lost, the nuclear deal could be revived; others said that, if Trump won, Khamenei would have no choice but to negotiate. Iranian officials rejected both scenarios, telling me that the Supreme Leader would never again make a deal. “The United States can’t be counted on to keep its word,” Mohammad Marandi, a professor at Tehran University, told me.

Over time, there have been hints that the regime is maintaining covert capabilities. The most recent ones surfaced in 2018, after Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, carried out a brazen plot to steal nuclear secrets from a secure warehouse in Tehran. Arriving in a semi truck before midnight, a team of agents broke into the facility and, using high-intensity torches, cut open safes. For six hours, they carted off documents and CDs, leaving just before an armed guard was due to begin his morning shift. According to a former senior U.S. intelligence official, the Iranian military launched an enormous dragnet operation, but the Israelis escaped across the border into Azerbaijan. Another former intelligence official told me that several members of Iran’s security forces were arrested afterward. “There was a big purge,” he said.

When reports of the raid emerged, Iranian officials said that the whole thing was a hoax, and that the documents were phony. The Israelis maintain that “the archive,” as they call it, was a history of Iran’s



nuclear-weapons program until 2003, when the regime claimed to have largely suspended it. According to a Western expert, the documents detailed the existence of two nuclear sites that had been hidden from inspectors; one had produced uranium hexafluoride, a material used in the enrichment process, and the other was a facility for testing weapons components. Western officials couldn't determine whether the sites were active, but, when international inspectors, alerted by the Israelis, asked to visit them, the Iranians refused—and razed the testing facility. “There was a rush to clean up the site,” the expert told me.

Last spring, Iran announced that it was abandoning the constraints imposed by the nuclear agreement, and stepped up its enrichment of uranium. A Western official who tracks the program told me that, at the current rate, the Iranians could have enough enriched material for a bomb in less than seven months. David Albright, the president of the Institute for Science and International Security, estimates that it could take half that long. Constructing a sophisticated weapon with the enriched uranium would likely require twelve to eighteen months more. A crude device could be ready to test much sooner, though—perhaps in the Iranian desert. Such a device probably couldn't be launched at an enemy, and would likely use much of the enriched uranium that Iran has. But, the Western official said, “the world would suddenly look quite different.”

Thus far, Iranian leaders apparently have not begun working to weaponize a nuclear device. Yet the uncertainty has refocused Western intelligence analysts on a pressing question: Will Khamenei decide to build a weapon?

Most analysts I spoke to believe that he will not, unless the regime faces an existential threat from outside the country. But if he dies? “The day he's gone, then I think all options are on the table,” the Western official said.

**O**n January 6th, Khamenei stood at the front of a huge crowd at Tehran University and wept. He was there for the funeral of Qassem Suleimani—the head of the elite Quds Force, who had, through military pressure, political maneuvering, and ruthless terror attacks, made Iran the most influential country in the Middle East. He had been killed three days before, on Trump's orders, when an MQ-9 Reaper drone struck his convoy near the Baghdad airport. Footage shared with me by an

Iraqi official showed one of Suleimani's hands, charred and torn from his body, with a distinctive ruby signet ring still intact—enough to prove his identity.

Suleimani's killing provoked an outpouring of national mourning, with millions of Iranians coming to see his body as his funerary procession travelled the country. In Tehran, the line of mourners stretched more than three miles. During the funeral, Khamenei lamented, "God, the wrapped bodies that are in front of our feet are your worshippers and the children of your worshippers." He seemed to be bidding goodbye not just to a national hero but also to someone whose popularity he could never hope to match.

Suleimani was a principal architect of Iran's foreign policy, but he was also believed to have been deeply involved in domestic decisions, including the suppression of the rebellions in 1999 and 2009. He was the Supreme Leader's closest counsellor—"Khamenei saw him like a son," Marandi, the professor at Tehran University, who knew Suleimani, said—and was the only Revolutionary Guard general who was never rotated out of his job. A senior Iraqi official recalled once asking Suleimani why he didn't run for President. Suleimani thought for a moment and said, "Why would I do that?" The official explained his logic: "Suleimani had all the power and no accountability."

Suleimani was also expected to help Khamenei orchestrate the selection of a successor, insuring that the next Supreme Leader suited his wishes. According to Iran's constitution, the process is as regimented as the Vatican's method for anointing a Pope: the new leader is to be selected by the Assembly of Experts, who have largely been appointed with Khamenei's approval. But most current members belong to the original revolutionary generation, and are now visibly slowed by age. Sadjadpour, of the Carnegie Endowment, described the demographics: "The median age is deceased."

Khamenei's first choice is likely to be his son, Mojtaba, a cleric in Tehran. In recent years, Khamenei has elevated Mojtaba's profile and given him more responsibility in overseeing the government. But many Iranians believe that, after Khamenei departs, the I.R.G.C. will become enmeshed in selecting a new Supreme Leader. Some expect the Guard to try to rule outright. Several former commanders have already assumed prominent political roles, aided by the institution's ability to spend its vast resources on favored candidates. "The I.R.G.C. is not going to take over all of a sudden," Alfoneh, of the Arab Gulf States Institute, said. "It's a slow-motion coup that's been in the works for years."

Most people I spoke with believed that the Guard would maintain a façade of clerical rule. Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's Chief Justice, is frequently mentioned as a candidate. Raisi, along with leading the judiciary, is an influential member of the Assembly of Experts. He also proved his revolutionary fervor at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, when he helped carry out the extrajudicial killings of thousands of M.E.K. prisoners and other leftists. "He's drenched in blood," Reuel Gerecht, an Iran analyst and a former C.I.A. officer, told me.

The coronavirus outbreak has only strengthened the I.R.G.C.'s influence. In March, Khamenei gave the Guard responsibility for containing the virus, and since then it has deployed tens of thousands of troops throughout the country. A public-health specialist working for the Ministry of Health told me that thousands of Basij militiamen are moving around Iran, without any protective gear, to disinfect buildings and streets. "The guards are trying to solve the coronavirus problem in Iran by brute force," the specialist said. In Tehran and elsewhere in the country, the Guard has attempted to control information about the virus, including death statistics, the specialist said: "The guards want to contain any damage that has been caused by the wrong decisions—or lack of decisions—made by Khamenei, and blame them on the executive branch, the President, and the Ministry of Health."

Many Western diplomats and experts believe that the I.R.G.C. is dominated by officers intent on preserving the status quo, which has enriched and empowered them. With Khamenei still in power, most signs suggest that the Iranian state is becoming even more conservative. Before the parliamentary elections in February, legal and clerical authorities barred seven thousand candidates—more than half of those who attempted to run. Among them were ninety current members of parliament, including a number of conservatives. "Some were probably corrupt," a Western analyst who works in the region told me. "Some were not considered loyal enough."

Still, some Iranians believe that many of the I.R.G.C.'s senior officers want to steer the country in a direction closer to that of China: strict politics, but a freer market. The reformist leader I spoke to, who is in touch with several I.R.G.C. officers, believed that one of the generals would ultimately emerge as a benevolent strongman—"our Napoleon"—to guide Iran toward greater prosperity. The government would be run by technocrats, not clerics, and the generals would loosen controls on freedom of speech and dress. "They want to reach out to the middle class," he said. "Think about it: the moment they get the clerics out of government, they would be incredibly popular."

That prediction struck many Western experts as overly optimistic. The reform-minded officers inside the I.R.G.C. probably make up only one of several factions, which exist in a state of internal rivalry and dissension. If those factions are unable to agree on a Supreme Leader, then the process could go out of control. “I think the selection of a new leader needs to happen quickly—it’s a twenty-four-hour thing,” a Western diplomat in Tehran told me.

The deteriorating relations with the U.S. have had visible effects on Iran’s domestic politics. The latest crisis is driven by the two countries’ struggle for influence in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militias have stepped up attacks on American personnel; it was these attacks that prompted Trump to kill Suleimani. Khamenei vowed revenge, and, on January 8th, Iranian missiles struck two U.S. military bases in Iraq, wounding several soldiers. Later that day, a Ukrainian Airlines plane went down near the Tehran airport, with a hundred and seventy-six people on board. The government initially denied any involvement, but reports on social media revealed that the Revolutionary Guard had shot down the plane, mistaking it for an enemy cruise missile. Angry demonstrations broke out. “Everyone was against the government then,” Sara told me.

Many Iranians I spoke to believed that the regime would strike again, in an attempt to humiliate Trump before the election in November. Some told me that it might try to take American hostages—evoking memories of the Embassy seizure in 1979, which helped destroy Jimmy Carter’s Presidency. One academic with ties to the Iranian leadership said, “I think the fate of Trump lies in the hands of Tehran.”

This may be bluster, but, as Iran’s economic problems deepen, the regime could find itself increasingly tempted to create a diversion. The same might be true for Trump, whose rhetoric has grown more bombastic since the Suleimani strike. In April, he tweeted, “I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea.” Iranian state media responded with equal belligerence, calling the idea “a fake Hollywood tale.”

Even as Iranians speculate about who will succeed Khamenei, many believe that, whoever becomes Supreme Leader, the revolution is no longer salvageable. One of them is Faezeh Rafsanjani, a former member of parliament and the daughter of the late President Rafsanjani. Faezeh grew up amid the country’s ruling élite but gradually became disenchanted with its ideology. In 2009,

she emphatically endorsed the protesters. Speaking to a crowd of demonstrators, she compared Khamenei to the Shah—a cardinal insult—and denounced what she saw as a theft of the people's vote. "The protests must continue, until they realize that a fraud of this magnitude cannot be pushed aside," she said.

The speech helped establish Rafsanjani as one of the country's leading dissidents, whose famous name made her criticisms all the more threatening to those in power. Rafsanjani became a target of unrelenting harassment, especially by members of the Basij. In one incident, captured in a video that surfaced in early 2011, Rafsanjani was walking out of a mosque when she was confronted by an overbearing militiaman. "You whore!" he growled, inches from her face. "Do you want me to rip your mouth open? Should I rip your mouth open right here? We'll ruin you! We'll kill all of you!"

Asked about the incident a couple of months later, Rafsanjani told an interviewer, "This government is run by beasts and thugs." She was arrested, convicted in a closed courtroom of spreading anti-government propaganda, and sentenced to six months in prison. In 2017, she was jailed again, for criticizing the Revolutionary Guard; she served both of her terms in the infamous women's ward of Evin Prison.

On a gray morning, I met Rafsanjani in her office. She wore a pink head scarf that obscured her face, but her eyes burned with urgency and intelligence. (Despite being a proponent of women's rights, she wears hijab as a matter of personal preference.) While she talked, she sat—and occasionally stood—behind a metal desk covered with heaps of papers.

Rafsanjani had little faith left in the system founded forty-one years ago. "Even the people who say they are reformers are not really reformers at all," she said. She noted that Rouhani had taken office with an overwhelming mandate for change. "I had hopes for him, but he's the same color as the rest of them," she said.

Rafsanjani did not blame the Trump Administration or the American sanctions for the country's problems; like many Iranians I spoke to, she felt that blaming the U.S. was a weak excuse for the regime's failure to reform itself. "The coronavirus is just one instance," she said. "There have been many events in recent years that show that our politics have gone wrong." Iran's increasing schisms, she argued, were the result of the regime's flawed ideas. "One is the inessentiality of human life, which

seems to be one of our most seriously pursued policies,” she said. “Another is the national-security lens—we look at things that have nothing to do with politics or security through the lens of national security. And when you put these two together you start to realize why these things keep happening.”

Isolated and dysfunctional, the Islamic Republic had reached a dead end, she said: “The regime has lost all popular support, and yet it is incapable of change. The result is that the Iranian people have lost hope. We are hopeless now.”

Just before I headed home from Iran, I visited a Western ambassador in Tehran. When I told him that I was going to the airport, he said, “It’s the second checkpoint you need to worry about. That’s the I.R.G.C.” On my way, I stripped everything from my phone and laptop—e-mail, photographs, encrypted-chat apps.

At Tehran International, I breezed through the security lines until I got to the checkpoint nearest the boarding gate. I was waiting for my backpack to come through the X-ray machine when a man put his hand on my shoulder. “We have some questions we’d like to ask you,” he said.

I was led to a room the size of a walk-in closet, where five men were waiting. As we sat down, our knees touched. One man, sweating, with a pinched face and an ill-fitting shirt, led the questioning. Another man translated. There was no chitchat.

“We’ve been watching you,” the interrogator said. I thought of all the Iranians I had met after hours, who would be in danger now. “You have been seen speaking to people without permission.”

The interrogator took my phone, and one of his men carried it out of the room. I wondered how long my plane would wait for me.

“You have been seen entering restricted areas,” he said.

I thought of Nicolas Pelham, a correspondent for *The Economist*. He’d been granted a visa by the Iranian bureaucracy and then been detained by the I.R.G.C.—one power center seeming to overrule another. He was held for seven weeks.

The questioning continued for several minutes, as the time of my flight came and went. The interrogator asked about Masoud Bastani, the muckraking journalist. “Who gave you license to meet Bastani?” he demanded. I was terrified that Bastani would be sent back to prison. But, as the interview went on, I realized that they didn’t actually know whom I had met with.

“You have been observed photographing restricted sites,” the interrogator said.

By then, the man had come back with my phone. Grasping for something, I told the interrogator to check it.

He looked at the phone, and found nothing. For a moment, he seemed embarrassed. Then he handed it back to me.

“You were right—you were not taking any photos,” he said. “You are free to leave the Islamic Republic. Have a nice flight.” ♦

*Published in the print edition of the May 25, 2020, issue, with the headline “The Enemy Is Here.”*

---

*Dexter Filkins is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “The Forever War,” which won a National Book Critics Circle Award.*

---

More: [Iran](#) [Middle East](#) [Foreign Policy](#) [Coronavirus](#) [Protestors](#) [Demonstrations](#) [Revolution](#)

Ayatollah Khamenei

---