Epilogue

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity
W. B. Yeats

Most observers expected, given the continuing tight control over political activity and general repressive atmosphere, that the Iranian Presidential elections of June 2013 would follow the pattern of those of 2009, with the *nezam* manipulating the process to secure the election of a candidate aligned with the Leader and his circle. This expectation seemed to be confirmed when the candidates' list was vetted in May to exclude Rafsanjani. It was a shock – the elderly shark had been humiliated at elections in 2000 and 2005 by the electorate, but for a former President to be vetoed by the Guardian Council seemed to emphasize even further the degree to which the system had swung to the right, narrowing its base of support. Rafsanjani was, seemingly, being punished for his statements in the aftermath of the 2009 elections. Ahmadinejad's preferred candidate was also excluded, effectively consigning him and his brand of politics to oblivion.

But the list of candidates was interesting in other ways too. Of the eight that the Guardian Council approved, there were five hardline conservatives (Jalili, Qalibaf, Rezai, Velayati, Haddad-Adel), one moderate conservative (Ruhani) and two reformists (Aref and Gharazi). It did not look too exciting; Qalibaf, Velayati and Rezai had all lost in previous Presidential elections, Aref and Gharazi were not prominent or charismatic figures, and Ruhani, while well-known as a diplomat and nuclear negotiator, had never cut a big figure in national politics either. But three of the candidates had serious foreign policy experience (Velayati, Ruhani and Jalili) and even at this early point it appeared the regime wanted to emphasize the foreign policy angle, presumably with a view to finding a solution to the nuclear problem, and relief from sanctions.

Until the last days before the poll on 14 June 2013 the election campaign did not come alive as the 2009 election had, and many felt that the televised debates were dull by comparison with four years earlier. The crisis over the economy, sanctions and the nuclear programme dominated the campaign. Jalili, who had been the chief nuclear negotiator under Ahmadinejad, appeared at first to be the preferred regime candidate. But in one highly significant moment in the debates Velayati (of all the candidates perhaps the one closest to Khamenei himself) criticized Jalili's conduct of the nuclear negotiations for being excessively obstructive and unimaginative – an unprecedented public display of disagreement within the highest circles of the *nezam*, on the most sensitive and vital matters of state security. Given that Jalili had been following the approved regime line in the negotiations at the time, it was also rather unfair, but it was another indication that policy was shifting.

As the campaign went forward, Aref and Haddad-Adel dropped out, and Aref gave his support to Ruhani in doing so, helping Ruhani's efforts to present himself as a candidate not just for moderates and those who might have voted for Rafsanjani, but for reformists too. He gathered support from reformists for his statements in favour of women's equality, release of political prisoners and free speech. In another exchange in the TV debates, when the 1999 repression of student demonstrations came up, he hinted at his more liberal position, by comparison with Qalibaf (a former officer in the Sepah) by saying 'I am a lawyer, not a colonel'. His bid for reformist support was helped enormously by Khatami's endorsement shortly before the poll, and something of a bandwagon of enthusiasm for Ruhani did finally develop in the last hours of the campaign.

After the votes were counted, it emerged that Ruhani had been elected with 50.7 per cent of the vote, narrowly squeaking past the 50 per cent threshold required for a candidate to succeed without recourse to a second voting round. He was well ahead of his nearest rival, Mohammad Qalibaf, with more than three times the number of votes.

Given the scale of the alleged fraud in the 2009 elections, it would not have been difficult to skew the 2013 result by the one or two percentage points necessary to ensure that the voting went to a second round – and it was far from clear that Ruhani would have won a second round. This suggested again the impression that the election implied a decision by Khamenei and his circle in favour of a candidate well-placed and well-qualified to resolve the nuclear dispute – an impression reinforced further

by a story reported in the Iranian press later to the effect that Ruhani's candidacy had only narrowly been approved by the Guardian Council after the chairman, Ayatollah Jannati, had intervened personally in his favour.

But Ruhani's election may have had another, more domestic significance also. The Ahmadinejad Presidency had been a significant lurch to the right in Iranian politics. The outcome of the 2009 elections, which increased the dependence of the Leader on the Revolutionary Guard and the rest of the security apparatus, was a dangerous further lurch in the same direction. As we have seen, Khomeini in his time always tried to keep left and right in balance. Despite the fact that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad eventually emerged still on top, the huge demonstrations that followed the disputed election of 2009 – the biggest since the revolution of 1979 – must have sounded as a warning to Khamenei. In that context, and without detracting from Ruhani's success, the result of the 2013 election also looks like a deliberate return toward what one could regard as the Khomeini model of balance: to more broad-based, popular government.

Hasan Ruhani was born in 1948 in a small town to the east of Tehran. He studied both conventional religious classes in the seminaries of Qom, and the secular law code in a law degree at the University of Tehran (later, at the end of the 1990s, he took a PhD at Glasgow Caledonian University). He was active in opposition to the Shah, and toward the end of the 1970s left Iran, accompanying Ayatollah Khomeini in exile in Paris for a time in 1978. Ruhani belonged to that group of clerics for whom Mohammad Beheshti was the model – conservative, but modernizing, with significant direct experience of life in the West, and good ability in Western languages. After Beheshti's death Rafsanjani was the leading exemplar of this tendency in Iranian politics, and Rafsanjani was Ruhani's patron and mentor. Ruhani rendered him service through the 1980s and the 1990s, both in Parliament as deputy speaker, and on particular tricky tasks – perhaps most notably in the Iran/Contra episode, when he was one of the few people trusted by Rafsanjani to speak to the clandestine US delegation that visited Tehran under Robert McFarlane in May 1986.

Ruhani was appointed as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) in 1989 – a powerful position that meant he chaired preparatory meetings as Khamenei's representative. He stayed as secretary of the SNSC for 16 years, until 2005 – it meant that he supervised the most vital decision-making of the Iranian State over that period. In the closing years of the Khatami Presidency, Ruhani came to new prominence (from October 2003) as the chief negotiator for Iran on the nuclear question – the Iranian press gave him the nickname of 'diplomat sheikh' – and masterminded the suspension of uranium enrichment at that time, acquiring a reputation well beyond Iran for his intelligence, flexibility and integrity. But as noted already, that initiative did not bear fruit and he resigned from the nuclear negotiator job (and from the position as secretary of the SNSC) shortly after Ahmadinejad's election in 2005.

After his election in 2013, Ruhani made clear his intention to push forward toward a resolution of the nuclear dispute as a matter of urgent priority. He was inaugurated as President at the beginning of August, and in September went to New York for the UN General Assembly, following in the footsteps of Khatami and Ahmadinejad, whose appearances there had struck such different postures. This time the message was clear – in his speech to the UNGA on 24 September Ruhani said that the era of zero sum games in international relations was over – that coercion and threat had to be replaced by compromise and dialogue to solve tensions and conflicts. This was true for the conflict in Syria as for the question of the Iranian nuclear programme. Iran was ready to remove 'all reasonable doubts' about her nuclear programme, but the best way to resolve the question lay through acceptance of Iran's 'inalienable rights'. The speech was carefully written for domestic as well as international hearing, but perhaps more important were the responses of interlocutors to private talks with the Iranian team (led by the new foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif) in the margins of the UNGA. American and British spokesmen welcomed a new, more conciliatory and workmanlike approach from the Iranian side. And then, as the politicians and diplomats left New York three days later, Ruhani and Obama spoke by telephone in what was generally interpreted as a breakthrough – the first such exchange since 1979.

There were dissenting noises from diehard hardliners in Iran on Ruhani's return, including from General Jafari, the head of the Sepah. But these were secondary to the continuing statements from Khamenei in Ruhani's support. With Khamenei behind him, Ruhani did not have to worry too much about those discordant notes.

Talks resumed between Iran and the P5+1 (the permanent five of the UN Security Council – The USA, Britain, France, Russia and China – plus Germany – sometimes also referred to as the EU3+3) plus the EU as an extra party in its own right – in October, in a much more positive spirit. In early November it looked as though a deal might be imminent when foreign ministers hurriedly flew to attend the talks in Geneva. But those talks broke down in the early hours of the morning of 9 November after the French negotiators insisted on further constraints on development of the Iranians' centrifuge capability, and on the development of a heavy water plant at Arak (capable, ultimately, of producing plutonium). Finally, when the negotiators reconvened in Geneva at the end of the month, they reached an agreement on 24 November. It was not a final settlement, but an interim deal, pending further negotiations toward a final agreement to be made within six months. Nonetheless, it was a great success, against the predictions of a broad mass of sceptics who had insisted the whole project was vain and impossible.

The core of the interim deal was that Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment above the 5 per cent level in exchange for relaxation of some sanctions – a relaxation estimated to be worth $7 billion to Iran ('modest', according to the US). In addition, the Iranians agreed to begin converting uranium enriched to a higher level to put it beyond weapon use, to increase the frequency and intrusiveness of inspections, to suspend work on the Arak plant and to halt development of improved centrifuges that would greatly increase the speed and efficiency of enrichment.

Initially, some reports noted an apparent difference of view post-deal – the Iranians were claiming it recognized Iran's right to enrich uranium, while the US and others were saying that it had done no such thing. As with many diplomatic ambiguities, both were right, and both wrong. No such statement appeared in the deal in those terms, but it did provide for Iran to continue enrichment below the 5 per cent level (consistent with 'peaceful purposes'), subject to conditions and subject to the still-to-be-negotiated final settlement.

It soon emerged that the Iranian negotiators had full backing for the terms they had agreed – President Ruhani and more importantly, Ali Khamenei quickly issued statements welcoming it. Khamenei said 'God's grace and the support of the Iranian nation were the reasons behind this success'. On the EU side, the chief EU negotiator, Catherine Ashton, was praised for her patient, painstaking work toward the settlement.

Netanyahu in Israel had spoken strongly against the talks in Geneva, and blasted their outcome also, as being too soft on Iran. But his bitter criticism probably helped to quieten hardline dissent within Iran. Similar opposition from Saudi Arabia seemed also to fall on deaf ears. But Obama had to persuade skeptics in the US Congress and elsewhere to give this new process a chance, and not impose new sanctions. To this end Obama and his colleagues presented the deal as a first step that halted or reversed the Iranian nuclear programme. That was one way of looking at it; signed off by seven of the world's most important foreign ministers, it nonetheless also signified international recognition of Iran as a nuclear power.

Part of the significance of the interim agreement was about the directions that the US and Iran had *not* taken. They had both pulled back from positions of intransigence, confrontation and escalation. The Iranians could have remained obdurate against any kind of concessions or limits on their nuclear programme, hunkering down and accepting the price of isolation and the massive economic damage from sanctions, which had been making life miserable for their people. The US could have continued with the 'no enrichment, can't trust Iran' line, steadily increasing the sanctions pressure until the only sanctions left were military ones. But Obama pulled back from that, and took a chance on trusting the Iranians. That was the real significance of the Geneva agreement.

It emerged after Geneva that there had been direct bilateral talks in secret between the Iranians and the US since March 2013 – well before Ruhani had been elected as President. Big political figures in Iran and in the US had made a commitment to a positive process of diplomacy. The involvement of the other state parties was important, but in its essentials it was a US/Iran negotiation. As with all initiatives involving a commitment of this kind, momentum and the political capital invested in the process counted for as much as the technical details.

According to the interim deal achieved in Geneva, a final settlement was to have been achieved within six months. But predictably, the negotiations proved difficult, and the deadline was postponed twice, in June and November 2014, before a framework deal was agreed on April 2 2015, on the basis that the technical details of a final agreement would be completed by the end of June. Eventually, after further extension of deadlines, a final and definitive agreement was made in Vienna on 14 July 2015.

Building on Geneva, the Vienna settlement (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – JCPOA) committed Iran to reduce its number of operational centrifuges from 20,000 down to under 6000, to enrich no uranium beyond the level of 3.67 per cent and to limit stocks enriched to that level to a maximum of 300kg (for 15 years), to restrict research and development of more efficient centrifuges (for 13 years), to convert the underground Fordow plant to medical research with a moratorium on enrichment there for 15 years, to redesign the Arak plant to prevent production of plutonium, to accept more or less continuous supervision of existing sites, and access to other facilities on request (subject to a consultation period of 24 days at most). The settlement also stipulated that the lifting of sanctions would be gradual and dependent on fulfilment of the Iranians' obligations.

Although it was adopted by the UN Security Council within a few days, the agreement was met with a storm of criticism from Republicans within the US political system. Much of this hostility was based on an assumption that Iran was incorrigibly malevolent and untrustworthy; hence the verification provisions were held to be inadequate (because there was a possibility for the Iranians to disguise some weapon-related activity); and the provisions for Iran to be free of some restrictions after 15 or 13 years were thought to imply too much faith in the ability of Iran to establish a higher level of trust with the other countries involved within that time period. From the Republican side, more considered objections were augmented by a deep-seated conservative mistrust of arms control measures on principle, the visceral dislike of Iran that had endured since 1979, and a profound unwillingness to allow the Obama administration any kind of policy success. But in the end, the Republican and other opponents of the agreement in Congress were not able to block the JCPOA.

Congressional misgivings over the agreement were not the only potential problem. Verification provisions designed to develop trust can often give rise to renewed disagreement, accusations of bad faith and acrimony, especially in the short term. The agreement stipulated that Iran would give an account of previous weapon-related activity; a provision that was never likely to be conducive to goodwill. But these pitfalls were overcome as the deal went forward and bedded in, and it became apparent over the next two years that the Iranians were committed to a scrupulous observance of their agreement obligations, such that no possible chink could be found to claim that Iran was in breach of the JCPOA.

The Iranian side met the JCPOA commitments that were necessary for the implementation of sanctions relief to begin, and did so rather faster than anyone had anticipated. Implementation of sanctions relief went ahead on 16 January 2016 after the IAEA confirmed that Iran had met the necessary conditions.

In the immediate aftermath of the agreement, there was some speculation that Obama might go further, and for example re-establish diplomatic relations with Iran at a low level; but this did not happen. Instead, it seemed both sides wanted to reassure opponents of the JCPOA, rather than build upon the agreement. Obama tried to reassure Saudi Arabia, who regarded the nuclear deal as a snub, and a sign of of possible US disengagement from the region. In Iran, Khamenei spoke to say that there would be no wider rapprochement with the US, and before long was casting doubt on whether the Americans would honour their commitments to remove sanctions. There was renewed concern in the autumn of 2015 over Iran's ballistic missile programme, and on 9 March 2016 the Revolutionary Guards tested two missiles, which according to Fars News were adorned with the old slogan 'Israel must be wiped out'. Ballistic missiles formed no part of the JCPOA treaty provisions, but the tests were regarded as provocative, and were presumably intended to be so. Another self-defeating provocation at the same time, from a similar quarter, was the arrest of a series of dual nationals (Iranians normally resident in Western countries – two of them were Nazenin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Siamak Namazi). As in earlier phases of the dysfunctional US/Iran relationship, the actions of hawkish obdurates in the one country played into the hands of their equivalents in the other. Over the same period Iran appeared to move closer to Russia as the Russian military intervention in Syria intensified.

The Qods force of the Sepah, led by their charismatic general Qasem Soleimani, had been active in Syria in support of the Assad regime since the Arab Spring-inspired revolt there in 2011 (the Iranians therefore must be held complicit in the many atrocities inflicted on Syrian civilians by their own government). After so-called Islamic State moved out of Syria into Iraq in June 2014 and took Mosul, the Iranians moved more forces into Iraq (in addition to the Qods force members that were already there), including small Sepah units and drones; and made their

own air strikes. The wars in Iraq and Syria were complex but became, in effect, a single struggle. From then on, the combination of Russian air attacks and Iranian-backed militia on the ground, co-ordinated with Kurdish forces and reformed Iraqi military units (as well as US and other Western help) drove IS slowly back. Soleimani appeared everywhere, liaising with Iraqi Shias and Kurds (though many Kurdish elements were hostile to the Iranians). IS resistance collapsed in Mosul in July 2017 and in the Syrian city of Raqqa in October, with most former IS territory reoccupied by the end of the year. These were major victories for Iran and the Sepah, notwithstanding that they were achieved with help from others; Iran received little international credit for them.

Iran was also blamed at this time, especially by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen. But this was always doubtful; another variant of the standard Gulf Arab elite view that anything going wrong with their dominance over the Arabian peninsula had to be the result of Iranian interference. In fact Iran had little or nothing to do with the original Houthi revolt; when the relationship with the Houthis later got closer it was largely as a result of the unsuccessful Saudi military campaign against Yemen, which by the summer of 2018 had cost thousands of civilian lives, a cholera epidemic and a humanitarian crisis; dwarfing any real or alleged effects of Iranian involvement.

The lifting of nuclear-related sanctions in January 2016 was followed (and preceded in some cases) by a surge of interest from outside in the commercial opportunities offered by the Iranian economy. Within a few days a deal was announced for Iran to buy 114 Airbus aircraft, and other similar announcements followed quickly, with Italian and French companies leading the way. But there were persistent concerns over the ability of Iranian banks to satisfy the world banking system's requirements over money laundering and other related regulatory matters; the Iranians' exclusion from the world financial system for several years meant there was a lot of catching-up to do. In the meantime, normal commercial activity was difficult and slow to resume.

The widely held perception was that Iran had huge, relatively untapped and undervalued economic potential. Years of sanctions had artificially depressed economic activity, the value of the Iranian national currency and the value of Iranian assets and businesses. In addition, Iran owned the worlds' fourth largest oil reserves, and the largest natural gas reserves worldwide. It also had a highly educated population and a strong entrepreneurial tradition, which had combined in recent years to produce, for example, a number of innovative businesses in the IT sector. High youth unemployment meant a pool of cheap labour, ready to take advantage of jobs released by new investment. Iran's diaspora of 4–5 million people were also a resource; many of those Iranians had cutting-edge businesses in western economies (notably in California); some of them travelled back frequently and were ready to invest money and know-how back home.

But set against that were a number of less encouraging factors. The economy had been depressed partly due to the effect of sanctions, but also because of poor economic planning, still too marked by a statist mindset. The dominance of hydrocarbons in the economy and the related insidious effects of rentierism also acted as a brake, there were concerns about legal safeguards for commercial activity, especially by foreigners, and it remained to be seen how the Revolutionary Guards would manage their commercial interests in the new circumstances. Corruption was widespread. Many of these problems were expected to be ironed out as Iran reintegrated into the international system, but some of the business pioneers would be likely to get a bumpy ride. As time went on, business confidence was also impaired by growing doubts about US–Iran relations and the future of the JCPOA.

These doubts culminated after the election of Donald Trump as US President in November 2016, with his announcement of US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, and the reimposition of US sanctions. In the interim, Trump and his new administration marshalled afresh all the anti-Iranian rhetoric, half-truths and exaggerations that had marked Republican opposition to the negotiation of the JCPOA in 2012–2015: Iran was the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, destabilizing a swathe of Middle Eastern countries through terrorism and its support for Shi'a militias, while oppressing its own people, and so on. Counter-arguments from almost all quarters,[1] that that the JCPOA was a rare example of successful diplomacy in the Middle East and a pillar for stability there, made no impression on the populist President, who called it the 'worst deal ever', and replaced advisers unwilling to agree his radical line with others more amenable (notably Rex Tillerson, his first Secretary of State, supplanted after only a few months by Mike Pompeo – a former head of the CIA). The exiled opposition cult group the MKO came forward again to present itself as the future for Iran, with the support of a mixed bag of dupes close to Trump, notably John Bolton, his new National Security Adviser.[2] Trump also realigned the US with Saudi Arabia and Israel in the region (those two states had themselves drawn closer together since 2015) and his people tried to argue, against all the evidence, that Iran had broken the terms of the JCPOA (at least 'in spirit' – notably with reference to the missile tests).

By the summer of 2018, especially after Trump's bizarre summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki in mid-July (the two men were left alone with interpreters for two hours and no official record was taken), it began to look as though Trump was using his strident anti-Iranian position to distract hawkish Republican supporters from his supine behaviour toward Russia – approaching the ultimate apotheosis of the one-eyed but oft-repeated claim repeated by some in Washington for many years that Iran represented a comparable threat in the twenty-first century to that of the Soviet Union in the twentieth.[3] Speculation strengthened that Putin held some kind of damaging information about Trump.

In the meantime a rift opened up between the US and her NATO allies as Germany, the UK and France stood by the JCPOA and did their best to keep the agreement alive. The possibility of secondary sanctions being applied by the US against European firms trading with Iran promised to intensify international tariff wars already burgeoning because of Trump's aggressive trading position toward China, the EU and the rest of the world in general. Once again, as on other occasions since 1979, questions around Iran appeared to have blown up into a problem of wildly overinflated proportions; in this case, arguably, for reasons that ultimately had little to do with Iran.

Meanwhile, President Ruhani was re-elected in May 2017, seeing off a hardline opponent, Ebrahim Raisi, a judge who was implicated in the 1988 prison massacres, and whom some were speaking of as a possible future successor to Khamenei. There was a 74 per cent turnout and Ruhani got 57 per cent of the vote. But the Iranian economy went from bad to worse, even before US sanctions were reapplied at the beginning of August 2018. The Iranian rial lost almost half of its value against the dollar by July as compared with the beginning of the year, and inflation rose sharply to 18 per cent, nearly doubling since April. Of course, this came on top of an already poor economic situation, which had been the main factor precipitating widespread and serious protest demonstrations around the country at the end of 2017.

These demonstrations were different in various ways from those that followed the re-election of Ahmadinejad in 2009. They began in Mashhad in the north east on 28 December, but spread within a few days to central Iran, to the south-west, to the south east and to smaller places around Tehran (but with relatively few in the capital itself). The protests of 2009 had been led by the reformist candidates in the election, Mir-Hosein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, and stopped short of calling for an end to the Islamic republic; instead they urged liberalizing reform of it. In the winter of 2017–18 the protests appeared to be genuinely spontaneous. They were coordinated on social media and were not led by any notable politicians (though Ahmadinejad did try to climb onto the bandwagon). They drew also from different (albeit overlapping) social groups – broadly, from younger and poorer people, unemployed and working class rather than middle class – though many were educated former students who had failed to get work. The protests were centered on provincial cities and towns (as many as 75 of them), rather than on the capital, Tehran. They attacked the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, but also the President many reformists voted for in 2013 and 2017, Hassan Ruhani, with many calling for an end to the rule of the clerics altogether.

The grievances of the demonstrators were diverse, and often reflected local problems, but were mainly economic or economic-related. High prices featured strongly; also the lack of jobs. But politicians were attacked for failing to provide relief after recent earthquakes (notably the severe one that caused over 600 deaths in Kermanshah province in western Iran in November 2017), or for mishandling longstanding drought and water shortage problems – often with added accusations of corruption. In several cases, people were protesting at the loss of their savings that had followed recent failures of provincial banks or savings schemes. Elsewhere people responded bitterly to rumours of forthcoming cuts to subsidies on basic commodities. Economic problems affect poor people in the provinces differently. Where in Tehran and other big cities even some of the poorest have been able to create opportunities based on family or political or other connections (one route has for years been via organizations catering to veterans of the Iran-Iraq war, for example), scope for that in smaller towns and villages, away from the centres of even regional power, is less.

So where the demonstrations of 2009 reflected, at least in part, a political dispute and division among the ruling elite itself, these new protests looked much more like an attack on the ruling elite as a whole, from the lower strata of Iranian society (the *mostazafin*) that since the revolution have often been on the lips of politicians but who have for the most part remained in poverty and powerlessness just as before. This difference also emerged in the reactions of the political class to the protests. The hardline right responded predictably, with large counter-demonstrations formed of loyal regime adherents bussed in for the purpose, and assertions that the anti-government manifestations had been instigated by a hidden foreign hand (President Trump had spoken up to promise support for those attempting to overthrow the Islamic Republic). By comparison, reformist politicians seemed to be embarrassed by the protests, and were often critical of them, especially when some turned violent. Some reformists may have been influenced by reports that the earliest protests in Mashhad had been instigated by conservatives and had been explicitly aimed at Ruhani. Others said they did not want Iran to become another Syria.

In opposition to the official blaming of foreigners, one explanation was that the original idea of the protests could have been a coup by hardliners and the Sepah against President Ruhani. Another suggestion was that the MKO might have been responsible, at least for the more violent outbreaks. But the desperate economic position of the poorest in Iran was explanation enough. Protest died down in January, after the deaths of at least twenty and the imprisonment of thousands, but continued sporadically in subsequent months, at a lower level.

The country did not unite in protest, but the system suffered a shock, as was evident in statements from leading politicians, including Khamenei, who blamed foreign powers like the UK, the US and Saudi Arabia for fomenting the unrest in standard terms, but also (another contrast with 2009) seemed to accept that there were genuine grievances, and that the system in general had to accept responsibility and take notice. He said citizens had a right to air legitimate concerns, that those concerns must be addressed, that the *nezam* must listen, and provide answers. 'I am also responsible' he added.[4] There were even suggestions that economic reform might include a pullback by the Sepah from some economic involvement.[5] But later (in speeches over the summer) Khamenei blamed mismanagement by Ruhani's government for the economic problems.[6]

Looking back over the period since 2015, it looks like yet another false dawn. Few predicted that Trump would win the US Presidency (there is reason to believe that he and his family were themselves surprised, if not shocked).[7] It was a mistake for Iran to play into the hands of anti-Iranian politicians in the US by provocative actions like the arrests of dual nationals and the missile tests. But Iran kept to its side of the nuclear agreement, and US withdrawal from the JCPOA was not justified. It is more to be understood by Trump's need to position himself in US politics, and his apparent preoccupation (to be observed in other areas – notably Obamacare, and his obsession over the size of the crowd at his inauguration) with dismantling Obama's achievements, than by reference to Iranian actions.

The underlying fact is that the JCPOA should not have been allowed to stand or fall as the last word in relations between Iran and the West. The JCPOA was never framed to deal with matters outside its remit (in the lead-up to May 2018 Trump and his administration repeatedly referred to it as a 'flawed' deal, justifying that accusation by saying, for example, that it had done nothing to change Iran's alleged destabilizing behaviour in the region). The parties needed to maintain the momentum: to build on the JCPOA to remove other outstanding problems involving Iran, including ballistic missiles, Syria, the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Iran and Israel, as well as any lingering concerns over nuclear matters (what is really necessary is for this to be part of an inclusive negotiation, involving all Middle Eastern states and the prime external parties, toward the creation of a new security structure for the region as a whole).[8] The next step that would really have transformed the picture for the better would have been for Iran to have been brought to modify its position on Israel.[9]

But none of this happened. As we have seen, the Iranian regime and some of the other signatory governments sought instead to reassure or appease those who had opposed the JCPOA, and at the time of writing (the autumn of 2018) we are back in the same old position of entrenched hostility between Iran and the US, which as ever, serves the interests of the most negative and retrogressive elements in both countries so well. It may yet be that the Iranian regime will collapse under the strain – some have speculated that this could even happen before the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, in 2019. But as we have seen in this book, those that have hoped for that in the past have been disappointed. The Islamic

Republic has proved to be resilient. And even if it did collapse, it would be foolish to expect that what would follow would necessarily be better, for Iranians, or for the stability of the Middle East region.[10]

It may be that the JCPOA and the hope of wider improvement in Iran's external relations are not yet dead; the EU signatories are doing their best to preserve the agreement. One can only hope, for Iran and for the future of the Middle East, that they succeed; and if not, that eventually some future constellation of negotiators, as brave and far-sighted as Obama and Ruhani and their helpmates, will resume the necessary toil toward lasting reconciliation.