



PERSPECTIVES

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Iranian Protests Raise Tricky Questions for US and Saudi Policymakers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In many ways, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad faces the same considerations in deciding how to respond to the protests in Iran as does US President Donald J. Trump. Support for the protesters could amount to support for hardline conservative factions in Iran.

If Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's checkered foreign policy track record is anything to go by, Iran could tempt him to embark on yet another risky adventure inspired by widespread anti-government protests in Iran – the real focus of his multiple regional quagmires, which include the devastating war in Yemen and the failed effort to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign.

In many ways, Prince Muhammad faces the same considerations in deciding how to respond to events in Iran as does US President Donald J. Trump. This month, Trump will have to choose not only whether to certify to Congress Iranian compliance with the 2015 international agreement that curbed the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, but also whether to waive US sanctions on Iran. A decision to reimpose economic sanctions could mean a US withdrawal from the agreement.

At the core of Trump's decision, as well as Prince Muhammad's deliberations on how and if to respond to the Iranian protests, is this question: Does a strengthening of hardline conservative factions in Iran serve the US and Saudi purpose of at least further containing the Islamic Republic, and possibly engineering a situation that would be conducive to regime change?

"The most likely scenario is that the evidence of popular dissatisfaction and the inevitable repression will harden the Trump administration's position on sustaining the deal and provide additional incentives for ratcheting up new

economic pressure on the government, They also may see some possibility of flipping the Europeans if the crackdown is fierce and well-documented,” said Brookings fellow and former State Department policy planning Iran expert Suzanne Maloney. Europe has urged Trump not to nix the nuclear agreement.

Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, in contrast to the hardliners, has sought to reach out to the protesters by recognizing their right to criticize while denouncing violence and promising to address their economic grievances.

Rouhani may be able to tackle some issues like the fraudulent financial institutions that have deprived many of their savings, but will struggle to fix the country’s structural economic issues, including the power of hardline institutions such as the Revolutionary Guards Corps. He may also be able to institutionalize and anchor in law the right to protest with the backing of hardliners. Moreover, addressing economic issues will be even more daunting if Trump effectively withdraws from the nuclear agreement.

Ultimately, the odds are that hardliners, irrespective of what scenario unfolds, will emerge strengthened by the current crisis, either as a result of the protests losing momentum as the regime curbs access to social media, a brutal squashing of the protests as a last resort, or because increased external pressure will initially unite rival factions and reinforce widespread disillusionment with the nuclear agreement – a compact that has failed to provide tangible economic benefits to a majority of Iranians.

Looming in the background is the risk that Prince Muhammad, with or without US backing or cooperation, will seek to exploit the Islamic Republic’s problems by attempting to further destabilize it by stirring unrest among already restive ethnic minority groups such as the Kurds and the Baloch. Kermanshah, a city in predominantly Kurdish western Iran, was one of the first cities to which the protests spread after they erupted in the conservative stronghold of Mashhad.

Saudi Arabia has funneled large amounts of money in the last 18 months to militant groups and madrassas or religious seminaries in the Pakistani province of Balochistan, which borders on the Iranian region of Sistan, and Baluchistan – both populated by restive Baloch populations. A Riyadh-based think tank believed to be supported by Prince Muhammad last year published a blueprint for stirring unrest among the Iranian Baluch.

President Trump and the US State Department have in recent days expressed support for the protesters, urged the international community to do the same, and said they back those in Iran who seek a peaceful transition of government.

Various US analysts have argued that Trump’s anti-Iranian track record, including his attempted bans on granting visas to Iranians, curtails the impact

of his support for the protesters and might even strengthen the hardliners by allowing them to point fingers at alleged foreign instigation.

“While we’re on Trump, the impact of his tweets has been marginal at best. They’ve triggered a slew of angry comments, packed with ridicule. Across classes, factions and generations in Iran, there is a shared contempt for #POTUS whose policies look erratic and hypocritical,” tweeted Bloomberg News’ Iran correspondent, Golnar Motevalli.

Rather than speaking out, the analysts proposed concrete steps the US could take to support the protesters. Maloney and journalist Maziar Bahari suggested the US could use its influence with technology, satellite internet providers, and social media companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to try to keep the protesters’ communications channels open.

Former State Department official Reza Marashi argued that advice he and others proffered in 2009, when the Iranian government faced far larger protests against alleged election fraud, remain valid in the current situation.

“We advised our superiors to express concern about the violence against protestors, and highlight the importance of respecting free speech, democratic process, and peaceful dissent. We also emphasized a need for the US government to publicly express its respect for Iranian sovereignty, its desire to avoid making America the issue during a domestic Iranian protest, and its belief that it is up to Iranians to determine who Iran’s leaders will be,” Marashi recalled.

Much of that advice has been ignored by the Trump administration. In doing so, the administration has not only allowed Rouhani and the hardliners to point to a scapegoat, but has seemingly gone out of its way to raise Iranian fears that US policy, with the Saudis in tow, is focused on regime change.

“Washington would be wise to acknowledge the limits of its power inside Iran. Policymakers and pundits cannot change this simple truth: The problems are Iranian, the protestors are Iranian, and the solution will be Iranian,” Marashi noted.

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