



What Could the Iran Uprising Portend?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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Q: Anti-government protests in Iran – occurring for the first time since 2009 – are attracting international attention. The scale and ferocity of the uprising have left many people dead, injured, or arrested. The reasons for this new internal instability, and the potential repercussions for the country and the regime, have generated a lively debate. BESA asks the experts: What could the uprising in Iran portend?

Respondents: Benjamin Weinthal, Ze'ev Maghen, Michael Rubin, Anoush Ehteshami, Ali Ansari, Peter Rough



Benjamin Weinthal, Research Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies

There are two possibilities for the Iranian protests sweeping the country.

First, the Iranians seeking liberty, democracy, self-dignity and economic justice could topple the regime controlled by the incorrigibly reactionary Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It is probably a tall order to dissolve the regime, but the different character of the revolts blanketing Iran reveal a bundle of potential for a new

political and social system. A telling point is that the protests, in contrast to the 2009 Green Movement demonstrations, are not largely limited to Tehran but have permeated the country and smaller cities. BBC Persian reported that 90% of the protests unfolded in cities that have not previously experienced demonstrations against Iran's clerical rulers. The mix of working-class Iranians and young people demanding an end to the regime is a breathtaking development.

Widespread labor unrest in a largely closed society like Iran is a salient example that the regime's foundation is on shaky ground. The chants voiced among the protesters suggest that the outrage is chiefly about human freedom. Some of the slogans voiced: "We don't want an Islamic Republic!" "Death to the Dictator!" "Mullahs Must Get Lost!" "The Clerics Act Like Gods!" "Death or Freedom!" "Leave Syria, think about us!" "Not Gaza, not Lebanon – my life for Iran!" and "We will die – [but] we will take back Iran!" Whereas the Green Movement activists of 2009 protested the fraudulent presidential election, the ubiquitous protests over the last week help explain that this new movement is about emancipation.

The second possibility is that Iran's regime employs its massive security apparatus (the Revolutionary Guards Corp and the Basij) to crush the protests. With over 20 people dead and more than 2,000 arrests, Iran's clerical rulers are already waging a bloody conflict. It is worth recalling that an Iranian regime that aided Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in his use of chemical warfare to wipe out civilians will go to great lengths to preserve its Islamic revolutionary system.

If the worst case scenario succeeds and the current protests are smashed, there is still a strong basis for a new revolt. European Union and US support for democracy promotion in Iran will help enormously for the next wave of protests. Put simply, ordinary Iranians loathe the regime of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The inherent potential of regime change will not vanish. In fact, it will increase.



Professor Ze'ev Maghen, Professor of Arabic Literature and Islamic History and Senior Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University

The fundamental difference between the ongoing protests in Iran and similar demonstrations in previous years is that they are undermining the very basis of the Islamic Republic. In the past, demonstrators complaining about the economy or against corruption or election irregularities could hardly threaten the Islamic Republic itself. But current slogans reflect strong nationalism. They are calling for a return to the Iran of before the Islamic Revolution and are not simply targeting a particular person, although “death to the dictator” is still heard these days.

The future course of the ongoing protests will mainly depend on two factors. The first is the number of participants, which is not particularly large as yet. The second is the ability of the Islamic Republic to practically apply its repression mechanism and silence the voices of opposition. For the time being, the protesters are finding it difficult to motivate the masses to take to the streets around the country and support the cause of nationalism against the ayatollahs. However, if the number grows, the Iranian regime will be placed under threat. It is under those circumstances that regime change might be cultivated.



**Michael Rubin, Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute (AEI),
Washington DC**

Make no mistake, the fall of the Islamic Republic would be a gift to the world. Iran is a country of fantastic human capital and wealth and Iranians deserve to be free. The Iranian public is also largely immunized to Islamism and other populisms, having suffered so dearly for them over the decades. But it's important not to be Pollyannaish about the difficulties that would ensue. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is extraordinarily wealthy, and at least some are true believers. They may not go down without a fight, even if Ali Khamenei ends his days swinging from a lamppost. Even if the Revolutionary Guards move on, they will be a formidable economic force in the future.

It's naïve to believe Iranians are pro-American or even pro-Western. Conspiracy theories don't die overnight. A naïve leftism and statism has long dominated Iranian intellectual circles. And while lofty rhetoric of social justice may sound good in tea houses and university campuses, it's going to take serious work to

rebuild the damage done to Iran over decades. Still, the overall balance sheet will be positive should the Islamic Republic end, not only for Iranians, but also for Lebanese, Syrians, Yemenis, and many others.



Anoush Ehteshami, Professor of International Relations in the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University

These are significant developments in Iran.

This level of *countrywide* protest was last seen in 2009 following Ahmadinejad's reelection as president against all predictions and pollster expectations. In 2009 demonstrations started in Tehran and spread to other major urban centers; the demonstrators had a clear set of grievances regarding the election's outcome ("Where is my vote?") and the system's repressive and dismissive response to it; the demonstrators had clear leadership in the figure of the two popular, reform-leaning candidates (both of whom are still under house arrest); and the demonstrations were organized.

This time, while protests were triggered as a response to the difficult socioeconomic conditions and were sparked by President Rouhani's hardline opponents, they soon spread beyond their control and acquired an anti-regime form. This time around there is no leadership, no organized force to manage the protests, and no clear demands that can be met or addressed. So while it may be easier to quell the protests, their spontaneous and political nature, as well as their spread, marks them out as a signal of widespread dissatisfaction and pent-up anger and frustration against the regime.

Ironically, the protests make life very difficult for the centrist and pro-reform President Rouhani, whose election victory last year was welcomed as a sign of reformist-consolidation, reinforcing the reform camp's grip on city councils and in the parliament. The assumption was that with them in control, Iran was stabilizing around the center ground. The protesters are signaling that small changes, cosmetic reforms, or talk of change without action is no longer acceptable to them.

Further, slogans against Iran's regional policies indicate that there is general concern about the direction of Iran's foreign policy and the "axis of resistance" that Tehran so proudly and openly sponsors and supports. Iranians want an end to regional adventurism and isolation and demand that the resources squandered in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen be used to help them at home.

So the regime is facing a serious crisis. A reformist government that promised change for the better, rule of law, openness, and freedom of thought and expression cannot then brand protesters foreign agents and dismiss their concerns – and yet without major structural change and a serious check on the power of the clerical and security establishment, little can be changed! The pro-reform government simply cannot enforce the necessary structural changes.

Also, Iran's regional and foreign policy is set by the Supreme Leader and agreed by the country's Supreme National Security Council. The government cannot change Iran's regional and foreign policy by itself; nor does it want to change the principles of the regime's foreign policy, as the current foreign policy course of action is all about Iran's "revolutionary horizons." This government certainly cannot try and renegotiate that policy with the Leader and the security establishment and expect to stay in power.

The government is between a rock and a hard place domestically and is in danger of appearing weak and vulnerable externally, which might invite pressure from its regional detractors as well as the US. Questioning the legitimacy of the Rouhani government will make it more vulnerable to pressure by the hardliners at home. This will not only add to Tehran's problems but may well push the outside opponents of the nuclear deal to seek its renegotiation, or worse still termination. If the Iranian security apparatus uses excessive force against the protesters, imprisons large numbers of people, and kills many on the streets or under torture, then it will be very difficult for the parties who remain supportive of the nuclear deal, like the EU, China, and Russia, to come to Tehran's defense.

Finally, the crisis can only deepen the cleavages in the Iranian state between the so-called moderates and hardliners, thus weakening the regime and its apparatus in the long run. These protests are perhaps a wake-up call for the regime, whose leadership is increasingly detached from the people and appears hypocritical and unresponsive to the people's and the country's needs. As I said in my recent book on Iran, this is a regime "stuck in transition" – and as we are now witnessing, this limbo land is dangerous and unsustainable.



Ali Ansari, Professor, School of History, St Andrews University

It is difficult to assess at this stage how the protests might develop, but the authorities are clearly preparing for a clampdown by pointing the finger at the usual foreign suspects and attempting to make a clear distinction between rioters and protesters, a distinction that I suspect will be quite difficult to make in practice. The immediate consequence therefore is likely to be a period of further repression and a weakening of Rouhani, who faces the unpalatable choice of siding with his constituents or with the revolutionary authorities – and losing credibility with whichever side he disappoints. Experience of course suggests that he will side with the authorities.

How matters subsequently develop depends very much on what efforts might be taken to address the causes of the discontent. Again, history suggests that the authorities will do very little to address the clear political deficiencies, preferring instead to labor away at economic development as the solution. History has shown this to be ineffective with the consequence that the Islamic Republic is likely to be facing a period of protracted turbulence and instability.



Peter Rough, Fellow, Hudson Institute, Washington DC

The first rule of crisis management is that early facts are unreliable – and quite often tend to be wrong. As a result, it is important to remain analytically cautious in assessing the events unfolding on the ground in Iran. Even so, that uncertainty should not translate into political paralysis. Iran is a committed enemy of the West, and the US and its allies should seize this opportunity to apply pressure on it. The

protesters in Iran must hear that even more powerful actors than their own oppressors stand with them.

In the best-case scenario, the protests in Iran trigger a comprehensive US policy to pressure the Iranian regime. The US has taken at least one step in this direction already, issuing new sanctions against entities linked to Iran's ballistic missile program. Appalled by the regime's crackdown, President Trump may decide to go a step further by sanctioning complicit individuals. In the ideal scenario, the president would decline to continue waiving sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran and publish information on the institution's role in channeling money to regional proxies and wars. A broad campaign to undermine Iran in Syria would follow.

For years, Iran has cultivated a Janus-faced image: while Hassan Rouhani wore a Western smile, Qassam Soleimani brutally exported the Iranian revolution. In the uprising, the people of Iran have exposed Rouhani as a regime functionary rather than a moderate reformer. Paradoxically, Rouhani's hardline competitors inside the regime will interpret the protests as vindication, arguing that his style has brought the regime to the precipice of ruin. As a result, the mullahs are likely to turn even more ruthless in the coming year, crushing dissent at home while continuing their malfeasance abroad. In the process, the true face of Iran will reveal itself even more clearly.

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