



PERSPECTIVES

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Amid Ethnic Protests, Iran Warns of Foreign Meddling

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran has raised the specter of a US-Saudi effort to destabilize the country by exploiting economic grievances against the backdrop of circumstantial evidence that Washington and Riyadh are playing with scenarios for stirring unrest among the Islamic Republic's ethnic minorities.

Tehran is accusing the US and Saudi Arabia of being behind the ongoing protests being conducted by Iranians against the regime.

Iran recently witnessed minority [Azeri and Iranian Arab protests](#) in soccer stadiums while the country's Revolutionary Guards Corps reported [clashes with Iraq-based Iranian Kurdish insurgents](#).

State-run television warned in a [primetime broadcast](#) that foreign agents could turn legitimate protests stemming from domestic anger at the government's mismanagement of the economy and corruption into "incendiary calls for regime change" by inciting violence that would provoke a crackdown by security forces and give the US fodder to tackle Iran.

"The ordinary protesting worker would be hapless in the face of such schemes, uncertain how to stop his protest from spiraling into something bigger, more radical, that he wasn't calling for," the broadcast said, according to journalist Azadeh Moaveni, who live-tweeted quotes.

The warning aligned with the Trump administration's strategy to escalate the protests that have been continuing for months and generate the kind of

domestic pressure that would force Iran to concede by squeezing it economically with the imposition of harsh sanctions.

US officials, including President Donald J. Trump's national security advisor John Bolton, [a long-time proponent of Iranian regime change](#), have shied away from declaring that they are seeking a change of government, but have indicated that they hope sanctions will fuel economic discontent.

The Trump administration, after withdrawing in May from the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program, [this month targeted Iranian access to US dollars, trade in gold and other precious metals, and the sale to Iran of auto parts, commercial passenger aircraft](#), and related parts and services. A second round of sanctions in November is scheduled to restrict oil and petrochemical products.

"The pressure on the Iranian economy is significant...We continue to see demonstrations and riots in cities and towns all around Iran showing the dissatisfaction the people feel because of the strained economy," [Bolton said as the first round of sanctions took effect](#).

Bolton insisted that US policy was to put "unprecedented pressure" on Iran to change its behavior," not change the regime. However, his remarks echo Israeli attitudes of three decades ago, when officials argued that if the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) were to recognize Israel it would no longer be the PLO but the PPLO, or Part of Palestine Liberation Organization. In other words, the kind of policy changes the Trump administration is demanding, including an end to the Iranian ballistic program and support for regional proxies, by implication would have to involve regime change.

A string of recent, possibly unrelated incidents involving Iran's ethnic minorities coupled with various other events could suggest that the US and Saudi Arabia are indeed covertly playing with separate plans developed in Washington and Riyadh to destabilize Iran by stirring unrest among non-Persian segments of the Islamic Republic's population.

Last year, before President Trump took office, Bolton [drafted a plan at the request of Trump's then strategic advisor, Steve Bannon](#), that envisioned US support "for the democratic Iranian opposition," "Kurdish national aspirations in Iran, Iraq and Syria," and assistance for Baloch in the Pakistani province of Balochistan and Iran's neighboring Sistan and Balochistan province as well as Iranian Arabs in the oil-rich Iranian province of Khuzestan.

A Saudi think tank, believed to be backed by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, called in 2017 in a [study](#) for Saudi support for a low-level Baloch

insurgency in Iran. Prince Muhammad vowed around the same time that [“we will work so that the battle is for them in Iran, not in Saudi Arabia.”](#)

[Pakistani militants](#) have claimed that Saudi Arabia has stepped up funding of militant madrassas or religious seminaries in Balochistan that allegedly serve as havens for anti-Iranian fighters.

The head of the [State Department’s Office of Iranian Affairs met in Washington in June with Mustafa Hijri, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran \(KDPI\)](#), before assuming his new post as counsel general in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards said last weekend that they had [killed ten militants near the Iranian border with Iraq](#). “A well-equipped terrorist group...intending to infiltrate the country from the border area of Oshnavieh to foment insecurity and carry out acts of sabotage was ambushed and at least 10 terrorists were killed in a heavy clash,” the Guards said.

The KDPI has recently [stepped up its attacks in Iranian Kurdistan](#), killing nine people weeks before Hijri’s meeting with Fagin. Other Kurdish groups have reported similar attacks. Several Iranian Kurdish groups are discussing ways to coordinate efforts to confront the Iranian regime.

Similarly, the recent ethnic soccer protests are rooted in a history of football unrest in the Iranian provinces of East Azerbaijan and Khuzestan that reflect long-standing economic and environmental grievances – but which also, at least in oil-rich Khuzestan, might have had Saudi fingerprints on them.

Video clips of Azeri supporters of Tabriz-based Traktor Sazi FC [chanting “Death to the Dictator”](#) in Tehran’s Azadi stadium during a match against Esteghlal FC went viral on social media after a live broadcast on state television was muted to drown the protest out. A sports commentator blamed the loss of sound on a network disruption.

A day earlier, [Iranian Arab fans clashed with security forces](#) in a stadium in the Khuzestan capital of Ahwaz during a match between local team Foolad Khuzestan FC and Tehran’s Persepolis FC. The fans reportedly shouted slogans reaffirming their Arab identity.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arabs have a long history of encouraging Iranian Arab opposition and troubling the minority’s relations with the government.

Iranian distrust of the country’s Arab minority has been further fueled by the fact that the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran or Mujahedin-e-Khalq

(MeK), a controversial exiled opposition group that enjoys the support of prominent serving and former Western officials, including some in the Trump administration, has taken credit for a number of the protests in Khuzestan. The group advocates the violent overthrow of the regime in Tehran.

In June, two of Trump's closest associates – Rudy Giuliani, his personal lawyer, and former House speaker Newt Gingrich – [attended a gathering in Paris of the Mujahedin-e-Khalq](#).

In past years, US participants, including Bolton, were joined by Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of the kingdom's intelligence service and past ambassador to Britain and the US, who is believed to often express views that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman prefers not to voice himself.

“The mullahs must go, the ayatollah must go, and they must be replaced by a democratic government which Madam Rajavi represents. Freedom is right around the corner...Next year I want to have this convention in Tehran,” Giuliani told this year's rally, referring to Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the Mujahedeen who is a cult figure to the group.

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