



PERSPECTIVES

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The Response to the Fakhrizadeh Killing Shows the Regime's Isolation from Its People

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The paltry number of demonstrators who took to the streets of Iran in response to the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, as well as other forms of evidence, reveal that the Iranian regime is dangerously isolated from the country's citizens. The disconnection between the regime and the people is reminiscent of the Soviet regime in its last years in power.

The dramatic, perfectly executed killing of Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, revealed—even more than did the killing of Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani in January—just how porous and exposed is the Iranian security establishment. Dozens if not hundreds of well-placed and informed Iranians appear, whether for pecuniary or political reasons, to be willing to work with the US and Israeli security services. The regime's control over and surveillance of the state is clearly lax, despite its many security forces. The regime not only failed to thwart the killing but has been unable so far to apprehend the culprits.

The killing of Fakhrizadeh put on display the greatest danger threatening the Iranian regime: its isolation from its own citizenry. It is reminiscent of the kind of isolation that drove Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to attempt to reform the system out of fear that he and his colleagues at the top would face fatal retribution from a populace that had long ago lost faith in the regime.

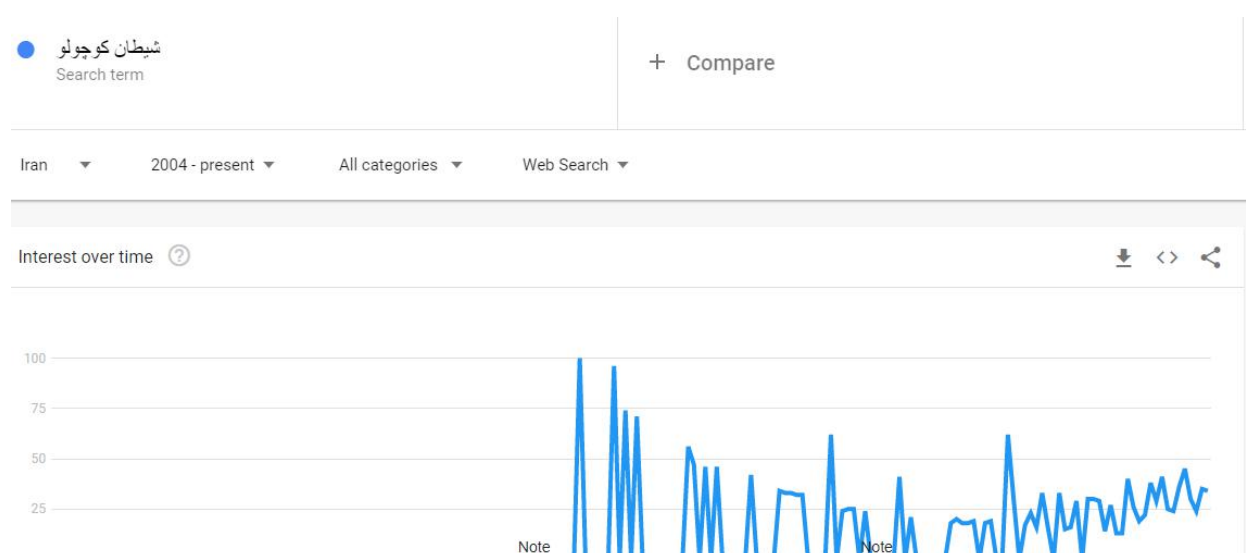
Thirty years ago, a move as striking as the killing of a key security figure inside Iran would have brought tens if not hundreds of thousands of citizens into the streets to chant "Marg bar Israeel" (Death to Israel) or "Death to the Little Satan and the Great Satan [the United States]." Flags of both countries would have been trodden upon and set aflame.

Thirty years later, photos of the streets of Iran after the Fakhrizadeh killing show numbers of demonstrators that can be counted on one's fingers. All told, the demonstrators in various cities numbered in the hundreds at most. Such is the loss of ideological ardor among ordinary Iranians.

Data sourced from Google Trends confirm the message the photos represent.

Searches for the phrase "Little Satan," a term that is used in the ayatollahs' newspeak to refer exclusively to Israel, show that its highest peaks of popularity since 2004 occurred at least a decade ago. (One must bear in mind that internet penetration has increased greatly since then, meaning the graph does not plot the relative decline in searches given the increasing usage of the internet in Iran.)

Google Searches for "Little Satan" inside Iran

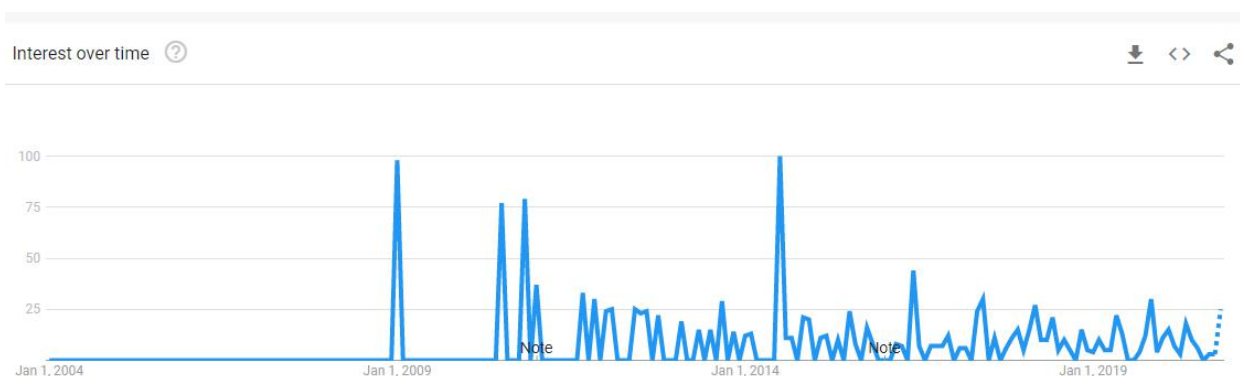


Source: Google Trends

Also telling is how limited the term's popularity is in terms of location. Terms that are frequently searched can also be broken down in Google Trends by location (usually by province or district) or by location type (city or countryside). For example, Iranian searches for the word "Khomeini" are sufficiently frequent that Google provides the breakdown by province. But for the phrase "Little Satan," there were not enough searches to provide such a breakdown.

Similarly, the popularity of the chant "Death to Israel" has declined over time.

Popularity of the chant “Death to Israel” inside Iran



Source: Google Trends

While internet searches for this chant were sufficiently numerous to provide a breakdown by province, interest was limited. Google Trends could only generate data for nine of Iran’s 31 provinces.

The results of the breakdown by province are hardly surprising. Qom Province (pop. 1.1 million), home to the city with the highest density of Shiite religious institutions and schools and the burial sites of venerated religious teachers, leads the country in searches for “Death to Israel.”

By contrast, at the bottom of the list is Tehran Province, which has over 14 million inhabitants (12 times more than Qom) and is the political and economic capital of the country. Searches for “Death to Israel” in Tehran Province relative to its population were one-thirtieth the relative amount of searches in nearby Qom Province.

All told, the paltry number of demonstrators and scant interest in the regime’s hackneyed chants and rituals are reminiscent of the last years of the Soviet Union, when only communist diehards supported the system.

Why should it be any different in Iran? The Russian man in the street in the last days of the USSR could not understand his country’s economic and military largesse toward Nasser’s Egypt and Hafez Assad’s Syria at their expense. Neither can the average Iranian understand the Islamic regime’s funneling of Iranian money and other resources into Syria. Just as Russians came to resent the Soviet Union for spending blood and treasure in far-away Afghanistan as they stood on food lines at home, the Iranian people question why the regime does the same for Hezbollah in Lebanon at their own expense.

Even less can they understand why they—many of whom yearn for a good education and the opportunity to participate in the wider world of science,

technology, and international business—should be expected to spend their time chanting “Death to America” and “Death to Israel.”

No killing of a regime superstar, it seems, will persuade them otherwise.

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