



PROTESTS IN IRAN: A DESPERATE CALL FOR DOMESTIC REFORMS

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RETHINKING
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SERIES

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic is not immune to social unrests. Since 2017 onward, Iran has been the theatre of several spontaneous protests and riots, illustrating the consequences of complex structural deficiencies. Despite the regime's concerted efforts to forcefully contain the protests, often through repression or intimidation, the recurrence of unrests reveals an underlying failure to address the root causes of numerous issues.

Based on data collected on the recent anti-regime protests that took place between December 2017 and January 2020, this policy brief suggests that more progress could be made if the EU deployed increased diplomatic resources to pressure the Iranian regime to implement domestic reforms. For this purpose, the EU should consider using the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as a means to incentivize positive change in Iran.

Key Takeaways

- > Since 2017, Iran is witnessing the eruption of numerous social movements.
- > Protesters derive from a diversity of backgrounds and do not share the exact same concerns.
- > The protests evidence the existence of heavy structural deficiencies within the state apparatus.
- > The regime is not implementing the necessary reforms to respond to the social, political and economic revendications emanating from the population.
- > The reconsolidation of hardliner formations within the political institutions might further obstruct the implementation of reforms and contribute to the advent of a deadlock.
- > The Guardian Council of the Constitution is preventing moderate and reformist figures to run in the 2020 legislative elections.

2017-2018 AND 2019 UNRESTS: THE RISE OF SOCIOECONOMIC REVENDEICATIONS

The 2019 November uprisings might appear as a reminiscence of the 2017-2018 unrests. In a similar vein, these unrests were marked by an important mobilization of the lower classes, which traditionally constitutes the core of the Islamic Republic's supporters.¹ Social injustice was at the heart of the concerns expressed by the population, who used public chants and slogans to denounce precarious living conditions, the austerity policies designed by the government, rampant corruption, lack of transparency, the high rate of unemployment, the sudden price hike on gasoline, high inflation, and the general lack of economic perspectives.

For example, through the chant "No Gaza, no Lebanon, I give my life for Iran", protesters questioned the expensive regional policies of the regime, undertaken at the expense of the economic well-being of the population.² This slogan materialized as a desperate call for the Islamic Republic to engage in domestic reforms. While initially restricted to socio-economic issues, both movements quickly reflected political ambitions through chants such as "Death to the dictator" and "Death to Khāmenei".³

Questions of individual and collective liberties were also raised, supported by the rise of feminist movements that contest the policy of mandatory *hejāb* in public spaces. The Iranian regime let the concerns emanating from both movements go unanswered, refusing to engage in meaningful dialogue or reforms.⁴ During this period, the entire political spectrum, including

reformists, deeply condemned the uprisings. From their perspective, protests through which violence had erupted could simply not be endorsed. Moreover, they were afraid of being directly challenged by protesters, and consequently considered as part of the problem.⁵

The regime responded through an intense crackdown, especially in the 2019 protests, which were ultimately dismissed as the result of collusion between the protesters and foreign powers and, thus, harshly repressed.⁶

2020 PROTESTS: A POLITICAL CONTESTATION OF THE REGIME

In January 2020 a new wave of protests further challenged the regime, fundamentally questioning of its ability to efficiently govern the country. These protests largely erupted from the universities and were facilitated mostly by the middle classes. Many protesters condemned the shooting down of a Ukrainian plane, which caused the death of several students. They also targeted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), dismissing them as "incompetents" and as the Iranian equivalent of the Islamic State.⁷ Labelled as a "dictator", the Rahbar-e Enqelāb Khāmeneī was also heavily criticized by the protesters.

Such protests underlined the existence of a crisis of trust and representation inside Iran. While the security forces behaved with restraint, using only tear

¹ Azadeh Kian, "La révolte des pauvres ébranle le régime en Iran", *Orient XXI*, 8 février 2018.
<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/la-revolte-des-pauvres-ebanle-le-regime-en-iran,2265>

² "گسترش اعتراض‌ها در شهرهای ایران؛ کشته‌شدن بیش از ۱۰ معترض", *Iran International*, November 16, 2019.
<https://iranintl.com/ايران-گسترش-اعتراض-در-شهرهاى-در-هااعتراض-گسترش-ايران/10-از-بیش-معترض-۱۰-از-بیش>

³ *Idem*.

⁴ Ali Khamenei, "افزایش قیمت بنزین موجب افزایش قیمت دیگر کالاها نشود", پایگاه اطلاع رسانی دفتر مقام معظم رهبری, November 17, 2019.
<https://bit.ly/3bnvc6e>

⁵ Hessem Ghanatir, "Why Did Iranian Reformists Turn Conservative Overnight?", *IranWire*, November 25, 2029.
<https://iranwire.com/en/features/6494>

⁶ "Special Report: Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest: 'Do whatever it takes to end it'", *IranWire*, December 23, 2019.
<https://iranwire.com/en/speaking-of-iran/6572>

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLKfwp8JJU&feature=emb_title



Map 0-1 Anti-Iranian Regime Protests between 11-14 January 2020
Source: data collected by the author

gas, the dissatisfaction of the population was, once again, left unanswered by the regime officials. While Khāmeneī claims to be well aware of the challenges that his regime currently faces, as demonstrated by his desire to deliver himself the Friday Sermon on January 17th, 2020, his remarks about the recent protests were, at best, unsatisfactory.⁸ Indeed, while recognizing the plane crash as a “bitter tragedy”, he claimed that such an accident should not overshadow the “martyrdom and sacrifice” of Soleimānī.⁹

A NEW POLITICAL CONFIGURATION: THE CONSOLIDATION OF HARDLINER FORMATIONS

These developments illustrate the growing

consensus of discontent emanating from many demographics of the population; including the lower classes, students, women right activists, and union workers. However, while Iran is facing social, political and economic crises, the configuration of the political elite has prevented the implementation of the necessary reforms, as well as the development of a structured political opposition that could offer a viable political alternative within the country.

It is also noteworthy to point out the role of international pressure over this domestic context. Undeniably, the economic sanctions led by the United States provided the regime with a convenient excuse to clear itself of any responsibility in the deteriorating economic situation. In the meantime, the regime effectively converted American animosity into a justification for massive crackdown, fearing that protesters

⁸“Analysis: Khamenei In Rare Sermon Reiterates Regional Ambitions, No Negotiations With US”, Radio Farda, January 17, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/analysis-khamenei-in-rare-sermon-reiterates-regional-ambitions/30382770.html>

⁹ « Iran’s Khamenei defends Revolutionary Guard in Friday Sermon», Middle East Eye, 17 January, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/irans-khamenei-delivers-friday-sermon-amid-pressures-home-and-abroad>

might play Trump's game.¹⁰ Furthermore, the US withdrawal of JCPOA, the reckless policy of "maximum pressure," and the EU's limited response have only allowed the hardliners to capitalize on the growing dissatisfaction derived from the absence of the economic prosperity promised by Rūhānī's administration.¹¹

The danger of this configuration is that we are heading toward a dead end, leading to the further radicalization of already radical elements within the Iranian establishment. This trend is clear when observing the behaviours of the *Šūra-ye Negahbān-e Qānūn-e Āsāsī* (or, the Guardian Council of the Constitution). This institution, responsible for ascertaining the validity of electoral candidacy, is now forbidding many reformist and moderate figures to run in the February 2020 legislative elections.¹² Such a move demonstrates the increasing pressure exerted on progressive political formations within the establishment and the complexity to implement the reforms needed by the Iranian population. From this perspective, the silencing of the opposition, increase of military expenditures, and the crackdown on protesters are likely to intensify.

KEY INSIGHTS AND CONCLUSION

In light of these trends, the BIC believes that the European Union has a vital role to play in the resolution of the Iranian domestic crises and could improve the situation by further deploying diplomatic and economic resources to assuage tensions. A stronger, clearer, and more independent European voice is a prerequisite to any involvement in the domestic Iranian affairs, principally because it is essential to empowering Iranians to reject the American strategy, which blatantly lacks consistency and efficiency. Iranian problems need and deserve Iranian solutions.

Finding sustainable solutions requires all actors to

acknowledge and respect Iran's right to self-determination, independence and sovereignty, and to take into consideration the diversity and complexity of the Iranian society. The point should not be to enforce ready-made pseudo-reforms from Brussels, but rather to provide the population with the opportunity to develop local solutions to address Iran political, economic, and social crises. In this regard, the role of the EU should be solely restricted to ensuring that the regime establishes a safe space of political discourse and debate within the country. Ultimately, an Iranian compromise must be found between the establishment, representatives of the civil society, members of the opposition, unions, academics and activists in order to solve these complex issues. The formal integration of a healthy and functioning Iranian state should remain the top priority to bring prosperity to the country and stability to the region.

The clearest room for maneuver available to the European Union, in order to positively impact the situation in Iran appears to be the JCPOA. Indeed, raising the issue of sanctions is often the best way to interact with a regime as isolated as the Islamic Republic. The EU should condition the normalization of its relations with Iran to the implementation of the reforms needed by the population and reached through a compromise. Nevertheless, the European Union should be very precautionary when dealing with JCPOA, as it is a weapon of last resort.

The 'Nuclear Deal' was the first step of comprehensive approach aimed at intensifying exchanges of goods, people and ideas with Iran in order to promote a positive change in the country. The spirit of this constructive perspective should, by all means, be safeguarded. In this regard, European leaders must find an equilibrium between instrumentalizing the deal as a mean of incentive, while, at the same time, investing considerable efforts to preserve it.

¹⁰Noémie Taylor-Rosner, "Moyen-Orient. Flambée de colère en Iran après l'annonce d'une hausse du prix de l'essence", *Courrier International*, 17 Novembre, 2019. <https://www.courrierinternational.com/revue-de-presse/moyen-orient-flambee-de-colere-en-iran-apres-lannonce-dune-hausse-du-prix-de>

¹¹"Constant Challenges By Hardliner Rivals Likely To Affect Rouhani's Future", *Radio Farda*, January 18, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/constant-challenges-by-hardliner-rivals-likely-to-affect-rouhani-s-future-/30384587.html>

¹²Pezhman Tahavori, "What Will Iran's Next Parliament Look Like?", *IranWire*, January 21, 2020. <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6643>

Additionally, the success of a coercive diplomatic option aimed at pressuring the regime, would also rely on a European acknowledgement of the existence of a plurality of decision centres within the regime. Negotiating only with Rūḥānī's administration is insufficient to bring effective results. Considering that the sole viable solution to answer the aspirations of the population is the formal integration of a healthy Iranian state within the international community, pressuring the regime with JCPOA implies providing the Islamic Republic with the means to become a reliable partner for the European Union.

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- > The EU should deploy its diplomatic and economic resources to contribute to the rise of healthy and functioning Iranian state, ready to be formally integrated within the international community.
- > The EU should use JCPOA as a mean of pressure to ensure the implementation of domestic reforms in Iran in order to correct the political, economic and social deficiencies highlighted by the protests.
- > The EU's role should be solely restricted to providing a frame from which the Iranian population could design reforms that would respond to its own aspirations and needs. The purpose is to guarantee the emergence of a safe space of dialogue within the country that would permit the elaboration of compromises between the establishment, representatives of the civil society, activists, unions and academics.
- > At the same time, the EU must invest considerable efforts to safeguard JCPOA since a constructive and comprehensive approach toward Iran appears as the only way to defuse tensions.

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



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