

Why Is Iran Increasingly Anxious About Protests in Iraq and Lebanon?

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Abstract: The protests in Iraq and Lebanon which erupted in the second half of 2019 have created a challenge for Iranian interests as they seek to shake-up Tehran-backed political regimes. Just like the Arab uprisings in 2011 and the Anbar protests in 2013, Tehran is viewing these current protests through a geopolitical lens. The Iranian establishment's structural duality, securitized approach, and experience of backlash to its intervention in Syria, have created a relatively ambiguous official Iranian response to the protests: It has cautiously endorsed calls for political change, but also emphasized the role of foreign interference in fueling violence. This brief attempts to analyze the different Iranian official responses to the Iraqi and Lebanon protests, and explain how Tehran views them from a geopolitical point of view, which puts its deterrence strategies center stage.

The response of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to the remarkable protests in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019 has been characterized by a degree of ambiguity, showing both reserved endorsement and deeply suspicious attitudes (and even hostility). This is hardly a new foreign policy feature towards political change in the Arab neighborhood, which has become more visible since the eruption of the Arab uprisings in 2011. This ambiguity constitutes two variables:

■ Firstly, the perpetual state of crisis that the IRI has endured since its conception, which creates a sense of threat against political change in any area where it enjoys leverage. The level of this threat perception increases if change pertains to areas where it sees its leverage as critical to its own survival, i.e. the so-called 'forward-defense strategy.'¹

■ Secondly, the disposition of the regime, namely its structural duality, creates more than one foreign policy discourse thanks to the multiplicity of the regime's actors, sanctioned by the supreme leadership. Importantly, the IRI, as a state actor acting pragmatically, changes its assessments of events in correspondence with what it sees as new important variables, and thereby changes its responses accordingly.

The geopolitical and economic importance of Iraq and Lebanon for Iran

The IRI considers both Iraq and Lebanon as two countries in which it enjoys political and military leverage through non-state militant allies and proxies which it established and has continued to support. This leverage constitutes one of the cornerstones of the IRI's deterrence strategy in the Middle East. The IRI was able to solidify its influence following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 which allowed Tehran to back various militant groupings resistant to the American occupation and support friendly political movements which took part in consecutive Iraqi governments. Direct Iranian military intervention to prop up the government of Bashar Assad in Syria has helped create a direct geographic link between Iran and Lebanon, where Iranian-backed Hezbollah is a major military and political stakeholder. Trade is another important aspect for Iran, especially in the case of Iraq. The two rounds of multilateral and unilateral economic sanctions in 2011-2012 and 2018 proved to be backbreaking and prompted Iran to take advantage of its geographic proximity and political leverage by providing business incentives to ramp up non-oil exports to Iraq. In recent years, Iraq has been elevated in Iran's top ten recipients of exports, becoming its second biggest recipient after China.²

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Furthermore, Iraq is becoming an important geographic link for the IRI to increase its economic presence in Syria. In September 2019, the Iraqi government reopened the Al-Qa'im border-crossing with Syria,³ a move which was celebrated by Iranian state media because it will facilitate Iranian exports to Iraq overland and help diversify trade routes. The re-opening of the border-crossing was also seen as a strategic step by the Deputy General Secretary of Lebanese Hezbollah, Naim Qassem, who thinks it can help spur on Lebanese exports to Iraq, thereby helping boost the Lebanese economy.⁴ Any regime-change in Baghdad which leads to the sidelining or excluding of Iran's allies and proxies is perceived as a menace to Iraq as it fuses the extensive geopolitical and economic interests of multiple actors in the IRI-led regional 'axis of resistance.'

The multiplicity of IRI's discourse

The IRI's response to the 2013 protests of Anbar province in Iraq can in some ways be considered a microcosm of the 2019 wave of Iraqi public revolts which were the culmination of gravitating discontent from the periphery of the country (Anbar and Basra) to its center, Baghdad. Iranian state-owned media depicted the Anbar protests negatively with, for example, the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network (better known as IRINN) reporting the protests as part of a regional scheme to partition Iraq and set up an a Sunni statelet backed by Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.⁵ Another perception of the Anbar protests is that they helped ISIS infiltrate Iraq.⁶ Either way, the Anbar protests were seen as a threat in the eyes of the IRI.

While the IRI's leaders openly defend their country's geopolitical interests, the size and geographic distribution of the 2019 Iraqi and Lebanese protests (compared to the provincial ones such as Anbar), coupled with the precedent of the 2011 Arab uprisings which attracted much attention to the IRI's response, drew a degree of discursive caution from the IRI. The relative ambiguity of the IRI's discourse regarding the 2019 protests in Iraq and Lebanon, namely reserved support and deeply suspicious attitudes, is exemplified by the respective responses of the Iranian elected government in the form of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). On October 27, 2019,

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the MoFA spokesperson said; “the Islamic Republic of Iran supports the Iraqi people’s demands and requests, which have been clearly highlighted in the statements and remarks by the Iraqi religious authorities and Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.”⁷ On October 30, commenting on the uprising in Lebanon, the MoFA spokesperson added: “The Islamic Republic of Iran emphasizes the need for the solidarity, unity and rapport among all Lebanese clans, parties and characters in order to maintain the country’s stability and security and to respond to the legitimate demands of the Lebanese people at a calm atmosphere.”⁸

The statements of the MoFA were complemented by a speech by Khamenei on the same day in which he claimed that “those demands [of the protestors] can be met only through the framework of legal structures.” Having conceded the legitimacy of the protesters’ demands, he expressed his deep concerns about foreign interference, saying that: “The U.S. and Western intelligence services, with the financial backing of reactionary countries in the region, are spreading turmoil.”⁹ While Khamenei’s statements emphasize the role of foreign hijacking in the protests by derailing them and pushing them to violence, officials from President Hassan Rouhani’s administration belonging to the reformist-centrist camp in the country depicted Iraqi protests in a different way. For example, in a newspaper article the government’s spokesperson, Ali Rabiei, attributed discontent in Iraq to losing hope in the ballot box (but by emphasizing domestic dynamics he does not necessarily rule out foreign interference).¹⁰

The IRI is always deeply suspicious that international and regional foreign actors are plotting against its interests and its stability, but its leaders’ statements warning of foreign interventions often overshadow its other statements expressing careful and calculated endorsements of calls for political change when in geographic areas essential to its influence. Kayhan and Iran Diplomacy are two important Iranian media outlets which reflect the thinking and attitudes of Iran’s hardline and centrist-reformist state elites respectively. In a series of articles and editorials published by the two outlets they reduced much of the Iraqi and Lebanese protests to mere responses to socio-economic distress (particularly in the case of Iran Diplomacy) and emphasized foreign hijacking (more in the case of Kayhan), while ignoring the IRI’s leverage in Iraq as a factor. These articles contrasted those published in Western media outlets, which inflated the anti-IRI sentiments and drivers in Iraqi and Lebanese protests.

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The hostility between protesters in Iraq, Lebanon, and the IRI is, to an extent, mutually constitutive: Hostility expressed by protesters against IRI because of its upholding of the Iraqi and Lebanese governments drives the IRI to become more hostile towards protests, whereas Iranian statements and strong suspicions of armed intervention by local forces loyal to Iran exacerbate the anti-IRI sentiment among protesters. However, the difference between both sides is that while protests in Iraq and Lebanon are made up of a plethora of popular forces, the IRI is a unitary actor that exerts full control over its diplomatic, security and military institutions.

Parallel to the statements made by the IRI government representatives, media and human rights reports have suggested three forms of intervention by the IRI to help quell the Iraqi protests and keep the government, which it helped engineer last year, intact.¹¹ Firstly, reports have alleged that unidentified snipers are attributed to Iranian mobilization, whether through Tehran's own security personnel or Iraqi proxies.¹² Secondly, in late October Reuters alleged that Qasem Soleimani (the head of the Quds Force of the IRGC) and security advisors played a role in assisting Iraqi security forces tackle the protests in a report based on anonymous sources.¹³ Thirdly, Human Rights Watch has documented the presence of Iranian-made tear gas canisters, although it is unclear exactly who used these canisters and when they were supplied.¹⁴ The Iranian statements, coupled with reports circulating on several forms of intervention (which still need verification), increasingly depict the IRI in a confrontational position with Iraqi protests that aim to shake-up the Iran-backed Iraqi political system. This confrontational position solidifies hostility among a growing number of Iraqis towards their eastern neighbor.

The attack carried out by protesters against the Iranian consulate in Karbala on November 3 presumably whipped up Iranian hostility towards protests in Iraq. In a subsequent statement the MoFA did not reflect hostility but, "condemned the recent moves against Iran's consulate general in the Iraqi city of Karbala, and highlighted the acts taken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran to maintain the security of the country's missions in Iraq."¹⁵ The Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Ali Fadavi issued a starker response on November 5, 2019 stating that the US and Israel have

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a malign role in the events in Iraq.¹⁶ However, this is not the first time an Iranian diplomatic mission has been attacked and IRI has developed a thick skin in this respect as demonstrated last year in Basra, when the Iranian consulate was reportedly attacked and burned down by angry protesters.¹⁷ The increasing frequency of attacks against Iranian interests likely indicates more than one driver; growing public discontent with the IRI's influence in Iraq largely contributing to the preservation of the Iraqi political system, and discontent coming from Iraqi Shia religious actors settling scores with the IRI and its Iraqi allies and proxies. Foreign actors with an interest in exacerbating a pre-existing anti-IRI sentiment among Iraqi protesters may well have worked towards fueling this sentiment, even successfully having an impact.

Iranian security officials view protests in their nearby Arab neighborhood beyond the local dynamics, as part of a wider geopolitical scene and a proxy conflict with the US and its regional allies. This includes Iranian society itself. Internally, protests at home in 2017-18 reflect a continuous shift of support away from Tehran,¹⁸ posing a greater threat of instability to the IRI as protests expand geographically. Externally, the protests in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019 bear a degree of hostility towards the IRI, representing a qualitative development in the attitudes of

Arab protesters towards the IRI. The hostility towards the IRI in this wave of protests is in part due to the fact that Iranian allies and proxies are located in the areas of revolt, which was not generally the case in the 2011 Arab uprisings as they were more momentous in North Africa. Both the Iranian protests in 2017-18, and Iraqi and Lebanese protests in 2019 broadly intersect in their strong socio-economic drivers and hostile sentiments towards the IRI itself. As does the negative feeling towards its foreign policy. Nonetheless, in both waves of protests the reasons behind their hostility towards the Iranian establishment, the magnitude of this hostility, as depicted in slogans, banners, or attacks, varies.

Conclusion

The IRI faces increasing challenges in its efforts to portray itself as a consistent and ethical actor to a wide range of regional audiences. Under backbreaking sanctions, the more the IRI perceives political change as a threat to its forward-defense and deterrence strategies, which it deems key to its survival, the more its behavior is likely to be characterized by hard interventionism. While the Iranian intervention to assist with quelling a militarized popular rebellion against Bashar Assad in Syria in 2012 sparked a massive backlash in Arab Sunni countries, possible intervention in Iraq and

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Lebanon will most likely create intra-Shia fissures which the IRI is unwilling to see unfolding. Additionally, while the IRI may have managed to contain the 2017–18 protests and rallied large segments of the population behind it via an increased dose of nationalism to confront US sanctions and prior to that the threat of ISIS, it is becoming increasingly difficult for it to mobilize regional audiences under similar discursive vehicles and mottos, including a considerable segment of young Arab Shia citizens. At an event I attended last year, the sociologist Kevan Harris said that Iranian political factions are facing the challenge of finding a way to embrace Iranian societal segments that participated in the 2017–18 protests and adapting to discourses evolving from below (streets), in which political factions can also weaponize these discourses against each other. Therefore, the IRI is not only facing a domestic challenge, but also a transnational conundrum as a regional hegemon which has gradually become more reliant on hard power than soft power, whether through its direct interventions or those of its regional allies and proxies.

Endnotes

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