

THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF PUBLIC PROTESTS IN IRAN



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Abstract: The ongoing popular protests in Iran are the biggest challenge to the Islamic Republic's legitimacy since 2009. Although the protesters' demands do not directly include foreign policy issues, the international implications of domestic developments in Iran are already becoming evident. The protests have already reduced the possibility of normalized relations between the Islamic Republic and the West, throwing the fate of the JCPOA further in doubt. At the same time, the Iranian leaders find it increasingly crucial to stick to their "Look to the East" foreign policy strategy. Besides, Iran's apparent intention to drag the crisis to neighboring countries could have serious implications for Iran's regional policy and its relations with neighbors.

Introduction

The death of 22-year-old Iranian woman Mahsa Amini after being violently arrested by Iran's morality police – allegedly for not observing the appropriate Islamic dress code – sparked public outrage across the country. The Iranian government's lack of responsibility regarding the incident, on the one hand, and widespread public discontent over four decades of ineffective political, economic, and social policies, on the other hand, caused the outrage to quickly spark into a nationwide protest movement.

In less than a week, more than 80 cities across Iran witnessed public protests¹ in which people chanted slogans not only against the mandatory hijab for women or even the government's social and cultural policies, but also against the very political system and its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. In other words, protesting against the mandatory hijab was only a trigger for people to bring their accumulated grievances with the Islamic Republic to the streets.

The government's violent crackdown on protesters has so far resulted in dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries.² However, the vast geographical extent of the protests and the diversity of social groups involved – from women to students, as well as various ethnic groups – has made it extremely difficult for the government to regain full control over the situation. As has always been the case with public protests in Iran, government officials have accused foreign actors of instigating unrest in the country. Khamenei's reaction to the ongoing developments clearly reflected this approach. In an October 3 speech, the Iranian leader claimed that the protests were orchestrated by "the US and Israel and their followers."³

But this familiar conspiracy narrative is not the only international aspect of protests in Iran. On the one hand, it is crucial to scrutinize to what extent, if at all, the protests are motivated or at least influenced by foreign policy issues. On the other hand, the protests are expected to

affect Iran's relations with the West, its "Look to the East" foreign policy strategy, as well as its relations with its neighbors and the broader Middle East.

The marginal role of foreign policy

If we take the popular slogans chanted during the protests as an indicator to understand people's demands, the recent protests are considerably different from other mass protests in the past. Indeed, since the 1979 Islamic revolution, and especially over the past few years, the streets of Iran have witnessed protests, both large and small. Nonetheless, we can consider the 2009 Green Movement and the public protests of November 2019 as the most serious waves of protests over the last four decades. In both cases, dissatisfaction over the government's foreign policy was clearly reflected in the slogans. The Green Movement was initially a reaction to the 2009 presidential election, which most Iranians considered fraudulent, but it also entailed deep frustration over the government's domestic and foreign policy. "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I will sacrifice my life for Iran" was one of the famous slogans at the time,⁴ which simultaneously pointed to the nationalist feature of the movement and its opposition to state ideology, i.e., prioritizing support for Islamist movements around the globe instead of focusing on the country's national interests. The Green Movement also defined itself as a democratic and liberal movement and, therefore, expected support from democratic states around the world, especially the United States. The slogan "[US President] Obama, either with them or with us" was a reference to this expectation.

The November 2019 protests had primarily been caused by economic issues, and the lower-income segments of society made up the majority of protesters in the street.⁵ Corruption and economic mismanagement, on the one hand, and crippling US sanctions, on the other hand, had made living conditions unbearable for many Iranians. At the same time, many believed that the Iranian government's military interventions abroad had exacerbated economic problems at home, and money that should have been spent on improving people's lives was spent elsewhere. This view was reflected in the slogan "Leave Syria, think about us," which was chanted in many protest gatherings.

But this time, slogans related to foreign policy are almost absent from the protests. Instead, two types of demands are of prime importance: First, basic human rights issues such as women's rights and social freedoms. "Woman, life, freedom," the main slogan of the protests, is symbolic of such demands. Second, opposition to the entire political system of the Islamic Republic was reflected in all kinds of slogans against the clerics and the Supreme Leader. In other words, it could be said that during the past 13 years, the protest movement in Iran has gradually shifted from focusing on demands for political reforms to economic issues and then

to basic social and human rights. At the same time, protesters are increasingly targeting the political system as a whole rather than specific policies and procedures. The Islamic Republic's move toward increased authoritarianism has made many people believe that any policy change would be possible only through a fundamental change in the political system. At the same time, unlike in 2009, people on the street are not asking for foreign support. This could be seen as a sign of collective awareness that any change must be initiated from within the country, and external support is not the main factor for change. Therefore, while Khamenei accuses the West of steering unrest in Iran by supporting the protests, protesters have, in fact, excluded the West from their calculus.

Iran and the West: Another brick in the wall

The recent protests in Iran come at a time when Tehran's relations with Washington and European capitals are at one of their most sensitive stages. After more than a year of negotiations between Iran and world powers to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA), significant differences between Iran and the US still remain. In fact, well before the protests began, those differences had brought the talks to a standstill.⁶ At the same time, Iran is closer than ever to the ability to build a nuclear weapon, and is trying to use the progress in its nuclear program as leverage to pressure the West into more concessions.

In these circumstances, widespread public protests have put the Western parties to the nuclear negotiations in a difficult position. The liberal and anti-authoritarian nature of the protests, on the one hand, and global public opinion's unprecedented sympathy with the protesters – especially women – in Iran, on the other hand, have made it almost impossible for Western governments to ignore what is happening in Iran. Therefore, European states, Canada, and the US have condemned the violent suppression of protesters in Iran, and called on the Iranian government to stop the violence. Washington and Ottawa have imposed sanctions against Iranian officials involved in suppressing the protests,⁷ and the EU is planning similar measures.

Meanwhile, there is no sign that the West would be ready to halt the negotiations with the Islamic Republic in response to the violent suppression of protests. The US government has announced that it still considers diplomacy the best way to address Iran's nuclear program.⁸ The European Parliament also rejected the notion of suspending nuclear talks with Iran due to the protests.⁹ The US and Europe are worried that suspending diplomacy with Iran may give Iranian leaders the opportunity and incentive to weaponize their nuclear

program. The argument here is that an authoritarian state armed with nuclear weapons can pose a far greater threat to regional and international peace and security. Aware of these concerns, it seems that Iranian authorities have also started blackmailing Europe to prevent any decisive action from the West. For instance, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has warned Europe that any "hasty and ill-considered" action by Europe will result in "effective and reciprocal action by Iran."¹⁰ With this warning, he is apparently referring to the possibility of further developing Iran's nuclear program.

As such, the Iranian government has apparently taken the JCPOA hostage to reduce international pressure. In this situation, one can think of two scenarios for the fate of the JCPOA talks. In the first scenario, by continuing to express willingness to revive the deal, while simultaneously blackmailing the Western parties, Iran will try to keep the nuclear issue at the center of the West's attention. The Iranian leaders' calculations might be that if the nuclear issue is resolved at this time, the West will have a freer hand to pressure the Islamic Republic on human rights issues. This would be the most likely scenario if the government manages to maintain relative control over the situation in the short-term through suppression or other means. In the second scenario, if the domestic situation gets out of control, Iran may show some flexibility in the negotiations. In this case, the logic would be that by restoring the deal and removing the sanctions, the government will get access to new financial resources to reestablish control, while also buying back the loyalty of some segments of the society for whom economic hardships constitute the main reason to protest. In this case, concerns over regime survival would outweigh considerations regarding potential new demands by the West – at least until the government would feel secure on the domestic front. But in any case, with or without the JCPOA, the recent protests have widened the gap between the Islamic Republic and the West so that normalized relations between the two sides cannot be expected in the foreseeable future.

Iran and Eastern powers: Authoritarian empathy

The new challenges in managing relations with the West are expected to make the Islamic Republic more determined to pursue its "Look to the East" policy. Indeed, Tehran's tilt toward the "East" predates the protests and indicates a gradual strategic shift in Iranian foreign policy. As protestors were demonstrating following the death of Mahsa Amini, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was in Uzbekistan to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) annual summit. At the summit, Iran's SCO status was upgraded after 17 years from an observer state to a full member. The development could be considered the most evident symbol of a growing tendency toward the East in Iran's foreign policy.¹¹

From the Iranian leaders' point of view, the international system has been increasingly transitioning from a unipolar structure centered on the US to a multipolar one, in which non-Western powers, especially China and Russia, play a more determining role. This transition allows revisionist states like Iran to free themselves from the systemic pressures caused by their continuous confrontation with the West and to find reliable partners among the rising powers. This situation has, in fact, led to a transitional disorder that gives regional powers like Iran an opportunity to enhance their role in the emerging multipolar system. From this perspective, Russia's war in Ukraine and the international reactions to it are the most evident signs of the birth of a new order. Iranian leaders are watching with interest as the US fails to rally its traditional allies in the Middle East – and the Global South in general – to isolate Moscow,¹² concluding that the West's attempts to isolate Tehran will similarly fail. But an essential prerequisite for this eventual failure would be Iran's maximum coordination with Russia and China. This can explain Iran's support for Russia in its war of aggression against Ukraine.

However beyond these geopolitical calculations, domestic policy considerations have also been an important driver of Iran's Look to the East strategy. In fact, there is a direct connection between the Islamic Republic's increasingly authoritarian rule and its desire to develop ties with China and Russia. Unlike Europe, which has always been critical of the human rights situation and Iran's lack of political and social freedoms, Russia, and China, themselves authoritarian states, are easier partners for the Islamic Republic. In recent years, the Iranian government has increasingly used Chinese technologies for tighter control over the Internet and communication networks and, as a result, to control its citizens. Last year, Iran also signed an agreement with Russia to cooperate in the field of information security.¹³ Therefore, Iran's perception of the ascending role of Russia and China in the international system, the unpromising perspective of relations with the West, as well as the authoritarian empathy between Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing, are among the factors that, in the aftermath of the protests, will likely push the Islamic Republic further toward the East.

Here, it is worth mentioning that in current circumstances, Beijing's support would be more vital for the Islamic Republic, as Moscow is struggling with its own growing domestic problems, mainly caused by Western sanctions and the Russian people's dissatisfaction over the Kremlin's latest plans for "partial mobilization" for the war in Ukraine. Still, it is difficult to imagine how China could help the Islamic Republic survive if domestic unrest reaches the point of no return. The best Beijing can do is to continue buying Iran's oil or, probably, providing Tehran with loans or other types of economic assistance. But as mentioned before,

people's demands on the streets far exceed merely improving economic conditions. Therefore, no amount of financial rewards – be it as result of a revived JCPOA or Chinese assistance – could help the Iranian government deal with the roots of public discontent.

Iran and the Middle East: The axis of turmoil

As far as Iran's regional policy is concerned, the recent protests are significant in at least three respects: First, the Iranian government's attempt to externalize the crisis to distract public opinion from the root cause of domestic problems. Secondly, the regional states' reaction to the protests. Last but not least, are the implications the protests will have for Iran's network of allies across the region, or the "axis of resistance."

The fact that Mahsa Amini was an ethnic Kurd from the city of Saghez caused some observers in the early days of the protests to warn that Iran's sensitive ethnic fault lines might be impacted as a result, and give rise to secessionist sentiments in Kurdish-populated areas. But what happened in practice was a nationwide reaction in which the ethnic element played a marginal role. Nonetheless, shortly after the outbreak of the protests, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) started targeting Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in Iraqi Kurdistan in response to what it called "intensified activities of separatist and terrorist groups."¹⁴ This is despite the fact that there has been no reliable evidence of separatist Kurdish militias being actively involved in the protests. Therefore, the Islamic Republic was apparently trying to highlight the threat of separatism by provoking Kurdish groups and bringing them into conflict. By doing so, the Iranian authorities seem to be trying to securitize the domestic atmosphere and discourage people from participating in the protests. Sistan and Baluchistan province in southeastern Iran, home to the Baloch ethnic minority, has also witnessed a similar approach by the government. During the September 30 protests in Zahedan, the capital of the province, at least 80 people were killed.¹⁵ The official media and the authorities attribute the clashes in this city to "terrorist and separatist" elements.

As for reactions by regional states, almost all of Iran's Arab neighbors have so far refrained from taking a stance vis-à-vis the protests. Although the Iranian government accuses the Saudi-funded Persian-language media of fueling the protests, Riyadh has so far remained silent on the issue. The same is the case for other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and Arab states in general. The only exception so far has been Qatar's Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, who described the protests as a "domestic issue" but also emphasized that Doha is against using violence to deal with the protesters.¹⁶ The main reason behind the Gulf monarchies' cautious stance could be the fact that they are categorically against any form

of grass-roots movement and populist regime change, as seen in their reactions to the Arab Spring. In fact, they might be afraid that a revolutionary overthrow of the Iranian government might inspire similar movements in their own countries that would threaten state stability. However, it is more likely that they do not consider the protests to be an existential threat to the Islamic Republic, and do not want to provoke Tehran by supporting them.

Finally, regarding the third regional aspect of the protests, what is happening in Iran is the most recent instance of the crisis of public legitimacy in the so-called “axis of resistance.” Over the past three years, Iran and its non-state allies have faced growing public backlash throughout the region. In Iraq, one of the main pillars of popular protests since 2019 has been public resentment over the perceived role of Iran and its Iraqi allies, especially the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in Iraq’s social and political problems.¹⁷ In Lebanon, Hezbollah has been increasingly under pressure for its role in the country’s economic and social crises.¹⁸ Now, the protests in Iran have highlighted the crisis of legitimacy in the core of the axis of resistance. As such, the Islamic Republic’s success or failure in controlling the protests will directly impact the ability of its allies to deal with public pressure at home. This can explain why Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah called the protests in Iran the result of “incitement by Western countries and some countries in the Persian Gulf.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Popular protests in Iran have made the Islamic Republic face the biggest challenge to its legitimacy, at least since 2009. Although the protesters’ demands do not directly include foreign policy issues, the international implications of domestic developments in Iran are already becoming evident. The protests, and the international sympathy for the protesters, have further reduced the possibility of normalized relations between the Islamic Republic and the West. This has also thrown the fate of the JCPOA in doubt. It is difficult for Western states to justify diplomacy with the Islamic Republic while protesters are being suppressed. In this situation, Iranian leaders may no longer have much incentive to conclude the JCPOA negotiations and, instead, see the fragile status quo as the best way to manage international pressure. At the same time, their motivation to develop closer ties with Russia and China will further increase. With regard to the region, Iran’s apparent intention to drag the crisis to neighboring countries, especially Iraq, could have serious implications for Iran’s relations with its neighbors. The Iraqi government has already expressed its strong protest against Iran’s violation of its sovereignty. Any friction between Tehran and Baghdad could also have a negative impact on the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia hosted by Iraq. In any case, the real impact of the protests on the Islamic Republic’s

foreign relations depends on two factors: First, whether the Iranian government can bring the situation back under control in the short term, and if so, at what cost. The second factor is what position foreign actors take regarding the protests. For instance, if the Arab states of the Persian Gulf openly support the protesters, Iranian leaders may think of a retaliatory move, which could trigger an escalatory cycle and endanger regional stability. Currently, it seems that all regional actors have adopted a wait-and-see approach to the protests in Iran while evaluating their options for various possible scenarios.

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