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PROTESTS IN IRAN: ORIGINS, DRIVERS, AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS



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PROTESTS IN IRAN: ORIGINS, DRIVERS, AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Introduction

On 7 Jadi of the current Solar Hijri year, Iran once again witnessed the emergence of a new wave of street protests. The initial spark was a strike in the Aladdin Market and the Charsou Bazaar in Tehran. Protesters closed their shops and gathered in surrounding streets, including Republic Street, demanding price stability and urgent attention to deteriorating living conditions. This strike, which was a direct response to the sharp rise in the US dollar exchange rate and the unprecedented depreciation of the national currency, quickly went beyond a limited economic protest. Within a short period, it turned into street demonstrations in various parts of Tehran and soon spread to other cities and provinces across Iran.

Although Iran has experienced several waves of large-scale protests in recent years, early signs of this new movement suggest significant differences compared to previous cases. These differences are evident not only in its point of origin but also in the demands, the social composition of the protesters, and the range of factors influencing the protests. Accordingly, the central question of this article is: What is the nature of the recent protests in Iran, which forces and factors have contributed to their emergence and expansion, and what possible paths do these developments open for Iran's political and social future?

By focusing on the character of the protests, the demands of the demonstrators, and the balance of forces involved, this article seeks to outline the most likely scenarios ahead and to examine the broader outlook for Iran's future developments.

INITIAL ORIGINS AND THE EXPANSION OF PROTEST DEMANDS

As noted in the introduction, the initial trigger of this wave of protests in Iran was a strike in Tehran's major markets, launched in response to the sharp increase in the US dollar exchange rate against Iran's national currency. This economic strike quickly escalated into broader protests and street demonstrations across Tehran. While the initial slogans focused on sectoral and economic demands, particularly the need to control currency fluctuations, they soon evolved into broader criticism of the government's economic mismanagement.



Just one day later, on 8 Jadi, the protests spread to other Iranian cities. At this stage, the slogans adopted a distinctly political tone, prompting police intervention to contain the demonstrations. With the entry of university students into the protests, the demands became fully politicized, and slogans expressing support for the Pahlavi family were reported. In the following days, protests expanded to most cities and provinces across Iran. Chants such as “Death to the dictator,” “Long live the Shah,” “This year is the year of blood; Seyyed Ali will be overthrown,” and “This is the final battle; the Pahlavis will return” clearly signaled a transformation from an economic protest led by market traders into a nationwide movement with far-reaching political demands.

In response, the government adopted a range of coercive measures to suppress and control the protests. These included the use of tear gas and, in some cases, live ammunition against individuals described by Iranian authorities as “rioters.” In addition, schools and universities were closed in many cities, including Tehran. On 19 Jadi, the government imposed a complete nationwide shutdown of the internet and telephone networks. As a result, almost all Iranian websites, except for one or two state-run platforms, became inaccessible even from outside the country.

Although the total disruption of internet and telephone services has made systematic monitoring of the protests extremely difficult, available reports suggest that the situation in Iran has remained highly unstable, violent, and marked by significant casualties.

REASONS FOR THE EXPANSION OF THE PROTESTS

On the surface, the protests in Iran are rooted in severe economic dysfunction. Protesters describe this situation as the result of prolonged economic mismanagement, while the government attributes it primarily to external sanctions. Regardless of these competing narratives, it is undeniable that the economic conditions faced by ordinary Iranians have been steadily deteriorating. While economic hardship served as the initial trigger of the protests, political demands have been the key factor sustaining and expanding them.

Within this dynamic, the sharp increase in the US dollar exchange rate has functioned as a central pressure point, affecting all social groups without exception. As a result, the protests quickly moved beyond the marketplace and spread to broader segments of society, reaching diverse social classes across Iran. What has pushed the current



protests toward a point of no return is the widespread perception among citizens that the existing economic crisis cannot be resolved within the current managerial and institutional framework of the Iranian state.

Consequently, protesters have moved beyond purely economic demands and have begun to directly challenge the political system itself, and more specifically, its highest authority, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. This shift is clearly reflected in the slogans voiced during demonstrations. In this sense, the current wave of protests, both in scale and intensity, is significantly broader than previous protest movements and can be understood as expressing a shared grievance across virtually all social strata in Iranian society.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EXPANSION OF THE PROTESTS

Although the transformation of an economic grievance into a broad political demand in itself reflects the increasing seriousness of the current wave of protests in Iran, the speed, scale, and nationwide spread of these demonstrations cannot be explained solely by internal dynamics. Given Iran's domestic conditions and the state's historically strong capacity for control and repression, the rapid expansion, persistence, and nationwide reach of the protests suggest a level of coordination and external support that goes beyond spontaneous public mobilization.

While no clearly identifiable internal political force within Iran openly possesses the organizational capacity to plan and direct such large-scale protests, opposition groups to the Islamic Republic have been highly active in the realms of propaganda and mobilization through covert networks inside the country. For example, Reza Pahlavi, the former crown prince of Iran, has played a visible role in encouraging protesters. A call he issued on Instagram, urging the continuation of demonstrations, reportedly received nearly eighty million views, indicating the significant reach of opposition messaging through digital platforms.

At the external level, the country's most frequently cited potential factors influencing and steering this wave of protests are the United States and Israel. In this context, Iran's foreign minister has stated that Israel and the United States have fueled the protests and provided support for what Iranian authorities describe as "riots." Although Israel is often identified as a primary suspect and its indirect involvement cannot be entirely



dismissed, Israeli officials have officially denied any role in the protests, stating only that they are prepared to respond should Iran initiate military action against them.

The position of the United States, however, has differed notably from that of Israel. Six days after the outbreak of the protests, former US President Donald Trump explicitly addressed Iranian authorities on his social media platform, stating that “if Iran shoots peaceful protesters and kills them violently, as is their custom, the United States will come to their aid.” Although Trump’s statements shifted repeatedly over the following two weeks, at one point suggesting that reported deaths might have resulted from crowding rather than state violence, he later reiterated his earlier threats. He also claimed that Iranian officials had sent messages indicating a willingness to negotiate. More recently, Trump stated, “Iranian patriots, continue your protests. Seize government institutions. Record the names of killers and abusers. They will pay a heavy price. I have canceled all negotiations with Iranian officials until the meaningless killing of protesters stops. Help is on the way. Let us make Iran great again.” He subsequently claimed that killings had stopped and that executions had been halted.

Taken together, these statements suggest that the US president has asserted for himself a perceived right to intervene in Iran’s internal unrest, reinforcing claims of American involvement in the protests. At the same time, such rhetoric is likely to embolden protesters by encouraging them to continue demonstrations under the assumption of external backing from the United States.

Beyond the United States and Israel, many other countries, particularly Western states, have expressed support for Iranian protesters. In some cases, they have even permitted the lowering of Iran’s official flag at diplomatic premises. More recently, the President of the European Parliament banned Iranian representatives from entering the Parliament in solidarity with the protesters. Although these actions may not constitute direct intervention in the expansion of the protests, they clearly signal which countries stand alongside the demonstrators and may contribute to strengthening protesters’ morale and determination to continue their actions.

STATE RESPONSE AND CAPACITY TO CONTAIN THE PROTESTS

Since this wave of protests emerged in response to deteriorating economic conditions, the Iranian political system has articulated a dual and somewhat contradictory response. On the one hand, senior officials of the Islamic Republic,



including the Supreme Leader, have acknowledged the legitimacy of public protest over economic hardship and have promised dialogue and engagement with protesters. On the other hand, they have simultaneously threatened firm repression against those labeled as “rioters” or agents of disorder. For example, in a speech addressing the protests, Iran’s Supreme Leader stated, “Protest is legitimate, but protest is different from rioting. We will talk to protesters; officials must talk to protesters. But talking to rioters is useless. Rioters must be put in their place.”

Through this distinction, the Iranian state seeks to project an image of itself internationally as a system that recognizes the democratic right to protest, while at the same time asserting its authority to eliminate what it defines as disruptive and subversive elements. However, no clear criteria or transparent mechanisms exist to distinguish legitimate protesters from alleged instigators of unrest. As a result, in practice, state repression may not be limited to those officially labeled as “rioters” or “mercenaries,” but may extend broadly to demonstrators as a whole.

In terms of its capacity to contain protests, the Iranian state has a well-established record of successfully suppressing previous waves of demonstrations. In addition to deploying regular law enforcement forces as the first line of response, the state possesses other instruments that operate more indirectly to dismantle protest networks and identify organizers behind the scenes. These include the intelligence services and, more importantly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Compared to other forces, the IRGC enjoys extensive human and material resources and typically intervenes when conventional police forces prove insufficient.

Units commonly referred to as “plainclothes forces,” operating with broad authority reportedly derived from the highest levels of leadership, target protest leaders and frontline demonstrators, and are widely perceived as having significant latitude in their actions. It is for this reason that, during the current wave of protests, some Western countries have sought to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization. There have also been reports suggesting that the Iranian state has brought in allied Iraqi armed groups to bolster internal security, although such claims remain difficult to verify independently.

Nevertheless, what has placed the Iranian government in a strategic dilemma between accommodation and harsh repression has been the repeated warnings issued by former US President Donald Trump. Whether these statements translate into actual military



action against Iran remains highly debatable. However, the continued threats and rhetorical support for protesters may encourage the Iranian authorities to exercise greater caution in the use of overt coercive force against demonstrators.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

Considering key variables such as the depth of the current crisis, the elevated level of political demands, the state's coercive capacity, and the extent of external pressure and intervention, three major scenarios can be outlined.

Scenario One: Regime Change. Based on the severity of the ongoing crisis, the radicalization of political demands, and the potential for sustained external pressure, the collapse of Iran's current political system cannot be ruled out. The realization of this scenario depends on several critical factors: the continuation of protests in a networked, nationwide, and inclusive form; the seizure of government institutions (a point emphasized by the former crown prince and, more recently, by Donald Trump); the participation of all social strata, particularly state employees, in the protests; and external intervention through sustained encouragement of demonstrations and the restriction of the Islamic Republic's international room for maneuver. Such external pressure could include the occupation of Iranian diplomatic missions abroad, the imposition of harsher sanctions (including Trump's threat to impose a 25 percent tariff on any country trading with Iran), and, ultimately, military intervention. Military involvement could take the form of targeted operations against decision-making centers, efforts to dismantle repressive institutions, particularly the IRGC, or large-scale bombardment of such facilities.

The likelihood of this scenario increases significantly if all of these factors occur simultaneously and in a coordinated manner, thereby placing the Iranian system under intense internal pressure while subjecting it to overwhelming external blows that undermine its capacity to respond. Conversely, the absence of direct foreign intervention reduces the probability of this outcome. Although Trump has stated that "all options are on the table," entering a military confrontation with the Islamic Republic—often described as a "wounded lion"—would entail substantial costs for both the United States and Israel, which may deter such action. Another factor that weakens this scenario is the possibility of a negotiated settlement. As Trump has suggested that Iranian officials have expressed a willingness to negotiate, it is conceivable that, in exchange for major concessions, external pressure could be eased. Ultimately, this



would depend on whether the Iranian leadership is prepared to offer concessions acceptable to the United States. In a context where the choice lies between survival and collapse, concessions aimed at preserving the system may be viewed as the more rational option.

Scenario Two: Containment and Management of the Crisis, The realization of this scenario also depends on several conditions: gradual and extensive repression in an environment where external monitoring is severely restricted; the dismantling of key opposition networks and organizational centers within the country; the deployment of auxiliary forces, potentially including allied Iraqi armed groups or other external supporters; and the provision of economic incentives to the population through increased subsidies or similar measures.

This scenario is plausible if the state succeeds in simultaneously employing its full coercive capacity to neutralize protest organizers and core networks while offering reassuring economic promises to the broader population. Another decisive factor would be the implementation of social reforms demanded by the public. Given the Iranian state's demonstrated capacity for repression, as evidenced in previous protest cycles, combined with selective flexibility and engagement with public demands, this scenario appears relatively likely. However, a necessary condition for its success is the absence of escalating external pressure or direct military intervention aimed at regime destruction. In such circumstances, while the Iranian government may show flexibility in responding to domestic demands, it may also be willing to make limited concessions to external actors, including the United States and Israel, to reduce international pressure.

Scenario Three: Prolonged but Controlled Crisis, according to this scenario, social unrest neither leads to the collapse of the political system nor results in the restoration of durable stability. Instead, protests continue intermittently in a fragmented and manageable form. The state shifts from widespread repression toward a more selective control strategy, concentrating coercive force on major cities and sensitive locations, particularly Tehran and key centers of power. In other regions, intelligence measures and the disruption of protest networks become the primary tools of control.

As street protests subside to some extent, external pressure—especially the threat of US military intervention—also diminishes. However, the persistence of sanctions and the structural inefficiencies of the Iranian economy contribute to a gradual deterioration



of living conditions. The long-term outlook under this scenario is the repetition of a familiar cycle: periodic public mobilization followed by state repression. While the government may remain capable of containing street-level unrest, social dissatisfaction continues to deepen over time. Inevitably, such a trajectory leaves Iran's future increasingly uncertain and renders the recurrence of any of the above scenarios possible once again.

CONCLUSION

The recent protests in Iran, which initially emerged from economic grievances among market traders in response to currency volatility and deteriorating living conditions, rapidly evolved into a broad-based movement with a distinctly political character. This transformation reflects the depth of Iran's structural discontent, where livelihood-related demands, exacerbated by economic mismanagement and external pressures, quickly translate into confrontation with the prevailing political order. A defining feature of this wave of protests is its wide geographic spread, the participation of diverse social groups, and the explicit nature of anti-government slogans, including expressions of support for the former political system.

The expansion of these protests can be understood as the result of an interaction between deep domestic dissatisfaction and external influences. On the one hand, widespread public distrust in the state's ability to resolve economic and livelihood crises has served as the primary driver of sustained mobilization. On the other hand, moral and media support from opposition figures abroad, along with provocative statements by Western officials, particularly those from the United States, have intensified the crisis atmosphere and reinforced protesters' expectations of external backing.

In response, the Iranian government has once again adopted a dual strategy combining accommodation and repression. While formally recognizing the right to protest, the state has simultaneously labeled segments of the protesters as "rioters" and subjected them to coercive suppression. The extensive use of security instruments, coupled with the shutdown of communication networks, signals the government's determination to restore control primarily through coercive means.

Taking into account all visible and underlying variables shaping this wave of protests, three scenarios appear plausible: regime change, containment and management of the crisis, and the continuation of unrest without regime collapse but with significant



weakening of the political system. The first scenario becomes more likely primarily through decisive external intervention. Although domestic dynamics are essential, the probability of regime change increases substantially if external actors actively intervene. This maximalist scenario, however, would be extremely costly, particularly for external powers. In this context, the Trump administration's approach of sustained rhetorical pressure while avoiding direct military confrontation suggests a strategy of investing primarily in internal dynamics to push the Iranian system toward collapse at minimal external cost.

The second scenario aligns more closely with the Islamic Republic's historical experience. The Iranian system has long prepared for such moments and is therefore unlikely to be easily destabilized by mass protests alone. Through gradual repression, informal or unannounced reforms, and the provision of limited economic concessions to the population, the state may succeed in reducing the intensity of protests. Simultaneously, by offering selective concessions to the United States, where reciprocal gains are also expected, the government may attempt to ease external pressure and de-escalate tensions.

A third possibility is the emergence of a prolonged and attritional crisis affecting both the protest movement and the state. Under this scenario, the government survives but becomes increasingly fragile, while Iranian society grows more radicalized yet remains unable to overthrow the system. The state, in turn, adopts an increasingly securitized and police-centered mode of governance. This scenario blurs the boundary between a return to stability and systemic collapse, rendering Iran's future highly uncertain. Whether the country ultimately moves toward stabilization or disintegration will depend on the relative cohesion and strength of state institutions on the one hand and society on the other, as well as the role of external actors. Whichever side demonstrates greater cohesion and capacity will ultimately shape Iran's trajectory.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Iranian government should address the legitimate economic grievances of protesters, as alleviating deteriorating living conditions remains the most effective way to remove the core drivers of public unrest.
2. Iranian citizens should recognize that domestic stability is more valuable than any short-term demand. They should avoid acting as instruments of foreign interests



without careful calculation, or engaging in the destruction of public property and attacks on state institutions that ultimately harm the country itself. Instead, protests should be conducted in a manner consistent with Iran's rich civilization and cultural traditions.

3. It is essential that the Islamic Emirate maintain its policy of non-intervention and neutrality regarding developments in Iran, and that it encourages restraint on all sides through diplomatic channels and official statements directed at both the Iranian government and its people.

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