

Iran 2018 and Syria 2011: Similarities and Differences

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The protests in Iran over 2017-2018 do have some similarities with those in Syria in early 2011, both in their internal dynamics and in the interventions of Iran's external enemies. Yet there were also important differences.

Wide-scale protests in Iran were reported from 28 December 2017 onwards, beginning in Mashaad. However particular economic problems behind these protests had been building for some time. Tehran and Mashhad had seen protests in January and November 2017, over the failure of financial institutions in a scandal known as the 'Caspian Affair'. Many small investors had lost their savings.

By the end of last year a range of other grievances had been added, including rising prices, job losses and unemployment. To that we might add disillusionment that the JCPOA agreement (which led to reduced sanctions and greater oil sales) had not yet translated into substantial economic benefits for ordinary people.

The spread of these protests into more than a dozen cities attracted small political groups, many of them foreign backed, to add their chorus of 'regime change'. Those calls were amplified by their outside sponsors. The best organised in pushing these 'regime change' demands were the monarchists and the banned terrorist group the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), which began as a national left movement but was then purchased by Saddam Hussein and most of Iran's foreign enemies.

We have to recall that, in recent months, aggression against Iran has been openly and repeatedly pronounced by the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Israel and the USA. The June 2017 DAESH terrorist attacks on Tehran were preceded by direct threats, a few weeks before, from crown prince Mohammad bin Salman. He said

'we will work so that the battle is for them in Iran, not in Saudi Arabia'.

In the final weeks of 2017 Washington and Israel issued joint threats against Iran, saying they were working on 'concrete goals' against the independent nation. There can be little doubt that those three enemies would seize any opportunity to back internal 'regime change' agents. But they do not have any substantial internal partner.

In response to the politicisation of these protests, a number of large pro-government rallies were organised, dwarfing the size of the protest rallies. Many sections of the western state

and corporate media ran video of pro-government rallies, saying they were the protest rallies. Even video of the large 2011 Bahrain protests were promoted as 'Iran protests'. In most of these videos pictures of Iran's leader, many clerics and anti-Israel and anti-Trump placards could be seen. The many media fabrications of the war on Syria seem to have 'normalised' such reckless misrepresentation.

Online commentator Sayed Mousavi (@SayedMousavi7), observing protest rally photos and video online, said that politicisation of the rallies had alienated many from joining in,

'but it also inspired other dispersed yet more aggressive and opportunist interest groups to step in ... [and] these marginal groups started organising.'

Mousavi estimated that, while there had been many protests of 500 to 1,000 people in a number of Iranian cities, there had been no rally larger than 300 in Tehran. Unlike the very large political rallies in 2009, he said, there was no clear dynamic, no unified demands, no leader and very little presence in the capital.



The protests started in Mashhad in a gathering by people who had lost their savings due to the closing & bankruptcy of some financial institutions, known as the "Caspian Affair". (Source: Sayed Mousavi)

While much of the western state and corporate media promoted the 'freedom' and anti-government slogans, reactionary slogans were also widely reported. The son of the former Shah (a King imposed on Iran by Washington in the 1950s) was reported backing the 'regime change' and 'death to the dictator' demands. MEK leader Maryam Rajavi also backed 'death to the dictator' demands. Over two weeks at least 400 people were detained and 25 were killed, though the government says none of those were shot by security forces. Nevertheless, six were reported killed in Isfahan, as they tried to steal weapons from a police station. The online Telegram channel 'AmadNews' was blocked, for promoting violence.

The similarities with Syria in early 2011 are that in both cases the protests began with genuine concerns over domestic issues, but were infiltrated by small extremist groups, most of which had foreign backing. In Iran the focus of the protests grew into wider grievances, mostly over economic management. In Syria the rallies led with calls for constitutional reform of the Baathist system, following dissatisfaction with corruption and cronyism.

In both cases the western state and corporate media launched into a fairly systematic misreporting of events. In Syria, US-based groups such as Human Rights Watch claimed the violence was from security forces against 'peaceful protestors' for the first six months. In fact (and as I explain in Chapter Four of my book *The Dirty War on Syria*), sectarian jihadists were killing security forces from the first days, then blaming it on the government. Concerning Iran, the large pro-government rallies were repeatedly shown as 'protest rallies', in the western media.

It is important also to observe the differences. Iran is a large and resilient independent country, with significant internal political contest between two factions: liberals and principlists (called 'hard-liners' in the USA). Other opposition groups are very small.

In Syria the major potential ally Washington had for its 'regime change' aggression was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, backed by international al Qaeda 'jihadists'. Independent Turkish pollsters TESEV found that, after one year of the conflict in Syria, 5% supported violent attacks on the state. That seems small, but it represents over a million people (mostly Muslim Brotherhood supporters) who might sympathise with or assist jihadist fighters. Although sectarian jihadists in Syria, after the first year, became dependent on massive outside support and foreign fighters, they maintained a social base in several areas of the country.

Iran has no similar base for violent opposition. There is already a significant political dynamic within the country, including a dynamic for social reform. While there is a residue of monarchists and probably substantial anti-clerical sentiment, the main violent factions (like the MEK and DAESH) are small and dependent on external help. Similarly, the communities targeted by Saudi recruiters for DAESH are quite small.

The economic issues are very real, but the Saudi-Israeli-Washington dream of subversion lacks a strong internal partner. Perhaps that is why Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was unconcerned, saying just 'what has happened in Iran is being successfully contained'.

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