

BIGMUN 2018

United Nations, Security Council (SC)

Research Report

Topic 2: The escalating situation in Iran



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Introduction

The topic we will be discussing in the Security Council is the escalating protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Starting on the 28th of December 2017, escalating protests against the current theocratic leadership of Hassan Rouhani and Ayatollah Khamenei have taken place in Iran. Marking the most collective challenge towards the regime since the protests of 2009, the protests originally focused on the economic policies of Iran – though they have since spread to include political opposition to theocratic regime.

As of the 2nd of January 2018, the Iranian regime has reported 22 deaths and 3,700 arrests because of the protests¹.

Definition of key terms and People

Ayatollah Khamenei: The second and current *supreme leader* of Iran who has been in office since 1989, preceded by the Grand Ayatollah and revolutionary Ruhollah Khomeini.

Arab Spring²: A revolutionary wave of violent and non-violent protests, civil wars, riots and coups in Northern Africa and the Arab world. Though Iran is not included in the timeline of the Arab Spring, the significance of the 2009 protests influenced the rise of the Arab Spring.

Theocracy: A form of government in which a deity is the source from which all authority derives.

Inflation: A sustained increase in the general price of goods and services in an economy over a period of time.

Tehran: The capital of Iran.

¹ Al Jazeera “3700 arrested during protests in Iran” 9th of January 2018 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/3700-arrested-protests-iran-mp-180109100528230.html>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

² BBC “The Arab Spring” 10th of March 2010 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12813859>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

Mashad: The second most populous city in Iran and, along with Tehran, a hotbed for protests.

Iran nuclear deal³: A deal struck between Iran and six other countries in order to prevent the development of nuclear warheads in Iran. In return, the EU and United States ceased all nuclear-related economic sanctions.

Fatwa: A ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority.

Background information

After a CIA-led coup against the existing Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1951⁴, until the Islamic revolution of 1979 Iran was ruled by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who embarked on a set of economic, agrarian, social and administrative reforms known as the White Revolution – something that would modernize Iran at an unexpectedly rapid rate. Adopting a culture that increasingly grew parallels to the Western World of liberalism, Islamic religious sects felt isolated, and after the Shah arrested famous cleric Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini for a speech against him protests ensued in 1963. Eventually, social discontent, economic pressures – due to fluctuation in Western oil consumption – and monetary instability caused a manifestation of demonstrations against the Shah in 1978, eventually toppling the autocratic – though liberal – regime in 1979. Replaced by adored Islamic cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, the nation was quickly voted to become an Islamic theocracy mid-1979 by referendum. Left-wing and intellectual allies to the Ayatollah were quickly disbanded, formulating Iran into a nation pegged by conservative, Islamic values.⁵

At war with Iraq from 1980-88, Iran experienced multiple diplomatic confrontations and international conflicts – most notably with Western powers such as the United States and United Kingdom. The U.S hostage crisis of 1971-81 highlighted the growing fracture between the two nations. Experiencing relative stability throughout the 1990's, Iran adopted a

³ BBC News “Iran Nuclear Deal – Key details” 13th of October 2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>

Accessed the 10th of January 2017

⁴ BBC News “CIA documents acknowledge its role in Iran’s 1953 coup” 20th August 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23762970>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

⁵ Afray, Janet “Iranian Revolution of 1978-79” 24th of October 2017 <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution-of-1978-1979#ref282638>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

more tolerant approach towards Western culture – yet, as history repeats itself, Ulama influencer circles grew disenfranchised from the status quo, stimulating moderately liberal President Rafsanjani’s loss in the 1997 election. Replaced by reformist Mohammed Khatami, Iran felt the gruelling tension from both the liberal and conservative Islamic power groups⁶.

The first intensive challenge against the Iranian regime was in 1998, where over 1000 student protested against a government ban of the reformist newspaper, Salam. Over 1200 people were detained, and 3 people killed⁷. Most Iran observers believe these protests laid the foundations for what is known as the “Iran Independent Students Movement”. Most scholars mark this event as the start of strengthening civilian protests against the theocratic regime.

The execution and overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq tipped the power balance of Shia Muslims towards Iran, and, as a representative of this Muslim majority the regime has increasingly preached anti-Zionist sentiment. Partly due to Iran’s developing nuclear energy program, there were claims that the United States and Israel were planning an attack against Iran. Tensions arose, and nuclear-related sanctions by the EU and United States and been introduced against Iran – Russia and China opposed this, however. In order to quell the fear of Iran developing nuclear armaments, the Ayatollah issued a Fatwa forbidding the production, stockpiling and usage of nuclear weapons⁸.

The 2009 protests were the most significant and extreme resistance to the Iranian regime since the nation’s creation in 1979. Occurring after the re-election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, all three opposition candidates insisted that the vote was rigged and manipulated. Despite relatively peaceful protests, the police and paramilitary force suppressed them with batons, pepper spray, sticks and in some cases firearms. The official death toll is 36, and the opposition toll is 72⁹. Over 4,000 people were arrested in conjunction with the protests¹⁰. Centering in Tehran, the protests developed into what is known as the

⁶ PBS Newshour “Timeline: A Modern History of Iran” February 11th, 2010
https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/middle_east-jan-june10-timeline

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

⁷ BBC News “Six days that shook Iran” 11th of July 2000 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/828696.stm

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

⁸ Porter, Gareth “When the Ayatollah said no to nukes” 16th of October 2014 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/16/when-the-ayatollah-said-no-to-nukes/>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

⁹ CNN “chaos prevails as protestors, police clash in Iranian capital” 21st of June 2009

<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/20/iran.election/index.html>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

Iranian Green Movement – a political movement which demanded Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s resignation. The green movement further led to what is known as “The Green Path of Hope”, a series of economic and social reforms that promised prosperity. Economic strains continued throughout the decade, with citizens hoping that the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 would relieve the country of its economic problems by the EU and United States stopping their sanctions against Iran. Currently, the national unemployment rate 12.4% and inflation rate at 10% - prompting the current wave of protests.

Contrary to the previous protests of 2009 and 1999 which were centred around Tehran, the 2017-18 protests were initiated in the second most populated city of Mashad, quickly spreading to over 70 towns and cities. Some demonstrators were heard chanting “Reza Shah, bless your soul”, “death to the dictator” and “Khamenei, shame on you, leave the country alone!”. So far, 21 people have been killed by the Iranian police, and over 4,500 people have been arrested¹¹. The Iranian government has furthermore censored access various media platforms, including Instagram, Telegram and Twitter¹². Additionally, some cities have had their entire internet cut off¹³.

International reactions have generally criticized the Iranian regime for using violence against protestors, but most nations have been treading water lightly – not wanting to meddle in Middle Eastern affairs. On the 5th of January, following a request by U.S ambassador Nikki Haley, an emergency Security Council meeting was held regarding the violations of human rights of the Iranian protestors. Russia attempted to block the discussion – which the US overcame – yet there was not enough European support for action against Iran.

Major countries and organisations involved

Russia - Russia’s mutual ally of Bashar al-Assad with Iran has drawn the two nations together to form a relationship – though it is less a strategic alliance than a marriage of convenience. Russia tries to retain with the Middle East, as a Russian analyst stated, “a

¹¹ Economist “Iranians demand – and deserve – a less oppressive regime” 6th of January 2018
<https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21733998-now-alas-they-probably-wont-get-one-iranians-demandand-deserve-a-less-oppressive-regime>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

¹² Al Jazeera “Iran blocks Instagram, telegram after protests” 31st of December 2017

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/iran-blocks-instagram-telegram-protests-171231133323939.html>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

¹³ Z. Morris, David, “Iran cuts off social media and some internet access as protests continue” 31st of December 2017

dogma of flexibility”. This is demonstrated by their good relations with countries such as Israel, Syria and Saudi Arabia – something that seems to be unattainable by the West. Russia strongly believes that protests in Iran is an internal issue, and that any interventionist approach should be quelled¹⁴.

Israel - As a long-time nemesis of Iran, Israel fears Iran, and Iran fears Israel. The unrest in Iran has been blamed partly on Israel as well.¹⁵ Due to Israeli state being intrinsically Jewish, there are natural conflicts between Israel and any other Middle Eastern state. One might argue that the Israeli goal is to be the dominant force of the Middle East and, by disrupting the Iranian regime, they will be able to topple one of the largest power players in the region, thereby acquiring dominance.

United States - Though relations with improved under the Obama presidency, President Trump’s hard-line approach to both the Iran nuclear deal *and* the regime itself has caused relations to deteriorate. Threatening to retract the 2015 Nuclear Agreement, the USA has the most influence in reference to economic sanctions. As a strong ally of Israel, Iran innately is wary of the United States.

Saudi Arabia - The decades old feud between Saudi Arabia and Russia is partly exacerbated by religious differences – Saudi Arabia representing Sunni Islam and Iran Shia – though the main source of their rivalry is from a fierce struggle for regional dominance. Its allies include the United States¹⁶.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Despite numerous human rights violations in both the 1999 and 2009 protests, there has historically been little international reaction. Former Secretary General Ban-ki Moon

¹⁴ Cohen, Josh “commentary: Cracks in Russia-Iran alliance open options for Trump” 8th of January 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cohen-iran-commentary/commentary-cracks-in-russia-iran-alliance-open-options-for-trump-idUSKBN1EX298>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

¹⁵ Baynes, Chris “Iran says it has ended anti-government protests and blames US, Israel and Saudi Arabia for unrest” 7th of January 2018

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/irans-revolutionary-guard-says-it-was-ended-protests-and-blames-us-israel-and-saudi-arabia-for-a8146651.html>

Accessed on the 10th of January 2018

¹⁶BBC News “Why Saudi Arabia and Iran are bitter rivals” 18th of November 2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809>

Accessed the 10th of January 2018

congratulated Ahmadinejad despite the election results being widely disputed, and more than 200 intellectuals, human rights activists, and reformist politicians urged a reaction from the UN. No action was taken however.

Western powers have had a legacy of failing interventionist policies in the Middle East in the past decade – Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen – and therefore there is much scepticism towards meddling in the internal affairs of Iran's borders.

Potential solutions

There is no easy solution to the conflict in Iran. Economic sanctions could be used, though they could possibly prompt Iran to ignore the 2015 nuclear agreement. The geopolitical hotbed of the Middle East is not to be toyed around with – economic sanctions by the United States and EU will worsen relations with Russia and strengthen Russo-Iran relations.

Relevant UN resolutions

UNSC resolution 2231 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on 20 July 2015

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150819092747/http://www.un.org/en/sc/inc/pages/pdf/pow/RES2231E.pdf>

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<https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21733998-now-alas-they-probably-wont-get-one-iranians-demandand-deservea-less-oppressive-regime>

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