

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## The Ayatollahs and the Demonstrators: Is the Iranian Theocracy Running Out of Time?

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### Key Points

- The current demonstrations in Iran could prove to be a watershed in the Islamic Revolution.
- The theocrats were shocked at the demands of the demonstrators calling for their ouster.
- Given the deep currents of dislike for the theocracy among many ordinary Iranians, it is difficult to see how the ayatollahs may placate the demonstrators.

### Summary

Reports emanating from Iran state that the recent demonstrations by ordinary Iranians against economic hardships have been suppressed. These reports may well be true; the Iranian theocracy has previously shown little compunction in using overbearing force against demonstrators despite international protestations against the government-sanctioned violence. Speaking to the semi-official FARS news agency, Mohammad Ali Jaffari, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), [stated](#) that he had dispatched forces to Hamadan, Isfahan and Lorestan provinces to tackle 'the new sedition', no doubt a reference to the protests of 2009, the so-called Green Movement. In the aftermath of those protests, the government's official [figures](#) for the protests were 2,500 arrests in Tehran alone, with as many as 150 in jail and 30 dead. The claim was widely [disputed](#) at the time, with suspicions of a cover-up of a massacre in which "hundreds" of protestors were killed

being propounded. There is little reason to believe that the current government would have been any gentler in its treatment of the protestors this time around. In fact, it had less reason to be.

### Analysis

The current demonstrations began in Iran's second-most populous city, Mashhad, in the country's north-east and also its second-holiest. They soon spread across Iran, to Tehran and even to Qom, the country's holiest city and the home of the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Large crowds of protestors were [reported](#) in the northern city of Rasht and Kermanshah in the west, with smaller protests in Isfahan, Hamadan and elsewhere. The demonstrations began with people demanding better living conditions and protesting the increasing prices of food. The rate of inflation in Iran is around 17 per cent and unemployment, particularly for youth and women, is above 30 per cent. Those demands and protests soon became politically-oriented, however, with reports of anti-regime chants. In Kermanshah, for instance, where the largest demonstrations took place on the second day, protesters shouted slogans against the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and in other cities they [chanted](#) 'death to the dictator', also a reference to him. It now transpires, however, that the demonstrations were, to a large degree, the result of countless Iranians having lost their life savings due to the [collapse](#) of poorly regulated and unlicensed credit institutions in recent years. As one analyst [observes](#), 'Banks are shutting down without any kind of notice, and it's creating a huge political and economic backlash at a local level.'

The anti-theocracy twist was an unexpected facet of the demonstrations, however. The larger 2009 demonstrations were a protest against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the sixth president of Iran. While in that instance as with the current one, there was a political component to the demonstrations, the theocracy itself was not the target of the 2009 demonstrations as they were this time around, going by the chants of 'death to the dictator' and 'The people are begging, the clerics act like God'. There was further [chants](#) of 'Clerics should get lost', 'Shame on you, Seyyed Ali Khamenei', and 'Let the country go.' While this assault on the Supreme Leader was unprecedented, it was the chant of 'Referendum, referendum, this is the slogan of the people' that shook the government to its core. The "referendum" was clearly a call to put the vote to the people to decide if they wished to continue living in a theocracy, albeit one with vestiges of democratic processes. The current Islamic Republic was created after the 1979 Islamic Revolution when a referendum was put to the Iranian people.

## Anti-Establishment Demonstrations, December 2017



A second major difference between the demonstrations of 2009 and the current protests is that of leadership. While the 2009 demonstrations showed a definite hierarchy, there is no equivalent leadership this time around. It is the common signs of antipathy towards the theocracy by disparate demonstrations across the country that made the ayatollahs very nervous. The fact that vast numbers of Iranian people could rise up against the regime, minus a leadership to outline their goals and direct their efforts, only showed the common thread of a dislike of the theocracy being felt across the country.

It was that turn of events that led one [source](#) to report that it had come into possession of notes from various meetings of the Iranian hierarchy that spoke of finding a way out of the situation. According to the source, the notes said that the unrest had hurt every sector of the country's economy and 'threatens the regime's security. The first step, therefore, is to find a way out of this situation.' The notes allegedly went on to state, 'Religious leaders and the leadership must come to the scene as soon as possible and prevent the situation (from) deteriorating further' and added, 'God help us, this is a very complex situation and is different from previous occasions.' The notes claimed that protesters 'started chanting the ultimate slogans from day one. In Tehran today, people were chanting slogans against Khamenei and the slogans used yesterday were all against Khamenei.' Given the differences from the 2009 demonstrations that were discussed earlier and their confirmation of reports from other sources, those notes may well be genuine.

A little-noted element of the demonstrations is the role played in them by women. Iranian women have faced adversity in their quest for equality since 1979. It is hardly surprising, then, that two of the most iconic images to have come out of the demonstrations have been of female protestors. In one, a woman defiantly holds up her clenched fist in a cloud of tear gas. [Another](#) shows a woman with her head covering on a stick, defiantly bareheaded on a major road in Tehran. Women in Qom urged passers-by to join in the demonstrations, female students at [Tehran University](#) encouraged other students to remain steadfast against the regime while, in the southern city of [Kerman](#), female demonstrators led the chants of 'Death to the dictator'. In Central Iran, women demonstrators joined men to face off against security forces in the city of [Isfahan](#), while in [Najafabad](#) and [Shiraz](#) women were as vocal as the men in demanding the ouster of Ayatollah Khamenei. They faced the same dangers and took the same risks as men, being violently arrested in [Tehran](#) and beaten in [Rasht](#).



As the demonstrations grew, social media became increasingly involved. Telegram, the messaging application, shut down the account of the unofficial Iranian channel, Amad News, after receiving complaints from government officials in Tehran that the channel was inciting violence. Some analysts are of the opinion that this medium was one of the conduits used to organise the demonstrations in the absence of a leadership. The Iranian Minister of Information and Communications Technology, Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, used Twitter to [request](#) Telegram to close down Amad News, which it did. Telegram used Twitter to [explain](#) that Amad News had violated its policies on encouraging or inciting violence. Twitter also showed a group of people, allegedly students at Tehran University, asking people to join the demonstrators and, in reference to the theocrats, [chanting](#), 'This is the end of their adventure.' That elicited a response from the FARS News Agency, which [claimed](#) that 'opportunists are trying to raise unrest in front of Tehran University.'

The news agency should have pointed out that some leaders and ex-leaders are using the riots for their own ends. On 15 November 2017, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made provocative statements against corruption in the country and questioned why Ayatollah Khamenei found it necessary to reduce welfare funding if the country's funds belonged to the people. He announced his intention to [stand for office again](#) and refused to withdraw his nomination when asked to do so by Khamenei, further irritating the Supreme Leader. He next initiated a [feud](#) with the head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Sadeghi Larijani and his brothers, accusing them of 'stealing public money and corruption' and, for good measure, revived his populist message, attacking the rich and corrupt. As a consequence, individuals belonging to the "Revenge for Allah" militia, a hardline group, [attacked](#) and beat up some of his supporters. Ahmadinejad's unofficial website, Dolat-e Bahar, claimed that the attackers were Larijani's supporters. Ahmadinejad is said to be sheltering at a shrine in Tehran. It is also alleged that he is being investigated by the authorities for his role in the demonstrations, although that cannot be confirmed.

President Rouhani is, likewise, in an uncomfortable position. In a speech he delivered in Parliament on 10 December, he blamed 'fraudulent institutions' controlled by hardline clerics for a lot of the economic hardship being experienced by the people. That provoked a reaction against him by his conservative political opponents and the demonstrators who reminded him that much of that hardship occurred during his tenure as president. One [report](#), in fact, placed the blame for the demonstrations squarely at Rouhani's feet, alleging that the demonstrations were a response to his speech. The demonstrations, it claimed, were organised by hardliners against his speech; they, however, lost control of the demonstrations almost immediately.

While FARS may have pointed the finger of blame against local dissidents, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei held no such illusions, [stating](#) unequivocally that Iran's "enemies" were behind the unrest. Those enemies, he claimed, had joined forces to foment the demonstrations, adding, 'The enemy is waiting for an opportunity, for a flaw, through which they can enter. Look at these events over the last few days. All those who are against the Islamic Republic - those who have money, those who have the politics, those who have the weapons, those who have the intelligence - they have all joined forces in order to create problems for the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Revolution.' While he did not name those "enemies", it is probable that he had the United States and Saudi Arabia in mind and, more than likely, Israel. It drew the expected response from Washington. Nikki Hayley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, branded Khamenei's claim of "enemies" as 'complete nonsense', [saying](#), 'The Iranian dictatorship is trying to do what it always does, which is to say that the protests were designed by enemies. We all know that is complete nonsense.' She went on to say that the United States would ask the UN Security Council to convene in an emergency session to discuss the events in Iran 'in the days ahead'. 'The people of Iran', she claimed, 'are crying out for freedom. All freedom-loving people must stand with their cause.'

Saudi Arabia, for its part, would likely have kept a close eye on developments in Iran. Given the animosity between the two countries, Riyadh would undoubtedly have looked for ways and means to reduce Iran's influence in the region. As Saudi Arabia perceives the situation, Iran has a major influence in Iraq to the north of Saudi Arabia and in Yemen, to its south. It is

also a major actor in Syria, propping up the Assad regime there with IRGC personnel situated in that country. Iran's non-conventional force, Hezbollah, also has personnel in Syria. Saudi Arabia, more recently, was embarrassed by the Hariri affair. Sa'ad Hariri, the Prime Minister of Lebanon, was allegedly [summoned](#) by Riyadh and forced to announce his resignation from office from there, allegedly for not reducing Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon as Riyadh required. He later rescinded his resignation, however, without diminishing Hezbollah's (and, therefore, Iran's) influence in Lebanon, leaving Riyadh red-faced.

Saudi Arabia remains mired in Yemen, where it stands accused of war crimes, it hoped to browbeat Qatar into falling into line but failed and has almost certainly forced that emirate to move closer to Iran and faces many domestic issues, including the perception among many older Saudis that the current crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, more or less stole that title from its rightful owner, Mohammed bin Nayef, who remains under [house arrest](#) in his palace in Jeddah. Eleven princes of the House of Saud were arrested in Riyadh on 4 January, ostensibly for protesting against utility bills but it has been [alleged](#) that they were arrested for protesting the arrest of bin Nayef.

Riyadh has been studiously quiet officially about the demonstrations in Iran; the kingdom is hardly in any position to voice its support for the demonstrators who seek greater freedoms and a change of government. It has, nevertheless, allegedly made [contact](#) with opposition Iranian groups, including the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq and some Arab and Baluchi dissidents. They are fringe groups, however, and hardly pose a threat to the regime in Tehran.

The IRGC often boasts of its ability to destroy Israel and frequently warns that country not to underestimate its resolve to do so. Such hubris aside, it is unlikely that the IRGC or the Iranian Air Force would be able to match Israel's military might and, especially, its air power, Russian missiles notwithstanding.

Iran's greatest threat, however, does not emanate from the region but from the White House. The course and actions of the Trump Administration are difficult to predict but, as President Trump fulfils his election promises one by one, there exists the heightened possibility that he will, at some stage, decertify the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – the Iran nuclear deal – and place the country under sanctions once again. That would place the regime in Tehran under tremendous pressure, given that the current demonstrations stemmed in major part from the previous sanctions, which caused the Iranian people to become fifteen per cent [poorer](#) over the last ten years, according to one estimate. The demonstrators are also keenly aware that while the energy industry is returning back to the levels of production last witnessed during its heyday, virtually every other sector is lagging.

Much of the anger that drove the demonstrations stemmed from the fact that despite having most of the sanctions lifted and receiving around US\$120 billion in funds that were previously frozen, the people of Iran have seen little relief. They demanded, during the demonstrations, that the ayatollahs look after the Iranian people's welfare, get out of Yemen and Syria, and spend more money on food and other basic necessities for everyday Iranians.

Time is running out for the ayatollahs. They will undoubtedly have noted the speed at which economic demands turned into political ones, specifically the calls for their ouster. It is that undercurrent of dislike for the theocracy that will make them nervous. At stake is not only their rule but the very ideals of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. They fear that the social revolution that Khomeini brought about could be lost to the demands for more Western-styled freedoms. If the ayatollahs refuse to grant those freedoms and make the changes that the protestors demand, they know that the next series of demonstrations will not be very long in the future – and the ones after those, if the theocracy still holds power – not far off again. On the other hand, if they were to concede some social and economic liberties, they could well place themselves on the slippery slope to granting more and more freedom to the younger generations. That could see them lose the right to specify, for example, which candidates can and cannot stand for election to public office, including that of the President. They will be equally aware that mere force may no longer suffice to keep a nation cowed.

The ayatollahs now find themselves in a precarious position. It is difficult to see how they can escape the sheer force of public opinion and not permit Iranian society and the economy to change, whether they would like it to or not.

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