

# “IRANIAN PROTESTS AND TEHRAN’S REGIONAL ROLE”



## SUMMARY OF A AGSIW WEBINAR



14 FEBRUARY 2023

### OVERVIEW

Although demonstrations in Iran see to be ebbing somewhat, protesters are still defying both the regime and numerous predictions that they would quickly fade. Still, the protest movement has yet to threaten the foundations of the Islamic Republic. The protests and the regime’s brutal response have led to a significant deterioration of relations between Tehran and the West as nuclear negotiations have stalled and a new focus on containment and deterrence has developed.

However, dialogue between Iran and its Gulf neighbours has continued amid ongoing de-escalation efforts. But tensions between Iran and Israel are rising, as the new Israeli government seeks to limit Iran’s nuclear and military ambitions, by launching a drone attack on a weapons production facility in Isfahan.

To examine these issues, an ‘Arab Gulf States Institute In Washington’ webinar moderated by Ambassador William Roebuck (Executive Vice President, AGSIW) discussed the turbulent current state of crisis in Iran in the aftermath of the recent protests with an panel of informed regional analysts.

### SUMMARY OF KEY COMMENTS FROM THE SPEAKERS

1. **SANAM VAKIL** (*Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Program, Chatham House*)
  - The recent protests which have somewhat subsided but still alive, have been the most profound expression of dissent against the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).
  - On 11 February, when the IRI celebrated the 44<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, it was seen as crucial that the regime should declare that it had achieved full victory over its critics – although hollow and quite with foundation.
  - Indeed, the past 5-6 months have placed on full display the depth of popular anger and despair with the regime.
  - But the state is strong and without any hesitation for resorting to violence. Indeed, elite unity to be as coercive as necessary, has been its hallmark and it is a mistake to assume that this will change any time soon so long as they remain unified.

- Nonetheless, we are likely to see more protests and the next round will no doubt show the next level of popular mobilization. As the state continues to push back.
- Hence, in light of the IRI's declining legitimacy with some evidence of factional fighting within the Deep State (between conservatives and neo-conservatives), the onus is on the Iranian people to build the needed capacity and organization for taking matters forward.

## 2. **ALI ALFONEH** (*Senior Fellow, AGSIW*)

- In Iran, people are protesting for 2 reasons,
  - 1, Economic reasons
  - 2. Political reasons
- Since the first major protests against the Islamic regime in June 1981, there have been a total of 7 major protests of which 4 were for economic reasons and 3 were political (e.g., like the recent protests that were sparked in the aftermath of the killing of Mahsa Amini by the 'Morality Police').
- These protests are significant for 3 reasons:
  - 1. Previous local protests have turned to country wide ones aided by modern technology and social media.
  - 2. Protests have become more protracted – something that is dangerous for the regime.
  - 3. Protests have become more violent. In the recent protests some 590 protesters and some 73 regime officials have been killed.
- More than half of the protesters killed have been in Kurdistan and Baluchistan provinces (with ethnic and sectarian implications).
- Also, use of gunfire has been introduced to the equation given that government personnel were killed by gunshots in Kurdistan and Baluchistan.
- The 2022-23 protests were supported by the middle classes. Average age of protesters was 15! – a recipe for future trouble for the Islamic regime.
- For its part, before turning to violence and repression, the regime had tried with no avail to somehow indulge the people - e.g., IRGC publications attacked the Morality Police for its excessive behaviours and the like. But by resorting to acts of shooting the protesters, the regime has now supervised the most violent protests in Iranian history. The IRI has tried to justify its actions by suggesting as the Supreme Leader has done that “all protesters are lackeys of foreigners and agents of foreign intelligence organizations”.
- It needs to be borne in mind that unlike the Shah's regime where everything was hinged on one individual, the IRI is more institutionalized and as such much more durable.

3. **MOHAMMED AL SULAMI** (*Founder and President, International Institute for Iranian Studies, Rasanah*)

- Actions against the regime have crossed a number of red lines.
- Chants of 'death to the dictator' and 'death to Khamenei' were followed up by the burning of Khomeini's home in the town of Khomein which carried with it a huge symbolic message.
- Another major red line that was crossed was the act of burning and destroying pictures and statues of Ghassem Soleimani who was thought to have been a popular figure amongst different layers of Iranian society.
- The final important red lines that was crossed were the attack of individual mullahs and resort to 'knocking off their turbans' along with the burning of the Iranian flag with the Islamic insignia in events such as the world cup and the like.
- As such, the protests of the past 6 months have been very different to those of 1999 and 2009. They were also different to the more recent protests of 2021 which were manifested mainly by low-income suffering people for economic reasons.
- In the final analysis, it can be said that the recent protests had implications that went beyond just the issue of Hijab or the dress code.
- It is a fact that there is no going back to the status quo ante. This is exacerbated by the fact that the political cohesion amongst the regime elite is fractured (e.g., recent statements by the likes of Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mohammad Khatami).

