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A Year of Protests in Iran: Situation Assessment

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The wave of protests that erupted in December 2017-January 2018 in dozens of cities in Iran ebbed after about two weeks, but continued – albeit with less intensity and on a smaller scale – throughout the year. The continuation of the protests reflects the intensity of public frustration that has grown against the background of a deteriorating economic situation and the widening gap between the public and the regime; it is further fed by the citizens’ growing distrust of the political establishment and its failure to provide solutions for their distress. Looking ahead, the deterioration of the economic situation, together with the fundamental problems of the Islamic Republic, contain potential for a future protest movement. However, whether such a movement will become a real threat to stability depends on the regime’s ability to overcome its basic weaknesses, to unite the middle class with the workers, to improve organization at a national level, and to raise political demands that undermine the very existence of the Islamic regime. Iran has faced considerable economic challenges in the past. Over the years the public has been able to adjust to difficult situations, and the regime still has the means to suppress any protests that show signs of spreading. At this stage, it appears that the regime is unable to prevent the continuation of protest, but at the same time, the demonstrators are unable to undermine the foundations of the regime.

The wave of protests that erupted in December 2017-January 2018 in dozens of cities in Iran ebbed after about two weeks, but continued – albeit with less intensity and on a smaller scale – throughout the year. Since early 2018 there have been demonstrations and strikes all over the country, with most protesting the worsening financial crisis, the cost of living, workers not being paid, and the collapse of pension funds. Among the protesters were thousands of truck drivers who were angry at their terms of employment; traders in the Tehran bazaar, who were protesting the ongoing decline in the value of the rial; teachers, who asked for a 20 percent pay rise and the release of some the leaders of their trade union who were arrested during demonstrations; workers at two factories in Khuzestan Province in southwest Iran – a sugar factory in the town of Shush and a steel factory in the town of Ahvaz - complaining about having their wages withheld.

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between the public and the regime; it is further fed by the citizens' growing distrust of the political establishment and its failure to provide solutions for their distress. Even before the renewed economic sanctions came into force in August and November 2018, the foreign currency crisis deteriorated, inflation accelerated, and foreign investments were affected. In November, the Iranian Central Bank estimated inflation at 18.4 percent, and according to the International Monetary Fund, inflation in Iran in 2019 is expected to exceed 34 percent. The rate of unemployment, which already stands at 12 percent (and over 40 percent among young university graduates), is also expected to rise following the steep decline in economic growth and the flow of foreign investment. In August 2018, Minister of Labor and Welfare Ali Rabeie estimated that in the wake of the new sanctions and the closure of many factories, approximately one million Iranians would lose their jobs.

The considerable drop in the value of the currency and the rise in inflation oblige the government to compensate the citizens for the dramatic erosion in their purchasing power. In the final weeks before submitting the budget proposal for the new Iranian year, representatives of the government and the Majlis have held discussions in order to examine the extent of this compensation, particularly for society's weaker segments. In face of political pressure to compensate workers, the government will apparently have to agree to pay increases of about 20 percent, but even this will not fully make up for rising prices. The situation of the middle classes may be even more difficult, because unlike the weaker sectors, they will not be compensated with allowances and will have to bear most of the economic burden.

Public responses to the renewal of the sanctions, as reflected on social media, express growing fears of a greater economic crisis. As with the reactions to previous sanctions, the public response expresses reservations about the very fact of using sanctions to achieve political objectives and impose Western edicts on Iran. Many Iranians reject the contention of the US administration that the purpose of the sanctions is first and foremost to hurt the regime, and stress that the effects are felt most keenly by ordinary citizens, whose ability to deal with the sanctions is significantly less than that of the regime's senior officials. However, opinions among the public are divided regarding who is responsible for the current situation. While many blame the US administration, and particularly President Trump, for their plight, others direct most of the blame toward the Iranian government, which they think is not doing enough to ease their grievances.

At the same time there are signs of growing despair among the public, particularly given the dashed expectations of economic improvement that emerged after the nuclear agreement was reached. At a recent conference at Tehran University, reformist activist and journalist Abbas Abdi referred to opinion polls that chart the level of public despair.

Some 85 percent of respondents said they had lost hope in their future and in the chance that the Iranian government would resolve the crisis. Surveys also show the growing alienation between the public and the regime and clerics. This is seen, for example, in accelerating rates of secularism in Iranian society. About 50 percent of people surveyed say they do not fast on Ramadan.

While the severe economic crisis and the widening gap between citizens - particularly the young - and the establishment continue to feed the protests, the protest movement still suffers from a number of important weaknesses. First, the protests are random and disconnected. Most demonstrations and strikes die down after a number of days or weeks, whether due to partial acquiescence to the demands by the authorities, or as a result of limited use of force and arrests.

Second, most of the protests are localized. There is no national leadership, and there are no signs of coordination or even cooperation between the various sectors taking part in the demonstrations (women, workers, teachers, bazaar traders, and so on).

Third, most of the protests are very limited in scope. A series of demonstrations organized in early 2018, such as women objecting to mandatory hijab, and violent clashes between the security forces and members of the Sufi Nematollah Gonabadi order created the impression that the barrier of fear of the regime was breached, and that there was a possibility of more widespread civil disobedience. However, most of the protests died down quickly and the majority of current demonstrations involve at most a few hundred or thousand workers.

Fourth, the protests still have a large economic character. They usually start with specific economic and employment-related demands, although in some cases criticisms of the regime are also heard. It appears that the purpose is to achieve limited economic objectives, rather than political aims.

Fifth, the urban middle class, considered the backbone of any movements for political and social change in Iran, are at this stage still outside the cycle of protest. And not only are most of the protests organized by workers, but these are mainly workers who have, in a way unusual for Iran, managed to organize within independent trade unions, such as the teachers and the employees of the Haft Tapeh sugar factory. These are isolated cases, because the Iranian authorities ban the activities of independent trade unions, and only permit official “Islamic” unions, which operate under state patronage and with the employers’ approval. The independent trade unions help some workers organize and protest, but this is a fairly atypical phenomenon.

Sixth, the Iranian regime still has considerable and effective powers to suppress opposition. Demonstrations that became violent were crushed fairly quickly by the law enforcement bodies, without the need to involve the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. As in the past, the regime has also benefited from the ability to deflect at least part of any public criticism toward the government, and present the President as responsible for the economic crisis.

In conclusion, the deterioration of the economic situation, together with the fundamental problems of the Islamic Republic, contain potential for a future protest movement. However, whether such a movement will become a real threat to stability depends on the regime's ability to overcome its basic weaknesses, to unite the middle class with the workers, to improve organization at a national level, and to raise political demands that undermine the very existence of the Islamic regime. Iran has faced considerable economic challenges in the past. Over the years the public has been able to adjust to difficult situations, and the regime still has the means to suppress any protests that show signs of spreading. At this stage, it appears that the regime is unable to prevent the continuation of protest, but at the same time, the demonstrators are unable to undermine the foundations of the regime.