Iran’s Protests and the Threat to Domestic Stability

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THE ISSUE

As protests surge in Iraq and Lebanon, the Iranian regime also has to deal with its own protest movement. Since late 2017, there have been hundreds of protests in Iran per month about such issues as deteriorating economic conditions, environmental degradation, and political grievances. However, these protests are unlikely to threaten regime survival—at least for now. The Iranian protest movement is currently too decentralized and Iranian security forces are likely too strong to overthrow the regime. Still, the litany of grievances in Iran suggest that the regime will have to deal with persistent domestic discontent.

Weeks of mass demonstrations have engulfed Lebanon and Iraq, two countries where Iran wields significant influence. On October 29, 2019, for example, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned following massive protests. In Iraq, violent demonstrations erupted as protesters complained about poor economic conditions, the government’s failure to deliver adequate public services, and Iran’s influence in the country.

Even before the Lebanese and Iraqi protests began, domestic unrest within Iran prompted many observers to predict that the regime was on the verge of collapse. As former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton tweeted, “With the recent protests in #Iran, we can see the danger that the regime is in.” Representative Gerry Connolly (D-VA) remarked that “protests throughout Iran suggest that clerical rule’s days are numbered. Iranians want more freedom.” Citing unnamed senior U.S. government officials, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz noted that U.S. policymakers “believe there is now a rare opportunity to bring about the collapse of the Iranian regime.”

Not to be outdone, Trump adviser Rudolph Giuliani predicted that “the people of Iran obviously have had enough. The sanctions are working. The currency is going to nothing. . . . these are the kinds of conditions that lead to successful revolutions.”

In light of these views and the broader protests in countries like Iraq and Lebanon, this CSIS brief asks two main questions. What types of grievances have caused Iranian protests? Does the current protest movement represent a veritable threat to the regime? To answer these questions, this brief utilizes qualitative and quantitative information. It compiles a list of major Iranian protests since the 1890s and assesses factors that contributed to the outbreak of protests. In addition, it utilizes the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project to compile and analyze over 4,200 protests from January 2018 through October 2019.

In analyzing the data, this brief makes several arguments. First, while protests in Iran are not new, the number and breadth of protests today are significant compared to previous years. Since late 2017, there have been hundreds of small protests per month led by a range of networks
PROTEST DESCRIPTION

TOBACCO PROTESTS (1890-1892)
In 1890, Nasir al-Din Shah granted a monopoly over the purchase, sale, and export of tobacco grown in Iran to a British subject. But merchants and others whose livelihoods depended on the tobacco business were furious. Protests erupted across cities in an alliance that encompassed the bazaar (merchant class) and ulema (Muslim leaders).

CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION (1905-1911)
Riots initially broke out when merchants raised the price of sugar in the face of rising international prices. Mullahs and merchants then demanded reforms. The revolution led to the establishment of a parliament during the Qajar dynasty.

MOSSADEQ PROTESTS AND OVERTHROW (1953)
Protests broke out across Iran against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was overthrown in a coup with support from the United Kingdom and United States. General Fazlollah Zahedi became prime minister and the Shah returned from temporary exile.

KHORDAD UPRISING (1963)
Protests in Iran erupted in June following the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini after his denouncement of Iranian Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Israel.

QUM PROTESTS (1975)
Protests led by conservative Shia occurred in the shrine city of Qum against the government and its progressive policies. They shouted anti-government slogans as they smashed windows and doors and used sticks, stones, and clubs to attack policemen.

ISLAMIC REVOLUTION (1978-1979)
A popular uprising, with massive protests, that led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the replacement of his government with an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Khomeini.

From August 1991 to August 1994, several protests occurred in cities like Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Mashhad, Ghazvin, and Tabriz. Many of the protests were sparked by urban squatters who were angered by municipal authorities' attempts to evict them and destroy their dwellings.

STUDENT PROTESTS (1999)
Protests erupted in July following the regime's closure of the reformist newspaper Salam. Police raids sparked six days of demonstrations and rioting throughout the country, during which police killed several people, wounded hundreds of others, and arrested over a thousand individuals.

GREEN MOVEMENT (2009-2010)
Protests occurred following the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential election results (a disputed victory by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and in support of opposition candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

ARAB SPRING PROTESTS (2011-2012)
Following a groundswell of protests across the Arab world during the “Arab Spring,” the Green Movement organized protests beginning in February 2011. Sporadic protests continued into 2012 but were eventually crushed by the regime.

DEY PROTESTS (2017-2018)
Protests arose in cities throughout Iran beginning in December 2017 and continuing into 2018. The first one took place in Mashhad, Iran’s second-largest city, led by protesters initially focused on economic grievances. As the protests spread, however, their scope expanded to include opposition to the regime and concerns about corruption, environmental degradation, and other issues.

Figure 1: Examples of Historical Iranian Protests
forces are strong. The capabilities of Iran’s police forces have improved since the 2009 Green Movement, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij can act as surge forces if protests intensify and spread.

The rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first examines Iran’s history of protests and domestic unrest. The second section analyzes recent Iranian protests. The third assesses the regime’s response, including Iran’s efforts to strengthen its security forces. And the fourth section highlights Iranian weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

PATTERNS OF GRIEVANCE AND UNREST

Iran has a robust history of protests that have tested the state. As one history of Iranian protests concluded, “The topics of revolution and resistance are central to the history of the modern Muslim world, and especially to Iran.” As Figure 1 highlights, there have been a wide range of protests in Iran’s history, which have been caused by economic, political, environmental, and other grievances. In virtually all of these cases, more than one factor triggered the protests.

First, economic grievances have triggered the vast majority of protests in Iran, a trend which has historical precedents in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These grievances frequently include rising unemployment, increasing prices of basic commodities, growing inflation, or a recession. For example, the tobacco protests in 1890 occurred in part because Nasir al-Din Shah granted a monopoly over the purchase, sale, and export of tobacco in Iran to a British subject. Nationalism and a resentment of British domination also fueled the protests. Demonstrations erupted in Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz, and other locations. Over a decade later, riots broke out in Tehran when merchants raised the price of sugar during the constitutional revolution, leading merchants and mullahs to push for reforms. In recent history, the 2017 Dey Protests were sparked, at least initially, by frustration with poor economic conditions. The protests then expanded to include opposition to the regime and concerns about corruption, environmental degradation, and other issues.

Second, some protests also occurred because of political grievances, such as the passage of unpopular policies or programs, arrests of political leaders, anger at government corruption, or real or perceived fraudulent elections. The Khordad uprising in 1963 occurred following the arrest of Ayatollah Khomeini after his denouncement of the Shah and Israel. In 1999, students protested the closure of a reformist newspaper and a subsequent police raid against a student dormitory in what became known as the 18th of Tir and Kuye Deneshgah Disaster. In 2009, the Green Movement was initially triggered by concerns about election-rigging following the disputed victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the defeat of Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Finally, the Dey Protests—which, as discussed above, began in December 2017 as a reaction to economic concerns—quickly evolved into a wide-ranging political opposition movement. They became significantly more anti-regime than the reform-minded Green Movement, with chants of “death to the dictator” and “we will die, we will die, we will take back Iran” becoming common. Still, both the Green Movement and Dey Protests lacked significant organization, limiting the threat posed to the regime.

Third, protests have increasingly been motivated by environmental grievances, including water and food shortages. Since the mid-2000s, these grievances have been largely water-related, as major rivers and lakes in Isfahan, East Azerbaijan, and Ahvaz have dried up due to a combination of climate change and wasteful irrigation practices. The shrinking of Lake Urmia in particular sparked a series of violent protests in the city of Tabriz between 2010-2011. Meanwhile, when Tehran imposed water use bans on the agricultural sector in 2013 as a result of water shortages, farmers took to the streets to complain about unequal water distribution practices. Not all environmental protests have been water-specific, however. In early 2017 and during the Dey Protests, some individuals protested about poor infrastructure planning that caused marshes to dry up, as well as higher levels of air pollution—including in Ahvaz, designated by the World Health Organization as the most polluted city in the world.

Fourth, there were a range of other protests motivated in part by religious, cultural, and other grievances. The 1979 revolution was a popular uprising that led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and the replacement of his government with an Islamic republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. Religious leaders were deeply involved in several other demonstrations, such as the tobacco protests and the Constitutional Revolution.

While protests have occurred with some frequency, revolutions—which lead to regime change—have been rare in Iran and other countries. One of the challenges in starting a revolution is what economist Mancur Olson
termed the "collective action problem." Individuals—including would-be revolutionaries—value numerous goods that can be produced only through collective action. Collective goods are non-excludable; everyone can take advantage of them, regardless of whether they play a role in securing the good. If a group or network overthrows an oppressive government, for example, many people may benefit. Yet individuals also value purely personal goods, such as the time, opportunity cost, and risk involved in acting collectively. In other words, the benefits of collective action are often public, while the costs are private. Under these circumstances, every person’s best move is to stay home and let someone else work for the public benefit. The injury or death of participants (and sometimes their friends, family members, and neighbors), financial difficulties, unpleasantness of living a clandestine lifestyle, and forced relocation dissuade many people from participating in the initial stages of a revolution. The central implication of the collective action paradigm is that activists face tremendous obstacles in launching revolutions—let alone successfully overthrowing a regime.

In addition to the collective action problem, research on revolutions indicates that several conditions need to be in place for a revolution to occur: a weak and economically uncompetitive state, poor or co-optable security forces, a divided internal elite, popular social groups that are mobilized to protest the regime, and an ideology that justifies rebellion against the state. The absence of many of these factors helps explain why most protests in Iran have not led to revolutions.

THE CONTOURS OF RECENT PROTESTS

This section examines the over 4,200 protests that took place after the conclusion of the Dey Protests, from January 2018 through October 2019. The data used here were drawn primarily from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (ACLED), corroborated and updated as necessary using primary sources as well as Iranian and Western media reporting on individual protest events.

Recent protests occurred in nearly every province of the country, as illustrated in Figure 2. Many of the geographic areas in Figure 2 that fall outside of the heat area are sparsely populated, further highlighting the pervasiveness of the protests. Though generally more diffuse and rural than the Green Movement, current demonstrations have been particularly intense in Tehran and cities like Isfahan and Ahvaz. Motivations for current protests have nearly always fallen into one or more of the categories highlighted in the previous section: economic, which includes labor-related protests and comprises the majority of cases.

![Figure 2: Heat Map of Protests in Iran, January 2018 to October 2019](https://www.acleddata.com)
studied here; political, including anti-regime and anti-West demonstrations; environmental; and religious, cultural, and other grievances. As noted in the previous section, a combination of these factors fueled most protests. However, the protests generally erupted because of local issues and lacked centralized leadership and cohesion.

**Economic Grievances:** The Dey Protests served as a catalyst for many Iranians dissatisfied with their economic situation. As a result, 72 percent of demonstrations since January 2018 were fueled by economic grievances. \(^{18}\) Significant motivations include labor concerns (such as unpaid wages, factory closures, job insecurity, and poor working conditions) and issues related to the devaluation of the rial (Iran’s currency), high rates of inflation, and Iranian companies defrauding their investors. Figure 3 depicts a timeline of these protests.

The largest non-labor related protest movement during this time period was the so-called "bazaari" protests, which took place in Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz in late June 2018. These protests were carried out by urban merchants (or bazaaris) who closed their shops and took to the streets after the value of the rial reached a new low of 90,000 rials to one dollar on June 24, 2018. \(^{19}\) The bazaari protests comprised one of the largest protests in Tehran since 2012, when sanctions crippled the Iranian economy. \(^{20}\) Though the police clamped down on the 2018 bazaari demonstrations, some hard-liners within the Iranian government used them as an opportunity to attack the Rouhani regime for failing to adequately address Iran’s economic situation. As a result, the parliament removed several senior officials, including Masoud Karbasian, the economic affairs and finance minister, and Valiollah Seif, the governor of the Central Bank. \(^{21}\)

On the labor front, there were over 2,500 protests from January 2018 to October 2019. \(^{22}\) Several notable protests included:

- On May 1, 2018 (International Labor Day), protesters marched in Tehran, Kordestan, Alborz, Isfahan, Khuzestan, Yazd, Gilan, Razavi Khorasan, and Ghazvin provinces to demand higher wages, better working conditions, and more protection after retirement. \(^{23}\) News outlets indicated that hundreds of people protested in Tehran alone, and the police arrested dozens of demonstrators across the country. \(^{24}\)

- In May and September 2018, thousands of Iranian truck drivers went on strike in over 240 towns and cities across Iran. \(^{25}\) Protesters were motivated by the high costs of fuel and spare parts, which compounded problems already caused by low wages and poor insurance benefits. \(^{26}\)

- On four separate occasions over the 2018-2019 period—in May 2018, November 2018, March 2019, and May 2019—the Coordinating Council of Teachers Syndicates in Iran encouraged protests, which resulted in sweeping teachers’ demonstrations across the country. \(^{27}\) These protests occurred in at least 55 cities and 16 provinces, as teachers decried low salaries, poor health insurance, and a lack of job security. Some

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**Figure 3: Number of Economic Protests by Month, January 2018 to October 2019**

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), https://www.acleddata.com
also demanded the right to unionize and insisted that the Iranian regime release teachers detained in previous strikes.\(^{28}\)

The final economic protests of note were those related to fraud, of which there were 409 in 36 different cities between January 2018 and October 2019. The primary target of these protests were Iran’s private financial firms, which are owned and managed by individuals with links to religious institutions and the IRGC.\(^ {29}\) These firms—including the Caspian Credit Institution and Samen al-Hujaj—operated under limited regulation and accountability, and their investments in unprofitable real-estate development ventures, as well as a culture of corruption, caused millions of Iranians to lose their savings.\(^ {30}\) In April-May 2018 and January-February 2019, defrauded consumers took to the streets en masse to demand repayment.

**Political Grievances:** In examining Iran’s demonstrations since the Dey Protests, nearly 450 were in part political in nature. Some involved political grievances with the regime, including concerns about corruption. The majority of protesters in this category demanded the release of political prisoners, including journalists and activists who were arrested in previous protests. Other demonstrations were against the United States and Israel or in support of the regime against its domestic opponents.\(^ {31}\) On Quds Day (May 31, 2019), for example, Iranians in at least 220 cities across the country protested in support of Palestine and in opposition to the U.S.-led Middle East peace plan.\(^ {32}\) Several high-ranking government officials attended the rally in Tehran, where protesters set fire to American and Israeli flags and effigies of President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.\(^ {33}\) Previous anti-Western protests were smaller and reactive, including in response to U.S. government actions like its withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018 and President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2017.

**Environmental Grievances:** There were 261 environmental protests between January 2018 and October 2019, the majority of which were water related.\(^ {34}\) Figure 4 shows the ebb and flow of these protests over time. While there were not nearly as many environmental protests as economic ones, they were widespread and took place in over 90 cities and towns.\(^ {35}\)

There were several spikes in the data. The first took place in April 2018 when farmers across Iran protested against the Iranian government’s inability to provide water for its citizens during a period of sustained drought. Another wave of protests was centered in Khuzestan and Bushehr provinces in June and July of 2018, with demonstrations against water shortages, pollution, and low water quality.\(^ {36}\) There were other protests concentrated in Isfahan Province in November 2018 when Isfahan farmers protested government mismanagement of water pipelines for irrigation which led to water shortages across the province. While these protests were ongoing, the Iranian government cancelled funding for all water projects in Isfahan in the following year’s budget because of “financial

**Figure 4: Number of Water-Related Protests by Month**

limitations,” which led to an increase in protest activity, as well as the resignation of all 18 members of parliament from Isfahan Province. In March 2019, devastating flooding in southwestern Iran—particularly in Khuzestan Province—resulted in another wide-ranging series of protests against government mismanagement of the crisis. Finally, farmers across multiple provinces again protested against continuing water shortages in June and July 2019. As discussed above, water-related protests are by no means unprecedented in Iran. However, the combination of severe drought conditions (with 2017 being the country’s driest year in over 67 years) and excessive dam construction by the IRGC exacerbated tensions.

**Other Grievances:** Finally, some Iranians protested in part because of cultural, religious, and other concerns. While there were only around 55 unique events between January 2018 and October 2019 caused by cultural and religious grievances, there were two case studies that represented potential flashpoints.

One was the so-called “headscarf protests,” often referred to as White Wednesdays. Led by individuals like Masih Alinejad and Vida Movahedi, these individuals opposed Iran’s laws requiring women to wear the hijab (or modest dress, including headscarves) for religious reasons. Though protests against the hijab have taken place sporadically across Iran since the 1979 revolution, the latest wave began in December 2017.

A second cycle of protests took place in Khuzestan Province. Iranian Arabs demonstrated in March 2018 against an Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) television show for children which failed to include Arabs in a segment about Iran’s ethnic minorities. Ethnic discontent in Khuzestan has been growing for some time, with Arabs in the region increasingly vocal about the Iranian government’s “policies of poverty, marginalization, exclusion, unemployment, and deprivation.” The protests in Ahvaz reflected these sentiments, moving beyond their initial IRIB target to include complaints of inadequate Arabic-language education and media more broadly, as well as high rates of Arab unemployment in the region.

**STATE RESPONSE**

Iran responded to these protests by trying to strengthen its security forces and develop more effective technological capabilities. Regimes have historically used a range of tools to prevent or respond to protests, from coercion (such as arresting individuals) to cooption (such as buying citizen loyalty). While President Rouhani attempted some cooption after the Dey Protests by acknowledging the legitimacy of certain protestor grievances, Iranian leaders have frequently resorted to coercive instruments to defuse unrest.

**Strengthening the Security Forces:** The regime took steps to improve the capabilities of the police and other security forces following the Green Movement in 2009 and subsequent protests. As the first line of defense against protesters, the police—officially called the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (or NAJA)—play an important role in regime stability. The regime expanded the number of police stations and provided additional capabilities like armored vehicles, water spray for crowd control, and heavy weapons to deter or respond to riots. The regime also constructed new police headquarters, offices, and stations throughout the country. In Tehran alone, the government created more than 400 patrolling units in 375 municipal neighborhoods. The regime dramatically expanded the Intelligence and Public Security Police (polis-e ettelaat va amniyat-e omumi, or PAVA). It gathers intelligence in cities, towns, and neighborhoods through local informant networks (known as mokhber-e mahhali); identifies and penetrates protest movements; and arrests those that threaten the regime.

The regime also provided more resources to the police to deal with domestic instability. In 2018, the Iranian Parliament increased the NAJA’s budget by over 200 percent, including a 400 percent increase for weapons and armaments following the 2018 Dey Protests. In addition, Iranian police today are better organized, trained, and equipped than they were a decade ago. They also have more robust human and signals intelligence collection capabilities. The increased capabilities appear to have improved police performance, since the regime has generally not deployed militarized Basij units or IRGC forces in the most recent rounds of protests. The absence of the Basij and IRGC might also suggest that the protests have been relatively small, contained, and disorganized.

Limited opinion polling in Iran also indicates that the public believes the police have been relatively fair in dealing with protesters. About 66 percent of Iranians surveyed thought that the police handled the 2017-2018 protests “very well” or “somewhat well,” according to one poll.

**Improving Technology and Cyber Capabilities:** The 2009 protesters were able to leverage social media to communicate, organize, and criticize the regime. But the Iranian government studied the communication
methods of protesters after the Green Movement dispersed and cracked down on the use of the internet and social media in subsequent protests. The NAJA established the Cyberspace Police (polis-e faza-ye towlid va tabadol-e ettelaat, or FATA) in 2011 to monitor online content, investigate cybercrimes like financial scams and violations of privacy, and crack down on online activists and banned content. In October 2012, for example, FATA officers arrested Sattar Beheshti, who had written critical articles about the regime in his blog Magalh 91. FATA had been monitoring his internet and social media activity, including his criticism of Ayatollah Khamenei and other senior government officials for corruption, human rights abuses, and poor policy decision. On November 3, 2012, Beheshti was killed while in police custody.49

More broadly, the Iranian regime has increased its use of cameras, improved facial recognition technology to identify protesters, conducted extensive media censorship inside the country, and attempted to create a relatively closed system of information. The regime banned Viber, the messaging app Telegram, and the photo-sharing platform Instagram in an effort to undermine the ability of protesters to communicate, organize, and distribute information. Regime security forces also periodically cut off mobile lines and temporarily banned other popular social media applications during protests in some areas.50 In early 2018, at the height of anti-government protests, the Iranian regime occasionally blocked access to foreign data and servers.51 The government has also jammed satellite television stations. During the 2013 presidential elections, the government jammed satellite channels like BBC Persian and Voice of America, particularly on election day.52 The police and the Basij militia have additionally combated the use of satellite television by confiscating satellite equipment and arresting those caught in possession of it.53

Tehran also uses firewalls and other preventive technologies to block domestic access to specific sites in an effort to eventually move all Iranian traffic to a “National Information Network,” or “halal internet,” that can be more easily censored, monitored, and defended from foreign activity and culture.54 The government prevents public access to tens of thousands of websites, including those run by international news sources, Iranian opposition groups, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. The Iranian regime also blocks websites if they diverge from official doctrine regarding Islam, encourage protests, or differ from major domestic or international policies.55 The government has completely blocked Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Google, in addition to major blog-hosting platforms like WordPress, Blogspot, and Blogger.

WEAKNESSES AND VULNERABILITIES

Though the current protest movement does not pose a serious threat to the regime—at least not yet—there are weaknesses and vulnerabilities within Iran caused by local grievances. Several of the factors that have caused protests in the past—such as economic, political, environmental, and cultural grievances—are significant and unlikely to improve in the near future. Economic conditions remain bleak because of the U.S. economic sanctions and regime mismanagement. Real GDP growth plummeted to -3.9 percent in 2018 and an estimated -6 percent in 2019.56 The value of the rial plummeted from 32,000 to the dollar at the time of the nuclear deal to 154,000 to the dollar on the unofficial market by May 7, 2019.57 By August 2019, the rial was trading at 116,500 to the dollar, along with a monthly inflation rate of 40 percent, national unemployment around 12 percent, and youth unemployment around 25 percent.58 There are also deep political and social divisions in the country.59

The factors that have caused protests in the past are significant and unlikely to improve in the near future.

According to one poll, there is significant frustration with current conditions. Approximately 95 percent of Iranian respondents said that “the government should do more to keep the price of food products from increasing.” Eighty-one percent agreed that “the government should compensate people who lost money when some financial institutions failed.” More generally, almost three quarters believed that “the government is not doing enough” to help the poor or “farmers who are suffering due to the drought.” In addition, 96 percent believed that the government should do more to fight corruption.60

Along with U.S. sanctions, these factors will continue to create the conditions for protests in the country, though the government’s coercive measures will likely prevent regime change. Still, the United States can better exploit holes in Iran’s information crackdown to better
allow Iranians to air their grievances. While the regime blocked Telegram, for example, many Iranians use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to regain access.61 The U.S. State Department’s Internet Freedom program—which seeks to counter the efforts of authoritarian regimes like Iran to censor, monitor, and control the internet—has had some success in helping individuals bypass firewalls by using tools and software like Tor, a website which enables anonymous communication.62 These holes make Iran vulnerable to information campaigns, whether by overt public diplomacy efforts or covert, state-sponsored political warfare.

The United States should expand these types of programs. It should also support other information sources for Iranians at home and abroad, particularly those that highlight issues of interest to protesters (including the environment, human rights, and religious or cultural flashpoints). While satellite dishes are illegal within Iran, at least 70 percent of the population owns them and uses them to stream satellite channels from abroad.63 Historically, this content has been created and broadcast by large Western media corporations, such as BBC Persian and Voice of America’s Persian News Network. In recent years, however, their popularity has been outstripped by smaller, highly targeted networks, often established by Iranians in exile.64 The most popular of these is Manoto TV, a London-based network with creative programming designed to appeal to younger generations, which claimed 40 million viewers in 2018.65

Overall, the persistence of protests in Iran and other countries in the region—such as Lebanon and Iraq—suggests that a major component of U.S. competition with Iran should be ideological. After all, the U.S. information campaign against the Soviet Union—which included such platforms and systems as Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and the U.S. Information Agency—was critical during the Cold War. The United States’ greatest strengths—its support of democratic principles, open markets, and free press—are also Iran’s most significant weaknesses. Iran’s authoritarian political system and attempt to control access to information, including through state-run media, make it vulnerable to a U.S. and Western information campaign.

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ENDNOTES


5. On ACLED see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); https://www.acleddata.com.


7. See, for example, a similar list of factors for revolutions in Charles Kurzman, The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6.


23. Ibid.


30. Fassihi and Fitch, “The Spark Behind Iran’s Unrest.”


32. Ibid.


44. Katzman, “Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options.”


53. Saeid Golkar, “Manipulated Society: Paralyzing the Masses in Post-Revolutionary Iran.”


58. Vahdat and Gambrell, “Iran Moves to Strike 4 Zeros from Its Battered Currency.”