

January 1st, 2018

Immediate Intelligence Bulletin

Is Iran Approaching a Crucial Junction?

Information:

Public protests which began in the city of Mashhad on December 28, 2017 have ignited a wave of mass demonstrations in different cities in Iran including in Tehran.

To date, reportedly 12 people have been killed during the demonstrations and hundreds arrested.

Videos show protesters attacking governmental facilities and buildings.

According to the Iranian Minister of Interior Affairs, Qasim Mohammad Jalal al-Araji, armed militants have tried to attack police and military bases.

According to sources affiliated with the Iranian opposition based outside of Iran, the public protests are expanding and gaining momentum.

In response to the demonstrations, the Iranian Mullah regime has deployed the anti-riot units of the [Basij](#) force (The Basij is an oppressive paramilitary police force in charge of public order, morality, etc. who subdued the 2009 protests), has limited access to social media platforms, and temporarily blocked access to the internet and communication platforms.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has officially responded by saying “people are entitled to protest yet it must be done within the frame of law.”

To date Iran's Supreme Leader, 'Ali Khamenei has remained silent.

Analysis:

There are similarities - yet, some distinct differences, between this eruption of demonstrations and previous ones.

The current burst of discontent and frustration is fueled by the same frustrations which ignited previous large-scale protests - including the ones that followed the elections in June 2009. People are suffocated by economic and societal challenges and are infuriated with governmental corruption and the suppression of individual rights. The lifting of the sanctions on Iran, because of The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), generated the expectation among the public for a tangible improvement of the Iranian economy, which would positively impact Iranians everyday

life. Those expectations were not met. Thus, the sentiments of disappointment and frustration deepened.

The slogans chanted by protesters today - such as "*Death to the Dictator*" or "*Down with the Regime*" have also been expressed in previous demonstrations. As have the resentments of Iranians to the aggressive regional policy of the Mullah regime. For example, in 2009 they also chanted "*We will die for Iran, not Lebanon or Gaza.*" This growing criticism is further fueled by the fact that the regime allocates significant resources – financial and other - to support its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip. That anger is further emphasized this time due to the fact that - according official Iranian sources - more than 2,000 Iranian soldiers and officers have been killed to save Assad in the war in Syria and fighting ISIS in Iraq.

Some aspects of current protest are different from the demonstrations in 2009. One difference is the location of the outbreak of the demonstrations and the profile of the demonstrators. While in 2009, the demonstrators were primarily young people and the demonstrations were concentrated primarily in Teheran - this time the demonstrations began first in the city of Mashhad – the home of the Iranian Supreme Leader, 'Ali Khamenei, a more conservative and religious community, which has historically been aligned with the Islamist regime. Moreover, the protests have spread rapidly and widely in different parts of Iran - including in areas, and among populations, and that were not a stage for the 2009 protests. Another factor which is different than 2009 is the open and vocal support for the demonstrators and demonstrations that has been expressed by the US President since the outbreak of events.

Evaluation:

In my evaluation, the current protests present a serious potential threat to the Mullah regime.

I base that evaluation on the following current factors:

The regime's response has been – to date - relatively restrained – specifically in comparison to its aggressive, immediate response during the 2009 demonstrations.

The Iranian President addressed the nation, acknowledged the people's challenges, and legitimized the right to protest - while the Supreme leader remains silent. That response may indicate that the regime has – as of now - made the evaluation that the current protest has the potential to pose a serious threat to the regime, therefore, it strives to contain the protests, enable the ventilation of people's frustrations and criticism in the hopes of avoiding a further escalation.

However, the regime faces a dilemma.

On the one hand, enabling the continuation of the protests provides the protesters with moral momentum, thus the protests are likely to expand and escalate. Like any other dictatorship, the Mullah regime uses fear and terror to oppress and suppress criticism and unrest. The continuation of the protests may result in the breach of the barrier of fear. That is what happened in Syria in 2011 and was a turning point generating a bloody war resulting in the disintegration of Syria (*on that matter see my article "[Syria: The Wall of Fear is Cracking](#)", March 2011*).

On the other hand, violently crushing the protests as they did in 2009 can backfire on the regime. The current US administration – different than President Obama’s administration who turned a blind eye to the brutal suppression of the 2009 protests - will likely take the opportunity to support the protests by - for example, imposing more sanctions on the regime.

Prediction:

It is likely that the regime will continue a sort of relatively self-restrained policy over the next few days, hoping that protests will die out.

However, it is likely that protests will deepen and expand over the next few days.

In that context, there is a significant factor that should be taken into consideration in the immediate time term - the weather in Tehran, Mashhad, and other major Iranian cities in Iran is expected to be quite mild over the coming days.

In my assessment, a further escalation of the situation in Iran is likely.

Iran seems to be approaching a crucial junction.

End Immediate Intelligence Bulletin

Avi Melamed

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A New Middle East Requires a New Understanding

Avi Melamed who serves as the [Salisbury Fellow of Intelligence and Middle East Affairs](#) for the [Eisenhower Institute](#) with offices at Gettysburg College and in Washington, DC, is an expert on the Current Affairs in the Arab and Muslim World Arab and their impact on Israel and the Middle East.

His expertise includes: The Arab Awakening and Regional Ramifications; Arab perspectives on Israel; Current Affairs in the Arab World - and their Impact on Israel; Emerging Challenges and Opportunities in the Middle East; Evolving Forces in the Region; the Gaza Strip; the Geostrategic Environment of the Middle East; the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Jerusalem; Roots and Ideology of Radical Islam; Terrorism; the War in Syria; the West Bank; and In Through the Chimney - A New Approach to Countering BDS.

Avi is a former Israeli Intelligence Official and Senior Official on Arab Affairs. In his decades of public service, Avi - an Israeli Jew who is fluent in Arabic, English and Hebrew, with a unique understanding of Arab society and culture - has held high-risk Government, Senior Advisory, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorist intelligence positions

in Arab cities and communities throughout the region – often in very sensitive times - on behalf of the Israeli government agencies.

As an Author, Educator, Strategic Intelligence Analyst, Avi Melamed educates current and future leaders around the world about Israel and the Middle East and trains them to be Media Literate Critical Thinkers who dialogue with reality and don't get sidetracked by concepts, narratives and theories.

He coauthored [Separate and Unequal: Israel's Rule in East Jerusalem](#) in 1999, and he wrote *Ubrusi: The Novel* in 2010. His newest book. Avi's newest book, [Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth](#), (also released as an audio book) *a GPS to help you navigate the dramatically changing Middle East* offers a unique insight into the Arab world, challenges widely-accepted perceptions, provides a guide to make sense of the events unfolding in the region, and offers an out of the box idea that could lead to a positive breakthrough in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

He is the Founder and Director of the Eisenhower Institute's "[Inside the Middle East – Intelligence Perspectives](#)" program designed to ensure that the next generation of policy makers and influencers will be knowledgeable about Israel and the Middle East and will apply methods of critical thinking regarding Middle East Affairs.

Avi provides intelligence analysis, briefings and tours to diplomats, Israeli and foreign policy makers, international media outlets and a wide variety of organizations and private clients on a range of Israel and Middle East affairs.

In the private sector Avi facilitates relationships between Israeli and international firms and potential partners in the Arab world.

He is also the founder and creator of Feenjan – Israel speaks Arabic, a non-profit initiative which presents contemporary Israeli society and culture to the Arab world in Arabic, and serves as an online platform for Israelis and Arabs to discover and discuss issues of common interest.

Avi has his finger on the pulse on the Arab world. With a proven record of foreseeing the evolution of events in the Middle East and their impact on a local and regional level.

Through all of his efforts, as an analyst, educator, entrepreneur, and writer, Avi is a bridge builder. He dedicates himself to enhancing the Arabic, English and Hebrew speaking audience's comprehensive understanding of the Middle East and of each other.

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