

The New York Times

The Interpreter

Max Fisher and Amanda Taub

January 5, 2018

Welcome to the Interpreter newsletter, by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, who write a column by the same name.

On our minds: The protests in Iran, Part II.

Earlier this week, we made a confession: We don't know enough about what's happening in Iran to reach any firm conclusions. So we told you the four big things we were watching for and why they mattered.

Now that there's a bit more information, Iran experts are weighing in. Here are some thoughtful, illuminating (and appropriately modest) insights we found helpful and wanted to pass along to you.

1. Thomas Erdbrink, Tehran bureau chief for The New York Times, explains the rural-to-urban migration changing the country's politics:

For decades, those living in Iran's provincial towns and villages were regarded as the backbone of the country's Islamic regime. They tended to be conservative, averse to change and pious followers of the sober Islamic lifestyle promoted by the state.

In less than a decade, all that has changed. A 14-year drought has emptied villages, with residents moving to nearby cities where they often struggle to find jobs. Access to satellite television and, more important, the mobile internet has widened their world.

2. Marc Lynch, a George Washington University political scientist, discusses lessons from the Arab Spring:

Protesters are racing the clock, though. Uprisings gain power from the unexpected, massive shock to the system. In Tunisia and Egypt, huge crowds stayed in the streets, creating irresistible pressures, which forced long-ruling presidents from power in less than three weeks. But it is difficult to sustain mobilization indefinitely. Initial optimism fades, nonviolence is difficult to keep up, differences in political aspirations emerge, and the power advantages of the state take their toll. Protesters have a relatively narrow window in which to

make the regime's survival appear impossible, to persuade the middle class and elites to support their cause, and to force an endgame.

3. Narges Bajoghli, a Brown University anthropologist, finds evidence that some viral videos of protests — which shaped our understanding of events — are forgeries produced by groups linked to the Revolutionary Guards:

Like media outlets established in the aftermath of the Green Movement, which emerged after the disputed 2009 presidential elections, Avant TV stems from the media wars at the heart of political factionalism both inside and outside Iran. After the large-scale protests in 2009, regime media producers recognized that they faced a crisis of legitimacy. The director of one of the main channels of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) told me in 2010, “We know we’ve lost a great deal of our audience to foreign satellite stations run by exiled Iranian communities. And our young people get their news and entertainment from social media outlets. State television is no longer the way. We need to figure out new ways to influence the narrative and bring the story back to our side.”

The tactic that producers developed was to move away from content solely made for state television — which potential audiences almost automatically consider regime propaganda — to creating small production studios that develop content not easily identifiable as pro-regime. These ad hoc production studios receive funding from the IRGC and the government's cultural budget, but they remain small and unidentifiable on purpose.

4. Arash Karami, a writer for Al Monitor, offers a compelling theory for behind-the-scenes power rivalries that helped spark protests:

It is possible what we are seeing in Iran is the result of internal battles within the government that has inadvertently or uncontrollably spilled out into the streets.

[Iranian President Hassan] Rouhani made the opening move in his budget speech and leaked details to public of what religious and IRGC institutions were getting in order to get the public's backing while also cutting off unsupervised expenditures and nepotism.

Whoever Rouhani pissed off, he clearly was based in Mashhad, where the protests started. This is why later Iran's NSC summoned Ayatollah Alamolhoda, a hard-line cleric, Friday prayer leader in Mashhad and one of the most powerful people in Iran's holiest city.

In his first statement since the protests, IRGC head made two telling statements, one was that he criticized those who look to the US to improve economy (i.e. Rouhani) and two, he hinted at former official being involved in protests.

That IRGC does not want a Western oriented economy is no surprise. What was surprising however was the reference to a "former official" being involved with protests, which many believe was a reference to [the previous president, Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad, who has not been quiet lately.

As Iranian journalist noted, Ahmadinejad doesn't have the clout to ignite such protests & IRGC knows this. It is more likely they will use these protests to silence Ahmadinejad & also push back against the Mashhad clan that has been flexing its muscles.

5. Emma Ashford, a foreign policy analyst at the CATO Institute, rejects American navel-gazing:

Iran's protests aren't about us: they're economic at heart, and rooted in long-running structural economic problems, which are only partly the result of sanctions.

[Ms. Ashford links to a Reuters story headlined "Crisis of expectations: Iran protests mean economic dilemma for government."]

Hey, So This Is Terrifying: North Korea Edition

We've argued that the gravest, scariest threat with North Korea isn't a deliberate war, which seems unlikely, but rather an accident or miscalculation that could set off an unintended war.

A big scoop in The Diplomat, an Asia-focused publication, has validated our concerns a little more than we'd like.

The story's authors — Ankit Panda and Dave Schmerler — report that one of North Korea's missile tests ended in a shocking accident. The missile failed mid-launch and crashed into the middle of one of North Korea's own cities, "causing considerable damage to a complex of industrial or agricultural buildings."

The authors validate the story using open-source satellite imagery, showing the damage from the missile. They also pinpoint the locations of the launch and of the impact, which yields important new information about North Korea's missile technology.

Our biggest takeaway from this, though, is that North Korea can miss. On its own, that's not totally shocking; missile tests are about perfecting the technology, meaning they begin as imperfect.

But to miss so badly that they hit their own city? Then to cover it up to hide their failure? That should worry us because sometimes North Korea fires missiles near foreign cities, too. It's fired them over Japan. Reading this story, we had to ask: What if North Korea's next failed missile crashed into a Japanese city? Maybe world leaders would understand it as a mistake, or maybe they'd read it as a deliberate attack — or even as the start of a fuller launch.

Accidental war is very rare. But the logic of nuclear weapons means that both sides have strong incentive, if they believe an attack is coming, to launch first. Even if they think the other side is attacking in error.

It's scary stuff.

What We're Reading

- Michael C. Horowitz and Elizabeth N. Saunders, political scientists and friends of the column, review a bunch of academic research relevant to one question: Do the personalities and leadership styles of Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump make war likelier? Their answer: maybe a little, but not as much as might think.
- A new paper by the economists Sanghamitra Kanjilal-Bhaduri and Francesco Pastore finds that in India, “women’s education has a U-shaped relationship with paid work participation.”
- J. Furman Daniel and Paul Musgrave, political scientists, conduct a serious academic study on the effect of Tom Clancy books on American foreign policy during the Cold War. They conclude that voters and leaders perceived Mr. Clancy’s fictional works as if they represented reality, shifting popular attitudes and policymaking. They argue that this effect likely continues with mainstream pop culture portrayals of world events.