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New Year's Lessons from the Iranian Protest

Seth J. Frantzman

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Four days after protests broke out across Iran, many people are still trying to understand how this came about. Throughout the fall of 2017, Western media was full of stories about how Iran was united in the face of US President Donald Trump's criticism. The evidence for this was largely based on a few cherry-picked quotes from locals or even tweets, despite the fact that many social media sites are blocked in Iran. Now analysts and experts are scrambling to understand what has happened.

The first lesson of the Iran protests is that protests in general are not predictable. They begin, like the cottage cheese protests in Israel or the self-immolation that led to the "Arab Spring" in Tunisia in 2011, from something local and small. They may also be coordinated using apps such as Telegram.

Iran has been projecting strength for years. In the wake of the nuclear deal with the US it has become even more aggressive in its posturing, encouraging its proxy Shi'ite militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen to increase their visibility. Gone is any mask obscuring the octopus-like structure of the regime's foreign relations.

Qasem Soleimani, Iran's Quds Force commander, has become like a movie star in the Middle East, without the showmanship but with every bit of the virility. It must have been surprising for him to see the protests target not just the Iranian-backed proxies like Hezbollah, but him specifically. After all, wasn't Soleimani a great hero of recent years, stopping Islamic State in Iraq and saving Syrian President Bashar Assad from the "takfiri terrorists"?

It used to be, during the era of the Iran deal, that the regime would play the "good cop, bad cop"

routine it had perfected when dealing with foreign media and the West. “If you don’t sign the deal or if you get rid of it then the hard-liners will be empowered,” the “moderates” would whisper. And this whisper became a chorus. This narrative still exists. Google “US Iran deal hard-liners empowered” and you’ll find this narrative being advanced by Reuters, Al-Jazeera, Al-Monitor, The Atlantic, Business Insider and VOA News. And that’s just the first page of Google results. The Cato Institute notes that preserving the Iran deal “would also help empower [President Hassan] Rouhani and his team and undermine the hard-liners’ message.”

Only *The Wall Street Journal* disagrees. In January 2016 it wrote, “Nuclear deal fuels Iran’s hard-liners.”

But there are no moderates and hard-liners. The regime is all far-right hard-liners, who have simply put on a good show for almost four decades. Javad Zarif, the Cheshire cat lookalike who doubles as Iran’s foreign minister, wrote in October, “[T]oday, Iranians – boys, girls, men, women – are all IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps], standing firm with those who defend us and the region against aggression and terror.”

Except the boys, girls, men and women of Iran don’t all want to be IRGC. According to the protesters they want an end to economic malaise. They want a future that doesn’t involve bearded extremists endlessly “mansplaining” to them about the “great Satan.” They want the right not to have to cover their hair, a human right that most people in the world enjoy. They’d like the use the Internet normally and not be deprived of more than a quarter of the Internet sites, including half of the 500 most popular sites that others in the world enjoy. They don’t see why their country is wasting money on foreign wars and militarism. They don’t appreciate the suppression of minorities, such as Kurds, Arabs, Baloch, Azeris and others.

As New Year’s arrives the lessons from Iran give us hope for the region and the world. 2017 was the year that Islamic State lost 99% of its territory. But it was also the year that authoritarian regimes such as Iran continued their march. There may be positive signs from Saudi Arabia inching toward reform, but in general although the tide seems to have turned against far-right Islamist extremism, it has not resulted in great hope for the future. Iran’s protests tell us that even when people are confronted with the power of the state they are still willing to risk everything. Videos show them tearing down posters and writing “death to the dictator.” Those whose whole lives were spent under the constant propaganda seek the freedom they have been denied. The best lesson they can teach outsiders is to be critical of the narratives we have been sold.