



Arabian Gulf Centre  
for Iranian Studies

# ***DEMONSTRATIONS AND POLITICAL SYSTEM CRISES IN IRAN***



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by Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies

# DEMONSTRATIONS AND POLITICAL SYSTEM CRISES IN IRAN



## Executive Summary

**ON** 28 December 2017, demonstrations broke out in the holy city of Mashhad, catalyzing similar demonstrations in other cities, resulting from stagnant socio-economic conditions. The spiral of events which have unfolded, resulted in the demonstrators chanting political slogans, targeting the regime, because of its abject failure in satisfying socio-economic needs and its foreign policy, which has burdened the regime with excessive expenditure at the expense of its own people.

Iran has survived multiple crises post-1979 revolution, during the first decade. After this turbulent period, the regime stabilized and was able to overcome political and military rivals. This consolidation of power via the imposition of religious ideology and monopolization of political and economic choices, as well as control over foreign relations, was at the expense of multiple regional and international crises.

In the early 1990s, a political movement started to emerge in Iran, resulting in the reformist current, leading to Mohammad Khatami becoming the president. Khatami was part of a hidden ploy to distribute roles within the regime, where the dispute between the reformists and conservatives was simply a disagreement between supporters of Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih*.

In fact, the actual gap between the Iranian people and the reformists did not narrow but widened and this has been apparent whether the reformists or conservatives are in power, as Iranians have failed to decipher the difference between the two when it comes to freedom, openness and jurist monopolization over law and decision making.

This gap emerged with the outbreak of protests at Tehran University in 1999, with anger over laws issued by the Shura Council restricting the freedom of the press, resulting in the closure of "Salaam" the reformist daily newspaper. Khatami supported this closure and accused the students of destabilizing Iran. Thus, students came to realize, the dictatorial nature of the incompetent regime and the lack of difference between the reformists and conservatives. These protests were political in nature and could be considered as the beginning of Khomeini's ideological-political bankruptcy, as the system was paralyzed in responding effectively to the demands of protesters.

In 2009, the regime's legitimacy was questioned once again, with the Green Movement by reformists. This movement resulted in a strong political alliance named "*Front of Change*" to counter President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or the so-called "*Front of Extremism*." Ahmadinejad's opponents were all in the new front, reformist and conservative, including, the former chairman of Expediency, Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former chairman of the Shura Council, Nateq Nouri, Mohsen Rezai, and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.

The Green Movement was led by well-known political figures from Tehran such as Mousavi and Karroubi, along with middle-class people, women organizations, activists, and intellectuals. The movement received political support from all currents opposing Ahmadinejad's internal and external policies. However, security apparatuses, military forces, and Shiite militias overcame the movement by oppression. As well as, through controlling communication networks preventing the transfer of information inside and abroad. Moreover, religion was justified to confront any protest as they were accused of "opposing God, His Prophet and being seditious."

In 2017, the demonstrations, driven by stagnant socio-economic conditions, made the Iranians break their silence, pouring to the streets in Mashhad, Qom and other cities to express the failure of the regime, while billions of dollars are spent on "exporting the revolution."

The slogans of the protesters highlighted three main issues 1- stagnant socio-economic conditions 2- calls for the overthrow of Khamenei and his regime 3 the rejection of Iran's external role, which the regime has utilized to cover its internal failure.

This study will shed light on the most important protest movements in Iran after the 1979 revolution, and analyze the reasons and circumstances that contributed to the outbreak of such demonstrations. Moreover, analyze the implications of these demonstrations and focus on the major difference between them.

### **First: How Khomeini removed the opposition and stabilized ‘Velayat-e Faqih’**

Post-1979, Iran established a new regime; a phase that witnessed many turbulences, developments, and bloody events. In the early days, the Iranian authorities arrested dozens of senior officials from the Shah’s regime, conducted quick trials, resulting in the execution of many and prison time for others. The newspapers displayed pictures of dead bodies, in a clear message that dissent would not be tolerated, and there was no way back to the previous era. More than 200 senior Shah Officials were executed to prevent a counter-coup. The judges of the revolution, like Judge Sadiq Khalkhali, conducted brief trials without any legal defense, where defendants were not given any opportunity to defend themselves, amongst those who were executed without trial, Prime Minister, Amir Abbas Hwaida.

This brutality of the new regime shocked Iranians, especially the brutality that came from the clerics themselves, however as Iranians were united by a revolutionary ambition to overthrow one of the most powerful and oppressive regimes in the region, tolerated the violence of the new regime.<sup>(1)</sup>

After the pursuit of former regime officials, the regime entered bloody wars and conflicts with separatist movements led by ethnic minorities. The non-Persian nationalities actively participated in the overthrow of the Shah’s regime, hoping for justice and equality. However, minorities were quickly disappointed as the emerging regime began a massive campaign to repress the Arabs of Ahwaz in Muhammara, Turkomans in the Turkoman Desert and the Kurds in northwestern Iran. The new regime squashed minority demands with mass executions of Turkmen leaders and mass killings in Muhammara. Khomeini legitimized the military invasion of Kurdish regions via issuing a legal edict, resulting in the suppression of the Kurds.<sup>(2)</sup>

Khomeini used many ways to get rid of his opponents. For example, Khomeini threatened the leaders of the National Front Party when they called for demonstrations against Qisas [Kind of Execution] provisions in mid-1981, accusing them of apostasy and threatening them with execution. Despite the participation of some leftist and liberal forces, as well as the People’s Mujahedeen Organization of Iran (PMOI) in the revolution, Khomeini clashed with these groups, in particular, once Khomeini revealed his theocratic regime and its monopoly on power.

Unlike most opposition parties in Iran, the PMOI entered armed struggle, after its social centers, platforms, and libraries were attacked in February 1980. This crackdown pushed the PMOI to carry out a series of bombings and assassinations. It is recorded that the PMOI murdered 70 people at the Islamic Republican Party meeting in June 1981, assassinated President Mohammad Ali Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammed Jawad Bahner. To remove the PMOI threat, the Iranian regime began a violent attack on the organization’s centers, killed, and detained thousands of its members, forcing its elements to flee abroad.

In conclusion, the end of the Iran-Iraq War consolidated the ‘Velayat-e Faqih’ regime, all allies of yesterday and opponents of Khomeini were removed, and the revolutionary principles were entrenched, for Khamenei to succeed later.

### **Second: Khamenei and the culture of demonstrations in Iran**

A decade post-1979, Iran involved itself in the war with Iraq. Khomeini’s charisma played a

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(1) المرصد، شهادات تحكي وقائع من وحشية ودموية “الثورة الإسلامية” في إيران عام 1979. <http://cutt.us/HNQNb>  
 (2) كريم عبدیان بنی سعید، مستقبل حراك الأقليات العرقية والدينية في إيران في ظل التحولات الإقليمية والدولية. <http://cutt.us/g4X4P>

major role in building the legitimacy and stability of the regime, but with Khamenei's coming to power, protests began to emerge in Iran. Most of these protests were economic, some of them expanded, became popular and political in character.

The socio-economic stagnation, resulting in social crises, suffocating economic situations and corruption in Iran have resulted in protests becoming a feature of political culture in Iran. These demonstrations can be divided into three types:

### 1- Protests and demonstrations of a class and economic nature

This type is widespread, as several cities and provinces have witnessed such demonstrations, led by worker unions, teachers, hospital nurses, and retirees. In Tehran on 15 October 2017, such demonstrations occurred, as thousands of citizens who lost their money because of banking bankruptcy, accused the government of stealing their money.<sup>(1)</sup> These demonstrations were preceded by protests organized by worker trade unions in September 2017, demanding the government to pay worker salaries.

### 2- Anti-Regime political demonstrations

These demonstrations are not widespread, and the regime has been able to control them. One erupted in 2003, organized by the students of Tehran University, which called for the release of political prisoners and condemned the privatization of the educational sector. Also, in 2005 student protests were organized in many Iranian universities, 2007 protests broke out as fuel prices hiked, 2010 protests marking the Green Movement anniversary, and 2015 protests organized by Azerbaijani Turks after Iranian state television mocked one of its programs.

### 3- Political wide demonstrations

The students of Tehran University organized such protests in 1999 during the tenure of President Mohammad Khatami. Moreover, the 2009 protests in which the Iranian regime was accused of rigging the elections in favor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and finally the current 2017 protests in different Iranian cities, in which so far, 24 Iranians have been killed. These demonstrations pushed the regime to use violence and repression because of its wide range and sensitivity.

### Third: Students protests in 1999

The student movement has a brilliant record and has played a crucial role in modern Iranian history. Students played a key role in the emergence of many revolutionary movements and organizations in the Iranian arena. For instance, the 1979 revolution depended on the students of Iranian universities, which is why the Iranian people called the universities the "trench of freedom." The Iranian regime's realization of student movements' and their threat has made them a constant concern, especially in Tehran, which hosts hundreds of thousands of students and dozens of universities.

The demonstrations organized by the students of Tehran University in July 1999 were amongst the most dangerous for the Iranian regime. These protests began small and were limited to the university in reaction to the closure of the pro-reformists newspaper "Salam." However, the intervention of the police, the Basij and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), resulting

The 1979 revolution depended on the students of Iranian universities, which is why the Iranian people called the universities the „trench of freedom.“

(1) جنوبية، هذه أسباب التظاهرات في إيران ولذا تختلف عن ثورة 2009، 31 ديسمبر 2017. <http://cutt.us/inbem>

in the killing of students and the arrest of hundreds, led to the expansion of student protests, turning into a real crisis.

There is no doubt that the protests of students in 1999, were reflective of significant political and economic changes in Iran. The protests can be discussed through;

### **1- Pre-protests**

When Khamenei came to power, as the Supreme Leader, the Iranian political system entered a new phase with repercussions on the economic and social reality. Former Iranian President Rafsanjani took a new economic direction, and a new economic layer emerged, mainly benefiting officials and their associates, at the expense of real human development in Iran.

With the end of President Rafsanjani's second term (1993-1997), it became clear that the economic liberalization policies undertaken by his government did not lead to the improvement of living conditions. Politically, the regime tightened its security grip and besieged society through empowering the Basij, as well as introducing several laws restricting personal freedoms, which led to growing resentment among young people and the middle class in general.

In this atmosphere, the reformist movement formed in 1997. This movement called to expand the scope of personal and political freedoms with greater flexibility in dealing with the West. This trend succeeded in having Mohammad Khatami elected to the presidency. However, despite his promises, the situation did not change much in terms of rights, and liberties, even though he pursued a more open policy with the world.

With President Khatami in power, parliamentary legislation was issued on July 7, 1999, to limit press freedom. Thus, the pro-reformist "Salam" newspaper was shut down. That was the spark for the first major protest movement in Iran post-1979 revolution. The students considered President Khatami as a failure in delivering his reformist promises, along with frustration over conservative persistence in dominating political life and restricting freedoms.<sup>(1)</sup>

### **2- High-frequency protests in response to suppression**

On 8 July 1999, students of Tehran University organized peaceful demonstrations lasting for six days. These demonstrations took a more violent course, when the riot police attacked student housing, particularly at Tehran University, where one of them was killed.

A. The emergence of Ansar Hezbollah: a semi-official and semi-armed group formed in 1995, trained and supported by officials in the regime, this group is responsible for defending 'Velayat-e Faqih', and is considered as the regime's internal arm of repression. Ansar Hezbollah was activated in the 1999 protests, participating in the events of Tehran University and dealt harshly with the demonstrators. The use of excessive violence resulted in an escalation, as well as raising the ceiling of slogans directed towards the most prominent symbols of the regime. The demonstrators chanted, "Khamenei it is shame on you," and "Shame on the police." The protests intensified on the second day, accompanied by turbulence and riots in Tehran and other cities that lasted for a week. During, this period Tehran turned into a battleground, especially as young unemployed people joined the students. In response to the storming of student housing, the Minister of Higher Education Mustafa Moeen and the Chancellor of the University of Tehran resigned, saying, that the "security measures are unacceptable."

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(1) Gorgin, Iraj. "Looking Back At Tehran's 1999 Student Unrest." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. July 2008, 10. Accessed January 2018, 01. [https://www.rferl.org/a/Iran\\_Student\\_Protests/1182717.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Iran_Student_Protests/1182717.html).

**B. Dead and Injuries:** Four people were killed in these protests and more than 200 people were wounded.<sup>(1)</sup>

**C. Raising demands:** demonstrations accompanied with riots demanded the protection of press freedom and reopening the “Salam” newspaper. They also called for large-scale reforms and militants to resign, along with demands that President Mohammad Khatami carries out the reforms he promised in his electoral program, and because of the continued use of violence, protesters called for the fall of the regime.<sup>(2)</sup>

**D. Spread in the most prominent cities:** The most prominent cities that witnessed the demonstrations were Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, Shiraz, and Isfahan. They are considered as the major cities in Iran in terms of population density, economic and population weight.

**E. The absence of leadership:** There were no leaders behind these protests, but they represented a nucleus of the student movement that was to have an impact on political life in Iran later.<sup>(3)</sup>

**F. Security solution:** Initially, the regime used its official and quasi-official security forces to suppress the demonstrators, punish the protestors and attack them in their university housing. The most prominent manifestation of this was the demolition of some university buildings and the throwing of students from the windows. Further, the Basij and the IRGC surrounded Tehran University and dispersed the demonstrations by force.

**G. The crowds of the anti-movement:** on July 14, 1999, tens of thousands of President Khamenei supporters rallied in Tehran, organized by the Islamic Da’wa Organization, where tens of thousands of government employees were brought to Tehran.

**H. Reformists without reform:** the surprise was in President Khatami’s position, who stated that these reformist natured-protests had unsettled the Iranian people, and were considered as a betrayal.<sup>(4)</sup> Moreover, this position revealed an important fact concerning the nature of the Iranian regime, as reformists and conservatives compete with one another to serve the same idea [*Velayat-e Faqih*].

**I. Further repression of freedoms:** Despite these protests, the government issued legislation, which closed the public sphere and restricted the movement of protesters. For example, the “crime of thought” law prohibited “any violent or peaceful action against the regime,” as well as another law prohibiting “any communication, exchange of information, interviews or collusion with foreign embassies, organizations, or media at any level that can be judged as prejudicial to Iran’s independence, national unity or the interests of the Islamic Republic.” The failure of the movement provided an excuse for the regime to tighten its grip on the public sphere and impose restrictions on any protest.

#### **J. Most important indications of the 1999 protests**

■ These demonstrations were the largest in Iran since the establishment of the republic, except for the minority revolution post- 1979.

(1) „MIDDLE EAST | Six days that shook Iran.“ BBC News. July 2000 ,11. Accessed January 2018 ,01. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/828696.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/828696.stm).

(2) Reuters. „Student Protests Shake Iran’s Government.“ The New York Times. July 1999 ,11. Accessed January 2018 ,01. <http://www.nytimes.com/11/07/1999/world/student-protests-shake-iran-s-government.html>.

(3) „Middle East | Iran student protests: Five years on.“ BBC News. July 2004 ,09. Accessed January 2018 ,01. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3879535.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3879535.stm).

(4) Maloney, Suzanne. „Fifteen Years After the 18th of Tir: The Legacy of Student Protests That Shook Iran.“ Brookings. July 2016 ,28. Accessed January 2018 ,01. <https://goo.gl/VgAePy>.

- It was the first major uprising initiated by the generation born under the ‘Islamic Republic.’
- They were in opposition to the conservatives, reformists and the Supreme Leader Khamenei.
- They reflected the failure of ‘*Velayat-e Faqih*’ political ideology as a regime.

At that time, the Iranian regime, however, still maintained some popular legitimacy that permitted it to overcome that crisis. Khamenei himself went out to urge the Basij to show restraint. He said, “Even if the students insult the leader, for example, we have to be patient, even if they burn my own picture or tear it up.” Undoubtedly, the system benefited from the reformist current and threw all burden on it. The conservatives were considered as the savior the people. However, the regime was no doubt slow to respond, and it seemed that repression was the only way to survive such a crisis.

The demonstrators had no leading or meaningful purpose to go towards. The lack of leadership had a negative impact, their position turned into a major weakness and failed even to express dissatisfaction, and ended with pleas to the Supreme Leader to stop the violence. Nevertheless, it was the beginning of a new generation with the audacity to criticize the authority and its religious ideology, and perhaps paved the way for upcoming and recent protests.

#### **Fourth: The Green Movement 2009... Struggle on political authority**

The protest movements usually ignite under stagnant political, economic or social conditions. The protests in the Iranian Republic 2009 broke out under complex political conditions between the reformists and conservatives. This paper will analyze the Iranian environment before the outbreak of the protests, how they erupted, and the tactics which the regime utilized to overcome the protests.

##### **1- The struggle between political blocs and international isolation**

In the first decade of the third millennium, the political situation in Iran had undergone many changes by the time Mohammed Khatami had left the presidency. In 2005, the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power through the vote of the ordinary Iranian public [The religious poor], who considered him as the savior, as he had overcome the transportation crisis and provided soft loans to the poor when he was mayor in Tehran.

President Ahmadinejad’s political vision was to be tough with the reformist bloc and to be firm in negotiations with the West regarding Iran’s nuclear file, and its relations with Israel and the United States. President Ahmadinejad’s policies led to:

The protests in the Iranian Republic 2009 broke out under complex political conditions between the reformists and conservatives.

**A. Struggle between political blocs:** His internal policies relating to freedom, civil rights, social justice, and Iranian sects, led to a political conflict breaking out between the conservatives and reformists. This conflict later resulted in the emergence of the “*Front of Change*” to confront President Ahmadinejad, or the so-called “*Extremist Front.*” The front of change consisted of President Ahmadinejad’s conservative and reformist opponents, including the late Hashemi Rafsanjani, the Chairman of the Expediency Council at the time, Akbar Nateq Nouri, Mohsen Rezai, and Mohammed Baqer Qalibaf. The pro-government media called the two sides to align themselves with the “*Resistance Front.*”<sup>(1)</sup>

(1) أزمة الانتخابات الرئاسية عام 2009، الخريطة السياسية الإيرانية وتحولات ما بعد الأزمة، <http://cutt.us/uvp9p>

**B. Popular discontent:** President Ahmadinejad's hardened policies deprived some workers in the transport, electricity and rail sectors of their labour rights to form unions. In 2006, President Ahmadinejad's government brutally arrested the founders of the Public Transport Workers Union in Tehran, tortured, imprisoned and fined them, as well as suppressing their labor protests at that time.<sup>(1)</sup>

**C. Sanctions and international isolation:** The continual enrichment of uranium resulted in sanctions on Iran. Also, Iran was in international isolation because of regional and international concerns over its nuclear program and its risk to peace and security. As well as its financial and military support for Hezbollah and other proxies in the region.<sup>(2)</sup>

## 2- Eruption from Tehran leading to other cities

On 13 June 2009, President Ahmadinejad got his second term of the presidency at the expense of reformist, Ali Mir Mousavi, and the former Speaker of the Parliament, Mehdi Karroubi. The reformist movement erupted at that time accusing the Interior Minister, Ahmadinejad's ally, Sadeq Mehsouli and the former IRGC commander, Mohsen Rezai of rigging elections to keep Ahmadinejad in power. The protests continued for 3 consecutive days and for more than 45 intermittent days,<sup>(3)</sup> and here are some of the protesters' motivations:

- A. Rigging of the presidential election in favor of President Ahmadinejad.
- B. The policy of exclusion and marginalization towards political parties and currents.
- C. The arrest and torture of dissidents from political currents opposed to President Ahmadinejad.
- D. The failure of President Ahmadinejad's government to fulfill its electoral promises.<sup>(4)</sup>

The movements that emerged changed the long-term political equation in Iran. In contrast to previous movements, it was not armed, and it was not from the '*Velayat-e Faqih*' dissidents. The Green Movement, was named as such because of the green scarf of reformist figures, especially Mir Mousavi.<sup>(5)</sup> Several factors characterized this movement:

**A. Transition from the center to the periphery:** The protests broke out in four major Iranian cities, starting from Tehran (center) and then to Tabriz, Isfahan and Shiraz (periphery), that have better economic condition than other Iranian cities.<sup>(6)</sup>

**B. Volume of the protest movement:** Iran's unofficial estimations indicate that almost half of Tehran's citizens participated in the protests. Tehran had two million protesters and hundreds of thousands in Tabriz, Isfahan and Shiraz.

**C. The pace of the Green Movement:** Political demonstrations began in reaction to the rigging of the presidential elections 2009, and then developed into protests countering the regime. The people were left frustrated because of fake promises from both currents and went out to the streets, searching for a third alternative to express their interests.

(1) سامح نجيب، المشهد الإيراني: من ثورة 1979 إلى أزمة 2009. محاولة للشهم، نوفمبر 2009. <http://cutt.us/mJnfN>

(2) سامح نجيب، المشهد الإيراني: من ثورة 1979 إلى أزمة 2009. محاولة للشهم، نوفمبر 2009. <http://cutt.us/mJnfN>

(3) „Iran Election In Dispute as 2 Candidates Claim Victory.“ The Washington Post. June 2009 ,13. Accessed January ,01 2018. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/12/06/2009/AR2\\_2009061200916.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/12/06/2009/AR2_2009061200916.html).

(4) Gorgin, Iraj. „Looking Back At Tehran's 1999 Student Unrest.“ RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. July 2008 ,10. Accessed January 2018 ,01. [https://www.rferl.org/a/Iran\\_Student\\_Protests/1182717.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Iran_Student_Protests/1182717.html).

(5) مجموعة باحثين، إيران بين ثورتين، (دبي: الامارات العربية المتحدة، مركز المسبار للدراسات والبحوث، 2013) ط 1، ص-ص 291، 292.

(6) „The Green Revolution in Iran and Civil society.“ The New School. Accessed January 2018 ,01. [https://events.newschool.edu/event/the\\_green\\_revolution\\_in\\_iran\\_and\\_civil\\_society#.WkoRv1WWapo](https://events.newschool.edu/event/the_green_revolution_in_iran_and_civil_society#.WkoRv1WWapo).

**D. Availability of leadership:** Unlike many of the protests, which Iran has seen, the Green Movement 2009 was marked by its leadership, as Mir Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi become symbols for the movement.

**E. Participation:** The middle class, active student movements, civil society organizations, women's organizations, and large segments of the intellectuals participated in the Green Movement. The low-level participation from the working class, reflects the fact that the economic conditions in Iran during that period were much better than 2017.

**F. Leaders who supported the movement:** The former President Mohammad Khatami, many moderates and other liberals. The late President Rafsanjani also supported the movement without severing his connection to the regime. Among those who criticized the government's reaction and supported the protesters were Ayatollah Montazeri, the former deputy of Khomeini, Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Sanei, Grand Ayatollah Abdul Karim Mousavi Ardebili and Grand Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani.

**G. Protesters quality of demands and slogans:** The political demands included "re-election" and "overthrow of the regime." Also, the protesters demanded the government's recognition of rigging, the release of all prisoners, the freedom for press, and the right to assemble and form political parties. The slogans raised included "Where is my vote?", "rigged elections," "Freedom for political detainees," "Independence, Freedom ... Republic of Iran", and "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon ... I will sacrifice my soul for Iran."<sup>(1)</sup>

### 3- Tactics in overcoming the Green Movement

The Iranian regime was surprised with these popular protests in terms of size and momentum. Initially, the regime dealt with demonstrators randomly, but the sequence of events, resulted in clear tactics to strike and end the Green Movement:

**A. Militia Repression:** This was divided between the IRGC, the Basij, the Iranian Hezbollah and Ansar Hezbollah. The mentioned militias had the absolute powers to suppress the demonstrators to the point of killing. These militias have no official status so cannot be prosecuted, and perhaps the most famous case of killing was when a militia sniper killed Nada Agha Sultan. They also raided homes, hospitals, universities and housing, they prevented the treatment of the wounded, recording the dead, and denied burial. There are estimations suggesting that 180 Iranians were killed by these militias.<sup>(2)</sup>

**B. The deliberate arrests of leaders and random ones for protesters:** The arrests deliberately targeted the leaders, symbols and politicians of the movement to put pressure on the popular base, the political parties and associates, such as the arrest of Reza Khatami brother of former President Mohammad Khatami, and President Khatami's advisor, Mohammad Ali Abtahi. While, the arrest of protesters was random, and they were accused of belonging to foreign organizations, executing foreign agendas, or belonging to opponents abroad.<sup>(3)</sup>

**C. Media Disinformation:** The Iranian regime prevented any media coverage, while magazines and newspapers belonging to the Green Movement and reformists were closed. Then the IRGC took over a large part of the communication network and blocked the means of communication and the transmission of information.<sup>(4)</sup>

(1) „Tear gas and Twitter: Iranians take their protests online.“ CNN. Accessed January 2018 ,01. <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/14/06/iran.protests.twitter/index.html>.

(2) Charlie Szrom, Unrest in Iran: Incident Statistics and Map for Protests, Arrests, and Deaths, <http://cutt.us/5Nuq9>.

(3) Ibid

(4) Akbar Ganji, Iran's Green Movement Five Years Later — 'Defeated' But Ultimately Victorious, <http://cutt.us/QJ5iz>.

**D. Rape and torture in prisons:** Many reports talked about the torture of many protesters in prisons, including the rape of young men and women in prisons. One of the most famous Iranian prisons is “Kahizak” known as the “Guantanamo of Tehran.” While others were sentenced to death on charges of “fighting God and His Prophet” and belonging to terrorist groups, such as the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Organization (MKO). The number of execution cases reached 15 within 50 days post-election results.

**E. The trial of many political symbols:** Trials began for many political symbols, including former government leaders and members of the Green Movement, to put pressure on Mousavi, Karroubi, Khatami, and Rafsanjani to make political concessions and to end the protests. Namely, former Iranian Vice President, Mohammad Ali Abtahi, the former Speaker of the Parliament, Behzad Nabavi, the former Deputy Minister of Economy Mohsen Farhani, the former government spokesman Abdullah Ramzanzadeh, the former Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh, the former Deputy Minister of Interior Mohammad Adrian Farr were all put on trial. Also, those put-on trial included, Saeed Hajarian Khatami’s the former deputy, and head of the biggest reformist party, Mohsen Miramady and one of the three most important figures that planned to occupy the United States embassy in 1979. A number of reports mentioned that the authorities forced detainees to give false testimonies on state television, with testimonies ranging from the Green Movement being an America proxy and its goal being to weaken the Iranian Republic. The regime also backed anti-Green Movement demonstrations, where the demonstrators demanded the trial of what they called “symbols of sedition,” (Mousavi and Karroubi).

#### **4- Regional and international engagement with the Green Movement**

In general, the regional and international engagement with the Green Movement was characterized with deep reservation and silence, except for the GCC countries, which supported the movement. Turkey demanded that the crisis should be managed peacefully, whereas the Americans were divided between supporters like the former Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Levitz and opponents like former CIA Director Michael Scheuer.

#### **5- The Implications of the Green Movement 2009**

- A. The protests erupted from the center (the political capital), which includes the elite and the middle class, and shifted towards other cities of lower classes.
- B. The demands and slogans were political and reformist.
- C. The existence of visible leadership represented by Karroubi and Mousavi
- D. Those involved in the protests were from the middle class, the political elite, active student movements, civil society organizations, women’s organizations and large segments of the intellectuals.

#### **6- Regime’s Strengths:**

- The control over media and communications sectors, limiting the transfer of information to block foreign observation.
- Depending on armed forces like the IRGC, the Basij and the Iranian Hezbollah to suppress the demonstrators and murder them if required.
- The spread of the regime via the IRGC, armed militias and representatives of Khamenei in state institutions and Friday sermons.
- The use of religion to confront any manifestation of protests as it is against “God, and His

Prophet” as well as being a seditious act.

- The regime’s recognition of the regional situation, which does not warm to the idea of revolutions, protests, and regime change.

### **7- Regime’s Weaknesses**

- Failure to fulfill electoral promises.
- Failure to respond quickly to protesters’ demands.
- Dependence on security dimensions without political and economic solutions.
- Its regional and international isolation.

### **Unrest of 2017, the revolution of the poor**

The unrest of 2017, which has mushroomed across Iran, reflects the fury and anger of the Iranian people over their government’s political and economic policy. We can tackle how this unrest has evolved as follows:

#### **1- Atmosphere of unrest**

The unrest was triggered by the country’s decrepit socio-economic conditions:

##### **A. Gap and clashes between governmental institutions**

During President Hassan Rouhani’s second term, the division between the governmental institutions has deepened as he pursued a reconciliatory foreign policy –especially- towards Western countries. Consequently, he managed to win a trump card by signing the nuclear deal with the European Union, and the P5+1 and advanced talks on infrastructure and oil investments- economic sectors which are monopolized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The disagreement between the Supreme Leader Khamenei and the IRGC has been vivid on many occasions, such as in the appointment of some ministers and government’s officials, the nuclear deal, the ballistic missile program, and the expected economic ramifications on the investments of both the IRGC and Khamenei’s institution.<sup>0</sup>

##### **B. High cost of Iran’s boundless regional interference**

Iran has penetrated widely across the region and has become an integral player in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, utilizing revolutionary slogans which are now being rejected by people in those territories and Iranians themselves. Iran has spent a vast majority of money on endless regional projects at the expense of its people who are deprived of the economic benefits since the lifting of sanctions post-nuclear agreement.

##### **C. Flawed nuclear deal**

After having persisted in its destabilizing acts in the region, Iran’s nuclear deal has become almost a dead letter. President Donald Trump reactivated the U.S. sanctions on Iran, and the U.S. joined the Arab-Islamic Coalition to pressure Iran, and it imposed sanctions on companies cooperating or investing in Iran. President Rouhani’s plan to increase his political legitimacy post-nuclear deal has faded away, as he failed to foster economic growth after having the sanctions lifted.<sup>0</sup>

(1) محمد السلمي: صراع روحاني مع الحرس الثوري الاقتصادي بواجهة سياسية، الوطن أونلاين، 10 أغسطس 2017. <http://cutt.us/EdkwM>

(2) صالح حميد: إيران تخصص 7,4 مليار دولار من موازنتها للحرس الثوري، العربي نت، 5 أبريل 2017. <http://cutt.us/eRsAZ>

#### D. Declining economic and social indicators

The Iranian people have been badly affected by President Rouhani's policies, which contrasts with the tenure of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as he [Ahmadinejad] sought to transfer the people's burden mostly on to his government's shoulders and directly support people via financial aid. The IRGC- in which Ahmadinejad was a member - was filling in the government's deficit, when it was necessary, in exchange for support for its expansionist project across the region. President Rouhani has pursued a liberal economic policy to attract international investors to activate economic growth. He has relied heavily on foreign investments which were expected to flow into the country post-nuclear agreement and he ditched Ahmadinejad's supportive financial aid.

It is worth mentioning here, the 2018 budget shows how the Rouhani government seeks to transfer entirely the economic burden on to the people's shoulders by tight austerity measures, such as, gas price hikes by about 50 %; diesel price hikes up to 30%; and the removal of subsidies to reduce the budget deficit. The number of Iranians living in abject poverty is about 10-12 million, i.e., 15% of the entire population. If subsidies are completely removed the number will reach more than 45 million, i.e., 67% of the population. Furthermore, the unemployment rate has increased amongst the more educated (1 employed among 3-degree holders unemployed),<sup>0</sup> despite the nuclear deal being implemented early in 2017.

#### E. The regime's imploding ideology

The regime's ideology has not been inspiring, anymore, as it was during Khomeini's time. Khamenei is not as charismatic as Khomeini. He does not have widespread popularity nor jurisprudential wisdom, this has resulted in him resorting to force to impose his regime's ideology. However, this has not been reflective of the people's voice. The opponents of Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih* have raised their voices in Qom. Khomeini's project has lost popularity, as Iran is held accountable for destabilizing the region. Also, this ideology lacks basic ethical and moral values, so it has been resisted and rejected in and out of Iran.<sup>0</sup>

#### F. Increasing foreign pressure

The post-nuclear deal, Iran exploited the removal of sanctions by destabilizing the region to cover up its domestic crisis. Iran has continued carelessly its ballistic missile program and escalated rivalry with regional countries, the U.S., and its allies. The regional destabilization has increased, resulting from Iran's boundless regional interference, and it sponsoring insurgents, terrorists, and militias- which has rendered the nuclear agreement pointless. President Barack Obama failed to tame Iran, therefore; President Donald Trump has strived to reactivate the sanctions and revoke the whole deal- Iran will consequently lose the golden opportunity it has had a post-nuclear agreement.<sup>0</sup>

In a nutshell, the legitimacy of the Iranian regime has been cut and it has failed to capitalize on the new environment post-nuclear deal. Also, internal clashes over intersected economic interests burst into the public view, and Iran increased its interference in the region, turning

(3) مركز الخليج العربي للدراسات الإيرانية: الشتاء الفارسي.. إيرانيون غاضبون وظروف اقتصادية خانقة، 31 ديسمبر 2017. <http://cutt.us/mSfyc>  
 (4) صادق حقيقت، حسين صافي (ترجمة): توزيع السلطة في الفكر السياسي الشيعي.. دراسة فقهية فلسفية مقارنة، بيروت: مركز الحضارة لتنمية الفكر الإسلامي، الطبعة الأولى، 2014، ص295، ص305.

(5) محمود حمدي أبو القاسم، تكتيكات ما بعد استراتيجية ترامب، 9 نوفمبر 2017. <http://cutt.us/sqNPX>

a blind eye and a deaf ear to several domestic crises. The 2017 unrest is just a backlash to Iran's economic incompetence and regional interference.

## **2- Evolution of the 2017 unrest**

The unrest on 28 December, 2017 is significant, as it mushroomed and acted as a catalyst in other Iranian cities. And it put the spotlight on the several crises facing the ruling system. The phases of the unrest can be explored as follows:

### **A. The spark in Mashhad**

The anti-government protests that broke out in Mashhad, one of the regimes fortresses, was quite astonishing. Mashhad is greatly significant for the Iranian regime —because it has the shrine of Imam Reza, who is the eighth Imam and has a great status amongst Shiites worldwide. Also, it is the birthplace of Khomeini and it is the center of pro-government *Marjas* [jurists] such as, Alamolhoda Raisi, who oversees the “Shrine of Imam Reza” complex. It is supervised directly by Khamenei, and its revenues are targeted towards establishing industrial projects, banks, hospitals, and religious institutions across Iran. Besides, many Iranian officials belong to Mashhad. This is what makes Mashhad the third most important city, after Tehran and Qom where most of the Shiite jurists are situated.

The Iranian authority usually has heightened security all over Mashhad whether by using the police or the IRGC to guarantee safety and security of 2.5 million Shiite pilgrims who visit every year the Shrine of Imam Reza. Given this intense level of security, it can be analyzed that there are hidden motivations behind the unrest in Mashhad, as not only from a security perspective but also, it is much better than other cities economically because of religious-tourism and its diversity of revenues. This means that the soil is far more fertile for further unrest in other cities where the socio-economic realities are much more severe and harsher.<sup>0</sup>

### **B. Spontaneous, popular and without a leader**

The protests were clearly spontaneous without any leading force or coordination. They were not supported by any religious or political force unlike the unrest of 2009 which was backed by many reformists and even jurists.

### **C. Social media's role in fueling the unrest**

Although the first call for the unrest was not on social media, the subsequent mobilization and coordination were announced and provoked on social media. The protests spread rapidly, which forced the Iranian authority to restrict access to social media.

### **D. Attended by students and advocated by the opposition abroad**

The unrest escalated as many students attended the protests and many Iranian opposition parties expressed their support by holding demonstrations in London and Paris. The unrest has been supported by the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI).

### **E. The protests mushrooming across Iran**

Previously, the unrests in Iran started from Tehran moving towards other cities and provinces. But in 2017 the unrest broke out in Mashhad and then moved to Northern, northwest and southwest Iran, and then reached the Capital, Tehran. The most significant areas and

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(6)[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/30/12/2017/a-second-revolution-in-iran-not-yet/?utm\\_term=.671779bfdcd4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/30/12/2017/a-second-revolution-in-iran-not-yet/?utm_term=.671779bfdcd4)

cities where the protests broke out are; Qom, Qazvin, Hamadān, Birjand, Rasht, Isfahan, Kermanshah, Shiraz, Kashan, Arak, Ziljan, Bandar Abbas, Kerman, Khirramabad, Sabzevar, Sari, Qojan Bojnord, Qaem Shahr, Zahedan, Mashhad, Nishapur, Kashmar , Shahrud and Yazd .<sup>0</sup>

The protests continued and spread across the country despite violence, fatalities, and police shooting the protests with live ammunition. The protests set fire to tires, burned government offices in various cities, and clashed with the police.

#### **F. Minorities’ aversion to participate**

Although the protests spread in most of Iran’s cities, minorities were unwilling to attend the unrest, as some protestors were chanting racist and xenophobic slogans, such as, “we are Aryans, and we won’t worship Arabs”. They also raised banners praising the former Shah and this deterred minority participation, as many minorities have reservations about the Shah who forcefully annexed their territories. However, it is possible that they did not want to trigger a government crackdown on the protests through their participation, which could have been used as an excuse by the government to unleash violence on the protesters.

#### **G. The protesters raised the ceiling on their demands**

At the very beginning, the protesters were expressing their fury over bad socio-economic conditions. They raised banners calling for ‘bread’ and improvements in living standards. Later, the demands snowballed into anti-government chants calling for the ouster of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei.<sup>0</sup>

#### **H. Rejecting Iran’s interference across the region**

The chants of the protesters were clear, with them asking their government to change its foreign policy and focus on “Iran First”. They believed that their country’s interference in neighboring countries has caused awful socio-economic ramifications. Apparently, this deep realization led to attacks on the IRGC headquarters, as it is sensed to be the real source of regional interference and economic failure. Without a shadow of a doubt, protesters burning pictures of Khamenei, Qassem Suleimani and vandalizing the IRGC headquarters in Bandar Abbas are major signs that the regime’s legitimacy is sinking.<sup>0</sup>

#### **I. The government’s reaction**

The unrest was quite shocking, the government immediately heightened security and deployed forces all over the major cities to confront the escalating rallies. The police were asked to show restraint, despite this, some protesters were killed and others injured during clashes (see table 1).

#### **J. Searching for a way out**

The capital city, Tehran’s Friday prayer leader, on behalf of Khamenei, sought to steer people’s anger by pointing fingers towards President Rouhani’s ministers, accusing them of being responsible for the current economic crises. Protesters were not convinced; they burned pictures of Khamenei and called for his ouster. The conservatives exchanged

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(7) <http://cutt.us/Oci0>

(8) <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=264050>

(9) <https://futureuae.com/ar-AE/Mainpage/Item/3579>

accusations and failed to accept responsibility. The deputy of President Rouhani accused some parties of the conservatives to have catalyzed the protests. Although some conservatives approved anti-government [Rouhani's government] slogans, they were annoyed by chants directed towards the Supreme Leader, Khamenei and the IRGC commanders.

### **K. The government resorted to force**

It seems that the regime relied heavily on force to put an end to the unrest, and accused international powers of plotting against Iran. The IRGC and police stated that the protests would be suppressed by 'force', this is what actually unfolded on the ground.

The protests in the Iranian Republic 2009 broke out under complex political conditions between the reformists and conservatives.

### **L. Pro-government rallies**

The regime did not try to mitigate the public outrage. It escalated the situation by sponsoring pro-government rallies across several cities, such as in; Teheran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Kermanshah, Qazvin, Rasht, Ahvaz, Khorramshahr, and Qom. The annual anniversary of the Green Movement was exploited to send a message to the opposition parties that the regime still has grassroots support, while it completely overlooked the public outcry.

### **M. Search for an economic solution**

To confront allegations of economic corruption, the spokesman of the Iranian government Mohammad Bagher Nobakht announced the government's blueprint for overcoming some pressing economic crises. This was after a meeting of the Coordinating Committee attended by the Chairman of Management and Planning Organization Mohammed Baqir Nobkhat, the Minister of Oil Bijan Zangeneh, the Minister of Economy and Finance Masoud Karbasian, in which they discussed a supportive monetary policy, energy prices, employment programmes and tackled major issues in the new budget. They announced that the government is expected to generate one million career opportunities starting on March 21, 2018.

### **N. International reactions**

The U.S. official response was clear, President Donald Trump's tweet expressed his support for the Iranian protests. In his tweet, he said, "many reports of peaceful protests by Iranian citizens fed up with regime's corruption and its squandering of the nation's wealth to fund terrorism abroad. The Iranian government should respect their people's rights, including the right to express themselves."<sup>10</sup> All the official and non-official U.S. responses echoed President Trump's statement. The new U.S. position on Iran seeks to change Iran's policy and, probably, change the regime and support the opposition. The new U.S. position has been reaffirmed by the statements of the Secretary of State and the Minister of Defense, and by having Iranian opposition attended recent congressional hearings.

On the other side, the Russians have moved in the opposite direction. The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on the protests, which stated that "Moscow "condemns any foreign interference in Iran's domestic affairs." It was also strange how the European countries kept silent.

In the Arab world, the only official statement was that of the UAE Minister of State for Foreign

(10) <http://cutt.us/7JAWs>

Affairs Anwar Gargash, when he said, “The protests in Iran represent an opportunity [for the government in Tehran] for rational review, to put the internal interest before Tehran’s quests in the Arab region.”

### The 2017 unrest is marked by:

- It first emerged as an outcry over harsh socio-economic conditions, then it converted into political demands, calling for regime change.
- The people’s deep realization of socio-economic ramifications resulting from Iran’s regional interference.
- It has not been led or sponsored by any religious or political force. Its chants surpassed the reformists and are not reflective of any party or stream in Iran. It is entirely spontaneous and popular, eventually turning into political demands to end the Mullah regime.
- It is the most wildly spread unrest for a long time, expressing anger and frustration over the collapsed economy, and costly interventions across Arab countries.
- The lower social strata living in abject poverty were the cradle of the revolution.

**Table 1- Comparison between the unrest of 2009, 2011, 2017**

	Unrest of 1999	Unrest of 2009	Unrest of 2017
Date	September 9, 1999	June 13, 2009	December 28, 2017
Period	7 days	3 consecutive days 45 discontinuous days	December 28-till now
City	64 cities: Tehran, Qom, Qazvin, Hamadān, Birjand, Rasht, Isfahan, Kermanshah, Shiraz, Kashan, Arak, Zanjan, Bandar Abbas, Kerman, Khorramabad, Sari, Sabzevar, Quchan, Bojnurd, Qaem Shahr, Zahedan, Mashhad, Nishapur, Kashmar, Shahrud etc.	4 cities: Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan ·Shiraz	5 cities: Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, Isfahan ·Shiraz
Social strata	Students who were, later, joined by variant social classes	mid-upper class of elite politicians, educated people, activists	Lower class of people living in abject poverty- with a number people from other social classes
Tools	Students’ fliers	Opposition TV channels, students’ fliers	Social media applications ( Telegram)
Leadership	Organized by students- without leadership	Mir-Hossein Mousavi & Mehdi Karroubi	Spontaneous- without leadership
Motivations	Issuing a new restrictive press law, and closure of <i>Salam</i> newspaper	Election fraud, policy alienation, detaining and torturing opponents	Harsh socio-economic conditions, high prices, high-economic pressures on the lower class
Demands	Execute the promises of reform, decertify the new press law, reopen <i>Salaam</i> newspaper-escalated later into calls for regime change	Government to admit being responsible for election fraud, conduct a new press and election law, free detainees, freedom of assembly, right to form political parties	Economic reform to ensure minimum living standards, political demands, ousting of the supreme leader and regime change, freedom, noninterference in other regional countries (particularly Syria)

Supportive forces	NA	Mohammad Khatami, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Yousef Saanei, Abdul-Karim Mousavi, and Bayat-Zanjani	NA
Slogans	“Khamenei, shame on you, leave!” “Shame on police”	“ where is my vote?”, “ election fraud”, “ free political prisoners”, “ freedom”, “ Republic of Iran”, “ No Lebanon nor Gaza, my soul for Iran”	“ Khamenei is a killer, his leadership is illegal”, “ Death to Mullah”, “ Death to Khamenei”, “Khamenei, shame on you, leave!”, “Iranians will die but they will not tolerate humiliation”, “ We die to restore Iran”, “ Leave Syria... think about us”, “Suleimani is a criminal, Suleimani is a killer”
Regime’s strategies	Security solution, force, and restrictions on individual liberties	Security solution, force, mobilizing pro-government rallies	Security solution, mobilizing pro-government rallies
Death toll	Five killed, 20 injured	Estimated, 180 killed and 1500 detained	Contradicting reports regarding the number of casualties, Iranian media outlets announced the death toll reached 24 and more than 1000 detained.

### The most significant differences between the three unrests (2009, 2011, 2017)

- The 1999 unrest broke out for political causes related to freedom of speech, whereas, the 2009 unrest was over alleged election fraud. The 2017 unrest was over-harsh socio-economic conditions and later political demands were apparent, such as regime change.
- In the unrest in 1999 and 2009, Iran’s regional interference was not raised, whereas in 2017 the protesters vented anger of Iran’s regional project, knowing its socio-economic ramifications
- The 2017 unrest is distinguished by starting from the outskirts and then moving to the center of Iran.
- The Green Movement in 2009 had leaders such as Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi. Its fundamental demand was about the right to free and transparent elections. This spontaneous popular movement [the 2017 unrest] was not led by politicians or clerics. It does not represent the thoughts of a particular party or stream.
- The protests in 2017 spread swiftly all over the Iranian cities within two days.
- Although the number of protesters, detainees, and fatalities in 2009 were greater, the 2017 unrest spread far wider.
- In the 2009 unrest, the protestors were from the educated upper-middle class, whereas in the 2017 unrest they were from the lowest socio-economic classes. However, as the protests continued, other classes joined them.
- In the 2009 unrest, the disagreement was between the reformists and the conservatives over alleged election fraud. In 2017, the protests expressed anger over the governmental policies, and towards the symbols of the regime Khamenei and the IRGC.
- In the 2009 unrest, the protests were backed by some political and religious forces. The 2017 unrest does not have a leader.

- In the 2009 unrest, the government used force to suppress the protests. In the 2017 unrest, it seems that the police forces were informed to exercise self-restraint as much as possible to stop protests from expanding.



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