

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## How the U.S. Can—and Should—Promote Freedom in Iran

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Iran's increasingly unpopular and repressive Islamist regime was rocked by a wave of protests earlier this year, the largest since 2009. Although local authorities and police suppressed the anti-regime demonstrations, reports of new protests by women's rights advocates and by Iran's Kurdish, Arab, and Sufi minority groups have further exposed the eroding base of political support for the regime. President Donald Trump correctly signaled his support for the human rights and freedom of Iranians. The Trump Administration and Congress should work together to put weight behind his words and provide strong support for Iranians seeking freedom from a totalitarian dictatorship.

### **Protests Underscore a Pent-Up Demand for Freedom**

Popular demonstrations ignited on December 28, 2017, by smoldering resentment about Iran's mismanaged economy quickly escalated to angry political denunciations of Tehran's rulers. The protests reportedly were triggered by a surge in prices of basic food supplies, which had also contributed to early "Arab spring" protests seven years ago. Other grievances included high unemployment, government corruption, and the expenditure of enormous

state resources on religious institutions and foreign wars during a time of belt-tightening and falling living standards. Protests spread quickly to more than 80 cities, sparked by social media posts, as state-controlled media blocked press coverage.

These were the largest protests since millions of Iranians flooded the streets in 2009 to protest then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rigged re-election. But the regime crushed those protests in a brutal crackdown in which at least 30 people were killed and thousands were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned. In contrast to the 2009 protests, which were spearheaded by urban middle-class students and professionals, the recent wave of protests were dominated by working-class and poor Iranians from cities and regions that formerly were bastions of support for the regime.

In the weeks since those protests were suppressed in January, two Iranian ethnic minorities, the Kurds in western Iran and Arabs in Khuzestan province, have mounted multiple demonstrations protesting state-sanctioned discrimination. Gonabadi dervishes, members of a Sufi religious sect, clashed with police in Tehran in February after one of their members was arrested, Iranian women continue to protest the compulsory hijab, and state workers have staged protests and labor strikes over unpaid salaries.

The regime clearly is nervous about its growing unpopularity. In 2016, President Hassan Rouhani issued a Charter on Citizens' Rights and promised to improve Iran's dismal human rights situation. But Rouhani, a pragmatic hardliner, has failed to moderate the repressive role of the Revolutionary Guards and harsh judicial system, both of which are con-

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trolled by ultra-hardliners. The regime continues to impose arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, and torture, and to carry out large numbers of executions, which has afflicted Iran with the highest per capita execution rate in the world.

### Trump's Tougher Iran Policy

In contrast to the Obama Administration, which muted its support for the rights of Iran's people during the 2009 protests in order to appease the regime, with which it sought a detente, President Trump made it clear from the outset that the U.S. supported Iranians' human rights. On New Year's Day, he tweeted:

Iran is failing at every level despite the terrible deal made with them by the Obama Administration. The great Iranian people have been repressed for many years. They are hungry for food & for freedom. Along with human rights, the wealth of Iran is being looted. TIME FOR CHANGE!<sup>1</sup>

The President's message of support for the Iranian people and a later tweet that "the world is watching!"<sup>2</sup> were the right signals to send to Tehran. Moreover, he is correct that simmering resentment over the costs of Iran's aggressive foreign policy have led protesters to call for more spending at home and less on support of radical groups abroad. Many protesters specifically denounced the regime's extensive corruption and its costly involvement in regional conflicts, such as those in Syria and Gaza.

Although the regime was able to suppress the December/January protests relatively quickly, it may not be so fortunate in the future. The growing number of Iranians disaffected by the regime's repression of political, economic, religious, and social freedoms, as well as the regime's refusal to address legitimate grievances, means that local protests could mushroom into a national movement.

Moreover, hardliners have blocked efforts at systematic reform. They have rejected harmonizing Islamic revolutionary values with democratic norms and condemned any move that would elevate the will of the people over their grim and self-serving

interpretation of the will of God. Reformists, including prominent former officials, such as ex-President Mohammad Khatami and former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, have been purged, prosecuted in show trials and condemned to house arrest or jail.

Political, economic, social, religious, and ethnic grievances will continue to fester. Iran's rial currency has lost a quarter of its value in the past six months, a sign that Iranians are hedging against the future by accumulating as many dollars and other foreign currencies as possible.

President Trump's tweets were a step in the right direction, but more must be done to give material and moral support, not just rhetorical support, to Iranians struggling for freedom.

To prepare for the next round of protests, the Trump Administration should:

- **Impose targeted sanctions for human rights abuses.** The State Department should identify officials involved in the recent crackdown and other human rights abuses, and apply targeted sanctions against them under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the linchpin of the regime's coercive power, deserves special attention for further sanctions, along with human rights abusers within Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, police, and internal security forces.
- **Aid opposition groups.** Washington should support the right of Iranians to challenge the heavy-handed repression and corruption of the tyrannical regime, but it should not publicly endorse specific opposition leaders or movements. The CIA should provide covert financial and material assistance to democratic opposition groups similar to the help that Washington extended to Poland's anti-communist Solidarity movement during the Cold War.
- **Help Iranians communicate with each other and access uncensored information.** Iranian newspapers, television, radio, and social media are heavily censored and packed with regime propaganda. U.S. officials and technology execu-

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1. Daniella Diaz and Dan Merica, "Trump on Iran: 'Time for Change!'" CNN, January 1, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/30/politics/donald-trump-iran-protests/index.html> (accessed April 10, 2018).  
2. Ibid.

tives should help to create reliable and secure Web-based platforms outside Iran that could be used by dissidents to disseminate messages and provide uncensored news to Iranians. If necessary, the Administration should relax Iran sanctions to give Iranian citizens access to technical tools to evade censorship and surveillance by the regime.

- **Mount an information campaign focused on Iran's corruption and foreign meddling.** The December/January wave of protests occurred after the Rouhani government released its new budget, which allocated increased funds for Shiite seminaries and other state-supported religious institutions. This angered many Iranians, who are forced to tighten their belts due to adverse economic circumstances. Washington should work indirectly to expose and publicize the corruption, wealth, and hypocrisy of Iran's leaders. For example it could leak pictures of the mansions, stolen assets, and imported luxury goods accumulated by corrupt officials, both inside and outside Iran. The campaign also should document and publicize the billions of dollars that the regime has lavished on its terrorist proxy network and on military interventions and subversion in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.
- **Work with Congress to demonstrate strong support for human rights in Iran.** Congress should hold hearings to expose and condemn the regime's human rights abuses and investigate additional ways of penalizing the regime for those crimes. The Administration should work with Congress on legislation to impose additional sanctions. For example, S. 2528, the Senate's proposed Continued Support for the Iranian People Act, makes it clear that the U.S. places a high priority on exposing and sanctioning human rights abuses by the regime.

## Conclusion

Iran's dictatorship has been undermined by a popular backlash against its economic mismanagement, corruption, and imperial overreach. Regime change, however, is unlikely to come peacefully or soon. But the U.S. can help to prepare the ground for a change in regime policy by driving up the long-term political, economic, military, and diplomatic costs of Iran's meddling in foreign countries; applying sanctions to weaken the regime; and boosting the opposition's long-term prospects for success. The Trump Administration should work with Congress to publicize and promote the legitimate political, religious, social, and economic grievances of frustrated Iranians and support their efforts to recover freedom from the oppressive and predatory dictatorship in Tehran.

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