



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

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THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S WAR ON WOMEN

Months after the outbreak of protests earlier this year, sporadic resistance to the Iranian government continues, with Iranian women emerging as a key activist demographic. Iranian authorities, in turn, are clamping down on female protests - most recently through the detention of a number of women who attempted to gather in Iran's capital city, Tehran, to commemorate International Women's Day. The activists had been trying to stage a peaceful protest in front of the country's Labor Ministry to petition for more political and civil rights. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 8, 2018)

A KINDER, GENTLER GULF POSTURE?

Iran is behaving better in the Persian Gulf, U.S. defense officials say. Pentagon observers have noted a change in Iran's typically provocative naval activity in and around the Persian Gulf in recent months. According to a spokesman for U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), there have been "no unsafe and unprofessional actions by Iranian naval forces since August 2017." The quiet marks a significant change in the regional *status quo* that has prevailed since 2015, in which Iran has routinely probed American and allied resolve through such provocations as the capture and detention of seamen and close quarters. The majority of these prior confrontations involved elements of Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, signaling authorization - or at least general approval - from the country's Supreme Leader. Consequently, American officials have been cautious to comment on the rationale behind the recent changes - and are uncertain about their permanence. (*CBS News*, March 15, 2018)

MISMANAGEMENT ADDS TO IRAN'S WATER WOES

Popular discontent over the Iranian regime's response to the chronic water shortages plaguing the country is growing. Farmers in Varzaneh, in Isfahan province, took to the streets in February to protest the Iranian government's mishandling of natural resources, including the transfer of local river water to steel factories in a neighboring province. The unrest prompted Hassan Kamran-Dastjerdi, a member of parliament for Isfahan province, to tell an open session of the *majles* in March that Iran's energy ministry had "plundered water" from Varzaneh's farmers by redirecting it to factories and refineries in surrounding areas. Such protests have become increasingly aggressive, and have on occasion involved violent confrontations with Iranian security forces. (*Voice of America*, March 16, 2018)

A DIFFERENT KIND OF INSURANCE POLICY

In an effort to safeguard its strategic presence in Syria, Iran has reportedly commenced building military facilities and installations near Russian troop encampments in the country. While some of the construction is being done in secret, Iran is also carrying out at least some building under the guise of residential construction for civilians in Syria. The new activity serves a clear strategic purpose. "The Iranian gambit is apparently based on the assessment that Israel - which has vowed to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence across its northern border - is unlikely to risk attacking facilities that are located near Russian forces and angering Moscow," notes the *Times of Israel*. The tactic, which does not appear to be coordinated with the Russian government, "potentially turns the nearby Russian forces into de facto human shields in any future conflict with Israel." (*Times of Israel*, March 26, 2018)

IRAN'S INCREASINGLY RICKETY RIAL

Government efforts to prevent the Iranian national currency, the *rial*, from further devaluation have not proven successful. In March, the *rial* fell to a record low of 50,860 to the dollar, according to the Financial Informing Network, an Iranian industry website. The Iranian government has attempted a variety of tactics - including a hike in interest rates and a crackdown on foreign exchange dealer - in order to slow the decline, but with little noticeable impact.

The economic turbulence, observers say, is linked to mounting uncertainty about the future of U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic. The recent elevation of two notable skeptics of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, former Cong. Mike Pompeo and former UN envoy John Bolton, to the posts of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, respectively, have cast doubt on the future of the agreement - and raised worries that a new round of comprehensive economic pressure against Iran might be in the offing in the near future. "I see many people looking to invest in neighboring countries because this fear is spreading about the future of the nuclear deal," one Iranian financial analyst has noted. (*Radio Farda*, March 26, 2018)

