



# How To Support The Second 'Persian Spring'

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Could we see a new Iranian revolution in 2018? For nearly a week now, tens of thousands of Iranians have taken to the streets in various cities throughout the Islamic Republic in the largest mass demonstrations of their kind in nearly a decade. In the process, they have raised the tantalizing possibility that we might in fact be witnessing a second "Persian Spring."

At least initially, the protests found their roots in Iran's ongoing economic malaise. Despite the promised dividends of their government's 2015 nuclear deal with the West, ordinary Iranians have seen little tangible improvement in their standard of living. To the contrary, conditions within the Islamic Republic have steadily worsened over the past year, punctuated by rising commodity prices, a drop in purchasing power, and a spike in inflation. Unemployment, meanwhile, remains rampant, with 40% of the country's youth currently estimated to be without work. Against this backdrop, the Iranian regime's rampant adventurism in places like Syria and Yemen, coupled with widespread official corruption, has generated no shortage of grassroots discontent.

But the protests have quickly become much more, and now represent a wholesale indictment of Iran's clerical system itself. The character of the current demonstrations - punctuated by chants of "death to the dictator!" (a reference to Iran's all-powerful Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei) - make abundantly clear that protestors are now seeking fundamental political change for the country. In the words of one astute observer, the uprising is now "not just about the economic situation, but a deep and desperate cry against an unjust and repressive system."

That trajectory should be familiar, insofar as it mirrors the evolution of the original "Persian Spring": Iran's summer 2009 uprising. Back then, grassroots outrage over the fraudulent reelection of then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad coalesced into a larger anti-government wave that came to be known as the "Green Movement." But Iran's nascent democrats ultimately failed to unite around a coherent political agenda or path forward. And because they didn't, they were eventually coopted into supporting the Iranian regime's new and more "moderate" face, current president Hassan Rouhani.

Western disinterest was to blame as well. The Obama administration, eager to hammer out some sort of *modus vivendi* with Iran's ayatollahs, at first remained largely silent in the face of Iran's ferment. As a result, regime forces were emboldened to brutally suppress the protests without fear of international retribution. The result was a savage crackdown that left the Iranian opposition politically neutered and largely irrelevant.

Today, however, things appear to be substantially different. Unlike in 2009, Iran's current protests aren't just about a rigged election, or factional domestic politics. They reflect a fundamental loss of faith in the current regime's stewardship of the Iranian ship of state, and in the clerical political system as a whole. That loss of confidence, moreover, appears to cut across all economic strata; unlike the uprising of the last decade, today's protests do not appear to be largely a middle-class affair. As a result of these features, they may prove to be a good deal more difficult to suppress than their predecessors.

Washington, too, is now paying renewed attention. Back in 2009, the Obama administration's characterization of Iran's protests as strictly an internal affair demoralized Iran's democrats, and emboldened authorities in Tehran, with tragic results. By contrast, the current White House has done an admirable job of enunciating America's support for Iran's protesters.

"Many reports of peaceful protests by Iranian citizens fed up with regime's corruption & its squandering of the nation's wealth to fund terrorism abroad," President Trump has tweeted. "Iranian govt should respect their people's rights, including right to express themselves. The world is watching!" Other prominent decision-makers on both sides of the political aisle have communicated much the same.

Such sentiments are undoubtedly a good start. But they must be matched by concrete actions on the part of the administration - such as new economic penalties against key regime institutions responsible for repression (including the country's Central Bank and its feared *Basij* domestic militia) - that help to constrain the way Iran's leaders respond to the current protests.

Already, the Iranian regime has mobilized to quash the uprising. It has deployed security forces against the protesters, resulting in a growing number of civilian casualties. It has likewise restricted access to the internet, and blocked access to social media platforms (like Telegram and Instagram) that opposition activists are using to coordinate and communicate. The regime's objective is clear: to throttle the current protests much as it did back in 2009, before they can grow to become a mortal threat.

By making it more difficult for Iran's ayatollahs to do so, the Trump administration can help to create the political space necessary for the country's opposition to truly flourish. If that happens, perhaps the second "Persian Spring" now playing out on the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities will be able to succeed where the first one failed.

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