

Protests and Drones Push EU–Iran Relations to the Brink

by Riccardo Alcaro

The protests that have jolted Iran's clerical leadership over the past weeks,¹ as well as news of Iran's drone and missile sales to Russia,² raise questions that EU policymakers and foreign policy analysts have been struggling with for years: how stable is the Islamic Republic? How to support protesters? And how to reconcile condemnation of the crackdown on demonstrators and the need to react to Iran's uncovered support for Russia's war effort in Ukraine with EU interests in regional security and nuclear non-proliferation?

Such questions are overdue, but answers are nowhere to be found. And yet they should be given, however unsatisfying these answers may be, based on an analysis of the available

empirical evidence and EU interests at stake.

The protests

Anti-government protests have been an ever more frequent occurrence in the recent history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The apparent irregularity of the re-election of a conservative president in June 2009 spawned oceanic demonstrations under the banner of the so-called Green Movement.³ In 2012 people took to the streets when the bread price rose amidst international sanctions over Iran's nuclear plans.⁴ In fall 2019 mass protests followed the government's decision to terminate fuel subsidies⁵ to face the consequences of

¹ Christina Lu, "Iran's Uprising Gains Steam", in *Foreign Policy*, 17 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Tk3RY0>.

² "Iran Agrees to Ship Missiles, More Drones to Russia", in *Reuters*, 19 October 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-iran-agrees-ship-missiles-more-drones-russia-defying-west-sources-2022-10-18>.

³ Abbas Milani, "The Green Movement", in *The Iran Primer*, 6 October 2010, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/node/23>.

⁴ "Iran Police Clash with Protesters over Currency Crisis", in *BBC News*, 3 October 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19812482>.

⁵ Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, "Iran Abruptly Raises Fuel Prices, and Protests Erupt", in *The New York Times*, 15 November 2019,

Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of Global Actors programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

renewed US sanctions after the Trump administration opted to unilaterally leave the 2015 nuclear deal.⁶

In all cases, the Islamic Republic managed to put down protests, more often than not through violence (especially in 2019).⁷ Yet the discontent of an exhausted population never subsided.

Indeed, resentment towards the clerical regime that has been in power since the 1979 revolution ended the despotic rule of the pro-US shah has been a constant throughout these instances of popular mobilisation, even when the immediate cause was of a different nature. This year, however, political discontent has been front and centre.⁸

After a young woman of Kurdish descent, Mahsa Jinah Amini, died while in custody of the so-called morality police for allegedly wearing the mandatory headscarf improperly, people took to the streets not to contest the regularity of an election or to ask for sounder and fairer economic policies. Their central demand is unequivocally revolutionary: they demand no less than the abolition of the Islamic

Republic itself.

As far as we know, this year's demonstrations involve fewer people than in 2019 and certainly 2009. However, while leaderless and generally uncoordinated, they have so far proved resilient (one may recall that the Green Movement lasted about 6–7 months and protests went on for a year before the 1979 revolution). They are spread across country and generations, although women and "Generation Z" (those born from the mid-1990s) are at the forefront.⁹ Remarkably, protests are as strong in areas where ethnic and religious minorities live as they are in Persian and Shia parts of Iran.¹⁰

Missiles, mobilisation and drones

It is worth emphasising this latter aspect to better explain the response by the authorities. Some ethnic and religious minorities – Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis – generally live on the fringes of national politics (and even geography), which has contributed to fuelling a sense of abandonment and bitterness. While insisting on the multi-ethnic nature of

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/15/world/middleeast/iran-gasoline-prices-rations.html>.

⁶ Edward Wong, "Trump Imposes New Sanctions on Iran, Adding to Tensions", in *The New York Times*, 24 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/24/us/politics/iran-sanctions.html>.

⁷ Amnesty International, *Iran: Details of 321 Deaths in Crackdown on November 2019 Protests*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2308/2020/en>.

⁸ Amir-Hussein Radji, "Iran's Anti-Veil Protests Draw on Long History of Resistance", in *AP News*, 28 September 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/7de9a98cc304922098a62dc9223986ad>.

⁹ Farnza Fassihi, "Iran Protests Surge to Dozens of Cities", in *The New York Times*, 24 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/24/world/middleeast/iran-protests.html>; Mahzad Elyassi, "Iranian Women are Colliding with the Iranian State", in *Bourse & Bazaar Insights*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2022/10/5/iranian-women-are-colliding-with-the-iranian-state>; Kim Ghattas, "A Whole Generation Revolts Against the Iranian Regime", in *The Atlantic*, 2 October 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/article/671631>.

¹⁰ Walter Posch, "A Regime Unveiled. Social and Ethno-Sectarian Tensions and Democratic Evolution in Iran", in *IAI Papers*, No. 22|26 (October 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16085>.

the Islamic Republic and its keenness to accommodate other confessions, the central government generally tends to see minorities as fertile grounds for interference by Iran's many enemies. This perception, in turn, augments the sense of encirclement of the Islamic Republic's establishment.

It comes as no surprise then that Iran's leaders, notably Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself, have denounced the protests as being instigated, even orchestrated, by foreign powers.¹¹ While used instrumentally to justify the ferocity of the repression, this narrative also stems from a real concern that Iran's enemies – especially the US and Israel – could use domestic turmoil to destabilise the regime. This is why Iran has launched dozens of rockets against anti-Iran militias in Iraq's Kurdistan and mobilised troops along the border with Azerbaijan, two areas where the clerical regime worries about increasing Israeli influence. The regime and especially the Revolutionary Guards – the military organisation amongst other things responsible for Iran's security policy – evidently decided a warning, backed by a show of force, was needed.¹²

While similar concerns may have contributed to shaping the Iranian leadership's much more consequential decision to provide Russia with armed drones (together with training on how to use them) and other weapon systems,

¹¹ Maziar Motamedi, "Iran's Khamenei Blames Israel, US in First Comments on Protests", in *Al Jazeera*, 3 October 2022, <https://aje.io/7qv7gx>.

¹² Abdolrasool Divsallar, "The Military Dimension of Iran Protests", in *AGSIW Blog*, 19 October 2022, <https://agsiw.org/the-military-dimension-of-iran-protests>.

broader strategic considerations must have played a role. Interpretations,¹³ not necessarily mutually exclusive, have alternatively explained this decision with Iran's hunger for easy cash, need for wheat¹⁴ at affordable prices, desire to acquire Russian aircraft¹⁵ or an urge to showcase its military prowess and prove it can meddle in the West's "neighbourhood". More worryingly for the EU, it is an apparent sign that Iran's leadership may have definitely given up not just on the US but Europe too, and it is now deliberately pursuing a policy of alignment with Russia and China in an anti-US coalition.

Repression

Against this backdrop, many in Europe (and elsewhere) pin their hopes on the protesters succeeding. There is not yet sufficient evidence pointing to the fall of the Islamic Republic, however. Over the years the clerical regime has sharpened its ability to suppress and marginalise dissent. In addition, albeit widespread and intergenerational, the protests do not seem to have reached the critical mass needed to trigger epochal change in Iran. The Islamic Republic is not a vertical structure of power. Instead, it is a polycentric

¹³ Eric Brewer summarised them in a thread on his Twitter account on 21 October 2022: <https://twitter.com/BrewerEricM/status/1583236001144909824>.

¹⁴ Nadereh Chamlou and Mark N. Katz, "Putin Got what He Wanted at the Tehran Summit. But Did Iran?", in *IranSource*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=549820>.

¹⁵ David S. Cloud and Benoit Faucon, "Iranian Drones' Role in Ukraine War Risks Deepening Tehran's Rift with West", in *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 October 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-turns-against-west-as-russia-uses-its-drones-on-ukraine-11666370375>.

system in which power is distributed across various constituencies and exerted through ideological affiliation, patronage as well as intimidation and violence.

Directly or indirectly, a considerable section of the population relies on the regime for their jobs, status, subsistence and even security. This does not mean that the regime enjoys the support of the majority of the population – quantifying such support is actually pretty difficult, as is measuring opposition to it. What it means is that the threshold to mobilise politically, thus potentially endangering the benefits the regime distributes (however unfairly), may be higher than is assumed abroad.

While revolutions are very hard to predict, history – of Iran and authoritarian regimes alike – points to two critical constituencies to gauge the possible outcome of the protests. One is the behaviour of the merchant and workers' class of the bazaar, reportedly critical to the success of the 1979 revolution.¹⁶ Thus far at least, the bazaar has not mobilised *en masse* in support of the protests, if not in the Kurdish regions. While Iran's economy has become more diversified and service-driven than it was forty years ago, the bazaar's joining of the protests would send a powerful signal to the regime.

The other constituency is Iran's security establishment, in fact a collection of various forces often in competition with one another ranging

¹⁶ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran. Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated ed., New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006.

from the Revolutionary Guards (both its military and intelligence wings), the regular arms forces, the intelligence services and the police. Again, though it is impossible to discern what happens behind closed doors, no significant crack is visible from the outside. If anything, the conservative forces in power have used the protests to settle intra-regime scores.¹⁷ The possibility that the protests result not so much in political change but in a more entrenched regime, more prone to lash out internally and externally, is real.

The response dilemma

Eventually we come to the question of what response the EU should put in place in light of the Iranian leadership's actions inside and outside the country.

At the moment, the EU, along with the US (and Russia and China) is still engaged in the diplomatic process ostensibly aimed at re-activating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal of 2015.¹⁸ The agreement had basically unravelled after the US recklessly left it in May 2018 and Iran gradually stopped implementing it from 2019 onwards, but hope for a restoration rose after Joe Biden succeeded Trump in the White House. Regrettably, the nuclear talks had stalled already before the protests

¹⁷ Patrick Sykes, Arsalan Shahla and Golnar Motevalli, "Iran Protest Crackdown Engulfs Prominent Child of Revolution", in *Bloomberg*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-28/iran-arrests-ex-president-s-daughter-for-inciting-rioters>.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, "The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never", in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 230 (17 January 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/18279>.

broke out in Iran, and now seem all but certain to fail.¹⁹

In fact, EU countries may be tempted to call them off altogether, and invoke a special “snapback” mechanism that would automatically restore UN sanctions on Iran and align with the “maximum pressure” policy that Biden inherited from Trump and refused to change until a deal on reactivating the JCPOA was reached. While the deal is most likely dead, giving up on nuclear diplomacy with Iran would be a hazardous choice with no immediate returns.

As a matter of fact, Iran is already under extreme economic pressure due to the extra-territorial nature of US sanctions. These are comprehensive in nature and have had the effect of impoverishing the population, fatally weakening the regime’s pragmatist wing that had struck the deal and perversely strengthening the hard-line faction that now controls all centres of power of the Islamic Republic: the Supreme Leader, Revolutionary Guards, judiciary, presidency and parliament. Most importantly, they have failed to stop Iran’s nuclear advancements and made Iran more aggressive in the region.²⁰ Another turn of the screw would do little to weaken the regime and nothing to aid the protesters. Attesting to this, the Biden administration has relaxed

restrictions on technological services with the goal of helping them.²¹

Besides, giving up on the possibility to bring Iran’s nuclear programme under a degree of control involves accepting the risk of an Iranian nuclear weapons capacity or a military intervention by Israel and/or the US to prevent that. A direct attack against Iran, even if initially limited to its nuclear facilities, would most likely disrupt recent attempts at detente by Iran and its Arab rivals.²² It would also likely result in escalation in several if not all regional hotspots in which Iran has a stake, from Syria to Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. In addition, Iran would retaliate – as it has in the past – by targeting energy shipments in the Gulf, with grave consequences for oil markets.²³

The targeted measures that EU countries have adopted so far against Iranian individuals and entities responsible for the crackdown and the drones transfers to Russia seem to reflect a cautious, incremental approach.²⁴ But pressure to break up relations with Iran and at least implicitly commit to a policy of regime change will increase. The claim by France, Germany and the UK that Iran’s weapons sales to Russia violates

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Is Restoring the Iran Nuclear Deal Still Possible?”, in *ICG Middle East Briefings*, No. 87 (12 September 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19560>.

²⁰ International Crisis Group, “The Failure of U.S. ‘Maximum Pressure’ against Iran”, in *ICG Commentaries*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/15998>.

²¹ “US Relaxes Internet Sanctions on Iran in Support of Protesters”, in *Al Jazeera*, 23 September 2022, <https://aje.io/rkm8h0>.

²² Madawi al-Rasheed, “Saudi-Iran Detente Could Save the Arab World from Another Decade of Strife”, in *Middle East Eye*, 20 October 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/229346>.

²³ “US-Iran Standoff: A Timeline of Key Events”, in *Al Jazeera*, 25 September 2019, <https://aje.io/u6ft>.

²⁴ Council of the European Union website: *Iran: EU Restrictive Measures*, <https://europa.eu/JG98CQ>.

UN Security Council resolution 2231, which back in July 2015 endorsed and incorporated the JCPOA, is an attempt to get leverage on Iran.²⁵ However, European countries can hardly get leverage only through the threat of further sanctions and isolation. The historical record provides abundant evidence that the Islamic Republic does not respond to pressure only.

The EU response had best be calibrated so as not to deprive the clerical regime of any incentive to engage again in nuclear and regional diplomacy. For as long as it is possible, the EU should strive to prevent its relationship with Iran from falling off the cliff, even while maintaining support for the protesters' demand that their basic rights be respected.

This policy response is far from satisfying. It is not even certain that it will bring results. But at the time of writing, it appears strategically as the wisest path to take.

22 October 2022

²⁵ Laura Rozen, "E3 Urge UN to Probe Iran Drone Transfers to Russia", in *Diplomatic*, 21 October 2022, <https://diplomatic.substack.com/p/e3-urge-un-to-probe-iran-drone-transfers>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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