

The Decline (and Fall?) of the “Fourth Persian Empire”

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Brief Analysis

The timing of the Iranian government decision to lift gasoline subsidies, which has effectively doubled the cost of fuel on Iranian motorists, raises fundamental questions about the Tehran regime’s political calculus. Despite protests raging in nearby Iraq featuring open and persistent rejection of Iranian meddling and influence, and despite a defining revolution in Lebanon reshaping its political landscape by presenting an unprecedented challenge to the Iranian stranglehold of Lebanese politics and the country’s Shi’ite community, the rulers of Tehran have acted with full confidence in the permanence of their power and with evident disregard to any risk of protest contagion to their own public. This calculation, proven erroneous by this public’s reaction, is more perplexing since in both Iraq and Lebanon, the original spontaneous protests were the result of excesses by respective governments seeking greater levies from a public already deeply skeptical of its political class.

The Iranian regime’s decision to proceed in spite of it all may be interpreted as a reflection of arrogance and an overconfidence in the regime’s ability to bypass popular sentiments and impose its will. The seemingly successful immediate repression—albeit still inconclusive in the longer term, may support this argument. Still, a more reasonable assessment is to point to a degree of denial at some levels of leadership of the dissonance between the narrative of the Islamic Republic and the interests and feelings of its subject population. Both arrogance and denial can help explain the behavior of the Iranian leadership, as well as its decision to bypass the last vestige of the country’s fictional democracy—the parliament—in conceiving and carrying through with the new economic measures. Both these motivations, however, may also usher a new phase of violence, from Iran to Lebanon.

Iran’s initial responses to the mass protests in Iraq and Lebanon help shed light on the calculations of Iran’s reaction to its own protests. At first, statements by the Iranian Supreme Guide and President seemed to distinguish between legitimate demands for accountability and reform and the efforts of “malevolent” forces (Western governments, first and foremost the United States, Gulf capitalism, and, evidently, Israel) in fomenting chaos and steering the protests away from its legitimate expressions. Yet the scope and tenor of the protests, which proclaimed the loss of trust in the governments of Baghdad and Beirut and demanded the complete departure of their respective political classes, required Tehran to reconsider its response. The gravity of the events as they developed seemed to have caught Iran and its local proxies by surprise.

In Iraq, the protesters loudly voiced the explicit linkage between corruption and subservience to Iran. Notably, effigies of the Iranian supreme Guide were destroyed. These actions in turn ignited immediate suppression, with

government agencies and paramilitary forces under Iranian control brutally repressing protesters while accusing state institutions and agencies less penetrated by Iranian influence of staging a “coup” against the legitimate (Iranian-tamed) government. Under international pressure, the Iraqi government has issued investigative reports of this suppression, but these fail to provide any deterrence. Instead, Baghdad continues to display its impotence as paramilitary units and snipers loyal to Iran persist in a quasi-daily infliction of death and injury on the protestors.

In Lebanon, where the notion had been cultivated that Hezbollah is an exception to the country’s otherwise endemic corruption (even if this belief isn’t borne out in truth), the initial response to the protests was an attempt to leverage them in order to encroach further on the Lebanese political class and system. It soon became clear, however, that the protests were not an ephemeral venting of frustrations but a sustained demand for real change. Even worse from an Iranian-centered perspective was that the appeal of the “17th of October revolution” reached deep into the Shi’ite Lebanese community. This community’s embrace of the demand that all of Lebanon’s political class be dismissed is a dangerous challenge to Iran’s allies and proxies. Successive measures were thus implemented to rectify the situation and maintain influence, positioning the pro-Iranian “Resistance” in direct opposition to the Revolution.

Shi’ite Lebanese demonstrators in towns and cities viewed as the backbone of support for the pro-Iranian “Resistance” were forcibly suppressed and intimidated. Activists or common citizens who produced viral material on social media that was deemed insulting or detrimental to the “Resistance” were tracked down and invited/coerced into producing regretful apologies. Black-shirted “Resistance” militants armed with batons and fuel containers—whom pro-Iranian media characterized as local inhabitants objecting to the disruption of their business interests—were unleashed onto the main “Revolution” public square in Beirut. These militants beat protesting men and women, rampaging through the tents, booths, and stages that had become the hallmark of the festive Lebanese revolution. Over the past weeks, the Iranian proxy camp has continued to apply the tactic of intimidating, demoralizing, and depleting the self-funded Revolution through a systematic brutal attack on protestors and through the destruction of the artistic and community expressions of the Revolution. So far, the resolve of the protestors to restore, rebuild, and persist in their festive and inclusive call for change continues unabated.

Counter to objective reality, the pro-Iranian narrative of the protests in both Iraq and Lebanon has consolidated into an assessment of them as created or manipulated by “embassies”, or as suspect at best, if not outright orchestrated by external enemies. On the basis of such denial, with both the Supreme Guide in Tehran and the Secretary General of Hezbollah in Beirut ominously producing similar sentiments against the protests, and with IRGC Quds force commander Qasim Sulaymani reportedly leading the effort to restore order in Iraq, it should be understood that the next phase is one where the Iranian camp will shift to pro-active repression.

From the perspective of Iran and its vassals, it would have been tempting to view the current situation as a repeat of previous challenges. Protests in Iraq have been a recurrent but ultimately containable feature of the past few years. And with an extended assassination campaign, anti-Iranian voices in Lebanon had been contained through selective elimination and comprehensive intimidation. Iran itself has endured economically-induced (and presumably “externally-triggered”) demonstrations, but a quick-response security regimen has been able to quell them. In light of the successful handling of these past events, the most recent challenges seemed to be under control, with the associated opportunities ready to exploit. From its own perspective, The Islamic Republic could feel confident in its regional deployment.

In Lebanon, bolstered by a nationally and internationally recognized role of actual resistance against the Israeli occupation that ended nearly two decades ago, the Iranian-founded, funded, and commanded Hezbollah has been able to negate and stymie any attempt at challenging its “right” to be maintained as an extra-national parallel army. Simultaneously, through its stranglehold on the Shi’ite Lebanese community, and through the empowerment of selective factional parties, it succeeded in imposing its will on Lebanon, as a society and polity.

Along the same successful model, in Iraq, capitalizing on the substantial contribution of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units to defeating the terrorism of the “Islamic State,” actions were under way to reinforce Iranian influence, both through the deployment of Iranian assets into state institutions, and through the reassignment of national Iraqi resources to serve Iranian interests. Recent investigative reporting in the New York Times and the Intercept, based on rare leaked documents from Iran, has confirmed the wide extent of the Iranian penetration into Iraq.

The nature of the Iranian hegemony in Syria and Yemen has been different from the models of Lebanon and Iraq, but the extent of Iranian presence across the region made it possible for regime luminaries to boast to internal audiences that Iran had control over four Arab capitals, and that the Islamic Republic is in fact the “Fourth Persian Empire” with a reach from Central Asia to the Mediterranean.

Through the might of its region-wide information apparatus, Iran proclaims that the West-Gulf-Israel alliance’s attempts to defeat it have failed. Iran’s messaging claims that it has honed its ability to withstand sanctions and sieges. The aggressive nature of the “extreme pressure” measures currently being applied by the United States may cause some temporary hardship, but Iran has already prevailed: despite all economic difficulties, Iran remains firm in rejecting any change in its foreign policy approach.

But the locus of the Iranian “Empire’s” fragility might just have been revealed inside Iran itself: the discrepancy between the leadership’s reading of the nation’s geo-strategic stance and potential and the Iranian public’s unheard demands for economic relief, accountability, and dignity. The leadership sees laudable sacrifice where the public sees humiliating deprivation; the leadership dismisses as incidental flagrant cases of corruption where the public sees a systemic abuse of power.

In a close to surreal reflection on the local and regional situation, the Secretary-General of Lebanese Iranian proxy Hezbollah began one of his recent public speeches by lavishly praising the Yemeni population for its willingness to endure poverty, lack of services, heat and unending war while remaining steadfast in its opposition to (a very distant) Israel. Uttered in the midst of a monetary and economic crisis afflicting Lebanon, traceable in good part to Hezbollah itself, the Secretary-General was quick to assure the Lebanese public that the funds for the sustenance of the “Revolution” were secure. Their provenance is directly from Iran, and is not through the banking system, the imminent collapse of which threatens the Lebanese livelihood and way of life. This narrative reflects the ideological Iranian axis mindset that it is ample consolation for the Lebanese, and the Iraqis, and the Iranians themselves that, economic and social devastation notwithstanding, the “Resistance” will remain a “thorn in the side of the enemy,” even if only theoretically.

A danger looms in this dissonance, and in the refusal to acknowledge that the ill-conceived and fictional war universe is a primary factor in draining local resources and exposing local and regional life and welfare to undue risks. A sober reading of the situation would have provided the leadership of the Iranian hegemony with the realization that their model of predatory expansion is proving non-viable, and the depletion of public resources this model requires doom it to inevitable failure.

Some in the leadership circles in Tehran, Baghdad, and Beirut may be well aware of this transparent truth, and may have accordingly availed themselves of the opportunity to ramp up their usurpation of public funds from “milking the cow” to “bleeding” it—plundering public funds and assets at an unsustainable pace. For the ideological few, who imagine “liberation movements” where actual armies of occupation deny the local population its fundamental rights, the trajectory is towards more indulgence in the quixotic mindset of an existential fight. Both of these approaches are potential recipes for more violence.

The “Fourth Persian Empire” is in decline through the weight of its own unsustainability. The U.S. measures taken

against it have merely accelerated the rate of erosion. Now that the tipping point resulting from an increasing scarcity of resources, a heightened avidity of the kleptocratic class, and a self-ignited public awareness have converged to create a storm of protest, it is hard to imagine how this bankrupt model of external domination can prevail in the long term. Lebanon may not be immune from the descent to more violence, already reached in Iraq and Iran. In all three places, it is an asymmetrical confrontation between unarmed protesters driven by concrete interests and universal values, and armed proxies of an ideological regime driven by illusions of supremacy.

The revolutionaries in Iraq and Lebanon, and maybe soon in Iran, do not need weapons to balance this unfair situation, and are not served by pronouncements from world capitals speaking on their behalf. They are, however, in need of principled and actual support. In the face of attempts by Tehran and its agents to stifle communications, especially through the internet, the protesters are in dire need of alternative methods to resist the disruption of their ability to inform, be informed, and to coordinate.

Most importantly, the protesters need the undue force against them to be noted and the perpetrators punished. The world—which has accommodated, accepted, or condoned the imperial impulses of Iran’s ideological elite—ought to consider the blood of the protesters the red line in the face of violence by Iran and its proxies. If it cannot rely on the undue advantage of repressive force, the fate of the “Fourth Persian Empire” will instead be determined by its current victims. ❖

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