



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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## After the Iran Protests

by Kevin L. Schwartz

Many questions still remain unanswered about the nature of the protests in Iran that began in December 2017. However, events seem to point to a watershed moment and not because protesters at times appeared more fearless in attacking symbols of Islamic Republic power, attempted to overtake government buildings, leveled slogans against leaders across the political spectrum, or at times offered chants in support of Iran's last shah. Rather the fury of the protests this time appears to have first been kindled by economic displeasure and point to a more general epistemic [questioning of the Islamic Republic's ability to deliver on life as promised](#).

How the protests are reported to have started remains unclear. Hardline opponents of President Hasan Rouhani are presumed to have organized protests in opposition to his economic policies to discredit him. Rumors have also swirled that it was former populist president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), now a curious thorn in the regime's side and advocate of everything from [judicial transparency](#) to [immediate and free elections](#), who helped instigate the initial protests. Either way, any hope that such efforts would remain confined to expressing displeasure at President Rouhani's policies or otherwise narrowly confined proved misguided: a wave of protests was sparked instead, testifying to how quickly a general rage over economic conditions could be set ablaze and morph into a systemic mistrust of the state.

### MES Notes

On Thursday, 3 May 2018, Middle East Studies (MES) at the Marine Corps University (MCU) will host a panel entitled "Turkey: Between Competition and Cooperation" as part of the Marine Corps War College (MCWAR) "Diplomacy and Statecraft" instructional block and the AY18 MES Lecture Series "Navigating Geopolitical Competition and Internal Wars in the Middle East and North Africa". Guest speakers include: Ambassador Ross Wilson, Atlantic Council; Dr. Sinan Ciddi, Institute of Turkish Studies; and Dr. Soner Cagaptay, The Washington Institute.

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: [www.usmcu.edu/mes](http://www.usmcu.edu/mes), or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or [adam.seitz@usmcu.edu](mailto:adam.seitz@usmcu.edu).

### MES at MCU Disclaimer

*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.*

The protests of late may have been smaller than those of the [Green Movement in 2009](#), but these ones have struck a chord in multiple towns and small cities [across Iran's provincial landscape](#), enlivening the working class and down-on-their-luck job-seekers among the youth far beyond Iran's capital. More importantly, whereas the Green Movement protests grew out of the specific event of a contested presidential election, the recent protests relate to a myriad of concerns over job prospects, inflation, government subsidies, disbursement to religious foundations, and payments to foreign entities. The difference is crucial in how the government is able to shape its version of events and manage any fallout from the protests moving forward.

Nearly a decade ago, when the Iranian government stamped out the post-election protests part of their success was controlling the narrative of events. When the protesters refused to recognize a verified election result, the government had little trouble in claiming their disobedience to the Islamic Republic and quickly moved to marginalize, repress, and arrest them and their leaders. These "seditionists", as the government called them, were operating outside the body politic and wanted to put an end to the Islamic Republic by taking actions in clear defiance of a political edict. The protesters needed to be crushed; their leaders, like Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, placed under house arrest.

The government today cannot reliably make such a neat, collective claim about the protesters' dissatisfaction or maintain strict control over the narrative of events, nor are there any leaders to arrest. These protests were not instigated by a single political event like an election result but rather by general fatigue of economic life. The data points under discussion are not the disputed votes in a limited number of ballot boxes but rather the price of eggs, the value of Iran's currency, and limitless perceptions of government responsibility. The government may be able to control the counting of votes but controlling citizens' perceptions over the state of the economy and one's own job prospects is invariably more difficult.

## MES Notes (Cont.)

**14 March 2018**

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on Iran's armed forces for the National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC), Charlottesville, VA.

**14 March 2018**

Adam Seitz presented a lecture entitled "Contextualizing Yemen's Internal War" as part of the MCU Faculty Sharing Series.

**23 March 2018**

Adam Seitz taught classes on Gulf States' Security Issues and Yemen for the US Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) CENTCOM Theater for Special Operations Forces (CTSOF) Course at Cannon AFB, NM.

**28 March 2018**

Amin Tarzi presented a lecture on Afghanistan and Pakistan to the NATO Regional Cooperation Course 19 (NRCC19) at the NATO Defense College (NDC), Rome, Italy.

**3 April 2018**

MES hosted Dr. Karen Young, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), for a lecture entitled "The Political Imperative of Economic Reform in the Gulf States," as part of the MES AY18 Lecture Series.

**10-21 April 2018**

Amin Tarzi provided lectures and seminars on the Middle East and North Africa for US Navy personnel serving onboard the USS *Harry S. Truman*. (See page 4)

**11 April 2018**

MES hosted the National Defense University (NDU) Near East South Asia (NESA) Center course for a group of 26 Lebanese Armed Forces officers visiting from the Fouad Shehab Command and Staff College.

**26 April 2018**

Adam Seitz spoke on regional security issues as part of the panel discussion "The Geopolitics of Energy: The Saudi Aramco IPO, Implications and Considerations" at the Daniel Morgan Graduate School in Washington DC.

None of these differences, of course, prevented the government from initially following the same playbook to quell the protests as in 2009 by claiming the protesters are sponsored by foreign enemies, threatening them with charges such as waging war against God, and deploying the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) to neutralize them. But such actions are only short term fixes meant to prevent and clear bodies from the street. Moving forward, the government will have to contend with a potentially direr and destabilizing challenge: a wave of workers, the unemployed, and lower classes viewing clerical elites—regardless of political affiliation—as a ruling class who enrich themselves at the expense of everyday citizens.

If the ruling clerics are unable to address the growing perception that state power is used to amass wealth for themselves while remaining indifferent to the economic woes of the many, then the Islamic Republic may find itself outflanked by the very same people who it long supposed to be among its most important base. This time there will be no easy claim that the protesters fall outside the body politic and wish to subvert the Islamic Republic, for it is in their name and the pursuit of social justice more generally that the Revolution is often claimed to have been made in the first place.

Such a fact, along with the speed with which the protests rippled through the country and took the government by surprise, has already led to a range of responses across political factions. Infighting and blaming amongst government factions has now reached a fever pitch with the Rouhani administration and its conservative detractors trying to pass the blame to the other and compete over a demographic the state had long taken for granted. It is unsurprising, then, that the government thus far has been unable to offer a unified response.

Even attempts by different factions to offer solutions have remained incoherent and contradictory. Conservatives have [recognized the protesters' economic grievances](#) and separated the protestors from the “seditionists” who questioned the Islamic Republic system and caused property damage. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has indicated that military organizations should divest from “[irrelevant economic activities](#)”, an ongoing source of frustration for many of the citizenry who see organizations like the IRGC unfairly benefiting from government largesse and preferential economic treatment. But it is unclear how such a policy directive would actually unfold in practice, if at all. Besides, such recommendations remain continually undercut by brushing off the protests as part of a larger foreign plot and by the Supreme Leader's claims that workers—[whose economic plight played no small role in the events](#)—have long been [a bastion of counter-revolution sentiment](#).

President Rouhani, for his part, had initially [contextualized the protests more generally](#) in the restrictive control the government places upon its citizens and has noted that the government cannot continue to dictate the lifestyle of the country's youth. For example, his administration, along with reformist parliamentarians has [expressed dismay](#) that the Iranian government [will be moving to block](#) the messaging app Telegram, whose users in Iran number about 40 million. Nonetheless, even while recognizing the larger political grievances structuring recent economic angst, when faced with the opportunity to show solidarity, for example, with those rallying against the compulsory headscarf, his

response [has been more lukewarm than supportive](#). This approach is much in line with Rouhani's pragmatist pedigree, especially around sensitive topics in times of turmoil: display an awareness of a cultural issue vexing many Iranians but do not offer enough support as to alienate the more conservative voices of the government by wasting limited political capital available to confront issues of presumed greater import, like the economy.

Since the original protests erupted over economic displeasure in December 2017, a spate of other protests has unfolded, ranging from those by a marginalized [Sufi order](#) to the economically and ethnically disenfranchised [Arab citizens of the Khuzestan Province](#). The most publicly prominent of these protests continues to be carried out by those individuals challenging the compulsory headscarf, inspired of late by the "[Girls of Revolution Street](#)" movement. Most recently, [a video of a woman being accosted by the police](#) for improper dress has gone viral and sparked widespread outrage. The government has vowed to investigate. As the government continues to search for its footing in a newfound, protest-filled environment where a constellation of voices is emerging to more readily and publicly challenge long-standing norms and practices, the outcome of any potential investigation is anyone's guess.

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## MES PME Support for US Navy RSEP

MES Director Amin Tarzi participated in the US Navy's Regional Security Education Program (RSEP) with the Carrier Strike Group 8 on board USS *Harry S. Truman* in April. Tarzi provided graduate-level lectures and seminars for senior leaders and regional introductions and topical overviews to all hands over the course of 10 days. This was MES's second assignment with RSEP, enhancing MCU's PME reach to the operating forces and providing time with the operating forces to deepen MCU faculty's understanding of the current requirements placed on the operating forces and enhance MES's curricular offerings. Additionally, the partnership between MES and RSEP allows for PME to be used as a strategic assist in furthering the goal of interoperability across the naval services of the United States.

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