

Protests in Iran and Erdogan's War Against the Kurds in Syria

An Israel News Talk Radio Discussion
by Jerry Gordon and Rod Bryant (February 2018)



Protests in Iran, Tehran University, January 2018

2018 broke with news of anti-government protests across Iran in more than 80 cities with cries of “death to Khamenei,” “down with the dictator”, “We don’t want an Islamic Republic”, “Get out of Syria,” Get out of Lebanon.” Unlike 2009 when the Green Movement protests brought millions in the streets of Tehran and a few other cities following the alleged fraudulent re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the vast preponderance of thousands of protesters in 2018 were not from the elite class, but instead ordinary Iranians. They were expressing grievances about low wages and high unemployment, especially acute for young people, given the majority of the country’s population is below age 24. There were accusations

about financial manipulations tantamount to Ponzi schemes perpetrated by unregulated financial institutions, hyper inflation from a building boom and crash. The grievances were directed at the country's Supreme Ruler, Ayatollah Khamenei and 'moderate' President Rouhani. Expectations had been raised following the 2015 nuclear pact with the UN that there would be economic boom, jobs would be produced and wages rise. Instead, the hundreds of billions of released sequestered oil revenues were diverted to fund foreign adventures in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen. Funds flowed into religious foundations favored by the Supreme Ruler and the mullahs and into businesses owned by the Revolutionary Guards. The leaderless protests were connected by a social media network of tens of millions of smart phones using an encrypted messaging service Telegram and apps that contravened interference by state security. The issues were how these protests could be supported from outside the country, who might lead them from the ex-pat communities and what could the Trump Administration bolster the Iranian desire for regime change.

Separately, the conundrum of how to support the Kurds in Syria arose threatened by invasion from Turkish armed forces targeting the enclave in Afrin. Turkish president Erdogan was incensed at the announcements from US Secretaries of State Tillerson and Defense Mattis about establishment of a 30,000 person Border Security Force (BSF) drawn from the US coalition-supported Kurdish YPG-led Syrian Democratic Force (SDF). The US coalition backed YPG-led SDF had won major battles in Kobani, Manbij and retook the Deir es Zour oil fields in eastern Syria.

Erdogan considers the YPG and its political party, the PYD, as nothing more than extension of the Turkish Kurdish Workers

Party (PKK) they have designated a ‘terrorist’ group. In his view the US proposed YPG Kurdish led BSF is a terrorist army threatening Turkey. In 2013 he had concluded a cease fire with the jailed leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, which he unilaterally broke in mid-2015 reigniting a virtual civil war in the largely Kurdish southeastern region of the country abutting Syria. After the July 2016 staged coup Erdogan had undertaken a limited incursion into Syria with Islamist allies from the Free Syria Army. On the weekend of January 20-21, 2018 Turkish forces invaded Afrin with FSA allies. The invasion of predominately Kurdish enclave of Afrin in Syria was preceded by artillery shelling and aerial bombing. The objective appears to be creation of another safe zone in Syria equivalent to the one from the 2016 episode. That triggered conversations between US and Russian Military chiefs and calls for an emergency session of the UN Security Council. This action comes less than 10 days before a Russia-sponsored Syrian peace conference in Sochi previously scheduled for January 29-30th. Syrian Kurds had been extended an invitation to participate over the objections of Turkey, Iran and Syria’s Assad. Given the events unfolding in Afrin the session could possibly be cancelled.

Against this background, senior editor Jerry Gordon was invited by Israel News Talk Radio Beyond the Matrix host Rod Bryant to discuss these developments and related issues concerning recent Trump Administration policy changes with regard to Israel, its capital of Jerusalem and curtailment of funding for the Palestinian Authority and Prime Minister Netanyahu’s state visit to India.

Rod Bryant: Thank you so much for joining us here on Israel News Talk Radio–Beyond the Matrix. I’m Rod Bryant along with my guest Jerry Gordon. Jerry in this week’s show I wanted to concentrate on the protests in Iran. Now this is not the first

time that you and I have seen a protest in Iran. As a matter of fact the one that I remember the best was when I was a young boy. I like to say that, it makes me feel young. It was the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that ended up landing many of our embassy personnel in danger for many months until finally they were let out after Carter Administration lost the election and Ronald Reagan won. So first let's talk about what was this protest? What did it look like?

Jerry Gordon: This protest was radically different than the 2009 protest that was against the fraudulent election of then-President Mohammad Ahmadinejad. That protest was largely focused in Tehran and involved the elite and supported the so-called Green or Reformist Movement inside the Islamic Revolution. This time it's not. The protests of the average working Iranians occurred throughout the country in more than eighty cities. By the time the current round of protests began to peter out this past week they had arrested about 3,700 people and I think a couple of hundred might have been killed. It was different this time because these people said, "Hey, you cut a deal with the world on the Nuclear Pact and you didn't deliver for us, the people that you are supposed to be supporting, Supreme Ruler, Ayatollah Khamenei." They wanted to see something in their paychecks to have the ability to buy things that they couldn't. Remember the vast majority of the Iranian population, fifty percent or better, is under the age of twenty-four.

Bryant: Wow, I didn't know that.

Gordon: Their unemployment rate is three times, nearly thirty percent versus the roughly national average of 12.8% for Iran's labor force. On top of that they have hyperinflation.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: Ahmadinejad when he was in power created a bunch of unregulated Ponzi scheme financial institutions that some in Iran called "Abu Madoff" funds.

Bryant: I didn't know that.

Gordon: Ahmadinejad wanted to foster another construction boom and that blew up resulting in the Khamenei regime having to begin a partial bailout. The worst part about it is those hundreds of billions of dollars of sequestered oil revenues released under the lifting of nuclear sanctions, went to fund two things, adventures overseas in places like Lebanon Syria, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf . Billions of funds were diverted to what are called religious foundation. The Revolutionary Guard who own a number of businesses, some of which are sanctioned because of the missile development violations. So not much of these released funds trickled down to the average Iranian. You could call this the failure of Islamic trickle down economic theory.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: It just did not work and so the average Iranian just blew their stack in grievous complaints. That was one aspect of it. The other aspect of it was the use of a certain messaging service called Telegram that is encrypted. Telegram

was used as the tissue connection between these average persons across the country. They could send messages saying "death to the dictator" meaning Ayatollah Khamenei, they said "get out of Lebanon, get out of Syria, and get out of Yemen."

Bryant: This is Telegram an app for their phone or Tablet?

Gordon: It's basically a smart phone messaging service.

Bryant: Okay.

Gordon: You and I happen to use another app called WhatsApp.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: Telegram was developed by a Russian and he left Russia because he wanted this to be used throughout the world by people like the ordinary Iranians. What is interesting is the comparison with 2009. In 2009 there were less than one million smart phones in Iran, a county of 70 plus million.

Bryant: Wow.

Gordon: Guess how many there are now?

Bryant: I have no idea.

Gordon: Forty-eight to fifty million.

Bryant: So the whole point is everybody in Iran has a smart phone nowadays?

Gordon: Right.

Bryant: This changes the dynamic of a grassroots protest.

Gordon: That's correct. Now interestingly the so-called moderate President Rouhani at one point said "well it's okay to protest." The reason why he said was they found that out that Telegram was being used as a messaging service by something like ten thousand businesses across the country, legitimately for commercial reasons and they were not going to kill it. They were consternated. They finally realized that there has been a real substantive social media revolution in their own country that allowed the ordinary folks to say get out of dodge meaning get out of you know where, Hezbollah in Lebanon or Yemen or Syria because they view that as the bad use of the released sanctioned funds. Funds that could have been used to invest in real jobs and real growth.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: But they are not doing that.

Bryant: That means that all the profits go to the Iranian government and different from say Saudi Arabia in which just about every Saudi citizen gets some type of reparations or remunerations.

Gordon: They get a subsidy.

Bryant: Subsidy, right from the government because of the sale of the oil. This means that most Saudis, I don't even know if they work honestly. Because the only people you see working are Filipinos and foreigners from different parts of the world in Saudi Arabia.

Gordon: Yes, the average young Saudi male of working age may well be from a certain class called "Sitting-around boys."

Bryant: Yes.

Gordon: They don't have very much to do. That is part of their problem.

Bryant: So in Iran they should be able to be receiving some funds and knowing that how it works in our economy it should be bursting at the seams. However, not when they are struggling and shouldn't be struggling with the amount of oil

sales that are going on now in Iran.

Gordon: Yes.

Bryant: So that coupled with the fact that the economy is not doing very well, means that the people are still struggling and they realize that Iran is spending millions or hundreds of millions of dollars to support terrorism. This protest is different because they want this stuff to stop.

Gordon: That's correct.

Bryant: Now these protests are not part of a specific political organization are they?

Gordon: No they are not. That is one of the difficulties. An Israeli commentator Jonathan Spyer has an article in *The Jerusalem Post* on why these protests were different than the episode in 2009. He pointed out that there isn't a revolutionary government as there was that precipitated the 1979 Revolution under the original founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. That raises the question about whether or not there should be support for a government in exile as there was during World War II when the Nazis occupying all of Europe. We had a Norwegian government, Czech government, a Dutch government, a Polish government etc., in exile in London. Is there isn't anything to akin to that in Iran? The only personality out there who the Iranians might coalesce around could be the late Shah's son who has the same name as the founder Reza Pahlavi. He lives in the US. I think he lives up

in the DC metro area. He was interviewed and he would really like to see a pluralistic government and economy and there were even cries amongst the protesters who would shout “bring back the Shah”, meaning bring back his son. He could be an iconic figure around which a “government in exile” could possibly be built, That is, if Iranians could deal with each other to permit one to be established. That is what Jon Spyer said in his *Jerusalem Post* op-ed. was a missing component that would have put real substance behind the protests. The other is something that the U.S. could do which is reform it’s Voice of America Farsi or Persian language service to generate, the kind of commentary, supporting regime change in Iran. Ironically it’s the Kol Israel Radios Farsi Service that is the most listened to by Iranians.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: If you take items I just enumerated that others have sort of locked onto you can see that there is something missing. That could be developed if there was a concerted effort on the part of other governments like ours. Realize that half of the population of Iran is not Persian, They are Arabs or Baloch or Lurs or Azeris or Kurds, don’t forget the Kurds.

Bryant: As a matter of fact if you talk to an Iranian they are going to tell you I’m Persian, don’t call me Iranian.

Gordon: That’s correct.

Bryant: We were talking about the Iranian protest before the break about what the United States could do to show its support. I'm not sure that we really did anything verbally to get behind this protest and I'm not sure why. Maybe you could provide some commentary about some active things that we could do to help encourage the average citizen of Iran to step up and think about regime change.

Gordon: The thing that we did this time that we didn't do under Obama in 2009 was to make an appeal for these ordinary Iranians essentially to keep up a level of protest against the regime. They got that message from some of President Trump's better tweets and from U.S. UN Ambassador Nikki Haley. The things that the U.S. has not done as I indicated before, was that we need to reform and create a more effective Farsi or Persian language service for the Voice of America. We just have not done it. It requires frankly new leadership to be appointed by the White House at the Broadcast Board of Governors that administers Voice of America, Radio Liberty and its various language services. That's one suggestion. The other that we haven't done is something that we did during the Cold War and that is to set up dissident groups from within the non Persian minorities inside Iran, some of whom like the Ahwaz Sunni Arabs, the Kurds and the Baloch have engaged in actual resistance against the central government, against the Revolutionary Guards. We also haven't put some disincentives on private foreign investors to not consider making direct investments in Iran until they clean up their act. For example the Airbus folks, you know have a great thing going with orders to upgrade Iran's civilian air fleets. Allegedly, selling Iran aircraft they are going to ship from the United States. The French in particular have gotten very cozy with the Iranians. They signed a whole bunch of agreements with the Iranians and their big auto company Peugeot had a banner year primarily because it could go back to its traditional export

market in Iran. So you want to heighten the risk for foreign direct investment until we see dramatic changes that would benefit the folks on the ground out there, the average Iranian workers. Those are suggestions that others in the Washington policy community might address both here in the United States and in Israel.

Bryant: The question is do you think it's possible to have a successful regime change without a lot of bloodshed?

Gordon: No. I think the tenacity of the Shia supremacists, the Ayatollah and the Mullahs, basically have stolen the country's provenance and stuffed their own pockets with funding these religious foundations that the Ayatollah as Supreme Ruler has set up. Also, the IRGC owns a whole bunch of companies. It's almost analogous to what the People's Liberation Army has done in China which owns a large number of businesses.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: You've got to change that. If you can't change that then you are going to have a lot of blood in the water and on the ground in Iran.

Bryant: What has been a big benefit for change in the world in the last say seventy-five years have been especially the socialist countries. Russia and China realizing that communism has not worked and that free market economic system at some level with a capitalist base is about the only way to really prosper. I think what they realized you can only stuff your

pocket if wealth is coming from a productive economy.

Gordon: That is in fact going on, now. We are in the seventh year of the infamous Arab Spring. You noticed the protests have grown elsewhere such as in Tunisia this past week. There were protests and arrests there and attacks on Jews in Tunisia. It is because their Islamist economic government replaced an autocratic one that didn't deliver for the ordinary people. So it is not only the socialist notion of command economy but it's the Islamic Sharia principals of economy that have failed.

Bryant: I'm not really sure how the Islamists economy works I mean is it a socialist based system or what?

Gordon: Well it is in part. I mean the big thing is so called Sharia finance and the doctrine in terms of how they handle things like interest and profits. The logical alternative is a free market system that it is the arbiter of how you allocate resources, capital and labor and organize production in response to complete market demand. They don't allocate resources that way.

Bryant: No.

Gordon: They have a command economy just like the Soviets did.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: That is the issue, why they are failing and their people protesting.

Bryant: Ultimately that is probably going to be one of the greatest benefits of society with the internet, the availability of information that nations are going to turn around and realize. Israel is prospering as a matter of fact if you look at Israel in its economy compared to all the nations around it is, you know it's in the stratosphere and doing well.

Gordon: That's right. Take a look at what happened recently. A big state visit on the part of Israeli PM Netanyahu with the Premier of India and he's putting on a big show for him. They have already signed nine or ten agreements that he's going to be taking away with him.

Bryant: Now these agreements are major economic agreements I mean these are huge.

Gordon: There are a number of defense agreements. For example they are going to be revisiting the shipping of so-called Spike missiles that Israel uses against Syria for example. There are also cultural agreements as well. These happen to deal with what Israel has been good at doing, building a start up economy.

Bryant: What do you think explains the love affair of

Netanyahu and India?

Gordon: I think it's the fact that Prime Minister Modi, who is an Indian Hindu nationalist, realizes that what he did in his home province of Gujarat by focusing on a less state supported economy and fostering entrepreneurship essentially was the way to go in terms of the economic future for everybody in the country. That is the model that Israel created.

Bryant: This goes back to what we were talking about earlier that the economy is going to drive change. I really do believe that. I mean back in the day before information technology change usually was brought about by major warfare, invasion and taking people's possessions and money, etc. Nowadays I think people realize, hold on a second, the average guy if you could empower him to make his own way and enable him to have the ability to make money, society as a whole is lifted up to a higher level.

Gordon: Yes, that has been the model that the West has created and then subsequently it took at least a hundred and fifty years to have that eventuate in the rest of the world. I mean the Indian economy was socialist underneath the Nehru family government. They were pro-Palestinian. They had basically a socialist economy and it was going nowhere.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: It was really the entrepreneurial revolution that occurred with the advent of technology that basically was the

spark plug. That is why they so appreciate what Israel have accomplished with a fraction of their population. 8.5 million versus India's 1.3 billion.

Bryant: I think that we are going to slowly see this shift also toward Africa. Because we see a lot of interests being promoted between African states and Israel. There has got to be a change and I think that they are beginning to see that.

Bryant: I think we need a Kurdish update. This whole thing between the Kurds, Erdogan and what is actually going to happen? Are we going to see a state of Kurdistan come up in the future and that is going to be an interesting subject to chat about?

Gordon: Yes. we are at a tipping point in Syria because the Kurds have demonstrated their ability working with the U.S. coalition to occupy a fairly significant portion of what was the obvious failed state of Syria at this juncture. There is a war going on between Erdogan on the one hand and the Russians on the other in terms of whether or not the Kurds in Syria in contrast to what happened in Iraq can really eventuate into some form of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria proper.

Bryant: I think it's a long time overdue.

Gordon: Exactly right.

Bryant: I would like to delve in a little bit on the Kurds

what's happening there and what is the possibility of a Kurdish nation or state to be recognized officially?

Gordon: We basically have to face the reality that what would have been an independent Kurdistan in Iraq failed this fall. It was gobbled up by Iran and a combination of proxy Shia Hashd Al Shaabi Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Recently the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Shia dominated central Iraqi government in Baghdad came to a civil aviation agreement enabling them to fly in and out of Erbil, their own capital of the KRG. The Kurds have been hamstrung when they lost Kirkuk in October 2017. Now we may have an opportunity for Kurdish autonomy in Syria because of the U.S. coalition backing the Syrian Democratic Force. The Kurds now occupy a significant slice of the Northeast of Syria and hold the oil and gas fields in Deir es Zour in Eastern Syria. This was after defeating ISIS in Kobani, Manbij and Raqqa. There has been debate going on between the Russians and the Turks about giving auspices for a version of an autonomous region inside Syria for the Kurds. There is an event coming up on the January 29th and 30th in Sochi at which there is going to be discussion about a possible deal to end the civil war which I don't think is going to be realized.

Bryant: I think Russia also wants them involved in those talks correct?

Gordon: That's correct. Russia, unlike Erdogan who wants to strangle them, feels that they have a stake in the game. They have earned it. They have a big chip to play in those discussions, especially if the US is serious about staying in Syria and backing the proposed Syrian Border Force that has inflamed Turkey's Erdogan.

Bryant: Right.

Gordon: There could be the auspices for achieving that. On the other hand the question is that going to be permitted and become a reality? The only stake the U.S. has announced is creating a so-called Border Security Force for the Kurds which will probably take years. They are projecting a force of about thirty thousand. The force could be drawn from the mixed Kurdish, Syrian, Armenian and Assyrian Christian and Arab force that liberated Raqqa and Deir es Zour. However, the bad actor in all of this is Erdogan. Erdogan has become the other hegemon in the Middle East besides Shia supremacist Iran. He has bases in Qatar and Somalia. In late December, he received the gift of a Red Sea island, Suakin, to build a naval base courtesy of Sudan's President Bashir, a Muslim Brother ally. That has enraged President el-Sisi in Egypt. He transferred troops with the assistance of the UAE to, of all places, Eritrea. They closed the borders between Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia over the course of a week. Now that support had been temporized. Erdogan, who is Muslim Brotherhood, supported Hamas. He has given safe haven to Muslim Brothers from Egypt and also Hamas. He is also allied with Sudan's Bashir to foster the overthrow of adjacent governments in Libya as well as in Chad.

Bryant: Now what is his connection you think with Qatar?

Gordon: Qatar has always been Muslim Brotherhood. We know they have supplied hundreds of millions of dollars of aid to Sudan to assist in its genocide in Darfur and other regions. We know that during the whole Benghazi episode with the CIA under John

Brennan, the Qataris were shipping in arms to various places in West Africa. More importantly they were shipping weapons via Turkey to Syria to support "the opposition."

Bryant: I find it surprising that President Trump gave them an "attaboy" recently for fighting terrorism.

Gordon: Yes, President Trump said, in effect congratulations on doing great counter-terrorism work. That was the same sort of communications language he used enabling lifting of Sudan sanctions for President Bashir, another member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Bryant: Do you think this is some kind of ploy to develop a relationship? I mean we also have to remember that is it possible that the Muslim Brotherhood that is in Qatar and in other places are supporting terrorist operations? Is it possible that neighboring Sunni emirates and Saudi Arabia don't know about that?

Gordon: It's not possible.

Bryant: Okay.

Gordon: Look, the Emir of Qatar is an autocrat. He doesn't have a constituent assembly. Unfortunately he donated a billion dollars to build the Al Udeid Air Base that we had created over there to supposedly assist in Middle East operations of Central Command. Ironically, it was to supplant

the NATO Base at Incirlik in Turkey which is not being used effectively because of questions of the dispute between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar.

Bryant: There had been a high level of regional operations in Qatar for years.

Gordon: Yes, there had been with the Al Udeid military base.

Bryant: However, you are telling me that that's not being fully utilized as it was previously?

Gordon: It is being utilized only to the extent that it would engage in doing tactical and resupply work but not most of the air missions in Syria and Iraq. The US led coalition has been carrying out. I think out of the UAE.

Bryant: We also have this sort of interesting developing alignment of tacit allies Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Israel and Egypt. Nations that previously either were silent, didn't say too much about it or just absolutely were in opposition to Israel. Now they are saying that they would align themselves with Israel, if something eventuated in a deal with the Palestinians. I just find it amazing, shocking and at the same time I'm scratching my head. What do you think about that?

Gordon: To the extent that Israel can exchange intelligence with them, supply them with weaponry and training that's fine. The big breakthrough will be on the question of pushing for a

peace deal with the Palestinians. Look what happened recently, Abbas basically said “kiss off Israel; we are reverting back to our Holocaust denial roots about acceptance of a Jewish state.”

Bryant: Right. In reality all of the threats that Abbas has handed Israel in the past few months with the Embassy in Jerusalem, cutting funding for Hamas, nothing has really changed. This is the same kind of rhetoric we have seen for sixty years. They are going to deny it. Is it going to hurt our feelings now? They have been doing that anyway.

Gordon: Trump, at least has realized that if you don't cut back on the money flow the Palestinians won't do anything.

Bryant: Right, of course.

Gordon: You saw what happened with the US UNWRA first quarter donation of a \$125 million, they cut it back to \$65 million. Already a lot of people on the ground in these thirty-two refugee camps across those areas are concerned about where their next flour bag is coming from. On top of the fact that they are being educated in anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hate. Then the next thing that has to happen is when Vice President Pence comes to Jerusalem.

Bryant: Yes.

Gordon: He may be bringing something with him assuming that it

is finally passed by the US Senate and signed into law, the Taylor Force Act.

Bryant: Now tell everybody who Taylor Force was.

Gordon: Taylor Force was a U.S. Army Military Academy graduate, who served as an officer in Iraq and Afghanistan. In March of 2016 he was knifed to death by a Palestinian terrorist at a seaside restaurant in Jaffa in Israel. He was there as a graduate student from the Vanderbilt University School of Management. He was checking out how the Israeli 'start up economy' works. He ends up a US victim of Palestinian terror. That was when the US realized that the PLO for years has been taking foreign donation monies from the U.S. and others and essentially . . .

Bryant: Paying the terrorists.

Gordon: Yes, the PLO was paying imprisoned Palestinian terrorists and their families over \$350 million dollars in what has been called "pay for slay" stipends.

Bryant: So if Pence is really going to come with a bite, that's what he needs to bring with him. In effect he not only said we going to cut back your aid, but we are also going to seriously affect your ability to continue this craziness of supporting terrorist families or terrorists themselves. Thank you joining the discussion Jerry. Tell everybody Shalom and we'll see you guys next week.

Gordon: Thanks for having me back. Shalom y'all.

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