

In Iran, It's Again "Death to Palestine"

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The immediate cause of the latest protests in Iran against the government was the shooting down of the Ukrainian passenger jet. Iranians on the streets were angry with their own government both for its incompetence in failing to recognize the jet as a passenger plane, and for its lying to the world about what caused the incident for several days. But there was much more going on in these protests, which widened from their original prompt to a wholesale protest against the rule, both corrupt and cruel, of the clerics. Once again, as in the 2009 student-led protests, regime change is being talked about by Iranian protesters.

The Islamic Republic looks more vulnerable than ever, for three reasons. First, there is the economic collapse within

the country, brought about by Trump's re-imposition of sanctions, which has led to a 90% drop in oil revenues within the last two years, a decrease in the value of the rial by two-thirds in one year, a steep rise in unemployment, and a 42% inflation rate for 2019. Second, Iran has continued its expensive adventurism abroad, supplying financial and military aid to the Assad regime in Syria, to Hezbollah in Lebanon, to Shi'a militias in Iraq, to the Houthis in Yemen, and to Hamas in Gaza. In 2009, one of the chants of the anti-regime protesters was "Death to Lebanon, Death to Palestine" – which meant "we don't want more Iranian resources going abroad to Hezbollah and Hamas or any others – we need those resources here at home." Iran's commitments abroad have only deepened since 2009, with its aid to Assad that began in 2011, its quarter-century of support for Hezbollah, which now has 140,000 Iranian-supplied missiles aimed at Israel, its financial and military aid for the Houthis in Yemen that began in 2015, and its more recent support for Hamas in Gaza. All of that is a terrific drain on the Iranian economy. Third, the targeted killing of Soleimani has scared Iran's leaders, who now know they are not safe from the Americans. Their careful response to Soleimani's killing, warning the Iraqis several hours in advance, knowing full well that that warning would be passed onto the Americans who would then take refuge in their bunkers, and the attack itself, in which no Americans were killed, and only eight received slight concussions from the blasts, strongly suggests a deliberate attempt by Iran not to kill any Americans, for fear of what Trump might then do in response.

The Democrats, and such members of the mainstream media as the New York Times and the Washington Post, who have criticized the Soleimani killing, predicting rage among the Iranian people, who supposedly would "then rally round" the regime, thus strengthening it, have been proven wrong. There were a few days of mourning in Iran, but as soon as the Ukrainian passenger jet was shot down, the protests against Soleimani's

killing evanesced, and on the streets of a dozen Iranian cities, protests against the regime resumed. They began with the anger over the downing, and then Tehran's lying about the downing, of the Ukrainian passenger jet, but within days the protests had widened, and along with corruption and mismanagement at the top, the protesters' focus was on the tremendous expense, for the Iranian people, of supporting so many groups abroad. Soleimani was no longer celebrated as a martyr; he was the architect, rather, of the foreign adventurism in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, that were used by the regime to divert the public's attention from domestic problems. But the expense of that adventurism no longer diverted attention from domestic discontent; it became, rather, another source feeding that discontent.

In 2018, protesters had chanted against the foreign commitments: "Not for Gaza. Not for Lebanon. I give my life for Iran"; in 2019, marchers went even further, angrily shouting "Death to Palestine."

This was understood inside Iran as an attack on the main foreign policy issue for the ayatollahs: the supposed perfidy of the Zionists, and the need to destroy the Jewish state. The mullahs were fixated on the issue. Ayatollah Khamenei published a book of his speeches on the subject of Jews and Zionism titled *Palestine*, promoted by Iran's official media in 2015. In one of the speeches in the book, which he delivered at the shrine of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Khamenei declared, "No other international issue is more important than Palestine in the world of Islam." Many Arab leaders, such as those in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, beg to differ. They have been increasingly downplaying the issue of "Palestine" as they enter into informal alliances with Israel against Iran; the Saudi Crown Prince reportedly told Mahmoud Abbas, in effect, to stop whining and accept whatever deal the Americans offered. He made clear that that Iranian aggression mattered far more to the Saudis than did

the “Palestinian issue.”

Ben Cohen details much of this in an article [here](#):

As Khamenei explained in another speech contained in the same volume, the Islamic revolution cannot be secure as long as the Jewish state remains in existence. “Without winning the battle of Palestine, our victory is incomplete,” he declared. “Since the first days of his mission and struggle in Iran, our deceased great imam [Khomeini] gave the first priority to the issue of Palestine.”

This last observation is certainly true. As the late Professor Robert Wistrich pointed out in A Lethal Obsession, his final book on antisemitism, “In Khomeini’s eyes, Jews were a major cause of ‘Westoxification’ in Muslim society, an important obstacle to the recovery of its pristine Islamic identity. He associated them with American materialism, the acquisitive mania that had seized Iran’s middle classes during the 1960s, and the shah’s repressive rule which favored Western interests and Israel.”

In a tract he published in 1970, Khomeini articulated these principles even more succinctly. “We must protest and make the people aware that the Jews and their foreign backers are opposed to the very foundations of Islam and wish to establish Jewish domination throughout the world,” he wrote.

Antisemitism, then, forms an integral part of the Khomeinist political theology that has driven Iran since the 1979 revolution. The thousands of Iranians who have been caught on camera in the last few days [in mid-January] refusing to trample the US and Israeli flags (another ritual as old as the revolution itself) are not, therefore, simply waving a middle finger at their rulers on their most sacred concern: They are rejecting the basic principles and worldview of the Islamic Republic. And they are proving, yet again, that the people of Iran should not be confused with the Islamic

Republic that rules them.

There are no obvious answers to the question of what Western countries should do about Iran, as there are all sorts of good reasons why they should avoid full-scale war. For most of the last 40 years, America has sought to contain the Islamic Republic through economic sanctions and the US military presence in the wider Middle East. It has now added to that pressure by confirming that the option of eliminating Iranian leaders is a part of its arsenal. Compared to five years ago, then, an uprising of Iranians against the regime is taking place in much more favorable international environment, thanks to the radical shift in Iran policy under Trump. Iran's rulers certainly know how vulnerable they are, which is why they want the rest of us to believe that they will take any measures necessary to survive, even as their revolutionary mission dies.

Now the Trump Administration has hit on the right mix of crushing economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and the clear if unstated threats to remove Iranian leaders as Soleimani was removed, to keep the Iranian regime in a permanently weakened state. And the crowds that make a point of not stepping on representations of flags, or on the flags themselves, of the Great Satan, America, and the Little Satan, Israel, and who shout "Death to Palestine," are attacking the regime in its very essence. The last time Iranians protested en masse, Barack Obama was president; he did nothing to encourage or help them. Now a very different president is in office, one who has already offered words of encouragement to the protesters and who may find more practical ways to help undermine the regime in Tehran. He can do so by having members of our government speak constantly about those inside Iran resisting the despotism, and the ways they are being suppressed, and by publicizing in the West the testimony of those who have escaped from Iran and can report on the many crimes of the regime, and finally, by devoting even more

resources to VOA Farsi-language coverage of the protests so that the Iranians not directly involved will be provided with accurate accounts of what is happening inside their country. Let the Iranians find out the details, too, about the \$250 billion dollar business empire of Ayatollah Khamenei, and the large, if lesser amounts, amassed by other corrupt clerics and officials who are a source of such anger. Trump could also find ways, with the help of the Saudis and Emiratis, to send financial aid, and even supply weapons, to the separatist movements that exist among the Kurds, Balochis, Arabs, and Azeris in Iran, who can together present a tremendous internal challenge to the Islamic Republic. Iran is now on a downward course. We don't need to, and after the fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan, should not, send troops to Iran – but we can do something else. We can grease the skids.

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