

Public Linkages and Popular Protest in Iran

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hile Iran has strategies in place to cope with U.S. sanctions, the reimposition of sanctions last November may force the Islamic Republic to find new ways to appease its citizens, argued Professor Kevan Harris at a recent CSIS Gulf

Roundtable. Dr. Harris judged that U.S. policymakers fundamentally misunderstand how Iran provides economic security to its citizens, and he suggested that the sanctions could have both unintended and undesirable effects as a consequence. Dr. Harris, assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), spoke at a CSIS roundtable on “Public Linkages and Popular Protest in Iran” on December 11, 2018.

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Kevan Harris is a historical sociologist and an assistant professor at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), where he specializes in development and social change in the global South. His current research projects focus on welfare politics in low- and middle-income countries; class and social mobility in Iran before and after 1979; and survey research in developing countries. Dr. Harris is also on the editorial committee of the Middle East Research and Information Project. Prior to joining the faculty at UCLA in 2015, Dr. Harris was a postdoctoral research fellow at Princeton University. He published his first book, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran*, in 2017. Dr. Harris received an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Johns Hopkins University and a B.A. in economics and political science from Northwestern University. ■

BUFFERS IN THE IRANIAN STATE

The Iranian government is accustomed to volatile economic straits, and it has put buffers in place to ensure that basic needs of citizens are addressed when revenue is tight and inflation is high. The first buffer consists of institutions that provide aid and social insurance to poorer and middle classes, such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the Social Security Organization. While charitable trusts in Iran, known as *bonyads*, are often claimed by U.S. analysts to act as the main backbone of Iran’s aid system, Dr. Harris found little evidence for their importance, using survey data as well as data from the organizations themselves. The Iranian state has recently reimplemented programs such as subsidized food baskets for poorer households to cope with high inflation.

Another buffer is Iran’s shifting economic structure, which is often unnoticed outside of the country. Dr. Harris pointed out that Iran has a diversified economy with a large industrial base. It is well-integrated into regional markets and small- and medium-sized trading firms can shift both the goods it exports and their destination when necessary. In earlier rounds of

THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable Series in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen.

The roundtable regularly assembles a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the strategic importance of Gulf energy, changing Gulf relations with Asia, human capital development, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

sanctions, he said, Iran experienced a rise in non-oil exports when its currency fell in value and its oil exports decreased.

Even with these countervailing buffers, citizens now feel a declining sense of economic security compared to previous years. Dr. Harris highlighted that inflation, recession, and the decline in both real wages and pensions have led to an absolute decline in living standards for many families. Nonetheless, Dr. Harris pointed out that the majority of Iranians perceive themselves to be middle class, when asked in survey interviews. It is important to note that the self-perception of relative decline among Iranians—the belief that families and individuals are falling behind compared to other times and other places—is how grievances in Iran become potent sources of protest.

A NEW WAY OF MANAGING PROTESTS

The economic downturn has sparked country-wide demonstrations against unpaid wages and hikes in the cost of consumer goods. Dr. Harris explained that while some reform-minded domestic intellectuals have interpreted the demonstrations as a signal of the weakening of state legitimacy, others see the rise of protests as signaling a shift in the political compact between the Iranian government and various segments of society. Citizens and politicians alike have become savvier in using protest to engage in politics, rather than protests being perceived as an existential threat to the postrevolutionary order. Dr. Harris said that there is ample evidence to support both arguments, and the effect that these protests will have on the Iranian state remains unclear.

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Dr. Harris contended that the Islamic Republic is witnessing new conciliatory methods of interacting with protestors in order to limit the spread of demonstrations. State officials now bargain with individual groups of demonstrators and make concessions to prevent protests from gaining momentum. Protest leaders are arrested at times, Dr. Harris explained, but violent crackdowns have been minimized, and security forces often aim to contain protests rather than crush them. Dr. Harris pointed out that, with time, demonstrations are also becoming routinized, and citizens may be participating with less concern about the consequences.

DRIVERS OF POLICY CHANGE

The way in which the Islamic Republic's political institutions translate Iran's mounting economic concerns into changes in Iran's foreign policy is a complex and lengthy process. He contended that the process involves a large number of actors who are often unwilling to cooperate with each other, as well as one in which many different actors effectively have veto power over any government action. He suggested that the lack of government cohesion over the policy process is partly due to the fact that Iran is not a one-party state at all, but a "zero-party state."

Dr. Harris emphasized that President Rouhani is now in an especially difficult position, since he ran on a platform of improving the economy through increased engagement with the United States. The renewal of sanctions benefitted politicians on the right, who hope to win support by focusing on Rouhani's failures. At the same time, politicians across the spectrum suffer from a pervasive "discourse of corruption" in media and everyday gossip in which candidates trade accusations at such a high rate that Iranian citizens perceive there is no one left to trust.

Dr. Harris proposed that, in order to more accurately assess how Iran will respond to U.S. sanctions and the Trump administration's abrogation of the nuclear accord, U.S. policy makers need a deeper understanding of how the Iranian system has coped with decreased revenue over the past two decades. The countervailing buffers in place will not fully absorb the impact of U.S. sanctions, but they will still shape the policy process by which segments of the Iranian government as well as society respond to increasing levels of hardship. ■

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