

Iran: Was America Behind Uprising?

OE Watch Commentary: Conspiracy theories run deep in Iranian society. Iranian television shows poke fun at the Iranian penchant for conspiracy and *Encyclopedia Iranica*, the leading international academic reference about Iran, dedicates an entry to the history of conspiracy theories in Iran. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's speeches regularly reference alleged American, Israeli, Saudi or British plots. Therefore, it is not surprising that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would blame the protests which began on 28 December on foreign governments, external enemies, and conspirators. As the first accompanying tweet from Khamenei's twitter feed shows, Khamenei points to "Americans and Zionists" with the "money for these asinine governments [being] Persian Gulf [Arab state] money." What is surprising, however, is that other regime officials publicly denied any external hand in the unrest. As the second passage demonstrates, Mahmoud Sadeghi, a parliamentarian and political ally of former President Mohammad Khatami, tweeted that there was no evidence of "external stewardship" of the protests. Within a week, his tweet had received over 9,000 likes and over 1,000 retweets, more than double that of Khamenei's conspiratorial tweet. Most of these 'liking' and 'retweeting' accounts appear to be originating in Iran, suggesting that at least some elements of the Iranian public are cynical and increasingly reject the conspiracies projected by the supreme leader and his government.

The direct contradiction of the Supreme Leader's line (it does not matter in the Iranian context that Sadeghi's tweet came before Khamenei's because Khamenei's word is retroactive) may also provoke a new regime crackdown on allies and supporters of Khatami and the so-called 'reformist' camp. Many reformist politicians remain in prison despite promises made five years ago by President Hassan Rouhani to seek their release. The outbreak of unrest and the support some reformists appear to have given to the protestors' demands suggests that imprisoned reformist leaders will not be freed anytime soon. There could also be an accelerating crackdown on those like Sadeghi who so vocally sought to neuter the position they understood Khamenei would take to delegitimize the protestors. If enough Iranian officials internalize Khamenei's perspective, the regime may see the protestors' economic demands as illegitimate. This in turn would mean that the grievances which exploded on the streets in late December will continue to build.

End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)

“There has been no stewardship by any foreign agent.”

Source: “Khamenei.ir (Farsi),” @Khamenei_fa, 9 January 2018. https://twitter.com/Khamenei_fa/status/950669951005839360

@khamenei_ir “In these cases, a triangle has been organized for these activities.” This map, it is about Americans and Zionists. The money for these asinine governments is Persian Gulf [Arab state] money. Its podium is also related to the murderous organization of the hypocrites [the Mujahedin al-Khalq]. 5:05 AM - 9 Jan 2018

Source: “Mahmoud Sadeghi,” @mah_sadeghi, 7 January 2018. https://twitter.com/mah_sadeghi/status/950092749306585088

@mah_sadeghi “According to intelligence officials, in recent unrest there has been no stewardship by any foreign agent.” 2:52 PM - 7 Jan 2018

