

# Iranian protests and Israeli-Palestinian consequences

In foreign policy everything is connected.

Every great power's foreign policy is calculated with respect to every other big power's foreign policy. What happens of importance in one country doesn't have effects only in that country. There are ripple effects throughout a region or even the world, sometimes major ones. Situations change, strategies are reviewed, tactics are adapted.

The growing tumult in Iran is of major significance. Not only in Iran itself but ramifications are being felt more widely. Not the least important involves strategy to move Israeli-Palestinian relations beyond deadlock.

For a few months we've known that a new American/Saudi proposal for the Middle East is to be rolled out early this year, perhaps sponsored by other governments as well. Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, the young Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MSB as he is known), is going to be a game changer.

At home, liberalizing the rigid rules of daily life within Saudi Arabia (women will be allowed to drive, cinemas will be permitted, etc.) are details of MSB's intention to liberalize Saudi government and society in general. He wants to turn Saudi Islam, or to return it, as he insists, to a less rigid, more open and tolerant way of life.

Saudi foreign policy is also changing, overcoming its lethargy, taking the initiative, seeking solutions rather than managing unstable balances. The Trump/MBS strategy is to break through Israeli-Palestinian deadlock by forcing it into a wider, regional plan. When a problem seems intractable, enlarging it sometimes offers a way forward.

Direct negotiations between the two parties—or the lack of them—will no longer determine whether there is movement or not. The two-state solution, conceived as a full Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and security, will be reviewed even by those who have long endorsed it as the only just outcome. The question will be posed whether the Palestinians as a people would be better off

with a fully independent state, or whether, given their history and politics over decades, an innovative solution is not better in their own interest.

The regional approach implies imposing from outside a realistic view of what is possible on Palestinian leaders who have failed for decades to develop one by themselves. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has gone on too long and for too long it has damaged other causes, equally worthy or more so. The Palestinian cause has worn out its welcome, even among its once ardent supporters in the West.

This approach became public with President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem officially as Israel's capital. Now it's clear this decision was not a one-off operation or some idiosyncratic gesture. It's a sign of the new strategy, getting beyond the peace process conception, forcing movement, unilaterally taking contentious issues off the table, preparing the regional plan. Trump's announcement that American aid to the Palestinians might be cut off if they don't adapt is another threat to force compliance. In the flurry of current events, it's hardly noticed that the Jerusalem decision has been swallowed and that the Saudis not only don't oppose it, they are privately in favor. Trump is also endorsing Israel's redefinition of Jerusalem's boundaries.

Because of the protest movement in Iran, however, the geopolitical terrain has shifted. Rebellion by the Iranian people against the theocracy is shaking the mullah regime and the effects are rippling out across the region.

With respect to resolving Israeli-Palestinian deadlock the implication is clear.

U.S./Saudi success depends on leveraging Sunni Arab government alarm over Iran's aggressive regional policy to win support for an imposed Israeli-Palestinian deal. Tehran's expansionism gives Sunni Arabs a common enemy, thus sufficient reason to endorse an imposed solution. Israeli destruction of Iranian military facilities being built in Syria appears as in everyone's interest rather than destabilizing. Weakening Tehran's ability to bolster Hezbollah and Assad is a common objective.

Paradoxically, but logically, an aggressive Iran fosters progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Today, an Iranian regime forced by popular protests to reform would be good news for the Iranian people. If the government cracks down hard this would reinforce the anti-Tehran coalition's determination. No matter which outcome one thinks is more important, you can't have both.

What happens on the Iranian street is key to the next phase.

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