

Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) Analysis



Regime Stability in Iran: The COVID-19 Effect

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Authors: Belinda Bragg, Ph.D. (NSI, Inc.), bbragg@NSIteam.com

Program Manager: Brianna Good (Northrup Grumman), brianna.good@ngc.com

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What is ViTTa?

NSI's Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) provides rapid response to critical information needs by pulsing a global network of subject matter experts (SMEs) to generate a wide range of expert insight. In support of US Central Command (J3), ViTTa was used to address four questions regarding geopolitical stability in Iran. ViTTa reports are designed to provide highly customizable and compelling analyses, reports, and briefings that consider varied perspectives across disciplines, challenge assumptions, provide actionable insights, and highlight areas of convergence and divergence.

Question of Focus

[Q4] What, if any, effect will COVID-19 have on regime stability in Iran, both over the short and medium term?

Subject Matter Expert Contributors

Mr. Eric Brewer (Center for Strategic and International Studies), **Dr. David Edelstein** (Georgetown University), **Prof. Anoush Ehteshami** (Durham University), **Mr. Ilan Goldenberg** (Center for New American Security), **Dr. Mark N. Katz** (George Mason University), **Dr. Daniel Markey** (Johns Hopkins University, SAIS), **Mr. Richard Nephew** (Columbia University), **Dr. Robert Spalding**, BGen, USAF (Ret'd) (Hudson Institute), **Dr. Ariane Tabatabai** (German Marshall Fund of the United States), **Mr. Behnam Ben Taleblu** (Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **anonymous expert**

Regime Stability in Iran: The COVID-19 Effect

Iran appears to have been hit hard by the COVID-19 virus, and there has been criticism both within and outside the country over the Iranian regime's response. The subject matter experts (SMEs) who responded to this question, however, do not think it likely that the pandemic will have novel direct effects on the stability of the Iranian regime, either in the short term or further out. At the same time, all were quick to point out that this is a difficult question. Not only is this the first global pandemic in the post-WWII era, and its global scope and duration remain to be seen (Brewer, Goldenberg, Nephew), but, as Dr. Ariane Tabatabai of the German Marshall Fund of the United States reminds us, "it is the Middle East, and in general you should never try to predict what will happen."

Instead, in assessing this question, the SMEs focus on drivers of social and political instability already present in Iran prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and how these may be intensified by the pandemic. The SMEs largely agree that the direct impact of COVID-19 on the stability of the Iranian regime will likely be negligible. However, the pandemic, and the regime's response to it, will exacerbate existing drivers of instability within Iran, as well as provide a justification for the regime to expand activities that buffer instability. Figure 1 shows the key drivers of instability and buffers of stability identified by the SMEs for the Iranian regime, and the associated actions or events that have and/or will intensify each (pre-COVID-19) driver and buffer. These are discussed in more detail below.

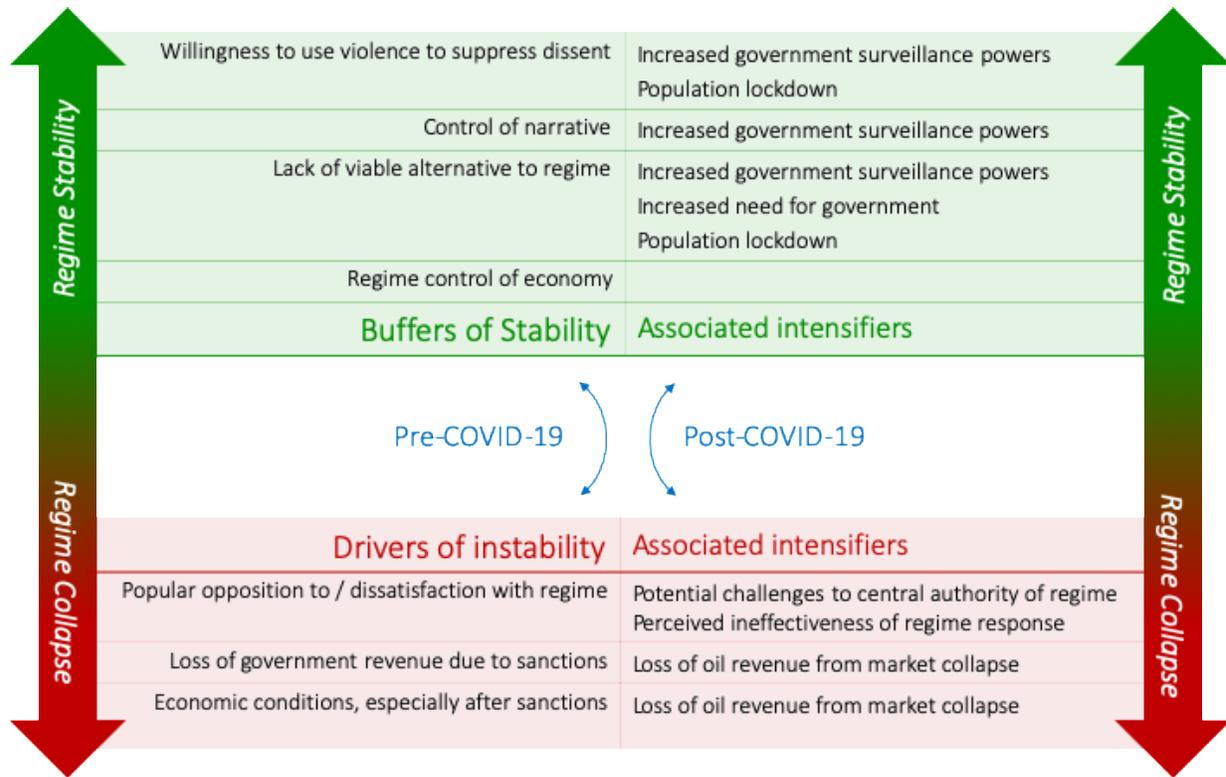


Figure 1: Drivers of Regime Instability and Buffers of Regime Stability in Iran

Drivers of Instability

Popular Dissatisfaction With and Opposition to the Regime

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already significant popular resentment toward the Iranian regime, exacerbated by what Mr. Behnam Ben Taleblu of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies refers to as “self-inflicted wound after self-inflicted wound.” Specifically, a series of events and policy responses made by the regime, including the death of General Qasem Soleimani, the shooting down of the Ukrainian airliner, the stationing of Russian bombers at an Iranian airbase, and the re-imposition of sanctions, have further undermined popular support for, and trust in, the regime (Brewer, Ehteshami, Taleblu). January 2020 also saw the first instances of armed resistance to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) by Kurdish groups in rural provinces and in Baluchistan (Ehteshami).

COVID-19 Intensifiers

The Iranian regime’s initial response to COVID-19 has, as Mr. Eric Brewer of the Center for Strategic and International Studies puts it, “been a disaster, and so it is yet another development that, I think, has undermined public confidence in the government” (see also: Markey, Tabatabai). Tabatabai considers Iran’s economic reliance on China and infighting within the government to have contributed to the ineffective and opaque response. However, she does note that, more recently, the IRGC have been taking a much more active role on the regime’s COVID-19 response in an effort to distract public attention away from the earlier issues noted above.

The IRGC’s desire to “rehabilitate their own image” (Tabatabai) is occurring at the same time as the Iranian leadership is exhibiting more division than it has in the recent past (Brewer). Furthermore, the advanced age of

many senior regime officials leaves them vulnerable to the virus, and any succession of senior leaders raises the potential for instability within the regime (Ehteshami, Nephew). Should wide-scale protests re-emerge and threaten the stability of the regime, Mr. Ilan Goldenberg, of the Center for New American Security, Dr. Mark N. Katz, of George Mason University, and Richard Nephew, all consider it most likely that the IRGC will be the organization to step in and take over. On the other hand, Prof. Anoush Ehteshami of Durham University does question whether, in the absence of a strong center, the IRGC would be able to retain stability. Either way, Dr. Daniel Markey of Johns Hopkins University cautions that dissatisfaction with the performance of the current administrators should not be equated with dissatisfaction with the regime itself.

Economic Conditions and Loss of Government Revenue

Popular dissatisfaction with the Iranian regime extends into the economic realm (Goldenberg). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Iranian economy was already feeling the pressure of US sanctions, and this was creating real problems in terms of regime stability (Nephew). As sanctions begin to compromise the economic security of the Iranian people, popular unrest becomes increasingly likely (Ehteshami, Nephew), although, as Mr. Richard Nephew of Columbia University points out, “for years we've been hearing that the economy is tanking and it's going to continue tanking” yet the regime continues. Nephew concludes, therefore, that, rather than result in the collapse of the current regime, continued economic hardship is simply more likely to result in the regime, through the security services, reasserting even greater control over the population.

COVID-19 Intensifiers

The collapse of the global oil and gas market in the wake of the pandemic has only worsened Iran's economic position, both at the individual level and for the regime. The Iranian regime is dependent on oil revenue, and not only has global demand dropped precipitously, but buyers prefer to buy from others, rather than Iran (Ehteshami). The regime is facing a public health crisis for its population of 80 million, and needs to keep doing business, but “the coffers are empty” (Ehteshami). Katz points out that authoritarian regimes in general have shown to be less effective in responding to natural disasters or wide-scale crises, and lack of revenue can only be expected to exacerbate this tendency for the Iranian regime. Combined with the fact that the lockdown has left the population “sitting there wondering ‘why us’ and thinking about regime response” (Ehteshami), it is to be expected that the economic impact of the pandemic will increase public dissatisfaction with the regime. However, once again, there is not a sense among the SMEs that this will be sufficient to collapse the regime. As Nephew points out, because the regime has weathered many economic crises in the past, that “getting [the Iranian's] to believe that the economy is bad enough that it's time to rise and revolt, that's a tough sell.” In a similar vein, Goldenberg reminds us that the regime managed to accommodate the effects of sanctions in the past, and “will likely be able to do so again.”

Buffers of Stability

Willingness to use Violence, and Control of the Narrative

Many of the SMEs believe that the regime's recently demonstrated willingness to use violence to suppress popular protests is a crucial buffer preventing social instability and popular discontent from destabilizing the regime itself (Goldenberg, Ehteshami, Nephew, Tabatabai, Taleblu). In addition, the resumption of US sanctions has made it easier for the regime to deflect blame for Iran's dire economic conditions away from the regime by returning to the familiar narrative of “it's the Americans' fault” (Nephew).

The SMEs point to the events of November 2019 as signaling not only wider and fundamental discontent among the population, but an increased willingness on the part of the regime to suppress and securitize the state. This ruthlessness, combined with the learned tolerance of economic hardship discussed above, is securing the regime. For, as Nephew summed up by quoting Karim Sadjadpour, “the Iranian population in 1979 was prepared to die, and the government was prepared to kill them. In the current time frame, the Iranian government is prepared to kill, and the Iranian population is not yet at a widespread level prepared to die.” If this is the case, unless and until the security forces are willing to refuse to suppress the population, a potential challenge to the regime will only come from inside (e.g., from the IRGC). At the moment, the IRGC is not motivated to challenge the Supreme Leadership, as its interests are met within the structure of the existing system (Katz).

COVID-19 Intensifiers

While the COVID-19 pandemic has not directly intensified the buffering effect of the regime’s willingness to use violence, it has allowed the regime to increase its control over the population, both immediately through enacting a lockdown and more permanently through increased surveillance and control of information and telecommunication technology. The COVID-19 pandemic effectively put an end to large-scale protests and other mass gatherings in Iran. So, perhaps counter-intuitively, the pandemic has strengthened the regime’s stability in the short term (Markey, Nephew, Taleblu). Concern for political rights has been replaced by more immediate concern for survival (Markey, Nephew). However, while priorities for the population may have changed, there is no reason to conclude that the pre-COVID-19 sources of dissatisfaction have disappeared, and they may well have increased. Once Iran reopens, “the potential for any of those triggers to ignite those same protests exists” (Taleblu).

If and when Iranians do begin to protest the regime again, they will face a regime with enhanced surveillance capabilities. As Brewer points out, COVID-19 “is a really fantastic excuse to increase efforts to monitor and surveil the population... to put in measures to improve their ability to detect and suppress dissent.” This is a view shared by Katz, who notes that compliance is more likely, as individuals will fear a return of the disease, and the regime can obscure the political implications under the guise of public health. Iran’s close ties to China will facilitate its adoption of surveillance technologies (Brewer, Ehteshami).

Regime Control Over the Economy

As discussed above, increasingly dire economic conditions have been a driver of instability, fueling popular dissatisfaction with the regime and hobbling governing capacity. Despite this, Markey argues that the regime’s control over the Iranian economy as a whole creates an unexpected buffer to regime stability: “Since the regime itself and the IRGC and its connected entities and other key pillars of the regime own the economy and own all of the avenues by which they might be able to circumvent sanctions and actually survive, everybody else is at a loss. They don’t have the resources or wherewithal to contest.”

COVID-19 Intensifiers

To the extent that the COVID-19 pandemic places even greater stresses and constraints on the Iranian economy, the population will become even more dependent on the government (Katz). This can be expected to reduce the motivation for popular action to challenge the regime (Katz).

Lack of a Viable Alternative

Pulling back from the regime itself, several of the SMEs discussed the importance of looking beyond this regime, to what might replace it (Ehteshami, Katz, Nephew). They note that one of the fundamental buffers to regime stability has nothing to do with the regime itself, but stems from the lack of a viable alternative. The current regime has been very thorough in both punishing and suppressing any potential opposition leaders, and even closing off the opportunities for change from within the regime (Ehteshami). Consequently, “it’s very difficult to see a charismatic leader emerge unless in a crisis that changes everything” (Ehteshami), and there does not appear to be a widespread belief that the removal of the current regime will result in something better (Nephew).

COVID-19 Intensifiers

Arguably, the increased surveillance capabilities afforded by the pandemic, combined with the population’s isolation during lockdown and increased economic reliance on the government, will intensify the effect of this buffer to stability in the same way as it intensifies the effects of the regime’s willingness to use violence.

Conclusion: The State of the Regime is Strong(ish)

It is too early to forecast the political ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic in any state, let alone one in the Middle East that has survived as many crises and pressures as has the Iranian regime. That being said, considering the drivers of instability and buffers of stability in Iran, on balance it seems most likely that COVID-19 will not significantly affect the stability of the Iranian regime in the short term, although the country as a whole will be adversely affected. All of the drivers of instability underlying popular discontent pre-COVID-19 remain, however. Heightened by the regime’s response to the crisis, and, in the case of economic grievances, likely worsened by the wider global impact of the pandemic, these pre-existing conditions are likely to re-emerge once things “return to normal.” However, in the face of the regime’s demonstrated willingness to use force to suppress opposition, and their (expected) increased surveillance capabilities, absent the emergence of a viable political alternative there does not appear to be the critical mass required to trigger a direct challenge to the current regime.
