

# How Trump's Iran Policies are Playing into the Hands of the Regime



US President Donald Trump claps during the State of the Union address in Washington, DC, on January 30, 2018. Photo AFP

Since Donald Trump entered the White House in January 2017, **Iran** has been one of his administration's most important foreign policy preoccupations. Almost immediately, Iran was officially put on notice, in response to an Iranian missile test and an **alleged attack** on a Saudi warship by Iranian-backed **Houthi rebels** in **Yemen**. Shortly after that, the Treasury Department **announced** a new wave of sanctions against Iran. President Trump, in his controversial **executive order**, included Iran on the list of countries whose nationals were banned from entering the United States (US).

In his first foreign visit to **Saudi Arabia**, Iran's archenemy, he made one of his harshest speeches against the **Iranian regime**. But perhaps his most significant effort to put pressure on Iran was to **refuse** to certify the **nuclear deal** made in 2015. In January 2018, after many weeks of speculation,

Trump agreed to keep the US in the deal for the time being, but he warned both Congress and the US's European allies that it will be the last such waiver he signs if Iran fails to agree to **radical changes**.

In late 2017, Iran faced a new wave of **popular protests** that shook the foundations of the regime. Since the popular **uprising in 2009**, which was sparked by an allegedly rigged election, there had been no popular mobilization against the state, and unlike the rest of the region, Iran had experienced a period of relative calm. Despite major **economic difficulties** caused by paralyzing sanctions and financial mismanagement, the country was considered politically stable, at least by regional standards.

When the protests broke out in the city of Mashhad and then spread around the country, the US was the first country to react. On 31 December 2017, Trump **tweeted**, 'Big protests in Iran. The people are finally getting wise as to how their money and wealth is being stolen and squandered on terrorism. Looks like they will not take it any longer. The USA is watching very closely for **human rights violations!**'

The next day, 1 January 2018, he **tweeted** again, 'Iran is failing at every level despite the terrible deal made with them by the Obama Administration. The great Iranian people have been repressed for many years. They are hungry for food & for freedom. Along with human rights, the wealth of Iran is being looted. TIME FOR CHANGE!'

This was shortly followed by a tweet from Vice President Mike Pence: 'As long as @realDonaldTrump is POTUS and I am VP, the United States of America will not repeat the shameful mistake of our past when others stood by and ignored the heroic resistance of the Iranian people as they fought against their brutal regime ... The bold and growing resistance of the Iranian people today gives hope and faith to all who struggle for freedom and against tyranny. We must not and we will not let them down. #IranProtests.'

Although the latest protests were not as bloody as those in 2009, the Trump administration was quick to call a UN Security Council emergency meeting. In that meeting, Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, **stated** that, "The Iranian regime is now on notice: The world will be watching what you do." However, Russia did not hesitate to **complain** that Washington was dragging a council focused on international security into what it called a domestic matter.



An Iranian man reads a copy of a daily newspaper bearing a picture of US President Donald Trump with a headline that reads in Persian “Crazy Trump and logical JCOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action)”, in front of a kiosk in the capital Tehran. Photo AFP

As calm returned to the Iranian streets, the Trump administration announced that it was looking into imposing sanctions on Iranian state television, as part of measures to punish those involved in the [crackdown on protesters](#).

These moves served largely to reinforce the regime’s position that ‘foreign agents’ were to blame for the anti-government protests. In other words, the US’s enthusiasm for ‘change’ helped the hardliners to frame the protesters’ genuine political and economic grievances as an external conspiracy.

In his first speech following the unrest, Iran’s Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#) said, “The enemy is waiting for an opportunity, for a flaw, through which they can enter. Look at these events over the last few days. All those who are against the Islamic Republic – those who have money, those who have the politics, those who have the weapons, those who have the intelligence – they have all joined forces in order to create problems for the Islamic Republic and the [Islamic Revolution](#).”

Iran’s powerful [Revolutionary Guard](#) also [blamed](#) the protests on the US, [Israel](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), as parliament and security officials met to discuss the most significant challenge to the clerical establishment in nearly a decade.

President [Hassan Rouhani](#) said citizens have the right to protest but that Trump “has no right to sympathize with Iranians”. He [added](#), “This man in America who is sympathizing today with our people has forgotten that he called the Iranian nation terrorists a few months ago. This man who is against the Iranian nation to his core has no right to sympathize with Iranians.”

Indeed, in comparison to the previous uprising, the US government has gone out of its way to show support for the Iranian protesters. Although it is difficult to measure public opinion in Iran, it seems very few people have been impressed with the American gestures. In 2009, the protesters actively called for Obama to support them. One of the famous slogans at the time was, 'Obama, you are either with them or US'. In the recent protests, however, no slogan was heard that acknowledged US support for the Iranian people. It seems that in recent years many segments of Iranian society have become disillusioned with the US.

Besides the working class, which has been particularly affected by the US sanctions, the middle class is also becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the US. Trump's recent policies, which include refusing to recertify the nuclear deal, calling the Persian Gulf the 'Arabian Gulf' and the travel ban on Iranian nationals, have **narrowed** the gap between the state and Iranian civil society when it comes to anti-American sentiment. Despite the likelihood of additional US sanctions in the coming weeks, as the Trump administration seeks to use human rights issues to apply more pressure on the regime, this anti-American sentiment looks set to grow.