



Recently, an article appeared in the New York Times discussing the American 'policy of maximum pressure' on Iran, reports Dominique Ankone. This policy entails financial sanctions re-imposed on Iran by the U.S. government after their formal withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. The author bases his article on the remarks of an officer of the Israeli army. The US strategy has resulted in discontent among the Iranians, according to the officer cited in the article. About the economic sanctions he is quoted to have said: "It has made it clear [within Iran] that there's a thin dictatorial layer, covering [big] resentment from a society who want to live and educate themselves. Given time, the economic pressure can topple the regime." According to the author, the policy is 'fueling a sense of grievance among a restive people'. Is a new Iranian Revolution possible, and why might it be thinkable?.

Looking at the history of the last Iranian Revolution in 1979 may be a good place to start. Sociologist Charles Kurzman described the Iranian revolution in his *The Unthinkable Revolution of Iran* (2004) on the basis of interviews with eyewitnesses. Another place to look would be social movement theory, comprehensively put into words by Sydney Tarrow in *Power in Movement* (2011 [1994]). Generally speaking, Tarrow identifies three broad structures which contribute to the success of a social movement: (1) social networks, (2) cultural identity and (3) political opportunities. The whole constellation of political opportunities is called 'political opportunity structure'. Tarrow defines it as "a set of clues for when contentious politics will emerge and will set in motion a chain of causation that may ultimately lead to sustained interaction with authorities and thence to social movements".

With this in mind we can put the current situation in Iran in historical perspective. In 1979, the election a few years earlier of Jimmy Carter (who had emphasized human rights throughout his campaign) and economic malaise following the oil crisis have contributed to opening up the political opportunity structure and paved the way for a successful revolution. However, Kurzman warns for monocausal explanations prioritizing economy, religion, culture or the political, and instead comes with an all-inclusive alternative explanation: only if contribution to a revolution seems rationally the most safe choice for people, does the 'unthinkable' becomes 'thinkable',

and a revolution suddenly seems 'viable'. Many diverse factors contributed to a situation in which the perilous endeavor of supporting a revolution in the face of vicious repression for many people seemed the best way to keep themselves and their families safe. Ultimately, these factors led to the 'melting down' of established social patterns, making the future and the outcome of the turmoil suddenly unpredictable.

Nowadays, Trump continuously declares that he wishes for the Iranian people a better future without the current malicious regime. On May 8 2018 for instance, in his speech announcing the United States' withdrawal from the JCPoA, Trump called the Iranian government 'the leading state sponsor of terror'. This remark was not an isolated suggestion made by a folly president, but instead signals a consistent judgement of the U.S. government. As a matter of fact, Trump merely echoed the remarks of former Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David S. Cohen, in 2011, who said in relation to the then still alive Iranian General Suleimani "Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world today". On itself, such remarks may open a political opportunity, as people in Iran may consider the United States on their side in an attempt to overthrow the revolution, but in relation to the response of the Iran government it may also close off political opportunities, in the way of restrictions, for instance on the freedom of the press.

Taken as a whole, it would seem that induced by longstanding attempts to discredit the Iranian regime, and economic problems induced by U.S. sanctions, which are further aggravated by the corona pandemic, a situation may emerge in which the 'unthinkable' may indeed suddenly becomes 'thinkable'. Just like the Carter campaign led to the hope that the United States would support a revolution, the reiteration of remarks against the current regime may create a political opportunity. Just like the oil crisis crippled the economy of Iran, the current sanctions and pandemic situation may foster contestation against the regime.

But both the historical situation as the present situation have more layers. According to Tarrow, social networks and cultural identity play a crucial role as well; unsurprisingly in this respect, Kurzman points to the role of the network of mosques and its religious leaders in mobilizing people for the revolution, and to the fact that the Iranian people are in majority Shia Muslims, though he downplays the significance of this cultural fact. Still from his account of the 1979 revolution emerges the images of a broad movement unifying many people with different political persuasions and interests. For example, the Bazaar merchants, who had 'fared reasonably well' during the oil crisis of the 70-s participated early and very actively in the movement.

Such broad resistance seems still a far cry away, but all depends on further economic and political developments; this could be a decisive moment. In this respect it is interesting to note that the New York Times cites an Israeli officer; Israel used to be on the side of Trump. Is this an implicit rejection of the U.S. stand, as they point to U.S. sanctions for creating a potentially revolutionary and unstable situation in both Iran and the region, or is this something they can take advantage off? In any case, social unrest is fostered by many different factors, all of which together may create a revolutionary situation; today, both domestic and international developments are favorable for political contestation.

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