

Don't try to change Iran's regime from the air

Western attempts to change unloved regimes in Muslim countries by force have such a dismal record of failure and unintended consequences that it is astonishing that anyone should even contemplate such a course in Iran. From the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan to the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq or the ousting of Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, regime change by Western occupation or bombing has led to prolonged civil wars, tens of thousands of dead, and often to sustained negative outcomes for the local population and international stability.

In Iran's case, the West has a heavy legacy of colonial domination, direct interference, and covert action that should give any sensible policymaker pause. This dark record stretches from British imperial dominance and exploitation of its oil in the 19th century to the 1953 CIA-led coup that ousted prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, to Western support for Iraq's 1980 invasion of revolutionary Iran. No wonder most Iranians, however much they may hate clerical rule, are viscerally hostile to outside interference. Nations under attack tend to rally around the flag. In Iran's case, that is amplified by the Shi'ite cult of heroic martyrdom.

Decapitating Iran's current, unloved clerical leadership, as Israeli leaders threatened to do, would most likely lead to the emergence of a military dictatorship originating from the Revolutionary Guards, who hold a near-monopoly of force in the country. Such a regime might dash for a nuclear weapon as insurance against another foreign attack. It might be less religious and ease conditions for women, but it would remain a

challenging foreign policy actor. Iran has a vigorous civil society despite harsh repression, yet there is no credible, organised, democratic political opposition. Moderate Muslim figures such as ex-President Mohammad Khatami appear discredited by association with the "system". The last Shah's exiled son has little perceptible following inside Iran, and the National Council of Resistance, created by the former revolutionary People's Mujahideen and discreetly aided by Israel, is seen as a cult-like sect with scant internal support. Whether some grassroots opposition movement emerges from Iran's military humiliation by Israel and the US remains to be seen—but it cannot be created from outside.

For now, the balance of fear is in the regime's favour. Minority ethnic groups such as the Kurds, Arabs, and Baluch might take advantage of any power vacuum to stage armed uprisings, raising the risk of civil conflict. Azeris, Iran's largest ethnic minority, might seek arms or external support in fear of discrimination by Persians, who make up about half of the population. The implosion of Iran might suit Israel, but it would undoubtedly add yet greater instability to the Middle East. Be careful what you wish for.

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