

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Iran: A Regime That Arrests its Experts is Not Serious About Solving its Water Crisis

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Key Points

- Arresting experts attempting to resolve a water crisis threatening the survival of the Iranian people is demonstrable of the fact that the regime in Tehran is not interested in such endeavours.
- A proper unpacking of the crisis must involve the regime admitting the damage it has done to the environment. Such a step seems far from possible.
- The water crisis stems from the regime itself. A theocratic regime that, in theory, does not fear its own destruction will be less attentive to the needs of its people and to the critics highlighting government ineptitude.

Summary

The role of the Iranian regime is an overlooked factor in the country's ongoing water crisis. It continues to silence critics of government policies that have contributed to the crisis. Iran's latest efforts to ameliorate the crisis through bans on high-water consumption industries should not be taken seriously when that very regime is simultaneously arresting experts trying to address the water crisis. Experts rightly point out that Iran's water woes stem from mismanagement, the degradation of agricultural systems and corruption. The conversation needs to go deeper and identify the source of the problem: the regime's failed attempts to prevent the aforementioned challenges from becoming challenges in the first place. The regime has [consistently made excuses](#) and prevaricated over an issue it does not want to take responsibility for. The recent arrest of environmental experts and their subsequent self-exile has made it abundantly clear that the regime should not be taken seriously, or trusted entirely when it talks of addressing its water crisis.

Analysis

From late December 2017 to early January 2018, protests erupted throughout the Iranian countryside as the country's environmental and economic challenges reached a crisis point. The regime and its armed protectors, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), quickly denounced the protest movement as a foreign attempt to stoke sedition and turn the youth against the government. Among a litany of economic issues, the environment and the stagnant political response have been of chief concern for many protestors. Massive water shortages, desertification, [air pollution](#) and environmental neglect are all man-made problems that the regime has allowed to occur under its own watch.

In an effort to build some sort of legitimacy, President Hassan Rouhani has tried to encourage Iranian experts living overseas to return to the country to contribute its economic and environmental revival. This is a risky play for Rouhani to make. Returning expats have concluded that the IRGC-gripped regime is primarily at fault; however, said regime has proven deaf to such criticism and has chosen to respond by arresting and imprisoning those who dare to speak out. The regime must be willing to accept most of the blame for the country's ensuing water crisis; given its nature, however, this is well outside the realm of possibility. The regime is arguably the root cause of the crisis and pressure must be mounted on Iran to change its behaviour for the good of its people.

A Band-Aid Solution

Iran's latest attempt to address its water crisis without actually addressing the root cause of the crisis was covered in a recent [article](#) in *Al-Monitor*. Poor territorial planning is one of the key factors that led to the country's water crisis. For years, Iranian politicians courted their constituents by promising to bring industry and jobs to their cities. As is often the case, the larger and more influential cities that have a greater share of the country's politicians tend to win contracts. Those cities are not always located near water supplies, however, and as a result water-intensive industrial cities must tap into poorly managed groundwater reserves.

A corrective measure outlined in the previously mentioned piece has been to 'ban high-water consumption industries in dry regions' by relocating them to coastal areas. Many of these industries are located in cities, such as Isfahan, far from the coast. There are a [number of water-intensive industrial projects](#) in Isfahan that no doubt employ thousands of people and contribute investment into the city. As is often the case, a city's political clout, as opposed to its access to a steady supply of water, is a greater qualifying factor when contracts are being distributed.

To assume that the only recourse is to move industries out of cities to the coast is a gross rejection of the political reality on the ground. Many of the key industries awarded to cities are rooted in corruption and patronage, not meritocracy or geography. The IRGC, one of the most powerful forces in Iranian politics, has managed to create a small financial empire outside of the mainstream economy – a shadow economy – by controlling the vast majority of the country's key industries. Khatam al-Anbia, an IRGC-affiliated company, for example, has worked with thousands of other businesses across Iran in an attempt to monopolise certain areas of the construction industry. Even though Khatam al-Anbia is awarded projects

by the government, the expansion of the Corp's economic empire is meant to fund the country's "["resistance economy" the IRGC has much to benefit from](#)". Political and military appointees in these cities are reluctant to see their assets moved to another city where they may fall within the dominion of rival officials.

These ideas are band-aid solutions and are usually concocted by those whose job it is to provide solutions that do not upset the status quo but nonetheless *look* like solutions. Among those arrested back in January and February were water experts and activists who imprudently described the root cause of the water crisis: the theocratic regime and the '[environmentally-destructive \[IRGC\] construction projects](#).'

Some of those experts are Iranian expats who studied and lived outside Iran but returned to deliver their knowledge to the next generation of Iranians. The [brain drain is a serious consequence](#) of the worsening situation in Iran and Rouhani knows he needs to rectify this. It is incredibly pointless, however, to coax experts back to Iran if those in charge do not want to hear what the experts have to say. Professional analysts operate within a marketplace of ideas – where there is a diverse range of views – but a regime that primarily favours its own vision at the expense of other ones will fail to see the bigger picture.

Iran's Real Crisis

No government or regime on earth wants to hear that its policies and the wilful neglect of its politicians are to blame for a crisis that could result in the displacement of 50 million people within 25 years. Most countries, however, do not jail academically certified experts whose prerogative is to problem solve and provide criticism. One of the reasons why countries like Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom are successful economic powers is because those countries have cultivated a civil culture that celebrates an individual's ability to criticise freely without fear of persecution. Governments in those countries do not always follow expert advice; however, they can usually expect a steady stream of it. This does not mean that the opinions of those living in a free society are always equal in value. The ability to freely provide an idea and then weigh its practical and intellectual importance, however, is what has enabled free societies to face and – sometimes – solve complex problems.

The Iranian regime, on the other hand, does not value any criticism that links poor government decision making with the country's water crisis. This, along with the country's ruined water reserves, stems from the regime's ideological fixation. Those within the theocracy committed to Iran's radical application of Shia Islam at home and abroad are morally indistinguishable from any of the other militant Islamic terror groups that dot the Middle East or any other group in the past that has rejected the idea that the survivability of their revolution is rooted in a single physical setting. Iran's theocrats have demonstrated since Ruhollah Khomeini that they are prepared to let Iran "burn" if it means the fulfilment of the revolution. In a letter to President George W. Bush, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad echoed this [sentiment](#).

This is Iran's real crisis. A country that does not fear its own destruction is not only difficult to militarily deter, but is incredibly nonchalant when confronted by those critical of practices that have led to the draining of Iran's natural resources, but the enriching and solidification

of the leadership, and the emboldening of its foreign policy. A country led by a purportedly fearless group of people determined on maintaining the country on a dangerous, ideological pathway is not going to be overly responsive to those questioning few who are trying to prevent their country from slipping further into crisis. This is Iran's real crisis perpetuating its water crisis.

In the aftermath of the December 2017-January 2018 protests, former reformist government minister Mostafa Tajzadeh [wrote](#) to an official close to the IRGC that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei leads a dictatorial regime that has succeeded in suppressing the political and civil freedoms of the people of Iran. He argues that when state institutions 'are in the hands of one man [Khamenei], there is a much greater chance that he will advance his own interests instead of protecting the citizens' political and civil rights and freedoms, particularly if the people become passive for any reason.' As well as outlining in detail the measures politicians must take to obtain a favourable view from the Supreme Leader, the letter explains how the judiciary, the IRGC (two bodies responsible for locking up environmental experts) and the Guardian Council perpetuate corruption and silence dissent. 'The institutions under the leader's oversight are either themselves corrupt, such as the judiciary, or have been, and still are, playing a role in indirectly spreading corruption.' Furthermore, 'the Guardian Council...and the judiciary' target individuals whose 'hands are clean but who are critical [of the regime].'

In other words, policy of national importance that ends up impacting water supplies and the environment are made by the people who actually hold power in Iran. Iranian diplomats defecting to the West in 2009 said as much when they [revealed](#) that the foreign ministry and Rouhani are powerless when it comes to critical areas like the economy and foreign policy because the real power is held by the regime and the security apparatus. When signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Obama Administration made the mistake of taking Rouhani's word as holy writ: that an infusion of capital and the unfreezing of Iranian assets would moderate the regime and be used to economically benefit the Iranian people. That did not happen. Protests about "bread and butter" issues have plagued the country since December 2017 and instead of boosting economic growth, most of the money from the JCPOA went to the IRGC. From 2015 to 2018, Iran's military budget went up by 40 per cent. Iranian adventurism abroad and repression at home demonstrates a refusal to reverse its modus operandi.

Some would argue that Rouhani is trying to change this, although many would rightly contest his ability to do so. As mentioned previously, he is trying to give jobs of importance to professionals both inside and outside of Iran to encourage innovation. His administration recently approached Kaveh Madani, an environmentalist who was educated and employed in the United States and the United Kingdom, to head the Iranian Environmental Protection Agency. He was liked for his simple approach to science and the water crisis and he was often sought after when either returning briefly to Iran, as he often did, or on foreign news channels. He believed that the water crisis was caused by population growth and the mismanagement of water and agricultural systems. In February this year, however, after relatives had warned him that his new position was '[elite-killing](#)', the IRGC and the judiciary launched a defamatory campaign against him, and labelled him a foreign spy who was only

interested in gathering state secrets for Western intelligence agencies. It should come as no surprise that Madani, and others like him, have been accused by those who not only own and build the very construction projects responsible for Iran's water crisis, but who also exercise control over the institutions used to suppress speech critical of the regime. Madani has since left the country. It is possible the campaign was launched by the regime to thwart Rouhani, however, the targeted arrests of environmentalists at large indicates a broader attempt to silence dissent.

Conclusion

A regime that detests its talented experts for making contributions to the betterment of their country is not a regime that should be held as one interested in protecting and safeguarding its own people. Iran is at a crossroads with a regime at the helm that does not seem to be able to grasp the seriousness of the environmental situation gripping the country. Instead of putting aside ideological barriers, Iran is reinforcing them by making it career suicide and a criminal offence to question the circumstances within which Iran's water crisis has arisen. The regime itself is probably incapable of reform, which is why western governments should make it part of their foreign policy to support those inside and outside of Iran who want to see political, economic and environmental change in their country.

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