

Iran between influence and protests

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The Iranian fuel protests began on November 15 in Ahvaz, due to a massive increase in the price of fuel by the government. The regime responded to the protests by blocking Internet access, although sources claim that government have now loosened Internet restrictions. But the iron fist of Iran has manifested in a more markedly violent way by killing more than 100 protesters. The regime has survived uprisings in the past but now it is starting to kill demonstrators in great numbers. Tehran is failing to deal with the increasing discontent of the population over economic mismanagement and fears that popular unrest might eventually lead to the overthrowing of the Islamic government. Iran is also failing to grapple with the heavy United States sanctions, which have left the country in economic despair, and has continued to blame Western powers for interference in the country's business.

Meanwhile, the European Union has strongly condemned the Iranian regime for dealing with the socio-economic crisis through violence, instead of constructive dialogue. The European Union, through the European External Actions Service, has indicated that freedom of expression and protest should be guaranteed and has recommended Iranian authorities to allow the free flow of information and the use of the Internet. Similarly, Amnesty International has condemned Iran for the death of the demonstrators.

Iranian-American frictions continue to take place also on other grounds. In fact, the Islamic Revolutionary Court found six activists of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation guilty of espionage for having had "contact with the United States". This is not an isolated case as several citizens holding dual citizenship have been accused of espionage in the country, amid increasing concerns that the accusations are brought forward for political resentment against Western powers. These "spy stories" happen in a country, Iran, that has just been urged to explain uranium particles being found at an undeclared site.

Moreover, the Iranian protests have to be framed in a very volatile Middle East in which the Iranian influence has been contested in the last months after years during which Teheran was able to expand its power. Since the '80 Iran has been a crucial actor in Lebanon due to its proxy Hezbollah that took advantage of the Syrian civil war to expand its influence there. However, in mid-October demonstrators took to the streets to oppose new taxes and called for the resignation of the government. Lebanese protesters also demand an end to the country's confessional and corrupt political system, where power is shared among religious and ethnic groups. The protests have been largely peaceful, although some clashes have broken out with security forces and caused five deaths. The situation in Iraq is even more volatile for two reasons. First, security forces have killed more than 300 people since the beginning of October when the protest began and this demonstrates that Iraqi security forces are willing to use force if necessary. Second, although Iraqi demonstrators are protesting against lack of service, jobs and corruption, they targeted Iranian symbols such as Iranian embassy in Baghdad, but the attempted assault failed, and the Iranian consulate, which was stormed, in the Shia holy city of Karbala on November 3.