



## **INTERVIEW WITH DR. RAZ ZIMMT**

# THE IRANIAN REGIME'S RESPONSE TO THE PROTESTS IN IRAN

**A Wikistrat Interview**

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE:

## **DR. RAZ ZIMMT**

Dr. Raz Zimmt is a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) specializing in Iran. He holds a master's degree and a PhD in Middle Eastern history from Tel-Aviv University. His PhD dissertation focused on Iranian policy towards Nasserism and Arab radicalism between 1954 and 1967. He also works as a research fellow at the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel-Aviv University and at the Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk (MENAD) at Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies. In addition, he is the editor of "Spotlight on Iran" published by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. His main research interests are the politics, foreign relations, society & social media of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



## INTERVIEW WITH DR. SAUD AL-SHARAFAT: JORDAN'S SECURITY CHALLENGES

**Wikistrat:** Thank you, Dr. Raz Zimmt, for joining us for today's interview on the recent protests in Iran. I want to get your analysis of the recent protest and how the regime responded to these protests. How do you understand these protests? What was different about these protests compared to the previous protests that we've seen in Iran?

**Raz:** Well, first of all, it was the most comprehensive and widespread protest since the 2009 protest in Iran. According to the reports coming from the Iranian Interior Ministry, there were something between 130,000 and 200,000 protesters on the streets. In addition, it was also the deadliest protest because, only in a matter of a few days, the Iranian establishment managed to use its repressive capabilities and to kill probably between 200 to 400 protesters. Now, unlike the 2009 Green Movement, and just like the protest which erupted in Iran two years ago, we could see that most of the protesters came from the weaker sections of Iranian society; mostly represented the working class, the more uneducated. Many of the protesters were unemployed. So, we can see the level of despair and the economic grievances of the Iranian public, which were very evident in this recent wave of protests.

Concerning the regime itself, I would say that we got another proof for both its willingness and its ability to crush whatever it considers to be a threat to the stability of the regime, even through the use of force. Therefore, the bottom line, I would say, is that on the one hand, it was very obvious that the protest

was not able to translate itself into a political change and to become an immediate and effective threat to the stability of the regime. But on the other hand, we could say that the regime is definitely not capable of delivering solutions to the grievances of the Iranian population. So, I assess that it's only a matter of time until it can be another wave of protests, mainly because of the economic problems.

I believe that the only chance of really making such protest in Iran being more effective is through the forming of a much wider coalition between the working class in Iran and the educated middle class, especially in Tehran, which is more capable of getting more and more Iranians to the street. Because as long as there are not hundreds of thousands or millions of Iranians in the street, I think it will be very unlikely that any kind of protest in Iran is going to be able to pose any immediate threats to the stability of the regime.

**Wikistrat:** I see. Many observers have claimed in the last week or so that these protests and mainly the direct challenge to the regime posed by these protests is evidence of the success or the effectiveness of US President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against the Iranian regime. So how do you interpret that? Do you think that this was caused directly by the US policy toward Iran and the sanctions? Or was this more of a set of factors and grievances which were just bound to explode at one point or another?

**Raz:** Well, my main problem with this narrative saying that the riots in Iran are proof of the effectiveness of the sanctions and the effectiveness of the “maximum pressure” policy carried out by President Trump is that, again, we tend to put much more emphasis on the economic issue rather than the political goals of the sanctions. We have to remember that there is no dispute whatsoever concerning the economic effectiveness of the sanctions. I mean, if you look at most economic parameters in Iran – inflation, unemployment, economic growth, the number of barrels of oil exported by Iran, etc. – no one can argue that the sanctions are not working. But we have to remember, though, that the main objective of the sanctions is not just to deteriorate Iran’s economic situation but to also use the economic pressure as a tool in order to achieve political goals.

And the main political goal is to dramatically and significantly change Iran’s policy, to make it go back to the negotiating table and then bring Iran to the point where it has to accept more and more concessions, mainly concerning the nuclear program, as well as its long-range missiles, and its regional policy. And when we talk about Iranian policy, we certainly cannot see at this stage any change in Iran’s policy. On the contrary, Iran’s policy has become even more assertive and more aggressive than before.

**Wikistrat:** I see. And also, how do you see the impact of these protests on Iran’s political system? I’m not talking here so much about the Supreme Leader but, in a sense, about this familiar divide between the moderates and the conservatives and those who take a more open approach toward getting along with the West. So how would these protests, in a sense, impact Iran’s willingness to engage this world and to look also beyond its borders in a different way?

**Raz:** Well, first of all, I think it’s very evident that since Mr. Trump’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, we have been able to see a consensus within the Iranian establishment, between the so-called pragmatists led by President Rouhani and the more hardliners led by Supreme Leader Khamenei, concerning Iran’s strategy. The political position and the public position of President Rouhani has deteriorated. We are seeing more and more evidence for the growing position of the

Revolutionary Guards. And my assessment is that in the next upcoming parliamentary elections, due in February 2020, we might see a further radicalization of the political establishment inside Iran.

Concerning Iran’s policy, which is dictated mainly by the Supreme Leader, I think we should not expect Iran to significantly change its policy, due to several issues. First of all, Khamenei considers the current situation as proof that the United States should not be trusted, and that even if Iran agrees to accept certain concessions, it will just expose Iran to more and more pressure. So, I don’t think he’s in the mood to give the US any more concessions.

And then there is also the issue of the upcoming elections in the United States. And my sense is that the main objective right now in Iran is to wait Trump out, just to try and survive somehow until the elections in 2020, hoping that Trump is not going to be reelected. So, I think that as we get closer and closer to the elections in the United States, it is less likely that Iran will be ready to accept any kind of concessions because those might be presented by President Trump as a winning card.

And the last thing I would say is that the internal problems in Iran actually exposed, in a way, the vulnerability of the Iranian regime. And I think that the last thing the Iranian Regime would like to do is to do anything which might be presented, either by the Iranian internal public opinion or by external public opinion, as another sign of its weakness. One of the most important issues for the Iranian leadership is to go back to negotiations from a better position, from a position of strength. And right now, it doesn’t seem like that.

So again, I think that, as Iran is pushed to the corner and we can see more internal and external pressure put on the Iranian leadership, it is less likely that the leadership will take a more moderate position and give up its “maximum resistance” strategy aimed to deal with Trump’s “maximum pressure” strategy.

**Wikistrat:** I see. And what about a different strategy or different policy here toward engagement with Europe? Because I understand what you just said about the regime’s position toward

the US not wanting to help Trump before the 2020 elections. But maybe this can be seen as having some potential, even if unofficial, opening in relations between Iran and Europe today, in the sense of wanting to come back to a better agreement and to somehow also improve Iran's international standing, so to speak.

**Raz:** Well, actually my sense is that Iran doesn't really believe Europe can deliver its needs. I think that even Iran's more pragmatic officials have by now realized the fact that even if Europe has the political will to come up with some solution to continue working with Iran economically, it doesn't have a real ability to bypass the sanctions.

Right now I think that Tehran really believes that the key is in Trump's hands. If President Trump accepts, for example, the French initiative, and is ready to either relieve some of the sanctions or to give a green light to Europe either to give a credit line to Iran or to buy some of the oil from Iran, it might work. Other than that, Europe by itself can do nothing.

And I also think that as Iran continues the policy of reducing its commitments to the JCPOA, and especially after the brutal repression of the riots last week, I see less and less willingness from Europe, as well, to come up with any real solution. So, I think that even if Europe wants to do something, it can't do a lot as long as Trump doesn't give them a green light. Iran has lost any confidence it had in the European leadership. So, the bottom line is that I think it will be even more difficult in the next few months to get out of this standstill between Iran and the United States.

**Wikistrat:** Okay, I see. And also, these were not the first protests, as you also mentioned, in Iran in the past few years actually; they are actually the third in the past ten years. But they are also a bit unusual in the sense that in the past few weeks and months we've seen protests also in Lebanon and Iraq. And much of the sentiment in these protests, especially in Iraq, was actually directed against Iran and against Iranian influence in these countries. So, did that, in your assessment, impact the Iranian Regime's response to the protests in Iran? Did it view its domestic and regional position differently because of this combination of both internal and regional

protests against the Iranian regime now?

**Raz:** Well, I think there is no doubt that Iran is very concerned with what's going on in Lebanon and especially in Iraq. I think there is a difference between those two countries because the situation in Iraq seems to be much riskier, especially with the recent attacks against the Iranian consulates, both in the Karbala and in Najaf, and there are also more Iranian interests, especially economic interests in Iraq. Iran certainly considers what's going on in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran as another so-called proof of this Western grand plan or plot to try and weaken the so-called resistance front.

But having said that, I think that Iran's response to its internal problems is only partially influenced by what's going on in Iraq and Lebanon. I do believe that the Iranian leadership considers the current circumstances – the internal circumstances, the regional ones and the international ones – as a very sensitive time for Iran.

That, in my view, was the main reason why they used so much force and killed so many people last week – because they don't want to take any risk which might jeopardize the stability of the regime. But I think that they know that there are differences between what's going on in Iraq and what's going on in Lebanon and what's going on in Iran, and I'm not sure they think that either Lebanon or Iraq is on the verge of changing its political order in a way which will make Iran much more vulnerable than it is. They certainly follow the events, they are concerned, but I'm not sure they assess that this is the end of their ability to influence Lebanon and Iraq. They will use whatever means they can to maintain their influence, just as they did before.

**Wikistrat:** What do you think of reactions of the regime to the protests? As you mentioned, it was sections of repression, including the use of lethal force, as well as an internet shutdown for several days. So, do you also see some nonviolent responses or a change in policies on economic and social issues for the most part, in the coming weeks and months, in trying to prevent the next wave of protests, which is almost bound to come given the continuing economic conditions in Iran?

**Raz:** I'm not sure they are capable of doing anything significant because, first of all, as

long as they can't sell more than 300 or 400 thousand oil barrels per day, their ability to deal with their budget deficit is very limited. They can do certain things. For example, the rise in the price of gasoline was one of their attempts to carry out a certain reform, which was certainly required in order to tackle their economic problems. But they can't do much more than that. They could try, for example, to demand that certain Iranian foundations, which don't pay taxes right now, start paying taxes. They could try and carry out certain reforms in the Iranian banking system, but I doubt it if the current government has the political strength to carry out such reforms and, in any case, their impact on the ordinary Iranians will be limited, at least in the seeable future.

We have to remember that even after the JCPOA was signed and the sanctions were removed, most Iranians didn't feel any kind of economic improvement because the Iranian economy is a sick economy. It's corrupt, it suffers from over-involvement of the Revolutionary Guards and semi-governmental foundations, it lacks transparency, the Iranian private sector is too weak, and all those things have to be dealt with by very painful structural reforms. I think it's very unlikely that, especially in times like these, when the government is weak and President Rouhani is about to enter his last year as the President, they will be able to carry out such reforms.

I really find it very difficult to believe that they can provide any real solutions to the major economic grievances of the Iranian population as long as the sanctions continue and as long as they don't carry out the major reforms needed to deal with the problems.

**Wikistrat:**

Given this combination of protests, both in Lebanon and Iraq and also in Iran itself, against the Iranian Regime, do you think we'll see any change in Iran's regional and foreign policy, toward its neighbors in the Arab Gulf, in Iraq, or elsewhere, in terms of being more risk-averse or maybe even more willing to put a pressure on those countries? Trying to maybe divert attention from its troubles back home?

**Raz:**

I don't think they will try to increase their activity in the region to divert public attention [from the protests in Iran]. Mainly because, as we could see last week, there are more and more voices inside Iran saying that Iran should put more focus inside Iran. Look, Iran has always been able to adapt some of its policies. You can see it for example in its policy toward Israel and Syria. As Israel increased its pressure and its activity against Iran and Syria, Iran tried to find other ways, for example, to deliver precise weapons. So, it's ready to adapt its policy when necessary.

But the bottom line is that Iran still considers its involvement in the region as a vital national interest mainly to achieve influence, which will serve Iranian security, political, and economic interests. So overall, I don't see any real change in Iranian regional policies other than perhaps certain adaptations, for example by reducing the direct military involvement of the Revolutionary Guards in Iraq or Syria and putting more efforts on economic or political activities.

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