

Iran: fear of foreign plotters may be justified

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Long-term instability in Iran is an alarming prospect for western countries keen to resolve disputes over the country's nuclear programme and other contentious issues. But continuing political weakness in Tehran is also likely to produce the opposite effect — increased regime concern about external attempts to interfere, destabilise, and exploit its vulnerabilities. This paranoid trend threatens unpredictable, even dangerous consequences – but may be justified.

Pinning blame for Iran's post-election turmoil on malign foreign enemies is already under way among so-called principalist, conservative factions. The pro-Ahmadinejad Keyhan newspaper on Tuesday denounced plots by "politically bankrupt dictators" to thwart the popular will. "The hopes of the imperialist triangle (America, U.K. and the Zionist regime) for a crawling coup d'état in the Middle East and revival of the dead Middle East plan have been dashed," it declared.

Javan newspaper was similarly acerbic. "Today democracy slogans have become a lever to provoke, interfere and overthrow," it said. "By announcing results in the presidential elections that did not benefit their favourite candidate ... some foreign media such as BBC Persian [service], al-Arabiya, Fox News, CNN and some French media have started a new wave to create social and political division and cause riots."

In largely cautious responses to Friday's polls, Barack Obama's administration has been careful not to feed the fires of xenophobic resentment. "It's up to Iranians to make decisions about who Iran's leaders will be. We respect Iran's sovereignty and want to avoid the U.S. being the issue inside of Iran," Mr. Obama said. But Iranian officials say U.S. protestations of non-interference would be more credible if the White House cancelled a \$400m Bush era covert programme, authorised in 2007, which they say was intended to destabilise Iran, with the ultimate aim of regime change.

According to the journalist Seymour Hersh, writing in the New Yorker last year, covert operations by the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command were used to support the PJAK Kurdish dissident group in northern Iran, the disaffected ethnic Arab minority in Khuzestan in the south-west, and militant Baluchi Sunni Muslim separatists in the south-east, bordering Pakistan.

While not officially acknowledged or disavowed in the U.S., the covert programme has been repeatedly linked by Iran to ongoing violence, bomb attacks and assassinations in all three areas, as well as to the main external opposition group, the Mojahedin-e-Khalq, which is allegedly funded and armed by the U.S. Iran also occasionally claims to have evidence of involvement by Israel's Mossad spy agency and British intelligence.

Although the problem can be overstated, Iranian leaders of all political complexions have reason to worry about the so-called minorities question in a country comprising multiple ethno-linguistic groups, namely Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, Turkmen, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews and Georgians. Recent reports from Iranian Kurdistan, for example, speak of 100 or more checkpoints being erected by Revolutionary Guards and the shelling of PJAK positions inside northern Iraq.

Iranian officials have linked the recent suicide bombing of a Shia mosque in Zahedan, in Sistan-Baluchistan, to U.S., British and Israeli support for the Jundullah Sunni Muslim separatist group. A failed attempt last month to blow up a domestic airliner in Ahvaz, in Arab Khuzestan, brought similar claims.

Iran said on Tuesday that members of a foreign-backed "anti-revolutionary group" responsible for fomenting unrest and armed with bomb-making materials had been arrested. Intelligence minister Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei said the group "wanted to achieve its goal through explosions and terror and in this connection 50 people were arrested ... They were supported from outside the country." Given the current uproar in Tehran, the temptation for the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and President Ahmadinejad to deflect attention by hitting out at real or imagined foreign enemies, for instance by indirectly re-targeting U.S. forces in Iraq or causing problems for NATO forces in Afghanistan, is growing dangerously. But even such extreme measures may not work.

The moderate Seda-ye Edalat newspaper wasn't swallowing the regime's line about external threats on Tuesday. "Why does the government not let the people protest peacefully?" it asked. "Why do we always want to call Iranian protesters a group of hooligans bribed by foreigners to sabotage everything?"

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