

Support from the public in the Gulf but official silence about Iran demonstrations

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The violent protests in Iran caught the world off guard and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were no exception.

There was, however, conspicuous silence by senior Gulf officials about the events that could have a significant effect on the region and relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours.

The demonstrations in Iran were seemingly motivated by economic conditions but quickly turned overtly against the clerical rulers, with chants of "Death to the dictator" levelled at Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Many in the Gulf said they felt vindicated by the demonstrators' complaints that the easing of sanctions after the 2015 Iran nuclear deal brokered with world powers had little effect on their lives as the leadership in Tehran funded expansionist designs in the region, which most GCC countries have complained about.

Gulf officials, however, were keen on not being seen or interfering with protests since open official support from GCC countries could lend credence to Tehran's claims that the demonstrations were manipulated from the outside.

However, expressions of support from public opinion in the Gulf countries were widespread. The Arabic hashtags "Uprising of the Iranian people" and "Iran protests" trended in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, generating 500,000 tweets in the first 48 hours of the protests.

Social media users in the Gulf region forwarded videos and photos in support of the protesters. One user identifying himself as Faisal wrote: "This is a result of spending billions on terrorist militias, while your people live in poverty." A Twitter user in Bahrain named Madmarham wrote: "Iran wanted



Tremors of discontent. A map locating the main cities hit by anti-government protests in Iran. (AFP)

our countries to witness unrest but now it reaps what it sowed."

"Supporting Iran protests means believing in people's right to demonstrate against a government that imposes additional taxes, increases the prices, manipulates religion and interferes in other countries at the expense of its people's welfare," wrote Kuwaiti TV presenter Ali al-Sanad on his Twitter account.

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Gulf media, whose stands often reflect official positions, expressed clear support to demonstrators.

"Here is the battle in the depth of Iran... indeed an overwhelming popular uprising. Let's do our best to support the Iranians with all their ethnicities against the Khamenei occupation," a columnist wrote in the Saudi daily Okaz.

Some voices cautioned against

possible repercussions of abrupt regime change in Tehran. In a commentary in the Saudi-owned pan-Arab daily Asharq Al-Awsat, former Editor-in-Chief Abdulrahman al-Rashid wrote that the fall of the Tehran regime might not be the best option for the region.

"If the uprising of the Iranian people were to bring about a change in Iranian policy and to stop its external operations and force the regime to shift to internal reform and development, that would be the ideal option," wrote Rashid compared with what he described as the "horrifying scenario that a regime collapse would entail."

The same publication carried an interview with Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi urging the international community to support the protesters and calling on them to pursue the path of civil disobedience.

"If the government has not listened to you for 38 years, your role has come to ignore what the government says to you now," Ebadi was quoted as saying.

Media in the UAE were also supportive of the protesters. "The Iranian people have suffered from poverty, hunger and joblessness over four decades and suffer from rampant corruption among ruling bodies, security services and army commanders," stated an editorial in the Emirati daily Al-Bayan.

In a stark contrast, Qatari media appeared to echo the official narrative of Iran. "Tehran pledges to respond decisively to law violators," was the headline of Qatar's al-Watan newspaper.

Qatar has been singled out by several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as supporting Iran at the expense of its Arab neighbours. Doha's cosy ties with Tehran have been one of the main reasons for the dispute between Qatar and a quartet of countries, which severed ties with Qatar last year.

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Saudi former minister returns to work as anti-corruption investigation winds down

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Saudi authorities' anti-corruption drive appears to be closing as individuals, including a former government minister and members of the royal family, detained in the sweep have appeared in public.

Former Saudi Finance Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf, who had been detained during the anti-corruption investigation, attended the kingdom's cabinet meeting January 2 in his capacity as minister of state and adviser to the king.

Assaf, who is also on the Saudi Aramco board, was detained because of embezzlement allegations related to the expansion of Mecca's Grand Mosque, unidentified sources told the Wall Street Journal. Since Assaf's release, Saudi media outlets reported that, after questioning, the former finance minister was determined to be not guilty.

Before the cabinet meeting, Saudi online news site Sabaq reported that Assaf would return to work after investigators reviewed complaints against him and found

him innocent of all charges. An editorial in Saudi daily Okaz stated: "The cabinet session is proof that the pockets of the minister with a white moustache have also proved to be white as well."

Also seen in public was the former commander of the Saudi National Guard and son of the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Prince Mutaib bin Abdulaziz, who attended a horse racing event with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz.

Numerous media outlets published pictures of the two princes. However, no details were reported regarding Prince Mutaib's involve-

● **Many high-profile detainees, including former Minister of Economy and Planning Adel Fakeih and Saudi billionaire Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, are still being held in Riyadh.**

ment in the investigation or his release.

Saudi authorities last November began a kingdom-wide anti-corruption campaign, holding both average citizens and royalty accountable. Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued a royal decree forming an anti-corruption task force with the jurisdiction to "investigate, issue arrest warrants, travel bans and freeze accounts and portfolios," a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency said.

More than 200 individuals, including members of the royal family, former ministers and high-profile businessmen, were arrested in the culmination of a 3-year investigation.

Saudi authorities leading the investigation negotiated settlements with some detainees and said that those held on corruption charges would be required to return misappropriated funds. Some suspects would have to turn over as much as 70% of their wealth, the Financial Times reported.

Most of those arrested agreed to settle to avoid further prosecution. The settlements totalled an estimated \$50 billion-\$100 billion, which was to be channelled into



Innocent of all charges. A 2016 file picture shows former Saudi Finance Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf speaking to the media in Riyadh. (Reuters)

economic development projects.

"The committee has followed internationally applied procedures by negotiating with the detainees and offering them a settlement that will facilitate recouping the state's funds and assets and eliminate the need for a prolonged liti-

gation," the public prosecutor said in a statement.

Many high-profile detainees, including former Minister of Economy and Planning Adel Fakeih and Saudi billionaire Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, are still being held at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh.