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POLICY BRIEF

Iranian Opposition Makes Gains on the Global Stage

MAY 04, 2023 | *Cameron Khansarinia,* ***POLICY DIRECTOR***
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A recent letter signed by 32 members of the Israeli Knesset (parliament) supporting ethnic separatism in Iran caused concern among Iranians across the political divide who viewed it as an attempt to violate Iran's territorial integrity. The letter appeared to many opponents of the Islamic Republic as a political gift to the regime, which often threatens that its overthrow will lead to separatism. Since the letter followed the historic trip to Israel by Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi aimed at rekindling friendly ties between the two nations, Iranian activists wondered whether the Prince's new high-level relationships would serve a purpose. Within a week of the letter's issuance, and after direct diplomatic overtures, Pahlavi delivered, as 25 of the 32 co-signers revoked their signatures in a diplomatic win for the Prince that has boosted the opposition.

The Bottom Line

- On April 27th, 32 members of the Knesset (more than 25% of the body) wrote to Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen urging support for "the national aspirations in southern Azerbaijan". "Southern Azerbaijan" is the manufactured term used by some in the ex-Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan to refer to Azari-speaking areas of northwest Iran.
- The letter was delivered just after Cohen returned from a trip to Azerbaijan, a country bordering Iran that has developed closer ties with Israel in recent years. It also appeared to coincide with exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi's trip to Israel where he was received by top leaders including the President, Prime Minister, the Minister of Intelligence, and other senior cabinet members.
- The letter, which explicitly called for the violation of Iran's territorial integrity and national sovereignty, and promised to turn the future, proposed statelet of "Southern Azerbaijan" into an ally of Israel, contradicted assurances to Pahlavi by Israeli officials regarding their respect for Iran's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Pahlavi publicly slammed the letter and wrote that he was pursuing the issue "with our friends in Jerusalem...". Less than 72 hours later, Intelligence Minister Gila Gamliel—the Prince's host during his visit—announced that 25 of the 32 signatories had formally revoked their signatories and stated their support for Iran's territorial integrity.

If the Letter is Dead, Why Does This Matter?

- The letter garnered swift and collective condemnation from Iranians, Iranian-Americans, and members of the Israeli and Jewish communities, including from the Iranian-American Jewish Federation. Israeli journalist Emily Schrader, in addition to condemning the letter, expressed confusion, writing, "I have no idea why these MKs would sign such a letter". After Minister Gamliel's announcement about the retraction of the vast majority of the signatories, Amir Hossein Etemadi, an aide to the Crown Prince, wrote that Gamliel had communicated to the Prince that several of the signatories "asserted that they had been misguided and... exploited."
- The letter posed a challenge to Pahlavi's diplomatic efforts after he publicly touted the restoration of what he called the "historical bonds" between the Iranian and Israeli peoples, The rescinding of the letter was widely viewed by the opposition as a success for his diplomacy with Israel.
- The swift Israeli retraction of the MKs' signatures, according to CEO of Manoto, the popular Persian-language television network, Kayvan Abbasi, "would not have been possible without the Prince's direct protest to the highest government officials." Since the murder of Mahsa Amini in September of 2022, the Iranian opposition has drastically increased engagement with the global leaders including high-profile engagements at the United Nations Security Council, the Munich Security Conference, and with other world leaders. After six months of such meetings, the Prince's success in revoking the MKs' signatures appears to be the first tangible outcome of the oppositions' engagements.

What About Iran's Diversity?

- Iran is an ancient country made up of dozens of languages, tribes, and groupings called *aqvam* (*qom* in the singular) which is often mistranslated as "ethnicity" or even more incorrectly as "nationality" in English-language Iran analysis. For example Iranian Kurds are a "qom" as are Iranian Azeris, Turks, Arabs, Taleshis, Qashqais, Persians, Turkmen, and dozens of other groups. Iranians "aqvam" have lived side-by-side in a united Iran for millenia.
- Analysis of Iran in Washington is often, and inappropriately, viewed through a contemporary Western lens of identity and racial politics, and thus seeks to exploit Iran's diversity by advancing regressive notions of separatism or ethno-federalism. Meanwhile, there is no proof that a significant number of Iranians of any background want to secede from Iran; in fact, available data shows just the opposite.
- Since the murder of Mahsa Amini, an Iranian-Kurdish woman whom her family referred to as a "daughter of Iran" and whose uncle also called Iran's soil "holy and indivisible," many Iranians have grown concerned about attempts to define the ongoing protests along ethnic lines.

U.S. Officials Need to Avoid Similar Mistakes

- As NUFDI outlined in its Maximum Support strategic policy initiative, the United States should continue to publicly declare its no-strings-attached dedication to Iran's territorial integrity. It should avoid using flirtations with ethnic separatism as an attempt to weaken the Islamic Republic, not merely as a matter of principle but as a matter of strategy. Promoting ethnic secessionism and Iran's division will not only strengthen the Islamic Republic by frightening anti-regime Iranians from overthrowing the regime due to the prospect of foreign-backed separatism, but will also, if successful, wreak havoc on the region and likely cause an uncontrollable flow of refugees, civil war, and other regional conflicts.
- More tangibly, as also argued in Maximum Support, the United States should refuse to meet or engage with "opposition" elements who do not support Iran's territorial integrity.
- A clear parallel for the Knesset members' blunder is H.R. 100, which currently has more than two hundred co-sponsors in the U.S. House of Representatives. H.R. 100 is a propaganda resolution promoting the largely-reviled Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) which was formerly listed by the State Department as a terrorist organization. Members of Congress should follow the example of members of the Knesset and retract their support from H.R. 100, which does not support the people of Iran and, instead, promotes an unpopular, dangerous ideology.