

Facing new sanctions, Iranians vent anger at rich and powerful

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1541573309263531400

Wed, 2018-11-07 06:00

GENEVA: More Iranians are using social media to vent anger at what they see as the corruption and extravagance of a privileged few, while the majority struggles to get by in an economy facing tighter US sanctions.

The country has been hit by a wave of protests during the last year, some of them violent, but as economic pressures rise, people are increasingly pointing fingers at the rich and powerful, including clerics, diplomats, officials and their families.

One person channelling that resentment is Seyed Mahdi Sadrossadati, a relatively obscure cleric who has amassed 256,000 followers on his Instagram account with a series of scathing posts aimed at children of the elite.

In one recent post, he blasted the "luxury life" of a Revolutionary Guards commander and his son, who posted a selfie online in front of a tiger lying on the balcony of a mansion.

Openly criticizing a well-known member of the powerful military unit that answers to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is in itself an unusual act of defiance.

"A house tiger? What's going on?" Sadrossadati wrote. "And this from a 25-year-old youth who could not gain such wealth. People are having serious difficulty getting diapers for their child."

The Iranian rial currency has hit 149,000 to the US dollar on the black market used for most transactions, down from around 43,000 at the start of 2018, as US President Donald Trump vowed to pull out of the nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers aimed at curbing its nuclear program.

That has sent living costs sharply higher and made imports less accessible, while the threat of financial punishment from the United States has prompted many foreign companies to pull out of Iran or stay away.

The situation could get worse, as additional sanctions come into force this week.

"Sultan of coins"

Wary of growing frustration over the relative wealth of a few among the population of 81 million, Khamenei has approved the establishment of special courts focused on financial crimes.

The courts have handed out at least seven death sentences since they were set up in August, and some of the trials have been broadcast live on television.

Among those sentenced to death was Vahid Mazloumin, dubbed the "sultan of coins" by local media, a trader accused of manipulating the currency market and who was allegedly caught with two tons of gold coins, according to the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA).

The tough sentences have not been enough to quell frustration, however, with

high profile officials and clerics in the firing line.

"Because the economic situation is deteriorating, people are looking for someone to blame and in this way get revenge from the leaders and officials of the country," said Saeed Leylaz, a Tehran-based economist and political analyst.

Washington is likely to welcome signs of pressure on Iran's political and religious establishment, as it hopes that by squeezing the economy it can force Tehran to curb its nuclear program and row back on military and political expansion in the Middle East.

Public anger among Iranians has been building for some time.

Demonstrations over economic hardships began late last year, spreading to more than 80 cities and towns and resulting in at least 25 deaths.

Clerics

In addition to his written contributions, Sadrossadati has posted videos of debates between himself and some of those he has criticized.

In one, he confronted Mehdi Mazaheri, the son of a former central bank governor who was criticized online after a photograph appeared showing him wearing a large gold watch.

In a heated exchange, Sadrossadati shouted: "How did you get rich? How much money did you start out with and how much money do you have now? How many loans have you taken?"

Mazaheri, barely able to get in a reply, said he would be willing to share documents about his finances.

Children of more than a dozen other officials have been criticized online and are often referred to as "aghazadeh" – literally "noble-born" in Farsi but also a derogatory term used to describe their perceived extravagance.

High-profile clerics have also been targeted.

Mohammad Naghi Lotfi, who held the prestigious position of leading Friday prayers at a mosque in Ilam, west Iran, resigned in October after he was criticized on social media for being photographed stepping out of a luxury sports utility vehicle.

Facebook posts labelled Lotfi a hypocrite for highlighting ways that ordinary Iranians could get through the economic crisis during his speeches. The outcry was a major factor in his decision to resign from a post he had held for 18 years.

"The hype that was presented against me in this position ... made me resign, lest in the creation of this hype the position of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution be damaged," Lotfi told state media after stepping down. "The issue of the vehicle ... was all lies that they created in cyberspace," he added.

He was one of at least four clerics in charge of Friday prayers who have resigned in the last year after being accused on social media of profligacy or financial impropriety.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[iran sanctions](#)

[US](#)

[Iran](#)

Iranians fear more hardships as US sanctions begin to bite Oil prices dip amid well-supplied market, Iran sanction waivers

[Snowden issues surveillance warning to Israelis](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1541570103353326700

Wed, 2018-11-07 05:50

TEL AVIV: US whistleblower Edward Snowden urged Israelis to be on guard against heavy-handed government and private surveillance in a speech by video link Tuesday and defended his 2013 massive leak of classified documents. Snowden highlighted Israel's high-tech capabilities, but warned that

accepting too much government surveillance and too easily acceding to the argument that it is needed for security reasons posed serious risks.

"If we can allow ourselves to be terrorized by someone with nothing but a knife, to reorder our societies for the convenience of state power ... we've stopped being citizens and we've started being subjects," said Snowden, who spoke from an undisclosed location in Moscow.

The 35-year-old also spoke of the NSO Group, the Israel-based company known for its Pegasus spyware.

The software has been pinpointed by independent experts as likely being used in a number of countries with poor human rights records.

"The idea is that companies like this increasingly are popping up all around the world," Snowden said.

In one case, international experts investigating the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico in 2014 were targeted with the spyware after it had been sold to the government, the experts said.

NSO Group says its product is intended to be used only for investigating and preventing crime and terrorism.

It says it investigates allegations of improper use.

Snowden, a former contractor with the US National Security Agency, leaked thousands of classified documents to the press in 2013 which revealed the vast scope of surveillance of private data put in place after the 9/11 attacks.

He has lived in exile ever since.

The United States has charged him with espionage and theft of state secrets, but Snowden said he still loves his country and hopes to return home.

But he said risks had to be taken since "this world will only ever be as good as we make it."

Snowden spoke to an invited audience in Tel Aviv at an event organized by Israeli public relations agency OH! Orenstein Hoshen.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[surveillance](#)

[Edward Snowden](#)

Bolsonaro's Israel embassy move: high-risk mix of religion, politics
Israel lawmakers to debate death penalty for Palestinian 'terrorists'

[Yemeni security forces in Marib thwart attempts to smuggle ancient statues](#)

Wed, 2018-11-07 08:55

DUBAI: Yemeni security forces foiled a Houthi attempt to smuggle rare antiquities out of the Marib province, arresting those involved, Saudi state-news channel Al-Ekhbariya reported.

The Yemeni news agency reported that security forces seized gold statues and gemstones at a military checkpoints outside the capital.

The police chief in the province said the suspects arrested for the smuggling

attempt were monitored for more than a month before they were arrested. The gang confessed to selling the relics to Arab merchants who acted as brokers.

The general director also said those arrested were part of a larger smuggling gang. He said the investigation revealed that many antiquities and gold bullion were smuggled out, and several archaeological sites have been destroyed.

He said the aim of the Houthi militia was to destroy all national capabilities, including the cultural heritage, where artifacts were seized in the Yemeni museums and official stores of the state.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Yemen](#)

[Houthi](#)

Arab coalition operation against missile and drone sites 'thwarted Houthi militia attack' Yemen government ready to re-start talks with Houthi militia

Iraqis maimed in battle struggle to survive as amputees

Author:

SALAM FARAJ | AFP

Wed, 2018-01-31 06:15

ID:

1517385299728397200

BAGHDAD: Karrar Hassan, 25, is just one of tens of thousands of Iraqi fighters wounded battling the Daesh group. Now disabled, he struggles to survive on a \$400 pension.

In 2014, he was unemployed and joined the Hashed Al-Shaabi, a paramilitary coalition dominated by Iran-backed groups that fought alongside Iraqi government forces against the jihadists.

Months later, during fierce fighting for the city of Fallujah west of Baghdad, his left calf was ripped open by a blast and Karrar lost the leg. The Hashed sent him for treatment to both Iran and Lebanon, and he returned with a prosthesis from the knee down.

This gave him enough mobility to allow a return to the front.

In 2015, Karrar was fighting in Baiji city, north of the capital, when he was hit again.

This time two bullets shattered his right knee, putting him out of action once and for all.

Iraq declared victory over Daesh in December 2017, after a gruelling three-year onslaught that also wounded tens of thousands of fighters.

The Hashed says it lost 8,000 men in the war on Daesh, and 26,000 were wounded.

Iraq's government, which mobilized tens of thousands of members of the security forces for the campaign, has not given its own toll.

Karrar, a father of three small children, has been left incapacitated.

Unemployed and now unable to drive, he spends his days at home trying to figure out how to provide for his family on a monthly pension of 500,000 Iraqi dinars (\$400).

This amount represents a bit less than a medium salary in Iraq, but for Karrar it is not enough to buy medicine for his injuries as well as food for his wife and three children.

He says the ointment he needs to rub on his skin to avoid chafing from the prosthesis "costs \$800" and lasts for 10 months.

Karrar would like to work, "but with my legs I can't even drive a taxi" or carry anything heavy.

Abu Mehdi Al-Mohandis, second-in-command in the Hashed, says hospitals run by the paramilitary unit provide free medical care for 60,000 fighters and 300,000 civilians.

Dhia Hussein runs Al-Razi hospital for the Hashed in Baghdad, where he says 1,450 amputees have received treatment over the past six months alone.

Iraq has a long history of bloody conflict, from the 1980-1988 war with its neighbor Iran to the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein and to the later struggle against Daesh.

Each conflict has resulted in a heavy toll of casualties, many of whom are amputees.

Tahssin Ibrahim has been making prosthetic limbs in Baghdad for more than 30 years.

He says the number of amputees has risen since the 2003 conflict, and the number of workshops specializing in prostheses and shops selling medical equipment has increased tenfold over the past 15 years.

Most of Ibrahim's clients are war wounded, and he says many are forced to borrow money to pay for their artificial limbs.

The most rudimentary prosthesis costs around \$1,000 in Iraq – more than twice the average monthly wage.

Ahmed, 32, was deployed with the federal police to second city Mosul, one of the jihadists' main hubs before they were driven out by a fierce offensive that lasted for months.

An Daesh mortar blast tore through his right leg, and Ahmed says his pension of 575,000 Iraqi dinars is simply inadequate.

Every month, half of this goes toward "paying for medical treatment," including doctor's visits and medicine, leaving him with just half to buy food for the family. That "is not enough."

A doctor's visit also means a taxi fare, he said.

"The bus is not adapted for handicapped people so I have to take a taxi," said the father of four.

One doctor who spoke to AFP, Ghassan Al-Alussi, believes that the pensions allocated to war veterans are "insufficient."

"Public and health institutions must do more for amputee fighters because they have defended the country," Alussi said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)

[Daesh](#)

related_nodes:

Revolutionary Guards clash with Daesh in western Iran

Iraqi Parliament eases financial sanctions on Kurdish region

Former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein wrote a love story that's available on Amazon

[Cut off by Israeli wall, Palestinian family declares 'republic'](#)

Author:

AFP

Wed, 2018-01-31 07:24

ID:

1517374949858033100

RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: The logic of an Israeli wall north of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank appears clear – on one side Palestinians, on the other the Israeli settlement of Beit El.

But look carefully and you will see a small gap in part of it leading into a courtyard where the Palestinian Jumaa family live.

The newly-built part of the wall which stretches along the road next to the settlement has left the 25 members of the extended family on the opposite side to the rest of the Palestinian town of El-Bireh.

They are, they say, partially cut off from the outside world, sometimes having to cross through an Israeli checkpoint just to buy milk and bread.

"The wall separated us from the people and from Palestinians. I feel I am inside the settlement, even though I am Palestinian," said Hossam Jumaa, 54 and a father of eight.

"Now we live alone."

At the house, the children of the three families play in the shadow of the six-meter wall, while their vegetable plots run toward the barrier.

The family said they were informed three years ago by Israeli authorities that they would extend the wall along the road, leaving them on the other side.

But they say construction increased after US President Donald Trump's December 6 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which led to widespread protests and the Palestinian government freezing ties with the US administration.

The Palestinians see east Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, which they say is being rapidly eroded by Israeli settlement growth throughout the West Bank.

"The work used to be at night, but after the protests broke out in the Palestinian territories following the American decision to recognize

Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the work was done in the day," Hossam's brother Hakim, 50, said.

The Israeli defense ministry said in a statement the wall was necessary "following a significant number of gunfire incidents from vehicles toward the Beit El community."

"The barrier does not harm any private land, does not block access to houses and does not change anything on the ground," it said.

"There is no harm to Palestinians or their land."

The wall cutting off the Jumaa family is different from Israel's controversial separation barrier sealing off the West Bank from Israel. Israel began building the barrier in 2002 during the bloody second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, arguing it was necessary to stop Palestinian attackers.

According to the United Nations, around 65 percent of the separation barrier has so far been constructed, with more than 80 percent inside the West Bank. The UN says it "impedes access to services and resources, disrupts family and social life (and) undermines livelihoods."

The wall affecting the Jumaas ranks among the barriers, fences and private security protecting West Bank settlements.

More than 400,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank.

The UN says their existence and growth on land supposed to form a future Palestinian state is one of the largest obstacles to peace.

Palestinians are banned from entering settlements except in exceptional circumstances, and there are near-constant tensions between them.

Settlers have been the regular target of violent attacks by Palestinians.

Hardline settlers on the other hand have attacked Palestinians.

The Jumaa family said they have asked for support from Palestinian politicians to oppose the wall but have had little help.

Hossam said being on the opposite side of the wall brings new fears.

In the early 1990s, he said, they were subject to an attack by settlers in which their windows were smashed.

"Now, after we became inside the wall, we are scared of attacks by settlers at any moment."

A nearby street is also used by the army, with the family worried of bumping into them late at night.

They say their children can no longer go to school or the shops alone without fear.

"We don't see anyone any more," seven-year-old Miriam said.

The family have increasingly little hope, instead taking to dark humor.

"Today we are independent. We will call ourselves the Great Republic of Jumaa," Hakim joked.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[Palestine](#)

related_nodes:

Palestinians slam Israeli expansionism

Israel shoots dead two Palestinians in protests over Jerusalem

Palestinians to get 3G in West Bank after Israel lifts ban