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As Venezuela buckles under Trump, Iran sees an uncomfortable parallel

1 HR 21 MIN AGO
By **Mostafa Salem**

The Iranian national flag flies atop a pole at Bam-e Tehran in Tehran, Iran on October 24. …

Pockets of protests erupting across Iran over the past week have intensified pressure on a dysfunctional government struggling to manage a spiraling economic crisis.

But a dramatic US military operation more than 7,000 miles away looms even larger over the Islamic Republic. Iran woke up over the weekend to dramatic scenes of US forces landing in the Venezuelan capital Caracas to capture Tehran's ally President Nicolas Maduro and move him to the US in a brazen nighttime operation that saw the president and his wife get **dragged out of their bedroom**.

On Monday, Trump issued his second threat to Iran in less than a week, warning again that if authorities kill protesters, the US would respond.

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The Iranian leadership, already grappling with internal unrest and multiple crises, is now confronting the prospect of renewed US military action after its nuclear sites were targeted last summer – an escalation driven by an emboldened US president who has also threatened other adversaries in the wake of the Venezuela attack.

"If they start killing people like they have in the past, I think they're going to get hit very hard by the United States," Trump said aboard Air Force One on Monday.

Protests erupted in Iran last week when disgruntled shopkeepers took to the streets to demonstrate against the country's plummeting currency. Largely peaceful and localized at first, the demonstrations quickly spread nationwide as other segments of the population joined in, leading to unrest across 88 cities in 27 of Iran's 31 provinces, a US-based activist group Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said. The regime eventually deployed the Basij paramilitary force to suppress hundreds of protesters.

Protesters march in downtown Tehran, Iran, on December 29. (Fars News Agency via AP) *(Fars News Agency/AP)*

After nine days of protests, at least 29 protesters have been killed and nearly 1,200 arrested, HRANA said. Iranian security forces cracked down on the demonstrations, even raiding a hospital in Ilam on Sunday where they arrested wounded protesters, a common tactic by the security apparatus.

Trump's blunt warnings have infuriated the country's leaders, who have since doubled down on crushing the protests.

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The leadership of the Islamic Republic has long-warned about American-instigated regime change, telling supporters and opposition alike that the ultimate goal of Western powers is to topple it.

Adding to American pressure, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared support for Iranian protesters, likely heightening paranoia in Tehran. Iranian officials have since denounced some demonstrators as "rioters," "mercenaries," and "foreign-linked agitators."

"Protesting is legitimate, but protesting is different from rioting. We talk with protesters. The officials must talk with the protesters. But, there's no point in talking with a rioter," Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on X this week. "Rioters must be put in their place."

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When Israel launched the surprise war against Iran last summer, the depth of its infiltration became evident when it was revealed that Israeli intelligence agents **smuggled weapons** into the country and used them to strike high-value targets from within Iranian territory.

Iranian authorities **arrested** scores and executed at least 10 in the aftermath of the war. On Monday, Iranian state media said a man was arrested in Tehran on suspicion of collaborating with the Israeli spy agency Mossad.

Vali Nasr, a professor with Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, said Iran now views US intentions as "maximalist."

"To Tehran, American intentions now are clearly maximalist and hostile," he told CNN. "Whether Venezuela is truly a triumphant launching pad for an Iran push is premature. The Venezuela saga has just started."

Iran is facing a "triple crisis," Sanam Vakil, director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Chatham House think tank in London, told CNN, adding that previously Iran faced economic and political crises, but is now facing external pressure from the US and Israel with the threat of another military conflict looming.

A child walks by a beach on the outskirts of 'El Palito' refinery on December 18, in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. *(Jesus Vargas/Getty Images)*

Similar but different

Under the leadership of late President Hugo Chavez, and later Nicolas Maduro, Venezuela became Iran's closest ally in the Western hemisphere. Deep economic ties and extensive military cooperation bound the heavily sanctioned US adversaries together.

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As Venezuela crumbled under the weight of sanctions, Tehran, much more experienced in dealing with American "maximum pressure," **delivered Iranian-flagged** tankers to help transport Venezuelan oil. The two countries signed dozens of bilateral agreements, including in a 20-year cooperation deal to repair and overhaul Venezuelan refineries and enhance military relations.

More recently, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) planned to build a train line for **Caracas' metro**, before pulling out.

The striking parallels between the two regimes have led many observers to turn their attention to Iran and question whether the ailing Khamenei could face a similar fate.

Both nations boast vast petroleum reserves and extensive mineral wealth, long positioning themselves as anti-imperialist adversaries of the US. Both have endured crippling US sanctions that have precipitated economic collapses. Trump has issued direct threats against each regime, intensifying the pressure on Tehran and Caracas alike.

The two countries are also very different. Iran is a theocratic republic rooted ideologically in Shiite Islam while Venezuela is a socialist and secular regime.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a meeting in Tehran on January 3.
(Iranian Supreme Leader/WANA/Reuters)

Iran may be better prepared for any regime change attempted from abroad than Venezuela was. Long anticipating an American plot to overthrow it, the Islamic Republic built a network of armed proxy groups to project power in the Middle East and fortify itself, and has built its military capabilities, including sophisticated drones and ballistic missiles as formidable weapons in the battlefield.

"All American centers and forces across the entire region will be legitimate targets for us in response to any potential actions," Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaker of Iran's parliament warned.

In Iran, loyalists and opposition alike are extremely averse to foreign intervention. Despite the 12-day Israeli war on Iran last summer, figures on all sides of the political spectrum came together in a rare show of unity, denouncing Israel for striking their country.

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Even if a regime change is attempted, it's not guaranteed to yield the results that Iran's adversaries may be looking for.

"The case of Venezuela is going to be very important for the Islamic republic and the world to watch how removing the leader at the top might not necessarily reorientate too much of the policies within the system," Vakil said.

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For Iran's leaders, the summer war was further proof of what they've been arguing for decades: that talks with the US are a ruse to eventually topple the Islamic Republic. Confrontation, Khamenei suggests, is an inevitability.

"Those who argued that the solution to the country's problems was in negotiating with the US have seen what happened. In the midst of Iran negotiating with the US, the US government was busy behind the scenes preparing plans for war," he wrote on X on Saturday. "We will not give in to the enemy."

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