



## Iran Continues Course as Half a Year of Protests Subside

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The recent wave of protests in Iran is subsiding, decisively pacified by the security forces and lacking the emergence of opposition leaders. Because there is little chance that the authorities will implement any significant reforms, the conditions for another anti-system rebellion will remain in Iran. The need to strengthen and stabilise the Iranian regime will encourage it to further broaden partnerships with China and Russia.

The protests that broke out in Iran last September just after the death of the Kurdish 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who had been detained and beaten by the Tehran police for not wearing the obligatory head covering (hijab), appear to be waning. During over six months of protests, 22,000 people were arrested and convicted (official data and likely understated) and likely several hundred civilians and regime forces members may have died in riots accompanying the protests.

**Impact on the Internal Situation.** The protests that began in October-November, initially limited to Iranian Kurdistan, spread to around 80 major cities in Iran, which has a population of 88 million. Amini became a symbol of rebellion against the repressive regime, and protesters united under the slogan of “woman, life, freedom”. The initiating role in almost all of the demonstrations, strikes, and protests turned riots was played by Iranian women, widely supported by high school and university students, as well as workers of several state-owned enterprises. Noteworthy was the protesters’ open hostility towards the entire system, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi. However, the protests by the young Iranians lacked leadership, organisation, and a positive political agenda. Nevertheless, the scale of the protests surpassed all crises facing the theocracy since the revolution in 1979. The most serious of them include rebellions by Iranian Kurds and Baluchs (1979-1983), student protests (summer 1999), and the “Green Revolution” after the presidential election in 2009. The latter was suppressed after several months of repression (4,000 arrested and about 100 killed), as well as house arrests for the leaders of the

“Green Movement”. Other riots in 2017, 2019, and 2022 lacked strong leadership and political motivation, flaring up locally and against the backdrop of drastic increases in commodity prices or the [lack of an effective response by the government to the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

The wave of protests this past six months led to the consolidation of the Shia clergy and the conservative government, as well as beneficiaries of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the authorities declared they had offered a “full explanation” of Amini’s death, they quickly denied the police were responsible for it. As it had effectively tried and tested its responses previously, the regime denied access to the internet, making it impossible for the protesters to organise and coordinate their plans. Moreover, potential opposition leaders were neutralised by arrest or intimidation, as were media, culture, and sport personalities sympathetic to the Iranian youth. In November, the regime also held show trials of the first thousand people arrested, followed by the first execution, with a majority of parliament (the Majlis) supporting the harshest sentences. In addition to intimidation, torture, and rape of detainees, the security forces also used toxic gases against the protesting female high school students (up to a thousand were hospitalised). The wide range of repression was accompanied by certain gestures to calm the public, like vague announcements of “reforms” of the moral police, further explanations of poisonings in schools, and an amnesty for 20,000 of the 22,000 detained. In the meantime, and by the second half of March, the protests lost their scale, intensity, and geographical range.

**Iran's Structural Problems.** The Iranian regime has managed to survive its most serious crisis so far, but its future depends more and more on the security apparatus. It has lost its social legitimacy, based on the thesis of a unique combination of theocracy (the rule of the supreme leader and clergy) with democratic procedures (elections at various levels of government). Iranian society lacks confidence in the system and its elite, as already evidenced by low turn-out in the [last parliamentary](#) and [presidential elections](#), which fell below 50%. The next general elections may be insufficient to refocus attitudes among Iranians towards the regime. In reality, the rulers of Iran are not interested in systemic changes anyway because any reform taking into account the aspirations of the young generation and women's rights would further undermine their ideology and religious legitimacy.

The pacification of the recent wave of protests does not eliminate the persistent and huge potential for an anti-system rebellion in Iran. So far, the majority of the repeated protests have been related to Iran's economy, reflecting the hyperinflation (currently at 53%), impoverishment of Iranians, and wide unemployment (official at only 8%, but de facto higher). During previous crises, the regime was skilful at manipulating the differences between the urban and rural areas of Iran, between the educated dissidents and the larger group of low-skilled workers. However, generational change will weaken the significance of these divisions and subsequent protests may each time be directed at the entire system. Iran's stability also will be tested with the expected succession of Supreme Leader Khamenei (who is 83), with the real mechanisms and challengers to the office still the subjects of pure speculation.

**Impact on Foreign Policy.** Since last September, the regime has been presenting the protests as motivated by "conspiracies" instilled by Israel and the U.S. and as "hybrid warfare" by EU countries. This approach serves to mask the internal sources of protest as well as to maintain constant tension with the West. It fits well with Iran's orientation towards tightening its informal alliances with China, Russia, and North Korea. The regime is convinced that it has promoted itself in the strategic calculations of Russia and China, and that the competition between them and the U.S. creates new opportunities and measurable benefits for Iran. Since summer of 2022, [Iranian assistance to Russia in the war against Ukraine has been increasing \(drones and ammunition transfers\)](#), with recent reports of Russian help in pacifying the protests and controlling the internet in Iran. It is likely that with their [recent announcements of normalisation of Iranian-Saudi relations](#), Iran will resume other tensions in the Middle East, aimed at rivals from outside the Persian Gulf. This scenario would be confirmed with further attacks by Iranian proxy forces on Israel, [weakened by its own political crisis](#), or against the small U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria (about 3,000 troops).

The chances for Iran's immediate return to compliance with the limits of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) are also

diminishing, while the quantity and quality of its enriched uranium are increasing. Although Iran is reportedly not engaged in active work on nuclear warheads, the regime's intention to enrich uranium to higher levels makes the [threat it will obtain a nuclear arsenal more credible](#); in turn, these are also moves to strengthen Iran's bargaining position vis-à-vis the U.S. and EU. Its calculus regarding the JCPOA also should be seen in the context of the current tensions between the U.S. and Russia and China while also preventing any further sanctions by the UN. Nuclear issues also have had a strong influence on the rather delayed and uncoordinated reactions by the U.S. and EU Member States to the Iranian protests. New sanctions by them were initially limited to the Iranian moral police, and only in January 2023 directed against judicial officials and leaders of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij militia. Also, two months of protest passed until December when a U.S. and Albania initiative succeeded in excluding Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

**Prospects and Conclusion.** Even the complete suppression of the recent protests by young Iranians will not eliminate their frustrations or anti-regime sentiments. The role of women of different ethnic and social groups in recent events has shown that it is increasingly difficult to maintain discrimination against them. However, there is little indication that the Iranian elite, ruling since the 1979 revolution, is interested in and able to reform the system. The regime could still be functioning for many years without social legitimacy, thanks to the extensive security apparatus, the dominance of the state on the labour market, and the continuity of privileges for children of the elite. The still-unresolved process of succession of power after Khamenei will be likely another and perhaps more serious test of the coherence and stability of the regime in the context of a rapidly changing society.

The existing pillars of domestic and foreign policy of Iran together with its informal alliances with Russia and China preclude the flexibility or pragmatism on many issues expected by many Western governments. On the other hand, there are no signs that Iran is determined to rapidly develop a nuclear arsenal, and a decision to do so must be approved by the current or next supreme leader anyway. Obviously, it is hard to predict if all steps necessary for such weaponisation will be approved by Khamenei's successor. Iran's growing capabilities in the area of fissile materials are already perceived as a potential threat to Israel and Arab states. The more than half year of protests has not been an impulse for the U.S. or EU states to remake policy towards Iran. They remain based on the hope for a return to the original limits and terms of the 2015 nuclear deal. However this approach based on the priority of revival of the JCPOA needs further revision in the context of other pressing factors—lack of regime interest in returning to the original terms of the deal, growing stocks of enriched uranium, lack of respect for Iranians' human rights, and Iran's continued military assistance to Russia.