



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 9 October 2022

Iran Protests: Context, Features, and Projections

Unit for Political Studies

Iran Protests: Context, Features, and Projections:

Series: **Situation Assessment**

9 October 2022

Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studies draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2022 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

A History of Protest 1

Features of the Latest Protests 2

Complex Context 2

Prospects for the Protest Movement 4



In mid-September, the death of Mahsa Amini, three days after her arrest by the so-called morality police for violating the mandatory Hijab law sparked a wave of protracted countrywide protests in Iran. The security forces responded to the protests, which began in Tehran, with extreme force, leading to dozens of deaths and hundreds of casualties. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in his first televised commentary, branded the unrest as “riots,” with foreign backing.¹ In keeping with precedent, the authorities cut off the internet in large areas of the country in an attempt to control the narrative² and classes at some universities were suspended or moved online for days after “clashes” erupted between students and security forces.³

A History of Protest

It is crucial not to underestimate these protests as part of a pattern of uprisings that break out every decade or so in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, both before and after the Islamic revolution that changed the face of Iran. In 1988 huge swathes of the country rose up against constitutional amendments, while 1999 saw widespread student protests and the 2009 Green Movement emerged in opposition to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad securing a second term in what reformists believed to be fixed elections. But the pace of these protests has picked up in recent years, recurring at shorter intervals, with some years witnessing the breakout of multiple protests. Among the most prominent of these have been the December 2017 November 2019 protests — the most violent since the Shah was toppled in 1979 — which, according to various sources, resulted in more than 1000 deaths,⁴ against the backdrop of fuel price rises ranging from 50-200%. Many regional protests during 2020 and 2021 were localised to the more marginalised peripheral provinces such as the majority Arab Ahvaz province, Sistan-Baluchestan province, near the border with Pakistan, where separatist armed groups are active, and in the Kurdish regions to the west and northwest.

In all of these recent uprisings, political slogans have soon turned into calls for the overthrow of the regime, demands for freedom, and demands that the government address domestic crises rather than squandering the national wealth on escapades abroad. Meanwhile, the authorities have always painted the protests in the same colours, repeating the regime’s age-old accusations of a foreign conspiracy as justification for its brutal suppression of dissent. The regime consistently cuts off the internet in the areas where protests break put before resorting to violence in order to prevent the dissemination of any media that could fuel demonstrations elsewhere.

1 Maziar Motamedi, “Iran’s Khamenei blames Israel, US in first comments on protests,” *Al Jazeera*, 03/10/2022, accessed on 04/10/2022 <https://bit.ly/3CeWGJn>.

2 Weronika Strzyżowska, “Iran blocks capital’s internet access as Amini protests grow,” *The Guardian*, 22/09/2022, accessed on 04/10/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3M9jQWe>.

3 “Iran: Classes Suspended after Clashes at Major Iran University,” *France 24*, 03/10/2022, accessed 05/10/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Mc8fG7>.

4 “U.S. says Iran may have killed more than 1,000 in recent protests,” *Reuters*, 50/12/2022, accessed on 05/10/2022, at: <https://reut.rs/3EkYnrG>.



Features of the Latest Protests

The recent protests stand out among previous movements because they have united people over a social issue, with the discrimination of women at its core and also concerning the authorities' interference in personal freedoms and choices. Hence, this time, women have represented the driving force from the outset. Mahsa Amini has become a symbol of women's oppression and the regime's religious dictates, and a trigger for general Iranian resentment of the regime's strict social policies since 1979. In this sense, the struggle between a society that is striving for freedom and good living conditions and a regime that considers the veil one of its most important and visible ideological symbols has been reduced to a battle over the hijab.

Complex Context

While the killing of Mahsa Amini sparked the latest dissent, various factors have contributed to the relative protraction of these protests. Deteriorating economic conditions, marginalisation, the feeling of alienation among a large segment of the Iranian youth that were born after the revolution, and a lack of any hope on the horizon have left many Iranians dissatisfied with the regime. According to official statistics, 60 percent of Iranians were born after 1979,⁵ and they have not known any regime other than the Islamic Republic. Furthermore, they have no personal memory of life under the Shah's regime of tyranny and corruption, which many of their fathers and grandfathers have helped bring down.

The re-introduction of sanctions on Iran following the Trump administration's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement, as part of the "maximum pressure" policy to push Iran to negotiate a new agreement, exacerbated an already worsening situation. Sources reveal that today as many as 40 million Iranians (equivalent to half the population) live below the poverty line,⁶ with somewhere between 10 and 16 million people (about a fifth of the population)⁷ living in informal housing and shantytowns.⁸ The Covid-19 pandemic was a further blow to the economy and Iran suffered from the highest relative death rate outside Europe and the Americas from 2020-2021, due to the government's mismanagement of the crisis and its poor health system. According to official statistics, about 150,000 Iranians died of Covid-19, while other sources estimated the true number to be double that.⁹ The US sanctions and successive lockdowns have reduced the gross national product by half; it fell from approximately 450 billion dollars in 2019 to about 200 billion in 2021, according to data from

5 "Society in Iran," *Fanack*, 19/09/2012, accessed 10/05/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3yjaKRb>.

"From Revolution to Reform: 40 Years after Khomeini's Triumphant Return to Iran," *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 14/02/2019, accessed on 05/10/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3EjDGw>

6 "About 40 Million Iranians Under the Poverty Line," *MENA Monitor*, 03/01/2022, accessed on: 05/10/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3V1fzZ5>.

7 "Extreme poverty... Iranian shantytowns," *Al Hurra*, 28/03/2022, accessed on 05/10/2018, at: <https://arbne.ws/3SXYJbD>.

8 "Iran is facing 'water bankruptcy'... and an official describes the crisis as 'more dangerous than Israel,'" *Asharq*, 26/07/2021, seen on: 05/10/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3EisjV6>.

9 "Coronavirus Fatalities in Iran exceed 150,000, Arabic News, 31/05/2020, accessed on 05/10/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3eaBFHV>

the World Bank.¹⁰ The disruption of supply chains and the rise in commodity prices globally after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, increased inflation in Iran to about 50 percent,¹¹ and the national currency fell to unprecedented lows against the US dollar.

Politically, since quashing the “Green Revolution” in 2009, the regime has tended to push away the remaining overt political trends in the country, including forces that seek reform within the regime, and power has become almost entirely concentrated in the hands of conservative hardliners. They have control all executive, legislative and judicial authorities, and behind them are the Revolutionary Guards, who are absolutely loyal to the Supreme Leader. The low turnout in the presidential elections won by the regime’s candidate, Ibrahim Raisi, in 2021, after the other candidates were excluded, served as an expression of Iranian frustrations that different voices had been silenced. The turnout in these elections was the lowest in the history of the Islamic Republic, not exceeding 49 percent. This could be explained by the loss of popular confidence in the possibility that voting in elections could bring change. In the elections of 2013 and 2017, approximately 73 percent of registered voters participated, while the turnout was 85 percent in the 2009 elections.

Although Raisi sought to challenge doubts of his legitimacy by adopting more popular policies, he has not succeeded in realizing any of the promises he made, either on domestic or foreign policy, more than a year into his term. At home, Raisi’s anti-corruption promises have not translated into significant results, and he was unable to improve the economic and living conditions of millions of Iranians struggling to carry the weight of recent crises. In fact, in the past year, poverty rates have increased and the middle class has contracted, while the privatisation programs pursued by previous governments have continued in spite of Raisi’s rhetoric of social justice. Thus, under Raisi, privatisation is being pursued at the expense of the promised projects to tackle poverty and efforts to reshape the public sphere in the mould of the conservative right have multiplied. The role of the morality police has grown and so have restrictions on public and individual freedoms, especially those related to women.

In terms of foreign policy, Raisi’s government has failed to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement, despite months of tortuous negotiations punctuated by eight rounds of indirect talks with Washington. Despite the policy of looking east and improving economic and trade relations with China, Russia and elsewhere, lifting the sanctions by re-activating the nuclear agreement remains a priority for Raisi’s government. It also remains likely the only way for Raisi to fulfil his promises to improve the country’s living conditions, by attracting capital and foreign investments. Similarly, the Iranian government, despite its efforts, was unable to achieve a significant breakthrough in its Arab relations, and five rounds of direct security negotiations with Saudi Arabia in Baghdad have yielded little progress. The sixth round was postponed indefinitely in light of the deteriorating political and security situation in

¹⁰ The World Bank, “Iran’s Economic Update — October 2021, Key Conditions and Challenges,” (October 2021), accessed on 7/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3exr6hZ>.

¹¹ “The Erosion of Iranians’ Purchasing Power as a Result of Accelerating Inflation,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 19/6/2022, accessed on 5/10/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Rz487T>.

Iraq, and the emergence of indications that Iran's grip on the country is loosening as Tehran fails to unite the Iraqi Shi'i forces under a consensus government.

In addition, Israeli operations inside Iran over the past year, targeting Iran's nuclear facilities, missile program, drone factories, figures associated with the nuclear program, and officers in the Revolutionary Guards, has weakened the position of the government. Tehran tried to respond by targeting areas in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which Raisi's government views it as an advanced operations centre used by enemies to target it. From this perspective, too, the region has been targeted with ballistic missiles and drones in conjunction with the recent protests as part of the government's attempt to link them with what Iran says are planned operations from abroad to weaken the regime.

Prospects for the Protest Movement

The protests that have erupted in the wake of Mahsa Amini's death at the hands of the morality police do not represent a serious threat to the Iranian regime, as they remain spontaneous and lack organization. Despite huge enthusiasm in Western media, it seems that they lack a clear leadership and turnout is still relatively limited. Furthermore, protest slogans differ according to area or region, which means that there is a clear difference in priorities, interests and goals, and an absence of a regulatory framework or consistent incentive for the protests. In other words, there is no organisation leading the protests, and there is no sign of alliances that reflect the unity of goals among the protesters. So far, no cracks have emerged in the regime's wall, despite the expression of sympathetic stances towards the protesters, including from artistic and sports figures. But voices are emerging from within the regime that talk of the need to fix some of the issues related to its interference in people's daily lives especially by the morality police.

The recurrence of protests confirms the build-up of anger and tension in Iranian society, and the widening gap between the aspirations and interests of Iranians and the policies of their government related to domestic issues of an economic or social nature, in contrast to the priorities of the regime in Iran, which focuses on foreign policy and regional ambitions. Despite the difficulty of predicting any outcomes for these events in Iran, it is expected that they either calm down, as happened in the previous protests, with or without major concessions from the regime, or with some concessions to reduce the enforcement of dress codes, or that the protests will deepen and spread. The regime could thus be pushed to use greater violence to confront the dissent, in a way that could entangle the country in a greater conflict. Alternatively, the protests could make a wake-up call for the regime to take action.