

Iran on the Threshold of Another Revolution

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Brief Analysis

The most recent wave of protests in Iran appears more unified and determined, suggesting it may be the start of something much bigger.

Nationwide protests have been taking place across Iran since September 16, when Mahsa "Jina" Amini died after her arrest by the Islamic Republic's morality police in Tehran two days earlier for what they described as her "inappropriate hijab." The 22-year-old Kurdish woman had been on vacation in the capital with her brother when she was detained. Two hours later, the Islamic Republic Police reported to her family that Jina had been hospitalized after experiencing a stroke and heart attack, and that she had gone into a coma. Although authorities did not allow her parents to see the medical report, a hacker group revealed pictures of her skull—which were subsequently [confirmed \(https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-france-arrests-d2885fc65f51a6ee8758791e192c6992\)](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-france-arrests-d2885fc65f51a6ee8758791e192c6992) as authentic by official media—showing that the right side of her head had been fractured as a result of a direct strike.

The regime's refusal to respond to the family's questions about what happened to Jina is far from the first time Iranian authorities have let an unjustifiable death go unanswered. Her death brings to mind Ukraine International Flight 752—[shot down \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/8/no-survivors-ukrainian-jet-crashes-in-iran-with-176-on-board\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/8/no-survivors-ukrainian-jet-crashes-in-iran-with-176-on-board) by an IRGC direct missile in January 2020—where all 176 passengers onboard were killed. Then too, the Iranian government initially denied its direct role in the incident.

The Amini family's resistance to a government order to bury her immediately at night and not to follow up on the case is the main reason that Amini's death has become a symbol for Iranian protests today. Her father has instead spoken publicly about his daughter's death and asked for people to support all women throughout Iran, not just his daughter.

Others quickly joined Amini's father's call. In Amini's hometown during her burial, women removed their scarves and chanted together with men, "Women, Life, Liberty"—"Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" in Kurdish. These demonstrations marked the beginning of the current protest movement, with the movement soon spreading rapidly throughout the

country.

In the past, mass protests in Iran have typically been more centralized to the capital city of Tehran. In contrast, this protest started in a peripheral area, namely in the Kurdish region in Western Iran where Amini was from. This region is familiar with repression; the regime has scrutinized the region since the Kurds' first uprising against Islamic Republic rule in 1979. The government has tried for four decades to mobilize the entire country against the Kurdish-populated region. The regime tends to portray the region as a threat to national security and as a divisive and disruptive element preventing unified national sovereignty.

This tactic is reflected in Iran's immediate response to protests against Amini's death, when state media and their affiliated agents on social media attempted to label the movement as a separatist, anti-Iranian campaign by Kurdish groups. Of course, this narrative completely ignores the fact that protestors in Tehran and other cities are from all different ethnic and religious backgrounds and still support the protest against the Tehran regime, chanting the Kurdish slogan "Women, Life, Liberty."

Notably, this divisive rhetoric has done little to curb protestors across the country. Moreover, these protests are challenging the typical gender divide that has previously defined similar women's movements in Iran. While past women's protests against the compulsory "hijab" head covering have been limited to women—often resulting in the women being repressed and forced to confess regret that someone outside of Iran had deceived or pressured them into protesting—the current movement has brought *both* genders to the streets across the country. Indeed, women and men can be seen joining protests against the compulsory hijab, chanting together against the regime's strict dress code.

Again, the regime has attempted to shape the narrative of this suppression, maintaining that hijab-wearing is completely voluntary. In his [interview \(https://www.cbsnews.com/video/iran-president-ebrahim-raisi-60-minutes-video-2022-09-18/\)](https://www.cbsnews.com/video/iran-president-ebrahim-raisi-60-minutes-video-2022-09-18/) with CBS, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi made a comment to that effect, stating that the hijab is a spontaneous and completely voluntary cultural behavior for Iranian women. He made such claims while simultaneously requiring his female interviewer, Leslie Stahl, to wear a hijab during the interview. During Raisi's visit to New York to attend the UN General Assembly, he canceled a planned interview with Christiana Amanpour of CNN after she [rejected \(https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/22/middleeast/iran-president-ebrahim-raisi-christiane-amanpour-intl/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/22/middleeast/iran-president-ebrahim-raisi-christiane-amanpour-intl/index.html) his demand to wear a headscarf during their meeting.

While the attack against Amini served as their impetus, it is important to note that the current demonstrations in Iran are going beyond protests against the obligatory hijab and the morality police. Instead, the rhetoric has quickly evolved into demands for regime change. In a first for Iran, people around the country can be seen [burning \(https://twitter.com/Javanmardi75/status/1572718296033824769\)](https://twitter.com/Javanmardi75/status/1572718296033824769) [the flag \(https://twitter.com/A_raefipur/status/1572523099509395456\)](https://twitter.com/A_raefipur/status/1572523099509395456) of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Most importantly, residents in cities such as Qom and Mashhad—long considered backbones of the Iranian regime's ideology and support—are also [protesting \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/21/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-hijab/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/21/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-hijab/) against the regime much like their fellow citizens. They are likewise chanting "down with the Islamic regime," "Women, Life, and Liberty," and burning portraits of the supreme leader Ali Khamenei and the late IRGC General Qasem Soleimani.

For the first time, it seems as though Iranians from all different regions and ideologies are uniting against the regime. This support is also extending internationally; although the regime's apologists in the West are trying to frame the demands as only addressing the mandatory hijab, the protests have become so much more.

Unlike in previous cases—namely the nationwide demonstrations that took place throughout Iran in 2009—Iran's unofficial lobbyists in the United States have had little success in even reaching the White House. Jake Sullivan, a

former aide in the Obama administration and current national security advisor for President Biden, has **admitted** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/26/us/politics/biden-iran-protesters.html>) that the White House was formerly led to believe that “if America spoke out, it would undermine the Iranian protesters, not aid them.” It seems that the White House has learned from its past mistakes.

This time around, the Biden administration has responded quite differently, adopting a more firm, supportive approach from the outset of the protests in Iran. And although Iran-affiliated institutions and individuals in the United States are surely attempting to change the narrative, their efforts have so far been rebuffed. With the Iranian people unprecedentedly unified and clear in their demands, international support for the protests is only increasing, while the voice of the Islamic regime in the West is declining.

Support (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/24/us/iranian-american-protest-us-mahsa-amini/index.html>) for the protestors can also be seen across the diverse Iranian diaspora, especially in largest populations of Iranian immigrants residing in the United States, Europe, and Canada. Although previously discouraged by the Iranian government's harsh restrictions and punishments against regime critics—even outside of Iran—these communities have been emboldened to demand regime change, not just reform.

With all this domestic and internal pressure, the regime is doubling down. As the protests become more widespread throughout Iran, the Islamic regime is cracking down on demonstrators scattered across the country. At least 76 people have been killed already. Domestic internet service has also been largely **disrupted** (<https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/24/tech/iran-internet-blackout/index.html>), raising concerns that the crackdown will worsen.

Even in the face of these crackdowns, this wave of protests has already proven to be distinctly inclusive and unified. People of different classes, ages, religions, and ethnicities are coming together in protest, and they have shown resilience and determination in the face of the regime’s armed troops. If Iranian citizens can continue these demonstrations into the coming days, the regime in Tehran will find itself struggling to resist a revolution—not just a protest. ❖

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