

The Demonstrations for Mahsa Amini: A Turning Point in Iran

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Brief Analysis

Despite the Iranian regime's efforts to suppress recent protests, they have quickly spread to every corner of the country, making this one of the most important events in Iran in more than four decades and suggesting this could be a turning point for the country's future.

The massive wave of protests that erupted after the tragic death of an Iranian-Kurdish woman, Mahsa “Jina” Amini, while in the custody of Iran’s morality police quickly grabbed the world’s attention. Having been arrested for allegedly violating Iran’s hijab mandate, Amini’s death importantly highlighted Iran’s intense domestic issues and public protests at a time when the world was more focused on the issue of Tehran’s nuclear program and regional policies.

After the Sunni-dominated Arab Spring of 2011, these protests could signal a new, Iranian wave of the “Shia Spring” that has engulfed Iraq and Lebanon over the past few years. At the same time, the protests represent a continuation in the series of domestic protests in Iran that have emerged over the past two decades, but have notably increased over the past five years.

Since changes in Iran’s domestic politics can directly impact the politics of many other places around the region, particularly in Iraq, the critical question in everyone’s mind is: where are the protests heading?

A Turning Point?

Iran’s current protests come more than a decade after the Arab Spring tore through the Islamic world, sparking regime change in some countries but complex, long-running civil wars in others. Since 2018, however, a different wave of public protests has engulfed Lebanon, Iraq, and now Iran—protests that may very well indicate the collapse of the Shia ruling elite in the region, just as the Arab Spring largely represented a mass movement against the Sunni ruling elite.

In Lebanon, protests and public demonstrations have severely weakened the position of Hezbollah and its allies in the country’s last election. In Iraq, protests have been ongoing since 2019, with recent flare-ups in Iraq’s Green Zone after

the “withdrawal” of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr from politics.

In Iran, the presence of forces such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has, until now, made similar large-scale protests hard to achieve. Indeed, the regime has clung to power despite growing anti-regime sentiment and demonstrations in the last few years. Nevertheless, the current wave of protests has actually prompted a change in rhetoric on the part of Iran's conservative leaders, including President Ebrahim Raisi

(<https://www.irna.ir/news/84899673/%2525D8%2525A2%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587-%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A6%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%2525B3%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525A7-%2525D8%2525A7%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%2525AC%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AF-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AE%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252581-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525AC%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252585-%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252584%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7-%2525D9%252587%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%252581-%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%252587>) who talked about the necessity of

changing the way of working and giving people more opportunities for the right to protest and criticize. Raisi stated: “What is wrong with setting up centers in universities, scientific institutes and circles for dialogue, criticism, and even protest against a decision?” The president of the Iranian Parliament, Mohammed Baqir Qalibaf, has likewise promised to investigate Jina’s death and to conduct certain reforms on laws pertaining to the hijab. Such rhetoric may be a catalyst for calming disgruntled people, but it could also be a response pressured by protestors.

On the other hand, the current wave of protests in Iran represents a marked difference in both the size and makeup of the internal resistance, indicating these demonstrations may yield different results. Most notably, the protests deviate from three general categories that have otherwise defined Iranian protests in the past two decades: middle-class, issue-specific, and geographically-isolated.

The first type of demonstrations of the past two decades could be counted as middle-class protests, where demands focused on more democracy and freedom within the Iranian system. One instance was the student demonstration in July 1999 against the closure of the *Salam* newspaper, which was close to reformists and included prominent locations such as Tehran, Tabriz, and Isfahan. The 2009 green movement was similarly middle-class, opposing the reported results of the Republic's presidential election and expanding over about a year in more than 39 cities and provinces in Iran. These protests continued to a limited extent the following year and the main motivation was that voters believed their votes had not been counted or had been stolen before the announcement of the election results.

The second attribute of demonstrations in Iran, which have intensified since 2018, is the focus on a specific issue. These protests typically arose in specific geographic contexts—the third qualifier of past Iranian protests—and focused on a definitive, typically economic concern. Due to the focus of these protests, members of the working class were seen as representative in these movements. This category includes the 2017-2018 protests against living expenses that emerged at the time of Hassan Rohani's cabinet, appearing to have been encouraged by the conservative faction of Iranian politics. Also included in this category are the protests against the increased fuel prices in 2019, known as “Bloody November (<https://www.hra-news.org/periodical/a-70/>)” and recognized as one of the most severe demonstrations in Iran. In addition, protests against water shortages (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/water-insecurity-irans-formidable-threat>) took place in Khuzestan and later in Isfahan in 2021, along with protests against high bread prices (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-bread-prices-protest-dezful/31846588.html>) in 2022.

Relative to these previous protest models, the latest wave of Iranian protests after Mahsa Amini's murder on September 17, 2022 have some unique features. The protests represent a geographically, ethnically, and economically diverse cross-section of Iranian society. Women— estimated to number more than 40 million in Iran—along with Iran's youth population are at the forefront of the protests, which support a vast network of popular groups and political clusters inside and outside Iran. These protests also represent a turning point due to the political, economic, and social nature of the protestors' slogans, including "Woman, Life, Freedom," "We Don't Want the Islamic Republic," "I Will Kill, I Will Kill, Those Who Killed My Sister," "Death to the Dictator, Be it Shah or Ayatollah," "We are all Mahsa, We Are All in This Fight Together."

Protesters are also coming from Iran's upper class, indicating the ability of this protest movement to unite Iran's different social and political groups around a single goal. Moreover, the international community has responded to these latest protests in a new way relative to muted responses in the past. Now, they are making statements in solidarity with Iran's protesters despite Tehran blaming the demonstrations on the existence of an "outside hand" or a vast network of outside cooperation.

Over the past several days, the regime has targeted the headquarters of Kurdish opposition parties residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and even some civilian targets—including schools—with drones and missiles. This has resulted in the death of several civilians. Still, the significant political, economic, and social frustrations behind the current protest movement have kept it going.

Understanding Internal Dissatisfaction in Iran

To understand what's happening in Iran, it's important to note the major generational gap that exists between Iranians today and those during the early days of the Iranian revolution. Today, about 85% of Iran's **population** (<https://www.population-trends-asiapacific.org/data/IRN>) is under 55. Of those, 41.2% are between the ages of 15 and 39. Even 55-year-olds were just twelve when the Islamic government came to power in 1979. As such, the imposition of a specific way of life according to religious views on the entire country does not match with the lifestyle and beliefs of this new generation.

There is a wide gap between the desires of the new generation and the criteria that the regime has established for the Islamic Government, the Islamic Community, and the Islamic World. While the Islamic Republic has exerted concerted efforts to impose their expectations both domestically and abroad for over forty years, they have failed in everyday life to instill their ideology into Iran's youth. On top of the cultural gap, there are ongoing hardships and economic problems that weigh on the shoulders of the Iranian people. According to **some reports** (<https://iranwire.com/en/features/65829/>), almost one of every five Iranians live in poverty.

Within the regime itself, it has been more than two decades since political conflict emerged among the Iranian ruling elite, including between the reformists and conservatives. Recently, however, the differences between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and three of Iran's previous presidents—Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani—are no secret. Internal division seems to be growing.

Moreover, the Iranian supreme leader is 83 years old, and news of him being seriously ill has been reported in the media several times. According to Mir Hossein Musauvi, one of Iran's Green Movement leaders, the supreme leader may be replaced by his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, after his death. Undoubtedly, the news of further disease or even the death of Iran's supreme leader—and the subsequent issue of succession—will have a major impact in raising protestors' morale and energy to continue.

In total, the economic crisis, public protests, and internal conflicts within the Iranian ruling class are scenes reminiscent of the end of the Soviet Union. Of course, it is not yet a given that this new wave of protest, though different, will immediately alter the political system through revolution or radical change. Tehran still has security and military forces such as the Pasdaran Army and other proxy militia forces available to suppress civilian protesters.

Nevertheless, it is clear that a change has begun. And with the government repeatedly shutting down demonstrations over the years, Iranians have become resilient in protesting repeatedly and vehemently.

Indeed, previous experience has shown that even if a massive suppression of protesters takes place—reminiscent of Bloody November when as many as **1,500 people** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-takes-to-end-it-idUSKBN1YR0QR>) were killed in less than two weeks—the protests will reemerge. Even the presence of large security apparatuses are no longer enough of a threat to prevent demonstrations against Tehran. Either the government will be obliged to create reforms in a controlled way, or the catalysts of public dissatisfaction will remain alive and unaddressed. Protests will be able to emerge in greater size at any moment and resentment will build, eventually leading to a full-scale uprising. ❖

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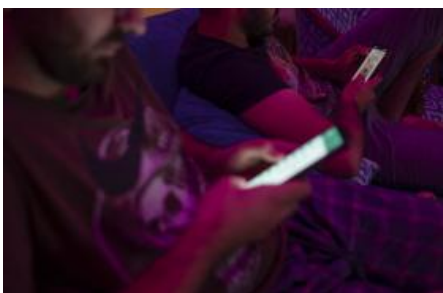
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