

# Violence in Iran's Uprising: What Happens If Either Side Escalates?

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Brief Analysis

**The regime still has additional means of making the crackdown even more lethal, and parts of the country are potentially primed to take up arms in response, with uncertain consequences on the ground.**

**A**s Iran's wide-ranging popular uprising enters its twelfth week, the regime has increased its efforts to ideologically justify the use of open-ended violence against the movement. How does this violence compare to the regime's past suppressive tactics, and will it push the protesters to respond in kind? As *Time* magazine recently described it, the current movement includes many young Iranians who are "educated, liberal, secular...and desperate for normality," so one might have difficulty envisioning their transformation into an armed struggle. Yet the situation is still ripe for escalation due to multiple factors: the unprecedented [air of defiance \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/conversation-masih-alinejad\)](#) against the regime; protesters' proven willingness to respond with violent defensive actions at times (the regime claims that more than sixty of its security personnel have been killed and many more injured when confronting demonstrators); Tehran's [apparent unwillingness \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khamenei-focusing-external-threats-not-protest-demands\)](#) to seriously consider their peaceful demands; and the plethora of lethal and suppressive options that regime forces have yet to deploy.

# The Many Forms of Regime Violence

Over the past two decades, the Islamic Republic has been subjected to more frequent popular uprisings, first in 1999, then again in 2009, 2017-18, and 2019. To confront the current wave, authorities are using many of the same tactics they employed in previous rounds.

When protests first broke out this September, the regime relied on the Law Enforcement Command (LEC), often referred to as simply “the police.” This agency’s motorbike-riding “Special Guard Units” and other elements were tasked with creating havoc at demonstrations, making arrests, beating people up (sometimes to death), and dispersing them with a combination of batons, tear gas, stun grenades, paintballs, shotgun pellets, and live bullets. In many cases, less-than-lethal munitions were fired at people’s faces from close range, greatly increasing their lethal potential. These LEC tactics continue to be used today.

When the police did not prove decisive, the regime brought in specially trained riot-control units from the **[much-expanded \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/murmurs-second-cultural-revolution\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/murmurs-second-cultural-revolution)** Basij militia force—specifically the Fatehin, Imam Ali, Imam Hossein, Beit al-Muqaddas, and Ashura battalions. These were followed by units described as “hybrid IRGC/Basij Operational Brigades,” indicating closer local cooperation between militia forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Additionally, substantial elements of the Intelligence Ministry and other intelligence organs began operating alongside the LEC early on, usually in plainclothes in order to better mingle with protesters, identify potential targets, make arrests, or commit killings at close range (whether targeted or random). Basij elements used this tactic as well. Citizen videos have also shown snipers on rooftops or IRGC troops with assault rifles shooting people on the sidewalk or in their cars. The main objective is to intimidate protesters into leaving the streets promptly, but these targeted tactics have been known to escalate into mass killings in the past (e.g., the Mahshahr massacre of November 2019). Regime forces have also been witnessed vandalizing homes and businesses, conducting drive-by shootings, kidnapping activists after identifying them via drones or closed-circuit video footage (which can now be reviewed with AI facial recognition software), and sexually assaulting detainees before releasing them (males and females alike).

As a last resort, the IRGC could send in core combat units with heavier equipment, including tanks and armored personnel carriers. Such elements might conduct what they call “intimidating marches” across cities and towns, or even open fire on protesters, especially those who approach military bases or government buildings. IRGC helicopters and drones have already helped the police transport personnel and track “troublemakers.” Moreover, the IRGC is ideologically and constitutionally empowered to inflict even more significant casualties on protesters. On December 5, for example, the force reportedly issued a **[statement \(https://36537967.khabarban.com/\)](https://36537967.khabarban.com/)** making clear that no more compromise was to be made on the treatment of protesters, whom it labeled as terrorist/separatist “thugs.”

**[According to \(https://ir.voanews.com/a/death-toll-rises-to-455-in-iran-protests/6855792.html\)](https://ir.voanews.com/a/death-toll-rises-to-455-in-iran-protests/6855792.html)** civil rights activists, over 458 civilians have been killed so far, including 64 teenagers and children. Around 18,000 people have been arrested, with many reportedly tortured and several sentenced to death. There is no accurate estimate of wounded, since many avoid seeking professional medical help due to fear of arrest.

Despite these tactics, large segments of the population continue to openly air their demands for regime change. Indeed, the suppression has been ineffective enough that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered the formation of yet another hybrid Basij/IRGC organization, according to a hacked document released on Telegram by the **[whistleblower group Black Reward \(https://t.me/black\\_reward/173\)](https://t.me/black_reward/173)**. This new organization will reportedly operate at the neighborhood level to confront decentralized dissident crowds head-on, using even larger numbers of

plainclothes personnel.

## Armed Resistance: Potential Triggers and Prospects

If continuing protests spur the regime to greater violence, would the Iranian people respond with armed resistance? And if so, could this approach succeed given the enormous logistical problems involved in acquiring weapons, training fighters, coordinating actions, and so forth? An effective armed struggle could surely eliminate some of the regime's lethal advantages, but the challenges would still be plentiful.

For example, the country's compulsory military service means that the majority of Iranian men know how to handle guns, and the border provinces are reportedly (<https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D9%88-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B2%DB%8C-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86/a-37675834>) home to a bustling firearms market capable of delivering weapons to central regions. Yet parts of this market are rumored to be run by the security services, so any activists-turned-guerrillas could find these lines of supply to be unreliable.

Even if arms were readily available, any younger revolutionaries would be ill trained for effective action at various tactical and operational levels. They would need capable leaders and timely intelligence to confront a well-prepared and equipped enemy. Some of these skills might be obtainable online (when internet service is available (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/social-media-irans-protests-new-public-sphere>), that is). Yet even skilled guerrillas would have no answer for regime kinetic advantages such as heavy armor and combat aircraft/drones. Syria's civil war offers ample evidence of how these types of disparities can decimate lives and infrastructure when international military assistance is not forthcoming.

An armed struggle using domestic means in conjunction with an overwhelming public uprising is what happened during the latter stages of Iran's 1979 revolution, when air force cadets mutinied and opened armories to the people. Repeating that phenomenon today would require significant military insubordination and defections. Internal reports leaked by Black Reward indicate that as many as 115 military personnel may have been arrested for supporting the current uprising; true or not, a lot more would need to happen on this front to substantially threaten the regime's survival.

Some reformist elements have argued that removing the regime, especially by force, would only throw the country into chaos and usher in another repressive regime. In their view, this lesson was proven by the 1979 revolution and reinforced by the Arab Spring decades later, when some countries watched old regimes return in more repressive form (Egypt), while others dissolved into protracted conflict (Libya, Syria). Reformers have therefore argued for slow change that does not provoke hardline elements—but the current movement **totally rejects this gradualist approach (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-irans-protests-differ-past-movements>)**.

Armed struggle is perhaps most permissible in traditionally tribal areas where many people own weapons, including ethnic minority-dominated regions such as the Kurdish, Baluch, and Arab border regions. Some argue that resistance in one such area could spur a domino effect that brings about the quick fall of regime elements elsewhere. Yet if this resistance failed to spread or otherwise affect public sentiments and regime decisionmaking at the national level, it could become isolated, marginalized, and labeled as a separatist movement.

Indeed, in an effort to divide the opposition and rally nationalist support, the regime has steadily fueled the narrative that foreigners are behind the uprising. These sentiments have been counterbalanced somewhat by nationwide demonstrations of sympathy for the Kurdish woman whose death sparked the revolt, as well as the movement's broadening scope since then.

Ultimately, the question of whether to wage armed resistance could become a matter of debate among protesters given Tehran's willingness to cause unlimited casualties and the absence of international will to stop the regime. According to Article 286 of Iran's Islamic penal code, most any citizen who publicly espouses regime change has committed an offense punishable by summary execution, even in seemingly harmless circumstances like setting a trash can on fire. Thus, some protesters might eventually conclude that they face little or no additional personal risk in taking up arms.

## The U.S. Role

The uprising has already achieved some irreversible victories. The regime's domestic image is in tatters—while it was long taboo to criticize Khamenei or question particular policies without simultaneously expressing support for the Islamic Republic, both are now being denounced in popular chants with the most graphic words imaginable.

Although the U.S. government does not have a formal policy of regime change in Iran, the Biden administration should be prepared to support the people's collective choice if that is what they decide. Under those circumstances, Washington's main interest would be a peaceful transition to a democratically elected, secular, and representative government. Even if the movement falls short of that goal, any progress it makes in diminishing the current regime's popularity and power would align with core U.S. interests.

In the meantime, the regime has significantly more potential for killing and torturing Iranians, so the U.S. government should urgently explore what steps it could take to impede Tehran from using those capabilities—while also preparing for the possibility of regime retaliation against American interests. Potentially helpful U.S. steps include cyber efforts to protect civilians, frustrate the regime's cyber-pursuit of peaceful protesters, and disrupt its communications.

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