

Why Secretary Rubio Should Provide Grant Waivers for Urgent Human Rights Work on Iran

by [Holly Dagres \(/experts/holly-dagres\)](/experts/holly-dagres)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Holly Dagres \(/experts/holly-dagres\)](/experts/holly-dagres)

Holly Dagres is the Libitzky Family Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Viterbi Program on Iran and U.S. Policy.



Brief Analysis

Even a short aid freeze can do great damage to programs that are vital to pressuring the Islamic Republic, keeping Washington abreast of developments inside Iran, and ensuring the safety of those fighting for freedom on the ground.

When President Trump signed his [executive order \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/) reevaluating U.S. foreign aid in January, Iranian dailies celebrated by posting headlines like “[Fatal blow to the opposition \(https://vatanemrooz.ir/newspaper/page/4242/1/298404/0\)](https://vatanemrooz.ir/newspaper/page/4242/1/298404/0)” and “[Trump’s financial shock to regime changers \(https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1684313/%D8%B4%D9%88%DA%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%BE-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%AE-%D8%B3%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%AC%D9%87\).](https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1684313/%D8%B4%D9%88%DA%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%BE-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%AE-%D8%B3%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%AC%D9%87).)” Among other effects, his order “immediately suspended” U.S.-funded NGO work for ninety days until the administration reviews grants individually to ensure they are effective and aligned with the president’s foreign policy objectives.

Ninety days may not sound like much, but for the numerous organizations focused on Iranian human rights and internet freedom, any freeze poses a significant threat. Not only does it jeopardize their mission at a time when Iran is in a precarious state, it also deprives Washington of an effective soft power tool to hold the Islamic Republic accountable, which Trump prefers over military action. Although some of these workers will continue their efforts on a volunteer basis, others will need to seek other employment, diverting attention and resources from a mission that is crucial to Iranian lives and the administration’s regional policy goals.

What State Department Grants Do for Iranians

For two decades, the State Department's Near East Regional Democracy fund has offered grants to numerous organizations that play an integral role in human rights and internet freedom advocacy on Iran. For example, these groups:

- provide vital documentation and on-the-ground reporting;
- advocate in multilateral settings like the United Nations;
- offer support and security to individuals facing heightened risks on the ground;
- provide circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs) in a country where 35 percent (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranians-on-socialmedia/>) of the world's most popular websites (e.g., Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter/X, YouTube) are blocked (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2024>).

Without these essential efforts, most policymakers and media outlets would be unaware of the dire human rights situation in Iran—a country that has the highest per capita rate (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202401227663>) of executions in the world and ranks eleventh (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2024>) from the bottom on Freedom House's Global Freedom Score. Similarly, without access to circumvention tools, Iranians would lose their most vital connection to the outside world, as they rely on social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter/X to amplify their voices (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranians-on-socialmedia/>). Since the mass protests known as the Green Movement erupted amid the rigged 2009 presidential election, the Islamic Republic has viewed internet and social media access as a national security threat. By posting viral hashtags and sharing videos and photos of protests and violent crackdowns, Iranians have provided crucial open-source documentation of their sentiments and rights abuses—particularly once such demonstrations became a regular feature of Iranian life after 2017, when systemic mismanagement, corruption, and repression prompted the first of several widespread anti-regime protests.

U.S. Aid and “Women, Life, Freedom”

The 2022 “Women, Life, Freedom” uprising was prompted by a hashtag that went viral after the so-called “morality police” murdered twenty-two-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini, a Kurdish Iranian woman, for allegedly violating mandatory hijab rules. Without the State Department-funded VPNs that around 30 million (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202306017257>) Iranian users depend on through internet freedom organizations, much of the information about the incident and subsequent protests would not have been relayed in real time from all thirty-one provinces of Iran, and it may not have become a major international news story.

Human rights organizations are also the vanguard in both holding the regime accountable for its gross human rights violations and performing integral documentation work for atrocity crimes. The research and witnesses that some of these groups provided greatly helped the UN's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, which found (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-iran/index>) that crimes against humanity were committed during the 2022 crackdown.

The Women, Life, Freedom uprising epitomizes the importance of maintaining a human rights advocacy ecosystem, in no small part to pressure the regime. Despite numerous crackdowns over the years, this ecosystem has bolstered the resilience of the Iranian people to continue their uphill battle for accountability despite the risks involved.

Should a major event occur during the ninety-day aid freeze—such as another wave of mass anti-regime protests, the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, or an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities—NGOs and Iranian activists would be significantly constrained in their ability to mount a rapid response. In particular, they would have trouble

documenting rights violations, assessing events on the ground, operating online circumvention tools, assisting fellow citizens who are injured, detained, or otherwise in danger, and other essential tasks. Notably, anti-regime protests **broke out (<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202502126755>)** in various parts of the country just last week amid the forty-sixth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.

Security Also Means Human Rights

It is hardly unusual for U.S. presidents to modify the policies of their predecessors. Yet many of the State Department's Iran-focused grants have been supported across multiple Democratic and Republican administrations, so placing a blanket freeze on them sends a message that may inadvertently serve the interests of the Islamic Republic. For example, the commentary coming out of state-affiliated media outlets has interpreted the freeze as a positive signal from Washington, with the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) even **suggesting (<https://apnews.com/article/iran-trump-usaid-nuclear-deal-talks-986793e2e21e2b338546767bba5f2df0>)** that the grant cuts could “affect the sphere of relations” between Iran and the United States. An aid stoppage can also cause prolonged disruption after it is lifted, as restarting programs takes significant time and resources—especially if valuable personnel have left.

President Trump has repeatedly **stated (<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113950996936674770>)** his preference to **avoid (<https://nypost.com/2025/02/08/us-news/trump-and-putin-in-talks-to-end-the-russia-ukraine-war/>)** military strikes on Iran, making U.S.-funded NGOs an even more crucial tool for exerting other kinds of pressure on the Islamic Republic. Their vital work aligns with the president's latest “maximum pressure” memorandum, which **calls (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/national-security-presidential-memorandum-nspm-2/>)** on the State Department to “lead a diplomatic campaign to isolate Iran throughout the world, including within international organizations” like the United Nations.

Indeed, Washington's efforts to advance human rights over the decades **are part and parcel (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trumps-foreign-assistance-review-prioritizes-funding-over-policy>)** of U.S. national security interests, providing unique leverage that can change the **behavior (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-biden-failed-human-rights?check_logged_in=1)** of authoritarian regimes. The Iranian people's struggle for freedom also aligns with American values, making government support for advocacy groups a moral imperative as well. Secretary of State Marco Rubio—a longtime **advocate (https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10156164754192708&id=58736997707)** of human rights around the globe, including in Iran—is well-positioned to carry this message. In 2023, he **cosponsored (<https://www.padilla.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/padilla-rubio-bill-to-hold-the-iranian-regime-accountable-signed-into-law/>)** the bipartisan Mahsa Amini Human Rights and Security Accountability (MAHSA) Act, a measure that was driven by **grassroots support (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/mahsa-act-army-house-bill/>)** from the Iranian diaspora and enabled Washington to sanction the upper echelons of the clerical establishment for their complicity in rights abuses. He also understands that in Iran, there's a “difference between the people and those who govern them,” as he **noted (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5F0m2vL3Is>)** during his confirmation hearing in January. Today, Secretary Rubio should further that work by taking the following steps:

- Issue an immediate waiver for human rights and internet freedom organizations to resume operations while the president's grant review process continues.
- Expand initiatives related to internet freedom, since access to the internet and social media is so integral to developments on the ground in Iran, and to Washington's understanding of these developments.

- Direct the U.S. government, in collaboration with tech companies, to find ways for people in Iran and other countries to connect to satellite internet cheaply and directly.
- Prioritize meeting with dissidents—particularly those involved in the Women, Life, Freedom uprising—to signal the administration’s commitment to the Iranian people.
- Appoint a special envoy for Iran to advance this message of support, leveraging the official @USEnvoyIran account (<https://x.com/USEnvoyIran>) on Twitter/X and engaging with Persian-language diaspora satellite networks that reach audiences inside Iran. Among other benefits, having a dedicated U.S. official in charge of this portfolio would prevent Iranian officials from slipping through the cracks in multilateral (<https://www.reuters.com/world/irans-appointment-chair-un-rights-meeting-draws-condemnation-2023-11-02/>) settings.
- Direct the State Department’s Persian-language social media platforms (@USAbehFarsi on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/usabehfarsi/?hl=en>) and Twitter/X (<https://x.com/USABehFarsi>)) to amplify their support of the Iranian people by consistently condemning human rights violations and highlighting specific cases, such as activists who are arrested or sentenced on bogus charges.

The Iranian people are counting on America’s support, and uninterrupted U.S. funding is a vital part of their fight for freedom at home and around the world.

Holly Dages is the Libitzky Family Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and curator of [The Iranist newsletter](https://www.theiranist.com/) (<https://www.theiranist.com/>). ❖

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