



## COMMENTARIES

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# Iran in the Wake of Mahsa Amini's Death

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**ABSTRACT** *Demonstrations and violence in Iran have continued for the last three months. After Mahsa Amini's death, the protests against the compulsory headscarf rule soon turned into demonstrations in which Sunni groups, especially the Kurds and the Balochs, came to the fore. This situation has led to a high number of deaths. The demonstrations in the capital Tehran, mostly supported by the middle-upper class, did not receive great support despite the discomfort of the broad masses. Instead, they turned into protests by university students, generally led by elite segments such as artists and athletes. When the Persian media and opposition activists abroad came to the fore, the reformist segment in the country was largely silent. Different political groups turned the events into a power-sharing ground for post-Khamenei politics. However, the fact that the events have entered their third month and the state has not yet resorted to its traditional iron-fist method raises questions. In the same period, the tension in Iran's relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Republic of Azerbaijan reveals the transitivity and interaction between domestic and foreign policies.*

**Keywords:** Mahsa Amini, Morality Police, Iran Protests, Ali Khamanei, IRGC

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## Introduction

**T**hree months have passed since the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was detained on September 13, 2022, and pronounced dead three days later in Iran. The resulting protests are still underway –albeit with fluctuating intensity. The protestors alleged that the young woman died due to ill-treatment in custody. In contrast, the police and other officials stated that Amini's death was being investigated and rejected the claim that she had been mistreated. The Iranian authorities released video footage of the young woman's final moments to support their claims.

Moreover, President Ebrahim Raisi offered his condolences to Amini's family by phone, and the revolutionary leader Ali Khamenei's representative in the Kurdistan province visited the dead woman's relatives. Notwithstanding, people close to the victim's family and the protestors insist that Mahsa Amini was repeatedly struck in the head inside a police vehicle. The protests have been underway in various cities and varying degrees for approximately three months. Whereas the regime replaced the compulsory hijab as the target of widespread outrage, it would be helpful to briefly touch upon the historical background of the rule, a policy the urban masses had been reacting against for some time. The Iranian Guidance Patrol, or morality police, a particular law enforcement unit known as *Gasht-e Ershad* in Farsi, is a relatively new institution. That organization emerged

under President Mohammad Khatami and became more potent during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. That police unit, which derives its *raison d'être* from the principle of "enjoining good and forbidding wrong" commonly found in Islamic teachings, was established to end the ongoing chaos in that area by setting standards and, mainly, to prevent arguments and physical fights between different social groups on the streets.

After all, disputes between pious and conservative Iranians and others, who were more lenient about the hijab or smoking outside in the holy month of Ramadan, had long been causing social problems. At the same time, footage of altercations between the police and young women often received millions of views on social media. It evoked a strong response from many parts of Iranian society –although the scope and impact of such practices diminished over time.<sup>1</sup>

## The Origins of Compulsory Hijab

A quick look at the Islamic Revolution of 1979 reveals that women, who did or did not cover their hair, fought together at the time, as Iranian newspapers from the initial months reported senior officials as pledging that there would be no compulsory hijab. However, the Iran-Iraq War, which started in September 1980, led to the emergence of a rigid version of martial law and, subsequently, the political arena shrinking. Accordingly, the impact of some precautions initially deemed temporary persists

to this day. Notably, the rising death toll of the protracted armed conflict, the volunteers from the countryside –primarily children of conservative families– getting into fights on the streets of Tehran due to what they witnessed there and asking officials whether they were fighting to preserve that lifestyle became influential over time. Consequently, Ruhollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* to make it compulsory for all female public employees to wear the hijab in July 1980. Later, the Islamic Shura approved a bill in 1984, which remains valid today, forcing all women to adhere to an Islamic dress code. The dress code applies not only to employees but all women in any public place across the country.<sup>2</sup> There are many noteworthy anecdotes in the memoir of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former President of Iran, about the subject.

There are vast social and cultural differences between Iran in the early days of the Islamic Revolution, which had a predominantly rural and poorly educated population of 35 million, and the country today, where three-quarters of 85 million Iranians live in the cities and the literacy and higher education completion rates are on par with developed countries. Women's roles and social standing are undoubtedly at the top of that list. It is possible to reach that conclusion by taking a quick look at Iranian society and even the inner circles of Iran's ruling elite. Indeed, the protestors have stressed that the social media posts of the children and grandchildren of top Iranian officials show that they lead entirely different

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lives. That is why a young woman dying in police custody after ostensibly failing to comply with the compulsory hijab rule fueled such uproar in Iran. The public statements of some parliamentarians and former senior officials also demonstrate that large chunks of Iranian society agree with that reaction. It has also been interesting to see famous athletes, actors, and media personalities –best known for their proximity to the regime and tending to respond cautiously to such developments not to upset anyone– make strong statements about the situation.

## **What Lies Ahead?**

Historical and cultural factors make Iranian society a protest-prone group of people because there is a constant gap between the state and society in Iran. That disconnect and emotional distance exist not only among ethnic and sectarian communities stuck between Iran's center and periphery but also between the various powers in the center. Judging by the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, it would not be misleading to claim that

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the country's social fault lines remain in motion. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the frequency of mass protests has increased from once a decade to once every three or four years. That is mainly due to the insufficiency of 'legitimate' channels for Iranians to express their demands. In light of the most recent developments, it is impossible to identify any political movement that pledges to end the compulsory hijab policy or make it optional for women to cover their heads –provided that there are no political parties in Iran. Likewise, anyone that dares to question the basic tenets of domestic or foreign policy (such as the Revolutionary Guards creating a monopoly in the marketplace or the government's Syria policy) could quickly appear before a court. For the record, former senior officials, too, also face the situation.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, Iran's high level of repression causes people to put off their social, economic, and political demands. Those demands become more radical and eventually lead to social explosion for various reasons.

As such, it is essential to appreciate that the particular development, which sparked the mass protests in Iran, was the metaphorical straw that broke the camel's back –rather than concentrating on their points of departure.

Moreover, Ebrahim Raisi's election as president, with a low turnout rate and thanks to the recent manipulation of Iran's electoral system, further tilted the balance of power between appointed and elected officials (which the regime had been careful to preserve since the revolution) toward the former group. By extension, the masses further lowered their expectations of 'legitimate' political platforms. As Hassan Rouhani's reelection in 2017 demonstrated, Iranians tend to actively participate in elections if and when they expect something from 'legitimate' politics. In contrast, they do not vote if they are unhappy with the state of affairs or simply devoid of hope. That Raisi was elected president with the lowest turnout rate in history and approximately 20 percent of eligible voters in Tehran participated in the election attest to that fact.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the above, the fact that Mahsa Amini, who lived in the Kurdistan province, was visiting Tehran at the time of her death caused the protests to be particularly intense in Iran's predominantly Kurdish areas. In this regard, what happened to the young woman immediately attracted interest from Kurdish political groups in other countries. For example, Masoud Barzani spoke with Amini's



family by phone and offered his condolences. Nonetheless, the protests were not limited to Iran's long-politicized Kurdish towns. They also spread across the country quickly. Among other places, protests broke out in Tehran's college campuses, the country's religious capital (Qom), and Kish Island in the Persian Gulf, known as 'Iran's Dubai.' Nor could the Turkish communities residing in various Iranian cities remain indifferent toward those developments. Specifically, Turks in Tabriz, Ardabil, Zanjan, Qazvin, and Hamadan participated in the demonstrations –which was unusual because those communities do not typically get along with Iran's Kurdish population for various historical and cultural reasons.

At this point, it is vital to recall why the nature of such mass protests makes them likely to move away from their point of departure and focus on other issues. For example, protestors in the Kurdistan province (where separatist organizations are prominent) chanted *Biji Kurdistan* (Long Live Kurdistan). In contrast, the masses in Tabriz chanted Turkish slogans concerning the recent past such as *Azadlıq* (Freedom), *Ədalət* (Justice), *Milli Hökumət* (National Government). That is undoubtedly the case for advocates of monarchy and other professional opposition movements like the People's Mojahedin Organization, too. There are understandable reasons for that situation since the social and political atmosphere mount pressure on all social groups (as mentioned above), yet those communities have different priorities.

For instance, the compulsory hijab may be the most potent pressure that some residents of the capital have encountered in their lives. In contrast, the protests of the Baloch people near the Pakistani borders, hundreds of whom have perished over time, are rooted in their century-long struggle against systematic and constitutional discrimination. Notably, there are no women among those protestors.

Although the mass protests spread across Iran within two months, influencing various ethnic and religious communities, similar experiences that the Iranian people accumulated in recent history suggest that Tehran can crack down on such attempted uprisings without trying too hard. Indeed, some commentators argue that the relatively low death toll (compared to the 2018 protests) indicates that the regime does not perceive a severe threat. It is undoubtedly true that the mass protests have given way to individual acts of civil disobedience and minor demonstrations on college campuses. Still, how disenfranchised Iranians, who are still within the system, shall respond to developments shortly could be a defining factor. In other words, political groups that enjoy some influence over the political system and recently developed a fear of exclusion could lead the protests, which have been dying down, in a new direction.

The poor health of Ali Khamenei, who has ruled the country for more than three decades, and that many members of the Assembly of Experts, which is empowered to appoint the



A selection of Iranian newspapers front pages with headlines reporting the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 18, 2022.

supreme leader, were absent during its convention during Khamenei's surgery were significant. Subsequently, Khamenei excluded former President Hassan Rouhani from the Expediency Discernment Council (*Majma'-e Tashkhis*), an advisory council, as the protestors chanted slogans targeting Mojtaba Khamenei, the supreme leader's son. Those developments highlight the importance of post-Khamenei scenarios and projections.

Given that the 2009 protests attracted 1 million people and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders described them as "more challenging than the eight-year war with Iraq," this new round could define Iran's future. The demonstrations are essentially a showdown within the state, in which Iran's moderates and reformists (starting with influential figures like Hassan Rouhani, Ali

Larijani, and Hassan Khomeini) are worried could leave them excluded from the system in the upcoming decades. Indeed, the representatives of those groups, who spoke to the press during the protests, generally appealed to the government, calling for a 'national dialogue' and stressing that the only way to stop the current and future protests was to enact lasting structural reforms. Despite facing pressure from the government, those groups have been careful not to make extreme statements over the last two months.<sup>5</sup>

## What Distinguishes this Wave of Protests from the Previous Ones?

As mentioned above, the fault lines in Iranian society are pretty active. Moreover, the protests of 1999, 2009, and 2018-2019 established that Iran's

urban population tends to demonstrate for various reasons. An important distinction, which one must make between the most recent protests and previous riots, is that the 1999 protests were limited to Tehran University. In contrast, the 2009 revolts spread across the Iranian capital. In 2018-2019, protests broke out in multiple cities –especially in low-income neighborhoods whose residents experienced the most severe economic challenges.

The current protests, set to enter their third month, have spread across the country. Still, some regions have played a more active role than others. Specifically, the predominantly Sunni parts of Iran have been the most active. Judging by various indicators, such as the level of participation in demonstrations and compliance with calls for strikes, the predominantly Sunni Kurdish towns have been the most active parts of the country. Meanwhile, the Sunni Baloch community, which populates Iran's least developed region, has suffered the worst casualties.

In Zahedan, the security forces opened fire on more than 100 Iranians protesting after the Friday prayer. The government does not refrain from responding harshly to the Baluch people since its crackdown does not evoke any severe reaction from Iranians or the international community.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the most recent Baloch massacre led Mawlawi Abdulhamid, a traditionally cautious Sunni leader, to break with the Iranian government. It can be argued that the al-

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ready distanced relationship between the Sunni community, which constitutes more than 20 percent of Iran's population, and the central government will never be the same. Although the Baloch community, which Abdulhamid leads and the Kurdish religious scholars support, has no chance of influencing Iran's political mainstream for various historical and political reasons, the state's harsh reaction and the Sunni community's emotional disenfranchisement could fuel radicalization, especially among young people.

Observers note that the Iranian government's response has represented another significant difference between the latest protests and the previous revolts. Over the last four decades, the administration has almost always opted for a harsh response and disproportionate force against protestors. Indeed, the security forces resorted to extreme measures against protestors in 2018-2019. According to foreign organizations, that crackdown resulted in approximately 1,500 deaths. The violent nature of the protests mentioned above, coupled with the worsening economic conditions



due to international sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic's destructive impact, further complicated the financial situation and alarmed the Iranian authorities. In the wake of those developments, the government took new steps to crack down on urban riots by forming and allocating funds to special police units. At the same time, the country imported some electronic surveillance and face recognition systems from China and elsewhere, according to media reports.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when the protests broke out, some experts commented that the Iranian government had expected the riots to occur much earlier. Furthermore, the participation of various social groups, including high school students, in the revolts may have encouraged the authorities not to crack down too harshly on the protestors.

Others claimed that the 'neo-conservative' groups led by Ebrahim Raisi refrained from using excessive force to stop their popular support from declining further. According to that interpretation, that group, which had significant ambitions for the post-Khamenei period, adopted a different approach to avoid lending further credibility to negative views about themselves. Still, the protests have entered their third month despite warnings from senior officials like Khamenei, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i, and Major General Hossein Salami, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' commander-in-chief. Although the protests do not attract many Iranians, they have not ended either. Meanwhile, footage

and images from Iran suggest that the administration has taken a step back—at least regarding the compulsory hijab. Time will tell whether those measures will entail the enactment of more drastic reforms over the following months.

In contrast, some members of the Iranian government believe that the authorities have been treating the protestors too leniently. For example, Hossein Shariatmadari, the managing editor of *Kayhan*, has accused the police of being too soft on the rioters. Likewise, some parliamentarians blamed Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, as 227 members of the Iranian Parliament signed a letter demanding that the ringleaders be punished as severely as possible. Meanwhile, former Presidents Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani have faced accusations of failing to side with the government against the protestors unequivocally. To sum up, there is partial uncertainty surrounding the balance of power within the Iranian government, yet the reasons behind it remain unclear. To compare the current situation to the Islamic Revolution, however, one could note that historians agree that the Shah's reluctant attitude encouraged the protestors and ultimately paved the way to revolution. Why Khamenei, who has a reputation for decisiveness in politics, refrains from excessive force remains an important question.

Another difference between the 2022 protests and previous revolts was

the growing influence of social media and international outlets, which almost orchestrated the riots.<sup>8</sup> Particularly, the London-based, Farsi-language satellite channels have become notably popular in Iran. The pro-government media's tendency to broadcast fake news and propaganda (as in the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet in 2020), too, contributed to the popularity of the news organizations mentioned above. In this regard, Iran International (reportedly funded by Saudi Arabia) and BBC Persian gained popularity and regularly attempted to guide the protestors. The international media's high level of activity left the Iranian government worried, leading the Ministry of Intelligence to designate Iran International as a terrorist entity. Furthermore, Iranian officials and senior IRGC commanders publicly threatened Saudi Arabia, insisting they would retaliate against that country unless it stopped funding Iran International.<sup>9</sup> The possibility of Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have been involved in a major conflict over Yemen, locking horns due to the protests, too, remains non-negligible.

### **How the Protests Impacted Iran's Foreign Policy**

Like previous protests, the latest riots in Iran quickly ceased to be a domestic affair and attracted the interest of foreign governments. In this regard, countries like the U.S., Germany, and France expressed support for the protestors, urging Tehran to refrain from excessive force against them. More-

**The Iranian government also attempted to intimidate Azerbaijan by holding a military drill in the Aras region simultaneously with the protests**

over, some of those governments sanctioned members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Iranian judiciary, and private communication companies.<sup>10</sup> However, a closer look reveals that those sanctions were largely symbolic, suggesting that the West does not expect the protests to yield significant results. Western powers, starting with the U.S., appear to primarily focus on restoring the 2015 nuclear deal. After all, failure to reach an agreement will likely make it harder for them to preserve the current state of affairs.

The protests also made a visible impact on Iran's external affairs. Initially, Tehran blamed the armed Kurdish groups near its borders due to the high intensity of mass protests in predominantly Kurdish areas (due to the fact that Mahsa Amini was Kurdish). It issued a request to the regional government in Irbil, threatening to launch a military operation unless the relevant groups were promptly moved away from Iran's borders.<sup>11</sup>

Despite deploying troops to the border, the Iranian government did not act on that threat as those groups,

## Facing immense domestic and international pressure, Tehran could trigger a new regional conflict with a potential knee-jerk reaction

including the Kurdistan Democratic Party, announced (partly due to Irbil's pressure) that they suspended their activities in Iran. Nonetheless, that development did not stop Tehran from attacking Irbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Koy Sanjaq, where Iranian Kurdish groups were stationed, with missiles and armed drones on November 14 and 21. In the wake of Mahsa Amini's death, "Woman, Life, Freedom" –popularized by the YPG, the PKK terrorist organization's Syrian branch– became the main slogan of the protest movement, and Kurdish groups have pioneered revolts in Iran and abroad. Those developments raise questions about the future of Tehran's long-standing relationship with militant Kurdish groups. In this sense, time will tell whether the Iranian government will continue to view Kurdish groups as 'balancing' players in domestic and international politics.

Another issue that the latest protests highlighted relates to growing tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan –which predate the ongoing riots and is rooted in recent geopolitical developments. Having experienced a disagreement with Baku over the proposed Zangezur Corridor following

the 2020 Karabakh War, Tehran has stepped up its rhetoric over time. The Iranian government also attempted to intimidate Azerbaijan by holding a military drill in the Aras region simultaneously with the protests. Iran's use of mobile bridges in that drill, which soldiers use to cross rivers, led experts to conclude that the country was getting ready to cross its border with Azerbaijan.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Azerbaijan responded to Iran's actions in kind, holding a military drill near its southern border in early November. At the same time, diplomats stationed in Tehran and Baku got involved in the bilateral tensions and issued veiled threats against each other on social media platforms.

Furthermore, Iran claimed that an Azerbaijani citizen had arrived from Baku and planned the attack on the Shahcheragh Shrine in Shiraz. Likewise, Azerbaijan announced that its security forces apprehended 19 terrorists with ties to Iran. It seems that tensions between the two countries will persist for some time, and the outcome of ongoing negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia shall significantly impact Baku's relations with Tehran. The escalation with Iran will likely encourage the Azerbaijani government to strengthen its cooperation with Israel further and openly play the "Southern Azerbaijan" card.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas those regional developments are pretty significant, the most critical items on Iran's foreign policy agenda remain the country's relations with the U.S. and the future of the nuclear talks. Although the

Biden Administration has repeatedly expressed interest in rejoining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), no progress has been made. The U.S. midterm elections, which took place on November 8, 2022, are unlikely to change Washington's position notably.

Meanwhile, Iran's support for Russia in the Ukraine war moved from political discourse to delivering weapons –which raises questions about the possibility of an agreement with the U.S. In other words, the Ukraine war and the protests in Iran are among the developments that make a deal less likely. Therefore, it seems more probable that both nations will uphold the status quo instead of rejoining the JCPOA. After all, Iran knows that the Biden Administration cannot offer the legal guarantees needed for a lasting agreement and does not want to repeat the mistake that it made during Barack Obama's presidency.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, experts assess that the Biden Administration, which opposes military action in the absence of a diplomatic agreement on Iran's nuclear activities, would not object to Tehran selling its oil to China and other customers despite existing sanctions –provided that the Iranian government won't step up its nuclear activities.

As regional and global tensions escalate, Iran's relations with Israel will bear particular importance. Under pressure from the Biden Administration, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government reached a maritime border deal with Lebanon. That deal ef-

fectively amounted to an agreement with Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran. Yet Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power, having gathered his strength, could assume a hawkish position on Iran to cause a headache for the Biden Administration. Facing immense domestic and international pressure, Tehran could trigger a new regional conflict with a potential knee-jerk reaction. Combined with Israel's ability to carry out operations within Iran's borders (which it did not attempt to hide in recent years), Tehran's vulnerability in the face of mass protests, and the Iranian government's severe problems with regional powers (with which it traditionally had relatively cordial relations), could encourage Netanyahu's government to deal a heavy blow to Tehran. That possibility is more likely to become a reality in the absence of a diplomatic agreement on Iran's nuclear capabilities, as the U.S. would be less willing or able to stop Israel. ■

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