

Civil Unrest Reaches “State of Explosion” in Iran

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After nearly a week of escalating unrest in Iran, following the Iranian regime’s murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16 for “improper hijab,” President Biden uttered a brief, [one-sentence remark](#) at the United Nations yesterday in support of “the brave citizens and the brave women of Iran,” without mentioning Mahsa by name. The Biden Administration should be far more forceful in its support of Iranian women and the human rights of all Iranian people, particularly by removing obstacles to technology companies providing internet access beyond the regime’s control. This is the morally correct and wise policy, that will only enhance U.S. leverage with Iran. Meanwhile, the unrest, coming amid reports of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s failing health, raises questions about a potential succession crisis.

What Happened?

- Iran’s “[morality police](#)”, which enforces strict dress codes for women such as wearing the compulsory headscarf (hijab), [arrested 22-year-old Mahsa Amini](#) in Tehran for “improper hijab” and beat her so severely that she died from her wounds while in police custody. She reportedly passed away on September 16 after having spent three days in a coma.
 - » While Iranian police claimed that Amini “suddenly had a heart problem” and denied any wrongdoing, Amini’s family said she had no health problems prior to being detained and evidence [showed](#) that she had been brutally beaten.
- Protests quickly spread nationwide after [initially](#) erupting in western Iran following Amini’s funeral, which was held in her hometown of Saqez in Iran’s Kurdistan province.
 - » Protests have intensified each day since [they started](#) on September 17, as an [estimated](#) 10,000 Iranians gathered in Tehran’s center on September 19, and they are expected to continue into the weekend at least.
 - » [Videos](#) and [pictures](#) shared mainly through social media [show](#) Iranians demonstrating in cities throughout the country including [Isfahan](#) and [Tehran](#), chanting slogans against the regime such as “[death to Khamenei](#)” as women [remove their hijabs](#) in the streets. As regime security forces [shoot](#) directly at dense [crowds](#) of protestors, in one instance firing at a [bus](#) filled with people, the Iranian people have held firm and can repeatedly be seen [chasing](#) the security forces away and [burning](#) down police stations and cars.
 - » Attempting to suppress the protests, regime security forces have already reportedly killed at least

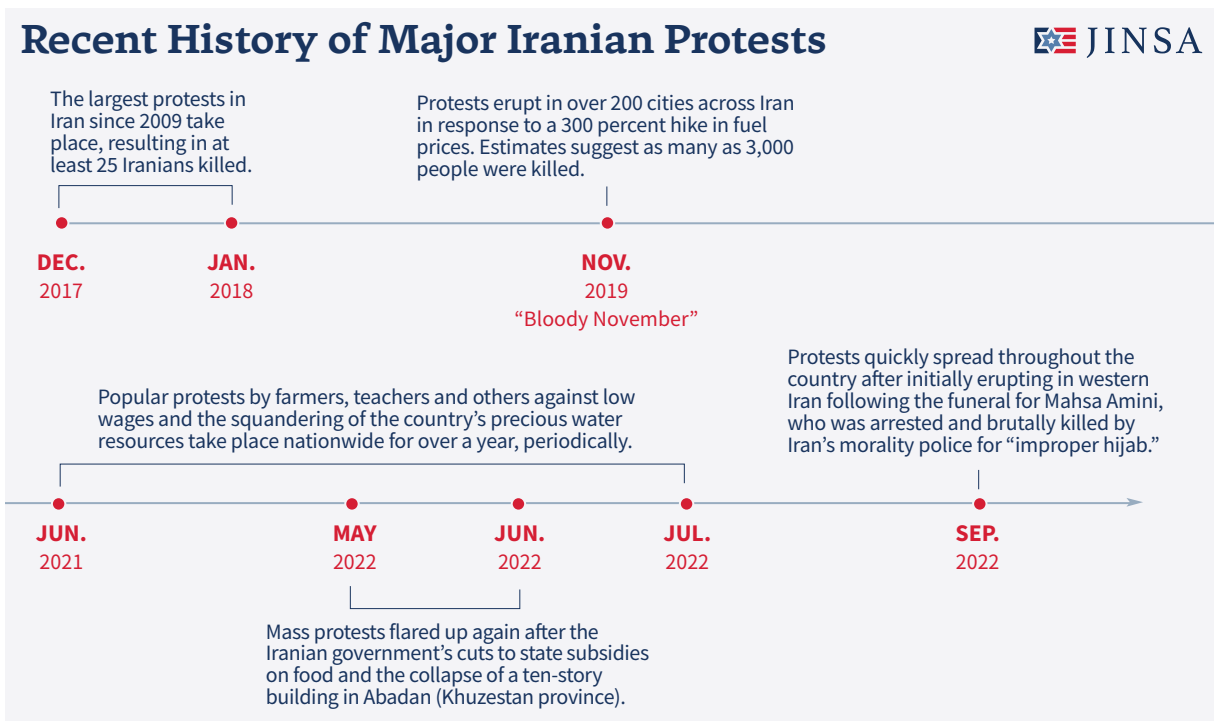
9 [protestors](#). One [video](#) purportedly shows Iranians carrying away a 10-year old girl who was [shot](#) in the head by Iranian security forces.

- » Internet monitoring group NetBlocks reported “[near-total](#)” [disruption](#) to internet connectivity in Sandanaj, the capital of Iran’s Kurdish region on September 19, as well as [partial disruptions](#) in Tehran and other cities. As the protests intensified and spread to over 50 cities, the regime [further](#) cut access to the internet as well as social media apps WhatsApp and Instagram.
- On September 16, the [New York Times](#) confirmed [rumors](#) that Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had fallen ill and cancelled all of his upcoming public appearances.
 - » Perhaps to dispel these reports, Khamenei [spoke](#) at a public event on September 17.

Why Is It Important?

- This latest round of civil unrest underscores the growing, broad-based discontent with the Iranian regime’s worsening repression and corruption, including its abusive and violent misogyny, brutal suppression of legitimate peaceful protests, mismanagement of the economy and natural resources, and its prioritization of resources for regional aggression.
 - » With continued and growing unrest in Iran and [no heir apparent](#) for Khamenei, his faltering health could be perceived by the Iranian people as an opportunity to demand [freedom](#) and/or lead to a major power struggle within the regime.
 - The Mahsa Amini protests have included [chants](#) against two [potential successors](#) for Khamenei, [President](#) Ebrahim Raisi and Khamenei’s son, Mojtaba. This, along with the broader discontent with the regime and [Raisi’s unpopular presidency](#), suggests that “the majority of Iranians will not accept [Khamenei’s] successor,” as Iran scholar Alireza Nader [wrote](#).
- In February, U.S.-funded Radio Farda obtained a “highly confidential” [document](#), purportedly from the IRGC, emphasizing rising discontent in Iran and warning that society is in a “state of explosion.”
 - » Notes reportedly included in the document from a November 2021 IRGC task force meeting caution that “social discontent has risen by 300 percent in the past year,” and that, since March 2021, protests had “increased by almost 50 percent and the number of protesters involved has nearly doubled.”
- The IRGC’s internal security concerns come on the heels of steadily widening unrest that dates back to 2017 and has seen thousands of Iranian citizens killed and arrested:
 - » Beginning in December 2017 and extending into early 2018, the [largest](#) protests in Iran since 2009 [resulted](#) in at least 25 Iranians [killed](#). The unrest spread to roughly 160 cities, including Tehran, with working-class Iranians “expressing their anger at graft, unemployment and a deepening gap between rich and poor.”

- » During “Bloody November” in late 2019, protests erupted in [over](#) 200 cities across in Iran in response to a 300 percent hike in fuel prices; the demonstrations [included](#) calls for “an end to the Islamic Republic’s government and the downfall of its leaders.” Initial [estimates](#) suggest at least 1,500, and as many as 3,000, people were [killed](#) in less than two weeks.
- » Beginning in the second half of 2021 and continuing into 2022, a series of popular protests each by [farmers](#), [teachers](#), and [others](#) against low wages, the regime’s corruption, and its [squandering](#) of the country’s precious water resources took place nationwide, with some protests lasting months and others continuing on and off [to this day](#).
- » Mass [protests](#) flared up again in early May 2022 after the Iranian government’s cuts to state subsidies on food increased the price of basic goods several-fold. The [collapse](#) of a ten-story building in Abadan (Khuzestan province) on May 23 resulted in at least [41 people](#) dying and sparked additional demonstrations.
 - As mourning Iranians gathered for days to protest at the collapse site, they increasingly [chanted slogans](#) against the [regime](#), the [IRGC](#), and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Police violently [repressed](#) the protests, which spread beyond Khuzestan, and the regime [cut off](#) internet and phone communications to areas throughout the [country](#).
- » Protests since at least 2009 have seen Iranians [expressing outrage](#) over the regime’s devotion of precious resources, and Iranian lives, to supporting Middle East terrorism and military expansion. One of [the chants](#), “no Gaza, no Lebanon, I give my life for Iran,” has been commonly used by Iranians for over a decade.
 - Videos from September 19, 2022, [show](#) protestors in Sandanaj tearing down a street sign labelled “Palestine.”



- President Joe Biden missed an opportunity, standing on the world stage, to directly and forcefully condemn the Iranian regime for killing Mahsa Amini. At the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, Biden devoted only a single sentence to the unrest in Iran, [saying](#) “today, we stand with the brave citizens and the brave women of Iran who right now are demonstrating to secure their basic rights.”
 - » U.S. Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) and National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan](#) released statements expressing their concern over the killing of Mahsa Amini, with Sullivan tweeting, “We will continue to hold Iranian officials accountable for such human right abuses.”
- U.S. presidents have varied in their support of Iranian protests, and Iranian human rights violations have been largely ignored during periods of U.S.-Iran engagement on nuclear deal negotiations.
 - » During the protests in May 2022, neither Biden nor Blinken commented on either the demonstrations or the regime’s violent response.
 - » President Trump repeatedly and strongly [expressed support](#) for the protests in 2019-20, with [tweets](#) in English and Farsi. In response to the violent crackdown of the 2019 protests, the Trump administration and European countries [imposed broad sanctions](#) on Iranian officials.
 - » During the Obama administration, when the Green Revolution protests engulfed Iran in 2009, John Kerry, who was then the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and later served as President Obama’s Secretary of State and negotiated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), [encouraged](#) President Obama to remain silent and not support the protestors, writing, “our saber-rattling only empowered hard-liners and put reformers on the defensive.”
 - The lack of U.S. support for the Green Revolution led to more suffering for the Iranian people in addition to a weak nuclear deal. Failing to speak out against Iran’s human rights abuses today for the sake of reaching a new [shorter and weaker](#) nuclear deal would be even more detrimental to the people of both Iran and the United States.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- President Biden should personally, forcefully, and directly condemn the Iranian regime specifically for its killing of Mahsa Amini as well as for the violent suppression of protests. Additional steps his administration should take to fulfill his [pledge to put democratic values](#) at the center of his foreign policy and increase pressure on the Iranian regime include:
 - » Immediately withdrawing from the failed nuclear deal [negotiations](#) with Iran, since a deal would provide the oppressive Iranian regime with billions of dollars without addressing any of its human rights violations, and adopting a “[Plan B](#)” strategy of comprehensive pressure on Tehran particularly focused on strengthening the capabilities of U.S. regional partners to defend themselves against Iran.

- » Having the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas Greenfield call an [emergency special session](#) of the Security Council out of concern for the Iranian regime’s human rights abuses.
 - Her predecessor Nikki Haley [set the precedent](#) for human rights as part of the Security Council’s jurisdiction when she presided over what the Trump administration called the first “thematic debate” on human rights in the Security Council in 2017.
- » Enacting additional human rights sanctions on officials linked to the repression of these latest protests and encouraging European partners to do the same, while making clear they will not lift any human rights-related sanctions as part a renewed nuclear agreement.
- The administration should immediately encourage and enable U.S. technology companies to provide Iranians access to tools and services to communicate freely with each other and the rest of the world.
 - » The Treasury Department should rapidly provide “comfort letters” and any necessary specific licenses requested by technology companies to facilitate the provision of satellite-based internet for Iranians.
 - Elon Musk [said](#) on September 19 that Starlink, which provides satellite Internet access coverage, “will ask for an exemption to Iranian sanctions” in order to provide Iranians with internet access and help enable them to share their stories and video on social media.
 - In response to Musk’s message, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) on September 20 [highlighted](#) its [longstanding general license](#), suggesting that Musk may not need a new license to provide Starlink service in Iran. In a statement to Reuters, an OFAC spokesperson indicated a willingness to work with Musk and Starlink if that general license didn’t apply.
 - While Treasury’s general license D-1 already covers the provision of technology and equipment for communication, OFAC’s statement might not be sufficient for risk-averse companies to believe they will avoid sanctions if the proceed with providing internet service to Iran. By rapidly providing “comfort letters” and any necessary specific licenses requested by technology companies, Treasury can ease these concerns.
 - » The United States should continue to robustly fund its internet freedom programs, including support for VPNs and similar alternatives that can be used to bypass authoritarian governments’ attempts to censor and shut down internet access during times of protest.