

A new Iranian revolution?



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INTRODUCTION

The current protests in Iran began as an instinctive, emotional response to an act of persecution on the part of the country’s theocratic leadership. It is fast becoming a revolution.

On Sept. 13, 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman from Kurdistan province, was traveling with her family to Tehran when she was detained by the regime’s religious police for being insufficiently “modest” in her dress.

Three days later, after falling into a coma while in custody, she died in hospital.

The morality police, or Guidance Patrol, are a feature of daily life in Iran. They were established in 2005 but their origins can be traced further back.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the state of Iran has considered itself not only religiously motivated and dedicated to spreading the word of Twelver Shiite Islam, but also duty bound to enact a kind of permanent revolution in domestic morality.



This includes the prohibition of substances such as alcohol and narcotics, which the clergy considers religiously prohibited. But it also means a greater degree of state surveillance associated with, and fixated upon, daily life in the country.

The Islamic Revolution was, in the state’s mind, a revolution against what it viewed as the lax morality of public life in Iran under the Shah. A new, conservative code of morality in public life was drawn up and administered by the powers that be, and has been upheld by the now-octogenarian generation that took power after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989.

This translates to a state that endows law enforcement with the statutory, even constitutional, authority to police ordinary citizens for even minor infractions or deviations from what the state considers to be “good behavior.”

In recent years, and in Amini’s case, the morality police have focused on the mandatory covering of women’s hair with the hijab. Amini was deemed to be wearing her hijab incorrectly and so the Guidance Patrol picked her up.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran’s Supreme leaders have sought to enact a kind of permanent revolution in domestic morality. AFP



The “generation gap” in Iran is understood, even in official circles, to be a driver of popular discontent with the regime in Tehran



THE DEATH OF MAHSA AMINI

What happened after her arrest is, at least to some degree, disputed. What is certain is that within a few hours of being detained by the morality police Amini was in the condition in which her family found her at Kasra Hospital in Tehran: Grievously injured and close to death.

The 22-year-old was in a coma for two days before she died on Sept. 16. The authorities insist she was not harmed by the morality police and have offered several possible explanations for how she came to die, including the suggestion that she suffered from a heart condition.

Amini’s family rejected this completely. They said she was beaten by members of the Guidance Patrol in the van she was taken to. This, they said, has been confirmed by other individuals who were picked up at the same time, and was evidenced by the injuries she had plainly sustained, which were apparent as she lay in a coma in the hospital.

Amini collapsed at the police station to which she was taken. An ambulance was called but did not arrive for some time, reportedly up to half an hour. It is unknown whether her life might have been saved if she had been taken to hospital sooner.

What is not in dispute, the family said, is that the beating Amini received was the sole cause

Iran’s controversial nuclear plan prompted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and foreign governments to impose heavy sanctions on the country. AFP

of her injuries and her death, and therefore the Iranian regime murdered their daughter.

This view was shared by many Iranians, especially the young, as the news of Amini’s death quickly spread on social media.

PROTESTS AND POPULAR SENTIMENT

Most Iranian women — especially the youngest group, corresponding to what is known as Generation Z in the West — are decades removed from the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the octogenarian leaders of which still dominate the upper echelons of Iranian politics, religious life and society, and whose strict values are forced upon the rest of the country.

There is some evidence to suggest that this new generation of young women, and young men, were already beginning to chafe under the country’s religious and moral restrictions before Amini’s death.

Iranian youths engage with social media in much the same way as their peers in less religiously strict societies. For example, despite sporadic prosecutions by Iranian officials, many young Iranians film themselves participating in social-media trends, including dancing, and some young women film and photograph themselves without veils¹.

But there are also economic aspects to the



Next: a woman wears a T-shirt bearing the word "Execution" in Persian, as she takes part in one of the many rallies in support of Iranian women that took place across cities all over the world. Below: Many of the Iranian women arrested during the process were detained at the infamous Evin jail, northwest of the Iranian capital Tehran. AFP

unhappiness and discontent among Iranian youth. The baby boom that followed the Islamic Revolution created a demographic challenge for Iranian social security systems, and a disincentive for the young to have children and engage with the social contract dictated by the leaders of the Islamic Republic.

The Statistical Center of Iran estimates that up to 77 per cent of Iranians between the ages of 15 and 24 are not employed or in training or studying, which is a dire state of affairs and a dramatic increase from the 31 per cent who were in the same situation in 2020².

This profoundly negative state of affairs, and its accompanying grim economic and social outlook, primes the young to be critical of the authorities that have brought them to this point and, in broad social terms, predisposes them to take part in large-scale revolutionary social movements that are not only critical of the status quo but also willing to challenge and even overthrow it.

Similarly, international sanctions — which were imposed to impede the Islamic Republic's pursuit of nuclear weapons and as a result of its broader activities as a rogue state — have decreased the prospects of prosperity and security for the young.

They find themselves in a society blighted by a devalued currency, poorly maintained technology and poor provision of consumer goods. The reaction of the leadership class, both the ruling clerics and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, to this has been increased policing of morality and growing restrictions on daily activities — in effect, a permanent state of punishment for the possibility of popular discontent.

In an analysis for the Middle East Institute in late August, Maysam Bizaer described "an increasing number of young, middle-class Iranians who are deeply pessimistic about their country's future³."

This is the seedbed of revolutionary sentiment. These young Iranians are unwilling, and economically unable, to "play the game" of their repressive society. Already alienated from the leadership class, and unrewarded by the state of the economy, they are highly sensitive to their lack of rights and freedoms.

The death of Amini was a stark reminder to them of this grim state of affairs and has become a rallying point for a generation of malcontents. Within a very short time, tens of thousands of members of Generation Z, who are more networked than ever through social media and therefore more rapidly mobilized than older Iranians, took to the streets to protest.

Even prior to this current movement, the stereotype of youth in Iran was already one of disconnection and disenchantment. As Bizaer noted in another essay for the Middle East Institute, the young people of Generation Z were considered apathetic and inattentive when

it came to politics. The lack of incentives for them to participate in society on the regime's terms had left them largely disengaged from mainstream Iranian life⁴.

But this did not mean that Iran's Generation Z had no sense of their country's politics and society. In fact, as the protests show, at the heart of the apparent indifference lay dislike and disapproval of religious traditions, the weight of orthodoxy and the demands it placed on the people.

This was the build up of energy that was eventually released by the death of Amini, driving the youth of Iran to organize itself online and take to the streets in protest.

GENERATION Z

Iran's Generation Z represents a small part of the country's total population. Its members were born between the baby boom of the years that followed the Iranian revolution and the recent arid years during which family planning was preached by the state.

They number only about six million, accounting for between 6 and 7 per cent of the country's total population of 83 million. But this does not mean their impact is proportionately small. Unlike previous generations of Iranians, this generation grew up with the internet, social media and all that this technology brought with it. It was influenced by examples of more-liberalized foreign cultures from a very young age, which inevitably fostered discontent with the strict and isolating demands of the Islamic Republic.

At the same time, thanks to its engagement with the digital universe, Generation Z was able to bypass much of the official censorship in Iran, which enabled broad questioning of the Islamic Revolution and the society it created.

Bizaer identified a series of political events, beginning in 2014 at about the time the oldest members of Generation Z started to reach their late teens, that demonstrated their capacity and willingness to mobilize and demonstrate.

These included the funeral of Morteza Pashaei, a popular young musician, which tens of thousands of fans unexpectedly attended, their presence interrupting the proceedings.

Other assemblies of the young, including mass gatherings at the end of the school year in 2022, were greeted with official hostility. One gathering in Shiraz, for example, drew criticism from authorities and demands from officials for a clampdown on the capacity of young people to meet in this way, including censorship of the internet⁵.

The "generation gap" in Iran is understood, even in official circles, to be a driver of popular discontent with the regime in Tehran and the emergence of protests and demonstrations.

As early as 2016, Saeed Razavi Faqih, a former political prisoner and activist-turned-social scientist, appeared to sound the alarm.

In an article for the reformist news station Ensaf News, he wrote: “This new generation has completely different demands, trends and views, and basically shares no common language with the managers and officials of the country’s administration⁶”

This analysis proved to be entirely correct. The lack of a common language has led to mutual distrust and contempt for authority among Generation Z.

Faqih focused in particular on the potential arising from this generation’s growing access to higher education, predicting that “as soon as they become aware of their ability to influence and bring about change, this mass population ruling the universities in big and small cities will transform everything.”

Faqih speculated that the misgivings of the young would be expressed primarily through their membership of, and passage through, the ordinary institutions of Iranian life on the path that has been laid down by the state. What has happened instead is that following a series of provocative incidents, culminating in the death of one of its own, Generation Z has taken to the streets.

A generation’s simmering discontent with the life they were being forced to lead by the regime boiled over, expressed first in the form of public protests and then, most notably, in a mass gathering at Amini’s grave after the 40-day period of mourning, in blatant defiance of a ban imposed by the state⁷.

The portrayal of the vast majority of the protesters as being young was believed to serve both the regime and the advocates of the protests, in different ways. The regime benefits from this portrayal because the younger the protesters appear, the more alien they can be made to seem to the rest of a rapidly aging Iranian population, more than 85 per cent of whom are older than Generation Z.

But the protesters, too, benefit because it projects an image of youthful idealism.

As Bizaer puts it: “Older generations of Iranians ... failed to achieve long-fought-for political and social freedoms during the past four decades” and many of them are now “expressing public admiration for their children and young countrymen⁸.”

In this, observers can discern the truth: That the youth of Iran has shown enough courage and bravery to prove their rulers wrong.

WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM

The protesters quickly unified around certain slogans and aspects of popular culture. One of the latter was the song “Baraye” by Shervin Hajipour, a 25-year-old musician. The track, the title of which means “Because Of” or “For,” is a collection of messages shared on social media by protesters explaining why they took to the streets.

The reasons they gave include: “For our sisters, mine and yours / For a change in the minds of the fanatics / For father’s shame about empty pockets / For the longing for a normal life.”

The song refers, in an ironic fashion, to the state of Iran and the theocratic demands it places on daily life in the service of religion as “this mandatory paradise.”

Within days of its release, “Baraye” had been streamed up to 40 million times on Instagram alone⁹. It was described as the most viral and most covered protest song ever released in Iran¹⁰.

It tapped into a long history of protest songs in the country, dating back even to the 1979 revolution against the Shah’s regime which, after purges, brought the Islamic Republic to power.

Within days of the song’s release, on Sept. 29 Iranian authorities arrested Hajipour and pressured him to delete the song, which he initially did¹¹. This, of course, demonstrated a fundamental ignorance of how the digital world operates. By that time the song had gone viral and been copied and covered by other musicians, so it continued to circulate both on social media in Iran and at demonstrations, where it was sung by protesters.

The final line of the song, “For women, life, freedom,” is emblematic of the protest movement as a whole and has become a major slogan.

CONTROL OF THE STREETS

The protests began in mid-September in Tehran and in Saqqez, the town in Iranian Kurdistan where Amini was buried, in defiance of the authorities. Slogans that would become widespread in the weeks and months that followed emerged in those early days. One of them was the aforementioned “Women, life, freedom.” Another was a radically defiant reworking of a phrase the regime has demanded be heard during Friday prayers since the days of the Revolution; instead of “Death to America,” the protesting Iranians started chanting “Death to the dictator.”

At the same time, women began to take off their hijabs in public. It was an act of defiance that demonstrated the laws that had, in effect, killed Amini, and which authorities continued in vain to try to impose, were no longer in force — and that when they gathered, the protesters had taken de facto control of the streets across Iran.

By Sept. 20, four days after Amini’s death, reports indicated that major protests were taking place in 16 of Iran’s 31 provinces, including Tehran. This was almost certainly an underestimate. An assessment of the number of protests by US radio broadcaster Voice of America, for example, referenced only reports that had been confirmed using geolocatable visual evidence¹².

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In the first few weeks of the protests, Iranian authorities tried to use conventional tactics to limit their scale and prevent escalation, such as shutting down the internet and blocking mobile applications, including encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram¹³.

Internet blackouts continued into late September but this tactic was only marginally effective. The protests became a self-sustaining process, organized largely within purpose-built chains of communication among new and old activists and increasingly planned offline.

As it became clearer to the IRGC and the leaders of the regime that they could not halt the protests solely by shutting down the internet, they began to turn to more basic, physical tactics to disincentivize and punish demonstrators.

MURDEROUS RESPONSE

Early reports of state violence against the protesters included the use of batons and shotguns. A report compiled by the non-governmental organization Amnesty International said that on Sept. 21, Iranian authorities ordered police and paramilitary forces to “severely confront troublemakers and anti-revolutionaries.” It estimated that on that day alone, 34 people were killed¹⁴.

Iran International TV is the first 24-hour Persian news channel based in west London. The privately funded channel was established in 2017 and has already a strong following thanks to its coverage of stories which Iranian media usually do not touch. Supplied

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In the week that followed, protests continued in Oshnavieh, Tehran and Shiraz, and were met with more violence. The Basij, Iran’s pro-regime paramilitary volunteer force, the IRGC and local police attacked protesters, including students, with batons and guns¹⁵.

As the protests continued to spread to dozens of Iranian cities, the violent response from the authorities only escalated.

As the regime has deployed violence, so it has become more institutionalized and expected, with authorities within the Iranian judiciary and legislature calling ever more loudly for its use.

The Iranian chief justice announced that, if arrested, protesters risked the death penalty for a variety of crimes. About 15,000 protesters appear to have been detained since the protests began, and so far four have been sentenced to death.

Iran’s legislature has voted — albeit not bindingly — for capital punishment to be imposed on all arrested demonstrators.

Simultaneously, however, this institutionalization of violence has also had an effect on demonstrators, who have become more used to it and therefore more willing to defy it.

DIASPORA SUPPORT

Contemporaneously with the protests in Iran,

demonstrations have taken place around the world, primarily among the Iranian diaspora. In North America and Europe, the Iranian opposition and its supporters have gathered to participate in the same defiant rituals practiced by the protesters in Iran: The ceremonial removal of hijabs and the ritual cutting of hair.

Such protests generally have taken place outside or close to Iranian embassies, offering a gift of coverage to international news outlets that are banned from operating freely within Iran.

In this way, the Iranian diaspora has supplemented the protests and given them a new global focus. What might have been dismissed as merely the latest in a series of protests that have taken place in Iran in recent years is instead being seen as having almost historic importance.

Many current and former world leaders, including in the US, have gone further in their comments about the protests than they have in relation to any other Iranian demonstrations since before the Green Movement in 2009. At that time, the administration of President Barack Obama decided not to endorse the protests, fearing that doing so would hurt the demonstrators more than it would help them. Obama himself said in a recent interview that, in hindsight, this was an incorrect conclusion¹⁶.

This time around, the increased international attention has in some ways changed the shape of the protests. Commentary from members of the diaspora, including famous social media personalities with Iranian backgrounds, has personalized and lionized the protesters in ways rarely seen in the Middle East region as a whole, and especially not in Iran, in the past decade.

Claims by the Iranian authorities that the protests were being whipped up by foreign agents and Zionist infiltrators have been significantly undermined by the efforts of the Iranian diaspora to highlight the fundamental rights that are in question and convey the protesters' view of the situation.

Previous attempts by Middle Eastern citizens to demand civil rights, including many of the protest movements that arose during the Arab Spring, were suspected in some quarters of being foreign-inspired "color revolutions," a small but nonetheless disruptive influence on the foreign policy of democratic countries in the EU and North America, which decreased popular support for aiding those movements.

The current protests have avoided this suspicion, due in no small part to the current nature of activism among the Iranian diaspora, which is steeped in modern social media tactics that were not available even during the Arab Spring years.

Similarly, the fact that in Iran these protests are being led by, and prominently include, young women is an important feature of diaspora activism, generating global sympathy and support.

Such global goodwill has positive effects for



Protesters are undermining the very sacredness of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the nature of his nominally secular government

the protesters. It disincentivizes some forms of government crackdown because anything done to the protesters will, to some degree, take place in the public eye and might hamper Iran's activity on the world stage. The state might therefore refrain from doing its absolute worst, in an attempt to avoid a backlash.

Nonetheless, very little information about the protests and the mistreatment of protesters emerges from Iran automatically. And the precedents set by recent protest movements within the country, and in other countries where the IRGC influence is strong, are not wholly positive.

THE 2019 PROTESTS

Amid the economic crisis in 2019, the Iranian people protested, in large numbers and across the country, against their government and the influence of the IRGC. Much like this year's demonstrations, news of the protests spread rapidly online and quickly took on a broader and, for the regime, a more threatening character¹⁷.

Protesters defaced offices and barracks of the Revolutionary Guards, chanted slogans critical of the supreme leader and the regime, and in general defied the authority the state maintained it was granted by Allah.

The reaction to the 2019 protests was particularly brutal. Up to 1,500 protesters were killed and many thousands were imprisoned, many of whom reported they were tortured.

This state violence was widely condemned but because it did not stop, it raised the potential stakes of participation in the demonstrations and this, in combination with internet blackouts and other suppressive tactics, did eventually succeed in halting the protests, which were significantly diminished after what activists called "Bloody November" in 2019¹⁸.

All domestic protest movements within Iran since the Islamic Revolution have met with the same violent response. But another precedent for the current crackdown is the way in which Iran-sponsored militias acted inside Iraq in 2019-20, a period during which they carried out assassinations of political figures, intimidated Iraqi protesters and disrupted demonstrations.

When IRGC leaders threaten Iranian protesters, they do so backed by years of experience in directing militias in the intimidation and killing of demonstrators in Iraq.

THE IRAQ PRECEDENT

When Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, commander-in-chief of the IRGC, said in November that it would be the "last day" of "riots," the Iraq precedent was what he intended to evoke. The same effect was intended when photographs began to circulate of IRGC officers armed with sniper rifles on rooftops in key cities.

In the past decade, the Iranian regime has deployed snipers, and ordinary thugs, to kill



Above: Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander Major General Hossein Salami vowed last November that it would be the "last day" of "riots". Right: pro-government paramilitary forces Hashd Al Shaabi have been called in to help suppress the protests. AFP



protesters across the Middle East but especially in Iraq. In 2019, and after, the Iraqi prime minister had to admit that the gunmen who shot Iraqi youths while they demonstrated in Baghdad and Basra were known to the Iraqi state but were not its own soldiers. They were members of Iranian militias²⁰.

This precedent is significant and has been intensified, as it has been reported that the Iranian regime has begun to import its militias that were operating in other countries into Iran to crack down on the demonstrations or intimidate those inclined to protest.

The opposition Iranian news website Iran International reported that members of Iraqi militias trained and led by the IRGC began to move into Iran in November, with the intention of helping to suppress protesters.

It said up to 150 armed troops were flown to Tehran from Baghdad²¹ and that they were members of Hashd Al-Shaabi, otherwise known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, a network of militias raised to fight Daesh. It has always been dominated and led by Iranian-controlled, IRGC-led armed groups.

As the war against Daesh wound down, these militias were not demobilized or disarmed, as the Iraqi state wished, but rather remained armed and ready to fight for Iranian interests — which many of them did before the pandemic in response to domestic Iraqi protests critical of the pro-Iranian government.

Another armed group that Iran International said has sent forces to Iran is Kataib Hezbollah, a prominent and notoriously violent Iranian-

backed militia in Iraq that has claimed credit for attacks on Baghdad's Green Zone and the international presence at nearby air bases.

These are not simply groups affiliated with the IRGC but are its direct projects. The origins of the militias lie in the regional policy of the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian regime. In Iraq, they are commanded by Iranian officers and employ Iranian regime assets on the battlefield.

It should be noted that journalists working at the London-based Iran International, an independent Farsi-language news channel that broadcasts to Iran via satellite, are reportedly in the sights of the IRGC. The British government is taking the reported threats to the organization and individual members of its staff seriously; in November, police stationed armored vehicles and armed officers outside its headquarters in Chiswick, West London²².

WARNING

The deployment in Iran of Tehran-backed militant forces from other countries is a potent warning. The regime's foreign assets are, in this reading, being brought in to aid the state that sponsors them and has underwritten their history of violence.

These groups are known to have a history of involvement in the suppression of protests. They perfected their tactics in Iraq and Syria, where organic local opposition to Iran repeatedly has been crushed or prevented from coalescing.

The militias are well-practiced in intimidating those they can easily scare off and targeting

civil-society leaders for assassination. It seems reasonable to conclude that when natural leaders of the current protests in Iran emerge, they will be at risk of being targeted in this way.

Many young Iraqis did not imagine they might be murdered when they took to the barricades in Basra and Baghdad in 2020 but the militias had other ideas. Their forces are primed to kill any dissenters or demonstrators who opposed the Iranian regime's wider regional policy. They will not hesitate to do the same inside of Iran at the behest of the supreme leader.

THE POSSIBILITY OF REVOLUTION

Many Iranians, both abroad and in Iran itself, have described the current demonstrations as the largest and most effective in the 43-year history of the Islamic Republic. Even more so than the 2009 Green Movement, this wave of protests appears to undermine the regime's narratives and the foundations of its laws, including its claims of spiritual authority and holy inviolability.

Protesters are undermining the very sacredness of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the nature of his nominally secular government. They openly chant their desire for the IRGC to be abolished rather than allowed to continue to dominate the state as it does.

Symbols of the regime have been attacked, including shrines to former IRGC leader Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in Iraq in January 2020 by a US drone strike, as have sites such as the notorious Evin prison, where many dissenters are incarcerated, and regional offices from which the IRGC and the state's domestic intelligence agencies operate.

Many Iranian dissenters and activists in the diaspora believe the regime has never been less popular and that this is perhaps the only real chance since the Islamic Republic was founded for a new Iranian revolution to overthrow the status quo and remake the state along new lines, and to introduce legal equality for women, impose fewer restrictions on daily life and "morality," and jettison the regional expansionist policies and nuclear program favored by the current leadership and the IRGC.

This would be a profound and serious change and would require a significant diminution in the capacity of the Revolutionary Guard, the network of militias and paramilitaries run by the Iranian state, and the carceral system used for suppressing dissent and incarcerating and punishing dissenters.

In early December 2022, it was conjectured that the Iranian regime was planning some degree of liberalization, most notably with regards to the Morality Police and the hijab law.

Mohammed Jafar Montazeri, the country's attorney general, was quoted by Iranian state media as saying that "the law requiring veils, known as hijabs, was under review by Iran's parliament and judiciary, and that the morality



The prospect of revolution is enticing but it cannot happen without immense effort and sacrifice

police had been abolished," per the Wall Street Journal, which also noted that Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's president, appeared to agree with the announcement during a televised statement.

The Western media suggested that this was a victory for the protesters and a move by the Iranian authorities to ameliorate the situation in response to the demands of the demonstrators.

Among the Iranian and Farsi-speaking diaspora, the reaction to the announcement was quite different. Activists viewed the statement as a lie — either a bald-faced deceit designed to reduce the incentive for protesters to continue to demonstrate or a clever obfuscation of the truth, or it simply represented a reorganization of the existing forces of the state under new names.

Activists believe that the clerical regime in Tehran simply has too much to lose to begin making any real, significant concessions of this kind. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps controls about half of the Iranian economy. The clerical regime is a state within a state, and its religious dictates must be imposed on the public and enforced if the clerics are to maintain their power.

The prospect of revolution is enticing but it cannot happen without immense effort and sacrifice. The Iranian state has already shown its willingness to kill many hundreds of people and threaten to execute thousands in its efforts to maintain its hold on power.

The Iranian people seem more motivated than ever to protest against an unwelcome status quo. But for it to yield to their pressure will require luck as well as the courage of which they have already shown so much.

CONCLUSION

The protesters in Iran have managed a great feat, not in coming out onto the streets but in sustaining their demonstrations against withering attacks from the Iranian state, and for garnering mass international sympathy.

It is increasingly possible to contend that the Iranian people are not automatically wedded to the Islamic Republic, the trappings of the Islamic Revolution, the Revolutionary Guards, and the laws and customs enforced by clerical authorities.

Indeed, in November a report from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, based on two polls of thousands of Iranians, concluded that the widespread rejection of the hijab was a symbol of a nationwide yearning for regime change and, in part, a product of the "unprecedented secularization" of the country.

In the words of Kasra Aarabi, co-author of the report and the Iran Program Lead at TBI's Extremism Policy Unit, the protests over the death of Mahsa Amini mark "the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic."

The report drew on the results of two large polls carried out in Iran, in 2020 and 2022, before the protests began, that highlighted the



Being chafed under the country's religious and moral restrictions, women have held a key role in these protests. AFP

extent to which the country has become an increasingly secular society.

They found that the mandatory requirement to wear the hijab was rejected by 70 percent of men and 74 percent of women, and that 84 percent of those who oppose the dress code also want an end to the Islamic Republic.

Meanwhile, only 33 percent of Iranians in rural areas and 26 percent of those in urban locations said they follow the Islamic obligation to pray five times a day, leading the TBI to conclude that "Iran's society is no longer religious²³."

Protesters have physically fought against the Revolutionary Guard, defaced monuments to the country's theological rule, demonstrated their disdain for the state-enforced veneration of martyrs, and shown that, above all else, they are people who desire political liberty, economic development and responsive government.

This will likely alter international assessments of the permanence and internal strength of the clerical regime in Iran. Many international leaders will now view the Islamic Republic not as an immutable fact in international affairs but rather as a contingent thing that is as vulnerable to popular sentiment as other wildly unpopular tyrannical governments.

Similarly, these protests have started to affect the calculations in foreign capitals regarding the most unacceptable aspects of the conduct of the Islamic Republic, namely its campaigns of intimidation and murder (domestically and globally), its use of proxy militias across the region, and its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic-missile technology.

If these things are not even popular domestically, as now appears to be the case, and if the regime behind them is vulnerable

to growing levels of discontent and dissent among its own people, there is no need to tolerate misbehavior by the Iranian state as simply a fact of life.

This has likely changed the international view of Iranian malfeasance in the medium to long term, a development that would have been unimaginable before the protests.

But whether the demonstrations are able to bring about long-lasting political change in Iran — perhaps even a new Iranian revolution to overturn the ill effects of the 1979 uprising — will primarily depend on the protesters themselves and whether they have the strength, bravery and fortitude to survive and surmount the forces of the state arrayed against them, and the violence the regime is prepared to use against its enemies.

If the international community wishes to help the protesters in Iran it has many options it can pursue. It could further ostracize the Iranian regime from international diplomacy. Those countries that have not yet declared the IRGC to be a terrorist organization could do so. With the regime willing as it is to disconnect Iran from the internet, the US and other countries could attempt to provide the Iranian people with satellite internet, via Starlink, as happened in Ukraine following the Russian invasion.

And if the world wishes to end the IRGC's empire, against which the protesters are arranged, it could clamp down on the terrorist financing and flows of foreign fighters to Iranian militias in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, which represent the tendrils of the state the protesters in Iran wish fundamentally to reform.

FOOTNOTES

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