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## WORLD

# Iran's Deadly Street Protests Are Replaced by Quiet Acts of Rebellion

Arrests and executions have smothered organized demonstrations, yet thousands of women in Tehran have abandoned compulsory headscarves in protest

By [Sune Engel Rasmussen](#) [Follow](#)

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Four months after a nationwide uprising erupted in [Iran](#), a lethal [crackdown](#) and an ailing economy have quieted antigovernment street demonstrations.

Students still occasionally gather at universities and high schools, and others shout slogans from city rooftops and balconies. But [organized protests](#) have largely tapered off. Those still willing to demonstrate gather in small groups, scattered around Tehran and other cities with little coordination.

Crowds of demonstrators have instead given way to a quieter form of rebellion. Thousands of women in Tehran now walk outdoors without the compulsory headscarf, or hijab. It is a form of civil disobedience unlikely to topple the regime but which many say will be difficult to contain in the future.

Similar embers of discontent continue to smolder over the government's refusal to consider protester grievances, according to activists, and demonstrations could flare up again.

The protests began in mid-September, set off by the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman arrested for allegedly violating Iran's strict [Islamic dress code](#). Demands for greater freedom quickly escalated into calls for the overthrow of the clerical leadership, in one of the biggest challenges to the Islamic Republic since its founding four decades ago.

The government, initially caught by surprise, rebounded with deadly force. Hundreds of protesters have been blinded by rubber bullets and metal pellets in street clashes. Thousands have been arrested, some by police using electronic surveillance, including data from ride-hailing apps, to detain people after they returned from rallies. At least 16

people have been sentenced to death for their role in the protests. Four have been executed. Rights groups estimate that more than 500 protesters have been killed.

As the prospects for ousting Iran's clerical rulers shrink, fewer people are willing to risk their lives to try.

“Many Iranians have come to the conclusion that the regime isn't viable, but they have not come to the conclusion that this revolt is viable,” said Peyman Jafari, a historian of Iran's social history and assistant professor at The College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Va.

That has left the protest movement without enough popular support to carry out national strikes or mass demonstrations, the kind of disruptions that could lead to the toppling of Iran's leadership, said academics, Western diplomats and activists.

Yet protests, which have become more frequent in the past decade, are likely to continue, driven by a younger, more secular generation of Iranians who increasingly outnumber the aging vanguard of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.



An image released Oct. 26 last year from a video of a protest rally in Saqez, Iran, the hometown of Mahsa Amini.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The protesters' challenge of laws requiring women to wear a hijab is a swipe at one of the ideological pillars of the Islamic Republic.

Demonstrators, rallying around the slogan “woman, life, freedom,” have stomped on pictures of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and evicted officials from their schools, brazen acts for any Iranian, regardless of gender.

Iranian authorities this month ordered police to issue fines to women who break the country's female dress code, as well as imposed penalties on taxis and restaurants that

allow women to enter without a hijab. So far, it has had little effect.

In one measure of Iran's secular turn, support for the hijab has fallen from 85% after the 1979 Islamic Revolution to around 35%, according to a 2018 survey by the Iranian Parliament's research center.

For some Iranian women, the experience of the past months has marked a point of no return. A protester in her 30s said she had become accustomed to walking around Tehran without a hijab. The experience, she said, made her realize how she had been conditioned to accept the regime's commands.

"Seeing how this law has been used to oppress women has meant that it has no legal value for me anymore," she said. "I won't say that I'm not afraid anymore. But the least I can do is demonstrate against the system, and show solidarity with others by not covering my hair."

The antigovernment movement hasn't settled on a political platform with the potential to unite Iranians. Millions oppose the Islamic Republic but are split over what should replace it.



Iranian protesters in October last year.

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

According to a poll in March last year by Gamaan, an independent research group based in the Netherlands, 34% of Iranians in the survey, including men and women, said they would prefer to live in a secular republic; 22% preferred an Islamic republic; 19% wanted a constitutional monarchy.

One protester said that in the protests' early days in Tehran she tried to build solidarity by handing out homemade decorative pins with "woman, life, freedom" written in calligraphy. "I wanted to create unity with the pins, to communicate with those who were

angry like I was,” she said. She is among many who have since abandoned street rallies out of fear of arrest and violence.

## Food, freedom

Inflation and Iran’s plummeting currency have exacerbated an economic crisis that makes it difficult to sustain the antigovernment movement and expand popular support, according to economists and protesters.

Economic hardship can spur demonstrations, “but a durable challenge to the regime requires the mobilization of resources like money, skills, and time,” said Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, founder of the Bourse & Bazaar Foundation, a U.K.-based nonprofit think tank focused on Iranian economy and policy.

“It is more difficult for individuals to provide those resources to the movement if they are facing acute economic hardship,” he said.

Workers, merchants and business owners have been among the hardest hit by Iran’s economic troubles. They make up the same groups that protesters would need to trigger a change in Iran’s leadership, according to political analysts.

“People are stressed about how to feed their children, and they don’t have time to think about protests,” said an activist in Tehran who works as a translator.



Iranians shopping at Tehran’s Grand Bazaar this month.

PHOTO: ABEDIN TAHERKENAREH/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

The national currency, the rial, has lost around 30% of its value since mid-September, plummeting to a historic low last week of 450,000 to the dollar on the open market. Inflation topped 40% for the fourth year in a row.



Many of Iran's economic travails stem from years of mismanagement and corruption. U.S. sanctions also have curbed crucial exports, including oil.

The recent currency slide started after international negotiations to revive a nuclear deal that would have lifted sanctions stalled over the summer. It accelerated when the government imposed internet restrictions during the protests. The effort to stifle dissent hurt private businesses and the services industry, which account for more than half of Iran's national output.

Internet shutdowns by authorities cost Iran an estimated \$773 million last year, according to Top 10 VPN, a website researching internet censorship. About 11 million Iranian jobs depend on social-media apps like Instagram, according to the Statistical Center of Iran.

Protests and clashes with security forces also have scared away foreign visitors. The owner of a tourism agency in Tehran said all incoming tours since September have been canceled after other countries warned against travel to Iran. "Not even during the Covid pandemic did we experience such a drop," he said.

## **Diaspora divide**

Iran's clerical leadership came to power in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. At the time, the economy was growing. An oil embargo by the Arab members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries that targeted supporters of Israel during the Yom Kippur War drove crude prices sky high.

Bolstered by a feeling of economic power, shopkeepers and unions in Iran joined with protesters in a yearlong uprising that ended the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

In 2009, hundreds of thousands of Iranians demonstrated against alleged election fraud, in what became known as the Green Movement.

The movement, largely made up of the urban middle-class Iranians and students, eventually fell to government forces. It didn't attract support from lower-income and working-class Iranians, who became the driving force in short-lived protests over economic hardships in 2017 and 2019. Those protests, in turn, failed to attract much support among urban middle-class Iranians.

During the current demonstrations, oil workers have gone on strike for better wages and working conditions, but they haven't joined forces with those seeking a regime change.

A student who joined in antigovernment protests from the first day said the movement needs leaders and structure, “Just being in the street isn’t enough,” she said.

The 1979 revolution largely succeeded because millions of Iranians of different political persuasions coalesced around one leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who was in exile in France at the time. There is no similar leader now, complicating any effort at building a political group to rival the current government.

Iranians abroad are divided over how the West should engage with Iran. One side supports diplomacy, such as the 2015 international nuclear deal, as well as sanctions relief. Opponents say such measures only prolong the Islamic Republic. They support sanctions, as well as severance of diplomatic ties and the closing of Western embassies in Tehran.



A mural of Iran’s national flag on a street, in Tehran.

PHOTO: ABEDIN TAHERKENAREH/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Since September, the rifts have deepened. Iranian lobbyists, journalists and analysts in the U.S. and Europe who support diplomacy have received death threats and had their personal information disclosed online. The University of Chicago received a bomb threat last fall against an Iranian journalist, prompting a panel discussion about the protests to be held online instead of in person.

One figure who has attracted support from Iranians abroad on social media is Reza Pahlavi, the U.S.-based son of the deposed shah. Still others oppose the return to a monarchy.

As a result of the divisions, the most organized opposition party outside Iran is the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, or MeK. The militant group has little support in the country over its support of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein during his eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s.

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians died in the war. MeK had been listed as a terrorist organization in the U.S. until 2012.

Many Iranian protesters say those living abroad don't understand the depth of their plight—caught between economic stresses and the risk of injury, arrest and government execution.

“Many people say that if they get killed in the protest,” the student protester said, “their family will die of hunger.”

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