

World · Analysis

# In Iran, anti-regime resolve persists as security forces intensify bid to crush movement

Opposition has yet to seize opportunity, thought-leader Majid Tavakoli tells CBC before he's jailed

[Nahayat Tizhoosh](#) · CBC News ·

Posted: Sep 23, 2023 9:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: September 23



Iranians protest in Tehran on Oct. 1, 2022, after the death in custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini two weeks earlier. (Middle East Images/The Associated Press)

One year after the historic Women, Life, Freedom uprising rocked the foundations of the Islamic Republic in Iran, authorities have smothered the movement — at least on the surface.

Dissidents inside and outside prison walls have been silenced as authorities ramped up their tactics around last weekend's

anniversary of Mahsa Jina Amini's death in September 2022 after she was taken into custody.

Yet, a discernible shift in Iranian public sentiment has come to light: the [once-dominant](#) idea of [reform](#) has been overtaken, with a broad consensus among Iranians now favoring regime change.

"It has taken some 15 years to come to the conclusion that this current state of affairs is incapable of reform," prominent thought-leader [Majid Tavakoli](#) told CBC News.

Tavakoli's imminent jailing stands as a testament to the regime's partial success in crippling the movement that arose after Amini's death.

"The goal is to eliminate me," said Tavakoli, who will be remanded into custody at Tehran's Evin prison in two weeks.



Majid Tavakoli has challenged the Iranian regime on multiple fronts through his writings that have been shared on social media. (Submitted by Majid Tavakoli)

Tavakoli has challenged the Islamic Republic on multiple fronts through his writings that have been shared on social media, analyzing the political structure of the regime and criticizing everything from the absence of political freedoms to its human rights record.

He has already been jailed for seven years, and shared descriptions of [torture and solitary confinement](#) from that time. He now faces another five years in prison on charges such as spreading "propaganda against the state."

Tavakoli asserts that despite differing motivations, neither Western countries nor the opposition in the diaspora have seized this pivotal moment to aid Iranians in their pursuit of a liberated Iran.

"Bringing political change is not the task of the people inside Iran, but that of a political force based outside of Iran," he said.

- **ANALYSIS** [Can Iran move from rallies to regime change? Only with a clear plan, says renowned dissident](#)
- [Iran's security forces briefly detain Mahsa Amini's father on anniversary of her death](#)

The regime's escalated assault, meanwhile, has ensnared a gamut of society — from the jailing of [women activists](#) and journalists to protesters and cultural icons like singer [Mehdi Yarrahi](#) to lengthy prison sentences for rapper [Toomaj](#).

[Dozens](#) of youth have been abducted by security forces, their fates [unknown](#) — details documented by [Aban Families For Justice](#), an alliance of families of victims of nationwide anti-regime protests in 2019.

Yet, Tavakoli said, beneath the silenced dissent, an irreversible cultural and political shift has developed within Iran — a collective hunger for complete regime change, rather than reforming the Islamic Republic that has held power since 1979.



A police officer stands on a street in Tehran on July 16, 2023. (Majid Asgaripour/WANA/Reuters)

Tavakoli himself has long held that view.

In 2009, when many Iranians rallied behind purported reformist presidential candidates, Tavakoli stood out when he made a direct [attack](#) on Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

He believes that today, society has finally reached a consensus, dismissing the possibility of reform within this autocratic theocracy as unfeasible.

"No issues were solved, society was disappointed, society little by little moved from a situation it could not tolerate to an all-encompassing anger."

This change in public sentiment is also evident in protest slogans within Iran.

The evolution of protesters chanting "Where is my vote?" after they participated in a widely contested presidential election in 2009 to today's "[We don't want the Islamic Republic](#)" signifies a seismic shift in public sentiment.

Even Iran's former reformist candidate for president commented on the events in Iran by characterizing the current structure of the political system as "[unsustainable](#)."

***WATCH | Iranian regime not willing to reform, thought-leader says:***



**Iranian regime can't and won't reform, prominent dissident says**

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Iranian society doesn't believe the regime is capable of solving its many grievances, and the regime itself has shown it's not willing to reform, says Majid Tavakoli.

[Extensive polling](#) by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change and GAMAAN (The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN) shows that the motivations driving Iran's anti-regime protest movement predominantly stem from a desire for secularism.

"As a secular state is impossible under the Islamic Republic, this is indicative of the demand for regime change among the people," the report concludes.

Inside Iran, sociologist Mohammad Fazeli appeared on state television early in the uprising last fall to dive into the "root causes of Iran's current crisis."

Fazeli said that Iranians at large are in despair, have lost hope for progress and development in the country and see their government officials' competency levels as "below average."

He invoked the cautionary tale of 1974, when sociologists warned then-monarch Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of a growing



disconnect with the people. Five years later, the Islamic revolution toppled the country's 2,500-year-old monarchy.

## West 'not ready for regime change in Iran'

But even if Iranians are united and have forsaken reform, the West is not in sync with those aspirations.

"The West is not ready for regime change in Iran," Tavakoli said.

He attributes some of this disconnect to Western think-tanks that propagate regime-sanctioned narratives.

"[Western governments] have a wrong image of the political structure in Iran, and strangely believe in the possibility of reform — or even a referendum," he said.

- **[LISTEN Mahsa Amini's death sparked revolution 'inside the heart of Iranian women': activist](#)**
- **[Iran sentences 3 more protesters to death amid international criticism](#)**

Former British prime minister Tony Blair has called on the West to make a "clear distinction between the people of Iran and the Islamic Republic" as a step toward recalibrating relations.

This sentiment is echoed by Ali Fathollah-Nejad, director of the Berlin-based Centre for Middle East and Global Order, who critiques the West's approach to Iran as "paradoxical."

"Western democracies place more trust in dictatorships and in presumed authoritarian stability than in a democratic movement," he said.



Iranian demonstrators taking to the streets in Tehran during a protest days after Amini died in custody. (AFP/Getty Images)

While expressing verbal support for the protests, the West's main actions have been to enforce sanctions on some officials, maintaining open diplomacy for nuclear deal discussions and negotiating a prisoner swap that released \$6 billion in frozen assets for the regime.

Former journalist Mehdi Ghadimi, who is in Iran, says the West is "short-sighted" and has continued to negotiate with the Islamic Republic throughout the uprising.

"We Iranian people know that the West negotiated our revolution away. But Western countries should know that a government that has no legitimacy among its people will collapse sooner or later."

## **Diaspora opposition's 'negative performance'**

Given the regime's complete control over political structures and its sophisticated intelligence apparatus, Tavakoli concedes that forming an independent, organized opposition within Iran seems improbable.

That is why, in part, he points to the importance of opposition voices in the diaspora.

"Iranians on the streets were awaiting guidance from outside of Iran. Likewise, those who refrained from protesting were also observing the absence of direction from abroad, questioning the rationale behind joining the street protests," said Tavakoli.

"Generally speaking, the diaspora opposition has had a negative performance over the last year."

While a group of diverse diaspora leaders came together earlier this year in Washington, forming an unprecedented [alliance](#), their efforts collapsed quickly.

### ***WATCH | Standing with others in resistance:***



**Suffering part of resistance for brighter future, Iranian dissident says**

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Majid Tavakoli says the pain and suffering he endured while he was jailed were more bearable because he stands side-by-side with others in their resistance against the regime.

Actor and human rights advocate Nazanin Boniadi, one of the alliance signatories, recently [admitted](#) the group failed "to articulate a vision that all Iranians could relate to and that could impel them to unite under the single banner of a secular democracy."

Despite this setback, Ghadimi said Iran is in transition and the struggle to form a united opposition is part of a protracted process.



He said the young generation is still carving out its path for Iran's rebirth.

"We are really talking about an Iranian renaissance that has been in the making for many, many years, with the goal of returning to a national identity."

## Iran's transition continues

As Tavakoli braced to be jailed, he spoke emotionally about the anguish of leaving his wife, Maryam, and their three-year-old daughter, Raha, once again.

But the silencing of Tavakoli and other dissidents is the regime's way of cutting the young generation off from influential voices.

"Majid is an inspiring person for many intellectuals in Iran. So keeping him imprisoned cuts off both society's reach to him and simultaneously cuts his hands from continuing to analyze Iran's situation," an independent journalist inside Iran, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told CBC News.



As Tavakoli, right, braced to be jailed, he spoke emotionally about the anguish of leaving his wife, Maryam, left, and their three-year-old daughter, Raha, once again. (Submitted by Majid Tavakoli)

"Look at the people who have consistently fought this regime. These are the embryos of a leadership," Abbas Milani, director of Iranian studies at Stanford University in California, said.

"[The regime has] made it difficult for a viable alternative to emerge, but the rudiments of effort to create that alternative are already afoot ... I believe we are in the midst of the most important cultural revolution in Iran in the last 200 years."

- [Kurds are among the victims of the Iranian regime's crackdown on dissent. Here are 3 of their stories](#)
- [Iranian regime blamed for poisoning of hundreds of Iranian schoolgirls, as gender-based attacks continue](#)

Meanwhile on the streets of Iran, women's continued refusal to wear the hijab in public remains a visible reminder of their resolve against a pillar of the Islamic revolution.

The country that [ignited](#) the rise of political Islam in the Middle East four decades ago is now home to a young secular generation delivering an ultimatum to it.

But for that ultimatum to come to fruition, Tavakoli said the protest movement must evolve into a next stage, with the guidance of an opposition force based abroad.

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