

Brutal suppression of protests in Iran

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The Iranian authorities have suppressed the largest wave of anti-regime protests since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. According to moderate estimates, around 13,000 demonstrators and approximately 500 members of the security forces were killed. This has largely brought the unrest to an end, although local clashes are still reported in Iranian Kurdistan and Baluchestan. At the same time, obtaining a comprehensive picture of the current situation remains difficult due to a strict information blockade in place since 8 January, including an internet shutdown.

In parallel with the internal crisis, relations between Israel, the United States, and Iran have escalated sharply. Both Tel Aviv and Washington openly voiced political support for the protests; President Donald Trump, for example, threatened direct intervention should the regime continue its repression, called for regime change, and pledged direct support to the demonstrators. No military action has taken place so far, due to factors including the risk of regional escalation, pressure from states in the region (including Turkey and the Gulf countries) on Washington, and symbolic concessions by Tehran (such as suspending executions of those convicted of participation in the demonstrations). The situation in and around Iran remains – and is likely to remain – highly volatile. Further tensions within the ruling elite, a deepening socio-political crisis, and the continuation of political and military pressure from the United States and Israel should all be anticipated.

Commentary

- **The current protests in Iran represent the most severe socio-political crisis since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.** According to the most cautious estimates from the US-based organisation HRNA, by 18 January the deaths of 3,919 people had been confirmed during demonstrations ongoing since 28 December 2025, while a further 8,949 reported fatalities remain under verification – although various media reports suggest the true number may be considerably higher. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has himself stated that several thousand people were killed during the events. Despite the regular occurrence of protests in Iran and the repressive nature of the system, the death toll in the current crisis far exceeds the combined number of victims over the past three decades (the deadliest protests to date, in 2019–2020, are estimated to have claimed around 1,000 lives, while in 2022 approximately 550 people were killed; earlier demonstrations were generally believed to have resulted in only a few to a dozen deaths).
- **The bloody suppression of the protests after 8–9 January, when they reached their most violent phase, led to their effective extinguishing.** In the days that followed, either

no further demonstrations were confirmed, or they took place only on a local scale. Sporadic clashes are reportedly continuing in Iranian Kurdistan and Baluchestan, where guerrilla and sabotage activities are being carried out, including by the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) and Salafi Baluch militant groups.

- **The protests highlighted both the scale of public frustration in Iran and the weakness of the opposition in the face of the authorities' resolve.** They unfolded dynamically and on a nationwide scale, with slogans and demands variably emphasising grievances linked to the country's dire situation, as well as anti-establishment sentiments, including monarchist themes, and the discontent of ethnic and religious minorities, notably Sunni Kurds and Baluch. No coherent political representation emerged during the unrest. Attempts to coordinate the protests by diaspora groups linked to Reza Pahlavi (the son of the last Shah and based in the US), and supported by Israel and the United States, also proved ineffective.
- **The authorities managed to preserve elite cohesion and the loyalty of the repression apparatus under the banner of defending the country against external interference.** The demonstrations were portrayed as externally orchestrated, allegedly supported by the transfer of Islamic State terrorists and Kurdish groups from Iraq. The extent of the threat to the regime may, however, be reflected in the use of regular Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces to suppress crowds, the deployment of the army to protect government buildings, and the mobilisation – reportedly for pacification purposes – of up to 5,000 Shia militia fighters from Iraq.
- **Iran's internal crisis has brought the risk of an open conflict between Iran, Israel, and the United States to a highly serious level.** Both states extended unequivocal political support to the protests and the diaspora opposition, and Trump openly pledged direct backing for demonstrators, including suggestions of strikes against Iranian targets. Such attacks have not materialised so far, which may be linked, among other factors, to the suppression of the demonstrations, the growing scepticism of the US president towards the monarchist diaspora opposition, pressure from regional states in favour of de-escalation, and, ultimately, the relatively limited US military resources available in the context of potential strikes and the parallel need to protect Israel against Iranian retaliation.
- **The forcible suppression of the protests in Iran does not guarantee longer-term stabilisation.** The violent unrest has deepened social tensions and further reduced the regime's capacity to rebuild legitimacy or improve economic conditions. Unless other factors emerge, this is likely to translate into further closure and hardening of the system, with no clear prospects for a positive breakthrough. Despite the elite's cohesion to date, tensions within the ruling establishment over future policy directions have intensified. This is suggested, on the one hand, by differing assessments regarding the tactics used to quell the protests and, on the other, by reports of large-scale transfers of assets abroad by figures linked to the regime.
- **Regardless of how events unfold, the international environment surrounding Iran is likely to remain highly unstable.** From the perspective of Iran's neighbours, both the collapse of the regime and an open conflict – entailing the risk of full-scale retaliation by Tehran (i.e. on a far greater scale than during the twelve-day war in 2025) – represent

serious and immediate threats. Developments involving Iran, together with the United States' ambivalent relations with its regional partners, will absorb Washington's attention in the near term. For the United States, the optimal scenario appears to be either forcing a profound revision of the regime or bringing about its collapse; the Venezuelan precedent suggests that this need not entail the immediate dismantling of the system. Methods to pursue this could include informal talks with representatives of the authorities in Tehran during the crisis, alongside a consistently applied policy of targeted sanctions (including measures aimed at Iran's financial operations). Nevertheless, key elements of pressure remain Israel's determination to bring about the fall of the Iranian regime and the military dimension, including the reinforcement of US forces in the region in recent days.