Iran's Protests

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In January 2026, the Islamic Republic of Iran faced a convergence of internal and external pressures that have pushed the regime into a state of extreme vulnerability. The ongoing nationwide protests demonstrate the persistence and yearning for freedom among the Iranian people while simultaneously exposing the government's inability to address fundamental economic, social, and political demands. Although previous uprisings were eventually suppressed, the current status quo is increasingly viewed as unsustainable due to a combination of hyperinflation, strategic military setbacks, and a looming leadership crisis. This brief examines the origins and trajectory of the current protests, their historical precedents, Iran's

shifting position in the regional political landscape, and the competing internal perspectives regarding Iran's future.

The current episode of protests began with merchants in Tehran's Grand Bazaar, who refused to open their stores in protest against high inflation, the drop in the value of the Iranian rial, and deteriorating economic conditions. Historically, the Grand Bazaar has been one of Iran's most important centres of power. As such, the merchants' strike signals not only economic desperation but also profound political discontent. The Iranian rial has experienced a steep decline, reaching approximately 1.4 million rials per dollar, while inflation rates have exceeded 50 percent generally and 70 percent for essential food items. These dire conditions ignited anger among many, successfully mobilising a broad socioeconomic coalition of merchants, students, labourers, the urban middle class and diverse ethnic minorities. What began in the Grand Bazaar rapidly spread from Tehran to major metropolitan areas and smaller provincial cities.

Beyond economic grievances, the movement has been fuelled by moral outrage following reports of security forces attacking hospitals in cities such as Ilam and Tehran. Whereas previous protests were often sparked by singular social or moral crises, the current protests reflect a deeper structural rupture where economic deprivation and political misrule are viewed as inseparable. As a result, protest slogans have swiftly evolved from demands for relief to overt calls for the overthrow of the regime.

A comparison of these events to previous Iranian uprisings reveals a significant evolution in the objectives and tactics of dissent. The 1999 student protests challenged specific governance failures, while the 2009 Green Movement framed its demands within the existing political system under the slogan "Where is my vote?". The more recent 2022 "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement emerged from a social and moral crisis regarding compulsory veiling and state violence against women, centred on personal autonomy and bodily dignity, and was distinguished by prominent female leadership.

The current protests, by contrast, combine social grievances with deep-seated economic anger and exhibit a more explicit revolutionary character. They are more geographically widespread in character, less focused on reformist outcomes, and more openly oriented toward regime change. Furthermore, the current protests have been described by some as exceptionally violent, reflecting a shift toward more aggressive tactics such as arson and direct confrontations with security forces in response to intensified state brutality.

The movement reflects a plurality of perspectives and slogans. Most importantly, many protesters' slogans are openly anti-regime, with calls for regime change and sometimes directly targeting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Protesters overtly calling for the downfall of the Islamic Republic through slogans such as "Death to Khamenei!" mark a decisive departure from previous reform-oriented movements.

Second, there is a notable rise in monarchist sentiment and even calls for the return of the exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi. This theme is particularly visible in Persian-speaking, Lor, and Caspian districts, with slogans such as "Javid Shah" (Long Live the Shah) and the pre-revolutionary Iranian flag with the Lion and Sun emblem at its centre appearing in major cities. While Reza Pahlavi has gained significant name recognition and media presence, he remains a controversial figure accused of sabotaging opposition unity. Critics view his movement as a potential return to authoritarianism under an ethnonationalist façade. In provinces with large marginalized ethnic populations, explicit anti-monarchist counter-slogans have emerged, including "Azerbaijan is honour, Pahlavi is dishonour" in Azeri-majority regions.

Several protests also feature a pronounced Iran-first nationalist sentiment, frequently voiced through criticism of the regime's foreign policy focus. The slogan "Na Ghaza, Na Lobnan, Janam fadaye Iran" ("Neither Gaza nor Lebanon; my life for Iran") reflects a common complaint that the Islamic Republic has placed regional interventions and geopolitical goals above domestic well-being and economic stability.

A significant hurdle for the protest movement remains the lack of a coherent alternative leadership or structure. While figures like the imprisoned Mostafa Tajzadeh or Reza Pahlavi are discussed as transitional leaders, the security services have been effective at arresting or exiling potential transformational figures, leaving an organised political transition difficult to envision. While the monarchist camp offers a comparatively clear alternative, republican and minority-rights opposition currents remain fragmented. Reza Pahlavi has articulated his vision centred on liberal-democratic principles, economic stability, reduced foreign entanglements and broader social freedoms, but scepticism about his intentions and legitimacy persists.

These competing visions reveal that a "negative coalition" of protesters has emerged. This entails that the movement is unified by a broad agreement on what must be removed, despite significant disagreements over the political project that should replace it. This plurality is best illustrated through the evolution of protest slogans, which reflect competing visions ranging from ethnonationalist monarchism to rights-based republicanism.

Despite these pressures, the Islamic Republic retains a formidable security and intelligence apparatus that has historically been masterful at maintaining unity and avoiding high-profile defections. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remains the regime's most critical pillar, functioning as a "military-industrial complex" with deep economic interests in the status quo. President Pezeshkian has called for dialogue and restraint, yet these gestures are largely seen as "cosmetic gimmicks" because the presidency lacks the power to enact fundamental changes. Meanwhile, former presidents like Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani have been marginalized or silenced.

Protests in Iran have caused concerns in the region's capitals, especially in the Gulf, which have viewed the protests in Iran as a threat to their national security as well. In the past, if the same scenario had occurred, Gulf states would have been pleased to see Iran attacked; however, calculations about regional security have changed, especially since the rapprochement brokered by Iraq, Oman, and China in 2023.

In the early days of the protests, the Gulf heavyweights (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar) kept a low profile, but when the protests got intense, contacts were made between the foreign ministers. On January 10, Oman's foreign minister, Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, met his counterpart in Iran. Although the readout of the meeting focused on regular focus points, one point that stood out was the importance of resolving issues through dialogue and diplomacy, indicating that Iran is ready for a dialogue with the United States.

On January 15, Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, held calls with his Iranian, Omani, and Qatari counterparts, urging for restraint and de-escalation to take place. The intensive diplomatic engagement played an integral role in overturning Trump's decision to attack Iran. For now, it appears that the Gulf states have been able to de-escalate the situation. Efforts by Gulf states to promote de-escalation should not be misconstrued as backing the Iranian regime, as they have been among the targets of Iran's destabilising regional actions. This stems from the fact that the relationship between Gulf states and Iran has considerably improved, which has added a measure of stability to the region.

There is fear that an attack on Iran will raise tensions in an already unstable region and trigger blowback similar to June 2025, when Iran attacked Qatar in response to U.S. strikes on its nuclear sites. While Gulf states believe the recent protests surpass past uprisings in intensity, they do not consider the current protests capable of unseating the leadership. Accordingly, the leadership is expected to remain, and Gulf states' backing of an attack would diminish prospects for engagement with Iran after the protest phase.

When calculating the threat to national security, one factor that has greatly influenced the Gulf's calculation is the threat from Israel. Israel's hegemonic behaviour in the region, attacking Lebanon, Qatar, Syria, and Yemen, has increased the liability of normalising the relationship for Gulf states, as Bahrain and the UAE are signatories to the Abraham Accords. There is a realisation emerging that the main threat to the region is from Israel rather than a weakened Iran. Since October 7, 2023, Iran's "Axis of Resistance" has significantly weakened, reducing its influence in the region. The Gulf states are worried that the fall of the region will unravel chaos in the area, creating a vacuum for Israel to take advantage of and consolidate strategic advantages, politically and militarily.

Another important regional country is Turkey, which has taken a similar approach to the Gulf. Ankara and Tehran have been regional rivals clashing

in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, but despite the hostile relationship, Turkey has called for preserving Iran's territorial integrity and stability. The Turkish government views the current protest as being on a smaller scale compared to the 2022 protest movement. Nevertheless, it remains concerned about the potential for a refugee influx from Iran, which could challenge border control capacities, intensify fiscal and humanitarian burdens, and complicate domestic political dynamics at a time of heightened public sensitivity toward migration and regional instability.

In response to the rising violence, U.S. President Donald Trump repeatedly issued stark warnings to Tehran. In his most forceful rhetoric, Trump declared that the United States was "locked and loaded" and would intervene if Iranian authorities violently suppressed or killed peaceful protesters. On his social media platform, Truth Social, he wrote that if Iran "shoots and violently kills peaceful protesters (...) the United States of America will come to their rescue", a statement that reflected his willingness to consider military options short of ground troops.

Amid this escalation, some news outlets reported that Trump had been briefed that Iranian leaders had halted executions and killings, leading him to moderate, or at least publicly soften, the immediacy of his threat of strikes. This shift in tone also appeared to ease global financial markets, with oil prices falling as investors perceived a lower likelihood of direct U.S.-Iran conflict.

Externally, Iran's weakened regional position and the cautious diplomacy of neighbouring states constrain the regime's ability to deflect internal pressures through foreign confrontation. At the same time, the resilience of the IRGC and the absence of unified opposition leadership limit the protesters' capacity to translate mobilisation into regime change.

As a result, Iran appears to be headed toward prolonged instability. The Islamic Republic may survive in the near term, but it will do so as a more brittle, constrained, and reactive state. This wave of protests should therefore be understood less as an endpoint than as an inflection point, one that narrows the regime's options and deepens uncertainty about Iran's political future.