



Woman in Tehran, July 2022. Photo: Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto

“Woman, Life, Freedom”: From Protest to Revolution?

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The tragic death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in mid-September 2022 ignited a fierce wave of protests throughout Iran, led primarily by young men and women born between 1990 and 2010, bearing the banner of the struggle for political and civilian freedoms. Unlike other protests that erupted in Iran in recent years, which focused on the demand for economic improvement, the 2022 protests display a clearly political and anti-establishment character, challenging the very existence of the Iranian system. The waves of protest that have become more frequent and extreme highlight the predicament facing the regime in the face of deep-seated processes in Iranian society. Thus far it appears that the regime is unable to prevent the ongoing protests, although the protesters also seem unable to destabilize the regime. Even if the Iranian authorities manage to suppress the protests, the displays of civil disobedience will likely continue. Over time they could erode the legitimacy of the regime even further, undermine its internal cohesiveness, and strengthen the discontent until it presents a significant challenge to the regime’s stability.

Keywords: Iran, society, politics, regime stability, riots, protest

Introduction

The tragic death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in mid-September 2022 ignited a fierce wave of protests all over Iran. Amini was arrested on September 13 while on a visit to Tehran with her family, on charges that she was not strictly complying with the mandatory veil obligation. During her detention at the police station, she collapsed, fell into a coma, and was moved to a hospital, where she died three days later. According to her family, Amini's death was the result of blows to her head while she was detained by the morality police. A short time after her death, the demonstrations began and spread quickly to large areas throughout Iran. The protestors shouted slogans condemning senior members of the regime, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, clashed with the law enforcement forces, and attacked public institutions. Some female demonstrators removed their head coverings and in some cases even burned them, in protest over the mandatory Islamic dress code. According to a human rights organization in Iran, as of October 20, at least 244 people were killed during the riots.

Although demonstrations are not an unusual occurrence in Iran, it is possible to point to a number of important differences between the recent wave and previous protests of the last two decades.

The failure of the Islamic Republic to achieve the central goals of the Islamic Revolution, and in particular to relieve the economic distress and provide political and civilian freedoms, has been the underlying factor in several waves of protest since 1979, including the student protests in 1999, the Green Movement in 2009, the popular protest in late 2017 and early 2018, and the gasoline riots in November 2019. In January 2020, thousands of angry citizens took to the streets to protest against the regime, following the shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger plane by the Revolutionary Guards and the

efforts by the regime to cover up the details of the incident. In the summer of 2021 a series of protests took place throughout the country due to growing shortages of water and electricity. May 2022 saw demonstrations over steep rises in the prices of flour, oil, eggs, chicken, and dairy products, amounting to increases of dozens or even hundreds of percent, following the government decision to cancel the official exchange rate designated for the import of basic food products and medicines. Shortly thereafter, protests broke out in southern Iran following the collapse of the Metropol building in Abadan on May 23, causing the deaths of dozens of people. The September 2022 protests are therefore only the latest in a series of demonstrations that have erupted with increasing frequency in recent years.

The 2022 Protests: What is Different?

Although demonstrations are not an unusual occurrence in Iran, it is possible to point to a number of important differences between the recent wave and previous protests of the last two decades. First, the size and geographical span of the current unrest is different, with protests spreading to over 100 cities throughout Iran. Most demonstrations have apparently brought out hundreds and even thousands of protestors. In comparison, the total number of demonstrators in the gasoline protests of November 2019 ranged, according to figures from the Iranian Interior Ministry, between 130,000 and 200,000 in over 100 locations all over the country. This number is higher than the numbers of those who participated in the protests of December 2017-January 2018, but considerably lower than the numbers for the 2009 protest (the so-called Green Revolution), which erupted following allegations that the results of the presidential elections had been rigged and brought hundreds of thousands of people out to the streets, and even more so in comparison to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which involved millions of people. By contrast, the geographical spread of the 2022 protest

was considerably broader compared to the 2009 disturbances, which were concentrated mainly in Tehran and a few other large cities. The scope of the riots in late 2017 and late 2019 was also particularly broad, although most of the demonstrations occurred in outlying provincial towns.

The socioeconomic profile of the demonstrators also differs from the past. While members of the [urban middle class](#) were prominent in the protests of 2009, most of the waves of protest in recent years, and particularly the gasoline protest in 2019, were led by people from lower social strata, who have conducted an ongoing struggle in light of their economic grievances. According to [data from the Intelligence Ministry](#) submitted to the Foreign and Security Committee of the Majlis, most of the detainees during those riots were unemployed, worked in low paid jobs, or lacked education. In contrast, the September 2022 protests were led mainly by young people from different social groups. According to [information from a security source](#) published in the conservative newspaper *Javan*, affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, 93 percent of the demonstrators were under the age of 25. The political commentator and regime critic Sadeq Zibakalam, [in an interview for the reformist daily Etemad](#), referred to the central role played in the protests by young people, women, and students from the urban middle class, and as evidence, cited the relative quiet during the disturbances in areas populated largely by poorer classes, including in Tehran itself. At the same time, other groups were also prominent in the protests: women from various social classes as well as ethnic or linguistic minorities, mainly Kurds and Baluchis, who expressed anti-establishment views but not necessarily ethnic separatism, with calls to end the discrimination and extend civil and political freedoms to all.

It is possible to identify a direct link between the leadership of protests by young men and women, primarily students, who have high

political awareness and wave the flag of the struggle for political and civil rights, and the agenda of the protests, which focuses on political-civil issues rather than economic demands. The 2009 protests had a clearly political character, although they focused on the claims by the reformist opposition of rigged election results (“Where is my vote?”). On the other hand, most waves of protest in recent years centered around the demand for economic improvements and social justice, although even here voices of a political and anti-establishment nature were heard. Leaving the weaker social classes outside the circle of protest (like leaving the urban middle class out of most of the waves of protest in recent years) makes it harder to bring together a broad national social coalition, which is an essential precondition for promoting political change in Iran.

Unlike the 2009 protests, which were led by leaders of the reformist movement, headed by Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, the 2022 protest (like the waves of protest in recent years) has no known organized leadership, although it is possible that the demonstrations in different cities have been organized by local activists. This is a common phenomenon worldwide in recent years, closely linked to the spread of social media, which facilitates large-scale organization without leadership. The absence of a united leadership could be an advantage in the early stages, since it makes it harder for the regime to arrest the leaders in an effort to suppress the demonstrations. However, the absence of leadership could also become a problem for the protest movement when it wishes to formulate clear objectives, promote defined demands, and present an alternative to the current political order.

As with previous waves of protest, here too the regime used harsh measures to suppress the demonstrations. The authorities reinforced the security forces in the central cities using all available means (including live fire in some cases) and have apparently detained thousands

of demonstrators. The internal security forces showed their efficiency at suppressing dissent, based on [lessons learned from previous protests](#). Most of the repression was carried out by the law enforcement forces and the paramilitary Basij militia, which is in charge of cracking down on anti-regime demonstrations. Apparently the authorities managed to disperse most centers of protests without significant intervention by the [Revolutionary Guards](#), who are summoned in the event of a serious threat to the regime's stability. The authorities also arrested human rights activists, celebrities who expressed support for the demonstrations, and leading political activists, including [Faezeh Hashemi](#), daughter of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was arrested on September 27 on charges of incitement and encouraging revolt. Moreover, [at least 40 journalists](#) have been arrested, including [Niloufar Hamed](#), a reporter for the reformist newspaper *Shargh*, who was the first to report the death of Amini in the hospital.

A short time after the disturbances erupted, the authorities began disrupting internet and cellular social networks used by the protestors to relay instructions, publicize demonstration dates in town centers, and distribute videos that document the protests. However, and unlike the gasoline protests in 2009, the authorities have refrained from disrupting social media platforms completely, and have limited themselves to slowing internet speeds, with some temporary blocks, mainly in the afternoon and evening hours, when most demonstrations take place. This apparent change in the policy [on social media obstruction](#) during the disturbances could reflect an attempt by the authorities to limit the cost of actions that disrupt the lives of ordinary citizens, cause severe economic damage to many people who depend on the internet for their income or education, and interfere with the banking system and business in general.

Main Insights from the 2022 Protests **Radicalization**

The ongoing failure of the regime to respond to public political, social, and economic demands, and its preference for suppressing dissent rather than tackling the grievances of the population have made the waves of protest in Iran more frequent and more radical. The protest movements over the last two decades have clearly demonstrated the willingness of Iranians to take to the streets with demands for a better future for themselves and their children. Nevertheless, the waves of protest in recent years appear unusual both in their frequency and in their radical nature, as shown by instances of violence and the anti-regime slogans. These protests are fed by the growing alienation of the population, particularly the younger generation, from the regime's institutions, by its oppressive character and breaches of human rights, as well as the economic crisis and the scale of corruption that has spread through the country's political and economic systems.

Although the September 2022 protests were triggered by the death of Amini, the demonstrators did not limit themselves to demands to remove the mandatory hijab, or to stop the activity of the morality police, but challenged the very legitimacy of clerical rule. This position is reflected in the slogan "woman, life, freedom," which became one of the most prominent slogans of the protests and relayed the desire for a change in the existing social and political order. The increasing radicalization in recent years is not surprising in view of the deepening public despair and frustration. Ever since the gasoline riots, prominent Iranian commentators, intellectuals, and academics have warned about this trend. For example, political commentator and journalist [Amir Mohebian](#) [warned](#) that the intervals between waves of protest were likely to become even shorter. He pointed to the growing frustration and anger among the public, and claimed that Iranian society was sitting on a "social bomb"

that could explode at any moment. He remarked that unlike the disturbances of 2009 that were led by a specific political movement, the recent demonstrations were spontaneous and popular. It was therefore harder to control them, which made them more dangerous.

The Generation Z Protest

The fact that the protest movement is led by Generation Z Iranians, roughly those born between 1990 and 2010, shows clearly the changes underway in Iranian society in recent decades, particularly among the youth, which lead to deeper rifts between young people and the regime and pose a growing challenge to the Islamic Republic. In recent years, there has been [strong criticism of this generation](#), including mockery and scorn for young people who prefer to spend their time in places of entertainment and shopping with no serious purpose. They have been compared unfavorably to the generation born in the 1950s and 1960s which led the Islamic Revolution, or those born in the 1980s and the early 1990s who led the 2009 protests. The striking inclination of the young urban middle class to engage in activities with no political-social purpose is cast by their critics as political escapism. Yet the active participation of young people in the recent protests shows that despite the growing attraction of individualism and escapism, they are no longer prepared to accept political and civil oppression by the authorities, limits on their freedom, and the deteriorating economic situation.

Since the outbreak of the protests, commentators and experts have pointed to the serious crisis facing young Iranians, which fuels their anger. [In an interview in Etemad](#), sociologist Mohammad Fazeli claimed that the youth are in despair and lack hope, especially when they compare their situation in Iran to other parts of the world. They feel they no longer have anything to lose and want radical change. In the last 43 years Iranian society has developed and is no longer willing to accept

the values introduced after the revolution. The attempt to impose on young people the post-revolutionary lifestyle is like trying to force them to wear what they wore as infants. Fazeli points out that the situation has changed since 1979: the population has grown from 36 million to 85 million, women are more educated and more active in the job market, and lifestyles are different. A society that has almost total access to the internet cannot live in the past, and women who have earned higher education and learned new ways of thinking cannot behave as before. The Iranian sociologist points to the widening dissatisfaction in many layers of society, whether because of economic distress or because of the lack of political freedoms.

[The Asr-e Iran website claimed](#) that the demonstrators represent the generation born in the first decade of the 21st century, who are very different from the previous generation. The latter were far more obedient to authority, whether out of education and respect or out of fear. However, the younger generation is no longer willing to obey automatically; they have to be persuaded, not dealt instructions and orders. They are more exposed to outside information from the internet and compare themselves to others, and therefore their expectations are higher. The authorities must engage in dialogue with them from a position of equality, with readiness to respect the wishes of the majority; otherwise, the regime will proceed from one crisis to another. The journalist and reformist activist Abbas Abdi also pointed to those born in the early 21st century, who are not willing to accept the official values of the Islamic Republic, as the instigators of the protests. [In a press interview](#), Abdi argued that Amini's death was the final blow that brought young men and women out to the streets. Years of humiliation by the morality police and degrading treatment of women by state institutions and in the allocation of resources have finally exhausted this sector's patience. Moreover, the authorities have provided no option for legal protest and people have no

other outlet except violent demonstrations. In the absence of the freedom to associate and freedom of expression that would allow citizens to express their demands in a legal manner, and without the possibility of bringing change through free political activity, their only recourse is to take to the streets.

The Struggle for Political and Civil Freedoms has not been Abandoned

In recent years, the increasingly severe economic and social crisis in Iran has pushed the fight for political and civil rights lower down on the public agenda. The citizens, including the urban middle class, have been focused on the daily struggle for survival, leaving little time to campaign for political freedoms. Iranian economist [Mousa Ghaninejad](#) referred to this situation when he argued that the economic improvements of the 1990s allowed the middle class to raise political demands and to realize them with the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997. However, citizens who are largely occupied with ways of improving their economic situation have little time to work for political freedoms.

The root causes lie in profound trends in Iranian society and in greater political oppression and enforcement of the Islamic dress code by the authorities.

The latest wave of protest proved that the struggle for political freedom has not been abandoned. Amini's death was the trigger for the demonstrations, but the root causes lie in profound trends in Iranian society and in greater [political oppression and enforcement of the Islamic dress code](#) by the authorities. In the summer of 2022 the security forces arrested senior reformist politician Mostafa Tajzadeh, who was accused of acting against national security and spreading lies in order to undermine public opinion. A few days later, three filmmakers, Mohammad Rasoulof, Mostafa

Al-e Ahmad, and Jafar Panahi, were arrested on charges of [spreading "propaganda against the system"](#) and breaches of public security. The increased political oppression is further evidence of the growing autocratization of the regime, particularly since the hardliners took control of all the main power centers following the election of President Ebrahim Raisi in June 2021.

At the same time, the Iranian authorities have strengthened the campaign for enforcing the Islamic dress code, particularly the mandatory veil (hijab). In early July, [President Raisi declared](#) that failure to observe the dress code amounted to "the organized promotion of moral corruption in Islamic society," and demanded that all government institutions firmly enforce the rules. In this, Raisi departed from former President Hassan Rouhani, who expressed support for limiting enforcement of the Islamic dress code, although he failed to bring about a practical change in the regime's policy due to opposition from the conservative religious establishment. Above all, increased enforcement of the dress code reflects recognition by the conservative establishment of looser observance of this restriction by the public, and especially the younger generation, as part of the accelerating processes of secularization in Iran. In late June 2022, in the southern city of Shiraz, the authorities arrested the organizers of a skateboarding event for young men and women, [who were filmed in a video that went viral](#), showing them mixing freely without the slightest attention to the Islamic dress code.

Women on the Front Line, the Hijab as a Symbol

The public campaign against forced veiling has in recent years become one of the most prominent expressions of the struggle of Iranian women for equal rights. Although over the years some policies regarding women have been reexamined in the light of political and other changes in society, women in Iran still suffer from legal institutional discrimination that affects

many areas of their lives, including criminal law, promotion in public and government service, laws of marriage, divorce, and child custody, and more. In recent decades there has been increased public awareness of this discrimination and a growing demand for changes in legislation, such as laws affecting women in public and political service, and the obligation to wear the hijab.

In the first days of the public protests that erupted in December 2017, Vida Movahedi stood up and uncovered her hair in a display of opposition to the forced veiling of women in the Islamic Republic. She quickly became a role model for dozens of women who took to the streets in the large towns and removed their veils. These protests reflected a further stage in the struggle against the compulsory hijab, which has not escaped the attention of senior officials and clerics, and has even caused the first cracks in the position of the religious establishment on the issue. In May 2015, Hojatoleslam Mohammad Reza Zaeri [expressed](#) highly unusual opposition to the mandatory imposition of veiling, and even claimed that the introduction of this policy after the revolution was a mistake that the authorities should acknowledge and rectify. He said that policy regarding the hijab should be based on the Islamic principle that “there is no coercion in religion,” and that if the regime would try to explain and encourage veiling, this would have a greater effect than compulsion.

The fight against the imposition of the Islamic dress code, and particularly the hijab, should be seen in the context of [increased public distance from religion](#). The extreme politicization of religion in Iran and the failure of the regime to solve the country’s severe economic and social problems have reduced support for the revolutionary regime in many sections of the public, and more importantly—weakened the attraction of religion in the eyes of the masses. The growing distance from religion is clearly evident in the lax observance of the Islamic dress code. [A study by the Majlis research center](#)

in the summer of 2018 found that 70 percent of women did not strictly observe veiling in accordance with the religious law; 10-15 percent of women were lax about veiling; and only 13 percent strictly observed the obligation. The survey also showed that most of the public was against government intervention in issues of veiling, and this opposition was even noticeable among women who were careful to wear the hijab. Only 40 percent of people questioned expressed support for government intervention in this matter. Amini’s death made veiling a central symbol of protest. Moreover, against a background of stricter enforcement of the Islamic dress code by the authorities, there has recently been [growing public criticism](#) of the violent conduct of the morality police, who have been filmed on various occasions detaining women and forcing them into police vans, and there have even been calls to dismantle the force.

The common element among all the movements for change in Iran has been the ability of groups with different and even opposing interests and ideology to unite around a shared symbol: the tobacco revolt (1891-1892), opposing concessions granted to Western companies to use Iran’s natural resources, in particular tobacco; the constitutional revolution (1905-1911), demanding a constitution; the opposition movement led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951-1953) around the demand to nationalize oil; the Islamic revolution led by Khomeini, in which a variety of groups united round the demand to change the regime.

The stormy responses to the death of Amini revived the debate around compulsory veiling. Former Majlis member Parvaneh Salahshouri, who has previously expressed strong criticism of regime policy, [said in a press interview](#) that wearing a veil is a private matter, and that citizens have the right to choose how to dress. She pointed out that no other country in the world, including Saudi Arabia, has compulsory veiling, and that the actions of the morality police simply create fear and hatred in the public

and do not enhance religious observance or the regime.

Conclusion: Changing Society, Trapped Regime

In an interview on an Iranian news website, the political commentator Fouad Sadeghi said recently that the latest protests gave the regime a final chance to respond to the public's demands. He warned that if this chance is missed, there will be no other way to control the society. However, it is highly doubtful whether the regime has the ability to change its course in a way that will satisfy public expectations. This is particularly true in view of the advanced age of 83-year-old Khamenei and numerous reports of his declining health.

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In-depth social trends and severe pressures, both domestic and foreign, are a serious challenge to the Iranian regime, which could over time endanger its position and even its stability. While far-reaching changes are underway in society and the demand for change is getting stronger, the regime continues to cling steadfastly to its positions in an effort to preserve itself by all the means at its disposal. The leaders are aware of the processes of change and of the widening gap between the public and regime institutions, and recognize the need to find a response, but there are differences of opinion at the highest level over the necessary solutions.

The Iranian regime has already shown some willingness toward limited flexibility, for example over the entry of women to football stadiums and the use of satellite dishes. They recently permitted the (limited) entry of [women to football matches](#), and not only—in deference to the demand of the international football

association—to international matches, but also to premier league games. This represented a definite retreat from the policy of discrimination against women. In addition, the 1995 law forbidding the use of satellite dishes to receive broadcasts from abroad is not strictly enforced. However, it seems that the regime is in a trap. Responding to public demands requires deviation from the revolutionary ideals and the introduction of changes in certain areas, however limited, such as restricting Islamic enforcement and expanding some individual freedoms. Such deviation is perceived by the regime as a show of weakness, inviting stronger demands for further concessions over civil and political freedoms that will endanger its stability. The Iranian authorities are well aware of the lessons of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, whose attempts to dispel the political tensions in the late 1970s by means of limited liberalization, including the release of political prisoners and extending the freedom of the press, only oiled the wheels of the revolution. Moreover, their readiness to adapt revolutionary ideology to the changing reality is even more limited today than in the past, in view of the absolute control of the hardliners of all centers of power. Former President Rouhani was well aware of the expectations and the need for the promotion, albeit gradual, of reforms to narrow the growing gap between the regime and the public, particularly the younger generation. On the other hand, Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Raisi are steadfast in their opposition to any change, and prefer to place the blame for the situation on Iran's foreign enemies who seek for regime change.

In spite of the ongoing protests, at this stage there are no signs of any willingness on the part of the regime to adapt the revolutionary model to the changing reality, specifically on issues such as veiling, which is one of the most prominent symbols of the Islamic Republic. On the contrary, high ranking clerics continue to declare that the regime attaches great importance to the continued policy. For

example, [Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi](#), in a message published following the outbreak of disturbances, stressed the right of citizens to criticize the conduct of the authorities, and stated that the authorities must listen to this criticism and even make changes, if necessary. However, he stressed that wearing the hijab is an important and essential religious duty that serves the interests of society, although it should be enforced in an appropriate way. The Iranian President has also so far given no indication of intent to change the policy. [In a television interview](#) on September 28, Raisi again accused the enemies of Iran, led by the United States, of encouraging violence in the country in an effort to undermine its national security. He said it was important to distinguish between legitimate protest and “riots” that endanger security and the lives and property of citizens. Raisi did not rule out public dialogue on the subject of reforms and methods of implementing the law, but insisted that such dialogue could not take place in the streets.

In this situation, the authorities are left with no choice but to continue relying on their effective means of suppression, based on an assessment that the balance of power between the regime and the protest movements was still in its favor. Indeed, notwithstanding the difficulties, the regime continues to retain some advantages that enable it to overcome challenges. First, it wields serious and effective tools for quashing unrest; second, it still enjoys considerable support from the security and law enforcement mechanisms, led by the loyal Revolutionary Guards who depend on it. There could be a turning point if it emerges that some members of the security forces refuse to participate in the suppression of dissent. Moreover, at this stage the ruling political elite has managed to maintain internal unity, in spite of [political disagreements](#). Unlike the Shah’s elite allies, who maintained close ties with the West and could find political and economic refuge outside Iran, the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic has no choice but to fight for

the regime. Third, the regime still enjoys active or passive support from various groups in the population, whether for ideological reasons or for reasons of economic dependence.

Moreover, it appears that part of the Iranian public is still concerned about the possibility of a revolutionary change that would lead to political chaos. Such chaos could be exploited by the Revolutionary Guards or by foreign elements, led by the United States, to impose on Iran a political order that does not necessarily coincide with the wish of the people. Many Iranians believe that an alternative to the present regime could be even worse, for example if the Revolutionary Guards take control of centers of power in the event of a collapse of the current political system. The Iranian experience of the Arab Spring in the last decade reinforced their sense that stability and gradual change are sometimes better than political upheavals whose outcomes cannot be anticipated.

In addition to the strengths preserved by the regime, some weaknesses can be identified in the protest movement. First, it has still not managed to recruit a critical mass of demonstrators. Most of the demonstrations are fairly limited, with hundreds or a few thousand people at most. Second, most demonstrations are local. There is no national leadership, and in most cases there are no signs of coordination or even cooperation between the various participating groups. Although [some workers’ representatives have joined the protests](#), such as contract workers in the oil industry or bazaar traders, it is difficult to coordinate the different centers of protest all over the country or shut down essential economic sectors such as the oil industry, as happened during the Islamic Revolution. Third, there is an ongoing difficulty of forming a nationwide social coalition, which is an essential condition for the promotion of political changes in Iran.

At this stage it looks as if the regime is unable to prevent the continuation of the protests, but at the same time the protestors do not

have the ability to undermine the foundations of the regime. The authorities' preference for suppression rather than response to public demands will continue to increase public anger and frustration, widening the already large rift between the public, particularly the younger generation, and the regime and its institutions, leading to more frequent, more violent, and more extreme protests. Even if the authorities are able to suppress the current wave of protest, further displays of civil disobedience can be expected, such as [women removing the hijab in public](#), [strikes by storekeepers](#), [strikes by university lecturers and students](#), [anti-regime slogans](#) shouted from balconies and windows, [drivers honking their car horns](#) in support of the protests, and [anti-establishment graffiti](#) on public walls. Even if such displays of opposition do not pose an immediate or serious threat to the regime, in the absence of practical solutions to public demands and the continuing disregard for deep-seated demographic, social, and cultural processes, Iran could spill over into a situation of endless revolt, which would undoubtedly threaten the survival of the regime.

The growing internal challenge to the Iranian regime could open new opportunities for the West to promote political change in Iran. In 2009 the United States administration led by Barack Obama refrained from giving practical support to the demonstrations, partly to avoid branding the reformist opposition as US collaborators. In any case, it is doubtful if such American intervention could produce different outcomes, since the protest movement

and its leaders at that time were not aiming for total political revolution. This is in contrast to the current movement, which to a large extent seeks to undermine the existing political order. However, it is doubtful whether active Western intervention on behalf of the demonstrators at this time would make a decisive contribution to a change in the balance of powers in their favor. The chances of total political change in Iran appear fairly remote without the formation of a nationwide social coalition, together with a united leadership and a refusal by some of the security forces to participate in the suppression of protests. These depend largely on developments in Iran itself, where the West has little influence. At most, the West can continue its efforts to promote initiatives that will give Iranian citizens free access to the flow of information, while expressing public support for the demonstrators that will encourage them to continue their struggle.

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