

Trend Analysis and Assessment Report

CLASSIFICATION LEVEL: DECLASSIFIED AND APPROVED FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION

Report Topic: Short-Term Assessment of the Civil Unrest in Iran

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Iran Regime Unlikely to Collapse Despite Heated Protests

Key Takeaway

Since the death of 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran’s Guidance Patrol – also known as the “morality police” – on September 16, 2022, Iran has seen large-scale protests across the country. The protests have largely been confined to major cities with large populations of young, college-aged Iranians, but have also seen widespread support in areas traditionally hostile to the Iranian regime such as Iran’s northwestern provinces, where the majority of Iran’s Kurdish population lives. The Iranian regime has responded by initiating rolling internet blackouts across Iran in order to disrupt communications and by deploying elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Iran’s cities in support of Iranian police forces. Iranian authorities have blamed the unrest on Western outside influence – primarily by the US and Israel— and have initiated a brutal crackdown against protesters that have resulted in hundreds of deaths. Western powers have responded by initiating sanctions against Iranian government officials and organizations.

Trend Pattern

Recent events suggest that the protests are larger than any previous Iranian civil unrest incidents –with the exception of the 2009 Green Movement protests— and are being further fueled by the brutal crackdowns being conducted by the Iranian regime.

- On October 2, Iranian police clashed with protesting students at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran. Approximately 200 students gathered at the university and chanted slogans against Iran’s clerical authorities, which led to the arrest of several students. Many were reportedly trapped for several hours prior to being arrested as security forces used tear gas and paintballs to prevent exits and plain-clothes officers surrounded the university. Videos surfaced on social media showing people trying to escape through a car park while being chased by security forces, students running away with gunshots ringing in the background, and a hooded detained protestor being escorted away. Irna, the state news agency, reported that after Science Minister Mohammad Ali Zulfigol arrived to speak with the students and security forces and calm was restored [01].
- Hundreds of protestors assembled at Khorramabad cemetery in response to the body of 16-year-old protestor Nika Shakarami being stolen by Iranian authorities and buried in the Veysian village of Iran. Nika Shakarami went missing after texting a friend that she was being chased by security forces in Tehran. The Iranian authorities denied allegations that she was beaten to death. State-affiliated media reported that her body was found in the courtyard of a home after falling from the roof of a neighboring house. An investigation into her cause of death has been initiated. Shakarami’s family transferred her body to Khorramabad where Iranian forces secretly buried her [02].
- On October 8, Iran’s state television broadcast was briefly interrupted. Footage of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meeting state officials was replaced with images of Mahsa Amini, slain protestors, and an image showing the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in crosshairs and in flames. The messages “join us and rise up” and “the blood of our youth is dripping off your paws” were also displayed with the images. An anti-government song, a common chant of the protestors, played in the background during the hack [03].

- On October 10, around 1,000 oil workers at the Bushehr and Damavand petrochemical plants joined protestors and called for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini's downfall. The oil workers blocked access to roads, set fire to some facilities at petrochemical plants, and chanted revolutionary slogans. Striking workers were reported in several cities across the country in recent days [04]. The Council of Oil Contract Workers alleged that as many as 4,000 oil workers participated in the strikes, but that number is unconfirmed. Iran has not commented on oil workers joining the protests, but the semi-official Tasnim news agency described the incident as a salary dispute [05].

As the protests continue, events suggest that Iran will continue to blame the United States for allegedly instigating and supporting the protests, particularly as Western powers enact more and more sanctions.

- Canada and the United States imposed sanctions on Iranian officials involved in the crackdown on protestors. On September 26, the United States sanctioned Iran's morality police and President Joe Biden said on October 3 that the U.S. will look to impose "further costs" on the people responsible for violence against Iranian protestors [06].

- On October 3, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, made his first public statement since the death of Mahsa Amini in the custody of the Iranian morality police. In his statement, he condemned the protests and riots and said they were "planned" and that "these schemes were designed by the U.S.". Khamenei also mentioned that foreign powers did not want to see an independent and strong Iran [07].

- On October 4, the EU announced that it was also looking to impose sanctions on Iranian officials involved in the crackdown on protestors. France's foreign minister said on Tuesday that the European Union was looking to impose asset freezes and travel bans on a number of Iranian officials involved in the crackdown on protestors [08].

- On October 22, the Iranian government announced it would take legal action against the United States for its support of the ongoing protests in the country. Iran characterized this support as "direct involvement", planning, and organization and announced that the Ministry of Justice was to file a lawsuit to investigate the damages and meddling inflicted by the United States' involvement in the unrest [09].

Assessment

The Iranian regime is almost certainly going to continue its brutal crackdown of the anti-government protests, as it has with preceding incidents. Iran has blocked large segments of its population from accessing the internet in order to disrupt the protestors' abilities to communicate with each other and the world. The majority of the first-hand reports and images of the government's actions are being revealed on social media, which the Iranian regime has less control over. Western-imposed sanctions are going to have a negative impact on an economy already damaged by United States sanctions.

We assess with high confidence that the reports of the brutal government crackdown, combined with the imposition of Western sanctions is likely to further fuel the protests, particularly in major cities and areas where the Iranian regime is unpopular. However, we assess with moderate confidence that it is likely the Iranian regime will eventually succeed in suppressing the protests and stabilize the situation.

Broader Implications

The majority of the protestors are young university students who have grown up in an economy weakened by United States sanctions and are less inclined to think favorably of the Iranian regime compared to the older, more conservative generations. This is not the first time the Iranian regime has dealt with student protestors. Its usual methods of deploying the IRGC and severing Internet access have proven somewhat effective, but social media has provided the protestors with an outlet that the Iranian regime struggles to control. The strike by oil workers is a

significant development, as it was the mass strike of oil workers during the 1979 Islamic Revolution that helped to topple the Iranian Shah. The imposition of additional sanctions on top of the United States imposed sanctions is another weakness for the Iranian regime as the economic damage could potentially sway the older segments of the Iranian population against the government.

Indicators

We will be looking for any indications of unsustainable damage to the Iranian economy. This could be an increased number of strikes in industries critical to the Iranian economy – such as the oil sector – or an increase in the number of older, working-age Iranians supporting the protesters. Additionally, we will be looking for changes in the dialogue of Iranian government officials and organizations. A softening of dialogue regarding the protests may indicate that the Iranian regime may be worried enough to potentially give in to some of the protesters' demands.

Sources

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