



PRIMER: Iran Protests

January 2026

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT:

- Over the last month, there have been approximately 900 protests across Iran, with thousands of protesters reportedly killed by security forces. Estimates of deaths far exceed those killed by the regime in the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom protests.
- The protests started over economic complaints but are now focused on general dissatisfaction with the Iranian regime and its repression of the Iranian people.
- The regime has implemented an internet blackout to prevent images and videos from circulating, which protesters are attempting to circumvent with mixed results by using Starlink.
- President Trump's decisions to take decisive action to destroy Iran's nuclear program in Operation Midnight Hammer and effectively enforce sanctions helped weaken the Iranian regime.
- **Ending the Islamic Republic of Iran benefits American interests** — for 45 years, Iran's current regime has funded terrorist groups, collaborated with other American adversaries like the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Russia, brutalized its own people, taken Americans hostage, and plotted to assassinate Americans on U.S. soil.
- President Trump's declarations of support for the protesters have been welcomed in Iran, and it is important the United States follow through on President Trump's pledge to help protesters if Iranian security forces continue to kill protesters.

BACKGROUND:

The Islamic Republic of Iran stands as the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East and a critical adversary. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and his regime view the United States as "The Great Satan," and the Iranian regime has made a concerted effort to pursue policies designed to hurt the United States, including attempting to build nuclear weapons and funding terrorist proxies like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis to attack American personnel and assets. The regime also shares collaborative relationships with other American adversaries: the Islamic Republic has supplied Russia with thousands of Iranian-designed Shahed drones per month in Russia's war against Ukraine while simultaneously selling 90 percent of its oil to China at discounted prices, for which the regime receives cash and other material support. Iran has also planned to assassinate Americans — including President Donald Trump, Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Many of these efforts have been tied to Iranian regime partners in Venezuela.

In 2025, decisive attacks by the United States and Israel weakened the Iranian regime considerably. After Israel's Operation Rising Lion significantly degraded Iranian air defenses and took out key parts of Iran's military command structure, President Trump launched Operation Midnight Hammer targeting Iran's nuclear weapons program and dealing it a devastating blow. Additionally, in response to the Iranian regime's continued belligerence, President Trump reinstated a maximum pressure sanctions campaign against Iranian oil and other key exports, which has proven effective in constricting the Iranian economy.

The Iranian regime also is one of the most repressive in the world, significantly restricting fundamental freedoms like religious liberty and using brutal tactics to suppress internal dissent. In 2019, demonstrations initially sparked by rising fuel prices — and later expanding into broader anti-regime protests across more than 200 cities — led

authorities in Tehran to kill approximately 1,500 protesters. Further, in 2022, public outrage against the Islamic Republic's strict female dress codes intensified after the regime beat and killed 22-year-old Mahsa Amini (for the "crime" of not covering her hair fully), triggering even more anti-regime protests in which over 500 people were killed and 22,000 were detained by the government.

THE CURRENT PROTESTS

Most recently, Iran's dire economic situation, caused in part by effective U.S. sanctions but mostly by regime corruption, mismanagement, and expenditures on terrorist proxies and nuclear weapons development, has sparked internal unrest. In January, the Iranian rial hit a record low of 1.43 million against the U.S. dollar, and inflation increased to between 40 and 50 percent. This economic collapse especially affected the merchant class located in Tehran's Grand Bazaar — a hub for change during the Iranian Revolution in 1979 which has historically abstained from protesting the current regime — pushing many shopkeepers to strike against the regime's economic policy. Truck drivers, students, upper-middle class families, and average Iranian citizens also joined the strikes, forming a broad coalition of Iranians extraordinarily dissatisfied with regime policy. Combined with a water crisis affecting 90 million people and deeply rooted public resentment against the regime for cracking down on past protests, these strikes have evolved into all-out protests decrying the illegitimacy of the Islamic Republic and calling for regime change. In the past month, there have been approximately 900 protests across the country, spanning 186 cities and towns in all 31 of Iran's provinces.

In response, the Iranian regime is cracking down on the protests. As the protests continue gaining momentum across Iran and generating support from outside the country, the regime has implemented an internet blackout to prevent images and videos being circulated. Protesters are attempting to circumvent this blackout by using Elon Musk's Starlink service to share information about the scale of the protests and the growing brutality of the Iranian regime's response. As a result, security forces have made a concerted effort to target Starlink users and jam electronic signals to keep information from getting out of Iran. The Iranian regime is using surveillance systems supplied by the Chinese firm Tiandy to monitor, identify, and track protesters, and according to recent reports, hundreds, and more likely thousands, of protesters have been killed in the past few weeks.

On a number of occasions, President Trump has posted messages on Truth Social praising Iranians' "enthusiasm to overturn that regime," threatening to "hit the regime very hard" if protesters are killed, and warning against the brutality of the Iranian regime. This is not the first time that the President has expressed solidarity with the Iranian people; in 2020, President Trump's tweet to the Iranian people in Farsi saying "your courage is inspiring" is the most-liked tweet in the history of Persian Twitter (now X).

ACTION ITEMS:

Maintain vocal support for the Iranian people: The success of the protests hinges in part on whether the United States is willing to follow through on promises that we "stand ready to help" the Iranian people. Accordingly, lawmakers must continue to spotlight the bravery of the protesters and the brutality of the regime. Without American rhetorical or material support in the face of Iranian repression, the protesters' remarkable momentum may stall.

Provide cyber support to circumvent and end Iranian-imposed blackouts: Islamic Republic-induced internet blackouts significantly weaken the ability of protesters to coordinate and mobilize against the regime while also restricting how Americans track the protests. First, the United States must try to disable the systems that the government in Tehran is using to jam internet and phones through cyber operations. Second, America must continue to expand access to Starlink, virtual private networks (VPNs), and other modes of secure communication for the protesters. Third, the United States must sanction companies enabling the regime's brutal repression, including the Chinese firm Tiandy.



Track and confiscate the “Ghost Fleet”: The United States has successfully seized several tankers carrying illicit Venezuelan oil following Operation Absolute Resolve in Venezuela. The Islamic Republic has its own shadow fleet that circumvents U.S. sanctions by transporting Iranian oil to China. Expanding our Ghost Fleet operations to Iranian ships allows the United States to inflict more economic pressure on the regime by denying the government revenue that it can use to pay its security forces and its terrorist proxies.

If Iran continues killing protesters, execute limited strikes targeting Iran’s repression apparatus and ballistic missile program: With President Trump rightly recognizing that the brutality of the Iranian regime needs to be addressed and stating the United States will take action to stop the killing of protesters, it is critical the United States follows through on President Trump’s threat as a means of maintaining effective deterrence not just in the Middle East, but globally. The United States should never bluff. These strikes should be targeted, focusing specifically on neutralizing the security forces leading the repression and on Iran’s ballistic missile program to reduce its capability to launch further attacks against American military assets or our allies in the region.