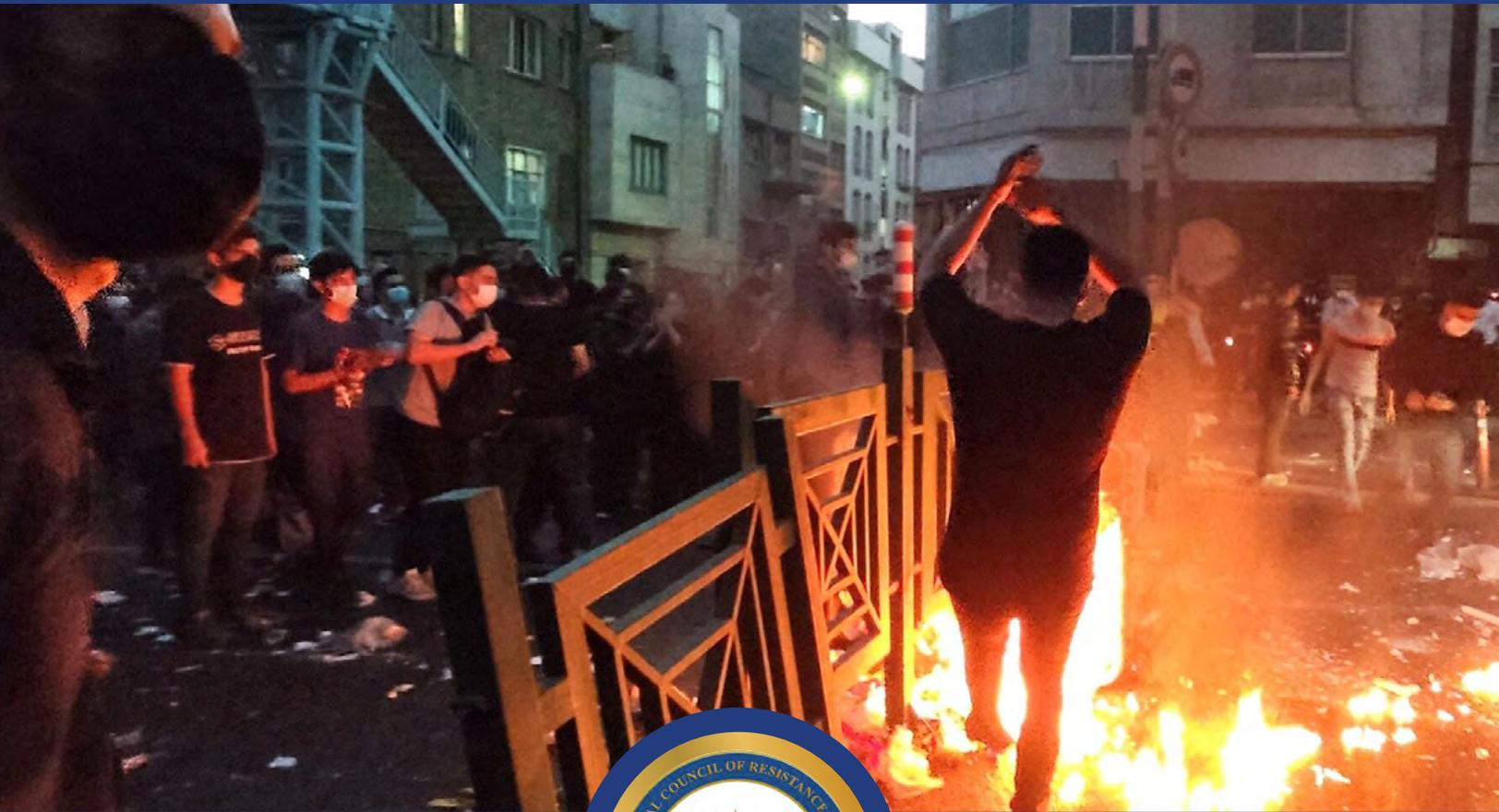


# IRAN: A Revolution in the Making

*September 2022 uprising: roots, prospects, and policy imperatives*

## First 40 days

October 28, 2022



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF RESISTANCE OF IRAN  
U.S. REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE (NCRI-US)

**IRAN: A Revolution in the Making**

*September 2022 uprising: roots, prospects, and policy imperatives*

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First published in 2022

by National Council of Resistance of Iran — U.S. Representative Office (NCRI-US), 1747 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Suite 1125, Washington, DC 20006

ISBN-10 (e-book): 1-944942-56-4

ISBN-13 (e-book): 978-1-944942-56-4

Library of Congress Control Number:

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

National Council of Resistance of Iran — U.S. Representative Office.

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*September 2022 uprising: roots, prospects, and policy imperatives*

1. Iran. 2.Revolution. 3.Protests. 4.Democracy. 5.Human Rights.

First Edition: October 2022

*Printed in the United States of America*

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*These materials are being distributed by the National Council of Resistance of Iran-U.S. Representative Office. Additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.*

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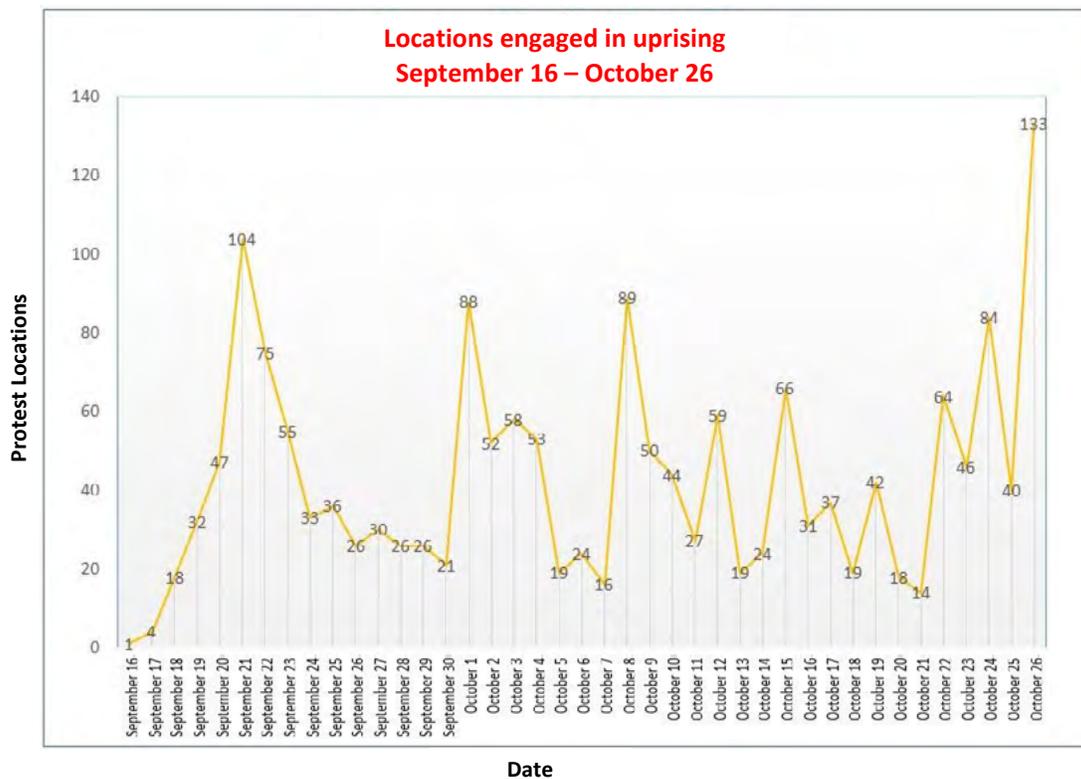
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# Overview



- ▶ On September 16, 2022, a new wave of anti-regime protests broke out in Iran. Now into its second month, the continuity of the unrest has far outlasted all previous uprisings since 2017.
- ▶ Some 203 cities, in all 31 provinces, many key universities and high schools have engaged in the uprising.
- ▶ Very different from past uprisings, the protests are spearheaded by women and youth, and supported by all of the Iranian population,
- ▶ Sparked by the regime's inhuman treatment of women evident in the murder of 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa (Zhina) Amini, the protests rapidly transformed into a universal call for regime change and a democratic revolution.
- ▶ Fatalities and casualties
  - ✔ The estimated death toll is over 450; MEK has identified 280 protesters killed.
  - ✔ At least 32 teenagers under 18 have been killed by the regime.
  - ✔ Estimated detentions exceed 25,000.
  - ✔ The regime has announced that over 20 of its repressive forces, uniformed and plainclothes, have been killed in the clashes and hundreds injured, as the people defend themselves against brutal attacks.
- ▶ Goals / slogans – The message of the protesters to the world is impressively unified all over Iran and is focused on the overthrow of the regime. The most universal slogan is “Death to dictator, death to Khamenei.” Other dominant slogans all target the heart of the regime, seeking to unseat the Ayatollahs, while rejecting the past single-party rule of the Shah, as in the chant “Death to the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Leader [Khamenei].”
- ▶ What is happening in Iran has all the hallmarks of a revolution in the making.



- ▶ All the regime’s efforts to crack down or deviate attention have failed; the uprising is expanding and broadening.
- ▶ No matter what the regime does, and despite all the possible ups and downs or even temporary pauses, the regime can never return to its pre-September 2022 status; thus Tehran is on a trajectory to fall with little chance to survive.
- ▶ Those leading the fight to confront the repressive forces on the ground are setting the pace and leading the way in the streets, as the nation is increasingly unified behind chants of “Death to Khamenei.”
- ▶ The protests are increasingly organized and on message, leaving little room for Tehran’s plots to derail the movement.
- ▶ Over forty years of organized resistance against the regime, including in Iranian prisons, and at a very high price, including the 1988 massacre of thousands of political prisoners, have created a culture of defiance, based on which the new generation is now operating in the streets.
- ▶ The 40<sup>th</sup> day of the start of uprising displayed utter failure of the repressive forces and the IRGC to prevent the expansion of the protests, making it increasingly more difficult to do so in the future.
- ▶ Recognition by the United States and the international community of the right of the Iranian people to self-defense and to overthrow the regime is long overdue.

# I. September 2022 Uprising



## A. Key Developments

- ▶ On September 16, 2022, a 22-year-old girl Mahsa Amini dies in custody due to blows to her head by the so-called “Morality Police.” She was arrested on September 13, and hours later ends up in the hospital in coma, from which she never recovered. Protests targeting Ali Khamenei erupt in front of Kasra Hospital in Tehran, where Mahsa died.
- ▶ On September 17, Mahsa is buried in Aichi cemetery in her Kurdish hometown, Saqqez among chants of “Death to Khamenei.” At the same time protests break out in the provincial capital city of Sanandaj in the Iranian Kurdistan and extends to other Kurdish towns of Divandarreh, Baneh and Bijar, then to other provinces. Protests soon engulf Iran’s all 31 provinces.
- ▶ University students joined by high school students demonstrate in campuses and call for the regime’s downfall.
- ▶ The regime’s brutal crackdown on university students backfires and more people join the protests.
- ▶ Iranian athletes, performers, writers, and intellectuals support the protests and condemn the regime.
- ▶ Tens of thousands of Iranians outside Iran demonstrate in major capitals and cities in support of the protests.
- ▶ High schoolers and middle schoolers join the protest as the scope and geographic expanse of the uprising expands to all social sectors across Iran.
- ▶ Oil and gas workers, bazaar merchants, and the business sector join in strikes and protests.
- ▶ The regime’s bid to shock society and intimidate protesters by carrying out a massacre of worshippers in Zahedan backfires. A huge demonstration un-

folds there, with protesters occupying a police station and torching several IRGC centers.

- ▶ The regime's counter demonstrations fail miserably. Particularly, its attempt to show support among school children backfires in Ardabil, where dozens of schoolgirls rebel and shout "Death to Khamenei" in what was supposed to be a pro-regime gathering. They are severely beaten by security forces, prompting a ferocious protest by the people of Ardabil the next day calling for the regime's downfall.
- ▶ Protests and shouts of "Death to Khamenei" in prisons, especially in Evin, Gohardasht and Rasht, astound Iran and shock the regime, whose security forces carry out an atrocity, killing many prisoners in Evin. Iranians lined highways to Evin for kilometers to break down the doors of Iran's Bastille, indicating the extent to which the regime had lost this battle.
- ▶ On the 40<sup>th</sup> day of the murder of Mahsa Amini, despite threats and road closures, tens of thousands of people walk to her memorial event in the cemetery of her hometown, Saqqez, where chants of "Death to dictator" were widely heard. Simultaneously, protests broke out in 70 cities including all major cities and the capital Tehran, which itself witnessed 55 locations waging protests simultaneously. In addition, 61 universities, and 35 bazars were involved in the protests. The next day, protests maintained its high momentum on the 40<sup>th</sup> day of the death of 17-year-old Nika Shakarami in the city of Khorramabad in Lorestan Province, which were joined with dozens of cities and chants of "death to the Dictator," and "Down with Khamenei."
- ▶ On Day 40 of the protests, killing of innocent visitors at Shahcheragh shrine in Shiraz, first blamed on ISIS by the regime, ignites additional anger by the people as a vast majority of the population hold the regime responsible for this heinous crime, intended to discredit the protests. Many see this crime as a sign of desperation. Parallels were drawn with bomb explosion in the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad in June 1994, which was first blamed on the MEK before the plot was exposed during internal regime factional fighting.
- ▶ The 40<sup>th</sup> day of the start of uprising displayed utter failure of the repressive forces and the IRGC to prevent the expansion of the protests, making it increasingly more difficult to do so in the future.

## B. Top Ten characteristics

### 1. Continuity

- a) Lasting beyond 40 days, unprecedented in compare to uprisings since 2009.
- b) Major milestones in the last 40 days:
  - ▶ From day one, people targeted Khamenei, called for regime change.
  - ▶ The uprising has engulfed the whole of Iran, stretching thin and exhausting the regime's security forces.
  - ▶ Continuity despite mass arrests, killings in the street and in custody.

### 2. Focus on regime change

- a) Clarity of Slogans
  - ▶ Death to dictator, death to Khamenei
  - ▶ We will fight, we will die, we will take back our Iran
  - ▶ Death to the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Leader (Khamenei)
  - ▶ Don't call it a protest; it is a revolution
  - ▶ This is the year of sacrifice, Syed Ali (Khamenei) is going to fall
  - ▶ From Kurdistan to Tehran, my life is for Iran
  - ▶ From Zahedan to Tehran, my life is for Iran
  - ▶ Freedom, freedom, freedom
  - ▶ Canons, tanks, machine guns are no longer effective;
  - ▶ Poverty, corruption, injustice; death to this tyranny
- b) How slogans have unified the population
  - ▶ *National unity key to the movement*

The slogan "From Baluchistan to Kurdistan, I give my life for Iran" has signified the unity of the protesters from various ethnic and social backgrounds.

▶ *Community support*

Many instances of people leaving the doors of their houses and shops open in protest areas to allow protesters to take refuge, of doctors and nurses attending to the injured in their homes, and of ordinary citizens intervening and fending off repressive forces are posted on social media.

▶ *Medical support*

Doctors and nurses care for injured protesters in their homes as hospitals are swept by IRGC forces to arrest protesters.

### **3. Khamenei the main target**

The people realize that Khamenei represents the regime as a whole and target him for regime change. The IRGC and the Basij, as well as the State Security Forces are all tools to keep the Velayat-e Faqih regime in power, headed by Khamenei.

### **4. Active engagement by all sectors of society**

Not only are the protesters in the street -- the students in universities, high schools, and middle schools and their families -- all involved in one way or another in the uprising, but the general populace also supports them overwhelmingly in cars honking and houses with open doors during demonstrations.

From day one, these uprisings transcended all ethnic, religious, economic and social boundaries. Neighborhoods in Tehran and cities representing all social and economic classes have been key in the protests. A popular slogan by protesters across Iran has been "From Kurdistan to Tehran, my life is for Iran," and "From Zahedan to Tehran, my life is for Iran."

Blue-collar workers, farmers, and other sectors of society have been involved in the protests. They are joined by teachers, physicians, nurses, and many in the bazaar, which used to be a stronghold of the Ayatollahs.

### **5. Organized and focused**

a) *Role of Resistance Units*

- ▶ Resistance Units have for six years spread a culture of defiance in the face of the religious dictatorship by torching regime symbols, posters, statues, IRGC and Basij centers, and pursuing regime change.

- ▶ On the anniversary of Khomeini’s death, Resistance Units in Iran, carried out extensive cyber operations during which they controlled and destroyed 5,138 CCTV cameras installed in Khomeini’s mausoleum, government centers, and various other institutions.<sup>1</sup> In another act of cyber resistance in early 2022, they managed to take control and broadcast messages by Maryam Rajavi on multiple state television channels,<sup>2</sup> which had an enormous impact on the general population that had not experienced such interruptions on state television for the past 43 years.
- ▶ Now protesters and the general public have taken up the mantle. A network of organized Resistance Units affiliated with the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) is helping to guide, support, and direct the protests and provide a mainstay of political guidance and stability for the movement and its continuation.
- ▶ These units have gradually increased in number, size, geographic expanse, and operational capabilities. They have played their role during the 2017 and 2019 uprisings and are playing their role in the 2022 uprisings.
- ▶ Hundreds of members of Resistance Units, have been arrested in the past few years.<sup>3</sup> Some have been subjected to severe torture, sentenced to long-term prison and some have even been sentenced to execution. But the regime has not been able to stem the tide of unit formation and expansion. To the contrary, the trend of Resistance Units forming and expanding has steadily increased throughout the country, despite arrests.
- ▶ In July 2021, about 1,000 Resistance units sent video messages of solidarity with the NCRI’s online Free Iran World Summit. In July 2022, this number had increased to 5,000, confirming a 500% growth despite the regime’s brutal reign of terror and repression.

b) *Tehran acknowledges the organized nature of the protests*

- ▶ The regime’s top leaders, as well as various senior and lower-ranking officials, constantly express alarm and anxiety over the growing role of the MEK and its affiliated Resistance Units inside Iran.

1 “Iran exiles claim disrupting Tehran’s surveillance cameras,” *Associated Press*, June 2, 2022.

2 “Iran state TV shows dissidents’ images after apparent hack,” *Associated Press*, January 27, 2022.

3 For example, on April 24, 2019, an intelligence official of the regime in West Azarbaijan Province *announced* that in one instance, 110 people have been “dealt with” for communicating with the MEK. Also in 2019, the Iranian Minister of Intelligence Mahmoud Alavi said: “Over the past year, we have confronted 116 [resistance] units affiliated with the MEK,” calling the operation “epic.”

- ▶ In a bid to discourage university students to join the ranks of the resistance units, the regime's president Ebrahim Raisi said in a speech to a group of Sharif University officials on October 6, 2022: "We are sure that the Sharif students will not allow ill-wishers and *Hypocrites* [MEK] to distort this university."<sup>4</sup>

Recounting events during the current unrest, a member of the Parliament's Security Commission, Javad Karimi Qoddousi, described the protests as planned and organized, before proceeding to provide a detailed account of such activities: "In these incidents, based on what was seen, teams of five people... destroy the place. They leave quickly, and another four come from the other side."<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the Friday Prayer leader and Khamenei's representative in Bandar Abbas, Mohammad Ebadizadeh, was quoted by the semi-official Mehr News Agency as saying, "The recent rioters were from the organized groups of MEK, who were also trained." Fars News Agency wrote on October 12, "It is the MEK that played a significant role in managing and directing the protests..."<sup>6</sup>

## 6. Women's leading role

Women have played a leading role in the uprising. Countless threats, intimidation, and misogynist aggression have failed to deter them. This should not surprise anyone; over 35 years of women's leadership in the organized Resistance<sup>7</sup> against the regime has helped to create a culture of defiance among Iran's women, who are not fighting only for their own rights; rather, their priority is to free their nation.

The world has been witnessing the courage, commitment, and wisdom of the Iranian women confronting a regime that considers them as second-class citizens. The courage has come about because, on the one hand, misogyny is the core of Islamic fundamentalism ideology, which started mandatory hijab for women as its first repressive initiative only weeks after it took power in 1979. On the other hand, women have, for decades, played an increasingly significant role in the nationwide resistance against the regime. Our movement was in the forefront of a major demonstration in Tehran in March 1979 in protest to the newly imposed mandatory hijab rules, defending women who chose not to wear hijab.

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4 State-affiliated *Farda News*, October 6, 2022.

5 Khorasan TV channel, September 29, 2022.

6 *Mehr News Agency*, September 30, 2022.

7 'Women: A Force for Change,' Maryam Rajavi, April 2010

Iranian women know that no women's rights will ever be recognized so long as this regime is in power. Thus, women's freedom can only be secured in a free and democratic Iran.

Women have long been in the forefront of the fight against oppression and dictatorship. During the 1988 massacre of some 30,000 political prisoners, thousands of women prisoners chose to say NO to the Ayatollahs and did not submit to their demands to denounce their activism and organizational affiliation. It is this history of 40+ years of women fighting against the regime and paying the ultimate price that is now manifested in the schoolgirls and female university students all across Iran, whose demand is no less than the overthrow of this regime.

## 7. Clear rejection of past dictatorship

Tehran wants to paint the protesters as either having been stirred up by foreign agitators, or as adherents to a return of the Shah's dictatorship, to discredit them.

However, slogans rejecting both the current theocracy and the dictatorship of the deposed Shah are heard all over Iran, both among the university students and the general public. The Washington Post reported on October 21, 2022, "One new iteration—Death to the Shah, Death to the religious leader," captures a consistent repudiation of autocratic rule, be it a king or a cleric.<sup>8</sup> The New York Times reported on September 22, 2022, "In the northern city of Rasht, protesters took over a street, chanting, 'Death to the dictator!' and 'Death to the oppressor, be it the shah or the supreme leader!'"<sup>9</sup>

## 8. Tehran the heart of the uprisings

The capital and its surrounding towns and suburbs have been a hotbed of protest. Over 20 and sometimes up to 55 locations per night have been protest centers, with crowds chanting anti-regime slogans and confronting the security forces. Most notably, the working-class neighborhoods of Naziabad and Shush, and the Grand Bazaar of Tehran have also joined in protests. One regime observer commented that if Naziabad joins the protests, then regime officials should start packing.

<sup>8</sup> "What Iran's protest slogans tell us about the uprising," The Washington Post, October 21, 2022

<sup>9</sup> "Protests Intensify in Iran Over Woman Who Died in Custody," The New York Times, September 22, 2022

## 9. Fearless, uncompromising

- ▶ **Fearless:** Broadly speaking, people have demonstrably lost their fear of the theocracy. The regime has marshaled its brutal Basij militia and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces, and deployed its signature ruthless suppression. And it has massively disrupted the Internet to have an open hand in doing so. In the cities of Sanandaj and Zahedan, security forces used machine guns and heavy weaponry in a bid to quell demonstrations, massacring dozens.

But as shown by the protestors' persistence for over 40 days, the regime's suppressive forces have proven largely ineffective in crushing the unrest. They appear incapable of suppressing teenage girls and boys, or the wider population united in their calls for the regime's ouster.

The wall of repression is showing visible cracks, and fear of the regime has been replaced with outrage, anger, and a determination to sacrifice for change, as can be seen in protesters fighting back against suppressive forces.

- ▶ **Pushing back:** Protesters have confronted the brutal suppression of the regime. In dozens of cases, people arrested by the security forces or plainclothes thugs (Basij militias affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or the Ministry of Intelligence) have been set free by counterattacking protesters.
- ▶ **Punishing the repressors:** Several Basij members have been killed during clashes with protesters whom they had attacked. Protesters have announced loud and clear that "We do not fear anymore; we fight." The regime has admitted to dozens killed and over 850 injured among its security forces. Many IRGC and Basij centers have been torched, police stations taken over, and offices of Khamenei's representatives in various cities attacked.

## 10. Role of university and high school students, and the youth

Students and Iran's new generation, in addition to women, are at the forefront of the movement. The pent-up anger over decades of suppression, corruption and plunder is erupting.

Additionally, a modern, vibrant and technologically savvy generation of youth is posing a vital challenge to the medieval theocracy's staying pow-

er. This is a generation that most strikingly does not have the slightest ideological affinity with the ruling mullahs or their policies.

University students have spearheaded the defiance that has shocked the regime, appearing in demonstrations and strikes at campuses day after day, despite brutal beatings, arrests, and attacks.

High school students and even middle school pupils have joined in as well, with their families assenting and supporting them in their rejection of the theocratic dictatorship.

## C. Why the regime has failed to quell the protests

It is a mistake to think the regime has a latent capacity to suppress that it has not used. The protests have shocked the regime. The top brass of the IRGC, including its commander-in-chief, Hossein Salami, are personally supervising and directing the crackdown.

Authorities have tried to quell the protests with five methods, all of which have failed:

1. Prevention – By rounding up and detaining potential protesters and leaders in advance.
2. Intimidation – By employing extreme torture and beatings and publicizing them.
3. Counter demonstrations – By trying to mount counter demonstrations to imply that a minority is opposed to it.
4. Repression – By mobilizing suppressive forces and deploying extreme violence on the streets with the combined forces of the national police (state security forces), the IRGC, and Basij.
5. Shock – By terrorizing the society, for example by massacring the people and worshippers in Baluchistan and hoping others will learn a lesson and stand down.

According to a document classified as “highly confidential,” prepared for Ali Khamenei, the regime’s supreme leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander-in-Chief, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, reported that in the first two weeks of the uprising, the IRGC, the SSF, and the Ministry of Intelligence had detained 9,654, 9,545, and 1,246 protesters, respectively. [That is a total of 20,445]

The regime has announced the release of some of the detainees in the meantime, but more have been arrested.

According to this report, 42 percent of those arrested are under the age 20. Also, Salami asserted that some of the detainees were “organized” members of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK).

The staying power of the protests, despite the brutal crackdown, have also had a highly demoralizing effect on the regime and sowed divisions in how to deal with such a widespread and unified opposition to its rule. How do you deal with schoolgirls shouting for regime overthrow and what are the repercussions of such repression other than accelerating the movement? The answer is obvious.

Salami’s directive to his subordinates to not deploy “demoralized, disaffected, and disgruntled,” personnel at the scenes of the protests speaks volumes to the state of the regime’s crack suppressive forces.

## **D. Myths & Misconceptions**

### **1. “It is leaderless”**

The uprising is not leaderless. Leadership is evident in the slogans and the tactics of the protesters, and in their fearless and ferocious steadfastness in the face of brute force. To expect a single face to be presented at this stage is simplistic. This revolution does not follow the old blueprint. It is more complex, due to the complexity of the situation and the enemy. But organization and leadership are inherent in its demands, its perseverance, and its continuity.

### **2. “No clear direction where it is heading”**

The trajectory is the downfall of the regime, no matter the ebb and flow of events. The whole of Iran is in rebellion, in particular women and youth. There is no going back. The regime has no future. This is becoming evident to even those within the regime. The direction is made clear by the popular slogan “Death to the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Leader [Khamenei],” indicating that the people are united on:

1. Overthrow of Khamenei and the entirety of the current regime,

2. A republic (rejecting a return to previous forms of monarchic dictatorship),
3. Separation of religion and state, as evident in chants rejecting the theocratic system.

These three principles form the foundation of the National Solidarity Front that the NCRI has invited all Iranian political forces to join.

### **3. “The military forces must change sides”**

The uprising has shown that there is only one choice for all sectors of the polity and society, including the military forces. The top brass of the military has been warned by the protesters, and yet when the time comes, the subordinate units and forces will undoubtedly join the uprising.

### **4. “Syrianization and Libyanization”**

The regime has fanned “Uprising Phobia” by promoting and insinuating “Syrianization” or “Libyanization” of Iran, a clearly incongruous comparison that ignores Iran’s history, its social development, and the nature of the uprising. The current uprising has cut through class, gender, ethnicity, and religious belief and is wholly united on the slogans of “Death to Khamenei” (overthrow), and “Death to the oppressor, be it is the Shah or the Leader” (charting a path forward to a democratic republic). It is not a battle between classes, or ethnicities, or religious groups, and does not pit a social or political majority against a minority. It is a unified struggle to fundamentally change Iran through regime overthrow and establish a democratic, pluralist republic based on the separation of religion and state.

# II. Elevation of 43 years of Resistance



## A. Key benchmarks from 1979 till today

- a) Demonstration against compulsory hijab in 1979
- b) Rejecting the Velayat-e-Faqih Constitution
- c) June 1981 and the start of an all-out Resistance
- d) 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners, mostly MEK members
- e) The culture of resistance over four decades now evident in the new generation
- f) Women are leading the fight for freedom, reflecting their history of four decades of participation in the Resistance against tyranny. Maryam Rajavi has paved the way for women in leadership and inspiring a generation of women with the mantra of “we can, and we must.”
- g) Some twenty-six years ago, in June 1996, the President-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran gave a speech in London entitled “Women, A force for change.” Speaking before tens of thousands of people in London, Maryam Rajavi addressed the ruling Ayatollahs, saying, “You have used all possible forms of humiliation, oppression, repression, torture, and murder against Iranian women. But I assure you that your oppressive rule will be swept away by Iran’s conscious and free women...Today’s oppressed women are the victors of tomorrow.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Excerpts* from the speech by the NCRI President-elect Maryam Rajavi to a gathering of Iranians at Earls Court Hall in London, June 21, 1996

# III. Policy Imperatives



## A. Historic opportunity for the international community

A free Iran with democratic values and legitimacy will enhance stability and security in the region, remove the most aggressive sponsor of terrorism and conflict in the region, and replace it with a new model for democratic development in the Islamic world, committed to peace and mutual cooperation. In supporting the democratic revolution in Iran and ending the appeasement of the theocratic dictatorship, the US and the world will see the Iranian people eliminate a virulent source of insecurity, terrorism, sectarianism, war, and instability, and at the same time open a new and hopeful chapter with a democratic and free Iran.

## B. Policy recommendations & practical steps for the U.S.

- a) First, the United States and the European Union should support the Iranian people's bid for democratic revolution against their tyrannical rulers. They must recognize the Iranian people's right to self-defense against the brutal attacks of the regime, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that recognizes the right "to have recourse as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression."
- b) Second, in concert with democratic allies at the United Nations, lead punitive political, diplomatic, and commercial sanctions against the Iranian regime. Shut down regime's embassies and

expel its diplomats, agents, and those who, directly or indirectly, lobby for the Iranian regime. Tehran must be treated as what it is, a pariah state, and thus should be expelled from all international bodies; all economic ties must be severed.

- c) Third, refer the dossier of four decades of genocide and crimes against humanity, including the 1988 massacre of 30,000 political prisoners, as well as those in November 2019 and current killings during the uprisings, including the October 2022 murders at Evin Prison, the United Nations Security Council, and bring the Iranian regime leaders, including Khamenei and Raisi, to justice.
- d) Fourth, continue to work with private technology companies to ensure unfettered and cost-free access to the internet and communications technologies by the Iranian people.