



LONDON POLITICA

REPORT

‘Women, Life, Freedom’

A Revolution to Bring About Gender Equality in Iran amidst Government Repression

February 2024

Eleni Anagnostopoulou, Manon Leprince, Faizah S. Chy, Barbara Listek, Angus Robins, Ellen Cameron, Joel Crisetig, Vanessa Birkhahn, Xingyi Wang, Charlotte Higgs



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Executive Summary

For decades, the Iranian government, headed by the preeminent religious authority, Supreme Religious Leader Ali Khamenei, has systematically restricted women's rights, preventing women from being empowered in both public and private spheres and enforcing strict dress rules, such as the mandatory hijab. The Iranian society as a whole faces long-standing ethnic and religious oppression and restricted democratic freedoms, in addition to economic insecurity. Collective grievances and perceptions of injustice, fuelled by Mahsa "Jina" Amini's death in September 2022, led to the 'Women, Life, Freedom' Movement, a wave of uprisings and domestic unrest that has transcended generations, social classes, and communities.

With women at the forefront, the Iranian people have risked their lives to fight for gender equality and human rights. They have mobilised through anti-regime demonstrations and engaged in subtle dissent through social media and defiant musical expression. Faced with these challenges to the status quo, state authorities have responded with physical violence and digital repression in an attempt to restore order, exert control, and deter the movement's activities and beliefs. Since the protests broke on 16 September 2022, state forces have killed at least 500 and detained at least 20,000 Iranians, including children and young people. Notwithstanding, women continue to oppose the government by defying the hijab law whilst enjoying support from most of Iranian society, including men, who have actively participated in protests and advocacy campaigns, as well as from the Iranian diaspora. Yet, despite widespread domestic mobilisation and extensive international sanctions, Tehran has not amended its discriminatory laws against women and has stepped up its surveillance mechanisms to deter any further civil resistance.

Although the demonstrations that followed Mahsa Amini's death did not lead to a political revolution, they did show that Iranian women are active agents of change, and that society legitimates and recognises their calls for gender equality: a precondition for peace and development in Iran and beyond.



Section 1

Context

Located at the juncture of the Middle East and Western Asia, Iran stands as a nation with a profound historical and geographical legacy. The country's population, currently almost at 90 million, is not just a statistic but a testament to its rich cultural diversity. The majority ethnic group, Persians, form about 60% of the populace.¹ Azeris, Kurds, Lurs, Turkmens, Arabs, Baluchis, and other ethnic groups add to the country's tapestry of diverse traditions, held together by the common thread of the Persian language (Farsi) and the Shia Muslim faith, the predominant religion. Historically, the 20th century witnessed several monumental events, such as the early 1900s Constitutional Revolution, the 1950s oil nationalisation under Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, and, ultimately, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, culminating in the establishment of the present-day Islamic Republic.

The status of women's rights in Iran fluctuated throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries under the influence of political forces aligned with the competing ideologies of tradition and modernity. In 1963, the then Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and his sister, Ashraf Pahlavi, worked with the High Council of Women's Organisations in Iran to give women the right to vote.² At the end of the 1970s, following these reforms, women could sit in the Iranian parliament, and many held influential positions in local councils.³ But later periods in Iran's internal politics show the differences in the absolutist and pluralistic interpretations of Islam when it comes to women's rights. While the religious government that came to power after the Iranian Revolution reversed the achievements of the late 1970s reforms, the Khatami administration⁴ was elected in 1997 and led to reforms that empowered even secular women – meaning not only strictly religious women – in media and government NGOs. But following the end of the reform period in 2003, the government was once more ruled by fundamentalists, targeting women's rights and weakening the NGOs that registered during Khatami's presidency. The morality police, prescribed by a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law, has been arresting women for even minor violations of Islamic dress rules, such as showing hair or wearing a chador with sleeves rolled up, ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁵ However, these heavy-handed efforts to control women's rights, clothing, and individual and societal behaviour became even more systematic in the mid-2000s after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president.

1 American Iranian Council, "MYTH vs. FACT: Persians and Arabs", *American Iranian Council*, November 2, 2016, <http://www.us-iran.org/resources/2016/10/21/myth-vs-fact-persians-and-arabs>.

2 Karuna Lakhiani, "The Past and Present of Women's Rights in Iran", *The Borgen Project*, October 24, 2021, <https://borgenproject.org/womens-rights-in-iran/>.

3 The Iran Primer, "Part 1: Phases of the Women's Movement", *The Iran Primer*, December 10, 2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/aug/11/iranian-womens-movement-four-phases>.

4 Jahangir Amuzegar, "Focusing on Women in the Internal Politics of Iran", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, July 26, 2018, <https://bjwa.brown.edu/15-1/focusing-on-women-in-the-internal-politics-of-iran/>.

5 Sanya Mansoor, "How Iran's Morality Police Enforces a Strict Interpretation of Islamic Law", *TIME*, November 10, 2022, <https://time.com/6230535/iran-morality-police-mahsa-amini-hijab/>.



In 2006, feminist activists initiated the One Million Signatures Campaign⁶ to advocate for changes to laws that discriminate against women. This campaign led to the drafting of the “Bill to Protect the Dignity and Security of Women Against Violence”, which covers physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence against women. The bill was only introduced in Iran's parliament in 2021. While it garnered some support among female lawmakers and was approved by members of parliament in April 2023,⁷ human rights organisations and supporters of women's rights believe that the outline of the bill has deviated from its original goal and that it falls short of international standards.⁸ Moreover, not only does this bill not put an end to discrimination against women, but its adoption amid nationwide demonstrations calling for gender equality and democracy could be seen as an opportunistic manoeuvre by the government to improve its image and that of Iran nationally and internationally. All in all, this schism in Iranian politics and the associated discrimination and hostility towards women has attracted worldwide attention and comprise the context of this report.

⁶ Maryam Rezaei Zadeh, “Iran Under Fire Amid New Restrictions on Women'S Rights”, *Stimson Center*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/iran-under-fire-amid-new-restrictions-on-womens-rights/>.

⁷ IRNA, “Iranian MPs Approve Bill to Protect Women's Dignity”, *IRNA English*, April 9, 2023, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85078310/Iranian-MPs-approve-bill-to-protect-women-s-dignity>.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Iran: Adopt Draft Law to Protect Women”, *Human Rights Watch*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/04/iran-adopt-draft-law-protect-women>; Shohreh Mehrnami, “Iran's Islamic Republic Claims to “Protect” Women with New Bill”, *IranWire*, April 13, 2023, <https://iranwire.com/en/women/115528-irans-islamic-republic-claims-to-protect-women-with-new-bill/>.



Section 2

The 'Women, Life, Freedom' Revolution: Emergence, Significance, and Key Demands

The recent 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement reflects the dynamism of Iran's socio-political landscape and marks an important chapter in Iran's contemporary history. Its emergence can be attributed to the long-standing grievances of Iranian women demanding their rightful place in a society that has seen them oscillate between empowerment and suppression. Post-revolutionary dynamics introduced restrictive socio-cultural parameters and systemic disparities, leading to accumulated frustration and a collective yearning for equality. However, the movement is not just about women's rights: it symbolises a broader quest for justice in Iranian society by emphasising that the struggle for women's rights in Iran is not just a gender issue but a human rights issue. Today, many Iranians recognise that women's and girls' rights are essential to democratic freedom.

The 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement and subsequent nationwide protests were ignited by the death of Mahsa Amini, or Jina Amini in Kurdish, in September 2022, who the morality police arrested for allegedly wearing the hijab inappropriately and for showing more hair than deemed acceptable. She was beaten and, after three days, died in custody.⁹ Female journalists Niloofar Hamedi and Elahe Mohammadi broke the news, following which they were unlawfully incarcerated by the Iranian regime. The protests started at the Tehran Hospital following the announcement of Amini's death. The slogan 'Women, Life, Freedom' was reiterated and quickly went viral at Amini's funeral in her hometown of Saqqez, in the Kurdistan province. The slogan originates from the Kurdish freedom movement, first used by Kurdish women in response to the economic and political persecution of Kurds in countries such as Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.¹⁰

The key demands and objectives of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement are outlined in a joint Manifesto signed by twenty independent Iranian trade unions, feminist groups, and student organisations in February 2023.¹¹ These revolve around fundamental economic, social, and political reforms. The manifesto articulates the meaning of the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom', which has gone far beyond its Kurdish origins by referring to the importance of women not only in the inner structure of society and within the household but also in positions of power and public life. Moreover, it seeks to address domestic violence, emphasise equitable female participation across sectors, and revisit educational curriculums to ensure gender-neutral narratives. As seen

⁹ Isaac Chotiner, "How Iran's Hijab Protest Movement Became so Powerful", *The New Yorker*, October 2, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/fatemah-shams-how-irans-hijab-protest-movement-became-so-powerful>.

¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of Iran's Rallying Cry", *Le Monde*, October 10, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/10/woman-life-freedom-the-origins-of-iran-s-rallying-cry_5999763_4.html.

¹¹ IranWire, "Trade Unions Issue Charter of Minimum Demands", *IranWire*, February 16, 2023, <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/113866-iranian-trade-unions-civic-groups-issue-charter-of-minimum-demands/>.



through the symbolic movement of taking off the hijab headscarf or cutting one's hair, Iranian women fight the oppressive regime and discriminatory laws that attack their bodies, freedoms, and identities. The insistence on the freedom to choose whether or not to wear the hijab without state interference became a symbolic representation of the broader demand for individual freedoms.

At its core, the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement seeks to dismantle the patriarchal and religious structures that have suppressed women's rights and perpetuated gender inequalities. The demands call for the immediate release of political prisoners, freedom of expression, and an end to discriminatory laws, emphasising the importance of individual rights and liberties. By challenging the criminalisation of political activities and advocating open discourse, the movement aims to create an inclusive and pluralistic society. It serves as a beacon of change in the socio-political discourse, pointing to a promising horizon where gender equality and human rights are universally upheld.

Section 3

Mobilisation Tactics

The 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement's mobilisation tactics have predominantly encompassed nonviolent civil resistance, defined as "a civilian-based method used to wage conflict through social, psychological, economic, and political means without the threat or use of violence".¹² Nonviolent resistance occurs outside traditional channels to defy and challenge the target government. In the case of the women's movement in Iran, mobilisation has taken the form of demonstrations - with the majority being peaceful - and popular dissent through the use of social media and music.

3.1 Demonstrations

The recent wave of anti-regime demonstrations, led by Iranian women, is the pinnacle of nearly two centuries of struggle¹³ for the civil rights of Iranian women as well as ethnic minorities.¹⁴ The current unrest is a combination of protests over gender apartheid¹⁵ and protests over the country's high inflation,¹⁶ unemployment, and decades of oppression. These grievances are exacerbated by the regime's authoritarianism, corruption, and coercive foreign policy, which have isolated Iran from the international community. Nonetheless, the ethnic dimension of the recent uprising is the most prominent, as Mahsa Amini – whose unjust death at the hands of the regime sparked the protests – was from Iranian Kurdistan. Notably, violence in Iran, particularly one-sided violence against civilians, has long been witnessed in the country's peripheral minority regions, especially the Kurdish northwest and Baluchi southeast.¹⁷

Mass protests began on 16 September 2022 in the Kurdistan Province's city of Saqqez, spread nationwide across 23 provinces, and occurred daily, involving both urban middle classes and rural working areas.¹⁸ At the centre of these protests was the chanting of the slogan 'Women,

¹² Florian Kriener and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "The Rise of Nonviolent Protest Movements and the African Union's Legal Framework", *European Society of International Law*, Vol. 10(4), October 14, 2021, https://esil-sedi.eu/esil-reflection-the-rise-of-nonviolent-protest-movements-and-the-african-unions-legal-framework/#_ftn1.

¹³ Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, 'Woman, Life, Freedom: The Origins of the Uprising in Iran', *Dissent Magazine*, December 5, 2022, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/women-life-freedom-iran-uprising-origins/.

¹⁴ Rahid Hamid and Ruth Riegler, "As Anti-Regime Protests Swell Across Iran, Ethnic Minorities Demand Freedom and Equality", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/anti-regime-protests-swell-across-iran-ethnic-minorities-demand-freedom-and>.

¹⁵ "Zan. Zendegi. Azadi. Woman, Life, Freedom", n.d., <https://www.womanlifefreedom.today/>.

¹⁶ H. Elif Ture and Ali Reza Khazaei, "Determinants of Inflation in Iran and Policies to Curb It", *International Monetary Fund*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2022/09/09/Determinants-of-Inflation-in-Iran-and-Policies-to-Curb-It-523280>.

¹⁷ "Iran", *Uppsala Conflict Data Program*, n.d., <https://ucdp.uu.se/country/630>.

¹⁸ Bahar Makooi, David Gormezano, and Cyrielle Cabot, "A Year of Revolt in Iran After the Death of Mahsa Amini", *FRANCE 24*, September 12, 2023, <https://webdoc.france24.com/iran-year-protests-after-death-mahsa-amini-women-repression-crackdown/>; Dana Sammy, "Anti-Government Demonstrations in Iran: A Long-Term Challenge for the Islamic Republic", *ACLEd*, April 12, 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/04/12/anti-government-demonstrations-in-iran-a-long-term-challenge-for-the-islamic-republic/>.



Life, Freedom', which is rooted in the Kurdish freedom movement¹⁹ and is used by girls and women in Iran to rally against the ideological use of religion against women in the alleged defending of Islam from Western-led modernism and imperialism.²⁰ As will be explored in the following section, some women even cut their hair and posted videos online, while others burned their hijab to defy the government's restrictive and oppressive dress rules enforced upon women by the morality police. Because, in the words of British-Iranian journalist Sahar Zand: "[women's hair in Iran], for too long, has been intertwined with religion and politics".²¹ Men and teenage boys have also participated in protests *en masse*, which shows that many Iranians view the subjugation of women by the morality police as being part of a broader government strategy of societal repression.²² As such, Iranian women and men united to "instigate transformative social and political change".²³

Between September and December 2022, over 400 violent demonstration events were also reported, with the use of Molotov cocktails against security forces being widespread during these events.²⁴ Even though demonstrations are still ongoing, their scale has significantly de-escalated compared to 2022, considering factors such as the regime's threat of and use of violence against protesters, as will be seen in the following section. While the movement continues to enjoy popular support, the number of active demonstrators remained low in 2023, deterred by fears of civil war. Yet, the struggle for women's rights continues²⁵ and has taken other forms aside from demonstrations, as seen with social media²⁶ and music.

3.2 Social Media

In response to the protests following Amini's death, Iranian authorities promptly enacted internet shutdowns to silence dissent.²⁷ The curtailment of freedom of expression within Iran is palpable, manifesting in the apprehension, intimidation, and cyber intrusions faced by activists who disseminate revolutionary content. However, Iranians have made skilful use of social media and the tools it offers to disseminate information globally.

¹⁹ Homa Bazafkan, "'Women, Life, Freedom' a New Revolutionary Era in Iran", VIDC, n.d.

<https://www.vidc.org/en/detail/women-life-freedom-a-new-revolutionary-era-in-iran>; Farangis Ghaderi and Ozlem Goner, "Why 'Jina': Erasure of Kurdish Women and Their Politics From the Uprisings in Iran", *Jadaliyya*, January 11, 2022.

https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44560?fbclid=IwAR2a7MUYSLoFFZmWJsL1Det1eD1S_dMMwGCRR0_mv87UU6t8vivPPx7TG1Q#.Y2RRhVknknl.facebook

²⁰ Shabnam Holliday, "Iran's 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement Highlights Global Issues", LSE Middle East Centre, October 26, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2023/02/10/irans-woman-life-freedom-movement-highlights-global-issues/>.

²¹ Sahar Zand, "Why Iranians are cutting their hair for 'women, life, freedom'", TED, February, 2023, https://www.ted.com/talks/sahar_zand_why_iranians_are_cutting_their_hair_for_women_life_freedom?language=en.

²² BBC News, "Iran: A Really Simple Guide to the Protests", BBC News, September 15, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-63240911>.

²³ Fariba Parsa, "Mahsa Amini's Legacy: A New Movement for Iranian Women", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 19, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90583>.

²⁴ Sammy, "Anti-Government Demonstrations in Iran: A Long-Term Challenge for the Islamic Republic".

²⁵ Peter Kenyon, "Public Protests Are Over but More Iranian Women Are Refusing to Wear the Hijab", *NPR*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/20/1183152677/public-protests-are-over-but-more-iranian-women-are-refusing-to-wear-the-hijab>.

²⁶ Tara Sepehri Far, "Unveiling Resistance: The Struggle for Women's Rights in Iran", *Human Rights Watch*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/26/unveiling-resistance-struggle-womens-rights-iran#:~:text=Since%20the%20summer%20of%202020,influential%20men%20in%20various%20industries>.

²⁷ Raksha Kumar, "Not Quite the Arab Spring: How Protestors Are Using Social Media in Innovative Ways" *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, December 6, 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/not-quite-arab-spring-how-protestors-are-using-social-media-innovative-ways>.



Instagram has become an essential political tool in Iran.²⁸ The Iranian authorities have adopted a nuanced stance towards Instagram because of its role in the Iranian economy.²⁹ However, as socio-political discontent has intensified, not only Instagram but also WhatsApp have been subject to restrictions.³⁰ Nevertheless, the decision to consider a permanent ban on Instagram has been postponed until the feasibility of a legitimate local alternative has been studied. The transmission of content to the 1500tasvir collective for authentication, particularly from individuals in minority enclaves like Kurdistan, reflects the platform's fundamental role in information verification and dissemination.³¹

The use of social media changed the women's movement in Iran fundamentally as the hashtag #WomenLifeFreedom became the rallying force of the protest.³² Young women and school girls posted videos online waving their hijabs³³ and chanting against the regime,³⁴ undeterred by violent crackdowns. They also started to upload videos of themselves and other women burning their headscarves.³⁵ These images – which also include young girls protesting against the dress codes imposed by their government – illustrate the importance of this new form of protest, which transcends generations. Social media like Instagram and Twitter shifted the protest from a regional one to a global wave of support, even covered by Western media.³⁶ Women around the world cut off their hair to protest against the mandatory hijab and in solidarity with women in Iran who have done the same.³⁷ As a result, the Iranian diaspora emerged as vocal advocates,³⁸ leveraging social media to connect with global feminist movements and share their narratives,³⁹ representing a boycott against the repression of women. The use of hashtags has also enabled the movement to spread worldwide and has helped to generate support for it.

²⁸ Mehdi Khalaji, "Social Media in Iran's Protests: A New Public Sphere?", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 6, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/social-media-irans-protests-new-public-sphere>.

²⁹ Jon B. Alterman, "Protest, Social Media, and Censorship in Iran", Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 18, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/protest-social-media-and-censorship-iran>.

³⁰ Reuters, "As unrest grows, Iran restricts access to Instagram, WhatsApp", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-restricts-access-instagram-netblocks-2022-09-21/>.

³¹ Matt Burgess, "Iran's Internet Shutdown Hides a Deadly Crackdown," WIRED, September 23, 2022, <https://www.wired.com/story/iran-protests-2022-internet-shutdown-whatsapp/>.

³² Zoe Si, (@zoesees), "I'm stunned by the images out of #Iran and by the bravery of the women protesting in the streets for freedom of choice from an oppressive regime. Standing with them as much as I can, in grief and solidarity", Twitter, October 4, 2022. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23WomenFreedomLife&src=typed_query.

³³ Khosro Kalbasi Isfahani (@KhosroKalbasi), "If we don't unite, they will kill us one by one": Teenage schoolgirls waving their hijabs in the air chant in city of Karaj, west of Tehran", Twitter, October 3, 2022, <https://twitter.com/KhosroKalbasi/status/1576930727341748224>.

³⁴ Shayan Sardarizadeh (Shayan86), "After unrest at many universities, school protests are now spreading in Iran. In Shiraz, schoolgirls wave their head coverings in the air today chanting "death to the dictator" on day 18 of protests over the death of #MahsaAmini", Twitter, October 3, 2022. <https://twitter.com/Shayan86/status/1576912290107965440>.

³⁵ The Telegraph, "Iranian women burn their headscarves in surging protests over hijab laws". YouTube, September 21, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L122aP3N_cw.

³⁶ David Gritten, "Iran protest: Schoolgirls heckle paramilitary speaker", BBC News, October 5, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63143504>.

³⁷ Middle East Eye, "Mahsa Amini's death: Women in Iran and around the world cut their hair to protest", YouTube, September 23, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGBYJK09pE>.

³⁸ Ahou Koutchesfahani, "How Iranian Women Use Social Media to Narrate Their Struggle to the World", King's College London, July 25, 2022, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/how-iranian-women-use-social-media-to-narrate-their-struggle-to-the-world>.

³⁹ Farinaz Basmechi, "How Gen Z Is Using Social Media in Iran's Women, Life, Freedom Movement", The Conversation, December 19, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/how-gen-z-is-using-social-media-in-irans-women-life-freedom-movement-195783>.

3.3 Music

Iran has maintained a strained association with music, which has been perceived as "diabolical" and "seductive".⁴⁰ In the nascent stages of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the issuance of a fatwa (edict or ruling) by Ayatollah Khomeini marked an expansion of restrictions governing musical endeavours.⁴¹ This decree exerted adverse effects on the cultural milieu, with manifold ramifications. An exodus of musicians ensued, seeking sanctuary in exile.⁴² The mere act of publicly bearing musical instruments became subject to punitive measures.⁴³ In Iran, the music industry operates under strict regulations enforced by the "Censorship Authority", involving mandatory reviews before concerts and album releases and protocols prohibiting content criticising the regime.⁴⁴ This framework reflects the regime's perception that musical engagement and creative expression can serve as a subtle form of protest.

"Baraye", a composition written by Iranian vocalist Shervin Hajipour a few days after the death of Amini, represents the hopes of the Iranian people for a future free of oppression and violence and has assumed the role of an unofficial anthem within protests in Iran.⁴⁵ Its lyrics, composed of tweets from Iranians expressing their reasons for protesting, emphasise the music's role in uniting the movement. "Baraye" received acclaim by winning the Grammy for "Best Song for Social Change" during the 2023 awards ceremony.⁴⁶ Despite Shervin Hajipour's arrest⁴⁷ following the song's viral dissemination in September 2022, "Baraye" has persisted in making a global impact with its thematic focus on women, life, and freedom.⁴⁸ Legal proceedings continue for Hajipour, who was released on bail following global protests on his arrest.⁴⁹ Iranian rapper Hichkas employs hip-hop, which is forbidden in Iran, with "This One Is For", making a bold statement against the regime's restrictions.⁵⁰ Iranian rappers Toomaj Salehi and Saman Yasin similarly participated in the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protests in Iran, and despite facing arrest and death sentences, they embody heroic symbols for their community.⁵¹

⁴⁰ Bahar Roshanai, "Music as a Mouthpiece of the Protests in Iran," *mdw-WebMagazin*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.mdw.ac.at/magazin/index.php/2023/04/24/musik-als-stimme-des-protests-im-iran/?lang=en>.

⁴¹ Mehrdad, Alipour, "Islamic Shari'a Law, Neotraditionalist Muslim Scholars and Transgender Sex-Reassignment Surgery: A Case Study of Ayatollah Khomeini's and Sheikh al-Tantawi's Fatwas," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 18 (1), November 22, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2016.1250239>.

⁴² "Exiled Iranian Rapper Shahin Najafi's Musical Defiance," *CBC News*, June 6, 2012, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/exiled-iranian-rapper-shahin-najafi-s-musical-defiance-1.1271942>.

⁴³ "Iran: Rule Banning Musical Instruments on TV Is Broken," *BBC News*, January 21, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-25830724>.

⁴⁴ Roshanai, "Music as a Mouthpiece of the Protests in Iran".

⁴⁵ Farnush, Ghadery, "In Iran and beyond, Arrests of Singers and Dancers Show How Music Can Be a Powerful Tool of Resistance," *The Conversation*, n.d., <https://theconversation.com/in-iran-and-beyond-arrests-of-singers-and-dancers-show-how-music-can-be-a-powerful-tool-of-resistance-210165>.

⁴⁶ "Best Song for Social Change Award", GRAMMY.Com, n.d., <https://www.grammy.com/awards/best-song-for-social-change-award>.

⁴⁷ Khosro Sayeh Isfahani, "Yes, I'm 'Trash,' but I Love Iran", *Atlantic Council*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/shervin-hajipour-trash-song/>.

⁴⁸ Astha Rajvanshi, "Why Iran's Unofficial Protest Anthem 'Baraye' Won a Grammy," *TIME*, February 6, 2023, <https://time.com/6253188/iran-grammys-shervin-hajipour/>.

⁴⁹ Isfahani, "Yes, I'm 'Trash,' but I Love Iran".

⁵⁰ Arian, Khameneh, "Hichkas: The Songs That Defied the Iranian Government", *BBC Culture*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230502-hichkas-the-song-that-became-an-iranian-protest-anthem>.

⁵¹ Roja Fazaeli, "Iran: Dissent by Public Figures Has Amplified the Protest across the Country – and the World," *The Conversation*, December 16, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/iran-dissent-by-public-figures-has-amplified-the-protest-across-the-country-and-the-world-196061>; Shirin S. & Şahane B., "'Now Is a Time for Rage': On the Bloody, Anonymous Art of the Iranian Protests," *ArtReview*, January 13, 2023, <https://artreview.com/now-is-a-time-for-rage-on-the-bloody-anonymous-art-of-the-iranian-protests/>.



Despite legal restrictions on public singing and dancing, Iranian women shared videos on social media expressing themselves through Mehdi Yarrahi's song "Roosarito" (Your Veil).⁵² Yarrahi's arrest in August 2023 reflects the Iranian regime's opposition to the song, which advocates for optional veiling rights in the pursuit of democracy.⁵³ Released on bail in October 2023, Yarrahi faces imprisonment again and 74 lashes following a court sentence in January 2024, highlighting once again the risks artists endure for challenging societal norms in Iran.⁵⁴ The artistic creations of female Iranian electronic artists like Azadi.MP3 have also contributed to the 'Women, Life, Freedom' Movement by expanding the genre of music in the movement.⁵⁵ Their track "Empty Platform", curated by Aida and Nesa Azadikhah, incorporates chants of the protests along with the beats. These artistic expressions are channels for those outside of Iran to engage emotionally with the societal context of the protests, transforming vocalised street chants into rhythmic manifestations. Spotify has introduced a playlist titled "Women of Iran" amidst the ongoing movement with music and commentary from women and their allies.⁵⁶ All in all, music advances the foundational ethos of the feminist movement, rooted in community, and music's potential to lead social change through creative dissent has not escaped the attention of authorities.

⁵² Whitney S., May, "Iranian Protest Songs in the Age of Social Media", *PopMatters*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.popmatters.com/iranian-protest-anthems-social-media>; "Iran Commences Legal Action against Singer for Hijab-Related Song", *Iran International*, n.d., <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202308274902>.

⁵³ Somayeh Malekian, "Pop Singer Arrested by Iran's Regime after Releasing Track Dedicated to Women," *ABC News*, August 30, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/ABCNews/pop-singer-arrested-irans-regime-after-releasing-track/story?id=102644569>

⁵⁴ IranWire, "Iranian Protest Singer Yarrahi Sentenced to Prison, Flogging," *IranWire*, January 9, 2024, <https://iranwire.com/en/news/124169-iranian-protest-singer-yarrahi-sentenced-to-prison-flogging/>

⁵⁵ Christina Hazboun, "Women, Life, Freedom! Iranian Electronic Musicians Reflect on a Year of Protest," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2023/oct/26/women-life-freedom-iranian-electronic-musicians-reflect-on-a-year-of-protest>

⁵⁶ Lily Moayeri, "Spotify Launches 'Women of Iran' Playlist", *Variety*, January 29, 2023, <https://variety.com/2023/music/global/spotify-women-of-iran-playlist-1235505641/>

Section 4

Government Responses

To crack down on the protests that followed the death of Amini, Iranian authorities resorted to excessive use of force against civilians – including children –, such as killings with live ammunition, arbitrary arrests, and extra-judicial executions. Authoritarian mechanisms of surveillance have also been utilised by government authorities to restrict the movement and exchange of information and the use of the internet by dissenters.

4.1 Use of Force

The regime mobilised the police, riot control teams, and plainclothes officers, as well as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary organisation created after the 1979 Iranian Revolution to protect the new Islamic regime, answering directly to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.⁵⁷ In the context of the civil unrest, security forces used tear gas to suppress large and largely peaceful crowds and, in some cases, live ammunition, leaving hundreds injured and dead.⁵⁸ Since the protests began on September 16 2022, and by 4 April 2023, at least 537 protesters had reportedly been killed by state forces, with the majority killed in the first months of protests.⁵⁹ In response to this crackdown, protestors gradually moved away from large gatherings, instead carrying out spontaneous demonstrations.⁶⁰ Still, even with spontaneous forms of protest, plainclothes security officers covertly blended into the crowds, using smartphones to take photographic evidence using the footage to track down and arrest demonstrators. As of October 2023, more than 20,000 individuals have been detained by authorities since the start of the protests in September 2022, based on a report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman.⁶¹ Hundreds of human rights defenders, activists, journalists, and lawyers were also arrested for their peaceful dissent or support of the protests.⁶² Some detainees have been sentenced to

⁵⁷ The Iran Primer, "Iran's Tactics During Protests", *The Iran Primer*, November 10, 2022.

<https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2022/oct/21/irans-response-protests>; CFR.org Editors. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards", *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 9, 2024. <https://www.cfr.org/background/irans-revolutionary-guards>.

⁵⁸ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran security forces clash with protesters over Amini's death", *Reuters*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-security-forces-clash-with-protesters-over-aminis-death-2022-09-27/>; Human Rights Watch. "Iran: Security Forces Fire on, Kill Protesters", *Human Rights Watch*, October 18, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/05/iran-security-forces-fire-kill-protesters>.

⁵⁹ Iran Human Rights, "Report on 200 Days of Protest Repression/List of at Risk Protesters", *Iran Human Rights*, April 4, 2023. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5795/>.

⁶⁰ Kourosh Rahimkhani, "At a Deadlock: Spontaneous Protests and the Iranian Regime", *Middle East Institute*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/deadlock-spontaneous-protests-and-iranian-regime#:~:text=The%20wave%20of%20mass%20protests,challenge%20an%20entrenched%20authoritarian%20regime>.

⁶¹ Javaid, Rehman, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman (a/78/326)", *United Nations General Assembly*, August 24, 2023. <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2099118/N2324994.pdf>

⁶² Human Rights Watch. "Iran: Brute Force Used in Crackdown on Dissent", *Human Rights Watch*, January 12, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/iran-brute-force-used-crackdown-dissent#:~:text=Iranian%20authorities%20have%20arrested%20more,or%20support%20of%20the%20protests>.

longer terms in prison while others have been sentenced to death.⁶³ As of May 2023, seven men have been executed over the protests extra-judicially, all meeting the same fate of being hanged following unfair trials.⁶⁴ Most of these men were charged with “*moharebeh*”, meaning enmity or offence against God, which is the Sharia law the state of Iran invokes to justify the death penalty.⁶⁵

4.2 Violence Against Children

Children have been among the victims of state violence too. Among the 537 recorded deaths, at least 68 of them were children.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the UN Human Rights Office reported in March 2023 that the Iranian authorities had deliberately poisoned more than 1,200 schoolgirls across Iran.⁶⁷ It stated: “The first reported poisoning of schoolgirls in Iran occurred on 30 November 2022, in the city of Qom. Since then, targeted chemical attacks against girls have been reported in 91 schools located in 20 provinces across Iran.” The poisonings have resulted in hundreds of schoolgirls being hospitalised and parents removing their daughters from school. Authorities failed to investigate the attacks properly and they provided no details as to the alleged series of arrests related to the poisoning cases.⁶⁸ It is additionally crucial to note that children and young people comprised a significant proportion of detainees. As per a report by Amnesty International, child detainees were subjected to different forms of torture and ill-treatment by the Revolutionary Guards, including electric shocks and sexual violence, whose aim was to extract forced confessions in a manner identical to the treatment of adult detainees.⁶⁹ Nika Shakarami, 16 years old, who burned her headscarf at a Tehran protest, was last seen alive on 20 September 2022 after reportedly being followed by security forces, the authorities claiming that she fell from a building.⁷⁰ Sarina Esmailzadeh, also aged 16, suffered a similar fate in Karaj.⁷¹ These are just a couple of examples of the risks of repercussions being extremely high in Iran, even for children.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch. “Iran: Thousands of detained protesters and activists are in danger”, *Human Rights Watch*, November 3, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2022/11/03/iran-thousands-detained-protesters-and-activists-peril>; Human Rights Watch. “Iran: Brute Force Used in Crackdown on Dissent”.

⁶⁴ Fassihi Farnaz and Cora Engelbrecht, “The People Executed in Iran in Monthslong Protest Crackdown.” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/iran-protests-death-sentences-executions.html>.

⁶⁵ Amnesty International, “Iran: Chilling Execution Spree With Escalating Use of Death Penalty Against Persecuted Ethnic Minorities”, *Amnesty International*, March 3, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-chilling-execution-spree-with-escalating-use-of-death-penalty-against-persecuted-ethnic-minorities/>.

⁶⁶ Hrana, “A Comprehensive Report of the First 82 Days of Nationwide Protests in Iran”, *Hrana*, February 6, 2023. <https://www.en-hrana.org/a-comprehensive-report-of-the-first-82-days-of-nationwide-protests-in-iran/>.

⁶⁷ OHCHR. “Iran: Deliberate Poisoning of Schoolgirls Further Evidence of Continuous Violence Against Women and Girls”, March 16, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/iran-deliberate-poisoning-schoolgirls-further-evidence-continuous-violence>.

⁶⁸ UN News, “Iran: Possible Crimes Against Humanity, Absence of Accountability - Top Rights Expert”, *UN News*, March 20, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134782>; Patrick Wintour, “Iran makes first arrests over suspected schoolgirl poisonings”, *The Guardian*, March 7, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/07/iran-makes-first-arrests-over-suspected-schoolgirl-poisonings>.

⁶⁹ Amnesty International. “Iran: Child Detainees Subjected to Flogging, Electric Shocks and Sexual Violence in Brutal Protest Crackdown”, *Amnesty International*, March 16, 2023. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-child-detainees-subjected-to-flogging-electric-shocks-and-sexual-violence-in-brutal-protest-crackdown/>.

⁷⁰ Miriam Berger. “Death of 16-year-old Protester Adds New Fuel to Iran Uprising”, *Washington Post*, October 6, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/06/iran-protests-nika-shakarami-mahsa/>.

⁷¹ Parham Ghobadi, “Nika Shakarami: Iran Protester’s Family Forced to Lie About Death - source.” *BBC News*, October 6, 2022. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-63154994>.

4.3 Digital Authoritarianism and State Narratives

In recent years, Iran has built an extensive network of state and non-state cybergroups.⁷² Iran's enhanced surveillance cyber capabilities have alarmed local dissidents. The regime can now block access to specific sites — in late September 2022, WhatsApp and Instagram access was prohibited.⁷³ Furthermore, there are reports of an advanced surveillance system named "SIAM": a new system with functions such as tracking and decrypting 2G text messages and even the ability to undermine multi-factor identification.⁷⁴ The extent to which advanced surveillance systems are utilised in Iran is difficult to define. Iranian authorities reportedly used such functions two weeks after Mahsa Amini's death, on 30 September 2022, a day also known as "Bloody Friday", due to the excessive use of force by security forces, which resulted in dozens of casualties among protesters. Through this surveillance system, protesters and their families were reportedly tracked, with the local government then threatening them into silence. Whilst there is some evidence of CCTV being used to track participants, telecom networks in the area will have also been utilised.⁷⁵ Even though SIAM did not enforce a total information blackout surrounding the event, "Bloody Friday" was seen in the following weeks as a terrorist attack, per government propaganda.⁷⁶

Tehran has additionally incorporated its cyber capabilities into its already extensive propaganda networks. The deployment of cyber-enabled 'psychological warfare' during the 2022 protests allowed Tehran to employ narratives in its favour and influence public opinion.⁷⁷ Such state-sponsored propaganda has been recently labelled as Influence Operations (IOs).⁷⁸ A notable way IOs have furthered regime objectives is through discrediting anti-regime sentiments. Supreme Leader Khamenei accused protestors of acting upon the objectives of "arrogant powers", a tagline disseminated across Iranian media.⁷⁹ Sophisticated cognitive techniques amplified that message, with disinformation campaigns villainising minority communities as colluding with foreign agents.⁸⁰ Examples of this include fake accounts disseminating videos in the subsequent protests over Mahsa Amini's death of armed Kurdish rebels amongst crowds of protestors — a covert attempt to decrease solidarity amongst the Iranian people.⁸¹ IOs can also be combined with advanced surveillance techniques to confuse protest movements. In early January 2023 — when protests formed against planned executions — an anti-regime social media group was hacked using SIAM. This account then disseminated false information about the assassination of a judge notorious for sentencing dissidents to

⁷² Morgan Demboski, "Analysis of the Iranian Cyber Attack Landscape", *IronNet*, September 14, 2021.

<https://www.ironnet.com/blog/iranian-cyber-attack-updates#CampaignUpdatesbyAPT>.

⁷³ Shiona McCallum, "Iran Unrest: What's Going on with Iran and the Internet?" *BBC News*, September 23, 2022.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-62996100>.

⁷⁴ Sam Biddle and Hussain Murtaza, "Hacked Documents: How Iran Can Track and Control Protesters' Phones." *The Intercept*. October 28, 2022. <https://theintercept.com/2022/10/28/iran-protests-phone-surveillance/>.

⁷⁵ Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre. "Bloody Friday in Zahedan", *Iran Human Rights Documentation Center*, October 20, 2022. https://iranhrdc.org/bloody-friday-in-zahedan/#_edn87.

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch. "Iran: 'Bloody Friday' Crackdown This Year's Deadliest," *Human Rights Watch*, December 22, 2022.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/22/iran-bloody-friday-crackdown-years-deadliest>

⁷⁷ Iran International. "Official Openly Brags about Iran's Disinformation Network on Twitter", *Iran International*, March 29, 2022. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202203299979>

⁷⁸ Sean Cordey, "ETH Library Cyber Influence Operations: An Overview and Comparative Analysis." *CSS Cyberdefense Reports*. October 31, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000382358>.

⁷⁹ Ali Khamenei, "Role of Arrogant Powers' Policies in Recent Bitter Events in Iran Is Obvious." *Khamenei.ir*. October 3, 2022.

<https://english.khamenei.ir/news/9189/Role-of-Arrogant-Powers-policies-in-recent-bitter-events-in>.

⁸⁰ Allan Hassaniyan, "How Longstanding Iranian Disinformation Tactics Target Protests", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-longstanding-iranian-disinformation-tactics-target-protests>.

⁸¹ Hassaniyan, "How Longstanding Iranian Disinformation Tactics Target Protests".



death,⁸² illustrating once again the link between digital authoritarianism and the spread of disinformation and propaganda.

State narratives were mobilised as a means of non-violent repression from the outset of the unrest, particularly to counter the movement's rhetoric and legitimacy. President Ebrahim Raisi reportedly called Amini's family on 18 September 2022, two days after her death and said: "Your daughter is like my own daughter, and I feel that this incident happened to one of my loved ones".⁸³ However, more aggressive narratives were soon disseminated. Just one week later, Raisi said that the protests were ignited by Iran's "enemies", referring to the US, Israel, and their allies in the region, who spread "conspiracies" to "achieve victory in the battle of narratives with a hope-creating information strategy".⁸⁴ The General Staff of the Iranian armed forces subsequently stated that the demonstrations were "plots" by "foreign enemies" to "wage a media and cognitive war to influence young Iranians".⁸⁵ Similarly, Supreme Leader Khamenei stated that "if the incident with the young girl had not taken place, they would have found another excuse to create insecurity and riots in the country".⁸⁶ As mentioned above, he blamed "arrogant powers", specifically the US, Israel, and their "mercenaries", referring to alleged Iranian proxy agents – or, as he called them, "treasonous Iranians" – for using Amini's death as a "pretext" for "riots" in response to Iran "progressing toward achieving a comprehensive power".

⁸² Amwaj Media, "Curious Case of 'Shot' Iranian 'Hanging Judge' Highlights Disinformation", *Amwaj.media*, January 18, 2023. <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/claimed-shooting-of-iranian-hanging-judge-highlights-disinformation>.

⁸³ The President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. "Your Daughter and All Iranian Girls Are My Children/ I Have Ordered the Incident to Be Investigated Carefully So That No Right Is Violated", September 18, 2022, <https://www.president.ir/en/139571>.

⁸⁴ Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. "Enemy seeks to spread despair and disappoint people", November 4, 2022. <https://irangov.ir/detail/384203>.

⁸⁵ Iran International. "Iran Threatens US, Israel With "Firm" Response In Case Of Any Attack", *Iran International*, December 29, 2022. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212296422>.

⁸⁶ Khamenei. "Role of Arrogant Powers' Policies in Recent Bitter Events in Iran Is Obvious"

Section 5

International Reactions

5.1 Condemnation

The international community, particularly the UN and G7 Governments, criticised the Iranian government, including its violent use of force against protestors and the blocking of the internet, and expressed solidarity with the Iranian people. In November 2022, a G7 press release stated: “We [...] express our support for the fundamental aspiration of the people of Iran for a future where human security and their universal human rights are respected and protected. We condemn the violent death of the young Iranian woman Mahsa “Jina” Amini after her arrest by Iran’s so-called “morality police”. We further condemn the brutal and disproportionate use of force against peaceful protestors and children. We urge Iranian authorities to honour their international obligations under international law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).”⁸⁷ The UN General Assembly echoed these concerns in a Resolution the Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted on 29 November 2022.⁸⁸ Comparably, UNICEF called for an end to violence against children and adolescents.⁸⁹ Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of Germany stated that: “the Iranian regime is now threatening protestors with the death penalty [...] Only because these women, men and children want to enjoy the rights we all want to enjoy: to live in dignity and without discrimination”.⁹⁰ Likewise, the United States Human Rights Ambassador, Michèle Taylor, stated that the people of Iran demand “something that most of us here take for granted: the opportunity to speak and to be heard”.⁹¹

5.2 Preventive Diplomacy

On 24 November 2022, the UNHRC mandated an Independent International Fact-Finding Mission to investigate alleged human rights violations in Iran related to the protests, especially concerning women and children.⁹² In September 2023, in the run-up to the anniversary of Amini’s death, the Mission stated that Iranian authorities escalated the harassment and intimidation of protester’s family members.⁹³ But there have not been any other public reports by the Mission

⁸⁷ G7. “G7 Foreign Ministers’ Statement in Germany, November 2022”, GOV.UK, November 23, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/g7-foreign-ministers-statement>.

⁸⁸ UNHRC. “Deteriorating situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially with respect to women and children”, *United Nations*, November 29, 2022. <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2FRES%2F35%2F1&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

⁸⁹ UNICEF. “UNICEF Calls for the Protection of Children and Adolescents amid Public Unrest in Iran”, *Unicef*, October 10, 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-calls-protection-children-and-adolescents-amid-public-unrest-iran>.

⁹⁰ Baerbock, Annalena. “Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock at the Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the Human Rights Situation in Iran”, *German Federal Foreign Office*, November 24, 2022. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/baerbock-unhcr-iran/2565298>.

⁹¹ Taylor, Michèle. “Special Session on Iran: Statement by Ambassador Taylor”, *U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva*, November 24, 2022. <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2022/11/24/special-session-on-iran-statement-by-ambassador-taylor/>.

⁹² UNHRC. “Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran”, *OHCHR*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-iran/index>.

⁹³ UNHRC. “Iran: On One-Year Anniversary of Jina Mahsa Amini’s Death in Custody, Heightened Repression of Women and Girls and Reprisals against Protesters and Victims’ Families Is Deeply Troubling, UN Fact-Finding Mission Says”, *OHCHR*,

since then, as of the time of this report. Fact-finding missions are investigative bodies responding to serious violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.⁹⁴ Yet, such preventive diplomacy measures are arguably more effective in evolving crises and “lack the power to affect fundamental calculations of perpetrators”, in addition to their level of influence being conditional on the political character of the target country.⁹⁵ Thus, the chances of a fact-finding mission being effective in preventing further human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran are slim. That is to say, the Mission’s findings – including the documentation and analysis of alleged violations of international human rights law that have been and are being committed in Iran related to the protests – will be presented before the UNHRC in March 2024.⁹⁶ Since domestic judicial accountability avenues are non-existent in Iran, the Fact-Finding mission could contribute to justice in Iran by engaging State responsibility under international law as well as individual criminal responsibility by contributing to legal proceedings in foreign tribunals, given that domestic judicial accountability avenues are non-existent in Iran.

5.3 Double Standards

On 14 December 2022, with an overwhelming vote of 29 to 8, the Islamic Republic of Iran became the first government in the history of the UN to be removed from the Commission on the State of Women.⁹⁷ Hillel Neuer, director of UN Watch, expressed that “this is a regime that beats, blinds, arrests, tortures, rapes and kills women protesters, and they never should have been there in the first place.”. More recently, however, despite the aforementioned responses, Iran was appointed to a leadership role within the UNHRC, with one of the country’s top diplomats leading the “Social Forum” on 10 May 2023, focusing on “the contributions of science, technology, and innovations to the promotion of human rights”.⁹⁸ Ali Bahreini, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN, was elected from several regional candidates. This decision was described by Mariam Claren, daughter of Nahid Taghavi, a German-Iranian human rights activist imprisoned in Iran, as a “slap in the face for all Iranians and anyone who loves freedom”, to which she added that she “seriously question[ed] the values of the United Nations.”.⁹⁹ This condemnation was widely echoed as this decision at the UN level could serve to legitimise the Iranian regime’s repressive actions.¹⁰⁰ In response to Iran’s appointment, the UN Watch released a petition to stop Iran from heading the UNHRC Social Forum. As of 30 October 2023, 90,000 people worldwide signed the petition, intending to reach 100,000 before approaching world leaders for support.¹⁰¹ While overturning Iran’s chairmanship may be challenging, appealing to the UN’s authority to expel Iran from the UN Women’s Rights Commission could be effective so long as the goal of 100,000 signatures is reached.

September 14, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/iran-one-year-anniversary-jina-mahsa-amini-death-custody-heightened>.

⁹⁴ UNHRC, “International Commissions of Inquiry, Commissions on Human Rights, Fact-Finding missions and other Investigations”, OHCHR, n.d., <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-is>.

⁹⁵ Madeleine K. Albright and William S. Cohen, “Preventive Diplomacy: Halting and Reversing Escalation”, in *Preventing Genocide: A Blueprint for U.S. Policymakers* (United States: United States Institute of Peace, 2008), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/Report%20Chp4.pdf?utm_source=usip.org.

⁹⁶ Impact Iran, “Questions & Answers on the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran”, Impact Iran, March 2023, <https://impactiran.org/2023/05/10/ffmqa/>.

⁹⁷ UN Watch, “Victory: How Iran Was Expelled from the U.N. Women’s Rights Commission - UN Watch”, *UN Watch*, December 22, 2022. <https://unwatch.org/victory-iran-expelled-from-u-n-womens-rights-commission/>.

⁹⁸ Shabnam von Hein. “Iran’s UN Ambassador to Chair Social Forum”, *DW*, May 17, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/controversy-as-irans-un-ambassador-to-chair-social-forum/a-65660386>.

⁹⁹ Shabnam von Hein. “Iran’s UN Ambassador to Chair Social Forum”.

¹⁰⁰ UN Watch. “Iran to Chair UN Human Rights Forum on Thursday, Sparking Protests”, *UN Watch*, October 30, 2023. <https://unwatch.org/iran-to-chair-un-human-rights-forum-on-thursday-sparking-protests/>.

¹⁰¹ UN Watch. “Iran to Chair UN Human Rights Forum on Thursday, Sparking Protests”.

5.4 Sanctions

For decades, the US government has upheld sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran to influence the behaviour of the Iranian regime when it comes to “its support for international terrorism, nuclear and missile development programs and proliferation activities, destabilising regional interventions, and human rights abuses”.¹⁰² Despite signs of improving relations between Washington and Tehran in early 2022, the death of Mahsa Amini and the subsequent crackdown on protesters led to another escalation in US sanctions.¹⁰³ Following a vigorous online lobbying effort by the Iranian diaspora, the US Congress enacted the MAHSA Act, instituting a more comprehensive sanctions framework on Iran.¹⁰⁴ This updated regime was passed on 27 January 2023 and targeted 29 individuals and entities – including key figures from the IRGC, Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), the head of Iran's Prisons Organizations, as well as regime-controlled media.¹⁰⁵

Other Western nations joined the Biden administration in its efforts to tighten the economic constraints on the Islamic regime. In September 2023, the British government imposed sanctions on Iranian politicians, such as the Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Mayor of Tehran, while Canada sanctioned members of the IRGC and “Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution”.¹⁰⁶ On 23 January 2023, the European Union (EU) implemented sanctions against 18 individuals and 19 entities responsible for the crackdown on the women's movement.¹⁰⁷ These sanctions supplemented earlier sanctions targeting Iranian officials in September 2022.¹⁰⁸ However, although the EU embeds women's rights in its guiding principles and has denounced Iran's rights violations, there have been no proactive actions – such as community-based programmes empowering women – other than economic sanctions, since the EU arguably focuses its Iran policies on the nuclear issue.¹⁰⁹ Also, despite a proposal in the European Parliament to label the IRGC as a “terrorist organisation”, certain European governments were reluctant to endorse that designation. Such a label could undermine prospects for reviving the Iran nuclear deal by escalating tensions between Iran and US allies.¹¹⁰

¹⁰² Congressional Research Service. “U.S. Sanctions on Iran”, *Congressional Research Service*, July 20, 2023. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12452>.

¹⁰³ Iran International. “2022: A Year Where Iran Nuclear Talks Turned Sour.” *Iran International*. December 28, 2022. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212282717>.

¹⁰⁴ Celeste Kmiotek, Lisandra, Novo, and Gissou, Nia. “The House Passed the MAHSA Act. Now What?” *Atlantic Council*, September 21, 2023. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/mahsa-act-army-house-bill/>.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury. “Treasury Sanctions Iranian Officials and Companies Connected to Repression in Advance of the Anniversary of Mahsa ‘Zhinā’ Amini’s Death.” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*. September 15, 2023. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1733>.

¹⁰⁶ Daphne Psaledakis, and Rami, Ayyub. “US, UK, Canada Issue New Iran Sanctions ahead of Anniversary of Mahsa Amini’s Death”, *Reuters*. September 15, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-issues-iran-sanctions-one-year-anniversary-mahsa-aminis-death-2023-09-15/>.

¹⁰⁷ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères. “Iran – Adoption of new sanctions at the EU foreign ministers’ meeting”, *Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères*. January 23, 2023. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/news/article/iran-adoption-of-new-sanctions-at-the-eu-foreign-ministers-meeting-23-01-23>.

¹⁰⁸ Council of the European Union. “Iran: Council lists four more individuals and six entities over serious human rights violations”, *Council of the European Union*, September 15, 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/09/15/iran-council-lists-four-more-individuals-and-six-entities-over-serious-human-rights-violations/>

¹⁰⁹ European Commission. “Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027 for Iran – decision”, *European Commission*, March 8, 2022. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/document/download/fc22b687-6840-4c4d-b436-0e3f68bfb80a_en?filename=mip-2021-c2021-9094-iran-decision_en.pdf.

¹¹⁰ Maziar Motamedi. “More Sanctions as Iran and EU Clash over IRGC ‘Terror’ Label.” *Al Jazeera*. January 23, 2023. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/23/more-sanctions-as-iran-and-eu-clash-over-irgc-terror-label>.

The successive rounds of Western sanctions have significantly impacted the Iranian economy.¹¹¹ In 2023, inflation peaked at 40%, while the national currency per international dollar ratio kept rising, reaching 118.01 in 2024.¹¹² Iran's attempts to nullify the impact of sanctions by selling oil to China and securing investments from Russia have shown promise, resulting in a 2.5% growth in its real GDP in 2023.¹¹³ Despite these positive developments, the potential benefits of these new partnerships are limited as Iran remains excluded from global capital markets.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, contrary to expectations of inducing regime change through sanctions,¹¹⁵ some contend that economic sanctions have constrained civil society's influence. A recent study found that sanctions impoverished the Iranian population, thus making it even more dependent on an increasingly militarised state.¹¹⁶ Remittances – which amount to a significant portion of many households' budgets – have plummeted, resulting in workers being unable to mobilise due to salary concerns.¹¹⁷ The Iranian middle and lower classes could benefit from a different economic coercion approach: Western countries could allow remittances to flow into Iran to “empower rather than harm Iranians seeking to hold their government to account”.¹¹⁸ However, such a policy seems currently unlikely as Iran accelerates the production of highly enriched uranium¹¹⁹ and backs its proxies to strike Western interests in the Middle East in the wake of Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip.¹²⁰

The sanctions imposed on Iran after the death of Mahsa “Jina” Amini and the brutal crackdown on her supporters have had an ambivalent impact. On the one hand, in a show of unity, many Western states have imposed a far-reaching set of sanctions on the Islamic Republic, highlighting their support for a vibrant grassroots movement committed to advancing women's rights. Despite differences in approach between the EU and the US on the right policy to contain Iran's nuclear project – with Washington imposing harsher sanctions on Tehran – many Western countries adopted similar sanctions. On the other hand, the new sanctions regime is likely to reproduce the same mistakes as previous ones, with the realistic possibility of harming ordinary Iranian citizens,¹²¹ while the regime will tighten its grip on Iranian social media, pursue an even more assertive regional policy,¹²² and develop its “resistance economy”.¹²³ Western states need to find a balance between hitting the Islamic Republic where it hurts and supporting civil society so that Iranians feel empowered to continue opposing the regime. Considering that the Iranian regime seems currently undeterred to change its domestic and foreign policies, it could be said

¹¹¹ Ebad Ebad. “Iran sanctions raise doubts about the success of economic pressure on Russia”, *Atlantic Council*, May 3, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-sanctions-raise-doubts-about-the-success-of-economic-pressure-on-russia/>.

¹¹² International Monetary Fund. IMF Data Mapper - Iran, IMF, 2024. <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/IRN>

¹¹³ Maziar Motamedi. “Iran's economy reveals power and limits of US sanctions”, *Al Jazeera*, February 2, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/2/2/irans-economy-reveals-power-and-limits-of-us-sanctions>; International Monetary Fund. IMF Data Mapper - Iran.

¹¹⁴ Motamedi. “Iran's economy reveals power and limits of US sanctions”.

¹¹⁵ U.S. Department of State. “Maximum Pressure Campaign on the Regime in Iran”, *U.S. Department of State*, April 4, 2019. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/maximum-pressure-campaign-on-the-regime-in-iran/>.

¹¹⁶ Narges Bajoghli. “Introduction: Studying the Impacts of Economic Sanctions in Iran: Everyday Life, Power, and Foreign Policy”. *Humanity Journal*, January 18, 2024. <https://humanityjournal.org/issue-14-2/introduction-studying-the-impacts-of-economic-sanctions-in-iran-everyday-life-power-and-foreign-policy/>.

¹¹⁷ Jamal, Abdi and Ryan, Costello. “Sanctions undermine Iranians' quest for freedom”, *Friends of Europe*, June 9, 2023. <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-sanctions-undermine-iranians-quest-for-freedom/>.

¹¹⁸ Abdi and Costello. “Sanctions undermine Iranians' quest for freedom”.

¹¹⁹ Kelsey Davenport. “Iran Accelerates Highly Enriched Uranium Production”, *Arms Control Association*, January/February 2024. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-01/news/iran-accelerates-highly-enriched-uranium-production>.

¹²⁰ Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh. “Why Iran Doesn't Want a War”, *The New York Times*, January 22, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/22/opinion/iran-war-middle-east.html>.

¹²¹ Bajoghli. “Introduction: Studying the Impacts of Economic Sanctions in Iran: Everyday Life, Power, and Foreign Policy”.

¹²² Daniel Byman and Seth G. Jones. “Can a Regional War Be Avoided in the Middle East?”, *CSIS*, January 17, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/can-regional-war-be-avoided-middle-east>.

¹²³ Motamedi. “Iran's economy reveals power and limits of US sanctions”.



that Western sanctions are merely symbolic, with a demonstrative effect of opposition to policies that do not adhere to international norms.

Section 6

Achievements and Challenges

More than a year after the death of Mahsa Amini, the regime's repression of the Iranian people has failed to quell the resistance. Journalists continue to oppose the government despite repeated imprisonments.¹²⁴ Many Iranian female athletes compete without the mandatory hijab,¹²⁵ famous actresses have removed their veils in public,¹²⁶ and many women continue to defy Iran's hijab law by driving their cars or using public transport without one, and more generally by going unveiled in public spaces.¹²⁷ Such dissent challenges the status quo by blurring the lines between private and public. Although the Quran does not explicitly state that wearing a hijab is mandatory, some Surahs state that women should not display their "charms".¹²⁸ Hence, outside the home or in the presence of men who are not family members, many Muslim women veil themselves.¹²⁹ By taking off the hijab in public, this strict separation of private and public becomes obscured.

In contrast to the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, when few Iranian men supported women as their rights were stripped away, many of them now stand with women in defiance of the regime. The movement catalysed a noticeable change in men's perspectives.¹³⁰ Young people are challenging long-standing gender biases and embracing more egalitarian views. That is a crucial development in a society where traditional views on gender roles have long been entrenched. The active participation of young men in protests and advocacy campaigns is evidence of a growing awareness and a move away from passive acceptance of patriarchal structures. Men have paid a high price for participating in the protests. As previously discussed, the Iranian regime has executed men following "sham trials", a tactic seemingly aimed at deterring them from joining the movement.¹³¹ While men's support for the movement ushers in a new era of democracy rooted in women's rights, it remains a vital concern for men not to overshadow

¹²⁴ Al Jazeera, 'Iran Lodges Hijab Case against Journalists Day after Temporary Release', *Al Jazeera*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/15/iran-lodges-hijab-case-against-journalists-day-after-temporary-release>.

¹²⁵ Jon Gambrell, "Iranian Athlete Who Competed without Hijab Returns to Tehran", *PBS NewsHour*, October 19, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/iranian-athlete-who-competed-without-hijab-returns-to-tehran>.

¹²⁶ Shabnam von Hein, "Iran: No Headscarf, No Job for Protesting Actresses", *DW*, June 11, 2023.

<https://www.dw.com/en/iran-no-headscarf-no-job-for-protesting-actresses/a-67322600#:~:text=Iranian%20actresses%20who%20defy%20Iran%27s,increasingly%20high%20price%20for%20protest.>

¹²⁷ Amidi Faranak, "'Your Car Will Be Confiscated': Iran Women Defy Hijab Law despite Threats", *BBC News*, June 12, 2023.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65842130>; The New Arab, "Iran: New Rules Bar Women from Tehran Metro without Hijab", *The New Arab*, April 10, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/news/iran-new-rules-bar-women-tehran-metro-without-hijab>; Patrick Wintour, "Women Not Wearing Hijab to Be Banned from Tehran Metro – Reports", *The Guardian*, April 10, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/10/women-not-wearing-hijab-to-be-banned-from-tehran-metro-reports>.

¹²⁸ Quran. "An-Nur 31", *Quran.com*. <https://quran.com/24/31?translations=95,17,18,19,20,22,85,84,101>

¹²⁹ Anna Piel. "Muslim Women and the Politics of the Headscarf", *JSTOR Daily*. April 6, 2022. <https://daily.istor.org/muslim-women-and-the-politics-of-the-headscarf/>

¹³⁰ Fariba Parsa. "Mahsa Amini's Legacy: A New Movement for Iranian Women." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 19, 2023. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90583>.

¹³¹ Amnesty International, "Iran: Death Penalty sought in sham trials." *Amnesty International*, November 16, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/6219/2022/en/>

women. While the increased visibility of men within the movement is positive, the focus should remain on women's experiences and leadership, a balance that could prove delicate to maintain.

Although caution must be exercised, it seems that the demonstrations have led some government officials and their affiliates to consider possible changes to the enforcement of the hijab law. Indeed, the headquarters of Amr-e-be-Marouf – a conservative institute affiliated with the government whose aim is to uphold Islamic norms – said in a statement that the means used by the authorities to force women to wear the hijab were “outdated” and “defeated” and that Iran needed to find “effective” and “inexpensive” ways of enforcing the law.¹³² Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, the President of the Islamic Consultative Assembly suggested that some changes were needed, saying that the government should prioritise Iran's economy over any other domestic matters.¹³³ He also said that on issues such as the hijab and chastity, the government should learn “from all the methods [...] used in the past” and “review and think about [them].”

Nevertheless, despite that the Iranian population remains actively opposed to its government's discriminatory policies against women, members of the international community continue to impose sanctions on Iran and international and human rights organisations continue to report the violation of the rights of Iranians, Tehran has yet to amend its laws that discriminate against women. In April 2023, the Iranian authorities began installing cameras in public places and thoroughfares to identify and penalise unveiled women.¹³⁴ According to the Iranian Interior Minister, women spotted on surveillance footage without the hijab will first receive a warning by text message. If she receives a second warning, she will be denied access to public services, such as banks, government offices, universities, and schools, and a third warning may lead to legal action. In July 2023, the morality police resumed patrols on foot and in vehicles throughout the country.¹³⁵ On 20 September 2023, the parliament passed the Hijab and Chastity Bill, which provides for penalties of up to 10 years imprisonment for violations of the government-imposed dress code.¹³⁶ The bill further equates refusal to wear the hijab with “nudity”, and offenders can be flogged and fined up to 360 million Iranian rials (\$720).¹³⁷ They also face travel restrictions and deprivation of Internet access. The bill penalises Iranians, including businesses and restaurants, that encourage or permit immoral behaviour, such as inappropriate dress.¹³⁸ This bill, which still has to be approved by the Guardian Council, reaffirms the Iranian government's desire to stifle the women's movement while confirming its view of women as second-class citizens.

Even though the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement has not had a flagrant impact on current legislation in Iran, it has succeeded in demonstrating that the question of women's rights can unite a large part of society and be used as a lever to mobilise and demand change. Iranian women, determined to change the social norms imposed on them following the 1979 revolution, enjoy much broader social support than in the past. Research conducted by GAMAAN has shown that

¹³² Vivian Yee and Leily Nikounazar. “Businesses Caught in Cross-Fire as Iran Enforces Hijab Law”, *The New York Times*, May 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/05/world/middleeast/iran-hijab-law-businesses.html>.

¹³³ Yee and Nikounazar. “Businesses Caught in Cross-Fire as Iran Enforces Hijab Law”.

¹³⁴ Reuters. “Iran Installs Cameras in Public Places to Identify, Penalise Unveiled Women”, *Reuters*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-installs-cameras-public-places-identify-penalise-unveiled-women-police-2023-04-08/>.

¹³⁵ Artemis Moshtaghian, Hande Atay Alam, and Kathleen Magramo. “Iran's Morality Police Resume Headscarf Patrols”, *State Media Saysé*, CNN, July 17, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/16/middleeast/iran-morality-police-hijab-patrols-intl-hnk/index.html>.

¹³⁶ United States Institute of Peace. “Parliament Passes New ‘Hijab and Chastity’ Bill”, *USIP*, September 25, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/sep/25/parliament-passes-new-%E2%80%99Chijab-and-chastity%E2%80%99D-bill>.

¹³⁷ Ravina, Shamdasani. “Iran – Concerns over Chastity and Hijab Bill”, *OHCHR*, September 22, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/09/iran-concerns-over-chastity-and-hijab-bill>.

¹³⁸ United States Institute of Peace. “Parliament Passes New ‘Hijab and Chastity’ Bill”.



the vast majority of Iranians, both in the country and throughout the diaspora, regardless of their religious affiliation, support the protests and oppose the Islamic Republic. As such, 80% of those surveyed in Iran support the protests, with 67% of them believing the protests will succeed, while members of the diaspora overwhelmingly support the protests, with 90% of them believing that they will achieve their goals.¹³⁹

If the demonstrations that followed Mahsa Amini's death have shown the Iranian government and the world anything, it is that Iranian women are active agents of change, seeking to ensure that their rights are upheld. Although a political revolution has not taken place yet, it seems to have already occurred in the minds of Iranians, who will most likely continue to support a movement for change to bring about gender equality and democracy in Iran.

¹³⁹ Ammar Maleki and Pooyan Tamimi Arab, "Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2022 Nationwide Protests", GAMAAN, February 4, 2023. https://gamaan.org/2023/02/04/protests_survey/.



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