



July 2026

The Changing Trajectory of Protests in Iran:

From Reformist Hope to the Search for Rapid Change

I. Introduction: Setting the Scene

The bloody protests of January 2026 in Iran, which left thousands dead and injured, once again demonstrated that social and political protest in the Islamic Republic is not a temporary or isolated phenomenon, but rather has been an enduring and dynamic feature of the country's political life. The intensity of the state's security response to these protests, the scale and geographic spread of the unrest, and the messages contained within the slogans chanted during the protests all raise important questions about the trajectory of the Iranian protest movement, its discursive transformation and the future of state–society relations. These questions require historically grounded and context-sensitive analysis, particularly for policymakers and state and international institutions.

Across all major waves of protest in Iran from the early decades following the 1979 Revolution to the present time popular mobilization has never been restricted to the direct action of citizens and civil society actors. Rather, protests in Iran have consistently unfolded and taken shape in interaction with opposition political actors and a diverse range of opposition currents, both inside and outside the country.

These various political currents, with their differing aims and strategies, have at times sought to represent or steer protest movements, and at other times have merely reflected, amplified, or capitalized on them politically, or through the media depending on the historical moment and the balance of power.

Given the wide range of discontent and protest in Iran, this report does not attempt to cover every incident of protest or mobilization that has occurred. Instead, it focuses on a selected set of the more significant protests that have taken place since the 1979 revolution, chosen on the basis of criteria such as their geographic scope, the intensity and pattern of the state's response to the protest, the extent to which protester demands moved from economic grievances to political and structural claims, the diversity of those participating in them, the dominant discourse of each protest wave, and their historical impact on subsequent mobilizations. This review begins with the unrest that occurred in Mashhad in 1992 and extends through the most recent protests of January 2026.

The central focus of this analysis is the transformation of protest discourses particularly over the three-year period between the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, with its rights-based and democratic slogans, and the protests of January 2026. The key question is: what are the factors that have led part of society to move away from peaceful strategies and toward options that seem to promise greater speed and decisiveness, but which also come at higher costs and greater risks.

Importantly, these tendencies are not necessarily voiced by a wholly different group from earlier protesters. Rather, some of the very people who participated in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement with democratic demands may, under new conditions, come to prefer different priorities and strategies.

The aim of this report is to offer an analytical picture of this discursive shift and its possible implications for the future of Iran's political and social transformations, a picture that may help policymakers and international institutions develop a more precise understanding of the internal dynamics shaping Iranian society.

II. Major Waves of Protest in Post-Revolutionary Iran

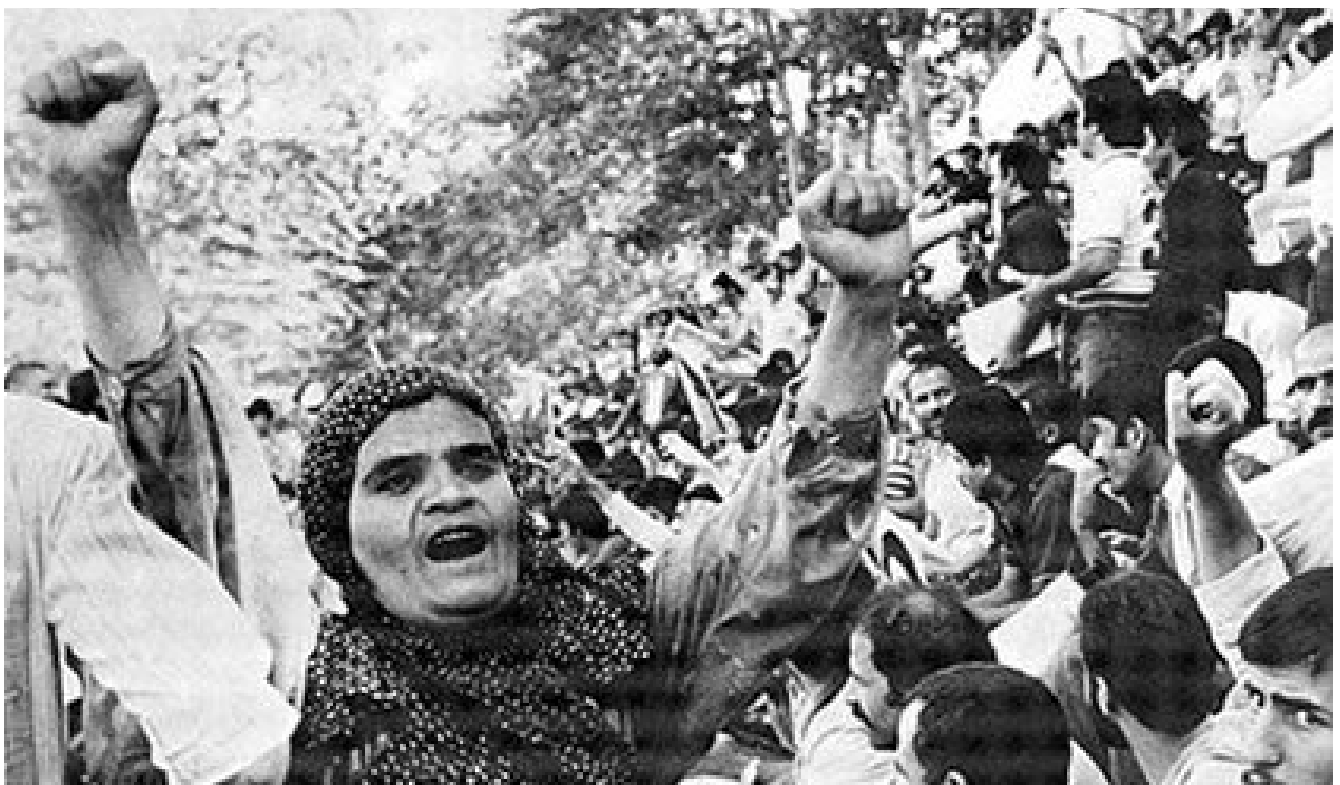
1. The 1992 Kooy-e Tolab Unrest in Mashhad: Economic Grievance Meets State Force

In June 1992, unrest broke out in the city of Mashhad, beginning in the neighborhood of Kooy-e Tolab, a marginalized, lower-income neighborhood. The initial trigger for the unrest was the municipality's decision to demolish unauthorized homes in the area, an action that directly threatened neighborhood residents with the loss of shelter.

On the surface, the protest centered on a localized and livelihood-related demand: stopping the demolition of homes. Yet it exposed the deeper fractures in society as its roots lay in urban inequality, the growth of marginalized, informal settlements in the post-Iran-Iraq war period, and the economic pressures of the early 1990s. For this reason, the protest quickly moved beyond that of a limited urban grievance.

Spontaneous Anger and the Absence of a Coherent Message and Demand

Within a short period, the protests escalated into direct clashes with the security forces. Reports described attacks on government buildings, the burning of certain premises, and even the seizure of several police stations. These developments made clear that the unrest was no longer merely about a municipal decision; it had transformed into a direct confrontation with state institutions.



At the same time, unlike later waves of protest, this movement lacked a coherent political message and a clearly articulated set of structural slogans. There was no visible demand for regime change, nor an explicit ideological critique of the system. Rather, the unrest was primarily an angry and spontaneous reaction by the urban poor, who lacked both political organization and recognizable leadership. It is precisely this absence of a coherent political discourse that distinguishes this unrest from the later student protests of 1999, the 2009 Green Movement, and the waves of protest that occurred in the 2010s.

Patterns of Repression and the State's Response

The government's response was swift and severe. According to official reports and news sources from the time, at least nine people were killed during the unrest, six of them police officers; dozens were injured, and more than 300 people were arrested. In addition, four protesters were executed after speedy trials. ([Amnesty](#))

The swift issuance of death sentences in response to a local protest reflected the government's stance that it would take a hardline approach, treating such protests as a national security matter and meting out harsh judicial punishments. This approach would be repeated on a far larger scale during subsequent nationwide uprisings.

Scope of the Unrest and the Role of Political Forces

The unrest remained essentially local and did not spread to the national level. Unlike in later protests, there was no visible role for intellectuals, students, or organized political forces on the ground. Nor did either domestic or exiled opposition groups play a decisive role in shaping or directing it. In this sense, Kooy-e Tolab stands as an early example of spontaneous, leaderless protest, a pattern that would later reappear on a national scale in December 2017, January 2018 and November 2019.

Historical Significance and Its Place in the Evolution of Protest

The historical importance of Kooy-e Tolab lies not in its immediate achievements but in its structural place within the trajectory of post-revolutionary protest in Iran. The event demonstrated that:

1. Economic and urban grievances can rapidly escalate into direct confrontation with state institutions.
2. Protests by the urban poor may take on a violent character while lacking political organization.
3. The state is willing to deploy severe security and judicial measures, even in response to local unrest.

In this sense, Kooy-e Tolab may be seen as the starting point of a longer trajectory in which local economic protests, over the following three decades, evolved into nationwide waves of unrest with demands that were explicitly political and overtly challenged the system.

2. The 1999 Student Protests: A New Generation Confronts the Limits of Reform

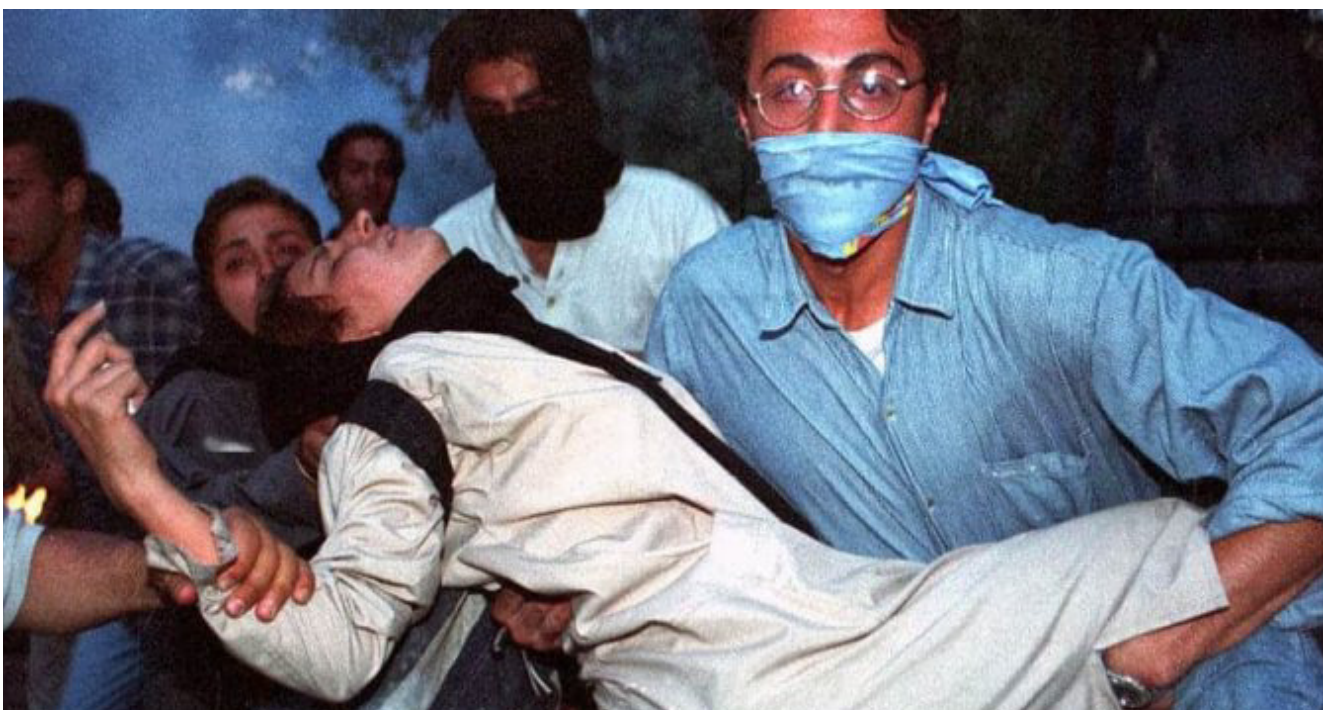
The protests of July 1999 began after the judiciary ordered the closure of the reformist newspaper Salam. The paper was considered to be one of the most important platforms for the reformist current and supporters of President Mohammad Khatami's government. Its closure took place in a context in which the student body and the broader reformist base already viewed the political openings of the Khatami era as fragile and under pressure from unelected institutions. In response, students gathered in the Tehran University dormitory complex, calling for freedom of the press and an end to the shrinking of political space. Thus, the protests' initial spark was rooted in a specific and rights-based demand: the defense of freedom of expression and the media.

Rapid Shift in Discourse and Demands

During the protest's very initial hours, its demands were largely framed within the language of law and reform from within the system. However, the overnight attack on the student dormitories by security forces and plainclothes groups affiliated with the Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah (both are state-sponsored paramilitary militias) marked a turning point.

During the attack on the student dormitory, doors were broken down, students were beaten, and property was destroyed. At least one student, Ezzat Ebrahim-Nejad, was killed, and hundreds were injured. Reports also indicate the mass arrest of students that same night and in the days that followed. ([HRW](#))

News of the dormitory attack moved the protest beyond the university campus and into the streets of Tehran, before spreading to several other cities. Over the course of a few days, the slogans evolved from defending press freedom to broader criticism of the structures of power. Some chants directly targeted the Supreme Leader an indication that repression could transform a limited reformist demand into a wider challenge to political legitimacy.



Patterns of Repression and Human Cost

According to human rights reports, at least four people were killed during these protests, and approximately 1,200 to 1,400 people were arrested. Many of those detained later received heavy judicial sentences. ([Amnesty](#))

The crackdown was carried out by security forces with the support of plainclothes groups, while the state's official narrative framed the protests as "riots" and the result of "enemy interference." This pattern, combining heavy-handed suppression by the security forces and building a political narrative about the protests and protesters, would later be repeated in response to subsequent protests.

The Role of Civil Society and Political Forces

Unlike Kooy-e Tolab, this protest had an organized core in the form of the student movement. Both the Islamic Student Associations and reformist activists played a central role in its outbreak. However, the reformist government either could not or would not effectively protect students against the security and judicial apparatus, an experience that gradually made part of the younger student generation more skeptical of the possibility of reform from within and aware of the limitations of it. It was at this moment that the gap between the social base of reformism and the government's actual ability to act in the face of unelected institutions became visible and apparent.

Historical Significance and Its Place in the Evolution of Protest

The Tehran University dormitory protests can be seen as the first broad confrontation between the post-war generation and the structures of power, in which:

1. A demand for press freedom developed into a broader challenge to the political system.
2. Repression by the security forces deepened the rift between the student body and the ruling system.
3. The practical limits of reformism in the face of security institutions were laid bare.

If Kooy-e Tolab in 1992 was an example of a localized protest focused on economic issues, the 1999 student protests were an example of student-led protest within the framework of reformism that was met with harsh repression. This experience planted the seeds of distrust among some members of the younger generations towards the idea that gradual reform from within is possible seeds that would grow and emerge more visibly in the 2009 Green Movement, and later in the protests that occurred in the 2010s.



3. The 2009 Green Movement: From Questioning the Ballot Box to Questioning Political Legitimacy

The protests that came to be known as the “Green Movement” emerged following the June 2009 presidential elections and the announcement of results that were disputed by many, and perceived by a large segment of society as marred by extensive fraud. Once again, the trigger was a specific and limited demand: a recount, or annulment of the election results. However, it is important to recall that the protests unfolded against a backdrop of accumulated political grievances, media restrictions, and the failures of the reform movement in the preceding decade. Therefore, the unrest quickly spread through Tehran and other major cities, drawing millions of participants particularly from the urban middle class, students, and the social base of the reformist movement. The wide scale of participation and the diversity among the protesters are some elements that distinguished this movement from previous protests and gave it historical significance.

Shifting Protest Discourse: From Questioning the Vote to Questioning the System

The Green Movement’s initial political slogan “Where Is My Vote?” centered on specific issues having to do with voting rights, electoral transparency, and accountability. However, as the protests grew, the slogans also moved beyond electoral questions and evolved into a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the power structure.

Chants such as “Death to the Dictator” and “Death to Khamenei” reflected the fact that some protesters had moved from contesting an election result to openly criticizing the leadership and the political system itself. From a discursive perspective, the Green Movement occupies an intermediate position between reformism from within the system and a more fundamental rejection of the system as a whole. Its initial hegemonic discourse remained that of “reform within the framework of the Constitution,” but out in the streets, the gap between that framework and the demands of part of the protest base became increasingly visible. This duality later proved important in understanding subsequent discursive shifts.



Patterns of Repression and the Human Toll

The state's response to these large-scale protests was expansive and severe. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij, and the police moved to contain the protests through mass arrests, street violence, and tight media control. According to human rights reports, thousands of people were arrested, and at least dozens were killed during the protests, or while in custody. ([Amnesty](#)) The case of the Kahrizak detention center, and the deaths of individuals such as Mohsen Ruholamini and Amir Javadifar, became emblematic of the widespread human rights violations of that period. ([HRC](#))

In February 2011, the house arrest of opposition political figures Mir-Hossein Mousavi and his wife Zahra Rahnavaard reflected the state's decision to contain these protests over the long term.

The Role of the Opposition and Civil Society

The Green Movement was characterized by a much broader civic character than previous protest movements. Emerging social media networks, universities, and the reformist social base all played an important role in mobilizing the protesters. At the same time, its formal leadership was defined through the figure of the "Green Leaders," and no extensive horizontal organizational structure took shape. Opposition groups abroad played a largely supportive role and provided media coverage, but failed to build an effective structural connection with the movement's internal social base. This experience would become important in later discussions surrounding the "crisis of representation" and the limitations of centralized leadership in subsequent protest waves.

Historical Significance and Its Connection to Later Protests

The Green Movement marked a turning point in the history of protest in the Islamic Republic. For the first time since the 1979 revolution, it revealed, overtly and on a mass scale the rift between the state and a significant part of the urban middle class, while placing the question of political legitimacy at the center of public contestation. Although the movement did not produce structural change, its repression and the complete closure of reformist channels led, in the years that followed, to a gradual erosion of confidence in the reformist strategy itself. In this sense, the Green Movement can be understood as a stage in which the possibility of reform from within had not yet been fully abandoned, but the seeds of doubt about its effectiveness had already been planted doubts that would surface more openly and in a more radical form in the protests that followed in December 2017–January 2018.



4. The Protests of December 2017 – January 2018: The Street Abandons Reformism

In late December 2017 and into January 2018, one of the most significant waves of protest in Iran emerged, combining economic and political grievances. This was the first nationwide uprising since the 2009 Green Movement. The protests began on 28 December 2017 in Mashhad and, within a matter of days, spread to more than 160 cities across the country.

Unlike the protests of 2009, which began in Tehran and were instigated by the elections, this wave of protests started outside the capital, and was rooted in economic discontent. Its impetus was a combination of economic factors: recession, unemployment, widespread corruption, declining purchasing power, and a growing sense of injustice in the allocation of public resources.

From Economic Demands to Systemic Critique: Shifts in Protest Slogans and Discourse

In the early stages, the protest chants primarily focused on rising prices, poverty, corruption, and economic mismanagement. Protesters objected to the way in which the country was being governed and to state budget priorities, particularly the allocation of resources to regional policies and military spending instead of improving people's living conditions. Yet the protests quickly moved beyond the framework of purely economic demands. In various cities, chants such as "Death to Khamenei," "Death to the Dictator," and "Khamenei, Shame on You, Leave the Country Alone" were heard. These slogans indicated that part of the protest movement had moved beyond criticism of the economic governance to criticism of the Supreme Leader and the political system as a whole.

From a discursive perspective, December 2017 marked an important turning point in the evolution of protests: for the first time since 2009, the street distanced itself from the hegemony of reformist discourse. A chant that was really popularized during this period, translating as "Conservative, Reformist, the Game Is Over," became an expression of the end of any trust in the idea of change from within the system, and the beginning of rejection of the political order as a whole.



Patterns of Repression and the Human Toll

Once again, the governmental response was swift and harsh. The police, the Basij, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps were all involved in suppressing the protests. According to official figures, at least 26 people were killed during the unrest; however, human rights sources and independent observers reported higher numbers of both casualties and detainees. Thousands were arrested, and reports emerged of beatings and ill-treatment in detention. ([Amnesty](#))

Although the severity of the suppression did not reach the scale of what was to come in November 2019, it demonstrated that the state was prepared to resort quickly to harsh security measures even against protests that lacked formal leadership.

The Role of the Opposition and Civil Society

During these protests, domestic opposition groups were unable, given security and media restrictions, to play an organizing or leadership role. The protests were largely spontaneous and unfolded without a formal framework or organization. The opposition abroad was active mainly at the media level, but failed to establish a structural connection with the social base inside the country. The absence of formal leadership was one of the features that distinguished this wave of protest from the Green Movement of 2009, and this lack of leadership would later become significant in discussions of the “crisis of representation.”

Historical Significance and Its Connection to Later Protests

The protests of December 2017–January 2018 can be seen as the point at which the hegemony of reformism in the streets was broken. These protests were the first nationwide demonstrations since 2009 that did not form in response to a political event like an election, were not centered on Tehran, and did not remain within the framework of reform from within the system. At this stage, two important changes took place:

1. The center of gravity of protest shifted from the urban middle class to smaller cities and more economically vulnerable social groups.
2. The discourse moved from criticism of the government to criticism of the structure of power as a whole.

These shifts, in turn, paved the way for the further radicalization of protest in November 2019, and later for the emergence of discourses advocating a more complete break with the system in the years that followed.



5. Bloody November: Fuel Protest of 2019 and the Unprecedented State Crackdown

November 2019 of an increase in the price of fuel. The decision, implemented overnight and without prior notice, was made in the context of rising inflation, depreciation of the national currency, growing poverty, and the erosion of the middle class. The protests initially centered on the rising cost of living and mounting economic pressure, but within days they spread to more than one hundred cities across the country and became one of the most extensive nationwide protest waves since the 1979 Revolution. ([HRW](#))

Unlike the 2009 Green Movement, which was centered on the urban middle class, in the protests of November 2019, residents of smaller, more peripheral cities and persons from more modest backgrounds and lower-income social groups played a much more prominent role. This shift in the social composition of protest is important in understanding the broader transformation of protest politics in Iran.

Escalating Anger in Protest Slogans and Discourse

At the outset, the protest chants and demands were primarily economic and livelihood-related. However, the slogans quickly moved beyond criticism of the government's economic policies. According to a report published by BBC Persian on 1 June 2020, the protests of November 2019 were accompanied by slogans that went beyond purely economic concerns, and in some cities demonstrators chanted phrases such as "Neither Gaza, Nor Lebanon, My Life for Iran" (a critique of the government's priorities). The report [documents](#) the broad spread of the protests across different Iranian cities and argues that the scope of public anger had expanded to include both the government's economic policies and its foreign policy priorities. If December 2017–January 2018 marked the beginning of a break with the hegemony of reformism, November 2019 was the stage at which economic protest became directly fused with political anger and rejection of the structure of power. The distance between "livelihood demands" and a "challenge to legitimacy" became much shorter.



Patterns of Repression and the Human Toll

The crackdown in November 2019 was far more severe than that of December 2017–January 2018, and many observers regard it as one of the bloodiest suppressions of protest in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Security forces, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij, and the police used live ammunition, tear gas, and mass arrests in cities across the country. According to Amnesty International, at least 304 people were killed. Others, including Reuters, citing internal sources, put the death toll at around 1,500. Thousands were arrested.

One of the most striking features of the government's response to these protests was the near-total nationwide internet shutdown for approximately one week, a measure aimed at restricting the circulation of images and information. This level of communications blackout reflected the government's preparedness to suppress unrest rapidly and by force.

The Role of the Opposition and Civil Society

The protests of November 2019 had no organized internal leadership. Neither reformists nor other domestic political actors played a guiding or organizational role.

The protests were largely spontaneous and unfolded in the absence of a centralized or hierarchical structure.

The opposition abroad and international media gave extensive coverage to the protests, increasing political and media pressure on the government. Yet inside the country, the absence of clear leadership and organized civil networks limited the possibility of turning the protests into a coherent political project.

Once again, this lack of organization later became important in analyses of the “crisis of representation” and the growing appeal of more centralized leadership.

Historical Significance and Its Connection to Later Waves

The November 2019 protests marked a turning point on three levels:

1. A sharp escalation in the intensity of repression and the normalization of the widespread use of live ammunition.
2. A deeper fusion of economic crisis with rejection of the political structure.
3. A shortening of the distance between what could trigger a protest about livelihoods into openly anti-government demonstrations.

This protest made clear that the street's break with reformist discourse and calls for structural, systematic change of the political system would be met with massive state violence that would have staggering human costs. The scale of the crackdown, combined with the nationwide internet shutdown, also deepened among parts of society a sense of abandonment and of the complete closure of lawful avenues for change an element that is essential to understanding the further radicalization of demands in the years that followed.

6. The 2021 Khuzestan Water Protests: Environmental Breakdown, Regional Discrimination, and Political Discontent Converge

During the summer of 2021, by the middle of July, a severe crisis in access to drinking and agricultural water led to protests in the province of Khuzestan. The backdrop to these protests was a combination of factors: declining rainfall, drought, mismanagement of water resources, and projects diverting water from the Karun, Karkheh, and Dez rivers to other parts of the country. Demonstrations first took place in cities such as Ahvaz, Susangerd, Shadegan, Shush, and Bandar Mahshahr, and centered on access to drinking water, agricultural water rights, and an end to water transfer projects. (IHR)

Unlike in December 2017 and November 2019, these protests were not ignited by a sudden economic decision, but rather, they resulted from a gradual and accumulated environmental crisis that reached a breaking point.

Government Mismanagement, Unequal Development, and Ethnic Discrimination

At the outset, the demands mainly centered on environmental and livelihood-related issues, but they quickly expanded to touch on other developmental and political matters. Protesters pointed not only to water scarcity, but also to regional discrimination, unequal development, unemployment, and chronic mismanagement.

Given the demographic composition of the province and the significant presence of Iranian Arabs, some protest chants and slogans also hinted at the issue of ethnic discrimination and the long-standing marginalization of certain ethnic minorities. In some demonstrations, explicitly anti-government chants were also heard, showing that an environmental grievance crisis could lead to criticism of the broader structure of governance. At the same time, the hegemonic discourse of the protests remained centered on the right to water and the right to life, rather than a direct rejection of the political system as a whole.



From the standpoint of discursive transformation, this wave of protests demonstrated that environmental issues can no longer be separated from politics and may become a platform for expressing deeper forms of social discontent.

Patterns of Repression

Security and law enforcement forces responded with speed and violence. Riot police, regular police, and the Basij were deployed to disperse the gatherings. According to independent sources, at least six people were killed and 361 people were injured or arrested. ([Hrana](#))

Internet access was restricted or cut in parts of the province in order to control the circulation of images and reports.

The acts of repression, including the use of live ammunition, mass arrests, and internet restrictions, closely resembled those seen in previous nationwide protests, even though the geographic scope of these protests remained limited.

The Role of the Opposition and Civil Society

These protests lacked organized leadership and were largely local and spontaneous in nature. Formal civil society did not play an organizing role, although environmental activists and some civil society figures expressed their support for the protestors' demands in the media.

The government largely attributed the crisis to drought, while also warning of "foreign enemies" seeking to exploit the unrest. The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, while acknowledging the "right of the people to protest," also emphasized the need to distinguish between protest and "enemy incitement." ([VOA](#))

Historical Significance and Its Connection to Later Waves

Although the protests in Khuzestan did not expand to reach the scale of the nationwide protests that took place in December 2017–January 2018 or November 2019, they were significant in several important ways:

1. They showed that environmental crises can quickly become social and political crises.
2. They highlighted the link between regional discrimination, developmental inequality, and political dissatisfaction.
3. They reaffirmed that even in response to fairly localized protests, the government would use the same modes of repression to quash protest.

In terms of the broader trajectory of protest in Iran, this wave marked a stage in which the right to survival water, environment, livelihood became one of the central axes of public demand. This same connection between dignity, life, and livability would later be rearticulated on a broader and more rights-based plane in the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement.

7. The 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” Uprising: The Rise of a Rights-Based Discourse and Civil Resistance

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests began on 16 September 2022, following the death in custody of Mahsa Jina Amini, who had been arrested by the so-called “morality police” for what the authorities described as a violation of the mandatory hijab regulations. Her death rapidly became a symbol of deep public discontent not only with compulsory veiling, but also with the broader architecture of coercion and control which has been a hallmark of policy making in the Islamic Republic. Protests first occurred in Kurdish-majority areas and quickly spread to Tehran and dozens of other cities. Unlike the protests of November 2019, which had focused on economic issues, these protests centered on questions of dignity, bodily autonomy, and individual freedom, and then rapidly evolved into a nationwide challenge to the structures of repression and discrimination.

A Vision of State–Society Relations Grounded in Gender Equality and Fundamental Rights

The central slogan, “Woman, Life, Freedom” rooted in Kurdish women’s movements, became the primary refrain of this uprising. At first, the protest chants emphasized freedom of choice in dress and women’s dignity, but soon expanded to broader demands for political freedoms, social justice, minority rights, and government accountability. Unlike the protest waves of 2017–18 and 2019, whose scattered chants were often driven by anger, these protests retained a coherent, rights-based, and civic framework of meaning.

The dominant discourse was one of democratization, gender equality, and the rejection of discrimination. Even the chants and slogans most directly challenging the system were articulated within an ethical framework grounded in human dignity. The imprint of decades of activism by Iran’s women’s movement and related civil society organizations was clearly visible in this uprising. Girls and young people with a high degree of gender consciousness played a central role in organizing and sustaining the protests. ([IHR](#))

From the perspective of discursive transformation, this movement stood at the opposite end from the protests of November 2019: if the November 2019 protests encapsulated the anger that had been fueled by economic struggles and desperation over livelihood, the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests symbolized a conscious demand to redefine the relationship between state and society on the basis of fundamental rights.

Methods of Action and Civil Disobedience

One of the defining features of this movement was its extensive reliance on civil disobedience. Refusing compulsory veiling in public spaces, removing headscarves in the streets, creating protest songs, staging artistic performances, and engaging in diverse forms of cultural resistance inside and outside the country all demonstrated that the struggle was not confined to sporadic episodes, or the street alone, but that it had now spilled into everyday life. This pattern of resistance continued even after the large-scale street demonstrations subsided, producing tangible changes in the public sphere.

Repression and the Human Toll

The state's response was severe and violent. Security forces used live ammunition, metal pellets, and conducted mass arrests. Human rights reports indicate that by the end of 2023, at least 551 people, including women and children, had been killed during the protests, and tens of thousands had been arrested. ([Amnesty](#))

Documented reports also emerged of deliberate shootings aimed at protesters' eyes, sexual violence, and the issuance of death sentences following unfair trials. Widespread internet shutdowns and pressure on the families of those killed formed part of the state's strategy to control the narrative.

The Role of the Opposition and Civil Society

Like many of the protests preceding it, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement lacked a centralized formal leadership. However, a broad network of women activists, students, artists, and civil society actors played a role in it through horizontal and decentralized forms of organizing. Unlike the protests of the Green Movement in 2009, when there were clearly identifiable symbolic leaders, the emphasis this time was on decentralized networks. Outside the country, attempts were made to form a coalition among opposition figures, including during a meeting held at Georgetown University, which aimed to bring together several prominent opponents of the Islamic Republic. That initiative, however, did not endure, largely because of disagreements over strategy and leadership.

Despite the failure to build a lasting political coalition, the movement left behind a concrete and social achievement: through sustained civil resistance, the demand for freedom of choice in dress was transformed into an everyday reality. Since these protests, in many public spaces, and even in some workplaces, women have appeared without observing compulsory hijab. This change demonstrates that sustained civic action can produce practical transformation even under conditions of repression.

Historical Significance and Its Place in the Evolution of Protest

The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement can be seen as the high point of the hegemony of a civic, democracy-oriented discourse in post-revolutionary Iran. This movement:

1. Elevated protest from economic or electoral demands to demands centered on dignity and fundamental freedom.
2. Shifted women's role from participation to symbolic leadership.
3. Demonstrated that horizontal organizing and civil disobedience could be sustained for months.
4. Showed that despite severe repression, these efforts did not disappear quickly.

This movement has been inscribed in Iran's political memory as one of the broadest and most identity-defining protests since 1979. Its significance for understanding subsequent developments lies in the fact that it showed that democratic and rights-based values still retain hegemonic potential even if, three years later, parts of society would begin to consider different options for other reasons.

8. The December 2025–January 2026 Protests: Escalating State Violence and Protest Radicalization

The protests that began in late December 2025 and into January 2026 emerged against the backdrop of a deep economic crisis: a sharp decline in the value of the Iranian rial, soaring inflation, and widespread livelihood-related discontent. The initial spark came from strikes and protests by merchants in Tehran’s Grand Bazaar over the exchange rate and rising costs, and quickly developed into street demonstrations and public calls to mobilize in cities across the country. Unlike the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, which began with demands centered on dignity and individual freedom, this wave of protest was once again triggered by accumulated economic pressures. Like earlier protests, it rapidly expanded demands for structural and political change.

From Economic Grievances to Decisive Political Change

The protest’s initial demands were economic in nature, but within a short period the slogans explicitly challenged the system. In many cities, chants were directed against the leadership of the Islamic Republic, and in some gatherings slogans were heard in support of Reza Pahlavi (the son of the deposed Shah of Iran), including even “Long Live the Shah.” The simultaneity of these two types of slogans an explicit rejection of the current leadership and a symbolic turn toward the pre-1979 order suggested an intensified search for alternatives among parts of society. Calls issued by Reza Pahlavi for nationwide demonstrations and strikes also reverberated across the media and social networks, fueling debate over the role of exiled opposition figures in Iran’s domestic political space.

From a discursive perspective, these protests marked a stage in which economically driven protests and demands rapidly moved towards a call for decisive structural change. The distance between livelihood-related grievances and the demand for a complete break with the system had become markedly shorter than in previous protests.



The Intensity and Unprecedented Nature of the Repression

The state's response was exceptionally swift and, in its intensity, highly unusual. Multiple reports indicate that a significant number of protesters were killed by direct gunfire within the first two days alone. Human rights observers and analysts have described both the speed and the initial scale of the killings as unprecedented in comparison with earlier protest waves. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, police forces, the Basij, and plainclothes agents used live ammunition, tear gas, and mass arrests. Widespread internet shutdowns and disruptions to telephone communications were also imposed, reportedly to prevent the circulation of images and documentation of the crackdown.

The number of victims remains disputed and continues to be a matter of contention. The Human Rights Activists in Iran ([HRANA](#)), in a report titled *Crimson Winter* covering the first fifty days following the outbreak of nationwide protests on December 28, 2025, documented a total of 7,007 fatalities. The Iranian government, by contrast, announced an official figure of 3,117, while some external sources have suggested that the real number may be in the tens of thousands. What most reports do agree on, however, is the extensive use of live ammunition, the scale of arrests, and the violent treatment of detainees in custody. In the political memory of Iranian society, this wave has come to be seen as one of the most brutal state responses to protest, particularly in terms of the speed and ferocity of the initial crackdown

State Narrative-Building and the Battle over Interpretation

Along with crushing the protests on the ground, the authorities also began an intense campaign to create and promote their own official narrative of the events. State media described the protests as “riots,” “foreign interference,” and the work of subversive agents. Some official statements emphasized the role of foreign calls to protest and Persian-language media outlets based abroad, and claimed that armed terrorists had been present among the crowds and had been mobilized and prepared by hostile forces.

This narrative-building served two main functions:

1. To delegitimize the protests in domestic public opinion;
2. To justify the intensity of the repression as a form of “defense of national security.”



By contrast, independent media outlets and human rights organizations presented a very different account of both the nature of the protests and the scale of the repression. In this sense, the protests of December 2025-January 2026 also became one of the most intense arenas where a battle over narratives and interpretation were waged.

The Role of Civil Society and Political Responses

During this period, domestic civil society was severely constrained and had little capacity for formal organization. Even so, numerous statements were issued by civil activists. In one statement, Mir-Hossein Mousavi condemned the repression and called for fundamental change and accountability within the power structure. In addition, a “statement by 17 activists” was published, emphasizing the direct responsibility of the ruling establishment for the killing of protesters and explicitly or implicitly calling for the resignation of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. At the international level, human rights organizations called for independent investigations, the release of detainees, and the immediate end of the crackdown.

Historical Significance and Its Place in the Evolution of Protest

These protests can be understood as a stage at which two trends intensified simultaneously: An increase in the level of state violence in the very first days of protest; A rise in anger and radicalism among segments of society. If “Woman, Life, Freedom” represented the high point of the hegemony of a rights-based discourse, the protests of December 2025-January 2026 showed that conditions of total political closure and severe economic pressure may push parts of society toward demands for faster and more centralized change. These protests were less a sign of any sudden abandonment of democratic values, but more a reflection of a deepening crisis and the shrinking of hope for the possibility of gradual reform a situation that is essential to understanding the discursive shift over three years that is under discussion.



III. Structural Factors Behind the Shift in Protest Priorities

The trajectory of protests in Iran over the past three decades shows that social demands have gradually moved from seeking reform within the system to calling for a break from the political order as a whole. This shift has not taken place suddenly, or from an emotional standpoint. Rather, it has taken shape in the context that has seen the gradual closure of formal institutions, the systematic repression of activists, and the erosion of public trust. In earlier decades, reformists and civil society actors sought to use formal mechanisms elections, social pressure, dialogue, and civil disobedience to expand political freedoms. But the suppression of the Green Movement, the absence of real and viable competition among electoral candidates, the repeated arrest of activists, and the closure of media space are among factors that gradually led to the blocking of these channels.

Despite these realities, during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising of 2022, where some of the clearest calls for a rupture with the political system were voiced, the dominant discourse remained rights-based, civic, and grounded in collective nonviolent action. The movement’s central slogan emphasized individual freedoms, gender equality, and human dignity, and was normatively defined within a democratic framework.

The key question, then, is how, within a relatively short period, the bloody protests of December 2025–January 2026 came to amplify voices that had not only moved away from reform or even peaceful transition but also had begun to imagine the restoration of the monarchy, personalized leadership, or even contemplated scenarios involving violence and outside intervention.

One common explanation for the shift of part of the protest base toward monarchism is the “crisis of representation” or leadership vacuum. Yet this concept alone is insufficient, and if invoked without analyzing the position of the various political and civic forces, it becomes reductive.

The reality is there have been public figures and symbolic capital from other political currents, from Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who has spent years under house arrest and in his recent statements has spoken explicitly of moving beyond the Islamic Republic and forming a constituent assembly, to political and civil activists from women’s rights defenders, teachers, labor activists, and other transition-oriented circles. Some of these figures remain in prison and represent enduring examples of civil resistance and sustained socio-political activism.

Despite this, a significant part of society has not rallied behind them. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot be reduced simply to the absence of a representative figure. It must instead be understood in relation to its broader social, psychological, and historical context factors that were also visible in the comparative review of protest waves and that at times cast doubt on the legitimacy and efficacy of these representatives.

What follows examines the reasons for this discursive shift in light of the signs that have appeared in the protests themselves.

1. The Collapse of Trust in Reformist and Peaceful Transition Discourses

The erosion of trust towards the idea of reform and the reformists has transpired and taken a more developed, concrete shape over the past decades, and is not merely an analytical impression constructed in hindsight. During the December 2017–January 2018 protests, for the first time since the Green Movement, the slogan “Conservative, Reformist, the Game Is Over” was widely heard in cities across the country. This slogan signaled a serious break with the idea of changing the system from within and showed that a significant segment of society no longer regarded reform within the framework of the Islamic Republic as an effective path to change.

This trend deepened after the bloody suppression of the protests against the fuel price increase that took place in November 2019. Many citizens, even in areas that had previously been considered electoral strongholds of the reformists, realized the presence of reformists in the government and parliament had failed to prevent major security or economic decisions. As a result, the public perception of the reformists’ inability or unwillingness to produce meaningful change grew stronger. By 2022, although the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising carried a democratic and rights-based discourse, a large part of it no longer placed any hope in formal mechanisms.

The complete absence of any figures from the reformist camp in the movement’s leadership and their failure to even be represented in the movement, as well as the public’s distrust towards the delayed statements they issued, demonstrated that the gap between society and this political current had become entrenched. Even figures such as Ali Shakouri-Rad, a well-known reformist politician, who attempted to adopt more openly critical positions than he had in the past, were unable to repair the rift that had emerged between certain sections of society and the reformist movement.

The reaction to such positions in social media and media discourse suggested that part of public opinion continued to view the reformist camp as either responsible for, or ineffective in the face of, the government’s repression. (Ali Shakouri-Rad has gone so far as to state, in recent interviews and talks, that the violence and the security crackdown were organized, and that in some cases the state itself fomented violence to create a pretext for repression, including, he suggested, the deliberate production of casualties from among its own ranks in order to provide the security apparatus with greater justification for violent suppression.) The case of Mir-Hossein Mousavi is more complicated.

Although his recent positions have more explicitly broken with the structure of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist), some segments of society continue to perceive him as connected to the legacy of the 1979 Revolution. In today’s tense and polarized atmosphere, that historical association, even if not analytically precise, has become a symbolic barrier. The label “57er,” derived from the year 1357 in the Iranian calendar (1979), the year of the Islamic Revolution, is also used online against republicans and transition-oriented reformers.

It reflects an effort to associate them with the perceived historical “error” of the Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Anyone labelled as such whether it occurs spontaneously or is amplified through narrative battles is immediately delegitimized and discredited.

2. Geopolitical Factors

Matters of foreign policy, and particularly the issue of Israel and Palestine, have also played a role in this discursive shift. Among those who want political change, including leftists, feminists, and activists for ethnic minorities, many hold critical views toward the Israeli government's policies and actions in the region and see themselves as defenders of Palestinian rights, albeit while emphasizing the primacy of Iran's national interests.

During the protests of late December 2017–January 2018, the slogan “Neither Gaza, Nor Lebanon, My Life for Iran” clearly showed that some viewed the Islamic Republic's regional policies as being in conflict with domestic economic interests. This slogan was not merely an ideological position; it reflected the feeling that the country's resources were being allocated to priorities that did not improve the lives of its own citizens.

For that part of society which sees the Islamic Republic's regional policies as a cause of sanctions, isolation, and economic pressure, any position that appears sympathetic to Palestine may provoke intense anger. Against this backdrop, a figure such as Reza Pahlavi, who has no ideological red line towards Israel and has even traveled there, appears to some people as a symbol of the possibility of a different relationship with the West and of breaking the current deadlock.

The perception that Israel, more than other international actors, seeks the overthrow of the Islamic Republic creates a form of instrumental appeal for some: a kind of hope in a rapid solution coming from outside.

3. The Appeal of Untested Opposition Figures and Unearned Trust

Another factor contributing to the discursive shift is the difference in the historical record of different political groups. Some political groups and currents, from reformists to other transition-oriented groups, have, over the past four decades, in one way or another, either operated within the field of power or confronted it directly at great cost. As a result, in society's collective memory they possess a concrete record one that is visible, judgeable, and open to criticism.

By contrast, other forces, including monarchist groups, have had no role in governance within the Islamic Republic and, in recent decades, have had no opportunity to test their strategies in practice inside the country. In an atmosphere of distrust and accumulated anger, this very untestedness can become a form of symbolic capital, especially when other actors are burdened with labels such as former collaborators of the system.

In such a context, part of society may be drawn to a particular group not because they are offering detailed, specific policies, but because, in the public imagination, they are not burdened by a negative association or record something that allows for the projection of hope and the imagined restoration of stability. This dynamic does not necessarily indicate the organizational superiority of that group; rather, it reflects a form of competition in a context where the legitimacy of other actors has been deeply eroded.

4. Economic Hardship and the Reordering of Priorities

Alongside these political and symbolic factors, economic issues have also been very significant. The protests of late December 2017–January 2018 were ignited in smaller towns and parts of the country that were more marginalized and vulnerable economically. In November 2019, the sudden increase in fuel prices triggered protests whose greatest intensity was seen in peripheral areas and among lower-income groups.

This pattern shows that the livelihood crisis has not merely been a general backdrop to the protests, but a significant driving force behind the mobilization.

Growing poverty, the shrinking of the middle class, and the pressure of sanctions, combined with ineffective domestic policies, have shifted the priorities of part of society from democracy to bread and survival. Under such conditions, gradual solutions based on civic networking of the kind proposed by transition-oriented democratic forces, through strengthening civil disobedience, building coherent sectoral protests, and gradually pushing back the state, appear to some people too slow and too costly. Instead, they are looking for a leader and a rapid point of support to rally behind, even if that figure represents the institution of monarchy, which remains structurally and normatively distant from a democratic republic.

The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in 2022 demonstrated that the discourse of democracy, collective self-governance, and civic transformation still retains hegemonic potential. At that moment, although monarchist forces were present, especially in demonstrations outside the country, inside Iran personalized symbols were less visible, and slogans focused more on women’s freedom, minority rights, and the rejection of the broader structure of repression. There were certainly disputes, including efforts to promote alternative slogans or challenge the feminist character of the movement, such as “Man, Homeland, Prosperity,” but these did not succeed in altering the movement’s overall direction. By contrast, in the protests that began in late December 2025, which were more directly fueled by economic grievances, the monarchists were able to make their voice heard more loudly inside the country as well. Over the previous three years, they had strengthened their media networks and, against a backdrop of despair, exhaustion, distrust toward other political currents, and worsening economic hardship, they were able to establish a more visible symbolic hegemony.

5. State Repression and the Exploitation of Social Divides

The state’s role in sowing, deepening, and exploiting social divisions cannot be ignored. Factors that contribute to deep division and distrust include the discrediting of civil society figures and other political actors, encouraging discourse that is offensive and polarizing, and the possible planting of agents provocateurs in some gatherings to generate tension. One case that exemplifies this is the death and memorial services for Khosrow Alikordi, an activist and lawyer from Mashhad who had represented some of the families of protesters killed during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests. On 6 December 2025, Alikordi’s body was discovered in his office in Mashhad, a death that those close to him saw as suspicious.

During his memorial ceremony, human rights activist Narges Mohammad and several others in attendance were arrested. Videos from the event began to circulate that showed scenes of tension, with those present hurling insults and verbal abuse, though according to some witnesses at the scene, the largest crowds were chanting in support of Mohammad, and those who were harassing the attendees were small in number. The selective circulation of certain scenes suggests that the battle over narrative has itself become part of the political playing field.

The government may well have benefited from the divide between republicans and monarchists, even if at certain moments it did not exercise full control over every development. In summary, what has developed over the past three years has not been a sudden shift, but rather the result of the accumulation and intensification of several factors: the erosion of trust in the reformists; the stigmatization of republicans and democratic transition advocates with the label of “57er”; anger at the Islamic Republic’s regional policies to advance its own strategic interests; mounting economic pressures; complete closure of the political space; and the absence of even minimal coalitions among democratic forces.

It is in such a climate that part of society has turned toward the past and sought, in the symbols of the pre-1979 order, both a kind of imagined stability and the possibility of rapid change.

However, this does not necessarily mean that all of its supporters reject democracy. It may instead reflect a search for a shorter route out of what is seen as a political deadlock, even though that choice itself raises new questions about its compatibility with republican structures and institutional democracy.

It appears that what has occurred in recent years is less a sign of a fundamental transformation in democratic values within Iranian society than a reflection of shifting priorities under the pressure of acute political, economic, security, and media conditions.

What transpired during the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests showed that values such as gender equality, minority rights, the rejection of discrimination, and the desire for collective participation in governing the country are still those that have the ability to mobilize action.

However, in the face of continuing and systematic repression, the complete closure of legal channels for change, a deepening economic crisis, the erosion of hope in gradual reform, and the political opportunism of certain groups, some segments of society have been pushed towards an option that they are being told will offer a faster way out of the impasse, even where those options remain institutionally ambiguous in relation to classical models of democratic republicanism.

In this sense, the turn toward personalized leadership or a nostalgic orientation toward the past can be understood less as a value shift than as a reaction to emergency conditions and a pervasive sense of foreclosed futures.

IV. Recommendations for the International Community

In light of the above analysis, it is strategically important to distinguish between a change in democratic values and the erosion of civic capacity as a result of political closure and repression. The evidence suggests that the central issue in Iran is not a fundamental normative shift, but rather the weakening of civil society infrastructure and the shrinking space for peaceful action. On this basis, the following recommendations may be advanced:

1. Focus on Strengthening Independent Civil Society

International support should be directed toward rebuilding and reinforcing civil society infrastructure, including:

- Support for independent professional, labor, and civic networks
- Protection for human rights defenders, journalists, and independent lawyers
- The creation of support mechanisms for activists at risk

2. Avoid Direct Political Alignment

Human rights institutions should refrain from overt alignment with particular political parties or specific individuals. Experience has shown that identity-based or personality-centered support can reinforce the state's narrative of foreign interference and make the domestic civic sphere even more vulnerable.

3. Strengthen Objective Documentation and Accountability

- Support professional and independent documentation of human rights violations
- Pursue international accountability mechanisms
- Help establish legal foundations for possible transitional justice mechanisms in the future

4. Support Horizontal Organizing and Social Solidarity

Past recent experience shows that whenever there has been more room for horizontal organizing, solidarity among social groups, and the articulation of rights-based demands and democratic tendencies have become more visible. The emphasis, therefore, should be on:

- Empowering civic networks
- Building bridges among diverse social constituencies
- Strengthening a culture of dialogue and cooperation among democratic forces

Conclusion: A Path Forward

The experience of recent years shows that whenever there has been greater space for horizontal organizing, solidarity across social groups, and the articulation of rights-based demands, democratic tendencies have also become more pronounced. A less costly path out of the crisis in Iran depends on investing in social empowerment and the rebuilding of civic capacities, not on backing particular political projects.

For international human rights actors, this distinction is strategically crucial. If the central issue is not a change in values, but rather the erosion of civic capacity and the closure of political space, then support should focus on rebuilding civil society infrastructure, protecting independent activists, strengthening professional and sectoral networks, supporting free media, and promoting impartial documentation of human rights abuses, not on aligning with particular political models or specific personalities.

Source

1. Abrahamian, Ervand. 2008. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Gheissari, Ali, and Vali Nasr. 2006. *Democracy in Iran*. Oxford University Press.
3. Fathollah-Nejad, Ali. 2020. *The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis*. Analysis Paper No. 28. Brookings Doha Center.



X FemenaNet

f FemenaNet

Instagram FemenaNet

YouTube FemenaNet

www.femena.net

Femena works with partners to promote gender equality, inclusion, and peace; expand civic space; strengthen civil society and WHRD resilience; visibilize the work of WHRDs and progressive feminist movements; and foster solidarity and south-south cooperation in the South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. Femena's work is particularly focused on contexts, experiencing crisis, conflict, authoritarianism and closing civic space.