

# Iran Revolution Monitor

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#IranFutures

Iran  
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Program

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## INTRODUCTION

The Iran Revolution Monitor tracks the country's arguably **longterm revolutionary process** from a set of selected relevant disciplines, including international politics, the nuclear issue, the economy, human rights, and the ecological crisis. It thereby aims to provide a sober assessment of the revolutionary process's **progression, regression or stagnation**, which should enable observers to better and realistically understand Iran's multifaceted domestic and international challenges during this key transformative period.

In this context, certain factors impact upon the power balance between society and the state, including macro- and socio-economic conditions, corruption, international pressures or their absence, space for civil society, labor activism and strikes, the level of freedom of expression and the rule of law, street and social protests, and demographics.

The concept of "long-term revolutionary process" has been proposed since the **Dey Protests** at the turn of the year 2017/18, with its de facto continuation with the **Âbân Protests** of November 2019, both led by the lower classes hitherto conventionally seen as the Islamic Republic's loyal social base. With the 2022 "**woman, life, freedom**" (**WLF**) **movement**, this revolutionary process has experienced a provisional culmination, with the rise of an intersectional dimension involving various classes and ethnicities.

This **first issue**, released in the wake of the one-year anniversary of the WLF movement, is devoted to **reviewing key developments over the last year**. The following issues, to be published on a monthly basis, will therefore be shorter in scope yet not complexity. As such, CMEG's **Iran Revolution Monitor** is the first publication that qualitatively traces this arguably historical development, which can not only change the face of Iran itself, but that of the Middle East and even of world politics as we know it.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

Iran's **nationwide WLF protests** that were sparked on September 16, 2022 in the aftermath of the death in custody at the hands of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI)'s morality police of Zhina Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman who was visiting the capital city of Tehran, were the most widespread uprising in post-revolutionary Iran. The protests led by women, Gen Z youth and marginalized ethnic groups also proved historic in terms of the explicit nature of demands of the demonstrators seeking regime change, evident in the slogans being chanted in the streets.

The IRI has **long been a massive violator of human rights**, heavily restricting the rights of women and marginalized ethnicities among others. It is notorious for its alarming rate of executions (in fact, the highest worldwide), including the execution of juveniles. Unsurprisingly, the regime resorted to its old toolbox of repression, harassing, detaining, torturing and executing protestors, while also opening fire on WLF protestors and bystanders, including children, killing hundreds and injuring many others.

Instead of even remotely responding to the many grievances of the protestors, the IRI chose to **heighten its long war against women** by institutionalizing and legalizing even more obstacles against those who do not "completely adhere" to the compulsory hijab. Not only did the regime re-deploy the morality police in July 2023, the authorities also heightened their digital surveillance and punitive measures against women who do not adhere to the hijab rules. The IRI now uses facial recognition, sending SMS to over one million women who have not adhered to the hijab, confiscating their cars as well as sentencing violators to punishments such as cleaning governmental buildings or washing corpses. The authorities are also hard at work to put citizens against one another, demanding that service providers such as bank managers or bus drivers deprive women not adhering to the hijab of their services. To this end, the regime is also in the final stages of passing a bill called the "Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab" in order to increase the scope and the scale of the punitive measures. UN experts have stressed that this proposed bill and the current *de facto* restrictions are "inherently discriminatory and may amount to gender persecution."

A year on, the brave and **resilient Iranian women, youth** and people continue their dissent, even if in a less centralized and publicized manner amid state violence and repression. Iranians, and in particular the youth, rely not only on their collective power in the streets, but also on the arts, sports, the legal profession, journalism, citizen journalism, factory workers and much beyond in order to make their demands heard. There are even activists behind bars who courageously document human rights abuses happening in jail and beyond. Some of the most persecuted marginalized ethnicities such as the Kurds and the Baloch continue their plight for freedom, equality and justice as strongly as ever, despite the disproportionate level of violence they face by the authorities. Meanwhile, carrying Amini's memory in their heart, Iranian women in particular and society in general continue to aspire for a more dignified future.

In the past year, **the democratic world expressed solidarity** with the women and people of Iran via numerous official statements, condemning the violence employed by the IRI. Meanwhile, an independent fact-finding mission was formed at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in order to investigate the violations of human rights committed by Tehran in the context of the WLF uprising. However, Iranian protestors are still waiting to see a more coordinated and encompassing effort by the international community that truly holds the IRI accountable for the atrocities committed throughout its existence since 1979. At the very least, they expect that the democratic world **refrains from re-engaging a regime** that commits mass violence domestically, regionally, and internationally.

## INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

**Geopolitical factors have been depressing Iran's revolutionary process**, helping to undermine the democracy movement while ultimately contributing to a sense of security, if not immunity, among Tehran's leadership.

Regarding the **role of the West**, both the U.S. and the EU's aim at revitalizing the JCPOA has remained intact. This has been the case despite a shift in public opinion, indeed a paradigm shift in both the diaspora and inside Iran that reformism had become a chimera and revolutionary transformation or regime change was the only option left.



This very context was best encapsulated by the [January 22 remarks of Iran's Foreign Minister](#) who said the “riots” in fall 2022 had only temporarily diverted the attention of the Biden White House that had re-engaged in talks with Tehran later in that year, in fact precisely at a time when the street protests had subsided. In fact, despite public pronouncements to the contrary, the U.S., with the active encouragement of the EU, had resumed negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue from at least early 2023. The West was thus reaffirming its desire to pursue business-as-usual with a regime that had lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the vast majority of Iranians. For it had become increasingly clear that in the case of Iran, regime and society's interests not only starkly differed but were even antithetical to one another. These talks finally resulted in a U.S.-Iran deal, involving Tehran slowing down its nuclear program, the release of \$10 billion of Iranian frozen assets abroad, and a prisoner swap. This arrangement is likely to encourage the continuation of Tehran's hostage and blackmail policy and the resumption of its nuclear escalation strategy. In fact, this policy choice was furthered by the dominant reading in Western policy circles that the Iranian uprising was merely a seasonal occurrence, instead of comprehending it as an ongoing revolutionary process.

Against this backdrop, Western punitive actions against Tehran were mostly mild, so as to not endanger a nuclear deal. Despite several U.S. and EU sanctions packages, Iran's power élite was not forcefully targeted, e.g. relative to that of Russia because of its invasion of Ukraine. For instance, despite the European Parliament's push, the EU has not designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization. On the positive side, the above-mentioned independent UNHRC fact-finding mission was created.

On the U.S. side, the Biden administration's lenient implementation of the sanctions regime has facilitated a [ten-year high](#) of Iranian oil exports to China, thereby ensuring an economic lifeline for Tehran.

It has been this precise context that fueled and cemented the Islamic Republic's perception of a weak West primarily and unabatedly interested in engagement with Tehran especially over the nuclear issue as a result of the de facto success of Iran's nuclear escalation strategy aimed at precisely this kind of Western alarmism leading to a conceding negotiating stance.

The Islamic Republic's **non-Western partners**, to little surprise, have been a stabilizing force for Tehran. In turn, Iran has offered important concessions: to Russia, in the form of military assistance for its war effort in Ukraine despite the important political costs associated with it, thereby markedly elevating the conflict potential with the West; and to China, with substantial discount on Iranian oil, amounting to a staggering \$300 million per month.

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic achieved a number of foreign policy successes in 2023, namely through the China-mediated détente with regional rival Saudi Arabia in March, its full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) this July, its admission into BRICS from January 2024, and the said deal with Washington.

As this perusal indicates, neither Western nor non-Western powers, or Tehran's regional foes, have shown tangible interest in democratic regime change in Iran, thus **fuelling a sense of regime security and impunity in Tehran** a year after the start of the WLF movement.



## NUCLEAR ISSUE & REGIONAL POLICY

There has been a **tight interdependence** between the revolutionary process on one hand and Iran's nuclear and regional policies on the other.

Regarding **nuclear policy**, in the aftermath of the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, the IRI decided to intensify uranium enrichment both in quantity and grade. The legislation passed by Parliament in the final year of Hassan Rouhani's presidency provided the “legal” framework to do so. Tehran's aim was to proceed on a double track: getting closer to a nuclear bomb and simultaneously using it as a threat.

Knowing that the West wants to avoid any new war in the Middle East, Iran has used its enrichment capacity as a threat toward the West to gain more benefits. That is why before the start of the WLF uprising, the regime was reluctant to renew the JCPOA without receiving decisive concessions from the West, like removing all economic sanctions, delisting the IRGC as a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organi-

zation, obtaining a guarantee from the Biden administration that its successor should not be able to withdraw from a renewed agreement.

The nationwide **revolutionary uprising has fundamentally changed the situation**. The regime has apparently lost any legitimacy in Iran and its legitimacy abroad has highly deteriorated.

In such a shaky state, with the decay of the system being imminent and to avoid defections from its power apparatus, the IRI started attempts toward regaining its standing abroad. In this vein, on one hand, it skipped its prior preconditions for the JCPOA's renewal. More so, it showed eagerness toward reaching any deal with Washington, the above-mentioned deal with Washington and, more recently, Supreme Leader Khamenei green-lighting direct talks with the U.S. On the other hand, the IRI continued to enhance its enrichment capacity to maintain the threat toward the West. Having an overall stockpile of 3,795 kg of enriched uranium, Tehran has now the potential for making several atomic bombs within a few months. Yet, it should be noted that enough high enriched uranium (HEU) does not translate into a bomb, as it would still require two to three years to produce one and its appropriate transport missiles. Furthermore, Tehran has imposed visa restrictions for IAEA experts.

Meanwhile, the conditions for a JCPOA renewal have dramatically changed. A conclusion, short of an interim deal, is beyond the horizon. The West remains determined to prevent the IRI from acquiring the bomb, while it aims to avoid a war. Yet, if Tehran advances its nuclear program with the same pace, the West may feel compelled to intervene militarily. There are some considerations that the West in general and the U.S. plus Israel in particular will not tolerate an Islamic Republic in possession of nuclear weapons due to two issues: for the sake of face-saving after so many iterations and to prevent the collapse of the nonproliferation regime.

In other words, for the IRI, détente - even if temporary - provides the way out of its precarious state. For Tehran will regain some of its lost international legitimacy, limited financial resources and some sanctions relief in exchange for de-acceleration of its nuclear program: Thus, the IRI has reduced the pace of its monthly production of the 60% HEU from 9 to 3 kg. It also granted some online controls of en-

richment, yet without passing the results to the IAEA.

As a result, the **West will get a breathing space** on the nuclear file until the Nov. 2024 U.S. presidential election. However, this nuclear détente that is on the agenda **does not amount to a sustainable solution**.

The uprising has also influenced **Tehran's regional policy**. Under the same (il-)legitimacy pressure, the IRI started revising its fundamental enmity with its Arab neighbors across the Persian Gulf.

It is well-known that the advanced economies of Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia react very sensitive to military conflicts in their vicinity. This was demonstrated in Sep. 2019, when Tehran's proxies attacked the Saudi facilities of Aramco.

Now, the Gulf states have taken advantage of a domestically and internationally weakened IRI to make it more accountable. Thus, they granted the regime some legitimacy in exchange for regional détente. The question is how sustainable this détente is, since there is little sign of the IRI being willing to reverse its regional policy, despite perhaps a temporary détente. This is because enmity with the U.S. and Israel has become the *raison d'être* of the IRI. The IRI considers its strategic depth in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as crucial for its power projection and survival, while this "axis of resistance" constitutes a significant source of conflict with Gulf monarchies.

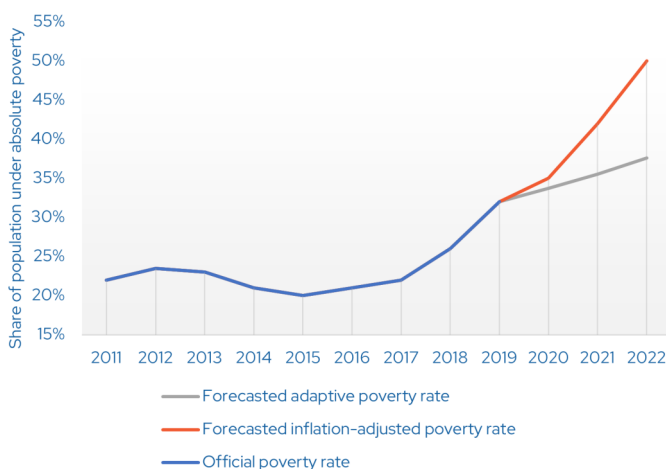
**In conclusion**, the rapprochement between the IRI and Arab Gulf monarchies as well as the negotiations and agreements with the West tend to curb the revolutionary process in Iran.

## **ECONOMY**

In Iran's ongoing revolutionary process, society strives to wrest control from the autocratic regime that has amassed political and economic power. A key metric for gauging progress is the balance of power between society and the state. Thus, the economic aspect of the Iran Revolution Monitor is dedicated to tracking these power dynamics and the factors affecting them. **Macro-economic concerns and socio-economic degradation**, such as unemployment and inflation, have fuelled public discontent and protests in Iran as in December 2017 and November 2019. Despite the Raisi admi-

nistration's claims, **significant economic improvements remain elusive**. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the year-on-year change in the consumer price index (CPI) reached a historic high of 54.6% in May 2023, with certain food categories, like meat products, experiencing a staggering 116.3% annual price increase during the same period, and prices of other essential products, such as bread, oil, and dairy, began rising by over 100% in July 2022. This steep rise in prices of essential goods has exacerbated poverty levels, with the most affected being the lower-income segments of society.

#### Development of poverty rate, official and estimated, 2011-2022



Data: Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare of Iran, 2019, and estimations by Mahdi Ghodsi as of January 2023.

These substantial price hikes are rooted in a 2022 government and parliamentary policy that eliminated the preferential exchange rate of 42,000 rials for \$1 on primary goods imports, despite warnings from economists about potential triple-digit inflation. The government reintroduced a preferential exchange rate of 285,000 rials for \$1 for primary goods imports after the market rate reached 397,000 rials for \$1 in late 2022. Although these inflation rates are historically high due to poor policy decisions, Raisi, on August 29, 2023 claimed that his government had effectively reduced inflation, even surpassing levels during Rouhani's presidency. This development highlights a **significant erosion of transparency and accountability**, factors that typically bolster state power over society.

Fostering a vibrant **civil society** - comprising NGOs, community organizations, advocacy groups, and grassroots movements - empowers society by serving as a check on government power and amplifying citizens' voices in democracies. However, Iran's autocratic regime has only in-

tensified restrictions and suppression. Taboos surrounding discussions of political system change hamper civil society's ability to expand beyond the state-imposed limits. Conversely, when civil society aligns with state ideology, financial support reinforces rent-seeking behavior among loyalists, leading to systemic corruption. Despite sanctions, recent years have seen increased budgetary support for these loyal entities, revealing the state's suppression of civil society. This becomes pertinent as civil society can be empowered through improvements in private investment. However, official statistics reveal that over 80% of Iran's economy is now under government or state control. By maintaining Iran within the high-risk jurisdictions of the Financial Action Task Force, the regime restricts citizens and the private sector from engaging in legal financial transactions with the world, all while pursuing illicit policies that bypass sanctions.

**International pressure**, on the other hand, has the **potential to diminish state power** more than it reduces society's power. Increased international pressure can force the government to allocate more resources to address external challenges and fewer resources to suppress civil society and protests. The release of over \$10 billion in frozen assets in Iraq and South Korea could bring additional resources for domestic suppression, arguably a current top priority of the regime. **A state that prioritizes loyalists over societal needs** during resource scarcity is unlikely to channel newly available funds toward empowering civil society. Consequently, continued international pressure is crucial to holding the regime accountable.



## ENVIRONMENT

While recent attention to Iran's revolutionary process has focused on women's freedoms and the repression of human rights, environmental issues have not been absent from calls for change. Despite the Islamic Republic's denial of the severity of its multifaceted environmental crisis and continued attempts to suppress environmental activism, public sentiment in Iran reflects a **growing environmental consciousness** that is coalescing with broader political challenges to the regime's stability.

The environmental challenges Iran faces are manifold, spanning from its **critical water crisis**, increased dust and sand storms, air pollution that plagues its cities, and signifi-

cant biodiversity loss. Rather than addressing these pressing concerns, the Islamic Republic has increasingly responded with denial, censorship, and violent suppression. This is evidenced by the 2018 arrest of nine conservationists on allegations of espionage, which included Kavous Seyed Emami whose [suspicious death in custody](#) echoed broader concerns over state repression. Among the detained conservationists was Morad Tahbaz, one of five detainees released in the “prisoner” swap deal brokered between the U.S. and Iran in August 2023. Since 2018, environmental matters have continued to remain highly sensitive.

Despite increased censorship surrounding environmental issues, Iranians remain undeterred in voicing their concerns over **mounting resource challenges**. In recent years, water cuts, recurrent power shortages, and fluctuations in the price of energy have fuelled public outcry. Energy subsidy cuts in 2019 induced large-scale protests across the country that were violently suppressed. In 2021, water shortages evoked public anger in Khuzestan that induced a wave of solidarity protests across other provinces called the [“Up-rising of the Thirsty.”](#) Both events highlight a growing link between the regime’s mismanagement of natural resources and civil unrest in Iran.

As environmental issues continue to disrupt daily life, increasing numbers of Iranians are channeling their discontent into calls for political action. In May, tensions between Tehran and the Taliban over the Helmand River’s water resources escalated into a [deadly border clash](#). The river provides a vital stream of water from Afghanistan to Iran that sustains the Hamoun wetlands of the Sistan and Baluchistan province, a region that is a frequent site of protests related to water shortages as well as dust and sandstorms. In June, residents in the capital were subjected to [water cuts](#), prompting public outcry on social media. Protests also erupted in August following water cuts in [Tabriz](#) as well as Divandareh, where at least [four protestors were injured](#). Government officials also announced a nationwide shutdown citing extreme heat, though sources inside the country indicated the closings were more likely a result of the nation’s insufficient power grid. While the Islamic Republic continues to downplay its environmental challenges, such **grievances are galvanizing resistance among different demographics**, such as farmers, who may not have openly supported the WLF movement.

Beyond physical protests, themes of environmental justice

are influencing art and culture in this revolutionary process. Shervin Hajipour’s song “Baraye” emerged as the WLF anthem, highlighting Tehran’s vanishing trees and the peril faced by Pirouz, the last of three surviving critically endangered Asiatic Cheetahs born in captivity. Pirouz’s death [ignited national outrage](#) over Iran’s mishandling of wildlife and resembles the fate of the desiccating Lake Urmia. Once the Middle East’s largest saltwater lake, Lake Urmia is now drying up due to years of government negligence. In July and August, escalating concerns about the dire conditions of the lake [sparked protests in Iran’s Azerbaijan province](#).

As desertification and human-induced drought drive rural inhabitants toward urban areas, Iran’s **environmental issues are amplifying existing socio-economic challenges**, including unemployment, declining health outcomes, and increased urban resource strain. Given Iran’s scarce water resources and disproportionate vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, environmental issues will continue to act as a **threat to the viability** of the Islamic Republic.

## CONCLUSION

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As this inaugural issue of the Iran Revolution Monitor indicates, developments over the past year since the start of the WLF movement have shown **ups and downs** in the trajectory of Iran's long-term revolutionary process, as a combined result leading to a kind of **stagnation**. On the progressive side, last year's uprising constituted an **unprecedented clarification of societal demands** vis-à-vis the state, namely rejecting reformism and calling for revolutionary transformation and democratic regime change, which was accompanied by a growing awareness from the Iranian diaspora and the international community about Iranian society's grievances and struggle. Internationally, the Islamic Republic's legitimacy crisis has pushed it to seek détente with its foes, be it Riyadh or Washington, via **deals whose sustainability remains fragile**.

Domestically, the country's deep-seated crises – pertaining to the economy, human, women and minority rights, and environmental conditions – have persisted and even deteriorated, thus paving the ground for sustained if not enforced **societal disillusionment and discontent**. Also, the regime's massive **securitization and repression** ahead of the WLF movement's one-year anniversary have avoided the repetition of last year's massive nationwide uprising. However, given the **persistence of structural grievances** in Iran and the regime's **inability and unwillingness to provide policy answers** to them, the country's revolutionary process is set to continue. From what can be gathered from inside the country, and despite the international talk of calm and stability returning to the country, the situation resembles embers beneath the ashes, likely to necessitate a spark to trigger another major upheaval.





## ABOUT CMEG

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The Center for Middle East and Global Order is an independent Berlin-headquartered transnational think-tank devoted to exploring transformations in Iran, the Middle East, and the world order.

Our mission is to provide cutting-edge analyses toward better understanding these ongoing geopolitical and internal power shifts and their dynamics, while promoting sustainable peace and development for the Middle East through a new foreign policy that reconciles interests and values.



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