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Research Briefing

6 January 2023

By Philip Loft

Iran protests 2022: Human rights and international response

Summary

- 1 Women's rights in Iran
- 2 Minority ethnic groups
- 3 2022 protests and Iran's response
- 4 International response

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Summary

In September 2022, Mahsa Jina Amini, an Iranian Kurdish woman, was arrested by Iran's morality police for her alleged noncompliance with the country's Islamic dress code. Three days later, she died in police custody. The Iranian coroner rejects [claims she died from blows to her head and limbs](#).

Amini's death has sparked widespread protests for over 100 days. This briefing describes the background to the protests, including the rights of women and minority ethnic groups, the extent of the protests, and the response of the Iranian Government. It also sets out the international response, including new sanctions and UN proceedings.

Protests and response by Iranian authorities

Continuing protests in December saw [reported shop-closures and strikes](#).

[UN officials](#), the UK, and other [G7 Governments](#) have criticised the Iranian regime's response, including its use of force against protesters and suppression of the internet. While the numbers are uncertain, activists report that at least [19,200 people have been detained](#) and 516 protesters killed (as of 3 January 2023, according to the Human Rights Activists News Agency).

In [December 2022](#) and [January 2023](#), Iran executed four people linked to the protests. UN experts have called for Iran to [cease employing the death penalty](#), citing its similar use in 2019 and 2020. Rights groups [estimate between 26 and 100 protesters](#) are at risk of facing the death penalty.

According to one Iranian official, the [average age of those arrested is 15](#). UN experts are concerned that [children have been subject to force](#) and that minority groups including the [Sunni Baloch community](#) have been targeted by authorities.

[Iran argues that outside condemnation is hypocritical](#) and that foreign governments, including Israel and the United States, have been spreading misinformation and [supporting protesters](#).

[Several foreign nationals](#) have also been arrested for their alleged involvement, including [seven UK-linked individuals in December 2022](#), and Iran has [conducted drone and missile strikes](#) against Kurdish groups in Iraq's Kurdistan region, who it accuses of supporting the protests.

Iran has also [accused the UK of internal interference](#). Iranian officials in the UK have been summoned by the UK Government to criticise the Iranian Government's response. In November, the UK Foreign Secretary summoned

Iran's Chargé d'Affaires to raise [alleged death threats against some UK-based journalists](#). The Government has also summoned Iranian diplomats [to condemn the use of the death penalty against protesters](#).

The significance of the protests on the regime

Analysts have been cautious about how far the protests threaten the survival of the Islamic Republic. This is because the opposition is not unified, and [security forces have remained loyal to the regime](#).

However, combined with the lowest turnouts since 1979 for the [recent presidential](#) and [parliamentary elections](#) (around 40-50% of the electorate voted) the protests suggest [the state is struggling for legitimacy](#).

The regime's response also reflects fears of a [separatist movement among the Kurdish minority](#). The most likely short-term change may be the enforcement of the dress code, with President Raisi [hinting at change](#).

International response

Talks are stalled on [restoring the nuclear agreement with Iran](#). Any talks, concessions or proposals for sanctions relief are likely to struggle while the protests are ongoing and many of the parties to the negotiation, including the UK and EU, are critical of Iran's response to the protesters.

Some analysts have suggested now is not the time for sanctions relief, regardless of the outcome of the nuclear talks, [in order to maintain pressure on the regime](#). The international response has focused on three elements:

- Since September, [the UK and its partners have imposed sanctions against Iran](#), including against the country's morality police.
- On 24 November, the UN Human Rights Council held a special session on Iran. Iran said it would not participate, [arguing the decision is "political."](#) The Council [has now launched an investigation into the protests](#).
- In 2021, Iran was elected to the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The UK [supported Iran's removal from the body following a UN vote on 14 December 2022](#).

In 2022, some MPs called for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [to be proscribed a terrorist organisation in the UK](#) in response to its actions in Iran and potentially the UK. This would [make it illegal to be a member of the group](#). The Government [says it will not speculate on future actions and the IRGC is already subject to sanctions "in its entirety."](#) It reiterated this position in response to a Telegraph story in January 2023 [that the organisation will be proscribed "within weeks."](#)

1 Women's rights in Iran

1.1 Constitutional protections

From 1941 to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran was ruled by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. After being overthrown in the revolution, Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became Iran's supreme leader, and a new constitution was introduced to create the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's [post-1979 constitution](#) (PDF) provides for the rights of both men and women and equality before the law "in conformity with Islamic criteria."¹

Explicit constitutional protections for women have been criticised as focusing on the role of women in the family, which the constitution describes as the "fundamental unit" of society. The US-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center argues the "[constitutional provisions do not recognize women as individuals.](#)"²

In addition to allowing access to education for men and women at all levels, constitutional provisions include:

- The protection of mothers during pregnancy and when with children
- Family courts
- Providing support for widows and those without support.³

1.2 Progress and continuing discrimination

Areas of progress since 1979

There has been some progress for Iranian women since 1979, including in education.

UNESCO data states there was a [limited gender gap in primary and secondary school enrolment](#) during the last decade, or in the rate of literacy

¹ Constitute Project, [Iran's constitution of 1979 with amendments through 1989](#) (PDF), Article 20. All sources accessed 12 October 2022

² Iran Human rights Documentation Center, [Gender inequality and discrimination: The case of Iranian women](#), 5 March 2013.

³ Constitute Project, [Iran's constitution of 1979 with amendments through 1989](#) (PDF), "Women in the constitution" and Article 21

between girls and boys aged 15 to 24. A substantial gap in adult literacy remains, however, with around 50% of men and 75% of women aged over 65 illiterate (2016 data).⁴

Girls' participation in school has also not resulted in increased employment. Women make up around 16% of the workforce and following the Covid-19 pandemic there was a 20% drop in women's participation (to 4 million workers).⁵

In 2021, Iran's parliament passed a bill to improve the country's response to domestic violence, including through legal support and safe houses.⁶

Women remain “second class”

In 2021, the UN human rights expert on Iran said [women and girls continue to be “second class” citizens in the country](#), citing domestic violence, marriages of girls aged 10 to 14, and “entrenched discrimination.”⁷

[Examples of discrimination](#) include in family law where wives must seek their husbands' permission to take up employment, obtain a passport, and usually forgo maintenance claims to secure a divorce.⁸ Despite the latter, [divorce rates have increased in recent years](#).⁹

Women are also commonly [blocked from attending sports events](#), though authorities have allowed this on occasion without changing wider policy.¹⁰

Women remain underrepresented in the Iranian consultative assembly, the Majlis-e-Shura-e Islami. Following 2020 elections, 6% of MPs are women.¹¹

1.3

Requirement to wear hijab

Since the Islamic Revolution, women have been required to wear hijab in public places. This was introduced in steps following statements by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. The regime argues the policy is in line with Islamic practice.

⁴ UNESCO, [Islamic Republic of Iran](#).

⁵ Wilson Center, [Women, work and Covid-19 in Iran](#), 9 November 2021

⁶ Borgen Project, [Bill to fight violence against women in Iran](#), 10 April 2021

⁷ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Iran: Women and girls treated as second class citizens, reforms urgently needed, says UN expert](#), 8 March 2021

⁸ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 11 January 2021, paras 44, 57-9

⁹ [Marriage growth rate more than divorce, data shows](#), Tehran Times [online], 24 November 2021

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Iran: women blocked from entering stadium](#), 31 March 2022 and [Iran's women to attend historic match](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 10 October 2019

¹¹ Atlantic Council, [Factbox: the outcome of Iran's 2020 parliamentary elections](#), 26 February 2020

In 1983, Iran's parliament passed a law making hijab mandatory for all women in public places. Those not adhering to the law can be imprisoned for up to 60 days, fined or sentenced to up to 74 lashes.¹²

However, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran has noted that activists protesting the dress requirements are often convicted under [national security laws that carry harsher sentences](#). There have also been instances of related "vigilante justice."¹³

According to UK-based Justice for Iran, from 2003 to 2007 around 30,000 women were arrested for failure to wear hijab and there were 460,000 warnings issued by police.¹⁴

Iran is not the only state with mandatory dress codes. Since May 2022 the Taliban have required women to cover their faces in public in Afghanistan.¹⁵

However, some states in the region have reduced their restrictions: In 2019, Saudi Arabia lessened dress requirements for female tourists, and its Crown Prince has signalled that women no longer need to wear headscarves or full-length robes in public places, though all must dress "modestly."¹⁶

Changing enforcement

Enforcement of wearing hijab in Iran has varied over time. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's decision to require state media and schools to promote and enforce hijab in 2006 is viewed as the beginning of strengthening compliance.

Under President Ebrahimi Raisi, who has been in office since August 2021, Iran's "Gasht-e Ershad" (guidance patrol) have stepped up enforcement. This includes greater surveillance of women working in the public sector.¹⁷

In August 2022, further restrictions were introduced. This included new fines for government employees whose social media profiles do not conform to Islamic law. Recent punishments have included bans on entering banks or using public transport.¹⁸

¹² [Why Iranian authorities force women to wear a veil](#), DW [online], 21 December 2020

¹³ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 11 January 2021, paras 52, 53

¹⁴ Justice for Iran, [Thirty-five years of forced hijab](#) (PDF), 2014 pp18-19

¹⁵ [Taliban to force Afghan women to wear face veil](#), BBC News [online], 7 May 2022

¹⁶ [Saudi Crown Prince says abaya not necessary](#), Gulf news [online], 19 March 2018 and [Saudi Arabia: Your guide to new dress code and public decency code](#), 30 September 2019

¹⁷ [Iranian women under pressure as Raisi stiffens hijab mandate](#), Al-Monitor [online], 23 July 2022

¹⁸ [Iranian President signs decree further restricting how women can dress](#), Radio Free Europe [online] 15 August 2022

Public attitudes

In 2018, Iran's Government released an opinion survey conducted in 2014 suggesting at [least half the country believed the state should not regulate or require hijab](#).¹⁹

The protests seen in 2022 are not the first instance of the dress code being opposed in public, though they are the most sustained.

One of the first protests against the new regime in 1979 was by several thousand women opposed to the introduction of a dress code.²⁰

More recent protests include those in February 2018 when more than 30 women were imprisoned for not wearing hijab.²¹

Further reading on women's rights in Iran

- US Institute for Peace, [Protest context: Statistics on Iran's women](#), October 2022. Data on labour force, education, and political participation.
- Middle East Institute, [The role of women in building Iran's future](#), March 2020. Discusses continuing discrimination and potential for women's leadership in the country.

¹⁹ Brookings Institute, [Iran and the headscarf protests](#), 24 January 2019

²⁰ [Bazargan goes to see Khomeini as Iran rift grows](#), New York Times [online], 9 March 1979

²¹ [Iran arrests 29 women for not wearing hijab in protests](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 2 February 2018

2

Minority ethnic groups

Demographics of Iran

Iran is a majority Shia Muslim state. Most of its population is ethnically Persian (around 60% in 2016). Other large minority ethnic groups include the below. Kurds and Baluchis are largely Sunni Muslims.

- **Azeri** represent 16% of the population, or 12 million people. They are mostly Shia Muslims and integrated into society, though have faced some limitations in activism and speaking their own language in schools.
- **Kurds** make up 10% of Iran's population, or 8 million people. Many Iranian Kurds have been seeking greater autonomy within Iran, in line with neighbouring Kurdish regions in Iraq and Turkey. Relations have occasionally turned violent, and Iranian authorities fear a separatist movement from the community.
- **Baluchis** make up around 2% of the population, or 1.5 million. They are largely Sunni Muslims. There are some militant groups on the border with Pakistan.²²

2.1

Constitutional provisions

Iran's 1979 constitution states the [official language of Iran is Persian, and that official documents must be in this language](#) (PDF). The use of regional and community languages is allowed in schools and in the media, however.²³

The constitution also states that regardless of a person's ethnicity they enjoy equal rights.²⁴

However, the UN's Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran has noted that the "narrow scope" for non-Persian languages to be used means the rights of these communities are not fully protected.

In response to criticism, the Iranian Government has noted advances. The University of Kurdistan launched its first Kurdish language programme in

²² US Institute for Peace Iran Primer, [Iran minorities 2: Ethnic diversity](#), 3 September 2013. Sources in this section accessed 15 November 2022

²³ Constitute Project, [Iran's constitution of 1979 with amendments through 1989](#) (PDF), Article 15

²⁴ As above, Articles 19 and 20

2015, an Azeri language course began at Tabriz University from 2016, and Arabic had been present “for years.”²⁵

2.2

Reports of discrimination

The integration of minority ethnic groups has varied historically. In October 2019, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran said minority ethnic groups were among those who faced “[significant challenges to the realisation of their rights](#)” The 2019 report said:

- They represent a “disproportionate number” of political prisoners and those executed on national security-related charges.
- Advocating for minority languages, organising, or taking part in peaceful protests may be grounds for arrest and detention.
- There were reported discriminatory practices in employment, education, and access to basic services.²⁶

Economic challenges for minority groups

Many of the border areas where non-Persian groups are concentrated are relatively underdeveloped compared to central Iran. The recent struggles faced by Iran’s economy therefore exacerbate the existing challenges in these regions:

- According to Baluchi rights groups, 70% of people in areas with large Baluchi populations lived below the poverty line (2021), and they were also subject to discrimination in employment.²⁷
- Unemployment is higher in Sistan-Baluchestan and Kurdistan than Iran as a whole (being respectively 11%, 10% and 9%).²⁸

Death penalty

The Iranian Penal Code of 2013 provides for the death penalty for a wide range of offences, including “waging war against God,” “corruption on earth” and “armed rebellion,” as well as rape, armed robbery, and consensual same-sex relations.²⁹

²⁵ UN Special Rapporteur, [Situation of human rights in Iran](#) (PDF), 18 July 2019, para 43

²⁶ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. [Iran: UN expert says ethnic, religious minorities face discrimination](#), 22 October 2019

²⁷ US Department of State, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: Iran](#), 2022, section 6

²⁸ [Iran’s protests fuel ethnic tensions](#), Financial Times [online] 6 November 2022

²⁹ Iran Human Rights, [Annual report on the death penalty in Iran](#), 2021 (PDF), pp24-6

Amnesty International's latest report on the use of the death penalty in Iran, covering January to June 2022, states that 251 people were executed in this period. At least 65 people were members of the Baluchi ethnic minority.³⁰

Norway-based Iran Human Rights estimates that 69 Kurds, 34 Baluchis and 17 Arabs constituted 90% of those executed for their affiliation to banned political and militant groups in 2021.³¹

The Iranian Government states the death penalty is carried out following fair and transparent trials.³²

Treatment of Kurdish activists

Kurdish groups in Iran have sought greater autonomy and self-government within Iran.

According to rights groups, the regime has sought to suppress the activities of Kurdish NGOs. In 2020, 500 people from Iran's Kurdistan region were reportedly arrested for national-security related offences and "politically motivated reasons." In January 2021, human rights groups reported that at least 96 Kurdish activists were detained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or the police that month, and [around half were subject to "enforced disappearance."](#)³³

This followed arrests in 2019 and 2020. One NGO estimated that half the political prisoners in Iran were from Kurdish groups in 2019.³⁴

Discrimination against Azeris

Azeris are more integrated into Iranian society than other minority groups, partly reflecting the fact most are Shia Muslims (the majority religion of Iran). However, in 2021 there were reports of discrimination in employment, and the harassment and arrest of political activists.³⁵

Armed conflict

Armed conflict also occurs between some non-state groups and regime forces. This includes Iranian actions in Iraq, where it has undertaken missile

³⁰ Amnesty International, [Iran: Horrific wave of executions must be stopped](#), 27 July 2022

³¹ Iran Human Rights, [Annual report on the death penalty in Iran](#), 2021 (PDF), p78

³² UN Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Situation of human rights in Iran](#) (PDF), 4 August 2021, para 5

³³ Human Rights Watch, [Joint letter: Urgent international action needed to secure release of Kurdish activists and others arbitrarily detained in Iran](#), 3 February 2021

³⁴ UN Special Rapporteur, [Situation of human rights in Iran](#) (PDF), 18 July 2019, paras 86-8

³⁵ US Department of State, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: Iran](#), 2022

and drone attacks against Kurdish groups that it believes are [working with other Kurdish groups across the border in Iran](#).³⁶

In recent years, violence by non-state armed groups has increased, including attacks by some Kurdish, Arab and Baloch fighters against the IRGC within Iran.³⁷

Further reading

- US Institute for Peace (USIP) Iran Primer, [Iran minorities 2: Ethnic diversity](#), September 2013
- Minority Rights, [Iran](#), December 2017. Background and recent issues.
- USIP Iran Primer, [Baluch insurgents in Iran](#), 2017, and [Iran's troubled provinces: Kurdistan](#), 2021. Describe armed and other conflict with the Iranian state.

Discrimination has also been reported on religious grounds, and there is some overlap between the discrimination that these communities face. The Library debate briefing, [Land rights for religious minorities including Baha'is in Iran](#), April 2021, provides an introduction.

³⁶ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [Iran's security anxieties in Iraqi Kurdistan](#), 8 November 2022

³⁷ Foreign Policy, [How Iran's ethnic divisions are fuelling the revolt](#), 19 October 2022

3

2022 protests and Iran's response

3.1

The 2022 protests in context

Past protests

In recent years, [Iranians have protested against rising food and goods prices \(2017/18\), fuel prices \(2019\) and food \(2022\)](#). Often, these have been short-lived. Prices in Iran have been exacerbated by foreign sanctions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and domestic issues such as a weakening currency, drought, and economic management.³⁸

Response of authorities

The [response of authorities to these protests are often similar](#), with internet shutdowns imposed. The UN also says the "excessive use of force" has been the "default response" of authorities.³⁹

The regime has also blamed outside intervention,⁴⁰ citing past foreign involvement in Iranian affairs, including US and UK support for the 1953 coup during the Cold War.⁴¹

Comparing 2009 and 2022

The most substantial protests since 1979 were those by the [Green Movement of 2009](#), that opposed the 2009 presidential election results.

These protests were arguably the most well-organised, with clear leadership, and the most sustained, with the protests continuing for six months.

The numbers arrested and killed is uncertain, but reports have put these in the region of 4,000 arrests and 100 deaths.⁴² Several leaders were put under house arrest.⁴³

³⁸ USIP Iran Primer, [Protests in Iran 1979 to 2020](#), January 2020 and [Explainer: Iran's protests over food prices](#), 1 June 2022. Sources in section 3 accessed 11 November 2022

³⁹ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Presentation of the Secretary General's report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 21 June 2022

⁴⁰ For example, [UK expels two Iranian diplomats](#), BBC News [online], 23 June 2009 and [Iran prosecutor blames CIA, Israel, Saudi for protests](#), Al-Jazeera [online] 4 January 2018;

⁴¹ History Today, [Iran, Britain and Operation Boot](#), 8 August 2018

⁴² USIP Iran Primer, [The Green movement](#), 6 October 2010 and [Protests in Iran](#), 21 January 2020

⁴³ Amnesty International, [Iran: Decade-long arbitrary house arrest for dissidents must end](#), 14 February 2021

The protests since September 2022, although not yet lasting as long, have reportedly resulted in more people arrested and killed than in 2009.

3.2

Timeline of 2022 protests

16 September: Death of Mahsa Amini

In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, was arrested by Iran's morality police for her alleged noncompliance with the country's Islamic dress code.⁴⁴

Three days later, Amini died while in custody. Iranian officials deny reports she was beaten by police and say she died of natural causes.

Her death triggered widespread protests. Despite warnings by security forces, these protests have continued.

17-19 September: First protests

The first protests were held in Saez, in Kurdistan, at Amini's funeral. Protests spread to Iranian cities, including the capital Tehran, and universities.

Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, visited Amini's family on 18 September, stating there would be an investigation into her death. On 7 October, a coroner's report concluded Amini did not die from blows to her head and limbs.

22 September: New internet restrictions

On 22 September, access to social media sites such as Instagram and WhatsApp in Tehran and Kurdistan were blocked by authorities to hinder the organisation of protests. In response, the US said it would work to expand internet access for Iranians.⁴⁵

The first pro-regime and pro-hijab rallies were held in late September.

24 September: Iran attacks Iraqi Kurdistan

On 24 September, the first missile and drone attacks by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were launched against Kurdish groups in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Iran accused the groups of supporting terrorist activity and violence within Iran. Further attacks were reported in November.

The IRGC is an Iranian military organisation that works both in Iran and abroad to extend Iranian influence. The US designated it a terrorist organisation in 2019.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Unless stated, this timeline is sourced from US Institute for Peace Iran Primer, [Iran's tactics during protests](#), updated 10 November 2022 and [Timeline: Events in Iran since Mahsa Amini's arrest](#), VOA [online], 15 October 2022. Sources accessed 15 November 2022.

⁴⁵ US Department of State, [Joint statement on internet shutdowns](#), 20 October 2022

⁴⁶ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), p8

30 September: deadliest day of protests to date

According to Amnesty International, the deadliest day of protests was 30 September. The NGO and local activists state at least 66 people were killed by security forces in the city of Zahedan, though the figure may be higher.⁴⁷ Zahedan has a high number of Baloch people, who have previously been subject to discrimination (see above, section 2). Authorities state militants attacked a police station.

Iran blames foreign intervention

Criticism of foreign governments increased in October as senior Iranian leaders made their first public statements. The Supreme Leader, President and IRGC leaders claim that the US, Israel, the UK and others have been working to undermine the Islamic Republic.

Both Iran and the UK have summoned the other's diplomat representatives to raise concerns. Most recently, on 11 November the UK Foreign Secretary summoned Iran's Chargé d'Affaires to raise [alleged death threats against some UK-based journalists](#).⁴⁸

In response to sanctions imposed against it (see below, section 4.2), Iran has imposed its own against some foreign organisations and individuals, including some parliamentarians in the UK.⁴⁹

October: Energy strikes but students dominate protests

In October there were reports of strikes and protests among Iran's energy sector. However, protests by a range of workers have been relatively absent. This may be related to the pressures of the cost of living, the informal nature of work, and the struggle to organise (see below, page 17).

Reported protests, especially in October and November, have become concentrated around universities though there are reports of shop closures. Earlier protests also involved schoolchildren.⁵⁰

Iran's relations with European and North American countries deteriorated further in October with reports that the country has been providing Russia with drones and missiles for its war in Ukraine. The UK has been among those to introduce further sanctions against Iran in response.⁵¹

Mid-November: First death sentence for a protester

On 31 October, authorities announced that Iran will hold public trials for around 1,000 detained protesters in Tehran.

In November 2022, the first death sentence was imposed on a protester by an Iranian court.⁵²

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, [Iran: At least 82 protesters and bystanders killed in bloody crackdown in Baluchistan](#), 6 October 2022

⁴⁸ FCDO, [Foreign Secretary summons Iranian Chargé d'Affaires \[...\]](#), 11 November 2022

⁴⁹ [Iran imposes sanctions on UK institutions, individuals for "inciting riots."](#) Reuters [online], 19 October 2022

⁵⁰ US Institute for Peace Iran Primer, [Explainer: Iran's university protests](#), 10 November 2022; [Shops in Iran, including Grand Bazaar, close over protests](#), AP News [online], 15 November 2022

⁵¹ FCDO, [UK sanctions Iran over kamikaze Russian drones](#), 20 October 2022

⁵² [Iran court issues first death sentence in protest-linked cases](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 14 November 2022

December: First death sentences carried out

In December, the UN Human Rights Council considered the situation in Iran and established an inquiry into the protests.⁵³ Iran was also removed from the UN Council on the Status of Women.⁵⁴

Strikes were reported in some businesses in December.⁵⁵ Two people were also executed for involvement in the protests (see below, page 19).

3.3

Who is participating in the protests?

Iran's Government has introduced [restrictions on the internet and communications](#), making it hard to assess the full extent of the protests.⁵⁶

From reports, multiple groups are involved, though there is no single leadership or movement:

- **Women:** While women have previously participated in protests since 1979, the hijab law has become the symbol of the 2022 protests and [“women, life, freedom” one of its slogans](#).⁵⁷
- **Students:** University students have been some of the most consistent protesters since September, with [reports of sit-down strikes and boycotts of classes](#).⁵⁸
- **Minority ethnic groups:** Protests have been strong in [areas where minority groups such as Baluchis, Kurds and Arabs are concentrated](#). This may reflect historic grievances (see above, section 2).⁵⁹
- **Workers:** Strikes have been reported in the oil and gas sectors, as well as by teachers, lawyers, and doctors. However, these have not sustained. Reasons include the low degree of unionisation, and the precarious nature of work and wages.⁶⁰

Younger age groups: According to the deputy Commander of Iran's IRGC [the average age of those arrested is 15](#).⁶¹ School children are among those who have protested and been reportedly subject to violence by security forces.⁶² The Iranian Ministry of Education has reportedly expelled many students in response to their participation in the protests. Some arrested children have been reportedly transferred to

⁵³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights, [Human Rights Council to hold special session on the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 11 November 2022

⁵⁴ UN, [Iran removed from UN commission on the status of women](#), 14 December 2022

⁵⁵ [Iran businesses strike despite legal threats](#), Al-Monitor [online], 7 December 2022

⁵⁶ Reporters Without Borders, [How the Islamic Republic has enslaved Iran's internet](#)

⁵⁷ USIP Iran Primer, [The rallying cries of Iran's protests](#), 11 October 2022

⁵⁸ [Iran's universities under spotlight as protesters persist](#), DW [online], 7 November 2022

⁵⁹ [Factbox: Ethnic groups swept up in Iran's nationwide protests](#), Reuters [online] 17 October 2022

⁶⁰ Foreign Policy, [Why aren't Iran's workers spearheading a general strike?](#), 3 November 2022

⁶¹ [Iran says average age of arrested protesters is 15](#), Al-Monitor [online], 5 October 2022

⁶² Human Rights Watch, [In Iran, schoolgirls leading protests for freedom](#), 12 October 2022

psychological centres “for correction and education to prevent them being antisocial characters.”⁶³

Pro-regime rallies have also been [organised throughout the protests, including in the capital, Tehran](#).⁶⁴ Neither are Iran’s students a monolith bloc: some are members of the Basij paramilitary group, which has participated in the suppression of protests.⁶⁵

3.4

How has the regime responded?

Many international observers, [including the UK, have criticised the violence of the Iranian regime’s response to the protests](#). This has included the use of live ammunition against protesters, mass arrests and internet restrictions.⁶⁶

Those putting down the protests include the [Basij militia](#), a volunteer paramilitary organisation working under the IRGC.⁶⁷

Number of arrests and deaths

The numbers of those arrested and killed is uncertain.

- The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA)⁶⁸ has documented the deaths of 516 protesters, including 70 children, to 3 January 2023.⁶⁹
- An estimated 120 of those killed have been killed in two cities and in two days in Sistan-Baluchestan, which has a high concentration of Sunni Muslims—a minority in Iran.⁷⁰
- According to HRANA, 57 individuals from the police and security forces have been killed (as of 26 November).⁷¹

⁶³ UN, [Killings and detention of children in Iran must end, UN child rights committee urges](#), 17 October 2022

⁶⁴ [Iran’s pro-government counter-protesters try to change narrative](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 25 September 2022

⁶⁵ US Institute for Peace Iran Primer, [Explainer: Iran’s university protests](#), 10 November 2022

⁶⁶ HC Deb, [25 October 2021](#), c149

⁶⁷ USIP Iran Primer, [The Basij resistance force](#), 6 October 2010

⁶⁸ HRANA’s, [A comprehensive report of the first 82 days of nationwide protests in Iran](#), 8 December 2022, provides more information

⁶⁹ [Monitor: 516 killed since Iran protests](#), VOA [online], 3 January 2023

⁷⁰ BBC Monitoring, [Iran digs heels in over deadly crackdown on Sunnis in south-east](#), 15 November 2022

⁷¹ [Iran’s Khamenei praises Basij forces for confronting “rioters.”](#) VOA [online], 26 November 2022

- HRANA estimates around 19,200 people have been arrested, though some may now have been released.⁷² At least 1,000 are due to be publicly tried in Iran, according to state media.⁷³
- The Committee to Protect Journalists [say at least 71 journalists have been arrested](#) (to 5 December 2022).⁷⁴

The death penalty is being imposed

On 13 November, Iranian state media reported that the courts issued their first death sentence to a person involved in the protests, and prison terms for five individuals of five to ten years.⁷⁵

On 13 December 2022, Iran's judiciary said 400 people had been sentenced to prison, including 160 to between five and ten years.⁷⁶

Rights groups estimate between 26 and 100 people are at risk of being sentenced or charged with capital offences in connection to the protests.⁷⁷

At least two death sentences were carried out in December 2022,⁷⁸ and a further two in January 2023.⁷⁹

UN human rights experts state that since 2019 Iran has “[widely](#)” [used the death penalty against individuals participating in protests](#), often on “unsubstantiated” charges of murder or on national security grounds.

At least two people were executed following their involvement in protests in 2020.⁸⁰

The regime has blamed foreign actors

The Iranian regime has blamed outside influence for the protests. Speaking in November, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei said they were engaging in “hybrid warfare:”

⁷² [Monitor: 516 killed since Iran protests](#), VOA [online], 3 January 2023

⁷³ [Iran to hold public trials for 1,000 involved in Mahsa Amini protests](#), France 24 [online], 31 October 2022

⁷⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists, [Names of journalists arrested in Iran's anti-state protests](#)

⁷⁵ [Iran charges more than 750 over “riots,” issues first sentence](#), France 24 [online] 13 November 2022

⁷⁶ BBC News, [Iran protests: 400 people sentenced to prison over Tehran unrest](#), 13 December 2022

⁷⁷ [Iran protests: 100 detainees facing death penalty—rights group](#), BBC News [online], 28 December 2022; Amnesty International, [Iran: 26 people risk execution in relation to protests](#), 16 December 2022

⁷⁸ Amnesty International, [Iran: Public execution of Majidreza Rahnavard exposes authorities' revenge killings](#), 12 December 2022;

⁷⁹ [Iran executes two more men detained amid nationwide protests](#), AP News [online], 7 January 2023

⁸⁰ UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, [Iran: Stop sentencing peaceful protesters to death, say UN experts](#), 11 November 2022

In the hybrid warfare of the recent weeks, America, the Zionist regime, certainly European countries, and some grouplets employed all their facilities to harm the Iranian nation.⁸¹

This coincided with an [Iranian intelligence report](#) that accuses the US, UK, Israel and Saudi Arabia of providing training and support to opposition groups.⁸²

Foreign and dual nationals have been arrested and reportedly harassed

Iran has arrested several foreign nationals, including French and US citizens, and individuals linked to Israel,⁸³ criticised several foreign broadcasters, [including BBC Persian](#),⁸⁴ and [introduced sanctions against some UK politicians](#).⁸⁵

In December 2022, Iranian state media reported that seven people with links to the UK, including some with dual nationality, were arrested for involvement in the protests by the intelligence services of the IRGC.⁸⁶

There have also been reports that some British-Iran journalists working for Persian-language TV channels have been warned of a risk to their lives.⁸⁷

Iranian attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan

Kurdish groups in Iraq have also been accused by Iranian authorities of supporting the protests inside the country and supporting “separatism” under the guise of the protests.⁸⁸

In late September, Iran launched drone and missile attacks against Kurdish groups in Iraq’s Kurdistan region. Thirteen deaths were reported. Both Iraq and the US condemned the attack, and the UN called for the sovereignty of Iraq to be respected.⁸⁹

Further attacks have since been reported, and the IRGC has threatened a land-based military operation in border areas against Kurdish groups in Iraq

⁸¹ BBC Monitoring, Khamenei blames US, Europe for “hybrid war” in Iran protests, 2 November 2022

⁸² [Joint explanatory statement of the Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC \[...\]](#), Fars News Agency [online], 28 October 2022

⁸³ [Paris urges Tehran to release five French nationals](#), France 24 [online], 11 October 2022, [Iran claims to arrest 10 Mossad agents for burning security officials’ cars, homes](#), The Times of Israel [online], 24 October 2022; [Iran arrest 14 foreigners, including US citizens, over protests: Report](#), Middle East Eye [online], 20 October 2022

⁸⁴ [Why is Iran designating UK-based TV channels as “terrorists?”](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 23 October 2022

⁸⁵ [Iran sanctions British individuals, entities over terrorism, rights abuse](#), Tehran Times [online], 20 October 2022

⁸⁶ [Iran’s Guards arrest UK-Iranian dual nationals over protests](#), Reuters [online], 25 December 2022

⁸⁷ [Iran International: TV channel says Iran threatened UK-based journalists](#), BBC News [online], 9 November 2022

⁸⁸ Foreign Policy, [How Iran’s ethnic divisions are fuelling the revolt](#), 19 October 2022

⁸⁹ USIP Iran Primer, [Iran attacks Kurdish groups in Iraq](#), 29 September 2022

(though analysts judge there are few signs of a military build-up). In November, at least two people were killed in rocket attacks.⁹⁰ The US and Iraqi Governments again condemned the attacks.⁹¹

The regime has hinted at limited change

The regime has issued some statements that hint at conciliation while the use of force and restrictions on internet access and protest continue.

In a speech to the Iranian Parliament in October, [President Raisi acknowledged “weaknesses and shortcomings” in the country](#) while also blaming external forces for the unrest.⁹²

Supreme Leader Khamenei, who is ultimately responsible for the regime’s response to the protests, also differentiated between the protesters in mid-October:

Those who participated in the riots aren’t all of the same type. Some are agents of or in line with the enemy. Others are just agitated. They shouldn’t be judged the same. For the latter, cultural work is needed. For the former, judiciary & security officials must do their duty.⁹³

Regarding hijab, some in the Iranian Parliament [suggested police reforms](#) and Raisi said that “values cannot change but methods can.”⁹⁴

In December, there was uncertainty regarding the position of the morality police and enforcement of hijab.

While the Iranian Prosecutor General said that the police had been “abolished by those who created it,” his office has no responsibility for the police and state media have rejected speculation it has been abolished. Some policing officials have also suggested the methods of enforcement may become “more modern,” including using facial recognition technology.⁹⁵

In an address in December, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei did not discuss hijab or the morality police.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ [Iran renews assaults on Iraq’s Kurdistan region](#), Al-Monitor [online], 14 November 2022

⁹¹ US Department of State, [Iranian attacks the Iraq Kurdistan region](#), 14 November 2022

⁹² [Iran’s president tries to assuage anger as protests continue](#), AP [online], 4 October 2022

⁹³ [Protests continue to rage in Iran despite authorities crackdown](#), Asharq Al-Awsat [online] 13 October 2022

⁹⁴ Iran Front Page, [Ghalibaf: Iran’s parl’t to push for morality police reforms](#), 20 September 2022 and BBC Monitoring, [Explainer: What’s next for Iran’s September protests](#), 29 September 2022

⁹⁵ BBC Monitoring, [Briefing: Iran’s hijab policing is not going anywhere](#), 6 December 2022

⁹⁶ [Iran’s Khamenei shows no sign of retreat in latest speech](#), Al-Monitor [online], 8 December 2022 (accessed 13 December 2022)

3.5

How significant are the protests?

The protests are notable for their longevity, their national reach, and the leading role and participation of women and young people. However, analysts are cautious about their significance and threat they pose to the Islamic Republic. Five reasons are provided below.

1) Lack of an organised opposition

The protests have not seen the level of organisation of the 2009 protests by the Green movement following the disputed presidential election. The lack of an organised opposition [limits the protest's threat to the regime](#).⁹⁷

Some analysts have argued this is an advantage in allowing the protests to continue: Any recognisable or clear leaders would quickly be arrested by the regime. However, without organisation [prospects for reform are low](#).⁹⁸

2) A divided opposition

In addition to there being no clear leadership, existing opposition groups have struggled to organise, are divided over tactics, and many are in exile.

While Iran does allow political parties, these are relatively weak organisations compared to other countries.⁹⁹ In the 2020 parliamentary elections, conservatives took a majority of seats after many reformist candidates were excluded from standing by the regime.¹⁰⁰

Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah, has called for a transitional government, but it is unclear how many Iranians seek the return of the monarchy.¹⁰¹

The Reform Front, a movement close to Mohammad Khatami (Iranian President from 1997 to 2005, and who has [backed peaceful protests](#))¹⁰² has called for a referendum and the start of a national dialogue on change.¹⁰³

However, this contrasts with [other protesters, who have called for the end to the regime](#). Some analysts have suggested the nature of the opposition is now

⁹⁷ Atlantic Council, [Iran is having nationwide protests. Is it a revolution?](#), 30 September 2022

⁹⁸ Wilson Center, [When do protests succeed? The case of Iran and the Arab world](#), 17 October 2022

⁹⁹ Constitute Project, [Iran \(Islamic Republic of\)'s Constitution of 1979 with amendments through 1989](#) (PDF), Article 26

¹⁰⁰ USIP Iran Primer, [2020 parliamentary election results](#), 24 February 2020

¹⁰¹ BBC Monitoring, [Explainer: A guide to Iranian opposition groups](#), 14 October 2022

¹⁰² [Khatami: Protests are legitimate right, but violence contaminates them](#), Al Mayadeen [online], 28 October 2022

¹⁰³ [Iran: Reformist bloc calls for referendum to end crisis](#), Middle East Monitor [online], 10 November 2022

changing and future groups may be less content with seeking gradual reform.¹⁰⁴

Alongside divisions on political tactics, they also exist between the Persian majority and minority ethnic groups. The Iranian regime has been highlighting Kurdish demands for autonomy as a means of dividing the opposition.¹⁰⁵

3) Regime anxieties about separatism

One reason Iran is concerned about Kurdish groups in Iraq is its anxieties about separatism within Iran: Persians account for only around half the country's population (see above, section 2). According to the BBC, Iran's minority ethnic groups have been among [those targeted by state violence during the protests](#).¹⁰⁶

Amnesty International reports [at least 82 people were killed in state violence against Sunni Baluchis](#) following protests over the alleged rape of a teenage girl by a police officer in September and October.¹⁰⁷

Analysis by the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington suggests the threat of separatism and use of military force abroad is used to justifying violent suppression within Iran and also to [divide protesters concerned about civil war and separatism](#).¹⁰⁸

4) Violent suppression by the regime appears to be lower than 2019

The level of violent suppression in 2022 appears lower than 2019, suggesting the regime has not deployed significant numbers of the armed forces. In 2019, up [an estimated 1,500 protesters were killed](#).¹⁰⁹

5) Key groups have not mobilised or support the regime

- The Government has been able to organise counter-rallies.
- Security forces continue to back the state.
- Strikes by workers do not appear to be sustained.

¹⁰⁴ [Analysis: Iran's unrest sounds death knell for once vibrant reformists](#), Reuters [online], 10 November 2022; USIP Iran Primer, [Whither the reformists?](#), 14 December 2022

¹⁰⁵ Foreign Policy, [How Iran's ethnic divisions are fuelling the revolt](#), 19 October 2022

¹⁰⁶ [BBC identifies young people killed in Iran's protests](#), BBC [online] 14 October 2022

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty, [At least 82 Baluchi protests and bystanders killed in bloody crackdown](#), 6 October 2022

¹⁰⁸ Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [The military dimension of Iran protests](#), 19 October 2022

¹⁰⁹ [Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest](#), Reuters [online], 23 December 2019

Further reading on the significance of protests

- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, [Iran protests: Reform, revolution, or status quo](#), 14 October 2022. Examines the underlying causes of the protests on to the rights of women, young people and minority ethnic groups.
- European Council on Foreign Relations, [Generation no: The Iranian uprising and how the West should respond](#), 30 September 2022. Argues that ending diplomacy with Iran over the nuclear agreement will only benefit hardliners in the country.
- Washington Institute, [As anti-regime protests swell across Iran, ethnic minorities demand freedom and equality](#), 14 October 2022. Explores the significance of minority ethnic groups to the protests.
- Washington Institute, [Violence in Iran's uprising: What happens if either side escalates?](#), 8 December 2022. Examines the potential for a more violent response by the regime.
- US Institute for Peace, Iran Primer, [Dissent among Iran elite over protests](#), 8 December 2022. Attitudes towards the protests by political elites, senior clerics, and family of the Supreme Leader.

4 International response

4.1 What sanctions have been imposed?

How effective are the sanctions?

Analysis published by the Washington Institute argues that [human rights sanctions against Iran](#) “need more coordination and creativity.” While noting that the EU, US, UK, and others have implemented sanctions since September, it argues that their practical impact is “limited.” This is because many of the sanctions focus on asset freezes and travel bans against individuals who have limited assets or travel outside Iran, or to the countries that sanction them.

It argues that Governments should consider 1) stronger coordination when applying sanctions 2) extending them to the family members of sanctioned individuals 3) Targeting those who have previously travelled to Europe and North America 4) Threatening sanctions against individual IRGC members.¹¹⁰

In December 2022, the Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, said that sanctions would be used “swiftly and robustly” against those that violate human rights to “exact a price for malign behaviour.”¹¹¹

Before the 2022 protests, Iran was subject to multiple sanctions that target individuals and entities such as the IRGC. Sanctions also target its nuclear programme and support for armed groups abroad, as well as human rights violations. They can take the form of arms embargoes, asset freezes and travel bans.

For more on non-human rights related sanctions, see the Library briefing [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#), section 3.2.

Sanctions have also been introduced in response to Iran providing Russia with drones and missiles for the war in Ukraine.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Washington Institute, [Human rights sanctions on Iran need more coordination and creativity](#), 9 December 2022 (accessed 13 December 2022)

¹¹¹ James Cleverly, [Britain is not a passive observer on the world stage \[...\]](#), The Guardian [online], 9 December 2022 (accessed 13 December 2022)

¹¹² FCDO, [UK sanctions Iran over kamikaze Russian drones](#), 20 October 2022

UK sanctions against Iran

Under the UK's Global Human Rights sanctions regime, the UK Government intends to deter and provide accountability for those who commit serious human rights violations. These violations include torture, degrading treatment, slavery and defending the right to life.¹¹³

Iran is on the UK's list of 31 human rights priority countries, making it a state in which the Government is particularly concerned about human rights issues and where it considers the UK can make a difference.¹¹⁴

Full details of UK sanctions are published on the [Financial sanctions, Iran \(human rights\) page](#). Sanctioned entities include the Iranian cyber police which regulates social media and internet access, and individuals including police and prison officials, prosecutors, and judges.¹¹⁵

In response to protests, in October 2022 [the UK imposed sanctions against Iran's morality police and other senior figures](#), including commanders in the Iranian police and the Basij force. Any of their assets held in the UK or by UK persons anywhere, will be frozen.¹¹⁶

[Further sanctions were announced on 14 November](#), in which the UK designated the Iranian Communications Minister and members of the IRGC involved in the regime's response to the protests.¹¹⁷

As of 9 December 2022, the UK sanctions 119 individuals and two entities in Iran.¹¹⁸

European Union

The EU has implemented several human rights related sanctions. This includes against equipment that may be used for internal repression.¹¹⁹

In response to protests in September 2022, further sanctions have been imposed by the EU. In October, this included Iran's morality police and law enforcement forces.¹²⁰

¹¹³ FCDO, [UK sanctions relating to global human rights](#), 6 July 2020. All sources accessed 11 October 2022.

¹¹⁴ FCDO, [Human rights priority countries: Ministerial statement for January to June 2021](#), November 2021

¹¹⁵ HM Treasury and Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, [Financial sanctions, Iran \(human rights\)](#), updated 9 December 2022

¹¹⁶ FCDO, [UK sanctions Iranian "morality police" and senior security officials](#), 10 October 2022

¹¹⁷ FCDO, [UK and international partners announce further sanctions against Iranian officials](#), 14 November 2022

¹¹⁸ HM Treasury and Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, [Financial sanctions, Iran \(human rights\)](#), updated 14 November 2022

¹¹⁹ [EU Sanctions map](#)

¹²⁰ European Council, [Iran: EU sanctions perpetrators of serious human rights violations](#), 17 October 2022

On 14 November, the EU added individuals involved in Amini's arrest as well as Iranian state broadcaster Press TV to its sanctions list.¹²¹

Further sanctions were announced in December against Iranian security and media figures, and the state-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.¹²²

United States

The United States has the most extensive sanctions regime against Iran, with many being introduced in response to the Iranian revolution in 1979.

The Congressional Research Briefing [Iran sanctions](#) (last updated 2 February 2022) and US Department of State, [Iran sanctions](#), provide further detail.

Regarding human rights, US law:

- prohibits US firms from contracts selling technology to Iran that could use to monitor or control Iranian use of the internet.
- bars entry into the US and trade with multiple individuals engaged in censorship, control of the internet and wider human rights violations.
- sanctions companies selling goods or technologies to commit human rights abuses including firearms, rubber bullets, and police batons.¹²³

In addition, in 2019 the Trump Administration sanctioned the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei's office and his senior associates.¹²⁴

In September 2022, the US sanctioned Iran's morality police and other senior security officials involved in violence against protesters.¹²⁵ Others newly sanctioned included some governors, those managing prisons, and broadcasters.¹²⁶

Further sanctions were imposed in November against some IRGC leaders following their participation in the regime's response to the protests.¹²⁷

¹²¹ European Council, [Iran: EU adopts additional sanctions against perpetrators of serious human rights violations](#), 14 November 2022

¹²² European Council, [Iran: EU adopts Council conclusion and additional restrictive measures](#), 12 December 2022 (accessed 13 December 2022)

¹²³ Congressional Research Service, [Iran sanctions](#), last updated 2 February 2022, p33-35

¹²⁴ As above, p36

¹²⁵ US Treasury, [Treasury sanctions Iran's morality police and senior security officials for violence against protesters and the death of Mahsa Amini](#), 22 September 2022

¹²⁶ The US State Department, [Designation of Iranian officials and entities connected to ongoing protest repression, censorship and prison abuses](#), 26 October 2022; and [Sanctioning senior officials of Iranian broadcaster](#), 16 November 2022

¹²⁷ US State Department, [Designating Iranian officials connected to serious human rights abuses in Iran's Kurdistan and Azerbaijan provinces](#), 23 November 2022

4.2

UN response and actions at the UN

United Nations statements

The UN Secretary General, [António Guterres, has called on Iran to stop the “unnecessary and disproportionate \[use of\] force.”](#)¹²⁸

UN human rights experts, including the Special Rapporteurs on freedom of assembly and association, human rights in Iran, on violence against women and girls, and for human rights defenders, [have condemned:](#)

Alleged arbitrary arrests and detentions, gender-based and sexual violence, excessive use of force, torture, and enforced disappearances [by security forces].¹²⁹

The UN committee on the rights of the child has also [called for an end to the killing and detention of children.](#)¹³⁰

At the UN, Iran has expressed regret at the death of Mahsa Amini, and called for states to uphold the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.¹³¹

Removal of Iran from the UN Commission on the status of women, December 2022

Iran was elected to this UN Commission in April 2021 for a four-year term, beginning in March 2022. Of the 54 countries in the UN Economic and Social Council, 43 voted in favour. The decision [drew criticism from human rights groups](#) at the time.¹³²

On 2 November 2022, Albania and the US convened a special informal meeting of the UN Security Council. The US said it would work with other UN states to [remove Iran from the UN Commission.](#)¹³³

The UK says Iran has been “proven [...] not fit to sit” on the Commission and would work with the US and others to remove it.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ UN, [Iran: UN condemns violent crackdown against hijab protests](#), 27 September 2022. Sources in this section accessed 14 November 2022 unless stated.

¹²⁹ UN, [Iran: Crackdown on peaceful protests since death of Jina Mahsa Amini needs independent international investigation, say UN experts](#), 26 October 2022

¹³⁰ UN, [Killings and detention of children in Iran must end, UN child rights committee urges](#), 17 October 2022

¹³¹ Al Mayadeen, [West practices selective application of human rights: Iran UN envoy](#), 21 October 2022

¹³² [US criticised for response to Iran’s election to UN Women’s rights commission](#), VOA [online], 29 April 2021

¹³³ US Mission to the UN, [Remarks by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield \[...\]](#), 2 November 2022

¹³⁴ PQ 105330 [[Iran: UN Commission on the Status of Women](#)], 12 December 2022

Following a vote on 14 December 2022, Iran was removed from the body. While Iran said the actions were “exceedingly dangerous to the UN system integrity,” both the US and UK supported the decision.¹³⁵

UN vote for an investigation

On 24 November, the UN Human Rights Council held a [special session on Iran](#).¹³⁶ Iran called for countries to [boycott the session](#).¹³⁷

At the meeting, the UK called for an end to the suppression of the protests and justice for victims.¹³⁸ Following the meeting, the Council voted to set up an investigation into the protests. Iran has said it will not cooperate with the investigation, arguing it is “political.”¹³⁹

4.3

Proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation

What is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)?

The IRGC was established following the 1979 Iranian revolution as a counter to Iran’s established military forces.

The IRGC has ground forces based across Iran which number more than 100,000, a naval force of more than 20,000 that patrols Iran’s maritime borders, an air force which runs Iran’s ballistic missile program, and it also controls the [paramilitary Basij force](#), which can mobilise up to 600,000 volunteers.¹⁴⁰

It also works overseas providing money, technology and training to Iran-aligned groups in countries such as Syria and Yemen. For more details on its international presence, see the Commons Library briefing [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#).

During the 2022 protests in Iran, the [IRGC have been among those deployed by the regime](#) to counter the protests and it has been responsible for launching military operations against Kurdish groups in Iraq that the Iranian regime have linked to the unrest in Iran.¹⁴¹

¹³⁵ UN, [Iran removed from UN commission on the status of women](#), 14 December 2022; FCDO, [UK statement at the UN vote on ending Iran’s membership \[...\]](#), 14 December 2022; US State Department, [Removal of Iran from the UN commission on the status of women](#), 14 December 2022

¹³⁶ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human rights, [Human Rights Council to hold special session on the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 11 November 2022

¹³⁷ [Iran pushes back against protest scrutiny](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 12 November 2022

¹³⁸ FCDO, [UN Human Rights Council Statement on Iran: UK statement](#), 24 November 2022

¹³⁹ [Iran rejects UN investigation into protests](#), Al-Jazeera [online], 28 November 2022

¹⁴⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran’s Revolutionary Guards](#), updated 6 May 2019

¹⁴¹ USIP, [Iran’s tactics during protests](#), 10 November 2022

Debates on proscribing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation in the UK

The US [designated the IRGC as a terrorist organisation in 2019](#) as part of President Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran in order to curtail its nuclear programme.¹⁴²

Because this designation was in addition to existing sanctions and bans that were in place against the group, [there were few practical consequences](#) though analysts argue it sent, and continues to send, [an important message to Iran about its actions abroad and human rights abuses](#).¹⁴³

In 2020, the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee [called for the UK Government to proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation](#), arguing that:

We are satisfied that the actions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp meet the criteria for proscription in the Terrorism Act 2000 and see proscription as a logical extension of the existing restrictions placed on members of the IRGC by the EU's sanctions regime. The IRGC's philosophy and malign actions within Iran and across the region run counter to the interests of the UK and those of the Iranian people.¹⁴⁴

In response, the [UK Government said it took "careful note" of the recommendation](#) and would make any decisions under the Terrorism Act 2000:

Legislation allows for an organisation to be proscribed in the UK only if it is currently concerned in terrorism, within the meaning of the Terrorism Act 2000, and if the Home Secretary decides that the factors relevant to the exercise of her discretion weigh in favour of proscription.¹⁴⁵

It also stressed the IRGC is subject to sanctions in response to Iran's nuclear programme (see below). Proscription is a legal process, that requires the Home Secretary to consider whether an organisation is involved in terrorism and to consider factors such as the specific threat it poses to the UK and British nationals.¹⁴⁶ Proscription makes it a criminal offence to belong to the organisation and invite support for it, among other offences.¹⁴⁷

In response to an oral question in December 2022, the Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, [reiterated the position of the Government](#):

It is a long-standing Government policy that we do not speculate on future proscriptions. He [Greg Smith MP] will know that we have sanctioned the IRGC

¹⁴² US State Department, [Foreign terrorist organizations](#), accessed 3 January 2022

¹⁴³ Washington Institute for Near East Policy, [What will IRGC designation actually do?](#), 8 April 2019 and [Don't drop Iran's Revolutionary Guards from FTO list](#), 21 March 2022

¹⁴⁴ Foreign Affairs Committee, [No prosperity without justice: The UK's relationship with Iran](#), December 2020, HC 415, para 50

¹⁴⁵ [Government response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report No prosperity without justice](#), 16 February 2021, para 13

¹⁴⁶ Commons Library, [Proscribed Terrorist organisations](#)

¹⁴⁷ Home Office [Factsheet: Proscription](#), November 2021

in its entirety, and we have brought specific actions against individuals who we know to be involved either with arms distributions or violations of international humanitarian law.

In January 2023, the Daily Telegraph reported that the UK Government is expected to proscribe the IRGC “within weeks.” In response to the story, the Government said it would not comment on future decisions under the Terrorism Act.¹⁴⁸

Iran’s activities in the UK during 2022 and UK response

In addition to the protests in Iran, which has led to sanctions against some preparators of violence and human rights abuses, there have been reports that Iran or Iran-linked individuals have targeted people in, or linked to, the UK in 2022:

- In November, MI5 said Iran had organised ten kidnap and death plots in 2022 and that the country “projects threat to the UK directly, through its aggressive intelligence services.”¹⁴⁹
- Also in November, the UK Government said that two-London based journalists have faced death threats from Iran-based individuals.¹⁵⁰

It is uncertain what entities in Iran are responsible. In response to a December 2022 Parliamentary Question on the assessment the Government has made of IRGC activities in the UK, the Home Office Minister, [Tom Tugendhat, said](#):

We do not routinely comment on operational or intelligence matters, however the UK will always stand up to threats from foreign nations. As we set out in the Integrated Review in 2021, we are committed to addressing growing threats from Iran, as well as other states.¹⁵¹

UK sanctions against the IRGC

Under the Iran (Sanctions) (Nuclear) (EU exit) Regulations 2019, the IRGC is a [sanctioned entity](#). This provides for the freezing of related funds and economic activity for association with the proliferation or development of nuclear weapons in, or for use in, Iran.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ [Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps to be proscribed a terror group](#), The Telegraph [online], 3 January 2022; Also [Iranian revolutionary guards set to be labelled as terrorist group by UK](#), BBC News [online], 3 January 2022

¹⁴⁹ MI5, [Director General Ken McCallum gives annual threat update](#), November 2022

¹⁵⁰ [Foreign Office ask Iran to explain alleged death threats to UK-based reporters](#), The Guardian [online], 11 November 2022,

¹⁵¹ PQ104337 [[IRGC](#)], 16 December 2022

¹⁵² HM Treasury, [Financial sanctions, Iran relating to nuclear weapons: Current list](#), updated 14 June 2022

4.4

UK diplomatic response

The UK's response has included [sanctioning the Iranian morality police](#) and [summoning Iranian diplomats in the UK](#)—see above, section 4.1.¹⁵³

[Iranian diplomats have also been summoned by the Foreign Office](#) in the UK to raise concerns about human rights and threats made to UK-based journalists, [most recently on 11 November 2022](#).¹⁵⁴

In December, the Foreign Secretary summoned Iranian officials to call for an immediate halt to the use of the death penalty against protesters.¹⁵⁵

[The Government says it will not downgrade diplomatic ties with Iran](#), so it can continue to raise concerns with Iran's Government.¹⁵⁶

Reductions to the BBC World Service in Persian

In September 2022, the BBC World Service [proposed to end its radio broadcasts in ten languages](#), including Persian, and instead become online-only.

The World Service is funded partly through the BBC licence fee and through Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) funding. While the FCDO has announced £94.4 million in annual support,¹⁵⁷ wider pressures on BBC spending are cited as the reasons for the reduction in service.¹⁵⁸

In response to parliamentary questions, the FCDO says it was consulted on the changes and emphasised that [Persian language services will continue](#).¹⁵⁹

¹⁵³ FCDO, [UK sanctions Iranian "morality police" and senior security officials](#), 10 October 2022 and FCDO, [UK summons Iranian Chargé d'Affaires following worsening crackdown on protests](#), 3 October 2022

¹⁵⁴ FCDO, [Foreign Secretary summons Iranian Chargé d'Affaires over threats to journalists in the UK](#), 11 November 2022

¹⁵⁵ FCDO, [Foreign Secretary summons Iranian Chargé d'Affaires after Iranian regime executes protester](#), 9 December 2022

¹⁵⁶ PQ 83808 [[Iran: Diplomatic relations](#)], 16 November 2022

¹⁵⁷ HC Deb, [8 November 2022](#), c110

¹⁵⁸ [BBC World Service proposes 382 post closures as part of savings](#), BBC News [online], 29 September 2022

¹⁵⁹ HC Deb, [25 October 2022](#), c153

UK Parliament debates on the protests

The 2022 protests have been raised several times in the UK Parliament, with the most substantial proceedings being the below:

- HC Deb, [Crisis in Iran, 25 October 2022](#), cc149-59
- HL Deb, [Iran demonstrations, 27 October 2022](#), cc1596-1608
- HC Deb, [Iran, 16 November 2022](#), cc676-85
- HL Deb, [Iran: Executions of protesters, 12 December 2022](#), cc451-61
- HL Deb, [Iran: Women's rights](#), 21 December 2022, cc1136-9

The Commons is [due to debate the “Political situation and protesters in Iran”](#) on Thursday 12 January 2023.

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