

# FAQ: THE NOVEMBER 2019 PROTESTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS CHALLENGES IN IRAN, ONE YEAR LATER

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## WHAT PROVOKED THE PROTESTS IN IRAN ONE YEAR AGO?

On November 15, 2019, protests began in major cities in Iran in response to the decision of the government of President Hassan Rouhani to revoke fuel-subsidies, drastically raising the cost of gasoline by nearly 50 percent overnight. Demonstrations soon mushroomed across more than 100 cities and towns over the next week, as protestors quickly turned an economic matter into a referendum on the regime itself. Iranians now refer to these events as the Aban protests, named for the Persian month in which they occurred.

The regime met these protests with a harsh crackdown, including a sustained internet blackout that limited the flow of information into and out of the country. Under the cover of this internet blackout, Iranian security forces moved against protestors ruthlessly with weapons of war.

Initial assessments of the death toll varied greatly, but a month after the demonstrations, a Reuters report citing unnamed Iranian official sources put it at about 1,500. The same report claimed that Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, said of the protests, "The Islamic Republic is in danger. Do whatever it takes to end it. You have my order."

In addition to the killings, Khamenei's order appears to have endorsed a series of other crimes, as documented by Amnesty International. Some of these include mass arrests of up to 7,000 Iranians (including women and children), as well as forced confessions broadcast on state television. FDD experts have identified televised forced confessions under torture as a long-standing tactic of the Islamic Republic.

## WHY DO THESE PROTESTS MATTER?

Regime authorities put down the Aban protests more violently than any others in the 41 years of the Islamic Republic's existence. While the Islamic Republic has employed lethal force in the past, the regime's current legitimacy crisis – evident in statements by Iranian officials about using force to "take people to paradise," as well as in studies of unrest by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – is one factor driving the greater use of violence.

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In the [Green Movement](#) protests of 2009, during which security forces killed an [estimated](#) 112 demonstrators, Khamenei [reportedly](#) believed that his regime was “on the edge of the abyss.” Just over a decade later, Iranian officials continue to talk about the danger protests pose to regime security, and have described the Aban protests in [similar terms](#). Protestors now appear more willing to call for the downfall of the Islamic Republic, yet the regime has proven that its security forces remain largely cohesive and capable of responding with greater violence and intimidation when needed.

The Aban protests also illustrate key changes within the coalition opposed to the regime. As FDD scholars have [previously noted](#), post-2017 protests in Iran are motivated more by a desire to look past the Islamic Republic than by a desire to fix its myriad problems. In contrast to major uprisings in 2009 and [1999](#), the post-2017 protests do not champion Iran’s domestic opposition figures. As such, they may be the death knell for the country’s aging and marginalized reform movement. Moreover, protestors are [taking to the streets](#) more often, and in so doing, they are [disproving myths](#) about the resolve of Iranian protestors since the Green Movement was repressed over a decade ago.

## **WILL THERE BE MORE PROTESTS?**

Since the repression of the Aban protests, Iranians have [continued](#) to demonstrate, but in considerably smaller numbers. They are using every opportunity and [medium](#) available to them – such as the aftermath of the downing of the Ukrainian civilian airliner this past January – to [protest](#) against their leadership. Indeed, as Iranian authorities struggle to balance policy priorities, they are likely to continue making choices that result in more protests.

For example, while the COVID-19 pandemic is a short-term depressant for Iran’s protest movement, the regime’s botched [handling](#) of the crisis might [serve](#) as a potential accelerant for future demonstrations and more resentment against the regime. Other flashpoints could include a succession crisis after the death of Iran’s supreme leader; the challenge of continued macro-economic contraction; social malaise; rising unemployment; ongoing environmental crises; perceptions of foreign policy failures; threats to the country’s territorial integrity given rising ethnic discontent; gross electoral fraud; and [abusive](#) enforcement of Islamic law, to name just a few. How Washington contends with rising domestic expectations in Iran, as well as the regime’s foreign and domestic policies, is sure to factor into the longevity and effectiveness of the next major wave of protests.

## **WHAT IS U.S. POLICY ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND PROTESTS IN IRAN?**

Like its predecessors, the Trump administration has used executive branch authorities to sanction the Islamic Republic for human rights abuses. What has differed are the more frequent opportunities to use these penalties given growing levels of state repression and protests. Lest we forget, the universe of Iranian human rights violators includes the regime’s security services, the judiciary, prisons, communication companies, and entities owned or controlled by sanctioned actors that aid in crackdowns. The administration has met these targets with [increased economic sanctions](#), creative [use](#) of communications platforms, naming and [shaming](#) of human rights violators, and [expressions of solidarity](#) with the Iranian people when they take to the streets.

Given that Iranian human rights violations have continued, as documented by the [United States](#) and the [United Nations](#), this means that U.S. human rights policy has been more punitive than coercive. In the longer term, Washington still hopes that compounding political isolation and economic deprivation can get Iran’s malign behavior to stop or, at the very least, become harder to carry out. The continued public diplomacy component of Washington’s human rights policy can also be interpreted as an attempt to gain multilateral support for its unilateral “maximum pressure” [policy](#) while signaling to the Iranian people that the United States has not forgotten them.

## WHAT SHOULD U.S. POLICY BE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND PROTESTS IN IRAN?

The current administration has managed to raise the profile of Iranian protestors through its continued speeches and the imposition of [sanctions on those complicit in human rights violations](#). As demonstrated by recent U.S. [penalties](#) against those involved in the arrest, detention, torture, and killing of the 27-year-old wrestler [Navid Afkari](#) – who participated in protests in Iran in 2018 – Washington is capable of fine-tuning measures to expose and punish the exact persons and entities responsible. Washington should maintain this carefully calibrated element of U.S. human rights and protest policy, as it signals a granular understanding of Tehran's repressive apparatus and the ability to hold responsible the persons directly involved in crimes.

While an incoming Biden administration is set to [change](#) U.S. policy on Iran and re-focus on [prospects](#) for nuclear diplomacy, the president-elect should not ignore the human rights situation. FDD experts have [previously noted](#) how the Trump administration's approach to Iran failed to incorporate human rights or domestic governance matters into its framework for a new agreement. It would be a shame if the Biden administration replicated that mistake.

To that end, the incoming Biden administration should not distinguish between “hard” security issues and “soft” political issues, as doing so would devalue progress in important human rights-related matters. Until negotiations with Tehran commence, Washington should develop what FDD experts have [termed](#) a “bipartisan Iran protest policy playbook.” This roadmap should include [sanctions pressure](#), finding ways to keep Iranians connected online even as the regime continues to [shut down](#) the internet at sensitive moments, and finding ways to impede Iran’s progress on a [national intranet](#).

Congress also has a role to play in this regard. Just as its statements, press releases, and letters helped hold the Trump administration to its promise to support the Iranian people, Congress should continue to play a role during the next administration to keep the focus on the full array of Iran’s malign activities.

Washington should also seek to rebuild bridges with its allies who were skeptical about resorting to sanctions over Iran’s nuclear and missile programs. Rebuilding alliances and partnerships over areas of mutual strategic and moral concern, such as human rights, can and should be a priority. To that end, Washington should encourage the United Kingdom to [use its new](#) autonomous human rights sanctions authorities to target Iranian human rights violators. Washington should also press the European Union, which is [finalizing similar measures](#), to follow suit. While this will be no substitute for a genuine pressure policy on Iran, it can at least attempt to begin the conversation on synchronizing sanctions.

Lastly, while U.S. officials should not be the driver of any discussion surrounding regime change in Iran, when Iranians are pouring out into the streets demanding an accountable, responsible, and representative government, the president and other senior officials should acknowledge the legitimacy of the people’s aspirations.