

HALF A YEAR OF FEMINIST REVOLT IN IRAN

Civil society perspectives,
the regional dimension
and required EU action.

WOMAN LIFE FREEDOM WOMAN LIFE FREEDOM

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Executive Summary

Over the last six months, protests over the killing of a woman in police custody transformed into the most widespread revolt in Iran since the 1979 revolution. Protests are feminist in their demands and way of organizing. Under the – originally Kurdish – slogan of “Woman, Life, Freedom”, people are demanding fundamental political change and the full realization of human and women’s rights. Protests take place amidst a precarious socio-economic situation which both stabilizes the regime and adds to the protesters’ grievances. And even though street protests have ebbed in number for the moment, the unmet grievances are like ember to be reignited anytime. There is no way back to the status quo ante.

The revolt takes place against the backdrop of the long-running repression of civil society in Iran amid a consolidation of power by the regime’s hardliners. This is reflected in the gruesome response by the Iranian government against Iranian citizens including arbitrary arrests, killings of peaceful protesters, torture, systematic sexual and gender-based violence, the weaponization of formal criminal procedures, as well as blocking internet services and therefore of any information channels across the country. The regime intimidates and represses women and human rights defenders and activists both offline and online, both in Iran and abroad.

As a national reckoning with the crimes and human rights violations committed is not in sight, political as well as judicial accountability should be a central component in any international response. This includes the immediate and substantial documentation and verification of human rights violations, as well as mechanisms providing accountability ranging from applying the principles of universal jurisdiction at national level to creating special jurisdiction at multilateral level. Targeted sanctions against individuals and entities, as already applied by the EU, are an additional element of the response. However, restrictive measures such as economic sanctions often have a negative impact on civilians and little concrete political effect – which risks them becoming counterproductive for the objective of upholding human rights and solidarity with the Iranian people. Therefore, any far-reaching response to the regime’s violent crackdown going beyond focused human rights support or targeted sanctions against individual perpetrators, needs to be carefully weighed against its effect on the actual living conditions in the country as well as on the regional and international security dimension.

The EU, still in crisis mode over the stalled nuclear negotiations, is struggling to adequately respond. Developing a coherent and comprehensive approach by involving civil society voices into European policymaking is crucial. In light of current developments, the EU should respond by taking a determined stance against the execution of peaceful protesters, addressing the gross violations of women's and human rights and by using diplomatic as well as coercive instruments in a targeted manner. The key parameter to evaluate a specific policy or instrument should be its impact on the lives of Iranians in the country.



Jin Jiyān Azadī: Kurdish for Woman, Life, Freedom
Mural painting of the Improper Walls on Schwendergasse in Rudolfsheim-Fünfhaus, Vienna, by artist Btoy based on a photograph by Maryam Ashrafi

Foreword by Dr. Cornelia Ernst

As Chair of the European Parliament's interparliamentary delegation with Iran, I meet many Iranians who are committed to helping their homeland return to prosperity and recognition, to becoming a country where people live in freedom and dignity. When I visited Tehran for the first time almost ten years ago, I was particularly impressed by the women who, even back then, were fighting against injustice in their country with wisdom and self-confidence.

The meeting of a delegation of the European Parliament with the colleagues of the Majlis in Tehran at the end of 2013 took place at a time when doors seemed to be opening. Interparliamentary diplomacy can and should contribute to this, especially when relations with the respective government are severely strained. In the case of Iran, it is about decades of lack of freedom and oppression at home and an increasingly aggressive policy towards the outside world. It is widely known that the story has been different, first the United States withdrew from the 2015 nuclear agreement, harsh economic sanctions were reimposed, and the regime also fully embraced a hardline course.

Today, the human rights situation in the country is more dramatic than ever before in the history of the Islamic Republic. The death of Jina Mahsa Amini, who was arrested, maltreated and ultimately killed by the Iranian morality police for an alleged violation of the hijab law, shook the country. The situation is unbearable not only for women, but also for the numerous ethnic, religious, minority and other discriminated groups in Iran. And yet, or precisely because of this, the country has reached a point where fundamental change is irrevocably on the agenda.

The world is watching with admiration the courage of the people of Iran who, despite the deadly violence of the repressive apparatus, are calling for an end to the brutal regime. People from all corners of the globe want to help, to do what is possible to end the violence of the state against its citizens. The most important thing is not to forget anyone, to take everyone on board, not to overlook any experience.

It is our task to condemn human rights violations and to formulate clear demands in the face of violence and repression, restriction of the internet and violation of digital rights, arrests, torture, sexual violence, convictions and executions.

There are different ideas about the future of this country, both inside and outside Iran. For us Europeans, it must be clear that a coup instigated from abroad usually only leads to even worse violence by the rulers or to chaos and impoverishment. This is not least due to the narrow view from outside, which often cannot grasp the diversity of voices

committed to change in the country. Change, especially of a fundamental nature, must come from within: As a result of a democratic opinion-forming process among Iranians - „from Zahedan to Tehran“, as the protesters themselves shout.

Whole generations of families had to flee Iran, in different eras, for different reasons. The large Iranian exile community has children and children's children in all parts of the world. Many have lost family members; loss and pain have shaped their views, but also hope and strength. The development of this country will also depend to a large extent on them. And on the extent to which civil society within Iran continues to establish itself, the different forces outside and inside Iran come together and thus develop a democratic alternative for their country in the polyphony of the movements.

As the European Parliament, we can strongly support the emergence of such inclusive processes. The internet has turned the world into a village. What happens in the most distant places we follow live and we can help to ensure that events and things come to light, wherever we are. The actors of resistance need our empathy and living solidarity. We need the unbiased exchange of ideas, the critical and sober debate.

This includes this study, which has been produced in exchange with many Iranians over the last few years. With it, we want to contribute to the debate on possible policy approaches for the European Union and its member states' dealings with Iran. But we are also interested in promoting a culture of discussion on complicated international and social issues. The path to democracy, equality and the rule of law begins with pluralism and respect for dissent, but first and foremost with listening.

The world is changing. There are new geostrategic realities, the climate crisis and rapid technological developments. The region of the broader Middle East is also experiencing historical processes that are bringing about serious changes in the social development of each country in the region and in the relations of states with each other. It is necessary to understand the relations between Iran and Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia's role in the region, in order to take them into account when formulating a strategy for dealing with Iran.

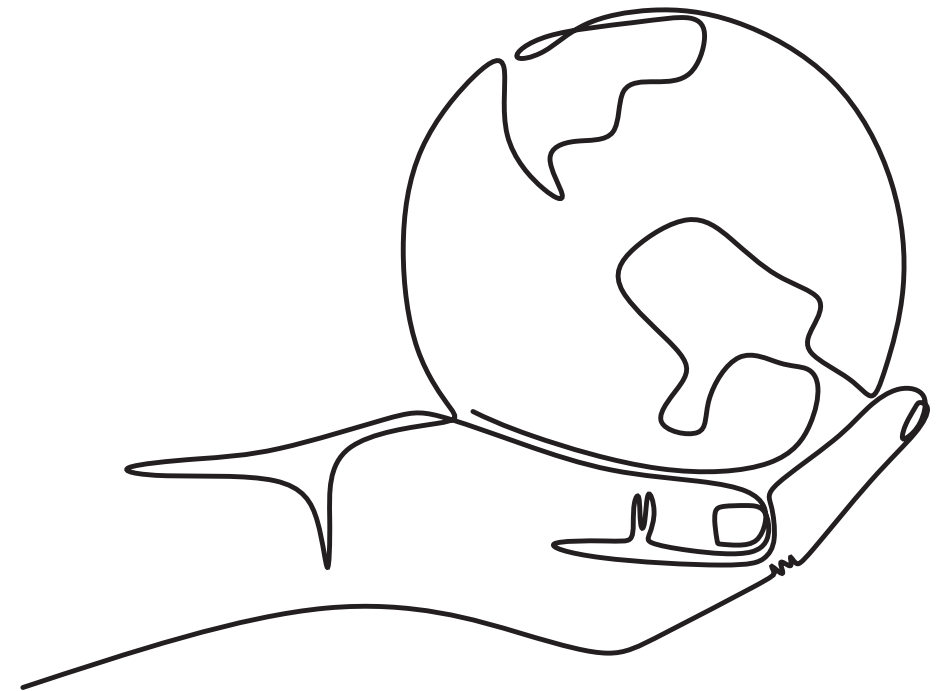
It is in the interest of Europe and the wider Middle East region to preserve the nuclear non-proliferation regime and put global nuclear disarmament back on the agenda. Shaping a consistent policy in defence of human rights is not in contradiction with negotiations on the revival of the nuclear agreement. On the contrary, the latter is intended to help prevent a nuclear arms race or a war waged with nuclear weapons in the region - an important building block in the struggle for respect for human rights.

More and more women around the world are taking their fate and that of their children and families into their own hands. The equal participation of all marginalised groups in all areas of society is a prerequisite for social progress. Iranian women are the hope of an entire country. Ours too.

Let us hold each other's hands tightly.



Dr. Cornelia Ernst





**Don't be afraid,
we are united!**



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1. Nature, background and development of the revolt

What started with protests demanding accountability for a young woman's killing in police custody, soon transformed into the most widespread revolt in Iran since the 1979 revolution. Iranians from all walks of life are claiming their basic human rights and demand fundamental political change. While the protests themselves are largely led by women, and the majority of those out on the streets belong to Iran's Generation Z below the age of 25 (cf. Dages 2022), the movement itself has seen backing from broad society. This includes workers' strikes (cf. Wintour/agencies 2022) in support of their demands. The uprising and the regime's response have deepened the rift between Iran's society and the government, which loses legitimacy by the day.

In the past weeks, in fact, street protests have somewhat subsided due to the brutal crackdown and the extremely violent response by the Iranian government against its own citizens. According to Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA) (cf. HRANA English 2023), at least 528 protesters had been killed in the protests up to early February, including 71 children. Four protesters were executed, and 112 protesters are estimated to be at imminent risk of execution of at least 19,623 individuals arrested. Accountability for those who have committed grave human rights violations the regime's use of extreme violence (cf. Moshtaghian/Mohammed 2023) against protesters is not in reach (cf. sections 2 and 4 below).

Still, Iranians continue to protest the regime in various forms. Persisting acts of civil disobedience range from chants of "death to the dictator" from people's homes in cities' residential areas at nights to individual and creative forms of protest (cf. iranintl 2022), including more and more women refusing to comply with mandatory headscarves in public. Especially in western Kurdish or south-eastern Sistan and Baluchistan regions, thousands continue to protest in the streets even when facing harsh repression. In the Baluch city Zahedan, for example, people continue to protest by the thousands every Friday (cf. RFE/RL's Radio Farda 2023a), even though the city has experienced some of the harshest, most violent and deadliest responses (cf. Human Rights Watch 2022a) by government forces.

The ebbing of protests is not a sign of a stabilization of the situation but rather amounts to a graveyard-like calm. Given the extreme violence used against citizens and the continued curtailing of women's rights (cf. Sahebi 2023), going back to a status quo ante is not imaginable. So, while mass protests have been suppressed for now, uprisings are likely to resurface (cf. Esfandiari 2023) in many parts of the country.

Three characteristics in the nature of these protests distinguish them from previous movements.

First, the revolt is in essence truly feminist. As engrained in the claim of “woman, life, freedom”, demonstrators demand fundamental political change and the full realization of human and women’s rights. The protests have been women-led and, for the first time, addressed issues such as violence against women. This has also led to a strong emphasis on marginalized perspectives and to the revolt’s intersectional character as being youth-driven, spanning across social classes and ethnic minorities, and stretching from urban to rural areas. Even more so, whilst the regime tried to instil sectarian divides amongst protesters (cf. section 2), the heavy discrimination and extreme violence particularly against ethnic minority groups has been widely visible. In response, rather than buying the regime’s narrative, the Persian majority has begun to develop a better understanding for the country’s (ethnic) minorities.

Second, the protests are feminist also in the way they are organized. They are a peaceful, collective, and leaderless movement that is organized in a decentralised way, thus responding to specific grievances in different localities while uniting under the “woman, life, freedom” umbrella. The revolt practices creative resistance, using social media and tech against the regime. The leaderless character stems from cross-societal backing of protests and renders their societal impact even wider, making them more difficult to suppress. At the same time, it creates the challenge that there is no clear political alternative to organize around.

Third, the revolt takes place amidst a precarious socio-economic situation. Iran has been in a politico-economic, social, and environmental crisis for years marked by rising poverty, increasing unemployment, raging inflation, and skyrocketing prices. As a consequence, many Iranians struggle to meet their basic needs (cf. Yee/Fassihi 2022). This is due to widespread corruption, government mismanagement including of the countries’ natural resources like water (cf. Adebahr/Lazard 2022), and a particularly strict sanctions period following the U.S. withdrawal of the nuclear agreement in 2018. This economic calamity has hit women and marginalized groups hardest.

The last point is critical, as the economic situation both stabilizes the regime adds to the protesters’ grievances at the same time. On the one hand, it has weakened the Iranians’ ability and capacity to mobilize (cf. The Economist 2022), as they often have to work several jobs to make ends meet. Moreover, a majority of jobs and working conditions are precarious and livelihoods insecure for many, which turns risking to lose a job, for example when arrested, into an existential matter. On the other hand, people in Iran can see that neither the reformist government of President Rouhani nor the current hardline administration of Ebrahim Raisi have managed to improve their lot. Therefore, labour protests (cf. Human Rights Watch 2022b) had been a constant feature even before the protests erupted, with workers, teachers’ and trade unions protesting unpaid wages, perilous working conditions, and heavy repression.

Those who are still actively supporting the regime are in part ideologically convinced, and in part financially invested or dependent. It is important to make this distinction considering the differences between a ruling militarist elite profiting from a corrupt regime pervading the Iranian economy, and those whose livelihoods, future and bare existence entirely depend on the current system. The largest group (cf. Vaez 2023) are those for whom the actual risks of openly opposing the regime currently still outweigh their sympathies with, if not the protesters then with some fundamental change.



However, the movement’s support base is broader than those visibly taking to the streets. The violent use of brutal force and government’s crackdown against peaceful protesters have even provoked criticism and a debate among leading Shiite clerics (cf. Adib 2023). Sham trials as well as the complete disregard of judicial proceedings and human rights have caused a group of Iranian lawyers and law professors to pen an open letter of public criticism (cf. RFE/RL’s Radio Farda 2023b) in January, remarkably so in the repressive climate and considering the regime’s crackdown on any form of dissent (cf. next section). Another difficulty in sustaining the protests’ momentum is the current lack of a more concrete political alternative to the Islamic Republic. Hence, one of the demands protesters have put forth is to hold a referendum on Iran’s future political order (cf. Ali 2023), which, however, has not gained a lot of attention at international level.

The backdrop of the revolt is the systematic repression of civil society and thus long-running shrinking of civic space in Iran amid the hardliners’ consolidation of power.

Already before current protests, the regime targeted professional organizations, journalists, as well as women and human rights defenders as the driving forces of change. This has led to a heavy crackdown on civil society and labour organizations (cf. OHCHR, 2022). The regime regards any kind of civic organization as a potential threat to its existence which points to the charges of „enemy of the state” or allegations of civic activists being “spies”. Born from a violent revolution itself, the regime consistently fears an overthrow, thus it remains wary of perceived enemies from within as much as from without. In a twin strategy of systematic pressure, it has made targeted use of the judiciary against civil society organizations, while creating parallel – state-controlled – organizations to deconstruct an independent civil society.

As a result, the number of registered civil society organizations decreased from thousands in the late 1990s to only a few hundred today, most of them with a focus on humanitarian work. The void is oftentimes being filled by grassroots organizations at a different level of professionalization, organization, capacities or resources. Still, cultural shifts over past years and not least in recent months have contributed to the current revolt. Iran has, for example, had its own “Me too” movement (cf. Far 2020), and LGBTQ+ flags are an increasingly visible part of the protests. It will hardly be possible to “go back” to a status quo ante for the regime considering these pushes for progressive change.

2. The regime’s repressive tactics

The Islamic Republic has had a track record of using excessive and lethal force and repression to quell political unrest. To name only the more recent examples after the 2009 Green Movement (cf. Milani 2010) of protests against a rigged election, the regime faced down protests in 2017/18 (cf. Reuters 2017) that were initially directed at the government’s failed economic policies, and later again in 2019 (cf. Reuters 2019) when citizens responded to sharply increased petrol prices. These riots came to be called “Dey Protests” and “Aban Protests”, respectively, after the Persian-calendar month in which they started.

From these experiences, the regime compiled a (metaphorical) “playbook” (cf. Ritchie/Rebane 2022) that it put into action once Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had signalled his full backing of the security forces. It exists of three main elements (cf. Lee et al. 2022): the use of indiscriminate force, violent and arbitrary arrests, and the throttling of internet service across the country.

Following an early order to “confront mercilessly ... any unrest” (cf. Lee et al. 2022), the police and special forces used life ammunition without regard for civilian lives. To this they later added the tactic of shooting protesters, in particular women, into their faces, breasts, legs, and genitals (cf. Parent/Habibiazad 2022) with shotguns, so as to inflict maximum pain and long-lasting mutilation. Within weeks, the death toll rose to the hundreds of protesters (cf. AFP 2023) with a gruesome share of 13 percent of minors being killed. A large part of which occurred in the Kurdish and Baluchi provinces in the country’s Northwest and Southeast, respectively. The most deadly crackdown has come to be known as “Bloody Friday” (cf. Human Rights Watch 2022a) in Zahedan on September 30, when Baluchi human rights groups have listed almost 100 people who were killed by the regime that day. In December 2022, the regime started to execute, sometimes publicly, alleged protesters (cf. Moshtaghian/Abdelbary 2023) convicted of the vaguely circumscribed and disputed offense of “war against god”, or *moharebeh*.

Whereas the arbitrary use of force is a well-established practice of the regime, weaponized sexual violence (cf. Qiblawi et al. 2022) marks a relatively new layer to the security forces’ response. Numerous cases of sexualized torture, rape, and other forms of sexual assault in prisons (cf. Human Rights Watch 2023) have been documented as the protests wore on. This clearly gendered element shows how the authorities aim to break the protesters’ resistance by returning those mentally and physically maimed women and men back into society. In this context, the announced pardon of those arrested by the thousands (cf. Wintour 2023) looks less like an act of clemency and more like a calculated move to finally quell the revolt.

Furthermore, the judiciary has been systematically abused. By 8 February 2023, 777 citizens had been brought to trial and convicted of alleged crimes directly related to their participation in nationwide protests. At least 44 defence lawyers have been detained since September (cf. Center for Human Rights in Iran 2023), making them unavailable to defendants and torpedoing their proper defence. Ridiculously short trials, sometimes lasting less than an hour, have resulted in convictions based on confessions, often extracted under torture. All this amounts to deliberate abuse of formal criminal proceedings, according to the UN Human Rights Commissioner (cf. OHCHR 2023). The sheer number of convictions handed down by the judiciary in the space of a few months underlines once again that the judiciary serves as a counter-insurgency tool and that orderly procedures are completely lacking.

Third, blocking access to the internet is intended to prevent both communication among protesters and the sharing of reports, pictures, and videos with people inside and outside the country. The regime had notoriously used this tactic during the “Aban protests” in November 2019, when the world learned of the killing of at least 400, possibly up to 1000 demonstrators, only after the end of a week-long internet shutdown. Similar disruptions followed during the deadly water protests (cf. NetBlocks 2021) in Khuzestan and elsewhere in the summer of 2021. Once people started to take to the streets over the death of Mahsa Jina Amini, the government first blocked access to Instagram, then to WhatsApp (cf. MacDonald 2022), before it restricted web access entirely to locally-based, thus government-inspected servers. Soon, it went after those who tried to report via Twitter (cf. Ta 2022) on the regime’s violence and in particular after women journalists (cf. RSF 2022) – another undisguised effort to systematically silence the voices of women.

Throughout the months-long revolt, access to the internet has been highly restricted (cf. Ershad 2023), so that people inside the country had difficulties communicating with one another as well as with the outside world. This is highly alarming, not least because of limited access of international human rights organisations and media, the information provided by Iranians through social media and online services is often the only source to track the regime’s violent repression. Over time, this has obviously also created huge economic damage (cf. Newman 2022), as companies could not process transactions. Again in mid-January 2023, the regime blocked mobile internet access for two days (cf. NetBlocks 2023), ostensibly to limit the potential for cheating in university entrance exams but more likely to conceal a crackdown in Zahedan, the capital of Baluchistan province. Together with the confiscation of devices like smartphones of protesters and the now pervasive digital surveillance, the frequent and long-lasting internet shutdowns amount to the advanced use of technology in the name of repression.

Given the widespread coverage in international media despite the internet shutdown, the regime employed two further tactics: conducting misinformation campaigns both inside and outside of the country and targeting the Iranian diaspora in both Europe and the United States. From early on, the government tried to frame a narrative (cf. The Iran Primer 2022) that is superficially emphatic to the primary cause (“Your daughter is like my own daughter”, President Raisi said to the family of Mahsa Jina Amini two days after her death), while being strict on labelling the protesters as “foreign-paid thugs”. Officials also wholeheartedly backed the security services deployed in the crackdown, including through a high-ranking presence at the funerals of killed service members.

The regime has also resorted to hacking the devices of activists, journalists, and politicians (cf. Human Rights Watch 2022c) that work on Iran and the Middle East more broadly. Actively launching large-scale social media campaigns using fake accounts, it has tried to steer and manipulate the debates both online and offline. And while the war on social media seems to be fought from many sides, not just Iran, it appears to be a constant feature that women commentators are the prime target (cf. Guyer2022). This violence also continues beyond the virtual space as the regime threatens and targets activists (cf. Harris et al. 2022) as well as women and human rights defenders around the world, including in the European Union.

In summary, as detailed in a Foreign Office report leaked to the press (cf. Litschko 2023), the regime is „relentlessly“ repressing demonstrators. The classified document clearly describes the extent of the repression against sections of the population, especially against women, but also against ethnic or religious minorities and against anyone who dares to protest against the ruling order. In their efforts to maintain the system of the Islamic Republic by all means, the regime’s leaders seem unwilling to reconsider the „brutal treatment of their own people“.



3. Needs and demands of Iranians

As detailed above, Iranian activists and diaspora civil society representatives have underlined the fundamental nature of the demonstrators' demands. Under the – originally Kurdish – slogan of “Woman, Life, Freedom”, people are asking for their basic human rights and political freedoms to be respected and implemented. From this derive a number of protesters' needs that, if met, can help the revolt to be successful.

Iran's constitution claims to guarantee at least some of these rights and freedoms, and the Islamic Republic is even party to international human rights instruments (cf. OHCHR n.d.-a) that uphold equality for women and non-discrimination. However, the reality is plainly different: the qualification of such rights ‘in accordance with Islamic principles’ in fact enshrines systemic discrimination, and the Iranian legal code includes further provisions that severely discriminate against women and limit their rights. Thus, protesters soon moved past the issue of mandatory hijab to demand the realization of equal rights and tangible political and societal changes. It is a remarkable qualifier of these protests that they also address issues like violence against women, which previously was a taboo topic in Iranian society.

Substantially, there are three broad categories of short-term civil society demands: those asking to address specific human rights cases and humanitarian needs; those calling for not just moral, but also material support for the revolt; and those demanding justice for crimes committed and seeking to stop the violent crackdown. The last point will be separately dealt with in the next section on accountability.

Every life matters. Therefore, while there is understandable hope that an overthrow of the current regime would in due course bring about a more peaceful and rights-respecting society, addressing individual cases of the regime's massive human rights violations remains a top priority. Consequently, Iranian and international human rights organisations draw international attention – if necessary, in urgent procedure – to imminent executions and to the fate of those having received a death sentence. They call for the release of prisoners, especially women's and human rights defenders (cf. FEMENA 2022c) as well as journalists, but also of the many minors that have been detained (cf. UNICEF 2022). Some, like Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA Iran), updated their grim tallies on a daily basis (cf. Human Right Activists In Iran n.d.), after having corroborated the countless clues they receive from family members, friends, and fellow activists.

The humanitarian needs can be differentiated between material support provided to protesters and their relatives inside Iran, and practical as well as legal assistance given to those trying to leave the country. The former can take the form of proffering

the financial means required for bail or for medical treatment after detention. Money is also needed to pay for family visits in jail or, quite basically, to replace someone's devices that were confiscated during the arrest, so that people can continue to report on the situation. Scaling the work of reporting and documentation, emergency funding is also needed to sustain the work of Iranian and international women and human rights organisations.

The other type of humanitarian aid involves offering visas or, indeed, asylum in third countries to those that the Iranian regime especially targets. Beyond notable cases of individual persecution, this generally includes rights defenders, journalists, and labour leaders, and particularly women activists. They need to be offered safe passage to, and refuge in a neighbouring country or beyond. This means to engage governments in the region on allowing them protected transit, and to provide asylum in Europe, ensuring the physical safety of those fleeing and facilitating their continued work.

This humanitarian aspect also includes work on the 'home front' so that asylum can be granted. For example, the reports and analyses used as basis for asylum decisions need to take political and lived realities of state-sanctioned persecution into account. Deportations to Iran of rejected asylum seekers do not reflect the political and human rights situation in the country. Instead, a general deportation freeze is needed. Otherwise, the regime will succeed not only in suppressing the revolt now but also in depriving the protest movement of its most active and able supporters.

Directly supporting the revolt, in turn, is more difficult but can be done. Again, sustained assistance is needed for those professional groups like lawyers, journalists, IT experts, and doctors that can lend direct support to the protests on the ground. However, given that the state has managed to subvert previously independent structures like the bar association and other professional networks (cf. above, section 1), new and innovative ways will have to be found to channel support.

In addition, there is a need to adequately respond to the regime's tech crackdown. If the Iranian leadership can shut down the internet, both governments and companies abroad should join forces to keep Iranian citizens linked to the web. This could include the direct provision of web access, though it would have to be different from the case of Ukraine, where US company Starlink delivered its kit at the outset of the war when Russia had run a cyberattack knocking of the Ukrainian grid. Because getting the necessary physical equipment into the country and the relatively easy targeting of the technical equipment puts people installing and providing them at great risk and renders things more complicated in this case. Alternative support involves providing proxy servers, virtual private networks (VPN), and cloud services that can be used from inside Iran via domestic access points.

Lifting specific sanctions is an additional element that some protesters have asked for. This means to allow the export of certain products and services to Iran such as secure communications that are used by demonstrators but are currently under sanctions. The United States took this step early on, whereas the EU does not have similar restrictions in place. In turn, activists also ask to ban products that serve the regime like filtering technologies and spyware. At times, there may be conflicting demands from activists, such as when a platform is used by both the regime and the protesters. In this case, an individual decision will have to be taken, based on the maximum amount of information available, on whether the benefits of sanctioning outweigh the drawbacks.

Finally, the severe restrictions on financial transactions due to persistent US sanctions still hamper any form of monetary support to Iranians inside the country. Intended to prevent payments to the regime itself, they also hinder the transfer of funds collected among the diaspora to pay for bails, medical treatment, or wage loss due to strikes inside the country. Sanctions as well as overcompliance in the banking sector also poses an additional barrier for Iranians to access digital services, for example in those cases in which credit cards are needed not only to pay for services but to set-up accounts. Alas, as these sanctions will not be lifted anytime soon, again a workaround will have to be found, for example through transactions involving European state-owned banks that do not run the risk of receiving a fine from the U.S. government for counter-acting US sanctions.



4. Accountability and international responses

The current revolt erupted around the issue of accountability for Mahsa Jina Amini's death. Still, after over five months there is no national reckoning with the crimes and human rights violations committed against Iranians in sight. Therefore, political as well as judicial accountability should feature as a central component in any international response. This would signal a clear stance against the regime's severe human rights violations, an upholding of international human rights standards, and solidarity with the Iranians protesting for their fundamental rights.

Eventually holding perpetrators to account requires, firstly, immediate and substantial documentation and verification of information on human rights violations. To this end, official measures, such as the establishment and ongoing work of the independent UN fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran (cf. OHCHR n.d.-b) based on UN Human Rights Council Resolution S35/1 (cf. Human Rights Council 2022) are immensely important. The mission's core tasks centre on investigating human rights violations as well as on collecting and preserving, consolidating and analysing the evidence of those violations. Yet, especially because of the regime's attempts to cover up and deny responsibility for crimes committed, (cf. Amnesty International 2022), those efforts need to be accompanied by the provision of substantial support to civil society organizations collecting such evidence. This allows for different kinds of networks and information to be included in a broad-based effort to prepare the ground for political and judicial accountability.

Mechanisms providing accountability range from applying universal jurisdiction at national level to creating special jurisdiction at multilateral level. The principle of universal jurisdiction offers the possibility of holding perpetrators accountable in a third country according to domestic legal procedures. There already are important reference points with regard to Iran, such as the 2022 conviction of an Iranian official for war crimes (cf. Johnson/Ahlander 2022) by a court in Sweden. National judiciaries could begin to collect evidence and conduct investigations against alleged perpetrators of serious human rights violations, such as high-ranking members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, or IRGC. This also applies to those government officials that currently enjoy immunity from prosecution (cf. Wirth 2002) before the national courts of a third country, as they could be held accountable at a later stage. While such measures may appear to be rather symbolical at the moment, as their success – if measured in stopping an official from exercising repression – is far from certain, they are immensely important in upholding human rights standards and instruments to which Iran has committed. Just as importantly, they hold the promise of delivering justice in the future.

Targeted sanctions against individuals and entities, as the EU has been applying them, are one core element in the repertoire of political actions. On Iran, the EU already has several sanctions regimes and mechanisms (cf. European Council, 2023a) in place, responding to the current situation but also in response to nuclear proliferation activities, preceding human rights violations and the use of Iranian drones in Russia's war against Ukraine. With regards to current protests, the EU has issued six specific sanctions packages (cf. European Council, 2023a), which by now include 204 individuals and 34 entities (cf. European Council 2023b). But considering the urgency and extent of human rights violations and heavy repression, the EU would need to be moving faster and accompany those measures with a strong emphasis on effective implementation. To this end, it could be helpful to coordinate internationally to create matching lists of Iranian officials who should be denied a visa and whose assets should be frozen. Civil society experts and human rights organizations working on the documentation of human rights violations can contribute and assist with the identification of perpetrators on open-source platforms like Spreading Justice (cf. Spreading Justice n.d.).

However, restrictive measures such as economic sanctions often have a negative impact on civilians and little concrete political effect. In the case of Iran, there is substantive evidence of how broad economic sanctions, especially the U.S. administration's "maximum pressure" policy imposed after exiting the nuclear deal in 2018, and overcompliance with international sanctions, have hurt not only the Iranian economy but especially ordinary citizens, for example by choking off imports of medicines (cf. Cunningham 2018). Instead of bringing the regime down, as it intended to, the policy has led Iran to double down (cf. Geranmayeh 2020) on its nuclear advances as well as on its internal repression, all while impoverishing the population so that it cannot even afford to go on strike in support of the ongoing revolt.

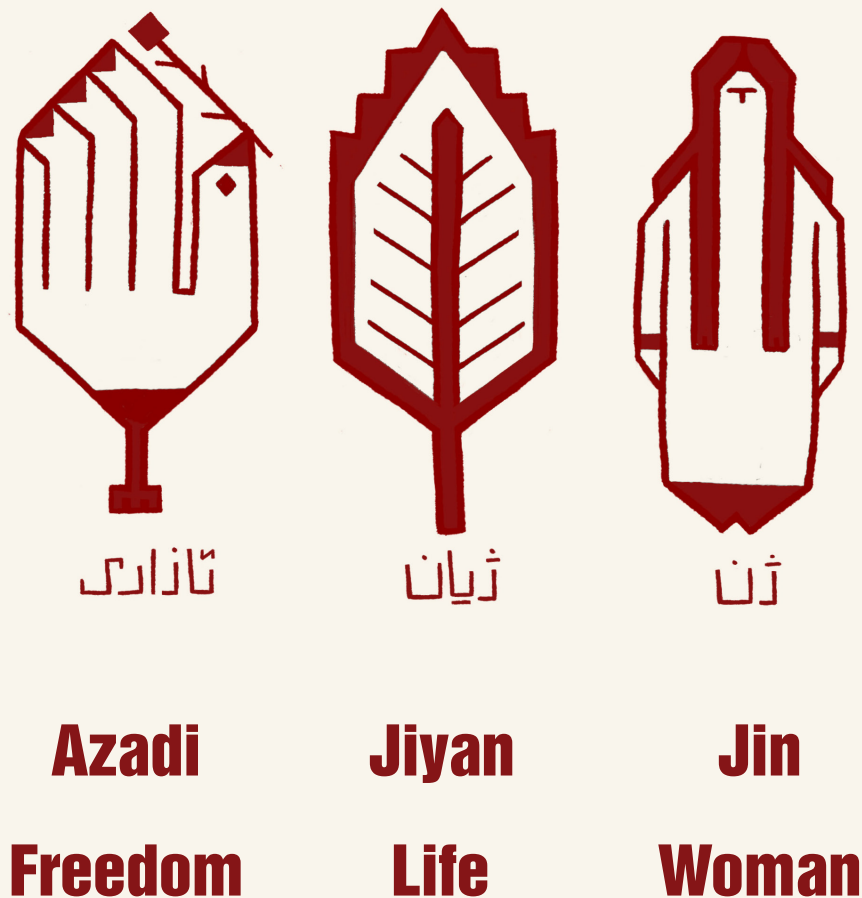
Especially if the objective of restrictive measures is to uphold human rights and solidarity with the Iranian people, their effect on the actual living conditions inside the country should guide political decision-making. Therefore, a "do no harm" assessment coordinated with civil society should accompany every new – and the extension of existing – sanctions mechanism. This can be expected to undo the currently large appeal of those restrictive measures, which have a considerable symbolic effect while imposing comparatively little political or economic cost on the sending entity (the relative loss in EU-Iran trade due to sanctions being always described as "a price worth paying" for the isolation of the regime).

A similar rationale should be applied to the call for designating the IRGC as a terrorist organization under the EU' post-9/11 anti-terror regulations (cf. European Union 2022). This designation would imply the freezing of assets and travel bans, as well as preventing any type of interaction with individuals and entities on that list, including communication, provision of goods or financial flows. However, the IRGC is already

listed under the EU's sanctions regime for weapons of mass destruction with asset freezes and travel bans. Moreover, the ongoing controversy about whether a court ruling is required for such a listing (cf. Davar 2023) goes beyond a mere technicality but includes a consideration as to whether the designation would stand in a European court. Absent an official opinion from its legal service, the Council is playing it safe because it would be a disastrous PR-win for the Iranian regime if a European court were to revoke this designation – a real risk with anything less than a legally watertight listing.

Given the above, an additional listing would be a show of solidarity with the revolt and demarcation to the Iranian regime. However, the symbolic messaging would not be an instrument to counter the guards' terrorist activities or to prevent them from cracking down on the protesters. Instead, the effects this step would have need to be considered, including from a civil society and human rights perspective. Here, the "do no harm" principle demands consideration of the designation's impact on Iranians already living in dire socio-economic circumstances. Given that the IRGC has become – after decades of international sanctions – a central economic actor in Iran (cf. Khajehpour 2017), their additional listing as a terrorist organization, compounded by European banks' and firms' overcompliance, could have the same effect as blanket economic sanctions, harming Iranians' access even to the basic provision of goods, medicine, and food.

If anything, the potential designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization by the EU should only be considered based on a prior civil society-coordinated harm assessment. This demand goes beyond the issue in question here, i.e. how to respond to the Iranian regime's violent repression of dissent, and addresses the general point of how the EU should devise its instruments. Because while there is obvious pressure on the EU and member states from within their domestic audiences in favour of harsher sanctions, like in this case the terrorist listing, those closest to the civilians on the receiving end of such a measure should have a say in the decision-making process.



5. The regional and international security dimension

This revolt has put Iran at a crossroads. Born from a revolution itself, the Islamic Republic has always been wary of being overthrown, thus tightly controlling its citizens while being suspicious of any liberalising influences, whether political, economic, or social, from abroad. While the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal at least allowed for the prospect of relative improvements, whether in Iran's international relations or domestic opening, the developments since have been negative: In 2018, the United States abandoned the accord, thus plunging the nuclear file into disarray. In the wake of this unilateral step, Iran lashed out at its regional rivals, and hardliners took over the remaining reins of power with Ebrahim Raisi becoming President in 2021.

In addition to the current internal upheaval, Teheran has openly sided with Russia in the latter's war against Ukraine. While this alliance of course negatively influences European perceptions of the Iranian leadership beyond the nuclear dispute, these factors show that the EU's Iran policy has more context to consider than the current domestic situation. And even though the revolt is primarily about the political situation inside Iran as well as the human rights concerns sparked globally by the regime's response, it also has direct and indirect implications for the security of neighbouring countries and the wider region. Stalled nuclear negotiations and Iran's siding with Russia in the war against Ukraine add a component of global security concerns.

Most directly, the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Turkey have been affected. Due to Mahsa Jina Amini's Kurdish origin, there has been a higher degree of mobilisation in provinces like West Azerbaijan, Kordestan, and Kermanshah in Iran's north-west – and a higher fatality rate during the crackdown. Decades of neglect and mistrust as well as socioeconomic hardship in these peripheral regions have created a highly securitized climate, in which Iranian security forces have killed a disproportionate number of protesters: Of all recorded deaths, more than half are reported from the Kurdish and Baluchi provinces alone.

Such targeted repression is part of the regime's effort of "playing the ethnic card" (cf. Shaffer 2022). Cynically, it aims to de-legitimize the homegrown revolt by painting it as separatist movements receiving support from abroad. For example, in late September, IRGC troops targeted what they claimed to be Iranian dissident camps in Iraq with missiles and drones (cf. Reuters 2022), killing 14 and wounding 58. The political gamble behind such attacks is clear: The Islamic Republic tries to pressure the Kurdish Regional Government (cf. Badawi 2022) of Iraq to cease its tacit acceptance of insurgent groups, which the former hosts precisely as a leverage over Tehran. Beyond Iraq, where it at least has its own influence through its ongoing support of Shiite political parties and militias, the Iranian regime is wary of the country's Azeri population

receiving support from Azerbaijan in the North, the Balochis from their fellow Sunnis in neighbouring Pakistan, and the Arab populations of Khuzestan in the West and of Hormozgan in the South from the various monarchies across the Gulf, mainly arch-rival Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).



At global scale, there is Iran's material backing of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine through arms deliveries. Such overt support has taken away any justification for the Islamic Republic to stand for the mostazafin, or oppressed, of this world, as was one of its founding myths. From the battle-changing delivery of kamikaze drones, to recently announced plans to produce such unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) inside Russia, to speculation about Tehran selling missiles to Moscow as soon as a UN weapons embargo lapses in October 2023 – the way Iran has tied itself to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the attempted overthrow its democratically-elected government leaves no room for speculation as to where it stands in geopolitical terms. If at the time of the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015, there was reason to hope that, by decreasing tensions in the field of non-proliferation, Iran could be swayed to become a respected member of the international community, today there is no such possibility. Instead, the dynamics of a multipolar world in which China and Russia side with Iran in their global confrontation with "the West", decrease the EU's leverage towards Iran.

With this, another security dimension comes into focus, which is the potential for nuclear escalation. Currently, the EU as well as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom as co-signatories of the nuclear deal, face a dilemma: Should they completely call off the talks – stalled since last August anyway – in the face of the regime's brutal crack-down? This would again be a largely symbolic step with no positive effect on the human rights situation on the ground. Should they instead keep the possibility of restoring the nuclear deal open once Tehran is willing to compromise on the remaining roadblocks? Yet, re-signing a deal and, worse, lifting sanctions in return for nuclear compliance is unthinkable as long as the current leadership remains in place.

While both sides seem to have settled on a non-response by just leaving things in limbo, the dilemma becomes more acute now that the EU has begun to publicly ponder putting the IRGC on its terror list. This move might lead to Iran ending its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency or even leaving the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Either step would have severe consequence for the global non-proliferation architecture, as regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey would themselves dash for the bomb – adding another dangerous element to an already fragile situation in a conflict-prone region. Already, Iran and Israel have for the past years engaged in a proxy war, both on the Syrian battlefield and in cyberspace. Increased attacks on nuclear and military facilities inside Iran, often alleged to be executed by Israel (cf. Engelbrecht 2023), illustrate the increasing threat of escalation.

In sum, any far-reaching response to the regime's violent crackdown going beyond focused human rights support or targeted sanctions against individual perpetrators, needs to also be carefully weighed against its effect on the regional and international security dimension. While cutting all ties with Iran to internationally isolate the country might respond to the urge of strongly opposing a repressive regime, this will neither help the Iranians themselves nor provide a viable solution to any of the regional and global security risks at hand. Carefully weighing its own interests, including in upholding not just global human rights standards but also supporting those facing severe repression, in maintaining the global rulebook of nuclear non-proliferation as well as easing existing regional security threats, the EU has difficult decisions to make.

„Let us hold each other’s hands tightly.“

- Dr. Cornelia Ernst



6. List of policy recommendations to the EU

When the Iranian revolt began in September 2022, the EU, still mainly in crisis mode over the stalled nuclear negotiations, was clearly not prepared. In fact, it is still struggling to adequately respond to the challenge. This also has to do with its narrow understanding of security, on display over the years when the EU and (most) member states disregarded the role of human and women’s rights as well as the importance of civil society engagement and only focused on the nuclear file.

Today, developing a coherent and comprehensive approach by involving civil society voices into European policymaking is crucial. In light of current developments, the EU should respond by taking a stance against the execution of peaceful protesters, addressing the gross violations of women’s and human rights through the Iranian regime and considering the use all diplomatic and other instruments available. The key parameter of evaluating a specific policy or instrument should be the impact it has on the lives of Iranians in the country.

Focusing on the immediate needs and demands of Iranians as outlined above, the EU should:

- Communicate clear human rights expectations to the Iranian authorities in particular with regards to executions of protesters, the use of lethal force to repress protests, the situation of detainees, their lack of access to fair trial and serious process violations.
- Closely monitor the situation of thousands of detained women and human rights defenders, journalist and peaceful protesters, sustain international attention, as well as prepare and support eventual accountability measures.
- Support global and local documentation and verification of rights violations and hold Iranian authorities accountable through targeted restrictive measures, as well as strengthening the effective implementation of those measures already in place.
- Strengthen international justice by working with the respective UN bodies (UN Human Rights Council/Fact-Finding Mission, Special Rapporteurs etc.) including financial support for their work.
- Consider and respond to the violence used against particularly vulnerable groups such as Kurdish, Baluchi, Bahai, youth, children, and other marginalized communities.

- Ensure protestors and human rights defenders at risk can leave the country to safe places. While visa and asylum issues are in the hands of EU member states, discussions at EU level provide a platform to focus on issuing humanitarian visa, facilitating multi-entry visa for women's and human rights defenders, as well as a general ban on deportations to Iran.
- Support and protect women's and human rights defenders – through means ranging from increased and flexible funding to facilitating unbureaucratic visa processes and the possibility to live and work in the EU.
- Protect women's and human rights defenders in EU member states from threats and the targeting of the Iranian regime or security services and facilitate supportive measures that allow them to continue their work in Iran.
- Make urgently needed emergency funding accessible and ensure that resources are also available for civil society projects on civil liberties, women's and human rights, and other aspects of priority to Iranians such as environmental protection and labour rights.
- Ensure continuous humanitarian funding and facilitate implementation of projects, for example by supporting UN organizations such as UNICEF.
- Monitor and minimize the impact of political and economic (restrictive) measures on the civilian population to ensure they are well in place and working. Conduct harm assessments on potential new sanctions including civil society representatives.
- Lead on creating a multilateral coalition of states that includes key global south countries to communicate clear and concrete human rights demands to Iran and press authorities to change their conduct.
- Explore ways to facilitate support for Iranian civil society – including through diaspora networks. This can include provision of funding via UN institutions and more creative channels such as south-south collaborative civil society initiatives.

In Memory of Jina Mahsa Amini



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Cornelius Adebahr is a political analyst and entrepreneur based in Rome and Berlin, focusing on European foreign and security policy, global affairs, and citizens' engagement. He is a non-resident fellow at Carnegie Europe in Brussels, an associate fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), a fellow at Hertie School in Berlin, and a member of the European Commission's experts' network, Team Europe.



Since 2005, he has taught at various international universities, including the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy in Erfurt, Tehran University in Iran, and the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Cornelius studied Political Science (International Relations), Philosophy, Public Law, and International Economics in Tübingen, Paris, and at the Free University Berlin, where he graduated in 2001 before receiving his PhD (Dr. rer. pol.) in 2008. He is the author of „Europe and Iran: The Nuclear Deal and Beyond” (Routledge 2017).

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Barbara Mittelhammer is an independent, Berlin-based political analyst and consultant. Her research focuses on feminist foreign policy, gender in peace and security, human security and the role of civil society in foreign policy making.



She has published on applying feminist foreign policy, i.a. towards Iran and Syria, and has worked with think tanks, foundations, international organizations, ministries, parliamentarians and civil society organizations, i.a. with Carnegie Europe, Heinrich-Böll Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, the German Foreign Office, or GIZ. In addition, she is a certified mediator. Prior to her independent activities, she was working with a political consultancy and the Munich Security Conference. Barbara Mittelhammer studied political science, international law and cultural anthropology in Munich and Paris.

Editor of the Study

Dr. Cornelia Ernst Member of the European Parliament

Cornelia Ernst is a German politician from DIE LINKE. and head of the Delegation for Relations with Iran. Since 2009, she has been working for DIE LINKE. in The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL). Furthermore, Dr. Cornelia Ernst is the coordinator of the Left group in the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) and Substitute in the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).



Dr. Cornelia Ernst said on the latest developments in relations with Iran, in particular the Iranian Parliament's call for demonstrators to be sentenced to death: „As Chair of the Delegation for relations with Iran, I strongly condemn the Iranian Parliament's call for the death penalty for the imprisoned demonstrators. This would affect some 14.000 imprisoned people. This is absolutely unacceptable. I would also like to strongly criticise Iran's supply of drones to Russia in connection with Russia's war in Ukraine. In addition, the Iranian Foreign Ministry recently imposed sanctions on some of my colleagues, Members of the European Parliament - this is unacceptable and violates our rights as MEPs to fulfil our mandate.

Therefore, as Chair of the Iran Delegation, I will work tirelessly to support civil society and the demonstrators. The European Parliament, and our delegation in particular, has a crucial role to play in this, and as Chair I will reiterate my full support and solidarity with the demonstrators in Iran. Their voices should be heard now and in the future. We will do all we can to establish secure channels of communication with civil society in Iran - we need that now more than ever.“



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