

Protests in Iran: Issues for Congress

December 15, 2022

Iran has been roiled by nationwide unrest since protests began after the September 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year old woman, who reportedly [was beaten](#) by security forces while in custody for allegedly violating Iran’s mandatory hijab (head covering) law. Women [have](#) played a [prominent role](#) in the protests, which have been [geographically dispersed](#), feature a broad range of [grievances](#), and include what media reports described as “[one of the largest general strikes in decades](#).” Iranian government personnel have [reportedly](#) killed hundreds of protesters and arrested [thousands in response](#). The Iranian government has [hanged protesters](#) sentenced to death for their part in the protests. Iranian officials [blamed](#) the United States (as well as [Israel and Saudi Arabia](#)) for fomenting what they call “[riots](#).” More than three months into the protests, neither the government nor the protesters have shown signs of backing down.

Observers are wrestling with the extent to which the protests, information about which is opaque, fluid, and [highly contested](#), represent a threat to the Iranian government. One [expert](#) has compared the 2022 unrest to the circumstances that preceded the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Observers also highlight the government’s determination to crush [dissent](#). On December 5, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines [stated](#) “we have yet to see how this ultimately evolves ... this is not something that we see right now as being ... an imminent threat to the regime.”

Some Members of Congress have issued statements and proposed legislation condemning the crackdown, and Congress may consider how protests impact U.S. policy initiatives on Iran, including nuclear talks, and U.S. support for democracy programs.

Administration Responses

In addition to statements, including by [President Biden](#) and Secretary of State Antony [Blinken](#), in support of the protesters, the Administration has taken other actions, including:

New sanctions designations. Following Amini’s death, the Biden Administration issued new designations, invoking [Executive Order \(E.O.\) 13553](#), with respect to serious human rights abuses by Iran’s government; [E.O. 13606](#), with respect to grave human rights abuses by the governments of Iran and Syria via information technology; and [E.O. 13846](#), which authorizes sanctions on persons who engage in censorship or other activities with respect to Iran. Several military and security forces were already designated under other E.O.s, including Iran’s Law Enforcement Forces (LEF). Entities so designated since September include [Iran’s Morality Police](#) (a component of the LEF) and a [number of Iranian](#)

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government [entities](#) and [officials](#) responsible for the crackdown and internet censorship. On December 9, the Administration designated [an LEF commander and a prison warden](#) pursuant to [E.O. 13818](#), which implements the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#). These are the first Iranian entities designated under E.O. 13818.

Export license and Internet service. In September, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control issued [Iran General License D-2](#), designed to expand internet services authorized for export licensing from the United States to Iran to counter what officials described as Tehran's move to "cut off access to the Internet for most of its 80 million citizens to prevent the world from watching its violent crackdown on peaceful protestors." Treasury officials stated that the new license expands access to cloud-based services, Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), and anti-surveillance tools critical to secure communication.

Action at international bodies. In late November, the U.N. Human Rights Council [authorized](#) a fact-finding mission to investigate allegations of human rights abuses committed by the Iranian government. The United States also [led](#) a successful effort to remove Iran from U.N. Commission on the Status of Women in [December 2022](#).

Options for Congress

Some [bills](#) and [resolutions](#) have been introduced to express [support](#) for Iranian protesters and call on Iran's government to cease violence. Additional legislative measures Members could consider include:

Support for civil society. The United States has supported civil society and human rights in Iran primarily through the State Department-administered Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) program since FY2009. For FY2023, the Biden Administration [requested](#) \$55 million for NERD to "foster a vibrant civil society, increase the free flow of information, and promote the exercise of human rights." Congress [appropriated](#) \$55 million for NERD in FY2022, including \$16.7 million for global internet freedom programs. NERD-funded training (e.g., internet freedom, legal aid) for Iranian activists takes place outside the country due to Iran's resistance to opposition activities supported by foreign donors.

Members could consider whether to make additional funding available for Iran-related democracy programs, while considering the security of recipients, and the risk that Iranian officials may cite such programming in their ongoing efforts to discredit protestors as foreign agents. The [decentralized](#) nature of the protest movement, which appears to [lack](#) unified leadership or organization, makes it difficult to assess what government steps, if any, would satisfy the protestors, and also may complicate U.S. efforts to provide support.

Nuclear negotiations. In the context of the protests, some [Members of Congress](#) have renewed [calls on](#) the Biden Administration to terminate indirect talks with Iran over the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement. Biden Administration officials are [reportedly](#) reluctant to do so, though they state that negotiations are [moribund](#) and [no longer](#) a focus of U.S. efforts. In 2015, Congress passed [legislation](#) mandating congressional review of agreements related to Iran's nuclear program; review of any revised or new agreement could present opportunities for Members to pursue democracy-related priorities. Congress could, for example, condition U.S. action with respect to the JCPOA on the Iranian government's response to the protests; such conditions might be expected to meet Iranian rejection. Proposed [legislation](#) would effectively preclude a revived nuclear agreement by prohibiting the President from waiving sanctions until the Administration makes certain certifications about Iranian behavior. Secretary Blinken on December 4 [stated](#) that the regime's actions in response to the protests "have only deepened our conviction that Iran must never be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon. We continue to believe that the best way to ensure this is through diplomacy."

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