



Iran's Social Unrest and the Future of the Regime



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Introduction

Since 28 December 2025, Iran has been shaken by widespread protests and strikes that began in Tehran's commercial districts and quickly spread nationwide. Shopkeepers, bazaar traders, students, and residents have moved from economic grievances to open anti-regime chants.

The unrest was sparked by a deepening cost-of-living crisis, a collapsing rial, and soaring prices, then fueled by broader anger over corruption, governance failures, and the state's handling of sanctions pressures. As the crackdown has intensified, the death toll has continued to rise. Reporting varies sharply due to arrests and communications blackouts: recent tallies cite around 2,000 killed, while opposition sources claim as many as 12,000 as of 13 January.

On January 13, Wikistrat hosted an expert panel to explore Iran's social unrest, its impact on domestic politics, and potential regional implications.

The Experts



Dr. Sina Azodi

Director of the Middle East Studies program at George Washington University. Dr. Azodi specializes in Iranian politics and foreign policy, U.S.-Iran relations, and nuclear nonproliferation. He is the author of the forthcoming book *Iran and the Bomb: The United States, Iran and the Nuclear Question* (2026).



Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute where he also serves as a Senior Fellow. He specializes in Iranian domestic and foreign affairs, political-military relations, and Iran's relationships with the U.S., Gulf states, and Israel. *He is the author of The Battle of the Ayatollahs in Iran* (2021).



Ahmad Hashemi

Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Program at the Global Policy Institute (GPI). Former Iranian Foreign Ministry linguist, pro-democracy activist and freelance journalist.

The regime is weakened but not knocked out

“[The regime is] bruised with a bloody nose, but I think they're still in a fight, both internally and externally.

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They're facing a multitude of crises at the same time: the crisis of legitimacy, the economic situation, the energy crisis. It is certainly weakened compared to 2019 or 2020.

But are they out of the ring? Have they been knocked out? The answer is no.”

Dr. Sina Azodi

*Director of the Middle East Studies program
at George Washington University*



Regime collapse remains unlikely despite the severity of the crisis

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"We don't see any major defections from the IRGC or any cracks in the machine of repression. We don't see any strikes in the oil sector or transportation, similar to 1979. And we don't see a unifying leader. There's only a mythical savior, and that's not helpful."

Ahmad Hashemi

Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Program at the Global Policy Institute (GPI)



Iranians are resisting in ways never seen before

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"I've done so many of these rounds of protest going back to 1999. I can't tell you this is the last time. But we can all agree Iran has never seen this before. This is a very new chapter.

The Iranian people are showing all the signs that they're going to resist, that they're going to stand up for their rights, and they're now showing signs to want to fight in ways we haven't seen them do before."

Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute.



Fear of the gallows keeps the regime united and willing to kill at scale

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"To put it very simply, the [regime's] mindset is either we stay together or we will be hung separately once the regime falls. This is why you don't see elite defection in the top ranks of the political leadership. You do not see any major defections in the top ranks of the Iranian armed forces, IRGC, or the law enforcement forces.

They strongly believe that this is a foreign-instigated plot, and they have to defeat it at all costs. This is why you are seeing an unprecedented number of casualties."

Dr. Sina Azodi

*Director of the Middle East Studies program
at George Washington University*



The leadership has chosen to kill its way out of this crisis

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"We've seen in the last couple of days the hardening of the consensus that the best thing to do for now is to kill their way out of this.

They do feel that if this protest movement really takes hold, they're all doomed, they're all gone, they'll all be hanging sooner rather than later. That might have created a temporary consensus of sorts."

Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute.



Zero enrichment is off the table while Khamenei lives

“[Khamenei] had once told an Iranian ambassador that you can stop enrichment under two conditions: one, when I die, or if I resign.

Iran might be open to a suspension in uranium enrichment as long as Trump is in office. This way Iranians can claim that they didn't give up on what they call their right to enrich uranium, and give Donald Trump a political victory.

But I don't believe they'll agree to permanent zero enrichment.”

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Dr. Sina Azodi

*Director of the Middle East Studies program
at George Washington University*



Regime change requires buy-in from defectors inside the system

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"What Reza Pahlavi needs to do very quickly, and that's where he needs help, is to link up with folks in Iran. The vast majority of Iranians have this idea that we can go from the Islamic Republic to something very different, secular, democratic, overnight, and we can just forget about everything that has happened the last 46 years. That's wishful thinking. We need to find a moment of transition. Transition requires a buy-in from people inside the regime. You need the defectors."

Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute.



The Crown Prince has lost legitimacy by leading from abroad

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"I say this as someone who initially and originally supported [the Crown Prince] wholeheartedly. In the past few years, he has said many things and some of his behavior have raised a lot of eyebrows in Iran. Just last night he was on CBS and, sitting in the US, he refused to take any responsibility for the defenseless people being killed by the Islamic Republic. He just said, 'This is war.' I don't remember a military commander sitting in comfort 8,000 miles away and leading his troops to war."

Dr. Sina Azodi

*Director of the Middle East Studies program
at George Washington University*



The regime exploits fragmentation fears to maintain support

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"The regime will say [external military aid] is part of a foreign plot. The Israelis, the Americans, the British, somebody's paying these people to come out there.

The plot is to dismantle Iran, to make Iran into what they call 'Iranistan,' a number of little states that will no longer be a threat. The regime narrative is that we are the only ones who can keep the beloved Iran intact."

Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute.



Khamenei rules by divine right, just like the Shah did

"The position of the supreme leader or Vali-e Faqih is not that different from the institutions of the Persian court. The titles of the Persian kings always carried the title of the Shadow of God on Earth. Even the constitution that gave legitimacy to the Pahlavi dynasty specifically says that kingdom is a God-given gift. I sometimes make the joke that Iranians replaced Mohammad Reza Shah with Seyyed Ali Shah. He's just another king using the same divine right to rule."

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Dr. Sina Azodi

*Director of the Middle East Studies program
at George Washington University*



IRGC takeover is not a future scenario—it is the current reality

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"The IRGC has been running Iran for some time now. So the idea that they take over means nothing. It is basically continuity. There will be no Khamenei without IRGC. What is he gonna do, have the seminaries in Qom come out and do the cracking down or firing ballistic missiles at Israel? IRGC was made in March of 1979. It might have had a claim to be heroes of the nation when they fought Saddam Hussein, but today they are in the business of killing Iranians."

Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute.



A soft coup by the IRGC is among the most probable scenarios

“A scenario, which I think is likely, is the transition to IRGC rule or a kind of quasi-coup. Considering Khamenei's advanced age, considering he might die or be removed, a soft coup can happen.

The IRGC taking the upper hand, if it is not already in that situation, is again likely.”

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Ahmad Hashemi

Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Program at the Global Policy Institute (GPI)



Western military strikes would consolidate regime support, not weaken it

"I don't think a foreign intervention, especially if it's in a kinetic form, will be beneficial. Maybe symbolically if the Supreme Leader's office or IRGC headquarters were targeted, it would be useful. But there's a lot going on in the diaspora and inside Iran regarding what the Western intelligence agencies, Israel, and America are going to do. If they are highlighting Reza Pahlavi as an alternative, this would most likely backfire unless there's a more neutral and diverse reaction from the West."

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Ahmad Hashemi

Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Program at the Global Policy Institute (GPI)



Use intelligence to turn insiders, not just to find strike targets

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"The United States, Israel, and others have a lot more intelligence capabilities in Iran than they let us know. Can they use those intelligence capabilities for more than just pinpointing places to strike?

Another way to use your intelligence is to turn people around. Make them play part of a game for the sake of an Iran that hopefully doesn't descend into civil war."

Alex Vatanka

Founding Director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute.

