



# FACT SHEET IRAN

1 January 2026 – 20 January 2026

## OUTLOOK

Since the end of December, Iran has been experiencing one of the most severe waves of nationwide protests. Compared with previous mobilisations – such as the student protests of the 1990s, the so-called Green Movement in 2008/09, the economically motivated protests against the tripling of petrol prices in 2019/2020, or the Mahsa Amini protests of 2022 – the current wave of protests exhibits both new dynamics and a new quality of state repression. It was triggered by the rapid collapse of the national currency and a worsening economic crisis which began in the Tehran bazaar. Within a short period of time, however, the protests developed into a wide-scale political mobilisation directed not only against socio-economic grievances, but increasingly against the existing system and the country's highest political leadership.

In parallel with growing criticism of the Supreme Leader, a considerable erosion of the Shiite clergy's social standing has been noticeable for years. Secularisation tendencies among the younger generation, as well as the continuing politicisation of the religious establishment and its identification with a system of rule perceived as inefficient and corrupt, have led to increasing alienation between the state, the clergy, and society. This development is also increasingly manifesting itself in open hostility toward clerics in public spaces; the arson attacks on hundreds of mosques and public buildings during the recent wave of protests illustrates the intensity of this social rejection.

In parallel with the escalation of violence, on the evening of 8 January 2026 the Iranian authorities imposed a near-total blackout of the internet and mobile communications. According to Amnesty International, this measure serves not only to prevent the coordination of protests, but above all to conceal serious human rights violations. The almost complete collapse of independent communication channels also makes it considerably more difficult to analyse the situation reliably. Currently, almost the only news agencies accessible from within Iran are state-controlled or state-affiliated agencies such as Tasnim and Fars News, spreading highly politicised narratives. Due to the virtual impossibility of communicating with independent journalists and academics in the country, it remains extremely difficult to make precise and verifiable assessments

of the actual developments, which continues to pose a major analytical challenge.

## DOMESTIC POLITICAL DYNAMICS

The nationwide protests began on 28 December 2025 and quickly spread beyond Tehran to numerous cities; according to the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, demonstrations were recorded in at least 46 cities. The state's response has been characterised by massive violence: Both the United Nations and Amnesty International report the systematic and coordinated use of lethal force by security forces. Amnesty International cites significantly higher casualty figures, citing official Iranian data of up to 2,000 deaths since the protests began, which are classified as unlawful mass killings on an unprecedented scale. Verified videos and eyewitness accounts also show that security forces repeatedly used live ammunition against predominantly unarmed protestors, sometimes at close range and from rooftops, including residential buildings, mosques, and police stations.

In an interview with the Persian-language channel Euronews in early January 2026, Saeed Leilaz, a former advisor to former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, explained that the Islamic Republic had reached a structural impasse, but that there was still no viable political alternative because there was no opposition which was realistically capable of taking power. Repeated attempts at establishing a viable alternative within the system through reforms and reform-oriented actors have failed. What has become clear not least after the recent protests and in view of Masoud Pezeshkian's institutional and political limitations, is that the core crises are not primarily between political factions, but are a core part of the system itself.

## ETHNIC GROUPS

In the wake of the current protests, increased mobilisation can be observed in ethnically diverse regions. Kurdish opposition parties from Rojhelat coordinated their actions, something which had not happened for a long time, condemning the violent suppression of demonstrations in Kermanshah, Ilam,



EINSATZBEREIT FÜR ÖSTERREICH

BUNDESHEER.AT

UNSER HEER

and Lorestan and calling on bazaar traders in Kurdish regions to participate in a nationwide strike on 8 January. This limited but politically significant coordination marks a change in the highly fragmented Kurdish opposition landscape. In Baluchistan, however, the protests took a much more radical turn when a group claimed responsibility for the killing of a police commander in Iranshahr, presenting it as retaliation for state violence against demonstrators. Although such incidents remain isolated cases, they highlight the ongoing risk of security-political escalation and the militarisation of protests in peripheral regions. The involvement of other ethnically diverse areas, including the Lor and Bakhtiyari regions, points to long-term patterns of political and economic marginalisation and reveals structural deficits in Iran's policy vis-à-vis ethnic groups.

In connection with increasing debates concerning possible forms of opposition leadership, the role of Molana Abdolhamid, a Sunni cleric who enjoys great social prestige not only among Sunnis, must also be taken into account. In his sermons, he regularly voices sharp socio-political criticism of government actions, but deliberately maintains a cautious position in order to control his followers and avoid a renewed violent escalation by security forces. This restraint must be seen against the backdrop of the 2022 protests in Zahedan, during which around 100 people were killed during a demonstration, followed by massive security measures that paralysed the entire province and severely impacted on everyday life.

## MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

There are few reliable and dependable official numbers available on the members of police and security forces killed. According to an Iranian government representative, as reported by Reuters, a total of around 500 members of the security forces were killed during the protests. This figure is to be understood as the government's account; independent organisations have published figures which sometimes differ significantly, and the communications blackout makes verification difficult. Parallel to the escalation since 8 January, the government's rhetoric has also become significantly more aggressive. Official bodies and state-affiliated media increasingly portray the demonstrators as "terrorists" or "armed rioters" and link the protests to external enemies; this shift in the narrative clearly serves to legitimise the use of maximum force and extraordinary security measures. In the same vein, state actors also report on armed civilians who allegedly fired not only at security forces but also at civilians; as in many conflict situations with information blackouts in place, however, such claims are difficult to verify independently.

For purposes of classification, it is important to note that Iran has had a structural problem with protests for years: namely the systematic presence of security personnel in civilian clothing, referred to in Iranian everyday parlance as "Lebas-shakhsi" (civilian forces). They not only gather information, but are often described by protestors as active forces of oppression and intimidation, and are frequently perceived as the triggers of escalation; their proximity to Basij-/paramilitary networks has been discussed in numerous analyses. It is precisely this

practice of "civilian forces" that makes it extremely difficult to assign clear responsibilities in dynamic street situations – especially as violence, chaos and rumours reinforce each other. Added to this, there is another factor which can be observed in numerous protests: in phases of uncertainty, criminal actors occasionally exploit the resulting chaos to achieve their own goals (looting, settling scores, opportunistic violence). Even if claims regarding a systematic control of such dynamics are viewed with great scepticism, it remains politically crucial that, despite years of presenting itself as the guarantor of "security," the state clearly has difficulty protecting its own forces and controlling escalations of violence. It is precisely this contradiction which can generate further criticism – even from circles that have previously been loyal to the system and trusted in the efficiency of the security apparatus.

## ANALYSIS

The ongoing crises and civil unrest highlight the Islamic Republic's structural inability to provide effective responses to the serious challenges facing the country – in particular the economic crisis, acute water and electricity supply problems, and the failure to ensure basic security. Together with the progressive erosion of the religious establishment's reputation and growing criticism, even from circles loyal to the regime, of its departure from core normative foundations, developments cast considerable doubt on the system's long-term viability. The protest movements of the past decade and their repeated brutal suppression are no longer a short-term expression of social or economic discontent. Rather, they point to a profound crisis of legitimacy. Even if the state succeeds in stabilising the current situation in the short term, the openly articulated slogans against the Supreme Leader, religious institutions, and the system as a whole point to a fundamental rift between society and the ruling order.

### Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher: Republic of Austria / MoD, Roßauer Lände 1, 1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by: National Defence Academy/IFK, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Vienna, Austria

Periodical of the National Defence Academy

Copyright: © Republic of Austria / MoD / All rights reserved

Printing: Reproz W, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Vienna, Austria



[www.facebook.com/lvak.ifk](https://www.facebook.com/lvak.ifk)