

The Reasons for the Latest Protests in Iran and the Processes That Led to Today

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On 28 December 2025, protests that began with the closure of shops in Tehran's bazaar due to the rise in currency prices quickly spread across all of Iran. At first glance, this event appeared to be economic in nature. In a short time, however, it took on a structural and political character and revealed a deep crisis in state-society relations. The fact that the protests encompassed different social strata, cities, and regions showed that the problem was not limited solely to market mechanisms or economic governance. On the contrary, it was closely linked to the erosion of political legitimacy, institutional distrust, and long-term social tensions.

What has happened in Iran raises serious questions regarding the sustainability and adaptability of the current governance model of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These protests have once again intensified debates about the structural problems of the Islamic Republic's government, the living conditions of the poor in Iran, injustice, inequality, social change or revolution, and the possibility of the overthrow of the government. In this regard, the main questions that need to be answered are the following. What are the fundamental and structural causes of public discontent and protests? What are the demands of the protesters? What is the Iranian government's reaction to the demonstrations and its strategy? Is there an alternative formation that could take the place of the Islamic Republic? What is the behavior and plan of opposition forces and groups?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to examine both the protests currently under way and the previous

protests, as well as the social and political movements that have led to the present moment.

How the Protests Started and What Happened

The protests that began on 28 December 2025 against the sharp depreciation of Iran's currency were initiated by the traditionally conservative population of Tehran's bazaar, which has long been known or claimed to be aligned with the government. They continued with the participation of other social classes and groups. After Tehran, the bazaars of cities such as Isfahan, Karaj, and Mashhad quickly joined the protests. Soon, the slogans became politicized and targeted the leader of the Islamic Republic and the structure of the government. Security forces responded to the protesters with violence, while protesters resisted dispersal. The violent behavior of security forces against protesters led to greater public anger and the expansion of the protests. In the first days of 2026, larger crowds, including students, youth, workers, and various urban groups, took to the streets and chanted political slogans.

Security forces used military rifles to disperse protesters. As a result, although the exact number is not known, thousands of protesters have been killed and thousands injured to date. The number of protesters killed increased significantly, especially after the widespread shutdown of the internet. Despite the internet blackout, photos and videos that made their way out of the country prove that the number of deaths is far higher than assumed. On 13 January 2026, Iranian officials told Reuters that approximately 2,000 people had lost their lives, a figure that includes both protesters and security forces.[\[1\]](#) According to preliminary reports released by the Iran Human Rights organization on 12 January 2026, at least 648 to 734 people have been killed, including directly confirmed cases.[\[2\]](#) Sources indicate that this number may be higher, since the report considers only directly confirmed cases. Some opposition media outside Iran claim that 12,000 or

more people have been killed. In its report on 13 January, the New York Post stated that the death toll could reach 20,000.[\[3\]](#) However, these figures cannot be independently verified and, due to internet shutdowns inside the country, cannot yet be accepted as definitive.

The government's approach to the protests is also noteworthy. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei described the protesters as "provocateurs" and "terrorists" who are "trying to please the American president." He emphasized that the Islamic Republic "will not retreat in the face of provocateurs."[\[4\]](#) The Intelligence Organization of the Revolutionary Guards stated that "the continuation of this situation is unacceptable" and that "the blood of those killed in recent terrorist incidents is on the shoulders of those who planned them."[\[5\]](#) It appears that the government attributes the source of the protests to forces such as the United States and Israel. The government's labeling of protesters as terrorists indicates that those detained will face severe punishments.

In addition to events inside Iran, the reactions of foreign countries and international organizations are also noteworthy. The Iranian government's violence against its people initially drew the attention of US President Donald Trump, who warned that if the Islamic Republic attempted to kill Iranians, he would take action. In his latest message, Trump called on the Iranian people to continue their protests and promised that "help is on the way."[\[6\]](#) The United States stated that it has also suspended all talks with Iranian officials until the violence stops and is exploring options for political and economic pressure.[\[7\]](#) Furthermore, new and broader sanctions against Iran are being planned to pressure the Iranian government.

European countries, led by the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, as well as Australia, have expressed concern about the violence of Iranian security forces against protesters. The High Representative of the European Union expressed solidarity

with Iranian protesters.[\[8\]](#) The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also called for an “independent and transparent” investigation into the deaths that occurred during the protests. Many international organizations have also warned against the internet shutdown and restrictions on the flow of information in the country. Some countries and leaders have expressed concern about the humanitarian crisis in Iran, although their positions differ. Countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt have warned against direct military intervention in order to prevent the escalation of the crisis.[\[9\]](#)

The Structural Causes of Discontent and Protests in Iran

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has experienced continuous protests. When we look at the protests from the revolution to the present day, we see that protests have occurred every year. For this reason, to analyze the causes of the protests currently under way, it is also necessary to pay attention to previous protests. In other words, the protests must be analyzed as the latest event in a long process.

Leaving aside the protests of the revolutionary years, the protests of the new era began in 1999 at Tehran University. These protests were related to students’ demands for freedom of expression. In 2003, the Student Movement once again protested in Tehran, Tabriz, and other cities. Later, some of the most significant protests occurred in 2006 in Azerbaijani cities and in Tehran against a caricature published in the newspaper *Iran*.[\[10\]](#) In subsequent years in Azerbaijan, periodic protests also took place against issues such as environmental problems (the protests over Lake Urmia) and discrimination.

One of the most significant events in Iran’s modern socio-political movements is the Green Movement. It emerged after the 2009 presidential elections as a civil movement aimed at

protesting the election results and implementing reforms in the country's political structure. The movement began with demands for civil liberties, human rights, electoral transparency, and the limitation of the power of certain government institutions. The Green Movement focused primarily on reforms within the system and on increasing people's political participation.

After 2017, socio-political movements and protests in Iran took on a new character. In that year, the first protest rallies began in Mashhad against the irresponsibility of institutions overseeing financial organizations and funds known as Qarz al-Hasanah, as well as their failure to respond to people's complaints. These protests spread rapidly, and in less than a week, demonstrations were held in more than 70 cities across Iran. These protests differed significantly from previous ones in terms of their social composition and demands. For example, while the 2009 protests were led by a segment of the urban middle class that focused on political and reformist demands, the protesters in 2017 were mainly from the deprived and marginalized segments of society. These protests were often described as *bread riots* or *the uprising of the hungry*.

The 2017 protests are also, to some extent, the starting point of the protests currently under way. Since those protests, slogans against the government, including slogans against the entire political system and Khamenei, became more radical and gradually moved toward overthrowing the government. Especially after the nuclear deal of 2015, many who had hoped for a political and economic thaw became disillusioned with the government after the January 2017 protests. This disillusionment was reflected in the well-known slogan *Fundamentalist, reformist, the story is over*. These protests and their suppression marked a turning point in deepening the gap between society and the government. They largely eliminated the role of so-called *elections* as a mechanism to reduce this gap. This process continued more intensely in

subsequent protests.

The *2019 Bloody Aban* (November) protests occurred after the re-rationing of fuel and a 200 percent increase in gasoline prices in Iran. One of the main features of these protests was that they spread not only to large cities but also to many small towns. Alongside economic problems, demands for personal, social, and political freedoms were also raised during these protests.

In January 2020, protests began after the Revolutionary Guards shot down a Ukraine International Airlines plane and the Islamic Republic government attempted to cover it up. During these protests, the government restricted the internet, suppressed protesters with violence, and responded by arresting many people. Although these protests did not last long, their effects were long-lasting.

In 2021, protesters in various cities of Khuzestan province, where the Arab population is the majority, held peaceful demonstrations to protest water and electricity outages. However, these demonstrations were met with clashes and repression by military and security forces. The scale of the protests and the wave of solidarity with Khuzestan protesters spread to other provinces, including East and West Azerbaijan, Lorestan, and Isfahan.

In 2022, protests occurred due to reasons such as the failure of credit funds to return citizens' money and trust, breaches of banking and financial contracts, delayed wages, theft in banks, and problems related to water and drought. In May 2022, the collapse of the Metropol building in Abadan increased the scale of the protests.

One of the most discussed and impactful events in recent years is the protests that began after the killing of Mahsa Amini by security forces on 16 September 2022. These nationwide protests, held under the slogan *Women, Life, Freedom*, demanded fundamental changes in the country's social and political

conditions. Women, youth, and students were at the forefront of this movement. The protests spread across the country and led to the deaths of hundreds of protesters and to the events known as *Bloody Friday in Zahedan*. After the protests were suppressed, the government executed a number of protesters. The *Women, Life, Freedom* movement has been highly influential in the realm of social demands, especially regarding women's freedom of dress. Even after these protests, many women removed their hijabs in streets, public spaces, cultural circles, and even some state institutions.

From a sociological perspective, these protests showed that Iranians' objections to social restrictions, women's rights violations, identity issues, and cultural oppression are no longer limited to a specific group or region. They can turn into widespread and networked movements quickly.

The economic causes of the ongoing protests

As noted above, on 28 December 2025 the Iranian rial reached its lowest value, and the dollar rose in the market to approximately 1,4 to 1,5 million rials, or 140 to 150 thousand tomans. This sharp decline caused a rapid increase in the prices of all imported goods and many raw materials used in domestic production. These fluctuations made it impossible to set stable prices or manage inventory in the market and in trade. This led bazaar merchants to close their shops and protest. In other words, economic problems are the most important factor behind these protests. Rising inflation and declining purchasing power have placed serious pressure on market vendors, workers, and the middle and lower classes of society, especially in essential goods such as food, medicine, and fuel. Sharp changes in the exchange rate increased production costs.

The government's shortage of foreign currency reserves, the daily expansion of international sanctions and restrictions, and economic actors' lack of trust in the government's

currency policy led to growing instability. The annual inflation rate reached high levels, especially for essential goods such as food, fuel, and medicine. The decline in purchasing power meant that the incomes of people and business owners did not keep pace with rising prices. The country's banks and financial system faced liquidity shortages due to sanctions and misguided policies. Limited access to state currency and the large gap between the official exchange rate and the free market rate intensified speculation in the currency and gold markets. This made the market extremely unstable and reduced the confidence of investors and consumers. These events coincided with the resignation of the Central Bank governor and the submission of the government's proposed budget to the Parliament. In the budget proposal, a large share was allocated to ideological, cultural, and religious institutions close to the government. This issue further fuelled anger over the protests and exposed economic distrust. [\[11\]](#)

The government's lack of transparency in economic policy and instability in decision-making pushed people and market actors to protest. When they felt that there was no reliable economic mechanism to protect the value of the currency and market stability, mass reactions and strikes began. In other words, the currency shock and inflationary pressure were the direct causes of shop and store closures, while the government's weak governance and structural problems caused these protests to spread rapidly.

The position of Iranian Azerbaijani Turks in the protests

Although Iranian Turks (Azerbaijanis) have played a certain role and function in the ongoing protests in Iran, they have exhibited several characteristics. In the protests that began in late December 2025, it is evident that there were no protests in Azerbaijani streets in the first days. In subsequent days, participation remained lower compared to central Iranian cities. Analysts view this not as a lack of

interest in nationwide protests but rather as the result of local complexities, previous repression, and the specific nature of ethno-social demands. Some analysts note that the lack of broad participation in recent protests should not be interpreted as complacency or passivity on the part of the Azerbaijani people. It should instead be understood as the result of fear of repression, bitter historical experiences, and the initial focus of the protests on simple economic demands.[\[12\]](#)

In later stages of the protests, Tabriz, Urmia, Ardabil, and other centers of Azerbaijan became scenes of mass anti-government demonstrations and clashes with security forces. Protesters chanted slogans such as *Freedom, Justice, National Government*, which demonstrated the link between demands for social justice and ethnic identity. Azerbaijani journalists, some political organizations, and human rights organizations and activists were also active abroad. Their most important activities included documenting repression, publishing protest statements, defending the civil rights of Turkic ethnic groups, and criticizing cultural and linguistic discrimination. Azerbaijani human rights activists emphasized that responses to the protests should not be accompanied by accusations of betrayal or inaction. They called for Turkic voices to be heard as active members of society in the process of change.[\[13\]](#)

There are various political and sociological reasons for Azerbaijan's and especially Tabriz's hesitation to join the protests. First, there is a prevailing belief among Turks that centralist groups, including Iranian nationalists, did not support Azerbaijan during its past protests. When we look at past Azerbaijani protests, these groups labeled Turks as separatists, pan-Turkists, and enemies of Iran. They supported government repression. This issue has been so deeply ingrained in Azerbaijani collective memory that most people refuse to join centralist movements. When I refer to centralist groups or movements, I am referring to forces that view the

concentration of political, administrative, economic, and cultural power in the country's capital or central authority as necessary, and that resist the transfer of meaningful power to regions, ethnic groups, or local governments. In Iranian political discourse, centralism is often linked to the idea of a single-identity nation-state, a single official language (Persian), and a highly centralized system of governance.

Another important reason for Azerbaijan's hesitation to join the protests is ideological. Considering the protests of recent years, it can be said that the hesitation in Azerbaijan stems from concerns that protests carried out for the people's rights may be appropriated by totalitarian ideologies. The problem is that some political groups, especially Pahlavi supporters, present themselves as the leaders and drivers of the protests. As a result, Turks approached participation in the protests with hesitation in order to avoid entering this discourse and to distance themselves from centralist groups.

The slogans of Pahlavi supporters and centralist groups are indeed reactionary and excessively ideological. For example, slogans such as *Reza Shah, may your soul rest in peace* fall into this category. Such slogans sideline the core issues of the protesters. They intensify accusations and denials in the tense atmosphere of protest and reduce its momentum. This issue has a particularly negative impact in regions such as Azerbaijan. Turks know that both the ideology of Velayat-e Faqih and the ideology of the Pahlavis are totalitarian and centralist.[\[14\]](#)

Ultimately, the reality is that through a historical process and based on the lived experiences of the past century, the Azerbaijani Turk people's understanding of politics, governments, centralist movements, and fundamentalist ideological movements has changed. This is because the Islamic Republic government, centralist currents, and discourses rooted in grand and fundamentalist ideologies, such as Iranshahrism and Pahlavism, have always denied Azerbaijani

Turk identity.

Historically, the protest behavior of Iranian Turks and Azerbaijani cities must be understood in the context of long-term political marginalization, cultural repression, and experiences of distrust toward the center. The delay in participation in protests on Azerbaijani streets during the initial phases was not due to passivity. This political behavior is the result of repression after the 1979 revolution and the experience of failure in previous nationwide protests. This collective memory has shaped a kind of cautious rationality in Turks political activity. In this framework, the potential harms and benefits of protest for Azerbaijan, the likelihood that movements will be captured by centralist discourses, and the risk of erasing ethnic demands all play significant roles.

In the later stages of the protests, Azerbaijan's participation demonstrated a dual connection between public demands and ethnic identity. The slogans and actions in Tabriz, Urmia, and Ardabil are not based solely on economic issues or solely on identity. They reflect opposition to poverty, corruption, and authoritarianism, as well as linguistic, cultural, and political demands. This shows that Iranian Turks see themselves as part of the country's protest community. At the same time, they have not fully dissolved into a broader all-Iran discourse. In other words, the role of the Turkic people and of their organizations, journalists, and human rights institutions must be analyzed discursively.

The gap between the dominant narratives of the centralist opposition, especially Pahlavi supporters, and ethnic demands has caused part of Turkic society to adopt a pessimistic view of the future after the Islamic Republic. Therefore, in the current protests, Iranian Turks see themselves both as allies of other peoples of Iran and as critics of the power structure and discourse of the center.

Conclusion

Although the protests initially appeared to be linked to economic issues, they primarily reflect broader demands and problems rooted in the structure of government. These events represent the accumulation of civil, social, and humanitarian demands that have formed over decades across various sectors of society and that in many cases have not been effectively articulated or clearly addressed. Regardless of the scale or duration of the protests, the persistence of structural economic and political problems, the effects of international sanctions, and the decline in hope that even minimal political demands of citizenship will be met can always provide fertile ground for political and social discontent and protests in Iran.

In general, the complex political, social, ethnic, and religious dimensions of these protests are also significant. From a political perspective, these protests are a direct response to the suppression of civil liberties, government inefficiency, and the lack of real public participation in key decision-making. They call for structural reforms or a change in power. From a social perspective, discontent stems mainly from economic pressure, unemployment, corruption, and widespread inequality. These factors have driven urban populations and youth into the streets. From an ethnic perspective, the protests reflect the long-standing demands of non-Persian ethnic groups for decentralization, equal political and cultural rights, and an end to structural discrimination. Different regions of Iran have different experiences of oppression and inequality, and they play active roles in protest movements. From a religious perspective, the protests also include opposition to the ideological use of religion to legitimize oppression, restrictions on religious freedoms, and pressure on religious minorities. A segment of society demands the separation of political power from religious ideological practices. This multi-layered nature of the protests means that current movements are simultaneously

economic, political, social, ethnic, and cultural. They represent the complex dimensions of Iranian society's demands.

One of the factors that has contributed to the general increase in protests in Iran is a crisis of hopelessness. This crisis is the product of a combination of economic pressure, political repression, social inequality, and restrictions on individual freedoms. The absence of a clear vision for addressing these problems has led a large segment of the population, especially young people, to feel that their efforts are futile and that real possibilities for change are limited. The suppression of protests, the arrest of civil society activists, the restriction of public and media space, and distrust in state institutions have further intensified this sense of hopelessness. This has turned it into a collective psychological and social crisis that reduces incentives for civic participation and, at the same time, leaves society vulnerable to sporadic, sudden, and unpredictable protests.

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https://www.tbsnews.net/world/iran-official-says-2000-people-have-been-killed-unrest-1333296?utm_

[2] At Least 648 Protesters Killed in Iran: IHRNGO Warns of Imminent Protester Executions. 12 January 2026.

[3] Chilling video captures 6-straight minutes of shooting, screaming during Iran protests. 13 January 2026.

[4] رهبر ایران: با معترض حرف میزنیم، اما اغتشاشگر را باید سرجایش نشاند 3 January 2026.

[5] سپاه با صدور بیانیه‌ای معترضان را به "فتنه‌انگیزی" متهم کرد 29 December 2025.

[6] (X). @Lindsey Graham. 1 January 2026.

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[7] Trump reaffirms support for Iranian protesters, Russia issues warning. 13 January 2026.

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[8] Council of the EU. 9 January 2026.

https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/01/09/iran-statement-by-the-hr-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-situation-in-the-country/pdf/?utm_

[9] US military to withdraw some personnel from Middle East amid Iranian threats. 14 January 2026.

[10] All references to Azerbaijan in this article refer to Azerbaijan of Northern Iran.

[11] بودجه ۱۴۰۴؛ افزایش سهم نهادهای بودجه پیشنهادی ۱۴۰۵ دولت December 20225 برای نهادهای حوزوی + ایفوگرافیک. 25

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