

Iran in the Wake of Women, Life, Freedom

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Today marks four years since Iran's morality police, the Gasht-e Ershad (Guidance Patrols), murdered Mahsa Amini. But despite four years of U.S. [condemnations](#), [solidarity statements](#), and even [strikes against Tehran's killing machine](#), Iran's government still punishes those who [protested](#) Amini's death and others like them. This continued crackdown shows the Iranian regime still fears its own people more than any external threat. That is why the United States must act on its promises. It's time that we help the Iranian people effectively oppose their government by exposing and sanctioning the country's repressive forces; combating the misuse of artificial intelligence (AI) to conduct mass surveillance; and expanding resources to help Iranians communicate during a nationwide internet shutdown.

Amini's Murder Sparks a Movement

Viewing a woman's hair as a threat to a four-decade-old regime, Iranian morality police in Tehran arrested and beat 22-year-old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini on September 13, 2022, for wearing her hijab incorrectly. After receiving [repeated blunt force trauma to the brain](#), she quickly succumbed to her injuries three days later. Amini's horrific death, which government forces claim was a result of a heart attack, sparked nationwide outrage that coalesced into the global "Women, Life, Freedom" movement. The movement not only urged citizens to speak out in support of women's rights, but also against the government's systematic control over its civilians. While fearless women throughout Iran symbolically [burned](#) their hijabs and cut their hair to reject their government's strict enforcement of Sharia law, security forces panicked. As protests mounted, authorities responded by indiscriminately [killing](#) over 500 protesters and arresting an estimated 20,000 people, indicating their authority was already in jeopardy.

Iran's then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [described](#) the protests as "riots," and pinned the unrest on the United States, suggesting that even the highest level of Iran's government viewed the movement as a threat to its power as a conservative theocracy. In superficial attempts to demonstrate reform and offer a crumb to the people to prevent more protests, the regime seemingly [relaxed](#) its enforcement of hijab mandates and claimed to have [abolished](#) the country's morality police. However, security forces [continued](#) to heavily monitor and restrict citizens' movements, as well as apprehend Women, Life, Freedom protesters long after Amini's killing. Notably, in 2024, the International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran [revealed](#) that the regime had deployed AI tools on phone apps to surveil women and ensure their compliance with the hijab mandate.

The Regime's Vulnerability Four Years Later

But even four years later, Iran's government still fears citizen dissent, penalizing anyone who challenges its authority. The Women, Life, Freedom movement exposed the widespread hatred of the regime and laid the groundwork for mass demonstrations that, in combination with Israel's Operation Rising Lion and Tehran's own contempt for its people, crested in the wave of protests in January 2026. After coming under heavy fire during the [12-Day War](#), experiencing a months-long [water shortage](#), and suffering an [economic crisis](#) caused by international sanctions, Tehran could not afford another blow to its foundation. As a [Tehran bazaar strike](#) in December 2025 over Iran's dying currency spilled into January and

sparked a nationwide anti-regime movement, the government felt the walls closing in on itself. With [millions of protesters](#) taking to the streets, authorities [enacted](#) a nationwide internet and communications shutdown while the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij paramilitary organization [slaughtered](#) tens of thousands of demonstrators and innocent bystanders. Just as the morality police lied about Amini's cause of death, Iranian authorities brought [false charges](#) against protesters, forced them to [confess to crimes under torture](#), and exaggerated their role in demonstrations to justify their outrageous punishments. Meanwhile, Ali Khamenei [described](#) the January movement as "an American plot," and characterized the demonstrators as "rioters" and "criminals."

Just like the Women, Life, Freedom movement, the January protests proved to be detrimental to the regime's stability, leaving the government vulnerable to a potential internal overthrow as Operation Epic Fury commenced on February 28. With a population enraged by its regime's mass killings and now coming under constant U.S. and Israeli strikes, Iran's government felt its grip on its power threatened from within like never before. As a result, authorities once again [shut down](#) the internet for a record-breaking 88 days while they [executed](#) political opponents and citizens connected to the January protests.

Tehran's Stricter Crackdown

However, the regime's fear of its own population did not fade when the strikes stopped. Instead, it doubled down by detaining and executing citizens for expressing their opinions while also continuing to rely on AI to monitor potential threats to its authority. Similarly to the International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran's 2024 report, AI giant Anthropic [revealed](#) in September 2026 that via virtual private networks (VPNs), government actors utilized the company's Claude AI platform to carry out advanced surveillance operations to monitor civilians. Additionally, they used the technology to maintain a database for tracking the identities of over 6,000 Iranians, indicating a U.S. company inadvertently helped Tehran suppress dissent.

But up against a heavily armed regime backed by AI assistance, Iranian civilians cannot effectively combat Iran's systematic oppression alone. According to human rights organizations, Iranian authorities [executed](#) at least 29 January protesters, as well as three people detained for supporting the Women, Life, Freedom movement between March 18 and late August. Furthermore, a court in Isfahan [sentenced](#) 10 January protesters to death as part of a single case and detained at least 311 people on freedom of expression-related charges in August alone. As Iran's citizens risk being put to death for expressing their opinions and rejecting Sharia law, the United States cannot wait to act until regime forces slaughter thousands more in the next wave of nationwide protests. Instead of claiming to stand in solidarity with the Iranian people, we must actually provide Iranians with the necessary tools to support their fight against repression.

Recommendations

First, no repressive entity in Iran should have the luxury of remaining anonymous. Therefore, the U.S. government should collect and publicly release the names of IRGC and Basij forces responsible for violating civilians' freedom of expression and the judges who have handed them harsh prison or death sentences, ultimately exposing their identities to both the Iranian public and the international community. While revealing their identities, the U.S. Treasury Department should sanction any IRGC, Basij, or judiciary official who has yet to be penalized for committing human rights abuses against protesters and political opponents.

Next, to prevent authoritarian regimes like Iran from exploiting AI tools, the U.S. government should urge American-based AI giants to develop stricter countermeasures to combat foreign militaries and

authorities from misusing chatbots to identify civilians and conduct mass surveillance operations. Additionally, the U.S. government should require Anthropic engineers to share specific details and techniques about the offenders with their counterparts at other top AI companies. By offering this information, Anthropic could prevent regime actors from reusing the same or similar prompts on other AI platforms.

Finally, the U.S. government should embark on a long-term internet freedom project with technology companies to help Iranians combat nationwide internet and communications blackouts. Partnering with companies that offer direct-to-cell (D2C) services enabling mobile phones to connect to a satellite without a physical dish, the U.S. government should fund research and development efforts to advance and refine D2C testing and implementation. With the help of humanitarian organizations in Iran, the appropriate government departments and agencies should deliver D2C-compatible phones to Iranians on the ground, allowing them to communicate and organize protests even if the regime enforces another blackout.