Abdanan Protest Must Serve as a Wake-Up Call for the United States

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The resistance in Iran is still alive, and this time, the United States must be ready to properly support Iran's civilian protesters. As Iranians in the city of Abdanan came together on November 17 to mourn the 13 oil refinery workers who died in a bus accident three days prior, the gathering quickly developed into an anti-regime protest to condemn the country's poor road infrastructure and safety measures, as well as the government's failure to address the needs of the people.

The Abdanan protest should serve as a wake-up call for the United States to deliver its promise to the Iranian people, whom President Donald Trump assured during Iran's nationwide anti-regime protests in January 2026 that "help is on its way." To deliver that promise, the United States should prepare now for the next protest movement in Iran by using American military assets in the region as deterrence to prevent violence against civilians, providing the Iranian people with internet and communications equipment, and sanctioning the individuals responsible for cracking down on peaceful protesters.

Abdanan Protesters Condemn Regime's Failures

The recent anti-regime protest in Abdanan demonstrates that the resistance against Iran's corrupt government continues despite its harsh crackdown on political dissent, especially 10 months after security forces killed over 36,000 people for protesting the regime earlier this year. On November 17, approximately one thousand people in Abdanan, Ilam province, a Kurdish region of Iran, rallied in the city's streets to condemn the deaths of 13 oil refinery workers who tragically lost their lives when their vehicle overturned on the evening of November 14. The rally quickly turned into an anti-regime protest, with attendees chanting phrases such as "Death to the dictator," and "Poverty, corruption, rising prices, we will fight until overthrow," amid the government's failure to address eroding road infrastructure and poor safety measures. According to Iran's Legal Medicine Organization, vehicular deaths across the country are up 10.8 percent compared to last year, with 10,357 people dying in traffic accidents during the first six months of the year. While Iranian citizens died in road accidents, the regime continued to show its true colors as it prioritized producing weapons, striking civilian ships, launching worldwide cyberattacks, and funding terrorism.

Also notable about the protest is that Abdanan is located in Ilam, a heavily populated Kurdish province, where political crackdown is common due to the regime's high suspicion of Kurds and their alleged support for opposition groups that reject the regime's power. In October alone, security forces arrested 55 Kurdish people, including teenagers, without providing any reason for their arrests, according to JINSA data.

Regime Forces Suppress Abdanan Protest

The regime's response to the Abdanan protest indicates that the government is just as afraid of its people as it was in January, signaling weakness amongst the country's security apparatus. To disperse the

protest, security forces engaged the demonstrators, fired tear gas into the crowd, and shot pellets at the demonstration. But even as they tried to quash the demonstration, people continued to protest. Later, Abdanan's Public and Revolutionary Prosecutor warned that "those at fault will be held accountable, and the case will be pursued until a final resolution is reached," and that "individuals who seek to exploit this incident to disrupt public order or incite public sentiment will be dealt with firmly." As a result of the protest, security forces detained at least 17 people, including a 15-year-old boy who authorities later released after interrogating him for two hours.

While the Abdanan protest resulted in a small number of arrests compared to the crackdown on January protesters, those detained in January and the months after continue to face severe consequences for opposing the regime, including forced confessions, long prison sentences, death sentences, and expedited executions. So far, the regime has executed eight January protesters and sentenced 22 others to death just in October and November alone, according to JINSA data. However, some of the judges issuing those sentences, such as Ehsan Adibi-Mehr and Judge Sabzevari (Mehdi Sabzevarnejad), are not individually sanctioned by the United States despite their egregious human rights abuses.

As the protest broke out in Abdanan, citizens immediately reported internet issues in the city, suggesting the regime tried to halt the spread of the protest before it sparked more demonstrations nationwide. The regime immediately shutting down the internet in response to the protest mirrors Tehran's past response to mass civilian unrest in Iran, including the first few months of the 2026 Iran War, the January anti-government protests, the 12-Day War in 2025, and the November 2019 demonstrations. With the internet enabling civilians to organize protests and share the country's human rights abuses with foreign media outlets, regime authorities are quick to shut down the internet or confiscate satellite internet terminals, such as Starlink devices.

Economic and Societal Turmoil Mirrors Previous Unrest

The Abdanan protest comes amid economic and societal woe in Iran, mirroring the conditions of what sparked the last protest movement in late December 2025 and January 2026. Before shopkeepers and bazaar workers in Tehran went on strike at the end of 2025 to protest the country's failing currency—the strike that sparked the January 2026 anti-regime movement—smaller pockets of protests popped up across the country throughout 2025 as the people condemned Iran's water shortage, power outages, and unfair wages. The condemnation of Iran's economic mismanagement also coincided with the 12-Day War and the following crackdown on minorities whom the government accused of cooperating with the United States and Israel—particularly Jewish and Baha'i citizens. Just as they did in 2025, the people of Iran are once again experiencing fuel shortages, surging prices, poor working conditions, and unfair pay. These poor conditions have given rise to small, yet frequent protests throughout Iran, all while Kurds, Baha'is, Arabs, and Baloch residents come under increased scrutiny from government authorities. Ultimately, economic failures, as well as systematic suppression of ethnic and religious minorities, can, and often do, accompany anti-regime protests in Iran.

Supporting Iran's Next Protest Movement

During the last protest movement in Iran, President Trump promised several times to help the Iranian people combat their authoritarian government, but any help proved short-lived, at best, as repression mounted in Iran following the cessation of hostilities. Before Iran's next major protest movement, the United States, which already has a significant military presence in the Middle East due to the ongoing war with Iran, must be prepared to support Iranian civilian protesters and ensure they have the tools they need to guarantee their basic human rights.

First, the United States must maintain a strong military presence and deterrence posture in the Middle East to intimidate the regime in case mass protests break out in Iran. The last protest movement peaked on the nights of January 8 and 9, but the United States did not finalize its military buildup in the region until February 28, which, even if the strike campaign were focused on protecting human rights, was too late to protect the protesters. However, maintaining presence now will save time and enable the United States to quickly respond if the regime tries to quell the next protest movement.

Next, the U.S. government should task the appropriate departments and agencies to help replace confiscated Starlink terminals in Iran that regime authorities have seized over the past year, first prioritizing the country's Kurdish region as the population there repeatedly faces arbitrary arrests, and then expanding nationwide. These devices will enable Iranians to access the internet during a terrestrial communications outage in the short-term.

While funneling Starlink terminals into Iran, the United States should also invest in a long-term plan to assist the Iranian people during a terrestrial communications outage. This plan should include the U.S. government funding research and development projects for enhancing direct-to-cell (D2C) services that allow users to access the internet without a physical dish. When research and development is complete, the U.S. government should explore options to equip Iranian civilians with compatible D2C devices that enable them to access the internet and communicate with the outside world even when the regime shuts down the country's internet services.

Lastly, the United States should individually sanction Iranian judges issuing extreme prison and death sentences for protesters and political opponents. By doing so, the United States can take part in ensuring these specific judges face foreign travel bans, asset freezes, and international reputational damage. With the regime continuing to crack down on protests and political dissent throughout the country, it is important that the United States keep its promises from earlier this year and properly prepare to help the Iranian people counter their authoritarian government during Iran's next protest movement.