

# THE DECLINE OF THE IRANIAN REGIME

27.1. 2025 Richard Klauber<sup>1</sup>

## Annotation

*For the past two years, the conservatives and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have been consolidating their position inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. This more radical approach has been seen in executions, the number of which is the highest in the last 20 years. While through 2023, the number of executions amounted to 75 % of all documented executions in the world, in October 2024, the regime executed more than 166 people.<sup>i</sup>*

*Tehran is taking advantage of the escalation situation to cover up the deteriorating conditions in the country. These conditions are caused by economic stagnation, and a weakened regime cannot afford any actions from the opposition within the state that would facilitate demonstrations, moderate policies or even support for Israel.*

## Introduction – Persecution of dissent and the development of society after the death of Mahsa Amini

Iran's mullah regime experienced unrest at the turn of 2022-2023 caused mainly by the death of Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa “Jina” Amini, who ended up in custody after being arrested for violating the rules for dressing women according to Hijab law, then she later died in a hospital where she was taken after interrogation.

During the protests, the Iranian armed forces used assault rifles and tried to suppress demonstrations by shooting into the crowd. 551 people were killed, thousands were arrested and another 10 were executed. Also, tortures and interrogations of detainees were the order of the day.

The regime continued to persecute the families of the protesters, who were threatened, and, in many cases,

the relatives of the detainee or executed were imprisoned in a show trial.

Many women remained rebellious to the regime, but no dominant actor within the opposition would express support for the protesters. Abroad, the anti-regime opposition has split into monarchists, nationalists, and liberals who cannot agree on how to proceed against the regime.<sup>ii,iii</sup>


The regime prepared several consistent measures ahead of the first anniversary of Amini's death. Before the protest, security forces detained women's rights activists and banned the families of the deceased protesters from holding commemorative events.

One of the armed forces of the Iranian regime, the Gasht-e-Ershad (or morality police) can impose heavy fines for not wearing a hijab since the new law was issued. The regime also targeted actresses and influencers who had been diagnosed with various fabricated mental disorders.<sup>iv</sup>

New Hijab law, following the original one from 2022, would introduce harsher punishments for women and girls for exposing their hair, forearms, or lower legs. This law, which has not yet entered into force, was suspended in December 2024 after protests by women's rights activists. This setback indicated further weakening of the Iranian regime.

The Iranian regime is weakening the atmosphere among ordinary people who are worried about the country's economic situation. The Iranian population is concerned about the advancing impact of sanctions, especially between the first and second rounds of the presidential elections when stock prices on the Tehran Stock Exchange fell sharply as Iranians began to buy gold in large quantities.

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Uncertainty about Iran's economic future caused gold prices to rise by 5.17 % after the first presidential round. Two factors caused this, firstly, the promises of the current president and then-candidate Pezeshkian to stop sanctions. These promises were not trusted, and the outcome of the first round itself was unclear, forcing Iranians to invest their savings in more stable commodities.<sup>v</sup>

The Iranian regime has shown that it will get tougher even on Western countries when it executed a dissident with German citizenship Jamshid Sharmahd in October 2024. Jamshid Sharmahd was convicted last year of “corruption on Earth” and terrorism when he was forced to confess to several crimes after being tortured.

Jamshid Sharmahd was a member of a royalist group called Tondar, which is based in the USA. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz called Sharmahd's execution a scandal and said that “Jamshid Sharmahd did not even receive the opportunity to defend himself against the charges at the trial.”<sup>vi</sup>

Here it turns out that the Iranian government is now not hesitating to execute even a dissident with German citizenship. From 2022 onwards, we can expect the regime to tighten and protests of similar magnitude to be seen less frequently.

### Persecution of ethnic and national minorities

The Iranian regime has struck down on minorities after the protests at the end of 2022. In addition to the Balochis and Kurds, it has long targeted Azeri Turks, Ahvazi Arabs, Turkmens, and Lurs. Persecuted religious minorities include Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, Jews, Sabean Mandaeans, Sunni Muslims, Yaresan, Zoroastrians, (and besides that Atheists).<sup>vii,viii</sup>

#### The Kurds

Historically, one of the most oppressed minorities in Iran is Kurds. In September-December 2022, during large-scale protests, the so-called morality police and

Basij paramilitary forces also suppressed protests in the Kurdistan province in the capital Sanandaj.<sup>ix</sup>

The mullah regime dared to conduct operations against the Kurds even outside its territory, especially in neighboring Iraq.

During the ongoing protests, the IRGC carried out an operation against the Kurdish organizations Komala and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan–Iran (KDPI), which the regime considers a terrorist organization. The operation was carried out in northern Iraq and cost the lives of 400 people, including 60 children.<sup>x</sup>


Iran's efforts to target Kurds outside its territory are also supported by the March 2023 agreement between Iraq and Iran. That treaty concerned 'protecting the common borders between the two countries and consolidating cooperation in several security fields'.

According to Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani, the agreement is supposed to prevent the armed forces from penetrating Iraqi Kurdistan into Iran and making incursions into the country. This agreement was a political and diplomatic victory for the Iranian regime, which used the treaty to launch strikes against Kurdish militant groups. Teheran accused some of the Iranian Kurdish opposition of collaboration with Israel.<sup>xi</sup>

#### The Balochs

Another ethnic group that was active in the protests against the regime in 2022 was the Baloch ethnic minority. There were 19 victims during the protests, but these were far from the first protests of this minority. The Iranian regime also oppresses the Balochis because of their dominant religious background. The Balochis represent a Sunni minority in predominantly Shiite Iran.

The Baloch population in Iran almost reaches 5 million inhabitants, which is 5.51 % of the total population of Iran, which makes the Baloch minority one of the most important Iranian minorities.



Considering Balochistan one of the poorest provinces in Iran the Balochis suffered from poor conditions and weak infrastructure. There are also Balochi militant organizations that operate outside the borders of the Iranian regime, which Teheran uses for propaganda, talking about external forces that undermine the regime.<sup>xii,xiii</sup>

The regime also oppresses Balochis in civilian life. Despite the majority population in Balochistan, the regime does not allow Balochi students to study at state universities. Furthermore, the regime has also managed to cut ties between the Afghan and Pakistani Balochi groups with the Iranian Balochis by building a border wall on the border with these countries. Some families have remained separated since then.<sup>xiv</sup>

A year later, in October 2023, the first anniversary protests in Zahedan were suppressed with the help of special police forces, shooting into crowds, torture, stoning, and other drastic means.<sup>xv</sup>

At the turn of 2023 and 2024, the armies of Iran and Pakistan launched missile strikes on the territory of the neighboring country against the Balochi organization Jaish ul-Adl (JuA), which is considered terrorist in both countries. The presence of JuA alone has caused mistrust between both governments, as both sides are suspected of supporting foreign “opposition” forces.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **The Baha'is**

The last group that has been increasingly persecuted since 2022 and is the main target of the Mullah regime is the Baha'i religious minority, which is suspected by the regime of spying for Israel. Although there is no direct evidence of espionage for Israel, the headquarters of this community, the “Universal House of Justice”, is located in Haifa, northern Israel.

The persecution of this religious minority began with the same intensity as today even before the protests of September 2022. Three years before that, there was the case of the village of Eyval, where the houses of

Baha'i people were confiscated and then burned and demolished by regime forces.

The persecution of Baha'i people and other religious groups is also embedded in the constitution and legal structure of the Iranian regime. Young Baha'is are expelled from schools, and even in textbooks hate speech about them is written and shamefully symbolized. Since 2021, there has been a 44 % increase in hate articles about Baha'i people. Additionally, since July 2023, there has been the first social media campaign approving the mistreatment of the Baha'i minority under the hashtag #Amir\_Kabir\_Thankyou.<sup>xvii</sup>

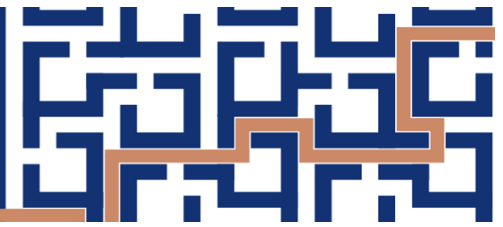
### **Pezeshkian the winner of the presidential elections**

After the tragic death of former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, early elections were held to decide the future direction of the country.<sup>xviii</sup>

Before these elections, the Iranian regime was experiencing problems in the struggling economy, sanctions imposed by Western countries, high inflation rates (around 40 %), and currency devaluation (600,000 Iranian rials per dollar). Framing its policy priorities, the Iranian regime still leads the Axis of Resistance against its archenemies of Israel and the USA.

The two main candidates, Lawmaker Masoud Pezeshkian and Senior security official Saeed Jalili offered opposing views on how to deal with the situation. Jalili, who represented the conservative part of the Iranian population, proposed resolving the crisis by linking itself to Russia, China, and non-Western countries so that the regime would not be so isolated and could circumvent sanctions more effectively.

Pezeshkian, on the other hand, aimed to be open to the West and to ease or stop the sanctions imposed by Western countries, as well as promised to renegotiate a nuclear deal with the West and open Iran to Western countries.



Only 40 % of the population eligible to vote turned out to vote, a record low, which also harmed the regime. A big problem for the conservative Jalili was his long-time rival and former mayor of the capital Tehran, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who also ran and divided conservative forces.

However, after dropping out of the first round, Ghalibaf supported Jalili. Pezeshkian won with 42.5 % of the vote, followed by Jalili with 38.6 %.<sup>xix</sup>



(on the left is Saeed Jalili and on the right Masoud Pezeshkian)

More voters turned out in the second round, and voter turnout climbed to 49.8 %. This shows voters' dissatisfaction with the regime's current direction, as even though the conservative votes Ghalibaf won in the first round went to Jalili (44.3 %), Pezeshkian won the race with 53.7 %.<sup>xxi</sup>

Pezeshkian, however, outraged many of his supporters. The new Iranian president chose older, more experienced politicians who prefer ideology over pragmatism, among them members of the IRGC.

Vice President Mohammad Javad Zarif, a former foreign minister who supported Pezeshkian in the


campaign, wanted to resign after pressure from hardliners who criticized him for supporting the dual citizenship law. But Pezeshkian did not accept Zarif's resignation. Pezeshkian has little chance of success, as Iran's bureaucracy is largely composed of unelected, not entirely competent, but regime-loyal officials who are very difficult to replace with impartial technocrats.<sup>xxii,xxiii</sup>

### The Cold War with Israel and the Escalation of the Arms Race

Since the October 7, 2023, attacks against Israel, Iran has reinforced an Axis of Resistance made up of militias through which it is waging a proxy war against Israel and the US. These organizations include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank, Houthis in Yemen, pro-Iranian elements of Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) in Iraq, and Al-Ashtar in Bahrain. But these are only Iran's main allies, besides them there are even smaller militias.

Less significant militias are located in Syria, such as the Fatemiyoun brigade and the Zainebiyoun brigade, which are made up of refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan. All these militias and their attacks are coordinated by the elite IRGC unit – the Quds Force.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In May of 2024, this line was about to expand with a new front, due to the Al-Ashtar militia, which carried out a drone attack on the headquarters of the Israeli company Trucknet Enterprises in the Israeli port of Eilat. The organization's allies also include the Al-Mukhtar Brigade and the Waad Allah Brigade, which could be among other terrorist organizations attacking Israel and the US.<sup>xxv</sup>



Israel has recently launched attacks on the leadership of Hamas, where it managed to kill its leader Yahya Sinwar, Hezbollah, where the secretary general - Hasan Nasrallah died in an airstrike, and it also carried out attacks on the Houthis. After these actions, where Israel was able to eliminate the highest levels of political and military leadership of Hamas and Hezbollah the Axis of Resistance was significantly weakened.

Iran responded after these attacks by launching drones and ballistic missiles at Israel, which in a few cases were able to penetrate Israel's air defenses with the support of US-led allied forces. Three weeks later, Israel responded by airstrikes into Iranian airspace and disabling the radar of the S-300 air defense system in Isfahan. These airstrikes, which Israel organizes regularly after airstrikes as retaliatory steps by Iranian missile strikes.<sup>xxvi,xxvii</sup>

An important factor now is Iran's diplomatic successes. Since the attack on October 7, Iran has managed to get closer to Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, which has condemned Israel's air strike on Iran as a violation of Iranian sovereignty and international law. This could harm Israeli diplomacy and also isolate the state of Israel, which could be problematic for Israel given strikes on targets in southern Lebanon, which increase tensions with Hezbollah.<sup>xxviii</sup>

## Conclusion

The Iranian regime is tightening the rules for women and especially minorities, both ethnic and religious. The ongoing repression indicates that the Iranian regime is facing economic difficulties for two reasons: sanctions imposed by Western countries and a bureaucracy that keeps loyal Iranians, mainly majority Persians and Shiites, in high official positions. On the other hand, competent people are often victims of persecution.

When it comes to the suppression of Iranian opposition groups, the regime scored an important success in the field of foreign policy in the form of a border agreement with neighboring Iraq in March 2023. The stagnant economy was supposed to be revived by the newly elected President Pezeshkian, but he reversed his promises, nominating conservative ideologues for ministerial positions instead of moderate politicians.

Iran has recently been conducting an escalation policy with the regime's archenemy, Israel. Through the Axis of Resistance, in which many pro-Iranian proxy groups are located, it carries out rocket and drone attacks on Israel. Iran is also gradually expanding this Axis to include other members of this Axis and establishing diplomatic ties with other Arab countries, to isolate Israel on a political and diplomatic level.

<sup>i</sup> October sees record number of executions in Iran. (n.d.). *Iran International*. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202411034057>

<sup>ii</sup> Two years after Mahsa Amini's death in Iran, protest movement endures harsh persecution. (n.d.-b). *France24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240915-iran-two-years-after-mahsa-amini-persecution-and-defiance>

<sup>iii</sup> Iran pauses controversial new dress code law. (n.d.). *BBCNews*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0mv83m4z7vo>

<sup>iv</sup> Iran's regime has crushed anti-veil protests, but it has 'lost the battle' for credibility. (n.d.-b). *France24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20230912-iran-s-regime-has-crushed-protests-but-lost-the-battle-for-obligatory-hijab>

<sup>v</sup> Iran's economy keeps declining amid political uncertainty and popular discontent. (n.d.). *Stimson*. <https://www.stimson.org/2024/irans-economy-keeps-declining-amid-political-uncertainty-and-popular-discontent/>

<sup>vi</sup> Iran executes German-Iranian dissident. (n.d.). *BBCNews*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2yv8327g9o>

<sup>vii</sup> Iran's protest crackdown disproportionately targeting minorities: UN experts. (n.d.). *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1152846>

<sup>viii</sup> Minorities in Iran have been disproportionately impacted in ongoing crackdown to repress the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, UN Fact-Finding Mission says. (n.d.). *UN News*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/08/minorities-iran-have-been-disproportionally-impacted-ongoing-crackdown>

<sup>ix</sup> Iran: Brutal repression in Kurdistan capital. (n.d.). *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/21/iran-brutal-repression-kurdistan-capital>

<sup>x</sup> Iran attacks positions in northern Iraq targeting Kurdish groups. (n.d.). *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/21/iran-attacks-positions-in-northern-iraq-targeting-kurdish-groups>

<sup>xi</sup> Iraq and Iran sign deal to tighten border security. (n.d.). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-iran-sign-deal-tighten-border-security-2023-03-19/>

<sup>xii</sup> Iran's regime plays with fire in Baluchistan. (n.d.). *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/30/iran-protests-baluchistan-sunni-shiite-sectarian-tensions/>

<sup>xiii</sup> Baloch population scattered around the world. (n.d.). *The Balochistan Post*. <https://thebalochistanpost.net/2023/02/baloch-population-scattered-around-the-world/>

<sup>xiv</sup> Iran: Human rights abuses against the Baluchi minority. (n.d.). *Amnesty international*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mde131042007en.pdf>

<sup>xv</sup> Iran: New wave of brutal attacks against Baluchi protesters and worshippers. (n.d.). *Amnesty International*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/iran-new-wave-of-brutal-attacks-against-baluchi-protesters-and-worshippers/>

<sup>xvi</sup> Experts react: What's really going on with Pakistan and Iran exchanging attacks? (n.d.). *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-whats-really-going-on-with-pakistan-and-iran-exchanging-attacks/>

<sup>xvii</sup> "The Boot on my neck" Iranian authorities' crime of persecution against Baha'is in Iran. (n.d.). *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/04/01/boot-my-neck/iranian-authorities-crime-persecution-against-bahais-iran>

<sup>xviii</sup> Ebrahim Raisi: What we know about deadly Iran helicopter crash. (n.d.). *BBCNews*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4nnd23d505o>

<sup>xix</sup> Iran Presidential Election 2024 Updates: Pezeshkian, Jalili head to run-off. (n.d.). *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/6/29/iran-presidential-election-results-live-vote-count-under-way-a-tight-race>

<sup>xx</sup> Pezeshkian and his rival Jalili. (n.d.). (n.d.). <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2024/06/29/3/5055513.jpg?ts=1719684261912>

<sup>xxi</sup> Iran Election run-off 2024 results updates: Pezeshkian wins Presidency. (n.d.). *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/7/6/iran-presidential-election-run-off-2024-results-live>

<sup>xxii</sup> Pezeshkian's cabinet reflects Iran's institutional stagnation. (n.d.). *The Washington Institute*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pezeshkians-cabinet-reflects-irans-institutional-stagnation>

<sup>xxiii</sup> Iranian hardliners thwart move by Pezeshkian to shield Zarif as VP. (n.d.). *Amwaj*. <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/iranian-hardliners-thwart-move-by-pezeshkian-to-shield-zarif-as-vp>

<sup>xxiv</sup> What to know about the Axis of Resistance, the Iran-backed militia network. (n.d.). *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/axis-resistance-iran-militia.html>

<sup>xxv</sup> Iran's axis of resistance claims new front against Israel. (n.d.). *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/irans-axis-resistance-claims-new-front-against-israel-1896718>

<sup>xxvi</sup> What to know about the Axis of Resistance, the Iran-backed militia network. (n.d.). *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/axis-resistance-iran-militia.html>

<sup>xxvii</sup> Why has Israel attacked Iran? (n.d.). *BBCNews*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68811276>

<sup>xxviii</sup> Iran plays down Israel's strikes, says they caused "limited damage." (n.d.). *Reuters*. [https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/explosions-heard-iran-syria-middle-east-braces-israeli-retaliation-2024-10-25/?utm\\_source=Sailthru&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=Weekend-Briefing&utm\\_term=102624&user\\_email=77e7d865fecf5914484cdaf890510d77bb1b7f32449b3cfa0617f6e6894d1b1e&lctg=643bb2daa9b99fb00402637a](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/explosions-heard-iran-syria-middle-east-braces-israeli-retaliation-2024-10-25/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_campaign=Weekend-Briefing&utm_term=102624&user_email=77e7d865fecf5914484cdaf890510d77bb1b7f32449b3cfa0617f6e6894d1b1e&lctg=643bb2daa9b99fb00402637a)