

A Regime Unveiled Social and Ethno-Sectarian Tensions and Democratic Evolution in Iran

by Walter Posch

ABSTRACT

Since mid-September 2022 Iran has faced a wave of countrywide protests from Iranians throughout the society. Protesters demand justice against police violence and an end to discrimination of women, Sunnis and ethnic groups. The protests are home-grown and spontaneous and show no sign to abate. They are neither centrally directed nor is there a clear leadership structure, as was the case with the so-called “Green Movement” in 2009. The clerical regime is left with two equally problematic choices. A brutal clamp-down would risk transforming the protests into ethno-sectarian strife, which would stymie the country for a generation. Alternatively, the Islamic Republic’s leadership could give in and start a political reform process which however would go against the interests and identity of its core followers. Assuming the regime brings the current protests to heel, it will still face the same in the future, and it is anything but certain it can endure an endless cycle of political unrest.

Iran | Society | Women | Opposition | Domestic policy

keywords

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by Walter Posch*

Introduction

The suspicious death of 22-year-old Mahsa Zhina Amini, an Iranian woman of Kurdish-Sunni extraction, has once again laid bare the very nature of the Islamic Republic: a galling disrespect for its citizens and civic rights. Amini passed away on 16 September 2022, ever since protests are ongoing throughout Iran demanding. Even if the official version was correct, according to which Amini passed away due to a heart attack in police custody, it does not exonerate Iranian security forces. The ensuing protests reveal the big distrust of Iran's population towards its security forces and are part of a row of similar civic protests erupting in the Islamic Republic regularly ever since the regime brutally suppressed the 1999 student unrest. Until now, the regime has been able to deal with situations like this by using a combination of brute force, manipulation and intimidation. It may well continue to do so in the future, although of the price paid is that of losing credibility and political legitimacy. Given current events and special circumstances, the regime may well reach a decisive moment anytime.

1. Countrywide protests and solidarity

Mahsa Zhina Amini's death was the stroke that broke the camel's back. The protests started in Tehran and spread throughout the country, from Sanandaj, Amini's hometown in the Kurdish northwest of the country, to Zahedan in Baluchistan close to the Pakistani border, from Mashhad in the northeast, to Sari on the Caspian Sea, and from there down to the Persian Gulf region. The main drivers of the protests were young women. Only in Tehran, hoodlums and associates of banned political underground organisations joined the mix. The better part of the dramatic pictures of destroyed public good in the initial phase was their responsibility. However, these groups mysteriously disappeared when the authorities realised that their narrative of accusing criminals and foreign agents fomenting unrest failed to convince the public as protests did not abate but continued loudly and peacefully.

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Iranian women cut their hair publicly in protest in a gesture soon to be emulated in solidarity by women worldwide.

Protests decreased a little towards the end of September, when security forces detained activists and anyone suspicious of organising the protests. Alas, the relative calm changed to a storm for several reasons. First, the security forces detained, tortured, raped and killed juvenile protesters. Intended as an intimidation and stern warning for the young female protesters, it achieved the opposite, as solidarity grew nationwide. Secondly, the harsh and incompetent handling of moderate protests in Zahedan and other Baluch cities as well as in Kurdistan, which enraged the local population. Third, the opening of the universities added women- and manpower to the ongoing protest movement. Contrary to previous protests, there is no coordination council or benign "reformist" or "moderate Islamist" politician of long standing to represent a movement.

This means on the practical level that infiltration and manipulation of a movement is impossible, because there is no organisation, hence measures taken by the security apparatus are ineffective. Secondly and more importantly, it means that protesters formulate their demands free from the reformists' political rhetoric and thus are free of their well-known roots in the regime. Throughout the country, people understood the connectedness of their struggle, namely the wish for a responsive and responsible government respecting civil rights. Thus, contrary to previous protests, we see a wave of unified solidarity comprising women and men from all walks of life, and not a regionally or socially segmented one. As a consequence, usual attempts of the regime (actually of any Iranian regime) to divide the protesters along political, social and ethno-sectarian lines have failed.

2. (De-) moralising ideology

Amini's death once again reveals the misogynist nature of the regime's security services and their so-called "morality police" (*gasht-e ershad*), who detained the young women because of her "improper" headscarf; a violation of the law because the Islamic Republic forces women to wear "proper" Islamic garments for ideological reasons. Activists of the Islamic revolution, such as Zahra Rahnavaard, the wife of former presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, may or may not have believed in the "liberating" nature of the *hijab* when she helped to impose it ruthlessly anyway,¹ temporary easing of the rules in later years notwithstanding.

For Islamists of all brands the headscarf is part of an ideological control mechanism based on the concept of "ordering the good and prohibiting the bad" (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-n-nahy 'ani-l-munkar*), which aspires to totalitarian control of the

¹ See the translation of her seminal speech which she held on 5 January 1986: Zahra Rahnavaard, *The Beauty of Concealment and Concealment of Beauty*, Address at the seminar for studying hijab, 5 January 1986, <https://www.al-islam.org/node/38096>.

society. In everyday policing, this Islamic principle originally intended to guide public morality enables the regime to gauge the degree of ideological submission of the population.

In itself, the headscarf would not be the biggest problem for Iranian women as many of them follow Islamic or traditional rules voluntarily. The problem is the lack of choice: women want to decide whether or not to wear the headscarf and they do not want to be harassed by the “morality police” any longer. Thus, the headscarf points to yet another problem: the role of brutal enforcers of said rules. The police are less a problem than zealous volunteers recruited usually from the Basij-militias, who call themselves the *hezbollahis*, the “party of God”.²

They have deep roots in Iran’s Islamist movement as their policies, slogans and methods are almost one-to-one copies of the Fedayan-e Eslam, a brutal terror organisation of the 1940s and 1950s that left an incredibly strong impact on the Islamic Republic, especially parts of its security services. The importance of the morality police has increased under President Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi, who hails from said milieu. So quite naturally, when faced with pressure from the over-zealous and politically well-connected *hezbollahis* operating the so-called “morality patrols” and demands from the population and female citizens, the police choose the former over the latter, hoping nothing too bad would happen – until it happens.

3. The sectarian angle

This brings us to a next point, the confessional character of the Islamic Republic. Mahsa Zhina Amini was a Sunni Kurd and the regime, regardless of its pan-Islamic brotherly rhetoric, shares the bigotry that is common to many other countries in the region, where adherence to another confession is widely regarded as a security risk. Iranian security agencies accused Sunni organisations occasionally of collusion with enemy countries in the past. Some Sunni countries have indeed supported radical Sunni factions inside Iran, mostly in retaliation of Iranian attempts to politicise the Arab Shia. Besides, during the Iran-Iraq war either side has tried to play the Kurdish opposition in the other country.

The securitisation of confessional and ethnic identity has practical consequences, because there are hardly any Sunnis employed in Iran’s security forces and therefore the possibility of intervention in favour of detained relatives and in-laws is nil. Shiite Iranians do usually have someone placed in the higher echelons of Iran’s security apparatus. This is due to confessional reasons but also to sheer

² See Walter Posch, “Iran’s Hezbollah: A Radical and Decisive Political Current”, in David Jalilvand and Achim Vogt (eds), *Radicalization during the Rouhani Years. Iran’s Political Shifts and their Implications*, Berlin/Beirut, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, March 2021, p. 15-22, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/17699.pdf>.

mathematics, since Iran's public sector and within that, the security machinery, is the biggest employer in the country.

The Islamic Republic therefore effectively bars almost a third of the population, namely the Sunnis, from access to positions in the security system and therefore denies them the possibility to intervene. This explains why most Sunnis are convinced that after the 2009 crackdown on the so-called "Green Movement" more fellow Sunnis than Shiites have been executed. After all, Iranian Sunnis experience systemic discrimination due to the Shite nature of the regime.

4. Kurds and Baluchis

This brings us to a final point: the ethnic question.³ Iran is a traditional multi-ethnic society, bearing more resemblances to an empire than a "modern" monolingual nation state. In fact, one of the strongest traits of Iranian society and state is its pride in the linguistic facets and ethnic diversity of the country. This said, in spite of some positive recognition of Iran's multi-ethnic nature in the constitution, and the personal interest Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei takes in the topic, many issues remain unresolved.

An attempt to address Iran's ethnic question in the framework of citizen rights was made during the Hassan Rouhani presidency (2013–2021) but went nowhere. Questions of language instruction, devolution of power to the provinces, of the state of Iran's many minorities and their cross-border relations have created problems for both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic.

There are differences though. Some minorities barely view themselves as minorities, and others have a tradition of self-confidence, self-governance and even the aspiration of statehood. This is the case with Iran's Kurds,⁴ but not only them. Kurds worldwide are infuriated because of the death of the young women and read this case as further proof Iran's discrimination of the Kurds as second-class citizens. Thus, protests erupted in Saqez and Sanandaj, the region Amini's extended family hails from. From the viewpoint of the army, the easiest way to deal with it was to shell a communist Kurdish-Iranian group's hideout in Iraqi Kurdistan. The military's logic was twofold: by going after a loud and vociferous but otherwise not so important group they hoped to warn the Kurds in and outside Iran without going for an all-out confrontation with Iran's Kurdish citizens. This

³ The Iranians are well aware of their ethnic diversity, an excellent overview together with a very useful political interpretation is from Seyed Reza Salehi-Amiri, *Modiriyat-e monâze'ât-e qoumi dar Irân* [Ethnic conflict management in Iran], 2nd ed., Tehran, Center for Strategic Research, 2012; for western readers we advise Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran. Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

⁴ See Walter Posch, "Fellow Arians and Muslim Brothers. Iranian Narratives on the Kurds", in Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (eds), *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 331-352.

may have had some success under different circumstances. However, this time the town of Sanandaj was already embittered because they felt humiliated in their Sunni identity due to Shiite propaganda in the previous summer⁵ on one hand, and for the simple reason of having had enough of the systemic discrimination on the other.

This may have political consequences on the regional level for Iran. Because in the long-run the Islamic Republic will find it harder to find accomplices among Kurdish political leaders, at least once the current leadership in the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP, Iraq's main Kurdish political force) passes away or retires from politics. The same holds true for the PKK, the Kurdish autonomist movement of Turkey, where the aging and detached leadership in Qandil-mountains, still sticks to suicide attacks,⁶ whilst democratically elected leaders like Selahettin Demirtaş understood and embraced the civil rights aspect of the protests in Iran and had his head shaved in solidarity with the slain women of Iran. It is cases like that of Amini that politicise and shape the views of the younger generation of Kurds outside of Iran too, who care deeply about civil and civic rights and oppose the political alliances made by their representatives in Qandil or Erbil with the authorities in Tehran.

The Kurdish Sunni ulema of Sanandaj have a longstanding friendly relationship with their counterparts in Zahedan, Baluchistan and Sistan province. During the last elections, maulana Abdolhamid Ismailzahi,⁷ who runs a famous theological school, the Darolfonun in Zahedan, took the unusual decision to support Raisi's presidential candidacy. Although the Kurdish criticised him for this decision, it made perfect sense, given the fact that previous support for the reformists did not yield any results. Maulana Abdolhamid helped the Iranian authorities in their dealings with the Taliban. He also propagates tolerance and brotherhood among Sunnis and Shias, a rather unusual thread for a Salafist. President Raisi would not or could not honour his efforts and live up to his end of the bargain regarding discriminatory policies against Iran's Sunni community (or communities). Thus, Abdolhamid was the first to send a condolence message to the family of deceased Mahsa Zhina Amini and he was most certainly the first to grasp the full political dimension of this case.

⁵ See the angry protest of Kak Hassan Amini, the mufti of Sanandaj, from 18 July 2022: *Congratulatory Banners of the so-called Eid-e-Ghadir* [in Farsi], <https://haalvsh.org/?p=7141>.

⁶ Most recently one was conducted by two women on 29 September 2022 in Mersin.

⁷ Maulana Abdolhamid Ismailzahi is a renowned Muslim scholar who together with other Iranian Sunni ulema revitalised Sunni Islamic jurisprudence in the Persian language. His influence goes far beyond Iran into Central Asia and Afghanistan for instance. At the same time he is the leader of Iran's Baluchis. The authorities harassed him with travel bans and house arrest but ultimately had to come to terms with him. He runs an internet site in English, Persian and Arabic as well as a Telegram channel. See his website at <http://abdolhamid.net>.

A few weeks before the Amini case, when an Iranian officer raped and killed a Baluchi girl in Chah Bahar,⁸ public security was maintained only thanks to Abdolhamid's efforts. Whence knowledge of the case of the unfortunate Amini spread to Baluchistan, it re-ignited local anger against the security forces. In a series of Friday sermons, Abdolhamid threw the gauntlet. First he insisted on a fair inquiry on the circumstances of the rape and murder of the Baluchi girl, warned the authorities that they cannot run the country by force and complained about the marginalisation of Baluchis because of their Sunni confession. He reiterated similar points on the Friday 30 September, the day when after prayer the community in Zahedan was attacked, leaving about 50 casualties behind, most of them shot in the head and in the heart.⁹

The use of life bullets instead of tear gas and other non-lethal means on behalf of Iran's security forces, who allegedly wanted to stop some juvenile protesters, gives vivid testimony to the disregard of Baluchi life and hints at a general Persian supremacist attitude within the security apparatus. How serious the situation in Baluchistan already is became clear when Abdolhamid sent a message to Tehran telling them that the masses, tribal elders and Islamic scholars, all of them demand a fair and impartial inquiry of the grave human rights violations against the Baluchis. He also called the victims *shahid*, Islamic martyrs, hence the perpetrators must be un-Islamic and advised the government that given the fact that insecurity and risk for life and limb of the Baluchi population comes from the security forces, the Baluchis prefer to maintain security in Baluchistan all by themselves, as they clearly are capable of.

Thus, in order to overcome the crisis, the Islamic Republic's security apparatus has to become answerable to the people's demands.

5. Outlook

One of the most striking details in the current crisis is the role of the security apparatus.¹⁰ Contrary to expectations President Raisi did not call on the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) to deal with unrest but to the regular army, the

⁸ Abdolhamid commented on several occasions on the rape of the Baluchi girl, so on 24 September 2022 (*Governing by Military Force, Wrong Policy*, <https://abdolhamid.net/english/?p=2733>); on 25 September 2022 (*Education, Base of Development and Progress*, <https://abdolhamid.net/english/?p=2735>); on 2 October 2022 (*Peaceful Rallies, Due Right of People*, <https://abdolhamid.net/english/?p=2749>); on 3 October 2022 (*Security Forces Killed Dozens of Worshipers in Zahedan*, <https://abdolhamid.net/english/?p=2751>); and on 8 October 2022 (*Officials Must Pursue the Incident Impartially & Fairly*, <https://abdolhamid.net/english/?p=2753>).

⁹ See Abdolhamid Ismailzahi, *Peaceful Rallies, Due Right of People*, cit.; and *Security Forces Killed Dozens of Worshipers in Zahedan*, cit.

¹⁰ On Iran's security apparatus see Walter Posch, "L'Iran in armi", in *Limes*, August 2018, p. 53-61 originally published in German: "Der Sicherheitsapparat der Islamischen Republik Iran", in Ludwig Paul (ed.), *Handbuch der Iranistik*, Vol. 2, Wiesbaden, Reichert Verlag, 2017, p. 148-159.

Artesh. This is an unusual step because the army has actually no role in domestic security. There might be good reasons for the president to do so. First, he hails from the network of the pious foundation in Mashhad, an economic competitor of the IRGC, which may explain a certain coolness towards the IRGC. Secondly the IRGC could not prevent the 2009 unrests, and thirdly their attempt to control all security institutions of the country plus their economic interests caused resistance of other institutions, notably the army and the Intelligence Ministry (VAJA).¹¹ One has to see the IRGC's ongoing reform against this backdrop.¹² Compared to previous crises the Guards not only play a secondary role but have become also the reason for insecurity and escalation, as the situation in Baluchistan indicates. The whole security apparatus seems to be stymied. And there seems to be awareness about the gravity of the situation. A realistic assessment concerning the impossibility to go for a Tiananmen-style "solution" comes from the Supreme Leader himself. He bemoaned the death of Mahsa Zhina Amini in front of the decree ceremony at one of the military academies. In other words: he warned the *basijis* not to take the (Islamic) law into their own hands. This said, the risk of such a scenario remains high.

As of now, the regime has few options left. It could go for an all-out confrontation and purge the ranks in the security apparatus of potential sympathisers with the protesters afterwards. Logical as this looks, it overlooks the factor of institutional competition within the security apparatus. It is also a guarantee for armed ethnic and sectarian unrest starting in Baluchistan and Kurdistan, with complicated international intransigencies and the potential to lead to a Balkan scenario for Iran. Furthermore, the security apparatus is victim to its own success: there is hardly any noteworthy opposition left, at least not an organised one, and declaring all unveiled women and schoolgirls security threats is after more than 40 years of the Islamic Republic is a hard sell, not only to the broader public but to its own followers too. A brutal attack on unveiled women and girls would prove politically useless as the genie is already out of the box and regular police forces restrain themselves (after all, at least some the protesting teenage girls must be nieces or daughters of Ayatollahs or IRGC generals). The only ones who would be willing and able to crack down brutally on the civil society are vigilantes mostly consisting of war veterans who are now in their late 1950s and cannot play the same role as in 2009. The same goes for two well-trained volunteer militias deployed to the battlefields in Syria.

Another scenario could be evolution. This would ultimately have to start with dealing with Amini's and all the other young ladies' death and brings us back to the headscarf. No one made this clearer than former president Mahmud Ahmadinejad,

¹¹ VAJA – for *Vezerat-e Ettela'at-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, or Intelligence Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The ministry's website (www.vaja.ir) included valuable information like declarations and information on current affairs but seems to be offline for a while now. Western sources call it incorrectly MOIS.

¹² Not much is known about these reforms but as a first step between 2009 and 2015 the fifteen military divisions were disbanded and units became attached to the provincial governorates. See Walter Posch, "L'Iran in armi", cit., p. 59 and the literature quoted there.

who boldly declared to be personally in favour for the *hijab* – just like a clear majority of Iranians is – but also added that it should not be forced upon women!¹³ To the best of our knowledge reformist politicians have been shy on this point. In any case, it shows that within the regime, a cost-benefit analysis of maintaining the *hijab* has shown its unsustainability. Therefore, there is simply no other way out of the current crisis than giving up the compulsory headscarf and the morality police as well as a thorough legal inquiry regarding the victims of police violence throughout Iran and opening the security forces to Sunnis. Whatever may come after this step will be part of a nonviolent political peaceful process within the Iranian system. However, once the political violence is out of the political equation, the system will already have changed. As transformation is unavoidable anyhow, it may as well be a peaceful evolution.

For the EU this means to focus on its relations with the Iranian state. It already served the Iranian public by restraining from pathetic demarches and declarations and thus destroyed the regime's main narrative according to which the EU is peculiar and the West in general are responsible for the unrests. By focussing on negotiating the reactivation of the nuclear deal of 2015, the EU would also support the main narrative within the Iranian society, which felt betrayed by the US quitting the nuclear deal and wants Iran to be treated as a serious power in the region.

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¹³ See the interview with him, dated 1 October 2022: "Ahmadinejad's First Reaction about Mahsa Amini's Death" [in Farsi], in *Mardomsalari Online*, <https://www.mardomsalari.ir/video/175920>.

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