

January 14, 2026

Protests in Iran: Possible U.S. Responses and Issues for Congress

Since late December 2025, nationwide protests have swept Iran, prompting a government crackdown and raising new questions about the stability of Iran's authoritarian government, a longtime U.S. adversary. President Donald Trump has said he is considering intervening to "rescue" protestors. Congress could consider for example: authorizing or restricting U.S. military action; overseeing potential Administration negotiations with Iran and reviewing any resulting agreement, including on Iran's nuclear program; sanctions; and foreign assistance aimed at expanding internet access in Iran. Congress also could assess whether outside intervention would strengthen or weaken the Iranian government or cause other unintended consequences.

2025-2026 Protests: Status and Context

The current wave of protests began on December 28, 2025, with merchants in Tehran's central bazaar closing shops to protest the collapse of Iran's currency (rial), which lost roughly half its value in 2025. Economic discontent among Iran's merchant class, previously viewed as supportive of the Islamic Republic, was quickly mirrored across a wider set of the population, with broader protests subsequently breaking out in cities throughout all of Iran's 31 provinces.

Figure 1. Anti-Government Protest in Tehran



Source: Associated Press, January 9, 2026.

After some initial conciliatory rhetoric, the government has turned to repression under cover of an information blackout; even so-called moderates have backed the crackdown against what the regime characterizes as a U.S.- and Israeli-backed plot. Following a call from exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi (more below) for protests to take place on January 8-9, the Iranian government throttled communication channels, blocking phone and internet access and reportedly using military assets to jam signals

from the 40,000-50,000 illicit Starlink terminals in the country. One U.S.-based human rights group has reported over 18,000 arrests and 2,400 protesters (as well as 147 security forces) killed as of January 13; other sources have claimed casualty figures of 6,000 or more. This "unprecedented" crackdown "may be discouraging protesters and decreasing the rate of protest activity," according to one January 13 analysis.

Current Unrest Differs from Earlier Instances

Major nationwide unrest swept Iran several other times in the past decade, including in 2017-2018 (about economic conditions and water scarcity), 2019 (in response to increased fuel prices), and 2022-2023 (the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini). Some characteristics appear to differentiate the current unrest from these previous episodes, including:

Fewer Iranian government options. In past rounds of protest, the Iranian government responded with overwhelming violence by state security forces, but also some limited policy modifications. For example, since the 2022-2023 protests, some reports indicate increasing defiance of the country's compulsory hijab (or religious head covering) law; implementation of a December 2023 law to increase punishments for violations of the country's dress code was halted in 2024. Given the depth of Iran's economic disfunction in 2025-2026, and many protesters calling for the end of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's rule and the Islamic Republic itself, the government appears to have fewer options to respond to grievances than in the past. The January 5 Iranian government announcement of monthly payments that amounting to around \$7 may have been an indicator of the government's financial weakness.

Iran's weakened regional position. Beyond Iran's escalating financial crisis, recent military setbacks have left Iran in one of its weakest strategic positions since the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic. In 2024, Iran suffered the loss of air defense and missile production capabilities in two rounds of direct conflict with Israel; regional allies built up through decades of Iranian investment were weakened (Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah) or collapsed entirely (the Assad regime in Syria). Iran's strategic capabilities were further degraded during the June 2025 12-Day War with Israel, when U.S. airstrikes "severely damaged" Iranian nuclear sites. In the wake of these losses, Iranian leaders and protesters alike may view protests and the possibility of foreign intervention as more concrete threats to the system than in the past.

President Trump's stated intention to "rescue" protesters. While U.S. officials during past episodes of

unrest praised Iranian protesters and criticized Iranian government crackdowns, President Trump's January 2 pronouncement on social media went further: "If Iran shots [sic] and violently kills peaceful protesters ... the United States will come to their rescue. We are locked and loaded and ready to go."

This statement, combined with the United States' use of force in Iran in 2025 and Venezuela in 2026 and subsequent statements from President Trump (including that "HELP IS ON ITS WAY"), could influence the thinking or actions of protesters, security forces, or government officials in Iran. It is unclear whether or how U.S. military intervention could constrain the repressive capabilities of Islamic Republic's large and ideologically-motivated security forces. Two analysts argue that "American strikes could tip the balance" in favor of protesters, but also caution that "the regime could triumph even if Mr. Trump bombs the country."

January 2, 2026: "If Iran shots and violently kills peaceful protesters, which is their custom, the United States of America will come to their rescue. We are locked and loaded and ready to go. Thank you for your attention to this matter! President DONALD J. TRUMP"

January 13, 2026: "Iranian Patriots, KEEP PROTESTING – TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS!!! Save the names of the killers and abusers. They will pay a big price. I have cancelled all meetings with Iranian Officials until the senseless killing of protesters STOPS. HELP IS ON ITS WAY. MIGA!!! PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP"

The current protest movement, like previous episodes over the past decade, appears to lack unified organization or leadership. As the representative of the royal family deposed by Iran's 1979 revolution, the Crown Prince has asserted a more prominent role in 2025-2026; President Trump described him as a "nice person" but suggested it wouldn't be "appropriate" to meet with him and that "we should let everybody go out there and we see who emerges." Some sources indicate the protesters come from a wide swath of Iranian society.

Possible U.S. Responses, Future Scenarios, and Implications for Congress

President Trump has reportedly been briefed on various kinetic and non-kinetic options for U.S. action. As U.S. officials debate end goals and courses of action, some potential scenarios include:

U.S.-Iran negotiations. President Trump said on January 11 that "a meeting is being set up" after "Iran called" to negotiate; Iran's foreign minister confirmed he reached out to a U.S. counterpart to begin discussions. Iranian leaders could be pursuing talks to buy time, or could assess that a new agreement including concessions on the country's nuclear program would reduce the probability of U.S. military action and possibly lead to economic benefits.

President Trump wrote on January 13 that he had "cancelled all meetings" with Iranian officials until "the senseless killing of protesters STOPS."

Regime change. Congress has not authorized the use of force in Iran, whether in connection with protests or otherwise. President Trump's December 2025 National Security Strategy argues, "We should encourage and applaud reform [in the Middle East] when and where it emerges organically, without trying to impose it from without." The Strategy refers to Iran as "the region's chief destabilizing force" but also as "greatly weakened." That perceived weakness, exacerbated by economic and military setbacks, could be cited by proponents of U.S. action to change Iran's government.

Based on open-source information, at this time there do not appear to have been widespread defections from within Iran's military, security forces, or political elite. This could constrain both the protesters' odds of success as well as the potential insiders with whom the United States could work to secure changes in government policy or personnel. Moreover, Iran's security forces appear to have strong economic interests in the current system. In 2012, the U.S. Department of the Treasury described the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as "Iran's most powerful economic actor."

Iranian officials have vowed to target Israel and U.S. military forces in the event of a U.S. strike. Extended military operations in a large and diverse country like Iran could impose costs, including humanitarian costs in the event that displacement follows a regime change, a protracted period of civil unrest, or both. Some governments that are U.S. partners in the region have reportedly cautioned privately against military action, citing concerns that Iran could retaliate by disrupting oil transiting through the Strait of Hormuz.

Economic pressure. President Trump posted on social media on January 12 that "any Country doing business with [Iran] will pay a Tariff of 25% on any and all business being done with the United States of America." Implementation details had not been released as of January 13. While the United States maintains comprehensive sanctions on many sectors of Iran's economy, other countries have relatively normal economic relations with Iran; significant U.S. trading partners and/or allies (such as Germany, China, India, and Turkey) are among Iran's top import/export partners.

Congress could consider legislative and oversight actions related to the use of military force, U.S. diplomacy and diplomatic agreements, sanctions, and foreign assistance. Congressional reactions to events in Iran and possible U.S. action have included expressions of solidarity with protesters; a call for the United States to "kill the leadership;" support for actions to protect protesters; and skepticism about the efficacy of U.S. military action to support protests.

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