

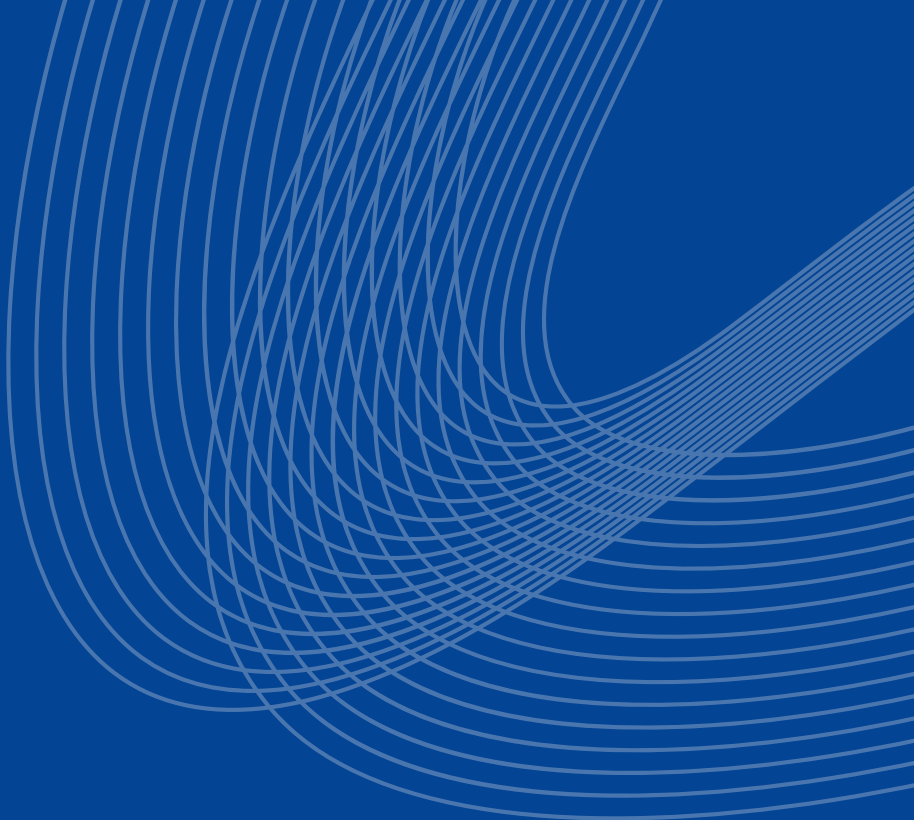


**CYRUS THE GREAT  
INSTITUTE**

# **THE 2025-2026 IRAN PROTESTS**

**STRUCTURAL DRIVERS, PROTEST DEMANDS,  
AND REGIME REPRESSION**





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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>01</b>	Abstract
<b>02</b>	Introduction
<b>03</b>	Timeline and Triggering Events
<b>04</b>	Underlying Structural Drivers
<b>06</b>	Geographic Origins and Spread
<b>07</b>	Composition and Demands
<b>08</b>	Regime Response
<b>09</b>	Implications and Outcome
<b>10</b>	Conclusions

# ABSTRACT

This report provides an analytical overview of the nationwide protest movement that emerged in Iran in December 2025. It examines the protests' timing, initial triggers, underlying structural drivers, geographic spread, social composition, articulated demands, and the response of state authorities. The immediate catalyst for the protests was a sharp economic shock marked by the collapse of the Iranian rial to historically unprecedented levels, intensifying long-standing concerns over inflation, unemployment, declining purchasing power, and widespread poverty. Beyond this trigger, the report situates the protests within a broader context of entrenched economic deprivation, authoritarian governance, pervasive social control, political repression, ideological rule, and environmental degradation.

The protests originated in Tehran and rapidly expanded nationwide, with documented activity across 222 locations in 78 cities and 26 provinces within eight days, indicating a sustained and geographically diffuse mobilization rather than a localized or sector-specific movement. Participation has spanned multiple social groups, including shopkeepers, students, women, workers, and younger generations. Despite this diversity, protest demands have converged around explicit rejection of the Islamic Republic as a governing system and calls for regime change rather than reform, including open expressions of support for monarchical restoration and Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi.

State responses have followed established patterns of repression, including mass arrests, use of force, reported fatalities, and restrictions on communication. The report concludes that the protests reflect the cumulative impact of long-standing structural grievances and represent a further consolidation of a post-2017 trajectory in which reformist expectations have largely been abandoned, signalling a deepening crisis in regime-society relations and continued domestic volatility.



# INTRODUCTION

This report offers a concise analytical overview of the nationwide protest movement that emerged in Iran in December 2025. Its purpose is to outline the timing, origins, underlying drivers, geographic scope, and key characteristics of the protests, as well as the responses of regime authorities and the principal demands articulated by participants. It is intended to serve as a factual and contextual reference for reporters, policymakers, and scholars seeking a brief and structured account of these developments.



# TIMELINE AND TRIGGERING EVENTS

The protests began on 28 December 2025 and were initially triggered by a sharp deterioration in Iran's economic conditions, most visibly reflected in the collapse of the national currency. On that date, the Iranian rial reached a record low against the US dollar, with exchange rates exceeding 1,450,000 rials (= 145,000 toman) per dollar, marking an unprecedented level of depreciation. This development intensified public concern over declining purchasing power, rising living costs, and economic insecurity.

The currency crisis occurred against a backdrop of prolonged structural economic pressures, including high unemployment, persistent inflation, and widespread poverty. The scale of the rial's decline is particularly striking when viewed in historical perspective: prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, one US dollar was valued at approximately 70 rials, underscoring the magnitude of long-term monetary erosion.





# UNDERLYING STRUCTURAL DRIVERS

Beyond immediate economic shocks, the protests are rooted in a constellation of long-standing structural drivers, including economic deprivation, authoritarian institutions, ideological governance, pervasive social control, and environmental degradation. While the sharp depreciation of the national currency served as the immediate catalyst for the current protests, economic hardship alone does not fully explain their scale, persistence, or political character.

Economically, sustained inflation, high unemployment, and declining purchasing power have contributed to widespread hardship. Analysts have argued that prolonged poverty and economic dependency have weakened social resilience and constrained opportunities for upward mobility. Over time, economic deprivation has functioned not only as a condition of hardship but also as a mechanism that limits political organization and reduces the capacity for sustained opposition by keeping large segments of the population economically vulnerable.

Socially, the regime exercises extensive regulatory authority over private and public life, reflecting characteristics commonly associated with totalitarian systems. Legal and informal mechanisms govern personal conduct, including dress codes, gender relations, cultural expression, and social activities. This pervasive regulation of everyday life has generated recurring tensions, particularly among younger generations and women, for whom restrictions on personal autonomy are experienced as intrusive and coercive.

Politically, dissent has been met with systematic repression. Protest movements and opposition activities have historically faced arrest campaigns, long sentences, torture, sexual violence in detention, disappearances, assassinations and executions. In nationwide protests in November 2019, security forces killed over 1,500 protesters; protests following Mahsa Amini's 2022 death killed over 500 demonstrators.

Foreign and regional policies have also influenced public sentiment. The Islamic regime's ideological and strategic engagements beyond its borders, including the recent war with Israel, have drawn widespread criticism that reflects not only economic concerns but also moral and humanitarian objections to militarization and regional destabilization. Public opposition has emphasized a preference for peaceful relations with neighboring states, greater international cooperation, and a foreign policy oriented toward regional coexistence and stability. In this context, state support for non-state armed actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah has been viewed as reinforcing regional conflicts and international isolation.

Additional sources of grievance include religious discrimination, as well as concern over environmental degradation. Water shortage, mismanagement of natural resources, and environmental decline have increasingly affected livelihoods, particularly in rural and peripheral regions. Corruption and large-scale development projects have further exacerbated ecological stress, transforming environmental issues into politically salient concerns.

In sum, while individual motivations for participation in the protests vary and immediate triggers differ across protest cycles, a broad convergence of grievances has centered on dissatisfaction with the governing system itself. For the participants, the protests reflect not a demand for reform but a fundamental rejection of existing political, social, and economic arrangements. Within protest discourse, slogans, and public statements, this rejection has increasingly been articulated as a demand for revolutionary change and the overthrow of the existing Islamic regime, rather than its reform.



# GEOGRAPHIC ORIGINS AND SPREAD

The protests originated in the capital, Tehran, where shopkeepers at the Grand Bazaar initially closed their businesses and mobilized in public spaces to protest worsening economic conditions, particularly the sharp depreciation of the national currency against the US dollar and persistently high inflation. These early demonstrations were primarily economic in character; however, they rapidly expanded as broader segments of the population joined, and protest slogans increasingly targeted the political system as a whole.

On the same day, protests extended beyond the capital and continued to expand geographically in the days that followed. Within eight days of their onset, protest activity had been documented at 222 distinct sites nationwide, spanning 78 urban centers across 26 provinces, including the cities of Ahvaz, Amol, Arak, Bandar Abbas, Hamedan, Ilam, Isfahan, Karaj, Kerman, Kermanshah, Lahijan, Mashhad, Qazvin, Qeshm, Rasht, Shiraz, Tabriz and Yazd.

The speed and breadth of this expansion indicate a nationwide protest dynamic rather than a localized or sector-specific mobilization. In terms of geographic reach and intensity, the current protests represent the most significant wave of nationwide unrest since the protest movement following the killing of Mahsa Amini in 2022.



## COMPOSITION AND DEMANDS

The protest movement has drawn participation from a broad cross-section of Iranian society. While initial demonstrations were led by shopkeepers, the protests quickly expanded to include students, members of Generation Z, women, workers and other social groups. As noted above, individual motivations for participation vary; however, the convergence of diverse grievances has enabled the protests to mobilize participants across socioeconomic, generational, and professional lines.

Despite this diversity, protest demands have exhibited a high degree of political convergence. Central among these is the rejection of the Islamic Republic as a governing system, with demonstrators increasingly articulating demands for regime change rather than reform. This position has been reflected in widely reported protest slogans such as “death to the Islamic Republic,” “death to the dictator,” and “death to Ali Khamenei,” alongside affirmative slogans expressing support for monarchical restoration (see 1, 2, 3), including references to the return of the Pahlavi dynasty and explicit endorsement of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi: “Javid Shah” (Long Live the King), “This is the national slogan: Reza Pahlavi”, “Shah of Iran – return to Iran” and “This is the final battle – Pahlavi will return”.

Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Shah of Iran, HIM Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was deposed during the 1979 revolution, has emerged as a focal point of opposition sentiment within the protest discourse. Residing in the United States, he is widely regarded by Iranians as a legitimate national figurehead and has attracted expressions of support across diverse social and political groups, including republicans and socialists.



## REGIME RESPONSE

State authorities responded rapidly to the outbreak of protests by deploying security forces across major urban centers. Reports indicate widespread arrests in multiple cities, alongside the use of crowd-control measures such as tear gas, water cannons, and physical force, including batons and rubber bullets, against demonstrators. There have also been reports of the use of live ammunition in some instances, with security forces estimated to have killed at least twenty protesters by the eighth day of demonstrations, with fatalities continuing to increase.

Historically, the regime's response to protest movements in Iran has followed a discernible pattern. During the first few days of mobilization, authorities have often tolerated limited protest activity while intensifying surveillance and identifying organizers, prominent participants, and informal leaders within protest crowds. This initial phase has frequently been followed by a more forceful period of repression, including mass arrests, harsh sentencing, torture, and executions. As part of this escalation, authorities have repeatedly imposed internet shutdowns and severe restrictions on digital communication, measures that obscure security force actions, impede documentation, and facilitate the use of lethal violence away from public scrutiny. Based on this established pattern, both the death toll and the scale of arrests are widely expected to increase as the protests persist and repression intensifies.



# IMPLICATIONS AND OUTCOME

Since the nationwide protests of 2017–2018, the Islamic Republic has experienced recurring waves of mass mobilization on an almost annual basis. That protest cycle marked a turning point as demands increasingly shifted from reform to explicit calls for regime overthrow. Subsequent protest waves reinforced this trajectory, most notably the November 2019 protests and the large-scale protests of 2022–2023 following the killing of Mahsa Amini. Together, these episodes eroded reformist expectations and narrowed the perceived space for incremental political change.

The current protest wave represents a further evolution in this pattern. It is the first major nationwide mobilization following the recent war between Iran and Israel, and from its earliest stages it has been characterized by explicit demands for the overthrow of the existing system and open endorsement of Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as an alternative national leader. Compared to earlier protests, political objectives have been articulated more clearly and consistently, suggesting a consolidation of oppositional narratives rather than fragmented or issue-specific mobilization.

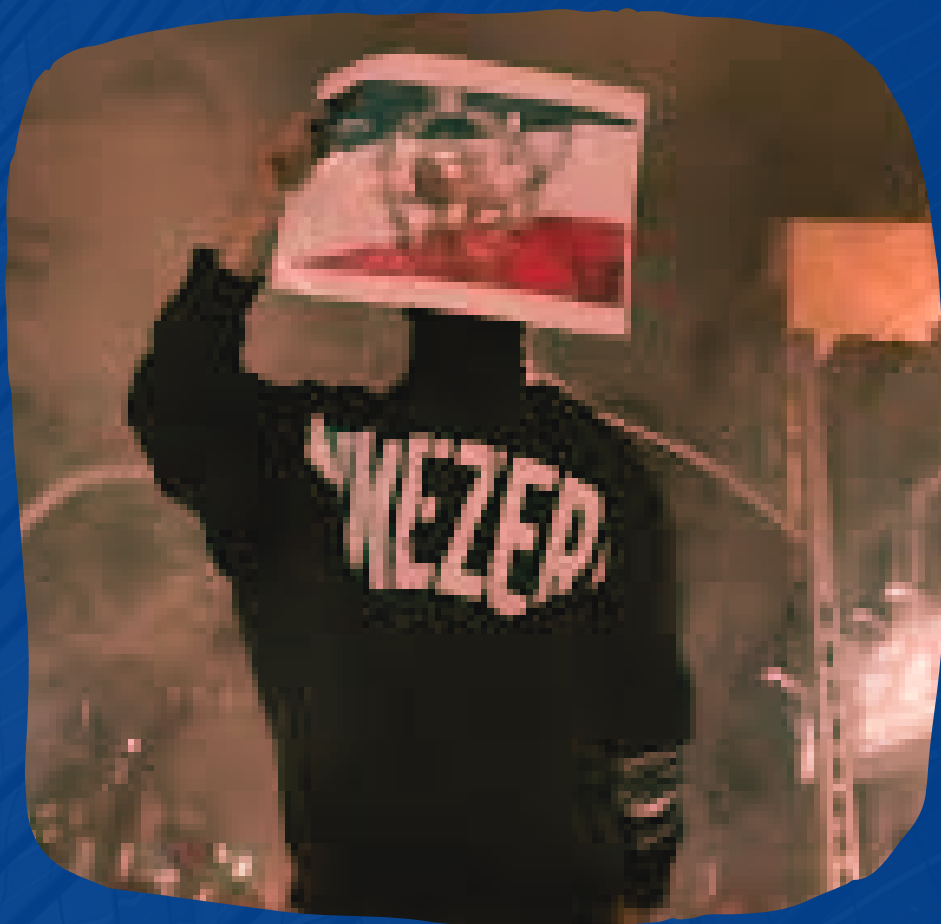
For the authorities, the protests do not appear surprising. Prolonged economic deterioration, persistent political repression, recurring protest cycles, and growing opposition mobilization abroad have point to continued instability. At the same time, regional tensions and the risk of renewed war with Israel add uncertainty to an already volatile domestic environment.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of the protest movement will depend on the extent to which opposition actors can broaden mobilization, strengthen coordination, and develop sustainable support mechanisms for protesters inside the country. Organizational capacity in this regard is steadily improving. For many observers, the increasing frequency, scale, and political clarity of protests are interpreted as indicators of a transformation in relations between the ruling Islamic regime and the nation, even if the timing of such change remains uncertain.



## CONCLUSIONS

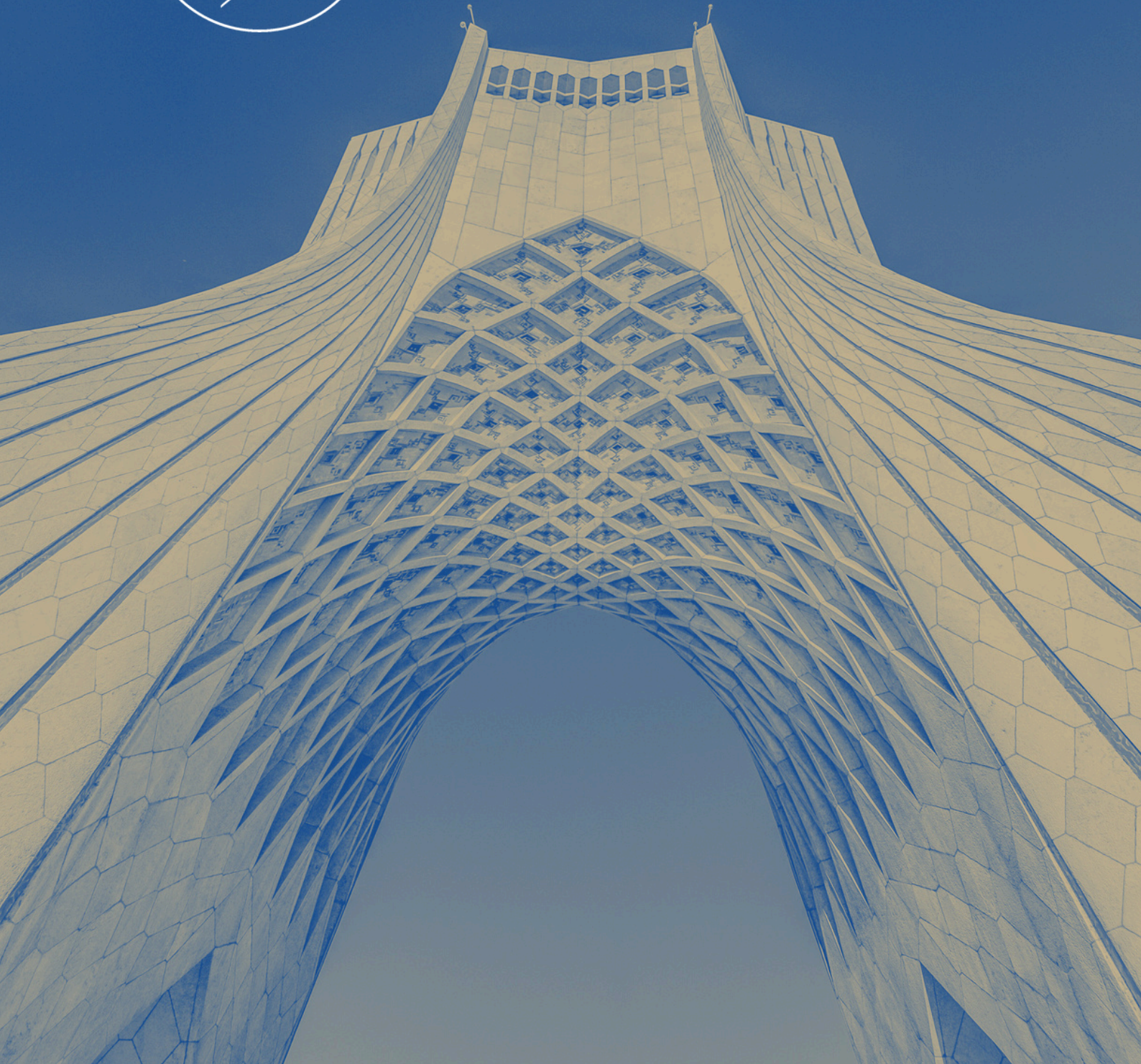
Since the nationwide protests of 2017–2018, the Islamic Republic has The current protests reflect the cumulative impact of long-standing economic, political, social, religious and environmental grievances in Iran, crystallized by acute economic shocks and intensified by regional developments. While triggered by currency collapse and economic distress, the protests are best understood as part of a broader and evolving pattern of nationwide mobilization marked by abandonment of reform as a viable political option and increasing demands for regime change. The rapid geographic spread, diverse social composition, and clarity of political demands underscore the depth of the current crisis in regime–society relations. Although the immediate trajectory of the protests remains uncertain, their persistence and political clarity highlight a sustained challenge to the governing system and signal continued volatility in Iran’s domestic outlook.







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