

## Mahsa Amini's Protests in Iran: Regional Implications and Way Forward

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*For decades, Iranian women have endured systemic oppression under strict laws curtailing their fundamental rights. The mandatory hijab, implemented in 1979, became a stark symbol of this subjugation, leading to countless instances of violence perpetrated by the "morality police" against those deemed non-compliant. Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022, a young Kurdish woman killed for a glimpse of uncovered hair, ignited a nationwide uprising. This paper delves into the regional ramifications of these historic protests, employing qualitative research methods to analyze their geopolitical and socio-economic consequences. It explores how the outpouring of anger and the calls for freedom have reverberated across neighboring countries, reshaping diplomatic relations and potentially paving the way for social transformation within Iran.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, Mahsa Amini, Protests, Geopolitical consequences, Socio-economic effects, Diplomatic relations.*

### INTRODUCTION

Iran has been gripped by widespread protests since the death of a 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September 2022. Amini, a Kurdish woman, died in police custody after being arrested for allegedly violating mandatory hijab rules. Her death sparked nationwide outrage and calls for accountability, igniting a movement that has transcended the issue of the hijab and evolved into a broader demand for human rights and political reform.

The mandatory hijab rule, imposed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has long been a source of contention in Iran, symbolizing restrictions on women's rights and freedoms. President Ebrahim Raisi's recent focus on stricter enforcement further fueled public frustrations, culminating in Amini's arrest and subsequent death. This tragedy triggered nationwide protests that quickly spread across the country.

The Iranian government responded to the protests with a heavy crackdown, drawing strong condemnation from the international community. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, over 300 people, including 40 children, have been

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killed. Over 14,000 individuals have been arrested, and concerns remain about widespread human rights violations (Basinath, 2022).

Regionally, Mahsa Amini's case has become a focal point for discussions on the broader implications of unchecked state power. Activists and human rights organizations in neighboring countries have seized upon her story to shed light on their own struggles against authoritarian regimes. The regional impact extends to diplomatic and geopolitical spheres, as international actors express concern over the handling of dissent in Iran and the potential spillover effects on stability in the region. Furthermore, the protests have ignited a virtual solidarity movements with individuals and organizations across borders expressing support for the Iranian people's quest for justice. Social media platforms have played a crucial role in amplifying the regional impact of Mahsa Amini's protests, fostering a sense of unity among those advocating for human rights and democratic values (Berger, 2022).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While Iran has witnessed sporadic protests throughout its recent history, the current demonstrations stand out for their unprecedented breadth and depth. Characterized by their geographical ubiquity and diverse social base, these protests raise concerns about potential spillover effects and regional destabilization. This paper examines the potential implications of the Iranian protests for regional peace and security by analyzing the arguments for escalation and containment, highlighting crucial uncertainties, and outlining plausible scenarios.

### **Scope of the study**

The current protests in Iran have a potential to spread across the region and may threaten the stability and security of neighboring counties. The scope of the study is to analyze the dynamics of recent protests in Iran and how they may impact the region. The study has also discussed the internal and external factors having influence on the protests and their intensity and whether these protests might result in dismantling the Iranian regime. Since the protests are on-going; therefore, the study has limitation of unpredictability and most of the scenarios discussed are hypothetical, keeping in view the current situation inside and outside Iran. Moreover, since there is media blackout, thus authenticity of the data cannot be ascertained.

### **Research Objective**

The research objective of the present study is to explore the impact of Protests in Iran within Iran and the nearby region.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory is used as a lens to analyze and promote women's empowerment in Iranian society. It highlights strategies for transformative change. By examining the interconnectedness of gender, race, class and other social factors, feminist theory sheds

light on the power dynamics that perpetuate inequality. This theoretical framework serves as a valuable tool for understanding the complexities of discrimination against women and informing efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable world (Walters, Scheinpflug, & Glinchey, 2023).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In an effort to control how women cover their bodies and their hair, two very distinct legal systems with diametrically opposed ideas have been used in the previous 90 years. In 1936, Reza Shah, the new king (1925–41), made the first attempt to enact hijab legislation. He demanded that ladies remove their veils in public in order to "unveil" them. Iranian women's attire saw modifications as a result of the shah's interpretation of modernism, which was influenced by Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (Hosseini, 2022).

Prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Pahlavi rule saw no legal dress code for women. While hijab use was prevalent, motivations were diverse, with scholarly analysis identifying factors like religious expression, cultural affiliation, and adherence to patriarchal norms like "namus" (honor) alongside individual choice. Following the revolution, the newly established Islamic Republic implemented mandatory hijab in 1979, despite significant protests led by Iranian women on March 8th, 1979, highlighting concerns about infringement on their right to choose. This law was codified in 1983, mandating head covering for all women in public spaces regardless of faith or nationality, prompting ongoing debates about religious freedom, women's rights, and cultural identity in contemporary Iran (Maranlou, 2022).

Iran's enforcement of mandatory hijab has evolved alongside its evolving social and political landscape. While criminal penalties emerged in the 1990s, a shift occurred in January 2018 with the introduction of "guidance" programs in Tehran for non-compliant women. As reported by local media, Tehran Police Chief Hossein Rahimi announced the replacement of detention and legal action with mandatory attendance at these programs, designed to educate women on Islamic dress codes. These "guidance" sessions, overseen by Gasht-e Ershad, reportedly involve lectures and pledges to adhere to Islamic norms in exchange for avoiding legal charges. This policy change, however, remains limited to Tehran, and persistent violators still face legal repercussions. (Berger, 2022).

In addition to the discriminatory aspects of the required dress code, a key legal concern is the lack of a definition for the offence of "bad hijabi" or "improper hijab" in the legislation. Because of the vagueness of the law's language, its enforcement, including the morality police, are free to discriminate against women (Agence France Presse, 2022).

Iran's current laws and legal procedures are based on a variety of sources, including Islamic principles, customs, government bylaws, and constitutional law. The judge who "endeavours to judge each case on the basis of the written law" is bound by Article 146 of the Constitution. In the absence of such a law, the judge must base his or her decision on reliable Islamic sources. Iranian women dressing vary depending on regional variations,

cultural influences, social level, political leanings, and religious convictions. Beyond merely limiting women discretion over their public appearance, the hijab is required. It affects every aspect of Iranian daily life (Agence France Presse, 2022).

For the past few decades, Iranian women's organizations have worked to modify this law. They have fought against the state's idea of "proper dress" every day by choosing what they wear, their style, their makeup, and how they leave their houses. Every time they move in public, the discriminatory statute that can stop them and tell them their lifestyle choices are "improper" can be challenged by them. They put themselves at risk of suffering from criminal sanctions, which can involve jail time or fines.

The required hijab, which has been adopted, decriminalized, and promoted, is the Islamic state's principal gender policy, yet women have made daring and wonderful attempts to advocate for their rights. The catchphrase "women, life, freedom" sums up this continual quest for justice, gender equality, and individual freedom. In these protests, which are taking place in the streets and on social media, Iranian women (and men) are calling for the repeal of the nation's compulsory hijab law. Polls show that most people are in favor of modifying the law. The resistance has grown over the past few weeks as a result of social media action and hashtags. There is optimism that public pressure would lead to modifications to Iran's required attire (Maranlou, 2022).

### **Analysis of Issues and Challenges**

Domestic developments within Iran have great potential to impact regional stability as it is one of the most important countries in the region. Though Young Iranian women are the face of current crises in Iran, as they are subjected to gender disparity in every aspect of life including education, basic human rights and employment etc., but the movement is characterized by its diversity and geographical spread. Starting with "Woman, life, freedom" as the rallying slogan, gradually it has turned into demand for regime change and dismantling of the conservative narrative adopted by the state. (Basinath, 2022). Though the protests started with the demands for women rights and doing away with hijab rules but quickly it transformed into calls for regime change. (Robinson, 2022). This bears a close similarity to Arab Spring, a series of uprisings and unrest across Arab world in early 2010. The Arab Spring had started from Tunisia and resulted in riots, civil wars and insurgencies in majority of Arab countries.

### **Dynamics of the Issue**

The protests are not limited to the women rights of the Hijab issue. Many experts consider these as a 'vote of no confidence' against the Iranian regime and its policies. There is 'politics' behind the protests (Agence France Presse, 2022). Many take protests as implications of western sanctions against Iran, due to which the economy of the country is crumbling. Inflation and Unemployment is on the rise, with living conditions deteriorating with each passing year. Similarly, many Iranian feel that Iranian money and resources are wasted in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and most recently in Yemen. Iran is also playing a significant role in Palestine by supporting Hizbollah. Could the Iranian economy improve

if the money used to maintain regional influence is spent on the serving local population and what would happen if Iran discontinues its support for the regional countries? Therefore, Iranian protests have political, economic, domestic, sectarian and regional dynamics.

### **Regional Impact**

The world has become global village in the present era of advancement and technology and does not remain aloof of the events place even in the farthest corners of the planet; however, the immediate neighbors are more prone and immediate recipients.

### **Impact on Iraq**

If the protests in Iran gain further momentum, Iraq would most likely be one of the first countries to experience its repercussions. The two neighbors share a long history of shared territorial border disputes and major part of this shared border has Kurdish majority areas on both sides. Since Mahsa Amini was of Kurdish descent, the protests are intense in Kurdish majority region of Iran. (Iran: Security forces fire on, kill protesters, 2022) Though they are more frequent in major cities and towns, the government has mainly targeted Kurdish areas and crackdowns have been intensified most notably in Kurdish-majority north and northwest. Internet is sporadically shut down in whole of country but Kurdish majority areas are facing longer shut-downs. Iran accuses that Kurdish separatists, after perpetrating violence in Iran have taken refuge in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan. (Berger, 2022). If the use of force against the Iran's Kurdish areas is intensified, it may result in unrest and violence in Iraqi Kurdish territories ultimately turning Iranian domestic unrest into an international crisis, having far-reaching effects. (Iran enters 'critical' phase as it tries to quash anti-regime protests, 2022).

### **Impact on Turkey**

Not only Iraq, but Turkey may also feel the repercussions of any large-scale use of force against Kurd dissidents as Turkey shares a 534 Kilometers long border with Iran and has a sizeable Kurd population. Moreover, there is a history of Turkey blaming Kurds for terrorist activities against Turkish interests and carrying out military actions against its Kurd dissidents. But currently, Turkey has chosen to remain silent on the Iranian protests and is monitoring the situation closely as it is concerned about spill-over effects of Iranian protests. It does not want to attract ire of Iran as both countries are in close cooperation in Astana process for finding a peaceful solution to Syrian conflict. (Tremblay, 2022)

### **Impact on Pakistan**

There is a clear divide in Pakistan on sectarian lines, among various other divides such as on regional basis, ethnic basis and linguistic basis. About 20% population of the country belongs to Shia sect (Qureshi, 2019). Thus spilling of the effects of the current situation in Iran is very likely. Since women are the face of Iranian protests and there is noticeable sectarian divide in our country. Therefore, Pakistan may also face the protests by women activists and religious groups, adding fuel to already volatile political situation

in the country. Especially, the ongoing women's movement of "Mera Jism, Meri Marzi", seen by the strong religious factor as an attempt to propagate vulgarity, may derive strength from the situation. They may be joined by other sections of society, disgruntled with governmental policies, leading to further political and economic destabilization. Iran, as a pre-emptive measure has sealed its border with Pakistan (Iran Closes its Borer with Paksitan, 2022), but it will have a negative impact on the trade between the two countries.

### **Impact on Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine**

Iran's support to a particular community in the aforementioned countries is well established. The balance of power, would swing in the region and the Iranian regime weakens (Sharma, 2022). Syria's Bashar al Assad and Hoti rebels in Yemen have primarily survived this long due to resolute support from Iran. Moreover, organizations like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Palestine are enjoying Iranian support. A political change or challenge to the existing regime may adversely affect these organizations bringing in a change in the regimes in a few other countries as well (El-Kasem, 2019).

### **Impact on Global Economy**

Iran remains under sanctions; however, Iranian oil is procured by many countries especially those in the region including India and China. The World has witnessed a spike in oil prices when sanctions were imposed on import of Russian oil. However, the double blow, if for any reason Iranian supplies are not guaranteed and taken-off the market, will send oil prices sky rocketing for many months. This will not only slower the global economic growth but will have severe implications on oil importing nations including Pakistan.

### **ANALYSIS**

In the wake of recent protests in Iran, various dimensions and perspectives have created a smoke screen. Iran has seen several protests, most recently in 2009, 2017 and 2019 and they all have same underlying issues; economic crisis, limitation on freedom of speech and expression and resentment and anger against the regime. Iranian regime portrays these protests as foreign conspiracy and has termed them as foreign funded and nefarious designs of Israel and the United States of America. Parliamentary commission constituted in September, by the government to probe the causes of Mahsa Amini's death concluded that the death was not because of torture. In fact there were three different investigations all ruled that Morality Police was not at fault, utterly rejected by her parents. However, there seems no serious effort on government's end to seriously engage the protesters and to bring them at the dialogue table.

The international media particularly in US, UK, and France has depicted it as a movement for freedom from the extremist regime. Iranian diaspora living in West, especially, the women rights groups and their leaders are being given vast coverage on BBC, CNN and other international media channels. Chinese and Russian media has however given less importance to it(Hongda, 2022). Whereas, social media played pivotal

role in portrayal of widespread public discontent and massive violence against the protesters, jolting the very foundations of the Iranian regime (Habib, 2022). United States of America has attempted to give wider technological platform to the protesters by providing Starlink, a satellite internet firm which was an attempt by USA to bypass Iran's censorship of social media and blockade of internet. The president of USA extended his support to the protesters and released a sanction guideline against Iranian Government. Nonetheless, at the same time, western countries are also carefully calculating their moves in order to avoid antagonizing Iran and keeping the diplomatic window open. (Hosseini, 2022)

The major demand of the protestors is of regime change and domestic unrest in Iran is likely to continue. However, demand of regime change characterized by ideological re-orientation of state is unlikely to be achieved, keeping in view the current momentum of the movement. The experience of Arab spring and history of past two decades reveal that political structures continue to survive despite such widespread protests. These protests, like the ones in the past, lack strong leadership and well-defined organization. Spontaneous protests do draw huge crowd and create uproar for a limited period of time but fail to sustain and achieve the desired goals. The 1979 revolution, the only successful one in the recent past resulted in regime change because it was organized and had a central, strong leadership.

Secondly, although Iran has historically shared an antagonistic relationship with world powers but world is busy in Russia-Ukraine war and safeguarding European borders. Real world gains take precedence over ethics, values and morality; therefore it is not a world-priority to bring a regime change currently. This lack of support from international community has weakened the impact of protests.

Since these protests are happening in the shadow of these geo-political realities, any instability in Iran does not bode well for regional oil production. Not only that regional security would be endangered, in case situation is worsened in Iran, but global oil market would also be disturbed. This would have far-reaching impacts for the entire international community.

However, current protests provided a propaganda tool to the West, providing reasons to impose more sanctions on Iran where economy is already crippled by sanctions. Country is under tremendous domestic pressure due to continuous post revolution sanctions. International isolation with a huge youth bulge and a struggling economy are a perfect recipe for further unrest and destabilization. Another factor that is adding pressure on the regime is liberalizing of Saudi society by its current regime. A comparison is readily drawn between the two states each of which insist on their own interpretation of Islam and are strategic rivals too.

## **CONCLUSION**

While dismantling the regime may not be the immediate outcome, Iran's current protests pose a significant challenge to its legitimacy and stability. Their widespread

nature, diverse motivations, and resilience resonate with historical movements that reshaped political landscapes despite not achieving immediate regime collapse. The government's heavy-handed response risks fueling further dissent and exacerbating economic and social problems, potentially increasing internal pressure for reform. While full-scale international support is unlikely, the regional implications of prolonged unrest cannot be ignored. The current wave holds potent potential to impact Iran's future, both internally and externally, making further research and analysis crucial.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1- Iranian Government should follow the path of conciliation and dialogue rather than using force against the protesters.
- 2- Much needed reforms should be introduced to ensure safeguard of fundamental human rights.
- 3- Iran's government needs to engage its Kurdish minority and their grievances should be addressed. Use of force against an already deprived and alienated group would do an irreparable damage to its national fabric.
- 4- Regional and international stake-holders should play positive rule and use their influence to help de-escalation in Iran as an unstable Iran would be a threat to everyone.
- 5- Iran's neighboring countries, such as Iraq, Turkey and Syria should engage their Kurd population through dialogue to avoid any possible unrest in the region.
- 6- International community should discourage discord and violence and should provide all possible assistance to Iranian Government to reach a peaceful agreement with the demonstrators.
- 7- Pakistan should keep a close eye on the unfolding events and should engage influential clerics and Ulema to spread the message of peace and religious harmony among masses.
- 8- Keeping in view the unending and ferocious protests and dwindling law and order situation, it is high time the Iranian government initiate dialogue with the protesting groups.
- 9- The Chinese and Russians should specially intervene and play mediatory role to bring the parties to dialogue table

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