



## Iran Democracy Monitor No. 202

November 21, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Resource Security; Iran

*For nearly a week now, Iranians have taken to the streets in sustained anti-regime protests throughout the country. The rallies began as a reaction to the Iranian government's decision to significantly hike domestic prices for gasoline, which until then has been heavily subsidized. Quickly, however, the protests became a broader outpouring of discontent directed at the Islamic Republic and its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. In this special issue of the Iran Democracy Monitor, we attempt to trace the most significant aspects of the unrest to date.*

### **IRANIAN AUTHORITIES BLAME FOREIGN INTERFERENCE**

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has pinned the blame for the protests - which have now engulfed more than 100 cities throughout the country - on foreign meddling and "sabotage," rather than legitimate domestic grievances. In a live speech on state television on November 18th, the Iranian Supreme Leader said that "sabotage and arson is done by hooligans not our people," and intimated that Iran's main foreign enemies - the United States and Israel - were behind the unrest. "The counter-revolution and Iran's enemies have always supported sabotage and breaches of security and continue to do so," Khamenei argued.

### **CALLS FOR OFFICIAL FORCE...**

From the outset, regime hardliners have advocated the need to suppress the protests by any means necessary. Iran's hard-line *Kayhan* newspaper, which is run by Khamenei ally Hossein Shariatmadari, wrote in an editorial that "[i]t is possible to bring [the protesters] to their knees through imposing heavy financial and military damage," and argued that it was the legitimate right of the Iranian government to do so.

Similarly, Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has warned that it is prepared to use overwhelming force against the protesters. An official statement issued by the IRGC emphasized that the Corps would "confront the continuation of any insecurity and action disturbing the people's peace and calm in a revolutionary and decisive way."

### **...BEGET A MOUNTING DEATH TOLL**

The resulting harsh regime response to the protests is beginning to exact a heavy human toll. According to watchdog group Amnesty International, over 100 people in 21 separate cities have been killed so far in clashes with regime forces. These numbers, however, are tentative, and observers suggest that the death toll could actually be considerably higher - more than 200, and climbing.

### **THE BATTLE OVER THE IRANIAN INTERNET...**

Among the most significant features of the 2009 "Green Movement" protests in Iran was the political opposition's extensive use of the World-Wide-Web to coordinate and organize. Iranian authorities learned this lesson well, and made a shutdown of the Internet one of their first responses to the current protests. The Iranian regime blocked virtually all Web traffic within the country early on November 17th, and as of November 21st connectivity remains practically nonexistent, according to monitoring conducted by web tracker NetBlocks.org.

Iranian opposition activists have petitioned the United States and European nations to respond to the shutdown by providing alternative Internet connectivity - but so far without success. They have also demanded that social media companies like Twitter and Facebook block the accounts of regime officials, who continue to be able to communicate. However, these companies have refused to do so, citing terms of service that limit such blocks to instances where the user uses the platform to promote violence or post content "deemed harmful to others."

### **...AND ITS REAL WORLD COSTS**

The regime's Internet crackdown, meanwhile, is having a further negative effect on the country's already-reeling economy. Iranian Communications Minister Mohammad-Javad Azari-Jahromi has admitted that online business transactions within the Islamic Republic "have fallen by 90%" since the outage began. Similarly, officials with the Tehran Chamber of Commerce point to massive "export problems," including lost shipments and a chronic inability to track them. Iran's stock market is also suffering notable losses, as jittery investors pull their assets from Iranian financial institutions.

[SOURCES: *Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2019; Reuters, November 18, 2019; *New York Times*, November 19, 2019; *VOA News*, November 20, 2019; *Times of Israel*, November 20, 2019; Netblocks.org, November 21, 2019]