



# Chinese Tech Is Powering Iran's Repression

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For nearly three months now, ordinary Iranians from all walks of life have taken to the streets to vent their rage at their country's ruling clerical regime. What began as grassroots unrest caused by the mid-September death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of regime security forces has transformed into something more: a fundamental rejection of Iran's draconian religious system of government.

But Iran's repressive regime is fighting back. Iranian officials have admitted to killing more than 300 protesters nationwide so far in their bid to quash the protests. Human rights organizations say that, in truth, the regime in Tehran has killed many more. It has also instituted a raft of social restrictions, ranging from curtailed media coverage to stepped-up surveillance of opposition activists.

In these efforts, Tehran has been aided by a key partner: the People's Republic of China (PRC). Even as it grapples with its own domestic unrest generated by an unsustainable "zero-COVID" strategy, Beijing is playing a major role in helping Iran's ruling ayatollahs repress that country's captive population.

The extent of that role is laid out in a new study by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD). "Iranian government representatives have publicized plans to leverage smart technologies, including AI-powered face recognition, to maintain regime stability and neutralize dissent," the report highlights. "Enhanced cooperation with China is central to those efforts."

The FDD study focuses on Tiandy Technologies, a Tianjin-based tech firm that, over the past several years, has emerged as a national leader in surveillance and monitoring technologies such as facial recognition, artificial intelligence-driven emotion detection software, and closed-circuit television. Its expertise has been used by the Chinese government in its extensive repression of the country's Uyghur Muslim minority. "Both Tiandy testimonials and Chinese government press releases advertise the use of the company's products by Chinese officials to track and interrogate Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities in China's Xinjiang province," the report reads. "According to human rights groups, Chinese authorities also employ Tiandy products, such as 'tiger chairs,' to torture Uyghurs and other minorities."

And increasingly, Tiandy's repressive tech isn't limited to bolstering the PRC's police state. It is also allowing China to prop up strategic partners like Iran. Last year, the FDD study notes, the tech firm supplied Iran's feared clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as its national police and military, with a number of key social control products, ranging from surveillance video recorders to thermal imaging cameras. Iranian authorities, in turn, have leaned on Tiandy's tech in their efforts to clamp down on the current dissent.

Tiandy, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. Back in 2010, Chinese tech firms like ZTE played a significant role in allowing the Islamic Republic to throttle its political opposition in the aftermath of a failed protest wave the previous year. They did so by selling Iran's government surveillance technology to monitor the landline, mobile, and internet communications of ordinary citizens. Iran's rulers, in turn, used this tech to "coup proof" their government, tracking down political opponents and agitators to prevent a repeat of the political ferment that fueled the so-called Green Movement in 2009.

Since then, other Chinese tech firms have found a receptive client in Iran's clerical elite, and their business within the Islamic Republic has boomed. When surveyed last year, no fewer than eight major Chinese technology companies—including Tiandy and the better-known Huawei—were actively lending their expertise to building a surveillance state for Iran's ayatollahs.

This repressive partnership is poised to grow still further. Last year, the Iranian and Chinese governments came to terms on an enormous 25-year strategic pact worth a projected \$300 billion. Under that agreement, the PRC has gained preferential access to infrastructure projects throughout the Islamic Republic, first mover advantage in Iran's telecom sector, and critical port access for its navy along the Strait of Hormuz. But China's tech giants can be expected to benefit from the lash-up, too—particularly since Chinese surveillance technologies have emerged as a key export commodity for Beijing.

U.S. officials are taking notice. Last week, Senator Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) sent a letter to the Biden administration flagging Tiandy's support of the Iranian regime, and asking pointed questions about whether the company should be sanctioned for its role in helping squelch the current protests.

Such a step is surely warranted. The PRC should undoubtedly pay a price for its role in seeking to thwart the cause of freedom in Iran. For the Biden administration, which so far hasn't done much beyond expressing tepid support for Iran's brave protesters, targeting a key enabler of Iranian state repression would be an important practical step. It would also be a significant symbolic one, putting the White House on the right side not just of the fight for freedom in Iran, but of the battle against China's techno-authoritarianism.

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