



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

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Related Categories: Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Europe; Iran

IRAN SQUANDERS ITS NATURAL GAS WEALTH

Iran enjoys enormous energy wealth, and is home to the world's second largest reserves of natural gas. However, persistent resource mismanagement and inefficiency on the part of the Iranian government have led to chronic gas shortages and shortfalls of other fossil fuels, as well as an inability to meet domestic demand. This state of affairs has been hammered home in recent weeks, as cement factories within the Islamic Republic have seen their operations impacted by gas shortages, forcing them to rely on "mazut," a variety of dirty diesel, to continue functioning. Observers estimate that the Islamic Republic requires around \$40 billion of investment and Western technology if it is to boost its gas production, which has steadily declined in recent years - even as the consumer price for gas and electricity usage has gone up. (*Iran International*, December 23, 2022)

IN EUROPE, A DEBATE OVER THE IRGC...

For years, Iran's aggressive foreign policy maneuvers – including the activities of its clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – have enjoyed relative impunity, without meaningful censure from the West. However, amid ongoing protests within Iran, as well as the Iranian regime's support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, European policy toward the Islamic Republic appears to be hardening. In mid-January, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for the EU to designate the IRGC in its entirety as a terrorist group under European law. A subsequent vote by the foreign ministers of the European Union, however, stopped short of implementing such a measure. (*Al-Monitor*, January 19, 2023; *Al-Monitor*, January 23, 2023)

...AND CONSENSUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

But if a blacklisting of the IRGC has failed to garner European consensus for the moment, there appears to be significantly more agreement among European governments about the need to respond to the Iranian regime's domestic repression. At their most recent vote, EU foreign ministers added a new round of sanctions – the bloc's fourth since the start of renewed protests in Iran in September – on individuals and entities complicit in regime repression. "At today's foreign affairs council, the Ministers adopted a new package of sanctions against Iran, targeting those driving the repression. The EU strongly condemns the brutal and disproportionate use of force by the Iranian authorities against peaceful protesters," the government of Sweden, which currently holds the Presidency of the European Union, announced on Twitter.

Iran, for its part, is preparing to retaliate against Western governments in kind. "The Islamic Republic will soon announce the list of new sanctions against the human rights violators of EU and England," Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Nasser Kanaani, has confirmed in a statement. (*Al-Monitor*, January 23, 2023; Reuters, January 24, 2023)

WHAT IRANIANS THINK OF THE PROTESTS... AND THEIR FUTURE

More than four months on, the protests that broke out within Iran following the mid-September death of Kurdish-Iranian activist Mahsa Amini at the hands of government forces have persisted, presenting a serious challenge to the legitimacy of Iran's ruling regime. This opposition is underpinned by a profound rejection of the tenets of clerical rule, a new survey by the Netherlands-based polling institute GAMAAN has found. The survey of around 200,000 respondents, three-quarters of whom were located within Iran, found an overwhelming majority (81%) to reject the Islamic Republic as a governing model. Additionally, two-thirds of those polled (67%) expressed optimism that the current anti-regime protests would succeed despite concerted repression from the Iranian government.

Up until now, however, the protests have not had much by way of organized leadership – a significant flaw that has allowed the Iranian regime to regroup and outflank the opposition. Activists now see rectifying this state of affairs as a top priority. "85% of respondents inside the country who support the protests agree with the formation of a so-called solidarity council (or opposition coalition), comprising prominent activists of various political orientations; 42% believe that such a council should definitively include prominent activists inside and outside the country, and 34% would agree with the formation of such a council being made up of individuals outside the country if those inside support them," the GAMAAN study found.

Then there is the question of Western support. According to the survey, "73% inside the country believe that Western countries should defend the protestors' rights by seriously pressuring the Iranian government. Of the Iranian respondents outside the country, 96% support this view." However, one-fifth of those polled inside the country (19%) "think that Western powers should not intervene, as the protests are an internal matter." (GAMAAN, February 2023)