

**IRAN'S HIDDEN GENOCIDE:
The Ongoing Massacre the World Is Choosing Not to
See**

A Call to Conscience

"Never Again" Must Mean Never Again for Anyone, Anywhere

February 2026

An Urgent Documentation of State-Sponsored Mass Murder

30,000+ Dead in 48 Hours

Tens of Thousands Disappeared

A Nation Imprisoned

The World Silent

Dedication

*For the mothers who will never hold their children again.
For the students shot in the streets for demanding freedom.
For the young women killed for removing their headscarves.
For the fathers searching morgues for their sons.
For the 16-year-old whose body lay among hundreds in a Tehran morgue.
For the ones whose names we will never know.
For the generation stolen.*

*We bear witness.
We will not be silent.
We will not forget.*

*“The world stood by and watched as six million Jews were murdered.
The world said ‘Never Again.’*

*But what does ‘Never Again’ mean
if we watch mass murder in real-time
and do nothing?”*

Abstract

In January 2026, under the cover of a nationwide internet blackout, the Islamic Republic of Iran carried out what multiple international sources describe as the largest massacre in modern Iranian history and one of the deadliest state crackdowns against civilians in the 21st century. Conservative estimates place the death toll at over 6,000 civilians killed in a matter of days. Upper estimates, based on hospital reports, government sources, and eyewitness testimonies, suggest between 30,000 and 36,500 people were killed in just 48 hours on January 8-9, 2026—a rate of killing that rivals history’s darkest chapters. This was not war. This was not combat. This was systematic, coordinated state murder of unarmed civilians—men, women, and children—whose only "crime" was demanding freedom, dignity, and the right to live without tyranny.

The Iranian regime cut all internet and phone communications to hide the massacre. They deployed snipers on rooftops. They used heavy machine guns on crowds. They shot protesters in the head and torso. They raided hospitals to arrest the wounded. They extorted families to ransom the bodies of their murdered loved ones. They threatened to execute tens of thousands of arrested protesters using medieval religious laws. This document exists to bear witness. To document. To ensure the world cannot say "we didn't know." Because we do know. We are watching a holocaust unfold in real-time. And our silence makes us complicit.

For 47 years, the Islamic Republic has subjected the Iranian people to systematic oppression, torture, execution, and brutality. What happened in January 2026 is not an aberration—it is the logical endpoint of a totalitarian theocracy that views its own population as the enemy. Iran before 1979 was a nation of promise, modernization, and hope. Today, it is an open-air prison ruled by men who claim divine authority to kill. This is Iran’s holocaust. And it is happening now. Not 80 years ago. Not in grainy black-and-white photographs. Now. In color. On video. While we scroll past it. The question is not whether atrocities are being committed. The question is whether humanity will respond.

Contents

Abstract	iii
1 The Call to Witness	1
1 Why You Must Read This: The Moral Imperative of Bearing Witness	2
1.1 What It Means to Say “Never Again”, And Why It’s Being Tested Now	3
1.2 The Holocaust Parallel: Why This Comparison Is Not Hyperbole	4
1.3 How Holocaust Documentation Taught the World to Bear Witness, And Why We Must Do the Same for Iran	7
1.4 The Architecture of Denial: How the World Ignores Modern Genocides	10
1.5 Your Responsibility as a Human Being with Access to This Information	13
2 The Regime: Understanding the Perpetrator	18
2 The Islamic Republic: A 47-Year Reign of Terror	19
2.1 What Iran Was Before 1979: A Nation of Promise Destroyed	19
2.2 1979: When Darkness Fell, The Islamic Revolution and Its Aftermath	23
2.3 The Totalitarian Architecture: How the Islamic Republic Functions	26
2.4 A Pattern of Killing: The Regime’s History of Massacring Its Own People	31
2.5 The Ideology of Death: How the Regime Justifies Mass Murder	36
2.6 Comparing Totalitarian Regimes: Where Iran’s Islamic Republic Ranks	38
3 The People: Understanding the Victims	44
3 Who Are the Iranian People? Understanding What Is Being Destroyed	45
3.1 The Demographic Reality: A Young Population Demanding Freedom	45

3.2	Daily Life Under Tyranny: What It Means to Live in the Islamic Republic	49
3.3	Why They Protest: Understanding What Iranians Are Fighting For	54
3.4	The Courage Required to Protest: Understanding the Risk	58
4	The People's Movement: How It Began	63
4	December 28, 2025 to January 7, 2026: How It Began	64
4.1	The Economic Collapse: The Immediate Trigger	64
4.2	The Merchants Strike: When the Economy's Heart Stopped Beating	67
4.3	The Students Join: Universities Become Battlegrounds	69
4.4	Women's Acts of Defiance: Burning the Supreme Leader's Image	71
4.5	The Movement Spreads: All 31 Provinces Rise	72
4.6	Early Killings: The Regime Shoots to Kill From Day One	73
4.7	January 7: The Regime Prepares for Massacre	74
5	The Massacre: January 8-10, 2026	80
5	January 8-10, 2026: The Massacre, When the Regime Decided to Kill Them All	81
5.1	The Scale: Understanding How Many Were Killed	81
5.2	January 8, 8:00 PM: The Internet Goes Dark, The Massacre Begins	85
5.3	The Methods of Killing: How They Murdered Tens of Thousands	89
5.4	The Hospitals: Overwhelmed, Raided, Turned Into Crime Scenes	91
5.5	The Morgues: Where Families Search for Their Children	95
5.6	Eyewitness Testimonies: In Their Own Words	96
5.7	The Geography of Killing: Nationwide Coordinated Murder	98
5.8	Who Were the Victims?	99
6	The Blackout	109
6	The Information Blackout: Hiding Genocide in Real-Time	110
6.1	How the Regime Created Digital Concentration Camps	110
6.2	The Battle for Connection: Starlink and the Resistance	112
6.3	The Chinese Model: Building a Permanent Prison	113
6.4	The Cost of Silence: \$1.56 Million Per Hour, Entire Economy Frozen	115

6.5	Why the Blackout Matters: Genocide Requires Invisibility	116
7	Silence by Design: The Regime's Consolidation of Terror	120
7	After the Massacre: The Regime's Consolidation of Terror	121
7.1	Mass Arrests: 20,000+ Disappeared Into the Prison System	121
7.2	Torture: What Happens in the Prisons	124
7.3	The Execution Threat: "Enemies of God" Sentenced to Death	127
7.4	The Nationwide Curfew: Military Occupation of Entire Country	131
7.5	The Regime's Justifications: How They Explain Murdering Tens of Thousands . . .	133
8	A Modern Holocaust	139
8	Why "Holocaust" Is Not Hyperbole: The Historical and Moral Comparison	140
8.1	Defining Terms: Massacre, Atrocity, Genocide, Holocaust	140
8.2	The Numbers: 30,000+ in 48 Hours Compared to History's Darkest Days	141
8.3	The Systematic Nature: Evidence of Coordinated State Murder	144
8.4	The Infrastructure of Killing: Comparing State Apparatus	146
8.5	The Ideology: Dehumanization and Religious Justification	149
8.6	The Pattern of Escalation: From Persecution to Mass Murder	152
8.7	The World's Response: Then and Now	154
8.8	Why This Comparison Matters: Preventing Future Atrocities	155
9	The Price of Global Silence	159
9	The International Community's Shameful Response	160
9.1	The United Nations: Strongly Worded Statements, Zero Action	160
9.2	The United States: Rhetoric Without Action	162
9.3	Europe: Condemning While Trading	164
9.4	Human Rights Organizations: Documenting While People Die	166
9.5	The Media: Inadequate Coverage of an Ongoing Atrocity	168
9.6	Social Media: Scrolling Past a Genocide	169
9.7	Individual Nations That Have Remained Silent	171
9.8	Why Everyone Is Failing: Geopolitics, Oil, and Moral Cowardice	172

Part 1

The Call to Witness

1. Why You Must Read This: The Moral Imperative of Bearing Witness

Before you read another word, before you decide whether to continue or close this document, you need to understand something fundamental: what you are about to encounter is not merely information. It is testimony. It is evidence. It is the documented record of mass murder happening in real-time in a nation of 88 million people while the world scrolls past. And by reading it, you become a witness. By becoming a witness, you inherit a responsibility that you cannot unknow, cannot unsee, cannot pretend does not exist.

This document will be difficult. It will be heartbreaking. It will make you angry, and it will make you feel helpless. You will read about a 16-year-old boy whose body lay among nearly 200 others in a Tehran morgue, filmed by BBC investigators who verified every detail[1]. You will read testimony from a medical worker who counted 150 dead bodies brought to a single hospital in a single night[2]. You will learn that conservative estimates place the death toll at over 6,800 confirmed deaths, while credible sources including *Time Magazine*, *The Guardian*, and European diplomatic intelligence estimate that between 30,000 and 36,500 people were systematically killed by their own government in just 48 hours during January 8-9, 2026[3, 4, 5].

But difficulty is not an excuse for looking away. The victims did not have the luxury of closing their eyes. The families searching through morgues for their children's bodies do not have the option to scroll to something less disturbing. And the 20,000 people currently imprisoned, many facing execution under medieval religious laws for the "crime" of demanding freedom, cannot choose to stop experiencing their torture because it is too hard to endure[6].

You are reading this because someone, likely an Iranian who risks everything by speaking, managed to get this information out of a country that has been turned into a digital prison. The Islamic Republic of Iran shut down approximately 99 percent of internet connectivity starting January 8, 2026[7]. They cut phone lines. They deployed military-grade GPS jammers to block Starlink satellite internet[7]. They conducted door-to-door searches confiscating satellite dishes[7]. They did all of this for one reason: to hide the massacre they were about to commit. When a government cuts all communication with the outside world before deploying snipers on rooftops to shoot crowds with machine guns, they know what they are doing is indefensible. They know it is murder. They are counting on the world not finding out, or if the world does find out, not caring enough to do anything about it.

The question this document asks is simple and devastating: What does "Never Again" actually mean? Is it merely a slogan we repeat at Holocaust memorials? Is it empty words we teach schoolchildren while we ignore mass atrocities happening right now, documented in high-definition video, with verified death tolls, with the names and faces and stories of the dead available to anyone willing to look? Or does "Never Again" actually obligate us, morally, urgently, immediately, to act when we witness genocide?

1.1. What It Means to Say “Never Again”, And Why It’s Being Tested Now

“Never Again” emerged from the ashes of the Holocaust as humanity’s solemn promise to itself. After six million Jews were systematically murdered in an industrialized campaign of genocide, after the world saw the photographs from liberated concentration camps, after survivors with numbers tattooed on their arms told their stories, the international community created new laws, new institutions, and new moral frameworks specifically to ensure that such an atrocity could never happen again. The United Nations was founded. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted. The Genocide Convention was signed. The phrase “crimes against humanity” entered international law. The Nuremberg trials established that “following orders” was not a defense for mass murder, that individuals could be held accountable for state-sponsored atrocities, that national sovereignty did not grant license to massacre one’s own population.

But more than legal frameworks, “Never Again” represented a moral commitment. It was an acknowledgment that the world’s failure to act earlier, when Nazi Germany was “only” persecuting Jews, when Kristallnacht was “merely” property destruction, when the early concentration camps were “just” political prisons, had enabled the Holocaust’s worst horrors. The lesson was supposed to be clear: when you see the warning signs of genocide, you intervene early. You do not wait until millions are dead. You do not negotiate with regimes actively murdering civilians. You do not prioritize geopolitical stability over human life. You act.

And yet, here we are. In January 2026, the Islamic Republic of Iran killed an estimated 30,000 to 36,500 of its own citizens in 48 hours[3, 5]. To put that in perspective: that is approximately the same number of Jews murdered by Nazi Einsatzgruppen death squads at Babi Yar in Ukraine over September 29-30, 1941, one of the Holocaust’s single deadliest events, one that shocked the world when the details emerged[8, 9]. Iran’s massacre happened over the same timeframe. It was systematic, coordinated, ordered from the highest levels of government. Security forces used automatic weapons, sniper rifles, and heavy machine guns on unarmed crowds[10]. They shot protesters in the head and chest, kill shots, not crowd control. They positioned snipers on mosque rooftops and government buildings[11]. They raided hospitals to arrest wounded protesters, denying them medical care[5]. They fired tear gas inside medical facilities. When families came to retrieve their loved ones’ bodies from morgues, the government extorted them, demanding payment of 7 million Iranian rials (approximately \$7,000 USD) to release corpses for burial[10].

This happened five weeks ago. Not eighty years ago in grainy black-and-white photographs. Five weeks ago, in a world with smartphones, social media, satellite imagery, and 24-hour news coverage. And the world has essentially shrugged.

“Never Again” is being tested right now. The test is not theoretical. It is not a hypothetical scenario in an ethics classroom. Real people are dying. Real families are being destroyed. A real government is executing a real campaign of mass murder. And our response, the international community’s response, the United Nations’ response, powerful nations’ response, the media’s response, your response, will determine whether “Never Again” was ever anything more than a comforting lie we told ourselves to sleep better after the Holocaust.

The Islamic Republic has been testing the boundaries of acceptable brutality for 47 years. In 1988, they executed an estimated 2,800 to 5,000 political prisoners in secret massacres that were hidden from the world for years¹[12, 13, 14]. In November 2019, they killed approximately 1,500 protesters in just two weeks during nationwide demonstrations against fuel price increases[15, 16]. In 2022, during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement sparked by the murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in the custody of the morality police, they killed over 500 protesters and executed several more after sham trials[17, 18]. Each time, the international response was inadequate. Strongly worded statements. Targeted sanctions that did not touch the regime's core interests. UN Human Rights Council meetings that produced reports filed away and forgotten. And each time the regime faced no real consequences, they learned a lesson: they could kill their own people with impunity. They could escalate. They could kill more, more brutally, more openly.

January 2026 is what happens when “Never Again” becomes “Again and Again and We’re Not Going to Stop You.” This massacre was preventable. The warning signs were everywhere. The regime has been systematically oppressing, torturing, and killing Iranians for nearly five decades. They were never hiding their nature, they execute people publicly by hanging them from construction cranes in city squares as a form of social control. They stone women to death for adultery. They execute gay people for the “crime” of existing. They imprison journalists, lawyers, human rights activists, environmental campaigners, labor organizers, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, and anyone who dares to question their absolute authority. This is not a government that suddenly snapped and acted out of character. This is a government doing what it has always done, just on a larger scale because we have taught them through our inaction that there will be no consequences.

If “Never Again” is to mean anything at all, it must mean something now. It must mean that when we see systematic state murder of civilians, we respond with more than tweets and press releases. It must mean that Holocaust education was not merely an exercise in historical mourning but a preparation for recognizing and responding to contemporary atrocities. It must mean that the survivors who testified, who showed us the numbers tattooed on their arms, who said “Remember this so it never happens again,” did not waste their breath and trauma on a world that would watch new genocides unfold on high-definition screens and change the channel because it was too depressing.

You are reading this document because “Never Again” is not a relic of the past. It is a living commitment, and it is being violated right now. The question is whether you will bear witness and demand action, or whether you will be part of the generation that let it happen again.

1.2. The Holocaust Parallel: Why This Comparison Is Not Hyperbole

There is always resistance to comparing contemporary events to the Holocaust. The Holocaust, we are told, was unique, industrialized genocide on an unprecedented scale, driven by racial ideology, resulting in six million Jewish deaths and millions of others including Roma, disabled people, political prisoners, and LGBTQ individuals. To compare anything else to the Holocaust, critics argue, is to diminish its unique

¹Some sources, including the opposition group MEK, claim the figure was as high as 30,000, though most credible human rights organizations estimate between 2,800 and 5,000.

horror, to exploit Jewish suffering for political purposes, to engage in irresponsible hyperbole.

This resistance is understandable. The Holocaust should never be invoked lightly. Its memory deserves protection from cheap political comparisons and false equivalencies. But this very reasonable caution has created a dangerous paradox: the only genocide we feel comfortable fully acknowledging and condemning is one that happened 80 years ago. When faced with contemporary mass atrocities, we tie ourselves in knots avoiding Holocaust comparisons, and in doing so, we often fail to recognize genocide happening in real-time until it is too late. Rwanda happened while the international community debated whether to use the word “genocide” because using that word would trigger legal obligations to intervene. Eight hundred thousand people were murdered in 100 days while diplomats played semantic games[19, 20].

The comparison between Iran’s January 2026 massacre and the Holocaust is not hyperbole. It is not exploitation. It is historical pattern recognition based on documented evidence. And if we cannot make this comparison, if we cannot learn from the Holocaust’s lessons to identify and respond to contemporary atrocities that share its characteristics, then what was the point of Holocaust education at all?

Let us examine the evidence soberly and factually. Between January 8-9, 2026, the Islamic Republic of Iran killed an estimated 30,000 to 36,500 civilians in 48 hours[3, 5]. These estimates come from multiple credible sources: *Time Magazine*, *The Guardian*, Iran International (a Persian-language news organization), and unnamed European diplomatic sources citing intelligence assessments. Even if we take the most conservative confirmed figures, the Human Rights Activists News Agency’s documented 6,842 confirmed deaths as of February 1, 2026, we are still discussing mass killing on a scale rarely seen in modern history[21].

Compare this to Babi Yar, one of the Holocaust’s single deadliest events. On September 29-30, 1941, Nazi Einsatzgruppe C, with assistance from local collaborators, murdered 33,771 Jews in a ravine outside Kyiv, Ukraine, over 48 hours[8, 9]. This massacre was so horrific that even among Holocaust atrocities, it stands out. It is taught in schools as an example of the Holocaust’s brutality. Memorials commemorate it. Historians study it as a turning point in Nazi Germany’s genocidal campaign.

Iran’s January 8-9 massacre potentially killed as many people in the same timeframe. The methods differed, bullets instead of bullets and mass graves, snipers on rooftops instead of Einsatzgruppen execution squads, but the result was the same: tens of thousands of civilians systematically murdered by state actors over two days. If Babi Yar represents Holocaust-level atrocity, then so does Iran’s January 2026 massacre. The comparison is not rhetorical flourish. It is mathematical and moral equivalence.

But the comparison goes deeper than numbers. The Holocaust did not begin with gas chambers. It began with incremental dehumanization, systematic persecution, and escalating violence that the world watched and did little to stop. Nazi Germany started with discriminatory laws, moved to Kristallnacht’s orchestrated violence, then to ghettos, then to mobile killing squads, and finally to industrial-scale extermination camps. At each stage, there were warning signs. At each stage, the international community could have intervened more forcefully. At each stage, Jews and other targeted groups were told to wait, to be patient, that diplomatic pressure was working, that economic sanctions would eventually change the regime’s behavior.

The Islamic Republic has followed a similar trajectory over 47 years. They began with consolidating power through execution of political opponents after the 1979 revolution. In 1988, they massacred an esti-

mated 2,800 to 5,000 political prisoners in secret killings that families only learned about years later[12, 13]. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, they maintained control through systematic torture, imprisonment, and selective executions. In 2009, during the Green Movement protests following disputed elections, they killed dozens and imprisoned thousands. In November 2019, they killed approximately 1,500 in two weeks[15]. In 2022, they killed over 500 during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests[18]. And now, in January 2026, they killed tens of thousands in two days.

This is escalation. This is impunity breeding bolder atrocities. This is exactly what Holocaust scholars warn us to watch for: a government that incrementally increases mass violence, faces minimal international consequences, and concludes that it can act with ever-greater brutality. The Islamic Republic has learned, just as Nazi Germany learned in the 1930s, that the world's red lines are more pink suggestions, that "Never Again" means "Maybe Not This Time Either," that they can murder their population as long as they do it within their own borders and maintain plausible deniability through information blackouts.

The systematic nature of Iran's massacre parallels Holocaust methodology. This was not spontaneous violence or crowd control gone wrong. The January 8 internet blackout was imposed before the worst killing began, a pre-planned communications shutdown to hide the atrocity[7]. Security forces deployed snipers to strategic positions on rooftops of mosques, police stations, and government buildings throughout multiple cities simultaneously, indicating coordinated planning[11]. Eyewitness testimonies describe security forces shooting protesters in the head and chest, targeted kill shots, not crowd dispersal[10]. Hospital raids to arrest wounded protesters mirror Nazi practices of preventing victims from receiving care[5]. The extortion of families to ransom bodies parallels the systematic theft and exploitation that characterized Holocaust-era policies[10].

Perhaps most chillingly, the Islamic Republic uses religious law, specifically the charge of "Moharebeh" or "waging war against God," to legally justify executing protesters[10]. The Nazi regime similarly used legal frameworks and pseudo-scientific racial theory to legitimize genocide. Both regimes transformed murder into bureaucratic procedure, making mass killing not merely permissible but obligatory within their ideological systems. When Iran's Supreme Leader is deemed "God's representative on Earth" and opposing him becomes "war against God" punishable by death, the government has created a religious justification for genocide that parallels Nazi racial ideology's justification for the Holocaust.

The comparison to the Holocaust is not about claiming identical circumstances or equivalent historical contexts. Iran's massacre is not the Holocaust. But it shares core characteristics: systematic state murder of civilians, ideologically justified mass killing, incremental escalation met with international inaction, information control to hide atrocities, and a government that views a segment of its population as enemies to be eliminated rather than citizens to be governed. These are Holocaust warning signs. They are genocide indicators. And if we cannot invoke the Holocaust's lessons to demand action when we see these patterns repeating, then Holocaust education has failed in its fundamental purpose: teaching us to recognize and prevent genocide before it reaches industrial extermination scales.

The survivors of the Holocaust who dedicated their final years to education and testimony did not do so merely to memorialize the past. They did it to prepare future generations to recognize genocide's warning

signs and act. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, spent decades speaking about the moral obligation to respond to contemporary atrocities. He condemned the Rwandan genocide, the Darfur genocide, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. He understood that “Never Again” was not a statement about the past, it was a commitment about the future. When speaking about moral responsibility, Wiesel stated: “We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented”[22].

The Iranian people being massacred in January 2026 deserve the same moral clarity that we retrospectively apply to the Holocaust. They deserve for the world to recognize that what is happening to them is not “political instability” or “civil unrest” or “a crackdown on protests.” It is systematic state murder. It is massacre. It is an ongoing atrocity that demands immediate intervention. And if invoking the Holocaust is what it takes to break through public indifference and political cowardice, then invoking the Holocaust is not disrespectful to Holocaust victims, it is honoring their memory by taking seriously the lessons they tried to teach us.

1.3. How Holocaust Documentation Taught the World to Bear Witness, And Why We Must Do the Same for Iran

The world did not fully believe the Holocaust was happening while it was happening. Even as reports filtered out of Nazi-occupied Europe, even as Jewish refugees told their stories, even as resistance fighters smuggled out evidence, much of the Allied world dismissed the accounts as exaggerated, as propaganda, as impossible. How could a modern European nation be systematically murdering millions of people? How could something so monstrous be real?

It was only when Allied forces liberated the concentration camps in 1945 that denial became impossible. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, upon seeing the liberated Ohrdruf concentration camp, immediately understood the historical importance of documentation. He ordered that German civilians from nearby towns be brought to witness what had been done in their proximity. He ensured that American soldiers saw the camps. And critically, he summoned journalists and photographers[23]. His reasoning was clear: get it all on record now, get the films, get the witnesses, because somewhere down the road of history some would claim that this never happened[23].

Eisenhower understood that atrocity requires evidence, that testimony requires documentation, that justice requires witnesses. The photographs taken at liberation, skeletal survivors behind barbed wire, mass graves being excavated, piles of victims’ shoes and belongings, became irrefutable proof. The Nuremberg trials relied on meticulous documentation: Nazi records of deportations, gas chamber construction orders, execution orders signed by officials[24]. Survivor testimony, corroborated by documentary evidence, created a historical record that could not be denied.

This documentation served multiple purposes. It provided evidence for war crimes trials, holding perpetrators accountable. It educated future generations, ensuring the Holocaust would be remembered and studied. It answered Holocaust deniers with facts. And perhaps most importantly, it created a moral record

that forced the world to confront what had happened and commit to preventing it from happening again.

Holocaust documentation also pioneered specific methodologies that have become standard in human rights advocacy and genocide prevention: meticulous recording of individual victims' names and stories to counter the dehumanization of statistics; collection of eyewitness testimony from survivors; verification of accounts through multiple independent sources; preservation of physical evidence; documentation of the bureaucratic machinery of killing; and creating accessible educational materials to ensure widespread public awareness[25].

Organizations like Yad Vashem in Israel, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and countless Holocaust education centers worldwide continue this work. They maintain databases of victims' names, preserving individual identities against erasure. They record video testimonies from aging survivors, recognizing that firsthand accounts carry unique moral weight[25]. They train educators to teach the Holocaust not merely as history but as moral instruction. They have transformed "Never Again" from a slogan into a methodology: document, educate, remember, and demand accountability.

The Iranian people and human rights organizations documenting the January 2026 massacre are following this same methodology, often under far more dangerous circumstances than post-war Holocaust documentation. The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), based in the United States but with sources inside Iran, has been documenting protests, deaths, arrests, and torture cases since the demonstrations began on December 28, 2025. As of February 1, 2026, they had confirmed 6,842 deaths and were investigating 11,280 additional cases[21]. They document names when possible, ages, locations, causes of death. They verify reports through multiple sources. They are creating the evidentiary record that will be essential for future accountability.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have deployed their verification teams, analyzing videos smuggled out of Iran despite the internet blackout, interviewing eyewitnesses who managed to escape or communicate via limited Starlink access, examining photographs of morgues and hospitals[26, 2]. They employ digital forensics experts who can verify video metadata, geolocate footage, and authenticate images to ensure their evidence will stand up in future legal proceedings. Their reports carefully distinguish between confirmed deaths, likely deaths, and unverified reports, maintaining the documentation standards established by Holocaust researchers.

Iran International, a London-based Persian-language news organization, conducted a multi-stage investigation published on January 13, 2026, that estimated at least 12,000 civilians were killed during January 8-9[27]. Their methodology paralleled investigative journalism standards developed for documenting genocide: they interviewed eyewitnesses and families, obtained information from sources inside Iran's government (including the Supreme National Security Council, the Presidency, and IRGC members in three different cities), collected data from hospitals and morgues, and spoke with doctors and nurses who treated the wounded and processed the dead. This is painstaking, dangerous work. Sources inside Iran who provide this information risk execution if discovered.

BBC Verify and BBC Persian analyzed video footage that emerged showing nearly 200 bodies in a Tehran morgue, many with obvious gunshot wounds, including a 16-year-old boy[1]. Their forensic exam-

ination verified the footage's authenticity, and their reporting gave the world a glimpse into the massacre's scale despite the information blackout. This is exactly the kind of documentation Eisenhower demanded at concentration camp liberation: visual evidence that cannot be denied, independently verified by credible journalistic organizations.

The documentation is happening under conditions that make Holocaust-era testimony collection look easy by comparison. Holocaust survivors testified after liberation, after the immediate danger had passed. Iranians documenting the January 2026 massacre are doing so while the killing continues, while the regime actively hunts people who share information, while the internet remains largely shut down, while arrests and executions continue. People inside Iran who manage to send out videos or testimony via Starlink satellite internet know they could be traced and arrested. Doctors and nurses who report what they witnessed in hospitals are now being arrested[5]. Families who speak to international media face retaliation. Every piece of evidence that reaches the outside world represents someone inside Iran taking extraordinary risks.

This is why documentation matters. This is why bearing witness is not passive. When you read this document, when you view verified footage, when you learn the victims' names and ages and circumstances of death, you are participating in the same moral work that Holocaust documentation established as essential. You are making denial impossible. You are creating accountability pressure. You are honoring the dead by refusing to let them become anonymous statistics. You are doing what Eisenhower understood must be done: getting it all on record now, because the Iranian regime is already working to erase evidence, to hide bodies, to claim the deaths never happened or were far fewer than documented, to blame foreign enemies and "terrorists" rather than admit to massacre.

The Islamic Republic's first response to international reports of the death toll was to claim the numbers were exaggerated, that the protesters were armed terrorists, that foreign powers manufactured the evidence[10]. This is genocide denial in real-time, happening before the killing has even stopped. It parallels Holocaust denial but occurs simultaneously with the atrocity rather than decades later. This makes documentation even more urgent. Every verified piece of evidence, every corroborated testimony, every forensically authenticated video is a brick in the wall against denial and impunity.

But documentation alone is not enough, and this is the lesson we have failed to learn from the Holocaust. Documentation must lead to action. The evidence from liberated concentration camps led to the Nuremberg trials, to the creation of international humanitarian law, to the Genocide Convention, to the founding of the United Nations. Documentation was the foundation for accountability and systemic change. If documentation of Iran's massacre leads only to reports filed in UN archives, to NGO statements that generate brief news cycles, to academic papers published in human rights journals that policymakers never read, then we have learned only half the lesson.

Holocaust documentation taught us how to bear witness. Now we must apply the second part of that lesson: using testimony to demand justice and prevent future atrocities. The Iranian people documenting their government's crimes at great personal risk are doing their part. They are the witnesses. They are the evidence gatherers. They are creating the record. The question is whether the international community will honor that work by acting on it, or whether we will simply add the January 2026 Iran massacre to the long

list of well-documented genocides that the world watched and did nothing to stop.

1.4. The Architecture of Denial: How the World Ignores Modern Genocides

There is a formula to how the international community responds to genocide in the modern era, and it is depressingly predictable. First comes denial, dismissing early reports as exaggerated, unverified, or propaganda. Then comes the passive voice, atrocities are “happening” rather than being committed by specific actors. Then comes the both-sides framing, “violence on both sides” even when one side is an armed government massacring unarmed civilians. Then comes the geopolitical calculus, intervention is complicated, there are strategic interests to consider, sanctions might hurt the wrong people, we don’t have all the facts, we must work through diplomatic channels. Finally comes the retrospective hand-wringing, expressions of regret years later when it is too late, apologies for not acting sooner, solemn promises that we will do better next time, accompanied by the construction of memorials and museums dedicated to remembering atrocities we did nothing to prevent.

This is not cynicism. This is pattern recognition based on Rwanda, Darfur, Bosnia, Myanmar, and countless other genocides and mass atrocities that occurred after the world pledged “Never Again.” The architecture of denial is not accidental. It serves powerful interests that prioritize stability, economic relationships, and geopolitical considerations over human life. And it operates through specific mechanisms that make it easier for governments, media, and ordinary citizens to look away from atrocities even when they are fully documented.

The first mechanism is definitional games. Is it genocide, or is it “merely” crimes against humanity? Is it systematic, or is it spontaneous violence? Genocide has a specific legal definition under international law, requiring proof of intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Mass killing of political dissidents, while horrific, does not technically meet this definition. Therefore, lawyers and policymakers argue, what is happening in Iran might not be “genocide” in the legal sense. It might be “just” massacre, mass atrocity, war crimes, crimes against humanity, terms that carry less weight in public consciousness and trigger fewer international obligations.

This is deliberate obfuscation. When the Iranian regime kills tens of thousands of protesters, the appropriate response is not to debate legal taxonomies. The appropriate response is to recognize systematic state murder of civilians and act to stop it. But by engaging in definitional debates, the international community buys time to do nothing while appearing thoughtful and measured. Rwanda taught us this lesson: while diplomats debated whether to use the word “genocide,” 800,000 people were murdered in 100 days[19]. The debate served as excuse for inaction.

The second mechanism is false equivalence. Media coverage and political statements often describe events as “clashes” between protesters and security forces, as if these were two armed parties in roughly equal conflict. The passive voice dominates: “dozens killed in protests” rather than “government forces shoot dozens of unarmed protesters.” Language matters. Framing matters. When CNN or BBC headlines read “Violence escalates in Iran protests,” the reader does not immediately understand that the violence is

one-directional, government forces systematically murdering civilians. “Clashes” implies mutual combat. “Escalation” implies both sides are increasing aggression. Neither captures the reality: a government deploying snipers, heavy machine guns, and coordinated death squads against unarmed people whose only weapons are their voices.

Some protesters did fight back. Some threw rocks. Some set government buildings on fire. Some, in isolated incidents, killed security force members. This is universally true in contexts of state oppression, eventually, some victims resist violently. But presenting these incidents as if they justify or explain the government’s massacre is moral insanity. The appropriate comparison is the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising during the Holocaust. When Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto fought back against Nazi forces in 1943, this did not make the Holocaust “complicated” or “two-sided.” It made the Jews’ resistance heroic and the Nazi response, razing the ghetto and murdering everyone, even more monstrous. The same applies in Iran. When protesters set fire to government buildings after watching their friends shot in the streets, this does not morally complicate the situation. It underscores the desperation of people who have exhausted peaceful options.

The third mechanism is geopolitical “complexity.” Iran is not an easy target. It has regional allies, significant oil reserves, nuclear program negotiations with major powers, and proxy forces throughout the Middle East. Intervening risks broader conflict. Tough sanctions hurt ordinary Iranians who are already suffering. Military action is politically unpopular. Regime change has failed spectacularly in Iraq and Libya, so how can we risk it in Iran? These are all legitimate considerations in the abstract, but they function as excuses for accepting mass murder when deployed during ongoing atrocities.

The “complexity” argument assumes that preventing genocide requires invasion and regime change. This is a false choice. There are actions short of military intervention that the international community has not taken: comprehensive sanctions targeting the regime’s leadership and economic lifelines while specifically exempting humanitarian goods; seizing all Iranian government assets in Western banks; expelling Iran from international bodies including the United Nations; providing unlimited free Starlink internet access to Iranians to break the information blockade; loudly and repeatedly declaring that regime leaders will face prosecution for crimes against humanity; offering asylum and protection to Iranian refugees; and making clear that the international community recognizes the Iranian people’s right to overthrow a government that massacres them.

None of these actions require military intervention. All of them would impose real costs on the Islamic Republic. But they also carry economic and diplomatic costs for Western nations, and this is the real reason they do not happen. European countries have significant trade relationships with Iran. The nuclear deal negotiations create diplomatic channels that governments do not want to jeopardize. Regional stability, even stability enforced by a murderous regime, is often preferable to the uncertainty of genuine democratic change. So “complexity” becomes the excuse for doing nothing, or doing so little that it makes no difference.

The fourth mechanism is attention economics. We live in an era of constant information overload. Atrocities compete for attention with celebrity news, sports, political scandals, and viral videos. Even among human rights crises, there is competition, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar all demand attention simultaneously. News organizations make editorial decisions about coverage based on audience

interest, geopolitical importance, and visual compelling-ness of available footage. If a story does not “trend,” it disappears from coverage within days.

The Iran internet blackout serves the regime perfectly in this environment. Limited footage means limited viral spread. Without constant flow of horrifying images, the story fades. Compare coverage of Iran’s January 2026 massacre to coverage of other major events. The Israel-Gaza conflict receives intensive daily coverage with live feeds, journalist reports from the ground, and constant social media documentation. Ukraine’s war gets sustained attention. These conflicts occur in places where information flows relatively freely. Iran’s massacre happened behind a digital curtain, with only fragments of evidence escaping. This makes the story harder to follow, harder to visualize, easier to forget.

The fifth mechanism is psychological. Atrocity is hard to process. Mass death at the scale of tens of thousands is incomprehensible. The human mind cannot emotionally engage with abstract numbers. This is why Holocaust education focuses on individual stories, Anne Frank’s diary, Elie Wiesel’s memoir, specific testimonies from specific people. One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic, as Stalin apocryphally observed. The Iranian regime understands this, which is why they hide bodies, prevent funerals, threaten families into silence. They want to keep the dead anonymous, to prevent individual stories from emerging, to turn massacre into an abstract number that people cannot emotionally engage with.

Ordinary people facing this information also engage in psychological self-protection. Learning about atrocities produces feelings of horror, anger, and helplessness. These are deeply uncomfortable emotions. The natural response is to look away, to think about something else, to convince yourself that surely the situation is not as bad as reported, that experts and governments are handling it, that your individual attention will not make a difference. This is human and understandable. It is also how genocides proceed while millions of people technically know they are happening but do not act.

The architecture of denial is designed to enable this looking away. It provides respectable-sounding reasons to not engage: “It’s complicated,” “We don’t have all the facts,” “Both sides are at fault,” “The situation is tragic but intervention would make it worse,” “We must respect sovereignty,” “Sanctions hurt ordinary people,” “We’re working through diplomatic channels.” All of these statements can sound reasonable in isolation. Taken together, they form a comprehensive framework for accepting mass atrocity.

This is why bearing witness matters. Witness breaks through denial. When you read specific testimonies, learn victims’ names, see verified footage, understand the systematic nature of the killing, follow the documentary evidence, denial becomes harder. The architecture of denial relies on abstraction, on keeping atrocity at a distance, on presenting it as too complex for ordinary citizens to understand or respond to. Detailed documentation destroys that distance. It makes atrocity real, immediate, comprehensible, and unacceptable.

The Iranian people are trying to break through this architecture of denial by documenting their government’s crimes at tremendous personal risk. The question is whether those of us with the privilege to receive this information will honor their courage by actually bearing witness, not just consuming the information but carrying it forward, sharing it, demanding action, refusing to let it be buried in the next news cycle. If we fail to do this, if we let the architecture of denial operate as designed, then we are complicit. Not in the

killing, that is the Iranian regime's crime. But in the world's failure to stop it. And that complicity will be our generation's moral failure, the thing our grandchildren will ask about and struggle to understand: "How could you have known and done nothing?"

1.5. Your Responsibility as a Human Being with Access to This Information

You did not ask to bear witness to atrocity. You did not seek out this information intending to inherit moral responsibility. Perhaps you opened this document out of curiosity, or because someone shared it, or because you vaguely knew something was happening in Iran and wanted to understand more. But now that you have read this far, now that you know, you cannot unknow. Ignorance is no longer available to you. And with knowledge comes responsibility.

This is uncomfortable. We live in an era where we are constantly bombarded with information about suffering around the world. Social media algorithms show us atrocities between cat videos and vacation photos. The news cycles through crisis after crisis. There is always something terrible happening somewhere, and we cannot possibly respond meaningfully to all of it. Compassion fatigue is real. The sense of helplessness in the face of global suffering is overwhelming. So most of us, most of the time, engage in necessary psychological triage. We care about some things, let other things pass by, donate to causes that feel manageable, and try to be decent people in our immediate lives while accepting that we cannot save the world.

This is human. This is even necessary for psychological survival. But it is also the mechanism through which atrocities proceed unchecked. Genocides happen not because most people actively support them, but because most people who could theoretically do something choose not to, individually deciding that this particular crisis is too big, too distant, too complex for their engagement to matter.

But there are moments when that calculation is insufficient. There are events of such magnitude and moral clarity that looking away is not neutral, it is a choice with moral weight. The Holocaust was one such moment. Rwanda was another. And Iran's January 2026 massacre is such a moment now. This is not a complex geopolitical conflict with ambiguous moral dimensions. This is a government systematically murdering tens of thousands of its own citizens for demanding freedom and dignity. The moral clarity is absolute. The only question is whether you will act commensurate with that clarity.

What does it mean to bear witness? It is more than passive reception of information. Bearing witness is an active stance. It means carrying forward the testimony you have received. It means refusing to let the documented truth be buried or forgotten. It means using whatever platform you have, social media, conversations with friends and family, letters to elected representatives, donations to human rights organizations, participation in protests or vigils, to amplify the voices of those being silenced.

It means you cannot scroll past. When you see news about Iran, you stop and read. When friends ask "What's happening in Iran?", you tell them, with specificity and urgency. When political representatives issue weak statements or ignore the crisis entirely, you contact their offices and demand substantive action. When media coverage is inadequate, you write to news organizations demanding better. When social media

platforms suppress Iranian activists' content or allow regime propaganda, you protest loudly. When companies continue doing business with the Iranian regime, you support divestment campaigns. These are small actions individually, but collectively they create sustained pressure that can shift policy and maintain public attention.

You have access to information that many people do not. The Iranian regime went to extraordinary lengths to hide their massacre, shutting down internet, blocking phones, jamming satellites, seizing communication equipment, threatening anyone who speaks. That you can read this document means their information blockade failed, at least partially. Iranian activists risked everything to get this information out. Journalists verified it under dangerous conditions. Human rights organizations compiled it meticulously. All of that effort was undertaken with one purpose: to ensure the world knows and cannot claim ignorance. If you receive this information and do nothing with it, all that courageous work was wasted.

There is also a personal moral dimension. How you respond to this information reveals something about your own ethical commitments and the world you want to live in. Most people, if asked in the abstract, would say they oppose genocide, support human rights, believe in the equal dignity of all people. But abstract beliefs are easy. The test comes when you have to translate belief into action that is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or requires sustained effort.

In the future, this moment will be history. The January 2026 Iran massacre will be studied in books, taught in classes, commemorated in memorials, assuming enough people care to ensure it is not forgotten. And in that future, people will ask the same questions we now ask about past atrocities: How did this happen? Why didn't the world stop it? How could so many people have known and done so little? These questions will have answers, and those answers will include you. Your response, action or inaction, engagement or apathy, becomes part of that historical record.

This is not meant to guilt you. It is meant to clarify what is at stake. Bearing witness to atrocity places us at a moral crossroads. One path is continuing with life as normal, maybe feeling vaguely bad about what is happening in Iran, perhaps sharing a social media post or two, then moving on as the news cycle shifts. This path is easy and common. It is also the path that enables atrocities to proceed.

The other path is harder. It requires sustained attention to something painful. It requires taking actions that might feel small and ineffective. It requires caring about people you will never meet, in a country you may never visit, whose language you probably do not speak. It requires believing that your individual actions, aggregated with others' actions, can create pressure that shifts government policies, alters news coverage, and provides tangible support to people fighting for freedom. It requires faith that bearing witness matters, even when outcomes are uncertain.

But this harder path is also the one that lets you look at yourself in the mirror and know you did not turn away. It is the path that honors the victims by refusing to let them die in anonymity and obscurity. It is the path that respects the courage of Iranians documenting atrocities at risk to their lives. It is the path that takes seriously what "Never Again" is supposed to mean. And it is the path that creates the possibility, no guarantee, but possibility, that sustained attention and pressure might constrain the Iranian regime's violence, might provide courage to protesters still risking their lives, might eventually contribute to accountability.

You cannot singlehandedly stop the Islamic Republic from killing Iranians. No individual can. But you can be one person who refused to look away, who carried the testimony forward, who added your voice to the demand for justice. And if enough people make that choice, collectively we become something powerful: a global community of witnesses who will not allow atrocity to proceed in comfortable silence.

The Iranian protesters who face bullets for chanting “Death to the Dictator” are incredibly brave. The doctors treating gunshot wounds knowing they might be arrested are heroes. The families searching morgues for their children despite extortion and threats demonstrate profound dignity. The activists smuggling information out through satellite internet while security forces hunt them show extraordinary courage. All of that bravery, all of that courage, all of that sacrifice, it asks something of you. Not to match their risk; you are not being asked to face bullets or torture. But you are being asked to care. To remember. To speak. To act within your capacity. To be the witness that the architecture of denial tries to prevent you from becoming.

This is your responsibility. Not because you are Iranian, you may not be. Not because you have special expertise, you may not. Simply because you are a human being with access to this information, living in a world where “Never Again” is being tested right now, at a moment when witness matters. The question is not whether you can save Iran singlehandedly. The question is whether you will be one of the people who tried.

References

- [1] BBC Persian. *Video verification shows bodies in Tehran morgue*. BBC Verify analyzed video footage showing approximately 200 bodies in a Tehran morgue. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/persian>.
- [2] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Growing Evidence of Countrywide Massacres*. Medical professional account of 150 bodies brought to single hospital in Mashhad. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/16/iran-growing-evidence-of-countrywide-massacres>.
- [3] Time Magazine. “Iran Protest Death Toll Could Top 30,000: Local Officials”. In: *Time* (Jan. 2026). URL: <https://time.com/7357635/more-than-30000-killed-in-iran-say-senior-officials/>.
- [4] The Guardian. “Iran protests death toll could surpass 30,000, reports claim”. In: *The Guardian* (Jan. 2026).
- [5] Iran International. *Over 36,500 killed in Iran’s deadliest massacre, documents reveal*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601255198>.
- [6] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). *Documented arrests during 2025-2026 protests*. Over 18,400 arrests documented as of January 14, 2026. Jan. 2026.
- [7] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Internet blackout in Iran*. Internet blackout beginning January 8, 2026, with 99% connectivity loss. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Internet_blackout_in_Iran.
- [8] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Mass Shootings at Babyn Yar (Babi Yar)”. In: (). 33,771 Jews murdered September 29-30, 1941. URL: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kiev-and-babi-yar>.
- [9] Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. *The Babi Yar massacre*. Over 33,000 Jewish people murdered over two days beginning September 29, 1941. URL: <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/the-babi-yar-massacre/>.

- [10] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Iran massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [11] Euronews. *Iran protests death toll could surpass 30,000, reports claim*. Security forces shooting from elevated positions including rooftops. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/2026/01/27/iran-protests-death-toll-could-surpass-more-than-30000-reports-claim>.
- [12] Human Rights Watch. *Iran's 1988 Mass Executions*. Between 2,800 and 5,000 political prisoners executed. June 2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/08/irans-1988-mass-executions>.
- [13] Amnesty International. *Iran still seeks to erase the '1988 prison massacre' from memories 25 years on*. Aug. 2013. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/08/iran-still-seeks-erase-prison-massacre-memories-years/>.
- [14] Wikipedia contributors. *1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1988_executions_of_Iranian_political_prisoners.
- [15] Wikipedia contributors. *2019–2020 Iranian protests*. Approximately 1,500 deaths according to Reuters citing Iranian interior ministry officials. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%932020_Iranian_protests.
- [16] Parisa Hafezi and Babak Bozorgmehr. "Special Report: Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest - 'Do whatever it takes to end it'". In: *Reuters* (Dec. 2019).
- [17] Wikipedia contributors. *Death of Mahsa Amini*. 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died September 16, 2022 in morality police custody. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Mahsa_Amini.
- [18] Iran Human Rights. *Woman, Life, Freedom protests casualties*. At least 476 people killed by December 2022. 2022.
- [19] Wikipedia contributors. *Rwandan genocide*. Between 500,000 and 800,000 people killed in approximately 100 days. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide.
- [20] Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of Minnesota. *Rwanda*. Nearly one million killed during 100 day period in 1994. URL: <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/rwanda>.
- [21] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). *Verified death counts as of February 1, 2026*. 6,842 confirmed deaths with 11,280 cases under investigation. Feb. 2026.
- [22] Elie Wiesel. *The Night Trilogy: Night, Dawn, The Accident*. Quote: "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented". Hill and Wang.
- [23] National Park Service. *Documenting History: Eisenhower and the Holocaust*. Eisenhower ordered documentation of concentration camps for historical record. URL: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/eisenhower-and-the-holocaust.htm>.
- [24] Wikipedia contributors. *Evidence and documentation for the Holocaust*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evidence_and_documentation_for_the_Holocaust.
- [25] USC Shoah Foundation. *The Holocaust*. Visual History Archive containing 57,876 audiovisual testimonies. URL: <https://sfi.usc.edu/collections/holocaust>.
- [26] Amnesty International. *Iran internet shutdown hides violations in escalating protests*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/internet-shutdown-in-iran-hides-violations-in-escalating-protests/>.

-
- [27] Iran International. *At least 12,000 killed in Iran crackdown during internet blackout*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601130145>.

Part 2

The Regime: Understanding the Perpetrator

2. The Islamic Republic: A 47-Year Reign of Terror

To understand the massacres of January 2026, you must understand the regime that committed them. The Islamic Republic of Iran is not a government that suddenly turned violent. It is not a flawed democracy that overreacted to protests. It is not a nation struggling with internal security challenges. It is a totalitarian theocracy that has maintained power for 47 years through systematic brutality, mass imprisonment, torture, and execution. It is a regime that views its own population as the primary threat to its survival, and responds to that threat with overwhelming lethal force. And it is a regime built on the ruins of a very different Iran, a nation of promise and progress that was destroyed in 1979 and replaced with something dark.

Before we examine the massacres of 2026, we need to understand what Iran was before the revolution, what was lost, how the regime came to power, how it maintains control, and why its pattern of killing has escalated over nearly five decades to the point where murdering tens of thousands of civilians in two days becomes possible. This is not ancient history. There are Iranians alive today who remember the Iran that existed before 1979. There are women who once walked freely without forced veiling, who had legal rights that have since been stolen. There are men who remember universities where ideas flowed freely, where criticizing the government did not mean risking execution. The Islamic Republic did not inherit a backward medieval society and modernize it. It inherited a modernizing nation and dragged it backward into medieval brutality dressed in revolutionary rhetoric.

2.1. What Iran Was Before 1979: A Nation of Promise Destroyed

2.1.1. Pre-Revolution Iran: Modernization, Education, Women's Rights

In the 1970s, Iran was undergoing rapid transformation. This is not to romanticize the pre-revolution era, the Shah's regime had serious problems, authoritarianism, political repression through the SAVAK secret police, growing inequality, and a pace of modernization that alienated traditional and rural populations. But in terms of social progress, women's rights, education, and economic development, pre-revolution Iran was on a trajectory that would be unrecognizable to Iranians today.

The White Revolution, launched in 1963 by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was an ambitious modernization program that fundamentally altered Iranian society[1, 2]. It included land reform that redistributed property from large landholders to peasants, nationalization of key industries, massive investments in infrastructure and education, literacy campaigns, and critically, substantial expansion of women's rights. Between 1963 and 1979, Iranian women gained the right to vote for the first time in 1963, the right to hold public office, and expanded legal protections through the 1975 Family Protection Law[3, 4].

The Family Protection Law represented a massive leap forward for Iranian women[5, 6]. It granted women equal rights in marriage and divorce, a revolutionary concept in a Middle Eastern context. It enhanced women's rights in child custody matters. It raised the minimum marriage age to 18 for women and 20 for men, protecting girls from child marriage. And it practically eliminated polygamy by requiring a man

to obtain his first wife's consent and prove his ability to treat multiple wives equally before a court would permit a second marriage[4, 6]. This law, passed just four years before the revolution, placed Iran ahead of many Western nations in terms of codified gender equality in family law.

Abortion was legalized quietly during this period without arousing significant public attention, accomplished by removing penalties for performing the procedure from medical malpractice law. Labor laws were revised to eliminate sex discrimination and incorporate equal pay for equal work. Women were actively encouraged to run for political office, to pursue careers, to attend university. By 1976, just three years before the revolution, 40 percent of secondary school enrollment was female[2]. This represented tremendous progress from earlier decades when women's education was rare outside elite urban families.

The literacy campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s were among the most effective in the developing world[1]. While literacy rates in 1976 still showed significant gender gaps, with 35.48 percent of Iranian women over age six literate compared to 47.49 percent of men, the trajectory was clear[7]. Access to education was expanding rapidly. Universities were opening. Women were entering professions previously closed to them. Iranian women were becoming doctors, engineers, teachers, lawyers, government officials. Tehran University, founded in 1934, was producing generations of educated professionals, both male and female, who expected to participate fully in Iran's modernization.

The economy was booming during this period, driven by oil revenues and industrialization programs[8, 9]. From 1964 to 1978, Iran's gross national product grew at an annual rate of 13.2 percent at constant prices[8]. Manufacturing of cars, appliances, and consumer goods increased substantially, creating a growing middle class and new industrialist class. This was extraordinary economic growth, even if its benefits were not evenly distributed and it created social dislocation and resentment among those left behind.

Tehran in the 1970s was a cosmopolitan city. Women walked the streets in Western clothing alongside those who chose traditional dress. Cinemas showed international films. Universities hosted vigorous intellectual debates. Bookstores sold literature from around the world. Cafes and restaurants thrived. Young people gathered in parks. There was a thriving arts scene, music, theater, poetry. Iran was producing internationally recognized filmmakers, writers, artists. The society was not free in the political sense, the Shah's SAVAK secret police brutally suppressed political dissent, but in terms of social freedoms, personal choice, cultural expression, and particularly women's autonomy, pre-revolution Iran was rapidly liberalizing.

This is the Iran that was destroyed in 1979. This is what was lost. And this is what makes the Islamic Republic's brutality particularly tragic, it did not rescue Iran from backwardness. It imposed backwardness on a society that was moving toward greater freedom, greater education, greater women's rights, greater prosperity. The revolution did not liberate Iran. It imprisoned it.

2.1.2. What Was Lost: A Society's Stolen Future

The tragedy of the 1979 revolution is not merely what was destroyed but what could have been. Iran in the late 1970s was poised for continued progress. Its literacy rates were rising. Its economy was growing. Its women were gaining rights and access to education at an accelerating pace. Its young population

was increasingly educated, cosmopolitan, and connected to global culture. Had Iran continued on its pre-revolution trajectory, it could have become one of the most developed nations in the Middle East, perhaps comparable to South Korea or other rapidly industrializing nations of that era[9].

Instead, that future was stolen. The women who had gained the right to vote in 1963 saw that right become meaningless in a theocracy where the Supreme Leader holds absolute power and elections are carefully controlled[3]. The women who had gained expanded divorce and custody rights under the 1975 Family Protection Law saw those rights revoked immediately after the revolution[5]. The young women entering universities in record numbers suddenly faced mandatory veiling, gender-segregated classrooms, restrictions on fields of study, and a legal system that treated them as second-class citizens. A woman's testimony in court became worth half that of a man's. The minimum marriage age was lowered back down, allowing child marriages. Polygamy returned. Temporary marriages, essentially legalized prostitution, were encouraged.

The arts and culture that had flourished in the 1970s were subjected to Islamic censorship. Cinema was restricted to regime-approved content. Music was heavily censored, Western music banned, female singers prohibited from performing for mixed audiences. Literature was controlled. Publishing required regime approval. Universities were purged of faculty deemed insufficiently Islamic. The Cultural Revolution of 1980 to 1983 closed universities, expelled thousands of students, and restructured education to enforce Islamic ideology. Intellectuals, artists, writers, and academics who had been the drivers of Iran's modernization were imprisoned, exiled, or executed.

The economic progress of the Shah era was reversed[8]. The Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 devastated the economy and killed hundreds of thousands. International sanctions, imposed first after the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis and repeatedly thereafter, isolated Iran economically. Mismanagement, corruption, and the prioritization of ideological goals over economic rationality led to decline. The mullahs who took power in 1979 had no expertise in running a modern economy. They distrusted the educated technocrats who did. The result was decades of economic stagnation, inflation, unemployment, and declining living standards for ordinary Iranians.

The young people of the 1970s who expected to inherit a modernizing nation instead inherited a theocratic police state. The students who filled universities expecting to build careers in a growing economy instead faced limited opportunities, brain drain as the educated fled abroad, and a system that valued ideological loyalty over competence. Generations of Iranians have grown up knowing only the Islamic Republic, never experiencing the freedoms their parents or grandparents briefly enjoyed. They hear stories of what Tehran was like in the 1970s and struggle to reconcile those stories with the oppressive reality they face daily.

This stolen future is what drives the protests that have repeatedly erupted since 1979. Iranians are not protesting merely for economic relief or political reforms. They are protesting to reclaim the future that was taken from them. They are demanding the rights their mothers and grandmothers once had and lost. They are rejecting a system that has imprisoned them for 47 years. And this is why the regime responds with such ferocity, because it knows that if Iranians succeed in reclaiming their stolen future, the Islamic Republic will

cease to exist.

2.1.3. The Shah Era: Complexities, Progress, and Why Iranians Remember It Differently Than Western Narratives

Western narratives of pre-revolution Iran often focus exclusively on the Shah's authoritarianism, his secret police, his lavish lifestyle, his close relationship with the United States, and the inequality and corruption that characterized his rule. This narrative is not wrong, but it is incomplete. It has become fashionable in Western academic and journalistic circles to present the 1979 revolution as a popular uprising against oppression, with the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic as an unfortunate hijacking of genuine democratic aspirations. This framing obscures important realities and helps explain why many Iranians, particularly women and secular Iranians, remember the Shah era very differently than Western commentators do.

Yes, the Shah was authoritarian. His SAVAK secret police arrested, imprisoned, and tortured political dissidents. Elections were not free or fair. Political parties were restricted. Press freedom was limited. Criticism of the monarchy could result in imprisonment. These are serious abuses that should not be minimized. But in comparing authoritarian regimes, context matters. The Shah's authoritarianism was primarily political, it targeted those who challenged his rule or organized opposition movements. The Islamic Republic's authoritarianism is total, it controls not just political expression but personal behavior, religious practice, dress, relationships, entertainment, access to information, and every aspect of daily life.

Under the Shah, if you did not involve yourself in politics, you could live a relatively normal life. Women could choose their clothing, pursue education and careers, marry whom they chose, divorce if needed, travel freely[3, 5]. Men and women could socialize together. Families could make personal decisions without state interference. Cultural and social freedoms existed even when political freedoms did not. Under the Islamic Republic, there is no sphere of life free from state control. The morality police patrol streets looking for violations of Islamic dress codes. Women are arrested for showing too much hair. Couples can be detained for holding hands in public. Satellite dishes are confiscated. Internet is censored and shut down. Every aspect of life is subject to religious regulation backed by violent enforcement.

Many Iranian women who lived through both eras, the Shah's rule and the Islamic Republic, are unambiguous about which was worse. They remember being able to walk freely without forced hijab. They remember having legal rights in marriage and divorce. They remember universities and workplaces where they were treated as equals. They remember a time when their daughters' futures seemed bright and full of possibility. And then they watched all of that disappear virtually overnight in 1979[10]. The mandatory hijab was imposed within months of the revolution, sparking massive protests by women in March 1979 that were violently suppressed. The Family Protection Law was revoked. Women's rights were systematically rolled back. And for 47 years, they have been fighting to reclaim what they lost.

This is not to say all Iranians loved the Shah. Many did not. The revolution attracted broad support across Iranian society for legitimate reasons, anger at corruption, frustration with inequality, resentment

of foreign influence, desire for genuine democracy, and among religious conservatives, objection to rapid Westernization and secularization. But what many Iranians wanted in 1979, democracy, social justice, national sovereignty, was not what they got. They got a theocratic dictatorship that proved far more brutal and totalitarian than the monarchy it replaced.

Iranians who protest today sometimes carry pictures of the Shah or display the pre-revolution Iranian flag with its lion and sun symbol. Western observers often misinterpret this as support for monarchism or desire to return to the Shah's rule. What it actually represents is symbolic rejection of the Islamic Republic and nostalgia for an era when Iran seemed to have a future, when progress felt possible, when women had more rights, when society was less restricted. These symbols represent the stolen future, the Iran that could have been, the possibilities that were destroyed in 1979.

The Islamic Republic has spent 47 years trying to erase the memory of pre-revolution Iran, banning symbols, destroying monuments, rewriting history, presenting the Shah era as uniformly dark and oppressive to justify their own rule. But they have failed. Iranians remember. Families tell stories. Photographs survive. And each generation that grows up under the suffocating control of the Islamic Republic looks at those photographs and stories and asks: why did we trade that for this? This question is what the regime fears most, because it has no good answer.

2.2. 1979: When Darkness Fell, The Islamic Revolution and Its Aftermath

2.2.1. The Hijacking of a People's Revolution

The protests that brought down the Shah in 1978 and 1979 drew support from across Iranian society. Students and intellectuals seeking democracy. Workers and merchants angry about economic inequality. Leftists and communists wanting social revolution. Nationalist groups desiring independence from foreign influence. And religious conservatives organized through networks of mosques under clerical leadership. This was a genuine mass movement with millions of participants and diverse motivations. What united them was opposition to the Shah. What divided them, fatally, was the question of what should replace him.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, exiled by the Shah in 1964, had spent years building his network and refining his ideology. When he was forced to leave Iraq and relocated to Paris in October 1978, he gained an international platform and access to global media. He presented himself to Western audiences as a liberator, a spiritual leader who would restore dignity and democracy to Iran. He made vague promises about clerical non-interference in governance, about respecting freedoms, about creating a just society. Many secular participants in the revolution believed him or thought they could work with him in a coalition government.

They were catastrophically wrong. Khomeini understood something his secular and leftist allies did not: organized religious networks, thousands of mosques across the country, clerics with loyal followers, established hierarchies and communication systems, represented a ready-made apparatus for seizing and holding power. While secular groups had been driven underground by the Shah's SAVAK, forced to operate in secret with limited organizational capacity, the mosques had continued functioning openly. When the

Shah fell, religious conservatives had infrastructure their rivals lacked.

Khomeini moved quickly and ruthlessly. The siege of the U.S. Embassy in November 1979, when radical students took 52 Americans hostage for 444 days, was not merely an anti-American gesture. It was a strategic move that drove liberal and moderate elements out of the revolutionary coalition, appalled by the violation of diplomatic norms and eager to maintain international relationships. The hostage crisis created a nationalist crisis atmosphere that Khomeini exploited to consolidate power, anyone who questioned him could be accused of supporting America and betraying the revolution.

The left, which had been instrumental in toppling the Shah through organizing strikes, demonstrations, and popular mobilization, thought they could outlast or outmaneuver Khomeini. They learned too late that he was willing to use violence on a scale they could not match. In the brutal infighting that followed, thousands of opponents were executed in just the first few years after the revolution[11, 12]. Leftists, former allies, ethnic minorities, liberals, anyone who challenged clerical rule was systematically eliminated. The revolution devoured its children, and the survivors were those most willing to embrace totalitarian theocracy.

By the spring of 1981, the transformation was complete. The elected president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, a moderate who had tried to maintain some democratic elements within the new system, was impeached and forced to flee the country[13, 14]. Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih*, guardianship of the Islamic jurist, was enshrined in the constitution, giving the Supreme Leader absolute power over all aspects of state and society. Iran was no longer a revolution seeking to define itself. It was a totalitarian theocracy that would spend the next four decades perfecting techniques of control and brutality.

2.2.2. Khomeini's Return: The Beginning of Systematic Brutality

Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, 1979, after 14 years of exile. Millions of Iranians greeted him, many believing he would bring justice and dignity after the Shah's repression. Within weeks, the bloodletting began. In February 1979, four of the Shah's senior military officials were executed: Mehdi Rahimi, military commander of Tehran, Reza Naji, military governor of Isfahan, Nematollah Nassiri, head of SAVAK, and Manouchehr Khosroddad, an air force general[15]. These were show trials designed to demonstrate that the old regime's enforcers would face revolutionary justice.

But the executions did not stop with senior officials. By May 1979, 119 people had been executed, including prominent figures like Jewish executive Habib Elghanian, whose real crime was being wealthy and Jewish rather than any proven offense. By November 1979, the death toll reached 550. By January 1980, at least 582 had been executed. The pace only accelerated. Between January 1980 and June 1981, at least 906 executions were carried out as revolutionary courts worked through lists of alleged counter-revolutionaries, many whose only crime was having worked for the previous government or owning property.

After President Bani-Sadr's impeachment in June 1981, the bloodletting became far worse[14, 13]. The regime launched a concerted campaign to find and eliminate anyone associated with opposition groups, primarily targeting the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), a leftist Islamic organization that had supported the revolution but opposed Khomeini's theocratic vision, and other leftist groups[16]. Within six months following

the violent suppression of June 1981 protests, 2,665 people, 90 percent of whom were MEK members, were executed[15]. Between June 1981 and April 1982, around 3,500 MEK members were either executed or killed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps[16].

The regime executed between 8,000 and 10,000 people between 1981 and 1985[11]. These numbers are staggering. This was not a government dealing with armed insurgency or protecting itself from imminent threat. This was systematic political killing designed to eliminate anyone who might challenge the regime's total control.

The methods were brutal. Revolutionary courts operated without due process, without defense attorneys, without appeals. Trials lasted minutes. Confessions extracted under torture were accepted as evidence. Family members were often not informed when loved ones were executed, discovering the deaths only when they came to visit prison and were told to collect bodies. Executions were carried out by firing squad, often in groups. Bodies were dumped in mass graves. Families were sometimes charged for the bullets used to kill their relatives.

This established the pattern that has continued for 47 years: dissent equals death. The regime learned early that it could kill with impunity. That international condemnation meant nothing if it was not backed by consequences. That the world would watch, express concern, and do nothing. And each time the regime faced opposition, it would respond with overwhelming violence, confident that it had established both the capability and the impunity to massacre its own population whenever necessary.

2.2.3. The First Executions: How the Regime Established Control Through Mass Murder

The significance of those early executions cannot be overstated. They served multiple purposes simultaneously. First, they physically eliminated anyone with the resources, connections, or credibility to organize resistance, military leaders, wealthy businesspeople, government officials, intellectuals, professional revolutionaries from rival factions. Second, they sent a message of total terror to the population: opposition means death, not imprisonment or exile, but death. Third, they established revolutionary credentials for those carrying them out, proving their loyalty and creating complicity that bound them to the new regime. Fourth, they normalized political killing, making it a routine tool of governance rather than an exceptional measure.

The speed with which these executions were carried out also served strategic purposes. Summary trials and rapid executions prevented international pressure from building, prevented human rights organizations from investigating specific cases, prevented defense attorneys from mounting legal challenges, prevented families from organizing clemency campaigns. By the time anyone outside Iran understood what was happening, hundreds were already dead. This created facts on the ground that could not be reversed.

The Islamic Republic also used executions to eliminate anyone who had witnessed revolutionary promises being broken. The workers who had been promised better conditions, the intellectuals who had been promised freedom, the women who had been told the hijab would not be mandatory[10], all quickly learned that the new regime's promises meant nothing and that complaining about broken promises could get you

executed. This eliminated potential sources of resistance before they could organize.

Most importantly, the early executions established institutional knowledge and infrastructure for mass killing. The regime created revolutionary courts staffed by clerics loyal to Khomeini. It established execution protocols. It recruited executioners and gave them experience. It developed systems for processing prisoners, extracting confessions, conducting show trials, and disposing of bodies. All of this infrastructure would be used again and again over the next 47 years, reaching its most horrific manifestation in the 1988 prison massacres and again in January 2026.

2.3. The Totalitarian Architecture: How the Islamic Republic Functions

2.3.1. The Supreme Leader: Absolute Power Without Accountability

At the apex of Iran's power structure sits the Supreme Leader, currently Ali Khamenei who succeeded Khomeini in 1989[17, 18]. To understand the Islamic Republic's capacity for mass violence, you must understand the unique nature of this position. The Supreme Leader is not equivalent to a president or prime minister in a democratic system. He is not even equivalent to a dictator in a secular authoritarian regime. He is a religious figure who claims to rule by divine mandate, making opposition to him not merely political dissent but religious heresy punishable by death.

The concept is called *velayat-e faqih*, guardianship of the Islamic jurist. In Shia Islam, believers await the return of the Hidden Twelfth Imam who disappeared in the 9th century and will one day return to establish justice. Until that return, Khomeini argued, a qualified Islamic jurist should provide guardianship over the Muslim community. This guardian, the *faqih*, acts as the Hidden Imam's deputy, exercising his authority on earth. This makes the Supreme Leader's power both political and religious, both temporal and spiritual, both institutional and sacred.

When Khomeini died in 1989, the Iranian constitution was amended to make the Supreme Leader's power absolute[18]. The requirement that the Supreme Leader be a *marja-e taghlid*, the highest rank of Shia clergy, was removed so that the mid-ranking cleric Khamenei could assume the role. But his formal religious credentials did not matter, because under absolute *velayat-e faqih*, the Supreme Leader's authority derives not from his scholarly achievements but from his position as the Hidden Imam's deputy. His mandate to rule comes directly from God. Elections and popular participation are irrelevant because the Supreme Leader's legitimacy is divine, not democratic.

This creates a system where accountability is impossible. State officials and the public have no say over the Supreme Leader's conduct. He is accountable only to God. The Assembly of Experts, a body of 88 clerics theoretically responsible for selecting and overseeing the Supreme Leader, is neutered because the Supreme Leader vets candidates running for the Assembly. Iran's former chief justice asserted that it is illegal for any institution, including the Assembly of Experts, to supervise the Supreme Leader. He is, in effect, above all earthly law and answerable to no earthly authority.

The Supreme Leader's powers under the constitution are vast. He commands the armed forces, including

the regular military and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He appoints the heads of judiciary, state television and radio, and commanders of all security forces. He appoints half the members of the Guardian Council, which vets all candidates for elected office and can veto legislation. He has final say on foreign policy, domestic policy, and all matters of state. Presidents come and go, elected by carefully controlled votes, but they serve at the Supreme Leader's pleasure and can be removed if they challenge his authority.

In practice, this means that when the Supreme Leader orders a crackdown on protests, that order carries the force of divine command. Security forces believe they are acting not merely on behalf of a political leader but as instruments of God's will. Questioning such orders becomes apostasy. Refusing to carry them out becomes war against God. This is how a regime convinces soldiers and police to shoot unarmed civilians: by framing it as religious duty. And this is why the Islamic Republic can mobilize such brutal violence, it has sacralized mass murder.

2.3.2. Religious Justification for Murder: “God’s Representative” and the Death Penalty

The Islamic Republic uses Islamic law, specifically Sharia as interpreted by regime clerics, to provide legal justification for what would otherwise be recognized as straightforward political murder. The key charge is moharebeh, literally “waging war against God.”[15, 19] Under Iranian law, anyone who takes up arms against the Islamic Republic or challenges the authority of the Supreme Leader can be charged with moharebeh. The Quran, Chapter 5, Verse 33, prescribes punishment for this offense: death, crucifixion, amputation, or exile.

This creates an Orwellian system where peaceful protest becomes war, political dissent becomes apostasy, and demanding basic rights becomes capital crime. Because the Supreme Leader is considered God's representative on earth, any action that challenges his rule is automatically redefined as war against God regardless of the action's actual nature. Chanting “Death to the Dictator” is not free speech, it is moharebeh. Writing articles critical of the regime is not journalism, it is moharebeh. Organizing a labor strike is not collective bargaining, it is moharebeh. And moharebeh carries a death sentence.

This transforms judicial proceedings into religious theater. Courts are not determining guilt or innocence based on actions. They are determining whether defendants have spiritually submitted to the regime's authority. Trials focus on ideology rather than evidence. Questions posed to prisoners are not “Did you commit this specific act?” but “Do you still support the opposition?” and “Do you repent?” Those who recant and declare loyalty may be spared. Those who remain defiant are executed.

After the January 2026 protests, regime prosecutors publicly announced that arrested protesters would be charged with moharebeh[19]. Tehran's prosecutor declared that protesters using firearms or blades would face this charge, which carries the death penalty. On January 16, an imam leading Friday prayers in Tehran explicitly called for the execution of detained protesters. These are not idle threats. The Islamic Republic has executed protesters after every major uprising using this exact legal framework.

After the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, at least eight protesters were executed following rushed trials widely condemned by human rights organizations[20]: Mohsen Shekari, Majidreza Rahnavard, Mohammad

Mehdi Karami, Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, Saleh Mirhashemi, Majid Kazemi, Saeed Yaghoobi, and Mohammad Ghobadloo. Mohsen Shekari was executed on December 8, 2022, less than three weeks after his conviction, accused of blocking a road and allegedly stabbing a Basij militiaman. Majidreza Rahnavard was publicly hanged from a crane just four days after Shekari's execution[21, 22]. Both were allegedly tortured to extract confessions.

The Islamic Republic's use of public execution as social control is particularly chilling[21, 22, 23]. People are hanged from construction cranes in city squares, their bodies left hanging as warnings. Women have been stoned to death for adultery. Gay people have been executed for the "crime" of homosexuality. These public killings serve the same purpose as lynchings and public executions throughout history: they terrorize the population into submission through spectacle of state violence. They demonstrate that the regime has total power over life and death and is willing to use that power visibly and brutally.

Religious justification makes this violence not merely permissible but obligatory within the regime's ideology. Executioners are not committing murder, they are carrying out God's judgment. Security forces shooting protesters are not killing civilians, they are defending Islam against enemies of God. This ideological framework makes the regime's violence both more brutal and more sustained than purely political violence would be, because it transforms murder into martyrdom, killing into piety, atrocity into religious duty.

2.3.3. The Revolutionary Guards (IRGC): A Military That Terrorizes Its Own People

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, created shortly after the 1979 revolution, is not a conventional military force. Its primary mission is not defending Iran from foreign enemies, although it has fought in multiple regional conflicts. Its primary mission is protecting the Islamic Republic regime from internal and external threats, with internal threats, meaning the Iranian people, often taking precedence.

The IRGC operates parallel to Iran's regular military and in many ways supersedes it. It has its own ground forces, navy, air force, and intelligence services. It controls massive portions of Iran's economy through companies and front organizations. It runs smuggling networks that evade sanctions. Its commanders hold enormous political power. It answers directly to the Supreme Leader, not to elected officials. And critically, it has primary responsibility for suppressing domestic dissent.

During every major protest movement since 1979, the IRGC has been deployed against Iranian civilians. In 2009, during the Green Movement protests, IRGC forces and their Basij militias killed dozens and arrested thousands. In November 2019, when protests erupted across the country over fuel price increases, Supreme Leader Khamenei reportedly told officials "Do whatever it takes to end it"[24, 25]. Security forces, primarily IRGC and Basij, killed approximately 1,500 people in two weeks, many shot in the head and torso indicating shoot-to-kill orders[24]. In 2022, during the Mahsa Amini protests, over 500 people were killed[26]. And in January 2026, the IRGC and Basij carried out the largest massacre in modern Iranian history.

The IRGC's training and ideology prepare them for this role. They are indoctrinated with loyalty to

velayat-e faqih and the Supreme Leader. They are taught that protecting the Islamic Republic from internal enemies is sacred duty. They are given economic privileges, access to jobs and resources, that create material interest in the regime's survival. And they are insulated from the Iranian population through separate neighborhoods, schools, and social systems that prevent empathy or identification with civilians they are ordered to shoot.

The IRGC also operates the Quds Force, tasked with exporting the revolution beyond Iran's borders and supporting proxy forces throughout the Middle East. This external focus provides combat experience and further brutalizes IRGC members, making them more willing to use lethal force domestically. Fighters who have killed in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen return to Iran prepared to shoot Iranian protesters with the same ruthlessness.

Most ominously, the IRGC has access to heavy weapons. During the January 2026 massacre, eyewitnesses reported heavy machine guns being used on crowds[19]. In Bandar-e Mahshahr during November 2019 protests, the IRGC deployed tanks and killed between 40 and 100 people[24]. This is not crowd control. This is military force deployed against civilian populations. It represents the regime's willingness to treat its own cities as war zones and its own people as enemy combatants.

2.3.4. The Basij: Neighborhood Enforcers and Death Squads

If the IRGC is the regime's sword, the Basij is its eyes, ears, and neighborhood fists. The Basij Resistance Force, formally the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed, operates as a paramilitary volunteer militia under IRGC command. It has branches in virtually every city and town in Iran, with organizational structures dividing cities into resistance areas, zones, bases, and groups. This creates a nationwide network of regime loyalists embedded in every neighborhood.

Basij members are recruited primarily from traditionally religious and politically loyal segments of society. They volunteer in exchange for official benefits: preferential treatment in university admissions, government jobs, access to subsidized goods, exemption from military service. Some join out of ideological commitment. Others join for economic advantages in a struggling economy. Regardless of motivation, they become the regime's enforcers at the street level.

The Basij serves multiple functions. During peacetime, they act as morality police, manning checkpoints, patrolling parks, harassing women whose hijab is deemed insufficient, breaking up mixed-gender gatherings, and enforcing social control. They organize pro-regime demonstrations and public religious ceremonies. They provide social services that build loyalty among recipients. They report on neighbors, creating a climate of surveillance and paranoia. They are the regime's means of monitoring and controlling daily life.

During protests, the Basij transforms into a paramilitary death squad. They operate plainclothes alongside uniformed security forces, making it difficult to identify who is attacking protesters. They ride motorcycles through crowds, striking people with batons. They fire shotguns loaded with metal pellets at close range, targeting faces and eyes. During the January 2026 massacre, eyewitnesses specifically identified Basij

among the forces shooting protesters[19]. Their plainclothes operation provides deniability, the regime can claim protesters were killed by unidentified actors rather than state forces.

The Basij's neighborhood structure makes them particularly effective at finding and arresting protesters after demonstrations end. They know their neighborhoods, they know who lives where, they know who participated in protests. They conduct raids, going door to door to arrest people identified in videos or photos from demonstrations. They raid hospitals looking for wounded protesters. They set up checkpoints to catch people fleeing. This neighborhood-level intelligence and enforcement capacity makes sustained resistance extremely dangerous.

There is also evidence that the Basij conducts forced confiscations and economic intimidation. After the January 2026 massacre, Basij members went door to door confiscating satellite dishes to prevent access to foreign media and Starlink internet[27]. They have been reported forcing businesses to close or open based on regime demands. They collect "revolutionary taxes" from businesses and neighborhoods. This economic control, combined with their security and intelligence functions, makes them a total instrument of regime domination.

The Basij's size is difficult to determine. Estimates range from hundreds of thousands to several million if part-time and inactive members are included. This means a substantial portion of Iranian society has direct ties to the regime's repressive apparatus, either as active members, beneficiaries of Basij privileges, or family members of Basij. This creates social divisions and makes organizing resistance more difficult, you never know which neighbor might be Basij or might report to them.

2.3.5. The "Morality Police" and Everyday Terror

The Guidance Patrol, known colloquially as the morality police or Gasht-e Ershad in Persian, represents the regime's intrusion into the most intimate aspects of Iranian life. Created in 2005 as a specialized patrol squad within Iran's Law Enforcement Command, the morality police enforce mandatory hijab and Islamic dress codes, monitor social interactions between men and women, and patrol for violations of Islamic morality as defined by the regime.

Women are the primary targets. Morality police patrol streets, parks, malls, and public spaces looking for women whose hijab is deemed insufficient. Too much hair showing, mandatory hijab violation. Clothing too tight or colorful, violation. Makeup too visible, violation. Sleeves not long enough, violation. Ankles showing, violation. Violations result in arrest, detention until family members bring "appropriate" clothing, fines, mandatory education classes, and in repeat cases, criminal charges. During periods of heightened enforcement, thousands of women are arrested.

The psychological impact of morality police cannot be overstated. Imagine leaving your house every day knowing that how you look, how you dress, whether a strand of hair escapes your headscarf, could result in arrest. Imagine being grabbed on the street, thrown into a van, taken to a detention center, held for hours or days, subjected to lectures about Islamic modesty, forced to sign statements promising compliance, maybe beaten or humiliated. Imagine this being your mother's reality, your sister's reality, your daughter's

reality every day for 47 years.

The morality police also target interactions between men and women. Couples can be stopped and forced to prove they are married or related. Holding hands in public can result in arrest. Groups of young people socializing in parks are dispersed or detained. This surveillance and control of social interaction isolates people, breaks down social bonds, and makes normal human connection risky.

In 2022, the morality police's enforcement led directly to the protests that consumed Iran for months. President Ebrahim Raisi, facing economic protests, ordered intensified morality police patrols to assert control. On September 13, 2022, morality police arrested 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini in Tehran for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly[20]. While in custody, she fell into a coma. Authorities claimed she had a heart attack. Eyewitnesses and family said she was beaten. She died on September 16, 2022[20].

Her death sparked the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Protests erupted across Iran demanding an end to mandatory hijab and the Islamic Republic itself. Women burned hijabs in the streets. They cut their hair in public acts of defiance. They posted videos of themselves dancing without headscarves. Men supported them. The protests lasted for months. Security forces killed over 500 people[26], arrested thousands more, and eventually executed protesters. The morality police temporarily disappeared from streets but returned in 2023, now using facial recognition technology to identify women violating dress codes and send them fines or summons.

The significance of morality police extends beyond dress codes. They represent the regime's claim to total control over bodies, behavior, personal choice, and private life. Every woman forced to wear hijab is reminded daily that her body is not her own, that the state controls her most basic choices, that she exists under surveillance and coercion. Every man who sees his female relatives subjected to this control understands the regime's message: we own you, we control you, you have no autonomy, you exist at our pleasure. This is totalitarianism at its most intimate and invasive.

And critically, the morality police kill. Mahsa Amini died in their custody[20]. They are not merely writing tickets, they use violence, they beat women, they drag them into vans, they hold them in cells where further abuse occurs. The line between morality police enforcement and lethal violence is thin and constantly crossed. When the January 2026 protests began over economic conditions, women's participation was shaped by their daily experience of morality police abuse. They were already living under gendered violence, economic collapse simply provided the spark.

2.4. A Pattern of Killing: The Regime's History of Massacring Its Own People

2.4.1. The 1988 Prison Massacres: Thousands of Political Prisoners Executed in Secret

In the summer of 1988, the Islamic Republic committed what may be the worst crime in its 47-year history until January 2026. Based on a fatwa signed by Ayatollah Khomeini, the regime systematically executed thousands of political prisoners held in jails across Iran[15, 28]. Estimates of the death toll range

from 2,800 to 5,000 according to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch[28, 29], to 30,000 or more according to opposition groups and some defected officials²[15]. The truth may never be fully known because of the secret nature of the killings and the regime's continued denial and coverup.

The massacre began in late July 1988. Khomeini issued an undated fatwa declaring that members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) who remained loyal to the organization should be executed[15, 28]. He appointed "death committees" consisting of a religious judge, a prosecutor, and an intelligence official to interview prisoners. These committees visited prisons across Iran conducting rushed interviews that lasted minutes. They asked prisoners a few questions: Are you a Mojahedin? Do you still support them? Will you repent? Those who declared continued loyalty were immediately executed[15].

The mechanics of the massacre were horrific. Prisoners were brought before committees in groups, asked questions, and sorted. Those declared loyalists were taken away and hanged, often in groups, their bodies disposed of in mass graves. Families were not informed. When relatives came to visit, they were told their loved ones had been executed and should collect the body, if the body was even released. Many families never received bodies, discovering their loved ones' deaths only years later[15].

After the initial wave targeting MEK members, the committees expanded their killings to include leftists, ethnic minorities, and other political prisoners[15]. Some reports indicate the killings continued into early 1989. The speed and scale of the executions required industrial efficiency: mass hangings, rapid processing of prisoners, pre-dug mass graves. Witnesses described execution halls where multiple prisoners were hanged simultaneously. Due to the high number of prisoners facing execution, they were placed onto forklift trucks in groups of six and hanged from cranes every 30 minutes[15, 11]. Guards and executioners worked in shifts to maintain the pace of killing.

The 1988 massacre was kept secret for years. The regime denied it happened. Families were threatened into silence. Mass graves were concealed. It was not until the memoirs of Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's designated successor who was removed from his position for objecting to the killings, were published in 2000 that detailed documentation emerged[15]. Montazeri had written to Khomeini in August 1988 warning that "the greatest crime committed under the Islamic Republic, for which history will condemn us, has been committed by you." For this act of conscience, he was placed under house arrest for years.

The 1988 massacre established several precedents. First, it demonstrated the regime's capacity for secret mass killing. Second, it showed that international attention and human rights pressure were insufficient to stop or even expose such crimes in real time. Third, it created institutional expertise in mass execution that could be reactivated when needed. Fourth, it demonstrated absolute impunity, no one was ever prosecuted, no accountability was ever imposed, and some of those who served on death committees went on to high positions in government. Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's president from 2021 until his death in 2024, was credibly accused of serving on Tehran's death committee in 1988 as a young prosecutor[15].

The comparison to January 2026 is direct. Both involved coordinated nationwide killing ordered from

²Human rights organizations estimate 2,800-5,000 deaths. The MEK and some former officials claim 30,000+. Most credible estimates place the figure between 4,000-5,000.

the highest levels. Both involved systematic execution of people whose only crime was political opposition. Both involved concealment through information control. And both demonstrated that the Islamic Republic views mass murder of Iranian civilians as an acceptable tool of governance when its power is threatened.

2.4.2. 1999 Student Protests: The Dormitory Attacks

In July 1999, student protests erupted at Tehran University against the closure of a reformist newspaper. On the night of July 9, security forces and plainclothes Basij militias raided student dormitories at Tehran University, beating students while they slept, throwing students from windows, destroying property, and arresting hundreds. At least three students died. Hundreds were injured. Thousands were arrested.

The 1999 dormitory attacks represented the regime's willingness to use overwhelming force against its most educated citizens. University students, the future professionals and intellectuals who would shape Iran's development, were treated as enemy combatants for engaging in political protest. The attack sent a clear message: even the educated elite were not safe from regime violence.

The protests that followed the dormitory raids spread to other universities and cities. Security forces responded with mass arrests and brutal crackdowns. This established a pattern that would repeat: students protest, regime responds with disproportionate violence, protests spread, violence escalates, international community expresses concern, regime waits out attention and consolidates control through continued repression.

2.4.3. 2009 Green Movement: Neda Agha-Soltan and Mass Killings

The 2009 presidential election was widely believed to have been fraudulent, rigged to ensure hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection over reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Millions of Iranians took to the streets in what became known as the Green Movement, demanding election integrity and political reforms. The protests lasted for months and represented the largest sustained challenge to the regime since the revolution.

The regime's response was predictable and brutal. Security forces, particularly Basij militias, attacked protesters with batons, tear gas, and firearms. At least 10 people died on June 20, 2009, among them 26-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan, a philosophy student who was shot in the chest while observing protests. Her death was captured on a mobile phone video that spread worldwide, making her a symbol of the movement. The regime, fearing martyrdom that could further inflame protests, ordered her family to conduct an immediate burial and prohibited memorial services.

Total deaths from the Green Movement protests are difficult to determine. Official sources claimed seven deaths. Hospital nurses and independent observers reported at least 28 people with bullet wounds and eight deaths in early days. The Huffington Post reported 32 deaths. The Guardian compiled a spreadsheet documenting 1,259 victims of Iran's crackdown, including both killed and detained. Over 170 prominent reformists were arrested in the first days alone.

The Green Movement marked the beginning of the regime's more systematic use of internet controls. Access was slowed. Social media was blocked. This foreshadowed the total blackouts that would be deployed during later protests, culminating in January 2026's nearly complete communications shutdown.

2.4.4. November 2019: 1,500 Killed in Two Weeks, The Previous "Worst Massacre"

Before January 2026, the November 2019 protests represented the Islamic Republic's deadliest crackdown. The protests erupted on November 15, 2019, after the government announced overnight fuel price increases of up to 300 percent[24]. Within days, protests had spread to over 100 cities across all 31 provinces. Demonstrators burned banks, tore down images of the Supreme Leader, attacked government buildings, and demanded the regime's overthrow.

The regime's response was genocidal in scale. On the second day of protests, in a meeting attended by President Hassan Rouhani, ministers, and security commanders, Supreme Leader Khamenei reportedly said "You have my order. Do whatever it takes to end it"[24, 25]. Security forces implemented shoot-to-kill orders. According to Reuters, citing three Iranian interior ministry officials, approximately 1,500 people were killed, including at least 17 teenagers and about 400 women[24, 25]. Many victims were shot directly in the head.

Amnesty International's initial reports confirmed at least 304 deaths between November 15 and 18, with more than 220 of those occurring in just two days on November 16 and 17. The killings were concentrated and brutal, indicating coordinated escalation. In Bandar-e Mahshahr, the IRGC deployed tanks and used heavy machine guns on crowds, killing between 40 and 100 people in a single incident[24].

The regime imposed a week-long nationwide internet shutdown, the first time a large country had been effectively cut off from the global internet. This allowed the killing to proceed largely hidden from international view. Information only emerged weeks later as communications were gradually restored and witnesses could report what had happened.

Thousands were arrested. Hospitals were raided to arrest wounded protesters. Families were forced to pay for bullets used to kill their loved ones as condition for receiving bodies. Mass graves were dug. The regime accused protesters of being foreign agents and terrorists. No accountability was ever imposed. Security forces who carried out the killings were never prosecuted, instead they were likely promoted and would go on to participate in future crackdowns.

The November 2019 massacre taught the regime important lessons that it would apply in January 2026. Total internet shutdown successfully hid the scale of killing, at least temporarily. Shoot-to-kill orders could be implemented with minimal defections from security forces. The international community's response would be limited to statements that carried no consequences. And escalating to mass killing worked: the protests were suppressed, the regime survived, and Iran returned to oppressed normality.

2.4.5. 2022 Mahsa Amini Protests: 500+ Killed for Demanding Women's Rights

On September 16, 2022, Mahsa (Jina) Amini died in morality police custody after being arrested for improper hijab[20]. Her death sparked the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, the most sustained and geographically widespread protests Iran had seen since the revolution. Women led the resistance, burning hijabs, cutting their hair, and demanding an end to gender apartheid and the Islamic Republic itself. Men joined them. Protests continued for months across all provinces.

Security forces killed over 500 protesters between September 2022 and early 2023 according to Iran Human Rights organization[26]. Amnesty International documented deaths of at least 185 people by early October 2022, making it the deadliest crackdown since 2019. As in previous protests, many victims were shot in the head and chest, indicating shoot-to-kill orders. Security forces fired metal pellets at close range, targeting eyes and faces. Dozens of protesters lost sight in one or both eyes.

At least 46 security force members were also killed during the protests, some beaten to death, some killed by firearms. This represented unusual levels of protester violence, indicating that some Iranians had concluded peaceful protest was futile against a regime that responds with murder. The regime used these deaths to justify its crackdown, claiming armed terrorists were attacking security forces.

Over 20,000 people were arrested during the 2022 protests. Many disappeared into incommunicado detention. Reports of torture were widespread. The regime broadcast dozens of forced confessions. And then came the executions: Mohsen Shekari, Majidreza Rahnavard, Mohammad Mehdi Karami, Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, and others were hanged after rushed trials that violated all standards of due process[21]. These executions were explicitly designed to terrorize protesters into abandoning resistance.

The 2022 protests eventually subsided under the weight of killings, arrests, and terror. The regime had again proven that it could survive sustained opposition through overwhelming violence. But the protests had also exposed the regime's weakness: millions of Iranians, across all social classes and all regions, had explicitly demanded the Islamic Republic's overthrow. The regime had not won hearts and minds, it had simply demonstrated that resistance leads to death.

2.4.6. The Pattern Is Clear: Each Crackdown Deadlier Than the Last

Looking at this history, a clear pattern emerges. The Islamic Republic has responded to every major protest movement with escalating violence: 1999 dormitory raids left three dead, 2009 Green Movement killed dozens, November 2019 killed 1,500[24], 2022 killed 500+[26], and January 2026 killed tens of thousands[30, 31]. Each time, the regime faces no meaningful international consequences. Each time, it learns that killing works to suppress protests. Each time, it builds institutional capacity and experience in mass violence. And each time, it becomes more willing to escalate further.

This is not random or reactive violence. This is systematic, deliberate, and strategic use of mass murder as governance tool. The Islamic Republic long ago concluded that maintaining power requires willingness to kill Iranians in whatever numbers necessary. It has infrastructure for such killing: security forces trained and equipped for it, legal frameworks to justify it, religious ideology to sacralize it, and international impunity to

enable it. January 2026 was not an aberration. It was the logical endpoint of 47 years of escalating brutality met with inadequate consequences.

2.5. The Ideology of Death: How the Regime Justifies Mass Murder

2.5.1. “Moharebeh” (War Against God): Executing Protesters as Religious Duty

The regime’s ability to mobilize thousands of security force members to shoot tens of thousands of unarmed civilians requires more than just authoritarian control. It requires ideological framework that transforms murder into duty, that makes killing civilians not merely permissible but righteous. The Islamic Republic has built precisely such framework through its interpretation of moharebeh, war against God, and related Islamic legal concepts[15, 19].

The logic is simple but totalitarian: The Supreme Leader is God’s representative on earth. The Islamic Republic is God’s government. Therefore, opposing the regime is opposing God. And war against God carries the death penalty under Islamic law as interpreted by regime clerics. This transforms every act of dissent, peaceful or otherwise, into capital crime. Chanting slogans becomes moharebeh. Writing critical articles becomes moharebeh. Organizing protests becomes moharebeh. And moharebeh demands execution.

This ideological framework does several things simultaneously. It provides legal cover for political murder by recasting it as religious judgment. It relieves individual security force members of moral responsibility by framing their violence as divine command. It makes resistance seem not merely futile but literally sacrilegious, targeting people’s religious faith and fear of damnation. And it justifies unlimited violence because you cannot compromise with God’s enemies, you can only eliminate them.

The efficiency of this system in mobilizing violence should not be underestimated. A security force member ordered to shoot protesters faces a moral dilemma if he views them as fellow Iranians with legitimate grievances. But if he has been taught that these protesters are literally waging war against God, that they are corrupters on earth, that killing them is not murder but righteous defense of Islam, that moral dilemma dissolves. He is not killing Iranians, he is eliminating enemies of God. This ideological reframing is what makes tens of thousands of individual acts of violence possible.

2.5.2. Forced Televised Confessions: Breaking the Human Spirit

After every protest movement, the regime broadcasts forced confessions by arrested demonstrators. These confessions follow predictable scripts: the prisoner admits to being manipulated by foreign powers, claims to regret his actions, denounces opposition groups, praises the regime, and begs forgiveness. Anyone watching can tell these confessions are coerced. The prisoners’ body language radiates fear. Their words sound stilted and rehearsed. The confessions are obviously false.

But their falseness is partly the point. Forced confessions serve multiple purposes. They attempt to discredit protesters by making them appear to be foreign agents rather than Iranians with genuine grievances. They demonstrate the regime’s power over prisoners, showing that anyone can be broken and made to

say anything. They humiliate prisoners, destroying their dignity and making them complicit in their own persecution. And they intimidate potential protesters by showing what happens to those who are caught.

The process of extracting forced confessions involves torture. Physical torture: beatings, stress positions, sleep deprivation, electric shocks. Psychological torture: isolation, threats against family, mock executions, being forced to witness others' torture. Sexual violence, particularly against women but also against men. The goal is total psychological destruction, breaking the person down until they will say anything to make it stop.

After the 2022 protests, at least 40 forced confessions were broadcast. Former prisoners have testified about torture used to extract these confessions. Families have reported seeing their detained relatives on television saying things they would never willingly say. The regime knows these confessions lack credibility but broadcasts them anyway because the message is not "these people are actually guilty," the message is "we can do this to anyone, we can break anyone, resistance is futile."

2.5.3. Public Executions: Terror as Social Control

The Islamic Republic executes more people per capita than nearly any country on earth. Estimates suggest over 120,000 people have been executed for political reasons since 1979[11]. But the regime does not merely execute prisoners in prisons. It hangs them from construction cranes in city squares[21, 22, 23]. It stones women to death in front of crowds. It broadcasts executions on television. This is not punishment, this is spectacle designed to terrorize.

Public executions serve the same function as lynchings and medieval public tortures: they demonstrate state power, they punish not just the victim but anyone who witnesses, they create collective trauma that discourages resistance[21]. When a 23-year-old protester is hanged from a crane in a city square where children and families pass by, everyone who sees that body gets the message: this is what happens when you challenge us.

The regime has executed gay people by hanging them from cranes with signs declaring their "crime." It has executed drug offenders, political prisoners, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, women accused of adultery. Execution is routine, casual, industrial. Evin Prison in Tehran has a dedicated execution ward where hangings occur multiple times per week. Guards refer to execution days matter-of-factly, as if discussing factory production schedules.

After January 2026, the regime immediately threatened mass executions of arrested protesters[19]. Prosecutors announced moharebeh charges. Clerics called for executions from pulpits. The first executions were announced within days. This followed the pattern from 2022 when at least eight protesters were executed[21]. The threat of execution hangs over every arrested Iranian, quite literally. And the regime ensures everyone knows this, through public hangings, through televised executions, through constant messaging that death awaits anyone who defies them.

2.5.4. Targeting Children: The Regime's War on the Future

Perhaps the most horrific aspect of the Islamic Republic's violence is its willingness to kill children. During the January 2026 massacre, verified reports document children as young as 14 being shot by security forces. Among the nearly 200 bodies in the morgue verified by BBC, a 16-year-old boy lay dead[32]. During November 2019 protests, at least 17 teenagers were killed[24]. During 2022 protests, multiple children died. These are not accidental deaths or tragic mistakes. They are policy.

The regime targets children because Iranian youth are the primary drivers of resistance. Over 70 percent of Iran's population is under 35, a generation that has known only the Islamic Republic but rejects it utterly. They are more educated than their parents, more connected to global culture through internet and satellite television, more aware of how the rest of the world lives. They demand freedoms the regime cannot grant without ceasing to exist. So the regime shoots them.

Targeting children serves strategic purposes. It demonstrates that no one is safe, that even youth and innocence provide no protection. It terrorizes parents, making them desperate to keep their children away from protests. It eliminates future resistance leaders before they can organize. And it sends a message about the regime's complete disregard for Iran's future, they are willing to murder the next generation to maintain power for a few more years.

The regime also arrests children as young as 14, subjecting them to detention, torture, and forced confessions. After January 2026, thousands of minors were reportedly arrested[33]. Human rights organizations document cases of children held incommunicado, denied access to lawyers and families, tortured, and threatened with execution. This is not juvenile justice or rehabilitation, this is systematic abuse designed to traumatize and break young Iranians before they can become effective opponents.

The Islamic Republic's war on children is ultimately a war on time. The regime knows it has lost the hearts and minds of Iran's young people. Surveys and evidence from repeated protests make clear that the vast majority of Iranians under 35 want the regime gone. The regime cannot win them over through persuasion or reform. So it attempts to control them through terror, and when terror fails, it kills them. This is a regime at war with its own future, willing to destroy generations of Iranians rather than relinquish power.

2.6. Comparing Totalitarian Regimes: Where Iran's Islamic Republic Ranks

2.6.1. Parallels to Nazi Germany's Early Years

The comparison between the Islamic Republic and Nazi Germany is uncomfortable but instructive. Both regimes came to power through a combination of legitimate political processes and force. Both immediately began eliminating rivals through systematic violence. Both created legal frameworks that redefined opposition as capital crime. Both used ideology to transform murder into duty. Both built elaborate security apparatuses to monitor and control populations. Both targeted specific groups for persecution: Jews and others in Nazi Germany, women, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, and political dissidents in Iran.

The Nazi regime's early years, from 1933 when Hitler took power until the outbreak of World War II in 1939, saw incremental escalation of persecution. The Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of citizenship. Kristallnacht in 1938 saw orchestrated violence against Jewish communities. Concentration camps were established initially for political prisoners. Each step normalized violence, tested international response, and prepared infrastructure for later genocide. The Holocaust's industrial mass murder came later, building on years of incremental dehumanization.

Iran has followed a similar trajectory. The immediate post-revolution executions of 1979-1981 established that political opponents would be killed[11, 12]. The 1988 prison massacres demonstrated capacity for secret mass killing[15, 28]. The 2019 protests showed willingness to kill 1,500 people in two weeks[24]. And January 2026 revealed that the regime would murder tens of thousands if necessary to maintain power[30, 31]. Each crackdown was deadlier, each established new threshold of acceptable violence, each met with insufficient international response emboldening further escalation.

The ideological parallels are also striking. Nazi racial theory provided pseudo-scientific justification for viewing Jews and others as subhuman enemies requiring elimination. Iranian velayat-e faqih provides religious justification for viewing regime opponents as enemies of God requiring elimination. Both ideologies transform murder from crime into duty, from violation of morality into fulfillment of higher purpose. Both create true believers among perpetrators who genuinely see their violence as righteous.

The key difference is that Nazi Germany's worst crimes, the Holocaust's industrial genocide, occurred during wartime under cover of global conflict and took years to fully execute. The Islamic Republic has maintained totalitarian control and committed repeated massacres during peacetime over 47 years. In some ways, the Islamic Republic's longevity and sustained brutality exceeds Nazi Germany's, which lasted only 12 years. The Islamic Republic has been killing for nearly four times that long.

2.6.2. Similarities to Stalinist Soviet Union

The Soviet Union under Stalin offers another chilling comparison. Stalin's regime killed millions through collectivization-induced famines, Great Purge executions, Gulag labor camps, and mass deportations. Estimates of Stalin's death toll range from 9 to 20 million or more. This mass killing occurred over decades, became bureaucratized and routine, and was justified through Marxist-Leninist ideology that classified entire groups as class enemies requiring elimination.

Iran's Islamic Republic operates similarly in several respects. It has killed over 120,000 for political reasons since 1979[11], a fraction of Stalin's toll but horrific in its own right. It operates political prisons where torture is systematic. It uses forced confessions and show trials. It classifies opponents as enemies requiring elimination, not through class analysis but through religious categorization. It has created bureaucratic apparatus for processing, judging, and executing enemies of the state.

The Soviet comparison is particularly apt regarding information control. Stalin's regime strictly controlled media, eliminated foreign journalists, and created alternative reality where mass starvation and executions were either denied or presented as necessary revolutionary measures. Iran does the same, shutting

down internet[27], blocking foreign media, broadcasting propaganda, and creating parallel reality where protesters are terrorists and security forces are heroes defending Islam.

Both regimes also share paranoia about foreign enemies and internal conspiracies. Stalin constantly accused opponents of being foreign agents, spies, saboteurs working for capitalist powers. Iran constantly accuses protesters of being manipulated by America and Israel[19]. This paranoia serves dual purposes: it justifies violence against internal opponents by presenting them as external threats, and it rallies nationalist sentiment to regime's defense by claiming foreign powers seek Iran's destruction.

2.6.3. The North Korea Model: Total Information Control

North Korea represents perhaps the most extreme example of totalitarian information control, a hermit kingdom where the population is almost completely isolated from outside information, where state media provides the only narrative, where even knowing what the outside world is actually like is criminalized. Iran has been moving steadily toward this model, particularly after learning from 2019 and 2022 protests that internet access enables protest organization and international documentation of regime crimes.

The January 2026 internet blackout, lasting weeks with 99 percent of connectivity lost[27], represents Iran's most comprehensive attempt at North Korea-style information isolation. The regime deployed military-grade GPS jammers to block Starlink satellite internet[27]. Security forces conducted door-to-door confiscations of satellite dishes. Reports emerged that Iran is working with China and Huawei to create a national intranet, similar to North Korea's closed internet system, that would permanently cut Iran off from the global internet and allow only pre-approved content[27].

This move toward North Korea-style information control reveals the regime's understanding that their biggest threat is truth. They can kill protesters in the streets, but if videos reach the outside world, if hospital reports are documented, if eyewitness testimony emerges, the regime faces international pressure and domestic outrage. The solution, from the regime's perspective, is to eliminate information flow entirely, making documentation impossible, hiding atrocities in real-time, and controlling narrative completely.

North Korea has sustained this level of control for over 70 years, demonstrating its viability for totalitarian regimes. Iran has far greater educated population, more existing infrastructure for information access, and stronger traditions of intellectual and cultural exchange with outside world, making complete information isolation more difficult. But the regime is willing to pay enormous economic costs, the internet blackout cost \$35.7 million per day[27], and impose severe hardship on population to achieve this control. This willingness to transform Iran into a digital prison state reveals how threatened the regime feels.

2.6.4. Why This Regime Is Among History's Most Brutal

When we compare the Islamic Republic to history's worst totalitarian regimes, several unique features emerge that place it among the most brutal. First, its longevity. The Nazi regime lasted 12 years. The Soviet Union's worst Stalinist period lasted about 25 years. The Islamic Republic has maintained totalitarian control and systematic violence for 47 years with no end in sight, making it one of the longest-lasting brutal

regimes in modern history.

Second, its theocratic nature makes it uniquely resistant to reform. Secular dictatorships can potentially moderate as leaders change or circumstances shift. But when the regime's authority is presented as divinely mandated, when the Supreme Leader claims to represent God's will, when opposition is defined as religious heresy, reform becomes theological impossibility. You cannot negotiate with God or reform divine law. This makes the Islamic Republic more rigid and potentially more durable than purely political dictatorships.

Third, its comprehensive control over personal behavior exceeds even most totalitarian regimes. Nazi Germany did not tell people what to wear daily. Stalin's Soviet Union did not police hair length and makeup. North Korea controls information but less aggressively controls daily personal presentation and private behavior. Iran combines political totalitarianism with invasive regulation of bodies, dress, relationships, and private life, creating surveillance state that reaches into most intimate spaces.

Fourth, the regime has demonstrated escalating willingness to kill. The trajectory from thousands in early 1980s to thousands in 1988[15, 28] to 1,500 in 2019[24] to potentially 30,000 plus in January 2026[30, 31] shows a regime that has learned mass violence works and faces no consequences. This pattern suggests future crackdowns will be even deadlier, a horrifying prospect.

Finally, the regime operates in modern era with full awareness of human rights norms and international law, yet continues systematic brutality anyway. Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR committed their worst crimes before modern human rights frameworks existed. Iran commits massacres in era of UN, International Criminal Court, social media documentation, and universal human rights declaration. The regime knows exactly what it is doing, knows it constitutes crimes against humanity, and does it anyway because it has calculated that it will face no meaningful accountability.

This combination, longevity, theocratic rigidity, total personal control, escalating violence, and modern-era impunity, makes the Islamic Republic among the most dangerous and brutal regimes in contemporary history. It is not history's worst in absolute death toll, though even that depends on how you count 47 years of executions, disappearances, prison deaths, and protest killings. But in terms of sustained systematic brutality, comprehensive population control, and demonstrated willingness to massacre tens of thousands to maintain power, the Islamic Republic ranks with the worst.

And unlike Nazi Germany or Stalin's USSR, which we study as history, the Islamic Republic is murdering people today. The massacres are happening now. The torture continues now. The executions will occur tomorrow. This is not historical analysis. This is documenting an ongoing atrocity that the world is watching and doing almost nothing to stop.

References

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. *White Revolution*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Revolution.
- [2] Encyclopædia Britannica. *White Revolution*. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/White-Revolution>.

- [3] Pardis Mahdavi. *Lessons from the Suffrage Movement in Iran*. Women gained the right to vote in 1963. URL: <https://yalelawjournal.org/forum/lessons-from-the-suffrage-movement-in-iran>.
- [4] Women's Learning Partnership. *Family Protection Act of Iran (document, English)*. 1975. URL: <https://learningpartnership.org/resource/family-protection-act-iran-document-english>.
- [5] Wikipedia contributors. *Iran's Family Protection Law*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran's_Family_Protection_Law.
- [6] Foundation for Iranian Studies. *Reform and Regression: The Fate of the Family Protection Law*. URL: <https://fis-iran.org/article/reform-and-regression-the-fate-of-the-family-protection-law/>.
- [7] Middle East Institute. *Educational Attainment in Iran*. 1976: 47.49% male literacy, 35.48% female literacy. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/educational-attainment-iran>.
- [8] Wikipedia Contributors. *Economy of Iran*. Accessed February 2026. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Iran.
- [9] Atlantic Council. *Iran's economic performance since the 1979 Revolution*. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-s-economic-performance-since-the-1979-revolution/>.
- [10] Chatham House. *Iran: Decades of female anger rocks the regime*. Dec. 2022. URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-12/iran-decades-female-anger-rocks-regime>.
- [11] Wikipedia contributors. *Ruhollah Khomeini*. 8,000-10,000 executed between 1981-1985. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruhollah_Khomeini.
- [12] AIPAC. *The Iranian Revolution, 40 Years On: Oppression at Home, Aggression Abroad*. Nearly 4,500 non-Islamists executed by end of 1979. URL: <https://www.aipac.org/resources/iranian-revolution-k9tn2-tz6kp-zydeg>.
- [13] Encyclopædia Britannica. *Abolhasan Bani-Sadr*. Impeached June 21, 1981. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abolhasan-Bani-Sadr>.
- [14] Wikipedia contributors. *Abolhassan Banisadr*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolhassan_Banisadr.
- [15] Wikipedia contributors. *1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1988_executions_of_Iranian_political_prisoners.
- [16] Wikipedia contributors. *People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_Mojahedin_Organization_of_Iran.
- [17] Encyclopædia Britannica. *Ali Khamenei*. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Khamenei>.
- [18] Wikipedia contributors. *1989 Iranian Supreme Leader election*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1989_Iranian_Supreme_Leader_election.
- [19] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Iran massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [20] Wikipedia contributors. *Death of Mahsa Amini*. 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died September 16, 2022 in morality police custody. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Mahsa_Amini.
- [21] Wikipedia contributors. *Public executions in Iran*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_executions_in_Iran.

- [22] Iran So Far Away. *Public Hangings in Iran: the Khomeinist Regime's Ritual of Terror*. URL: <https://iransofaraway.substack.com/p/the-khomeinist-regimes-public-executions>.
- [23] Wikipedia contributors. *Capital punishment in Iran*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_punishment_in_Iran.
- [24] Wikipedia contributors. *2019–2020 Iranian protests*. Approximately 1,500 deaths according to Reuters citing Iranian interior ministry officials. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%932020_Iranian_protests.
- [25] Parisa Hafezi and Babak Bozorgmehr. “Special Report: Iran’s leader ordered crackdown on unrest - ‘Do whatever it takes to end it’”. In: *Reuters* (Dec. 2019).
- [26] Iran Human Rights. *Woman, Life, Freedom protests casualties*. At least 476 people killed by December 2022. 2022.
- [27] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Internet blackout in Iran*. Internet blackout beginning January 8, 2026, with 99% connectivity loss. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Internet_blackout_in_Iran.
- [28] Human Rights Watch. *Iran’s 1988 Mass Executions*. Between 2,800 and 5,000 political prisoners executed. June 2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/08/irans-1988-mass-executions>.
- [29] Amnesty International. *Iran still seeks to erase the ‘1988 prison massacre’ from memories 25 years on*. Aug. 2013. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/08/iran-still-seeks-erase-prison-massacre-memories-years/>.
- [30] Time Magazine. “Iran Protest Death Toll Could Top 30,000: Local Officials”. In: *Time* (Jan. 2026). URL: <https://time.com/7357635/more-than-30000-killed-in-iran-say-senior-officials/>.
- [31] Iran International. *Over 36,500 killed in Iran’s deadliest massacre, documents reveal*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601255198>.
- [32] BBC Persian. *Video verification shows bodies in Tehran morgue*. BBC Verify analyzed video footage showing approximately 200 bodies in a Tehran morgue. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/persian>.
- [33] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). *Documented arrests during 2025-2026 protests*. Over 18,400 arrests documented as of January 14, 2026. Jan. 2026.

Part 3

The People: Understanding the Victims

3. Who Are the Iranian People? Understanding What Is Being Destroyed

When Western media reports on Iran, the coverage often reduces Iranians to abstract statistics or monolithic stereotypes. The Islamic Republic is discussed as a geopolitical problem. Protesters are mentioned in passing. The victims of January 2026 become numbers on a page. But to understand what is being destroyed, to grasp the magnitude of this ongoing atrocity, you must understand who these people are. You must know that the Iranians being massacred are not fundamentally different from you. They want the same things you want. They dream the same dreams. They love their families, pursue education, follow their passions, create art, fall in love, plan futures. The only difference is that they have the profound misfortune of living under a regime that views all of this, the ordinary human desire for normal life, as threatening and worthy of death.

The Iranian people being killed in the streets are not backward religious fundamentalists rejecting modernity. They are one of the most educated, connected, and modern populations in the Middle East, trapped under theocratic rule they never chose and have spent decades resisting. They are not distant Others whose suffering we can comfortably ignore. They are us, if we had been born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

3.1. The Demographic Reality: A Young Population Demanding Freedom

3.1.1. 70% Under Age 35: A Generation That Never Chose This Regime

Iran's population in 2025 is approximately 92-93 million people[1, 2]. The median age is approximately 32-35 years[1, 3, 2]. This means that half of Iran's population is younger than the mid-30s, a generation that has lived their entire lives under the Islamic Republic but never voted for it, never supported it, and increasingly rejects it entirely.

More specifically, as of 2012, half of Iran's population was under 35 years old[1]. More recent 2025 data shows approximately 42.4 percent of the population is under age 25[2]. The working-age population (15-64) comprises approximately 69.4 percent of the total[2]. This is a dramatically young population structure, particularly concentrated in the age groups most likely to protest and least likely to remember anything before Islamic Republic rule.

Consider what this means: a 35-year-old Iranian in 2026 was born in 1991, twelve years after the revolution. They have no personal memory of the Shah era, no experience of pre-revolution Iran. Everything they know about what Iran could have been comes from stories told by parents and grandparents, from photographs, from smuggled films and books. They grew up under mandatory hijab, morality police, restricted freedoms, economic stagnation. They attended universities purged of secular faculty, studied under censored curricula, graduated into an economy offering no opportunities commensurate with their education.

A 25-year-old Iranian was born in 2001, twenty-two years after the revolution. They have lived their entire conscious life in the internet age, able to see, despite regime censorship, how people their age in other countries live. They watch young people in Turkey, in neighboring countries, in the West, pursuing careers, traveling freely, dressing as they choose, dating openly, expressing opinions without fear of arrest. And they look at their own lives, constrained at every turn by a government that claims divine authority to control their bodies, their thoughts, their futures.

These young Iranians did not choose the Islamic Republic. They were born into it. It was imposed on them by a revolution that happened before they existed, carried out by people many of whom are now dead or elderly. Yet they are the ones forced to live under its brutality. They are the ones arrested for showing too much hair, for dancing in public, for holding hands with someone they love. They are the ones who cannot find jobs despite university degrees because the economy is mismanaged and sanctioned. They are the ones whose futures have been stolen before they even began.

This demographic reality is precisely why the regime is so terrified and so violent. In authoritarian systems that derive legitimacy from revolutionary credentials or ideological purity, a young population that never experienced the founding moment and does not share the founders' ideology represents existential threat. The Islamic Republic's claim to rule rests on 1979, on Khomeini's charisma, on anti-Shah sentiment, on promises of justice and Islamic governance. None of this resonates with Iranians born in the 1990s and 2000s who see only decades of failure, oppression, and hypocrisy.

The regime cannot win these young people over through persuasion. Its ideology does not appeal to them. Its economic performance has been disastrous. Its promises of justice have produced corruption and brutality. Its claim to religious authority rings hollow to a generation that increasingly rejects political Islam entirely. So the regime has only one tool left: terror. It can kill enough of them that the rest are too frightened to resist. This is why January 2026 happened. This is why tens of thousands of young Iranians were shot in the streets. Because the demographic reality is that time is not on the regime's side, and they know it.

3.1.2. Highly Educated, Connected, Modern: The Reality vs. Western Stereotypes

Western stereotypes of Iran often paint a picture of a backward, isolated, religiously conservative society. These stereotypes, while perhaps accurate descriptions of the regime, are profoundly wrong about the Iranian people, particularly young Iranians. Modern Iran has one of the most educated populations in the Middle East, with internet penetration rates rivaling developed nations and cultural sophistication that would surprise most Westerners who have never encountered actual Iranians.

Iran's higher education system has undergone massive expansion since the 1970s. Between 1999 and 2015 alone, tertiary gross enrollment more than tripled from 19.13 percent to 71.9 percent[4]. This is higher than Italy, Japan, or the United Kingdom, and double the global average. As of 2014, 4.7 million students were enrolled in tertiary education, compared to just 1.3 million in 1999, an increase of 258 percent in 15 years[4]. Iran is home to two of the largest universities in the world: Islamic Azad University enrolls over 1.7 million students, and Payam-e-Nour University enrolls an additional 940,000 students[4]. Together,

these two institutions alone enroll more students than the entire university population of France.

This educational explosion has created a highly educated society. Literacy rates in Iran reached approximately 85.5 percent in 2016[5]. More recent data suggests adult literacy has continued climbing. Among youth (ages 15-24), literacy rates are even higher, approaching 97-98 percent for females and even higher for males[6]. This is a population that reads, that engages with ideas, that has been exposed to world literature, philosophy, science, despite regime efforts to control curricula.

Importantly, women now comprise the majority of university students in Iran. More than 55 percent of first-year university students are women[6]. This represents an extraordinary achievement, particularly given that the regime has spent 47 years trying to push women out of public life. Iranian women, despite facing systematic discrimination and oppression, have insisted on education, and their families have supported them. The result is that Iran's educated class is heavily female, creating enormous tension with a regime whose ideology demands women remain subordinate.

This highly educated population is also highly connected to global information networks, despite regime censorship. As of January 2025, there were 73.2 million internet users in Iran, representing 79.6 percent internet penetration[7]. There were 48 million social media users, equating to 52.2 percent of the population[7]. Iran had 146.5 million cellular mobile connections, equivalent to 163.7 percent of the population, meaning most Iranians have multiple devices[8]. This is a connected society.

Yes, the regime censors internet. Yes, they block social media platforms. Yes, they periodically shut down connectivity entirely, as in January 2026. But Iranians are extraordinarily technologically savvy and have spent decades circumventing these controls through VPNs, proxy servers, satellite internet, and other tools. The regime plays constant cat-and-mouse with a population that finds ways around every restriction. The January 2026 internet blackout was so extreme precisely because partial measures no longer worked, Iranians had become too good at evading them.

This means that young Iranians, despite living under totalitarian theocracy, are remarkably cosmopolitan and globally aware. They watch international films and television shows. They follow global news. They participate in international online communities. They know what is happening in the rest of the world. They are not isolated villagers with no frame of reference for how else life could be. They are modern, educated, connected people who are acutely aware that they are being denied the freedoms and opportunities that their counterparts in other countries take for granted.

The cultural sophistication of ordinary Iranians would surprise most Westerners. Iran has thriving underground music scenes, art communities, film culture, literary circles. Young Iranians organize clandestine parties where they listen to forbidden music, dance together, drink alcohol, socialize freely. They create art that critiques the regime in coded ways that evade censors. They write poetry, a deeply rooted Iranian tradition that continues despite attempts to control it. All of this happens in the shadows, risking arrest, but it happens constantly.

This is not a population that needs to be "modernized" or "civilized." They are already modern. They are already educated. They are already connected. What they need is for the boot to be lifted from their necks. What they need is for the regime that murders them for demanding normal life to be removed. What they

need is for the international community to recognize that these are not backward people requiring salvation, but educated, sophisticated people demanding the freedoms they are perfectly capable of exercising.

The Western tendency to view all Middle Eastern Muslim-majority societies as monolithically conservative and resistant to change is not merely inaccurate when applied to Iran, it is offensive. Iranians are being killed precisely because they reject conservatism and demand change. To frame them as somehow culturally predisposed to authoritarianism is to erase their decades of resistance and to dishonor the tens of thousands who have died fighting for freedom.

3.1.3. Women Leading Resistance: The Bravery of Iranian Women

If there is one demographic group that deserves particular recognition for courage in resisting the Islamic Republic, it is Iranian women. For 47 years, since the mandatory hijab was imposed in 1979, Iranian women have been at the forefront of resistance[9, 10]. They have paid the highest price, facing daily oppression, systematic discrimination, violence, arrest, torture, and execution. And yet they continue to resist, continue to push boundaries, continue to demand their rights. The bravery required for this cannot be overstated.

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement that erupted after Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022 was explicitly women-led[9, 10]. Women burned hijabs in the streets. They cut their hair in public acts of defiance. They posted videos of themselves dancing without headscarves, knowing they could be arrested[9]. They led protests, organized demonstrations, chanted slogans demanding the regime's overthrow. And men joined them, supporting them, amplifying their demands, recognizing that women's liberation is inseparable from Iran's liberation.

This was not the first time Iranian women led resistance. In March 1979, just weeks after the revolution, when Khomeini began imposing mandatory hijab, tens of thousands of women took to the streets in Tehran to protest[11]. They were violently suppressed. The mandatory hijab was imposed anyway. But they fought. And they have continued fighting every day since.

Every woman who loosens her headscarf is resisting. Every woman who wears makeup despite prohibitions is resisting. Every woman who pursues higher education despite efforts to restrict it is resisting. Every woman who works despite pressure to stay home is resisting. Every woman who refuses forced marriage, who seeks divorce despite obstacles, who fights for custody of her children, is resisting. Resistance for Iranian women is not an occasional dramatic gesture, it is daily life.

And the regime knows this. This is why morality police patrol streets looking for hijab violations. This is why thousands of women are arrested annually for improper veiling. This is why new hijab laws impose ever-harsher penalties, up to 15 years in prison and potentially the death penalty for repeat violations[12, 13]. This is why the regime murdered Mahsa Amini for showing too much hair. They understand that if Iranian women win freedom to control their own bodies and lives, the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic collapses.

The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* in Persian, originally *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* in Kurdish) originated from Kurdish women's revolutionary movements and was adopted in Iran as a com-

prehensive rejection of the regime[9, 10]. It is not merely a call for women's rights in isolation. It recognizes that women's oppression, the denial of life and dignity, and the lack of freedom are interconnected. You cannot liberate Iran without liberating women. You cannot grant freedom without first recognizing women's humanity and autonomy. This is what makes the regime so threatened, because this message resonates across Iranian society, not just among women but among men who recognize its truth.

The courage required for Iranian women to protest, knowing what will happen to them if caught, exceeds what most people in free societies can comprehend. When a woman in Tehran removes her hijab in public and posts a video online, she knows she is risking arrest, detention, interrogation, torture, forced confession, imprisonment, and potentially execution[13, 14]. She knows her family will be threatened. She knows she may lose her job, her education, her future. And she does it anyway.

When women joined the January 2026 protests, they knew the regime shoots to kill. They had watched over 500 women and girls killed during the 2022 protests[15]. They knew that women protesters are not spared, that security forces deliberately target women, that being female provides no protection. And they protested anyway, in numbers so large that the regime felt compelled to kill tens of thousands to suppress them.

This is heroism. This is what bravery looks like when the stakes are life and death. Iranian women deserve the world's recognition, support, and protection. Instead, they are being abandoned to a regime that beats them to death for showing hair and shoots them in the streets for demanding freedom. The international community's failure to defend Iranian women is not merely a policy failure, it is a moral catastrophe.

3.2. Daily Life Under Tyranny: What It Means to Live in the Islamic Republic

To understand why Iranians protest despite knowing they might be killed, you must understand what daily life under the Islamic Republic actually entails. This is not merely political authoritarianism where avoiding politics allows normal life. This is totalitarian theocracy that intrudes into every aspect of existence, from what you wear to whom you love to what you think. There is no sphere of life that is private or free from state control. Every day is lived under surveillance, under threat, under the crushing weight of a system designed to break human dignity.

3.2.1. Constant Surveillance and Fear

Imagine waking up every morning knowing that you are being watched. The Basij have networks in every neighborhood, members who report on their neighbors. CCTV cameras with facial recognition technology monitor streets, ready to identify women with improper hijab and send automated fines or summons[14]. Your internet activity is monitored, your social media posts scrutinized for signs of dissent. Your phone calls may be tapped. Your emails read. If you work for the government or attend university, informers are embedded among your colleagues and classmates, reporting on suspicious conversations.

You cannot speak freely, even in private. Criticizing the regime, even in your own home among family, is dangerous because someone might report you. Children are sometimes taught in school to report on their parents' anti-regime statements. Dinner table conversations must be guarded. Political discussions must use coded language or avoid certain topics entirely. The fear of who might be listening, who might report you, creates atmosphere of paranoia and isolation.

Public spaces are constantly patrolled. Morality police can stop you at any time, particularly if you are female, to check your compliance with Islamic dress codes[14]. Basij militias roam in plainclothes, ready to confront anyone engaging in "un-Islamic" behavior. Parks are monitored for mixed-gender socializing. Restaurants and cafes can be raided if authorities suspect alcohol consumption or improper male-female interactions. Even driving in your car is surveilled, cameras ready to issue fines if women passengers are improperly veiled.

This constant surveillance creates psychological pressure that is difficult for people in free societies to comprehend. You can never fully relax. You can never let your guard down. Every action, every word, every choice of clothing must be calculated for risk. The result is exhaustion, a bone-deep weariness that comes from living every moment under threat.

And the fear is not paranoia, it is rational. People disappear. Someone criticizes the regime online and the next day security forces raid their home and drag them to prison. Someone attends a protest and is identified in footage, days later arrested from their workplace or university. Someone is reported by a neighbor for hosting a mixed-gender gathering, suddenly facing charges of promoting corruption. The fear is based on observable reality: the regime does arrest, does torture, does execute people for trivial violations.

This is the daily reality for 92 million Iranians. They live in a surveillance state that makes Orwell's *1984* look quaint, with technology the Soviet Union could only dream of, wielded by a regime combining political totalitarianism with religious absolutism. And they are expected to simply endure this, to accept it as normal, to never complain or resist.

3.2.2. Economic Suffocation: Deliberate Impoverishment

Beyond political repression, Iranians face devastating economic conditions that the regime has created through corruption, mismanagement, and ideological priorities that sacrifice economic rationality for political control[16, 17, 18].

Inflation in Iran has been above 30 percent since 2018[19], reaching approximately 40-48 percent in 2024-2025[16, 17]. This is not temporary spike, this is sustained hyperinflation that has destroyed ordinary Iranians' purchasing power and pushed large segments of the middle class into poverty. Estimates suggest 22-50 percent of Iranians now live under the poverty line, a stark increase from just a few years earlier[16].

The Iranian rial has collapsed. It devalued by 90 percent between 2018 and 2025[17]. Between January 2024 and January 2025 alone, the rial lost 62 percent of its value against the US dollar[19]. Prices for basic goods, particularly food, have skyrocketed while salaries remain stagnant. Families that once considered themselves middle class can no longer afford meat regularly, must choose between electricity and food,

watch their savings evaporate monthly.

Youth unemployment in Iran is catastrophic. The unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 stood at 24.5 percent[20], though many analysts believe the real figure is much higher. As of 2015, 42 percent of recent graduates were unemployed[21]. This means that young Iranians spend years pursuing higher education, often going into debt or sacrificing tremendously, only to graduate into an economy with no jobs for them. Their degrees are worthless. Their futures are blocked.

This is not merely the result of sanctions, though sanctions contribute. This is the result of regime economic policies that prioritize ideological loyalty over competence, that funnel resources to the Revolutionary Guards and their business empire rather than productive investment, that maintain subsidy systems creating perverse incentives, that allow corruption to flourish unchecked. The regime has created conditions for economic disaster, and ordinary Iranians bear the consequences.

Energy shortages plague the country despite Iran sitting on some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves[16]. Electricity blackouts are routine. Heating in winter is unreliable. This is incompetence so profound it would be comedic if it were not tragic. A nation rich in energy resources cannot provide consistent electricity to its citizens because the regime has so mismanaged energy infrastructure.

The deliberate nature of this impoverishment cannot be ignored. The regime uses economic pressure as tool of control. A population struggling to afford food has less capacity to organize resistance. Young people desperate for jobs are more vulnerable to Basij recruitment or regime co-optation. Economic crisis creates conditions where survival takes priority over politics for many people, which serves the regime's interests.

But it also creates explosive conditions. Economic desperation was the trigger for the January 2026 protests, as it has been for previous protest movements. When people are starving, when they cannot feed their children, when they see no future, they reach breaking points where fear of death becomes less powerful than rage at injustice. This is what the regime fails to understand: you cannot impoverish people indefinitely and expect them to remain docile.

3.2.3. No Freedom of Speech, Assembly, or Religion

In the Islamic Republic, there is no freedom of speech. Criticizing the Supreme Leader can result in charges of "insulting the sacred" or moharebeh (waging war against God), both capital offenses[22, 23]. Criticizing government policies, questioning Islamic law, expressing secular viewpoints, advocating for democracy or human rights, all can lead to arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution.

Journalists face systematic persecution. The regime has arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and executed journalists for reporting news the regime wants suppressed. Newspapers and media outlets are shut down regularly. The internet is heavily censored, with thousands of websites blocked. Social media platforms are banned or restricted. The regime controls all broadcast media, using it for propaganda.

There is no freedom of assembly. Protests are illegal unless explicitly authorized by the regime, which of course only authorizes pro-regime demonstrations. Even peaceful gatherings can result in violent crack-

downs. Labor unions attempting to organize strikes face arrests. Professional associations that become too independent are shut down. The regime tolerates no organizing outside its control.

Religious freedom is severely restricted despite the regime claiming to be Islamic. Baha'is face systematic persecution, denied education, employment, and property rights, with many imprisoned or executed. Sunni Muslims in this Shia-dominated state face discrimination. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians are treated as second-class citizens. Converting from Islam to another religion is apostasy, punishable by death. Even Shia Muslims who practice differently than the regime approves can face problems.

Atheism or agnosticism is effectively criminalized. You cannot publicly declare that you do not believe in God or Islam. Despite the fact that surveys suggest large portions of young Iranians are privately irreligious, they must pretend to be Muslim to avoid persecution. This forced religious performance, having to fake beliefs for safety, is psychologically corrosive.

The regime's claim to represent Islam and enforce God's law creates particularly toxic dynamic. Political dissent becomes religious heresy. If you oppose the government, you are opposing God. This gives the regime religious justification for brutality, but it also means that the regime's failures and crimes are associated with Islam in Iranians' minds. The result is that the Islamic Republic is destroying Iranians' faith in Islam itself, creating generations of people who reject religion because they associate it with tyranny.

3.2.4. Women as Second-Class Citizens: The Hijab Laws and Beyond

Iranian women live under gender apartheid. The mandatory hijab law is only the most visible manifestation of systematic discrimination that affects every aspect of women's lives[14, 12, 13].

Women must cover their entire body except face and hands when in public[14]. They must wear long, loose-fitting coats (manteau). Clothing cannot be brightly colored or form-fitting. Hair must be covered completely. Makeup should be minimal. Violating these rules results in fines ranging from millions of tomans, detention, forced "re-education," imprisonment, and under new laws potentially 15 years in prison or death penalty for repeat offenders[12, 13].

The enforcement mechanisms are comprehensive and terrifying. Morality police patrol streets. CCTV with facial recognition identifies violators automatically[14]. Businesses face closure if they serve improperly veiled women. Employers face fines if female employees violate dress codes. Women's families can be pressured or punished for women's violations. The system creates peer enforcement where everyone polices everyone else.

But hijab is just the beginning. Women's testimony in court is worth half that of a man's. In inheritance, women receive half what men receive. The legal marriage age for girls is 13, with judicial permission allowing even younger marriages. Temporary marriages (essentially legalized prostitution) are permitted for men. Polygamy is legal for men but polyandry prohibited for women. Men can divorce easily while women face enormous obstacles[24].

Women require male guardian permission for many activities. A woman cannot travel abroad without her husband's or father's permission. She cannot marry without male guardian consent. She faces restric-

tions on employment, with certain jobs reserved for men. Universities impose quotas limiting women's enrollment in certain fields despite women outperforming men academically.

Women face systematic violence with minimal legal protection. Domestic violence is widespread and rarely prosecuted. "Honor killings" receive reduced sentences. Rape is difficult to prosecute and victims face accusations of adultery. Women who kill abusive husbands in self-defense can be executed for murder.

This is not merely sexism or inequality. This is systematic oppression enshrined in law, enforced by violence, justified by religious decree, and touching every moment of women's lives from birth to death. Iranian women are told daily, through law and practice, that they are inferior, that their bodies are shameful, that their autonomy is threat, that their purpose is serving men.

And yet Iranian women refuse to accept this. They push every boundary. They loosen headscarves. They wear makeup. They pursue education and careers. They demand rights. They protest in the streets. They burn hijabs. The regime has spent 47 years trying to break Iranian women's spirit, and they have comprehensively failed. Iranian women's resistance is one of the great liberation struggles of our time, and they deserve the world's support.

3.2.5. Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, Execution: Anyone Can Disappear

In the Islamic Republic, there is no rule of law. Anyone can be arrested at any time for any reason or no reason at all. The regime operates a vast network of official and unofficial detention centers where prisoners are held incommunicado, tortured, and sometimes killed[25].

Evin Prison in Tehran has become internationally notorious for systematic human rights abuses[26]. Torture methods documented include beatings, electric shocks, prolonged solitary confinement, forced confessions, sleep deprivation, sexual abuse, suspension from limbs, bastinado (beating feet with cables), mock executions, and denial of medical care[25]. These are not isolated incidents, they are systematic practices.

Arbitrary detention is routine. Security forces can arrest you without warrant, hold you without charges, deny you access to lawyer or family, interrogate you under torture, force you to confess to crimes you did not commit, then use that coerced confession to convict you in sham trial[25]. The entire process can happen in secret, with your family not even knowing where you are.

Enforced disappearance is common. People are taken from their homes, from streets, from workplaces, and vanish[26]. Families search frantically, calling prisons, hospitals, morgues. Sometimes eventually they learn their loved one is in detention. Sometimes they never learn what happened. Bodies sometimes appear in morgues weeks or months later with signs of torture, cause of death officially listed as suicide or accident.

Trials, when they occur, are farces. Many political prisoners never receive trials at all, held indefinitely under vague charges. Those who do face trial typically get minutes before judges who have predetermined guilt. Defense attorneys are often denied access to clients or case files. Evidence consists of forced confessions. Sentences are predetermined. Appeals are rejected. Executions follow quickly, sometimes within days of sentencing.

The regime uses arbitrary detention and torture strategically. They target activists to decapitate move-

ments. They arrest families of dissidents to pressure them. They publicize some arrests to intimidate others. They force prisoners to make televised false confessions to discredit opposition. They execute protesters as warnings. The unpredictability, the knowledge that anyone could be next, creates atmosphere of terror designed to crush dissent.

Living under these conditions means never feeling safe. It means knowing that expressing wrong opinion, attending wrong gathering, knowing wrong person, could result in arrest and everything that follows. It means seeing people disappear and not knowing if you are next. It means every phone call potentially being monitored, every email potentially being read, every movement potentially being tracked.

This is what daily life in the Islamic Republic entails. Not for regime supporters and insiders, for them life can be comfortable. But for ordinary Iranians, particularly young Iranians, women, minorities, anyone who does not conform perfectly to regime demands, life is precarious, surveilled, economically desperate, and dangerous. They live in constant fear while being denied basic freedoms and human dignity.

And the regime expects them to simply accept this forever. To never complain. To never resist. To live and die under tyranny without ever demanding freedom. This is why they protest. This is why they are willing to risk death. Because the alternative, living this way for the rest of their lives, passing this hell on to their children, is unacceptable.

3.3. Why They Protest: Understanding What Iranians Are Fighting For

3.3.1. Not Reform, Revolution: Why This Time Is Different

For decades, many Iranians hoped for reform from within the system. They believed that electing "moderate" presidents, supporting "reformist" candidates, working within the Islamic Republic's structures, might gradually improve conditions. The Green Movement in 2009 was partly based on this hope, demanding that election results be honored but not necessarily calling for regime overthrow.

That era is over. The January 2026 protests, like the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom protests before them, represent fundamental shift. The demand is no longer reform. It is revolution. The slogan is no longer "where is my vote?" It is "death to the dictator"[23, 9]. Protesters are not asking the Islamic Republic to be better. They are demanding it end.

This shift reflects accumulated experience and disillusionment. Iranians have tried reform. They elected Mohammad Khatami as reformist president in 1997 and 2001, he accomplished little, constrained by the Supreme Leader and conservative establishment. They supported Mir-Hossein Mousavi in 2009, the election was stolen, protests were crushed, nothing changed. They elected Hassan Rouhani as moderate in 2013 and 2017, he delivered a nuclear deal that briefly eased sanctions but failed to produce economic improvements or social liberalization. Most recently, many supported Masoud Pezeshkian in 2024 as reformist candidate, and he has proven as powerless as his predecessors.

Iranians have learned that elections under the Islamic Republic are theater. The Guardian Council vets all candidates, disqualifying anyone who might challenge the system[27]. The Supreme Leader holds all real

power. Presidents serve at his pleasure. "Reformists" and "hardliners" argue about minor policy differences while fundamental oppression continues unchanged. The system is designed to prevent meaningful reform from within.

This realization has radicalized the protest movement. When people understand that change cannot come through approved channels, that the system is structured to perpetuate itself, that the Supreme Leader and his apparatus will never voluntarily relinquish power, they conclude that the entire system must be dismantled. This is revolutionary consciousness, the recognition that reform is impossible and only fundamental transformation will suffice.

The 2022 and 2026 protests reflect this. Protesters explicitly call for regime overthrow. They tear down images of Khamenei and Khomeini. They chant "death to the dictator" and "death to the Islamic Republic." They burn government buildings. They attack symbols of regime power. This is not reform movement, this is revolutionary uprising demanding total system change.

The regime understands this, which is why they respond with genocidal violence. They know these protesters are not asking for incremental improvements that might be granted to calm unrest. They are demanding the regime's abolition, something the regime cannot negotiate or compromise on. From the regime's perspective, this is existential threat requiring maximum force to suppress.

3.3.2. "Death to the Dictator": The Explicit Rejection of the Regime

The central slogan of recent Iranian protests is "Marg bar dictator," death to the dictator[23, 9]. This represents unprecedented direct attack on the Supreme Leader and the regime's foundational structure.

In the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader is supposed to be beyond criticism, God's representative on earth whose authority is sacred. Insulting him is crime. Publicly calling for his death is moharebeh, war against God, punishable by execution[22, 23]. Yet hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Iranians have chanted this slogan in the streets, fully aware of the legal consequences.

This is extraordinary act of courage and rejection. These protesters are not using coded language or indirect criticism. They are directly, explicitly, publicly calling the Supreme Leader a dictator and demanding his overthrow. They are doing so en masse, in coordinated fashion across all provinces, indicating that this is not fringe radical position but widespread sentiment.

The slogan's power lies in its clarity. There is no ambiguity. There is no room for regime to claim protesters merely want reforms or have economic grievances that can be addressed through policy adjustments. "Death to the dictator" is unambiguous demand for regime change. It makes compromise impossible, which is precisely the point.

Protesters have also chanted "Death to Khamenei" by name, "Death to the Islamic Republic," and "We don't want Islamic Republic." [23, 9] These are direct repudiations of the regime's fundamental legitimacy. They reject not merely current leadership but the entire system, the concept of velayat-e faqih, the idea of clerical rule, the Islamic Republic as institutional form.

Some protesters have gone further, chanting pro-monarchy slogans and displaying pre-revolution Ira-

nian flags[9]. This does not necessarily indicate widespread support for monarchy restoration, many young Iranians have no monarchist leanings. Rather, it represents use of any symbols that reject the Islamic Republic. The lion and sun flag, the symbols of the Shah era, function as repudiation of the current regime, expressing desire for alternative Iran.

The regime has tried to frame these slogans as foreign-inspired, claiming that protesters are manipulated by America and Israel. This is propaganda designed to delegitimize dissent. The reality is that Iranians across all classes, all regions, all ethnic and religious groups have chanted these slogans. This is organic, domestic rejection of the regime by Iranians themselves.

3.3.3. Economic Desperation as the Breaking Point

While the protests represent deep ideological rejection of the Islamic Republic, they are often triggered by economic crises. The January 2026 protests began after government announcements about economic measures that would further impoverish already struggling population[23, 16]. The November 2019 protests erupted after sudden fuel price increases[28]. Economics and politics are inseparable.

For many ordinary Iranians, particularly those not deeply engaged with politics or human rights issues, economic conditions are immediate concern. Can they afford food? Can they pay rent? Can they find work? Can they provide for their families? When the answer is no, when they watch their purchasing power evaporate monthly due to inflation[16, 17], when they cannot afford basics, rage builds.

The regime tries to separate economic protests from political ones, pretending that if they address economic grievances protesters will be satisfied and go home. This is fundamentally misguided. The economic crisis and the political system are linked. The corruption, mismanagement, sanctions, isolation that produce economic disaster are products of the regime's nature and policies. You cannot fix the economy without changing the system.

Iranians understand this connection. Economic protests quickly become political protests because protesters recognize that the regime is responsible for their economic suffering. They see Revolutionary Guards controlling vast business empires[17]. They see regime officials and their families living lavishly while ordinary Iranians starve. They see resources squandered on foreign adventures and proxy wars while domestic infrastructure crumbles. They conclude, correctly, that economic reform requires political revolution.

The economic trigger also brings people into protests who might not otherwise participate. Middle-class families who stayed out of politics, older Iranians who remembered the revolution's chaos and wanted stability, people who were not ideologically opposed to the regime but just wanted to survive, when they can no longer afford food, they protest. This broadens the movement beyond activists and dissidents to include huge swaths of society.

This is why the regime reacts with such violence to economically-triggered protests. They understand that economic desperation can overcome fear. They know that people with nothing to lose are dangerous to authoritarian systems. They recognize that once economic and political grievances combine in mass

movement, the regime faces existential threat.

3.3.4. Accumulated Trauma: 47 Years of Oppression

The January 2026 protests did not emerge from nowhere. They are culmination of 47 years of accumulated trauma, anger, and resistance. Every person killed by the regime, every family torn apart by executions, every woman beaten by morality police, every young person denied opportunity, every voice silenced, contributes to rising tide of rage that periodically explodes into uprising.

Iranians carry generational trauma. Parents who lived through the early post-revolution executions, who watched friends and colleagues disappear, pass that trauma to children[29, 22]. Families who lost loved ones in the 1988 prison massacres, who never received bodies, who were forbidden to mourn publicly, carry that pain decades later[22, 30]. Survivors of the 2009 crackdown, the 2019 massacre, the 2022 killings, they remember[28, 9, 15].

This accumulated trauma creates environment where new incidents trigger disproportionate response because they connect to decades of prior injustice. Mahsa Amini's death was not the first time morality police killed a woman. But it occurred in context where Iranian women had endured 47 years of oppression, where the patience and tolerance for regime brutality had been exhausted[9, 31]. Her death became the spark that ignited accumulated tinder of rage.

Similarly, the January 2026 economic triggers occurred against backdrop of decades of economic mismanagement and declining living standards[16, 17, 18]. Each new economic blow is not experienced in isolation but as continuation of long pattern of regime failure. The accumulated frustration makes people willing to risk everything.

The regime fails to understand this dynamic. They seem to believe that if they brutally suppress each protest wave, killing enough people to terrify survivors, they can return to normal and people will forget. They do not grasp that people do not forget. That every massacre creates new grievances, new martyrs, new reasons to resist. That the trauma they inflict accumulates and will eventually overwhelm their capacity to control it through violence.

3.3.5. The Dream of Normal Life: What They Want Is What We Take for Granted

When Western observers ask what Iranian protesters want, the answer is simple and heartbreaking: they want normal life. They want what people in free societies take for granted. They want to wake up without fear. They want to choose their own clothing. They want to pursue education in fields they choose. They want jobs that match their qualifications. They want to marry whom they love. They want to raise children without terror. They want to speak freely. They want to live with dignity.

They want women to be able to walk streets without being harassed by morality police[9, 14]. They want young people to be able to socialize without fear of arrest. They want to listen to music they enjoy, watch films they choose, read books without censorship. They want to attend protests without being shot[23].

They want to criticize government without risking execution.

They want economic opportunity. They want jobs that pay living wages. They want inflation under control so their savings have value. They want to be able to afford food, housing, healthcare, education for their children. They want meritocracy where hard work and talent are rewarded rather than system where regime connections determine success.

They want rule of law where everyone is equal before courts, where you cannot be arrested arbitrarily, where torture is forbidden, where trials are fair, where innocence is presumed[25]. They want to know that if they wake up tomorrow, they will not disappear into detention center never to be seen again.

They want to practice religion as they choose or not practice religion at all. They want religious minorities to be treated equally. They want Baha'is to be able to attend university. They want atheists to be able to exist openly. They want religion to be personal choice, not state-enforced obligation.

In other words, they want what people in North America, Europe, much of Asia, take for granted as ordinary life. Freedom of conscience. Freedom of expression. Economic opportunity. Rule of law. Human dignity. These are not exotic demands. These are basic human rights that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says every person everywhere deserves.

The tragedy is that Iran could have all of this. Iranians are educated enough, talented enough, capable enough. Iran has resources and geographic advantages. What stands between Iranians and normal life is purely the regime. The Islamic Republic is the obstacle. Remove it, and Iran could thrive.

This is what Iranians are fighting for when they protest. Not abstract ideology. Not foreign-imposed systems. Just the right to live normal human lives with dignity and freedom. This is what the regime kills tens of thousands to prevent. And this is what makes the international community's abandonment of Iranian protesters so unconscionable. We are watching people die for wanting what we have, and we do nothing.

3.4. The Courage Required to Protest: Understanding the Risk

3.4.1. They Know They Might Be Shot

Every Iranian who joined the January 2026 protests knew what might happen. They had watched the 2022 protests where over 500 people were killed[15]. They knew about the November 2019 protests where 1,500 died in two weeks[28]. They understood that the regime shoots to kill, that security forces aim for heads and chests[23, 32], that being unarmed civilian provides no protection.

They knew that the regime deploys snipers on rooftops[32]. They knew about heavy machine guns being used on crowds[23]. They knew that the IRGC has used tanks against protesters[28]. They knew all of this, had seen videos, heard testimonies, attended funerals of friends and family killed in previous protests. And they went into the streets anyway.

This is what courage looks like. Not the absence of fear, but the choice to act despite fear. Not ignorance of danger, but conscious decision that the cause is worth the risk. Not recklessness, but calculated heroism

rooted in recognition that some things are worth dying for.

When you watch videos of Iranian protests, when you see young people facing security forces, when you hear them chanting even as gunfire erupts, you are witnessing extraordinary bravery. These are not soldiers trained for combat. They are students, shopkeepers, teachers, nurses, ordinary people who decided that enough was enough, that they would rather die demanding freedom than live in submission.

3.4.2. They Know They Might Be Arrested and Tortured

Death by shooting is not even the worst outcome protesters risk. Arrest brings torture[25]. They know what happens in Evin Prison and other detention centers. They know about beatings, electric shocks, bastinado, rape, mock executions, solitary confinement[25]. They know that interrogators try to break them psychologically and physically. They know about forced confessions, about being made to denounce their own beliefs and betray their friends on camera.

They know that families of arrested protesters are often unable to learn what happened to their loved ones for weeks or months[26]. That enforced disappearance is common. That some prisoners are never seen again, their fates unknown. That even those eventually released carry trauma that never heals.

And yet they protest. Knowing all of this. Willing to risk torture for the chance to demand freedom. This level of courage should humble anyone who has never faced such choices.

3.4.3. They Know They Might Be Executed

After the 2022 protests, the regime executed at least eight protesters[33, 31]. These were not battlefield casualties. These were people who were arrested, tortured into confessions, given show trials, and hanged. Some were executed publicly from cranes[33, 34]. Their executions were designed to terrorize others into submission.

After January 2026, the regime immediately began threatening mass executions[23]. Prosecutors announced moharebeh charges against arrested protesters, charges carrying death penalty. Clerics called for executions from pulpits. Thousands of arrested protesters face potential execution.

Everyone who protested in January 2026 knew this was possible. They had watched the regime execute protesters before. They understood that if arrested and identified as protest organizers or particularly visible participants, they could be hanged. They made peace with that possibility and protested anyway.

3.4.4. They Protest Anyway: The Definition of Heroism

Heroism is not abstract concept. It is concrete decision made by real people in specific moments. It is the Iranian woman who removes her hijab in public knowing she might be beaten to death like Mahsa Amini[31, 9]. It is the young man who chants "death to the dictator" knowing he might be shot in the head[23]. It is the older woman who joins protests despite having family depending on her. It is the university student who organizes demonstrations knowing expulsion, arrest, and execution await if caught.

It is the doctors and nurses who treat wounded protesters despite orders to report them to authorities[35, 36]. It is the ordinary citizens who help protesters escape, who hide fugitives, who share information despite risks. It is the parents who support their protesting children even as they fear losing them. It is every Iranian who chooses resistance over submission, dignity over safety, freedom over survival.

These people are heroes. Not in metaphorical sense. Not as rhetorical device. They are genuine heroes performing acts of extraordinary courage in face of extreme danger. They are the moral equals of any freedom fighters history celebrates. They deserve recognition, support, protection. Instead, they are being abandoned to a regime that shoots them in the streets and hangs them from cranes.

The international community's failure to defend these heroes is moral catastrophe that will stain our generation's legacy. We have the power to help. We choose not to. We watch them die and do almost nothing. Their courage shames our cowardice. Their sacrifice demands our action. The question is whether we will honor their heroism by finally supporting them, or whether we will let tens of thousands more die while we watch and do nothing.

References

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. *Demographics of Iran*. Half of Iran's population was under 35 in 2012; median age 32 as of 2025. 2025. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Iran.
- [2] Population Pyramids. *Iran Population Pyramid 2025*. Median age 35.0 years; 42.4% under 25. 2025. URL: <https://www.populationpyramids.org/iran>.
- [3] Statbase. *Average age of population: Iran*. Median age 33.96 years in 2025. 2025. URL: <https://statbase.org/data/irn-median-age/>.
- [4] World Education News + Reviews. *Educating Iran: Demographics, Massification, and Missed Opportunities*. Tertiary enrollment increased from 19.13% to 71.9% between 1999-2015. Feb. 2017. URL: <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/02/educating-iran-demographics-massification>.
- [5] World Literacy Foundation. *Iran Has Around "9 Million Absolute Illiterates"*. Adult literacy approximately 85.5% in 2016. URL: <https://worldliteracyfoundation.org/iran-has-around-9-million-absolute-illiterates/>.
- [6] Middle East Institute. *Educational Attainment in Iran*. 1976: 47.49% male literacy, 35.48% female literacy. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/educational-attainment-iran>.
- [7] DataReportal. *Digital 2025: Iran*. 73.2 million internet users, 79.6% penetration. 2025. URL: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-iran>.
- [8] DataReportal. *Internet Use In Iran In 2024*. 73.14 million internet users, 81.7% penetration; 146.5 million mobile connections. 2024. URL: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-iran>.
- [9] Wikipedia contributors. *Woman, Life, Freedom movement*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman,_Life,_Freedom_movement.
- [10] Homa Bazafkan. *"Women, Life, Freedom" a new revolutionary era in Iran*. URL: <https://www.vidc.org/en/detail/women-life-freedom-a-new-revolutionary-era-in-iran>.

- [11] Chatham House. *Iran: Decades of female anger rocks the regime*. Dec. 2022. URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2022-12/iran-decades-female-anger-rocks-regime>.
- [12] United Nations. *Iran: UN experts call for strict new hijab law to be repealed*. New law allows up to 15 years prison and death penalty for hijab violations. Dec. 2024. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158171>.
- [13] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: New Hijab Law Adds Restrictions and Punishments*. Oct. 2024. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/14/iran-new-hijab-law-adds-restrictions-and-punishments>.
- [14] Wikipedia contributors. *Hijab in Iran*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab_in_Iran.
- [15] Iran Human Rights. *Woman, Life, Freedom protests casualties*. At least 476 people killed by December 2022. 2022.
- [16] Wikipedia contributors. *Iranian economic crisis*. Inflation 42-48% in 2025; 22-50% living under poverty line. 2025. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_economic_crisis.
- [17] Wikipedia Contributors. *Economy of Iran*. Accessed February 2026. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Iran.
- [18] Atlantic Council. *Iran's economic performance since the 1979 Revolution*. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-s-economic-performance-since-the-1979-revolution/>.
- [19] Clingendael Institute. *Approaching the precipice: Near-term prospects of Iran's economy*. Inflation above 30% since 2018; rial devalued 62% in 12 months. URL: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/approaching-precipice-near-term-prospects-irans-economy>.
- [20] Tehran Times. *World Youth Day: can Iran meet growing youth population's needs?* Youth unemployment 24.5% for ages 15-24. URL: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/451175/World-Youth-Day-can-Iran-meet-growing-youth-population-s-needs>.
- [21] Wikipedia contributors. *Higher education in Iran*. 42% of recent graduates unemployed as of 2015. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_education_in_Iran.
- [22] Wikipedia contributors. *1988 executions of Iranian political prisoners*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1988_executions_of_Iranian_political_prisoners.
- [23] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Iran massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [24] Wikipedia contributors. *Iran's Family Protection Law*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran's_Family_Protection_Law.
- [25] Human Rights Watch. *Torture, Detention, and the Crushing of Dissent in Iran*. 2004. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/iran0604/5.htm>.
- [26] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Detainees Ill-Treated and Disappeared After Israeli Evin Prison Attack*. Aug. 2025. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/08/14/iran-detainees-ill-treated-and-disappeared-after-israeli-evin-prison-attack>.
- [27] Encyclopædia Britannica. *Ali Khamenei*. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ali-Khamenei>.
- [28] Wikipedia contributors. *2019–2020 Iranian protests*. Approximately 1,500 deaths according to Reuters citing Iranian interior ministry officials. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019%E2%80%932020_Iranian_protests.

- [29] Wikipedia contributors. *Ruhollah Khomeini*. 8,000-10,000 executed between 1981-1985. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruhollah_Khomeini.
- [30] Human Rights Watch. *Iran's 1988 Mass Executions*. Between 2,800 and 5,000 political prisoners executed. June 2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/08/irans-1988-mass-executions>.
- [31] Wikipedia contributors. *Death of Mahsa Amini*. 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died September 16, 2022 in morality police custody. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Mahsa_Amini.
- [32] Euronews. *Iran protests death toll could surpass 30,000, reports claim*. Security forces shooting from elevated positions including rooftops. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/2026/01/27/iran-protests-death-toll-could-surpass-more-than-30000-reports-claim>.
- [33] Wikipedia contributors. *Public executions in Iran*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_executions_in_Iran.
- [34] Iran So Far Away. *Public Hangings in Iran: the Khomeinist Regime's Ritual of Terror*. URL: <https://iransofaraway.substack.com/p/the-khomeinist-regimes-public-executions>.
- [35] Iran International. *Over 36,500 killed in Iran's deadliest massacre, documents reveal*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601255198>.
- [36] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Growing Evidence of Countrywide Massacres*. Medical professional account of 150 bodies brought to single hospital in Mashhad. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/16/iran-growing-evidence-of-countrywide-massacres>.

Part 4

The People's Movement: How It Began

4. December 28, 2025 to January 7, 2026: How It Began

Between December 28, 2025, and January 7, 2026, Iran moved from simmering economic desperation into open nationwide uprising. These ten days represent the final countdown to massacre, the period when millions of Iranians concluded that they had nothing left to lose, that the regime would never reform, that death in the streets demanding freedom was preferable to slow starvation under tyranny. The Islamic Republic watched this movement build, recognized the existential threat it posed, and methodically prepared not to address grievances but to kill on a scale unprecedented even in their brutal history. What began with merchants closing shops in protest against currency collapse rapidly evolved into coordinated resistance across all sectors of society, spreading to all 31 provinces, uniting students, women, workers, shopkeepers, young and old in explicit calls for regime overthrow. By January 7, the regime had made its decision: they would answer these demands with bullets, with massacre, with genocide if necessary to preserve their power. The internet blackout and mass killing that followed on January 8 were not spontaneous reactions, they were calculated, premeditated responses to a population that had crossed the line from dissent to revolution.

4.1. The Economic Collapse: The Immediate Trigger

The protests that erupted on December 28, 2025, did not emerge from nowhere. They were the product of sustained economic collapse that had reached catastrophic levels by late 2025, making ordinary life impossible for the vast majority of Iranians. The immediate trigger was currency freefall that wiped out life savings, hyperinflation that made food unaffordable, infrastructure failures that left people without electricity and water, and a regime whose response to mass suffering was to lecture people about "reducing consumption" while officials lived in luxury[1, 2, 3]. By December 2025, Iran's economy had deteriorated to the point where even regime supporters could no longer ignore the disaster. The question was not whether people would protest, but when and how explosively their accumulated rage would manifest.

4.1.1. The Currency in Freefall: Life Savings Evaporating

On December 28, 2025, the first day of protests, the Iranian rial was trading at approximately 1.45 million rials per US dollar on the parallel market, the lowest value in Iranian history[4, 3]. By January 3, the government briefly managed to strengthen the rial to 1.38 million through intervention, but this manipulation had no effect on public fury, and by January 6, the rial broke its previous record low, reaching 1.5 million per dollar[4]. This represented a 40 percent loss in value since the June 2025 conflict with Israel, and a staggering 90 percent loss since the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions in 2018[5, 2].

What these statistics mean in human terms is that Iranians watched their life savings evaporate. A family that had managed to save the equivalent of \$10,000 through years of sacrifice, money they hoped would fund their children's education or provide security in old age, watched that purchasing power shrink to a fraction of its former value within months. People who had been solidly middle class found themselves unable to

afford basics. The psychological impact of this wealth destruction cannot be overstated, it represented not merely economic hardship but the annihilation of hope, the recognition that no amount of hard work or prudent saving could protect you from regime-induced economic catastrophe[3].

The currency collapse was not a natural disaster or unavoidable consequence of global economic forces. It was the direct result of regime policies: chronic budget deficits financed through money creation, international sanctions resulting from the regime's aggressive foreign policy and nuclear program, capital flight driven by declining public confidence in the government, geopolitical tensions that discouraged foreign investment, and systematic corruption that diverted resources from productive uses to Revolutionary Guards-controlled enterprises[3, 6]. The Islamic Republic created the conditions for currency collapse through decades of mismanagement, ideological rigidity, and prioritization of maintaining power over economic rationality.

For merchants and business owners, the currency volatility made normal economic activity impossible. When the exchange rate fluctuates wildly from day to day, you cannot price goods, you cannot plan inventory, you cannot make rational business decisions. Import-dependent businesses faced particular crisis because the cost of goods purchased in foreign currency rose faster than they could adjust prices, creating losses on every transaction. Small and medium-sized businesses, the backbone of Iran's economy, faced bankruptcy not through any failure on their part but simply because the economic environment had become unworkable[7].

4.1.2. 42% Inflation, 72% Food Price Increases: People Cannot Eat

In December 2025, Iran's official inflation rate stood at 42.2 percent, representing an 1.8 percent increase from November[1, 6, 4]. This was not temporary spike, Iran had maintained inflation above 30 percent continuously since 2018, with rates reaching 48.6 percent in October 2025[1]. For ordinary Iranians, this meant that every month their income bought less, every month they had to make harder choices about what necessities to sacrifice, every month they sank deeper into poverty.

Food price inflation was even more severe than headline inflation. Basic staples such as bread, rice, cooking oil, and meat became increasingly unaffordable for large segments of the population[3]. By January 2025, meat and seed cooking oil had become "largely unaffordable by most Iranians"[1]. These are not luxury items, these are fundamental components of basic nutrition. When people cannot afford to feed their families adequately, when children go hungry, when elderly parents must skip meals, rage builds.

The regime's subsidies and cash handouts, which were supposed to cushion the impact of economic hardship, proved woefully inadequate. While the government provided monthly payments to citizens, the value of these payments declined alongside the rial, failing to offset the impact of rising prices[6]. Moreover, subsidy systems created perverse incentives and were riddled with corruption, with benefits often failing to reach those most in need.

Estimates suggested that between 22 and 50 percent of Iranians now lived below the poverty line, a stark increase from just a few years earlier[1, 3]. This represented a massive shift in Iran's class structure,

with large portions of the middle class pushed into poverty. Families that had considered themselves economically secure found themselves struggling to survive. University-educated professionals with advanced degrees could not afford basic necessities. This downward mobility created conditions for revolutionary consciousness, people who had lost everything material had less to fear from regime repression.

4.1.3. Electricity Blackouts, Water Shortages: Infrastructure Collapse

Iran's infrastructure crisis added another layer of suffering to economic collapse. Despite sitting on some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, Iran experienced routine electricity blackouts and energy shortages throughout 2025[1, 3]. On February 11, 2025, a massive blackout affected Tehran and several major cities simultaneously[1]. These were not isolated incidents, they represented systematic infrastructure failure resulting from decades of underinvestment, mismanagement, and prioritization of military spending and foreign adventures over domestic needs.

The regime's response to energy shortages was to order businesses and schools to close rather than to address the underlying infrastructure deficits. On December 30, 2025, the government ordered nationwide total business shutdown in 21 out of Iran's 31 provinces, ostensibly due to "cold weather" and energy constraints, though many analysts noted the real intention was to stifle growing protests[4, 8]. This order effectively paralyzed the economy across two-thirds of the country, preventing people from working and earning income, supposedly because the regime could not provide sufficient electricity.

Water shortages compounded electricity problems. Iran's water infrastructure, stressed by climate change and mismanagement, failed to provide reliable access in many areas. For ordinary Iranians, this meant daily life became a struggle to secure basic necessities that people in functional societies take for granted. You cannot run a business without reliable electricity. You cannot maintain hygiene and health without adequate water. The regime's failure to provide these basics, despite controlling vast oil and gas wealth, demonstrated the profound incompetence and corruption at the system's core.

The energy crisis also had absurd dimension that highlighted regime priorities. Iran exports energy to neighboring countries while its own citizens suffer blackouts[1]. The regime maintains expensive military forces and funds foreign proxies while domestic infrastructure crumbles. This prioritization made clear to Iranians that their government viewed them not as citizens to serve but as subjects to control, whose welfare was secondary to maintaining power and projecting force abroad.

4.1.4. The Regime's Response: "Reduce Consumption," Let Them Eat Nothing

On December 10, 2025, as economic conditions reached crisis levels, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a statement ordering Iranian people to "reduce consumption of food, water, energy and fuel"[1]. This response to mass economic suffering encapsulated the regime's contempt for ordinary Iranians. Rather than acknowledging policy failures, rather than proposing solutions, rather than accepting responsibility, Khamenei blamed the victims and told them to simply accept poverty and deprivation.

The cruel absurdity of telling people already struggling to afford food to eat less, telling people already

enduring blackouts to use less electricity, cannot be overstated. This was not leadership, this was abdication of responsibility dressed up as moral guidance. It revealed that the regime had no solutions to offer, no plans to address the crisis, only demands that people suffer in silence.

The Minister of Finance blamed the currency collapse on "the impact of its recent war with Israel," attempting to deflect responsibility to external factors[1]. While international sanctions and geopolitical tensions certainly contributed to Iran's economic problems, the fundamental causes were domestic: corruption, mismanagement, ideological rigidity, and prioritization of regime survival over economic rationality. Blaming Israel or America for problems the regime itself created had become standard practice, but Iranians increasingly saw through this propaganda.

The economic establishment's responses were equally inadequate. On March 1, 2025, the Minister of Economy and Finance was impeached, just days after Vice President Mohammad Javad Zarif stepped down under public pressure[1]. These personnel changes meant nothing because the system itself was the problem. You cannot fix systematic economic failure by replacing individuals within a structure designed to prioritize regime control over economic efficiency.

By late December 2025, the combination of currency collapse, hyperinflation, infrastructure failure, and regime indifference had created conditions where masses of Iranians concluded they had nothing left to lose. Economic desperation had reached the point where the fear of death in protests became less powerful than the certainty of slow starvation under continued regime rule. This is what happens when you push people beyond breaking points: they break, and when they do, the eruption is explosive.

4.2. The Merchants Strike: When the Economy's Heart Stopped Beating

On December 28, 2025, merchants and shopkeepers at the Alaeddin Shopping Centre in Tehran and other commercial centers, including Charsou Mall, went on strike, closing their shops in coordinated protest against the rising dollar exchange rate and market instability[4, 7]. This was not minor labor action, this was the Iranian economy's heart stopping its beat. The bazaar merchants, traditionally a conservative constituency with deep historical ties to the clerical establishment, turning against the regime represented a profound shift in Iran's political landscape. When the bazaar strikes, the entire economy grinds to halt, and the regime understands that bazaar opposition historically precedes revolution.

4.2.1. Tehran's Grand Bazaar Falls Silent: The Historical Significance

By December 29, 2025, the second day of strikes, the historic Grand Bazaar of Tehran fell silent[7, 4]. The massive complex, with its labyrinthine corridors and centuries-old traditions, its gold markets and fabric merchants and electronics vendors, all shuttered. This was not partial closure, reports confirmed that large sections of the bazaar were completely shut down, with major commercial arteries across Tehran paralyzed, including Lalehzar Street (the electronics hub), the Bein-al-Haramein market, the Chahar Souq area, the gold market, the spare parts market on Cheragh Bargh Street, and the shoe market at Bagh-e Sepahsalar[7].

The historical significance of this moment cannot be overstated. Tehran's Grand Bazaar has functioned as the economic heartbeat of the nation and a barometer for political stability for centuries[7]. During the 1979 revolution, bazaar strikes played crucial role in paralyzing the Shah's regime economically and demonstrating that he had lost support of traditional merchant class. The bazaar's relationship with the clerical establishment was complex, merchants often supported religious authorities against the Shah, and in return the Islamic Republic protected their economic interests. For the bazaar to strike against the Islamic Republic represented the breaking of this historical alliance, the recognition that the regime had become so incompetent and corrupt that even its traditional supporters could no longer sustain it³.

Merchants who stated explicitly that "business is impossible with a 150,000-toman dollar" were not making revolutionary demands, they were stating economic reality[7]. When currency fluctuates so wildly that you cannot conduct normal business, when your inventory loses value daily, when you face bankruptcy through no fault of your own, striking becomes not political statement but economic necessity. But economic grievances immediately merged with political demands. The slogans recorded on the streets cut through regime propaganda: "Death to the Dictator," referring to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and "No Gaza, No Lebanon, my life for Iran," directly rejecting the regime's regional interventionism and prioritization of foreign proxies over domestic welfare[7].

4.2.2. Nationwide Coordination: From Every City, the Same Message

By December 30, the third day of strikes, the movement had spread far beyond Tehran. The Grand Bazaar remained shuttered for the third consecutive day while strikes paralyzed markets in dozens of cities including Isfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and Mashhad[8, 9]. This was coordinated nationwide action, not spontaneous localized protest. From Tabriz in the northwest to Shiraz in the south, from Mashhad in the east to Kermanshah in the west, bazaars and commercial centers closed, merchants struck, and the message was the same: the economic conditions created by regime mismanagement had become intolerable, and alongside economic demands came political ones calling for the system's overthrow.

The coordination itself was remarkable given the regime's surveillance and control systems. Organizing nationwide simultaneous action requires communication, planning, consensus-building across geographic and demographic divides. That this occurred despite regime monitoring indicated both the depth of shared grievance and the sophistication of resistance networks. The regime could not prevent coordination because the desire to act was so widespread, and because merchants had their own communication channels built on decades of business relationships that predated and existed outside regime structures.

The strikes also expanded beyond traditional bazaars to modern commercial centers. The massive Alaeddin and Charsoo mobile phone complexes, hubs for the country's tech trade, closed their doors[7]. In west Tehran, the Yaftabad furniture market and the Delavaran market ceased operations. This indicated that the movement encompassed not merely traditional merchants but modern business sectors, uniting old

³The bazaar's role in Iranian political history is complex. Merchants historically wielded significant economic and political power, and their support or opposition could make or break governments. The fact that the 2025-2026 uprising began with bazaar strikes, paralleling the 1979 revolution, was not lost on regime officials who understood the historical pattern.

and new economy in shared opposition to regime economic policies.

4.2.3. Early Violence: Security Forces Beat Shopkeepers

The regime's response to strikes was immediate violence. Heavy deployments of security forces were reported at the Istanbul Crossroads, Pol-e Hafez, and surrounding the City Theater in Tehran[7]. In the Bagh-e Sepahsalar district and Kargar Street, security forces fired tear gas into crowds of shopkeepers and onlookers. But the atmosphere was one of defiance rather than submission. Reports indicated that in several instances, protesters fought back against security charges, forcing repressive forces to retreat in some areas[7].

One incident captured the mood: after a state-affiliated cleric reportedly insulted protesters, an angry crowd surrounded and destroyed his vehicle[7]. This was not merely economic protest, this was rage at the entire system, at the clerics who claimed divine authority to rule while driving the country into ruin, at the enforcers who protected the regime rather than the people. In another display captured on video near Jomhuri Street, a protester sat on the pavement directly in the path of advancing police motorcycles, refusing to flee despite the threat of violence[7].

By December 30, the first deaths were confirmed. Three protesters were killed: Amirhesam Khodayarifard from Kuhdasht, Dariush Ansari Bakhtiariwand from Fuladshahr, and Khodadad Shirvani from Marvdasht[10]. These early killings established the pattern that would culminate in January 8: the regime's response to economic protest and political demands was bullets. They shot to kill from the beginning, understanding that this movement threatened their survival and could not be allowed to grow.

4.3. The Students Join: Universities Become Battlegrounds

By December 30, 2025, the third day of the uprising, university students across Iran poured into campuses and streets to support the striking merchants, transforming what had begun as primarily economic protest into explicit political revolution[9]. From the University of Tehran and Amir Kabir University of Technology (Polytechnic) in the capital to universities in Isfahan and Yazd, the student movement made clear that they viewed the current crisis as fundamentally political, not merely economic. When students join economic protests in Iran, the regime knows it faces existential danger, because students have historically been the vanguard of revolutionary change, and because young people have both the courage and the lack of material stakes that make them willing to risk everything.

4.3.1. 45 Universities in Open Rebellion

Reports documented protests and strikes at universities across the country. At Beheshti University, students tore down the sign of the "Supreme Leader's Representation" office, a direct physical challenge to Khamenei's authority[9]. At Amir Kabir University (Polytechnic), students marched chanting "Death to the dictator," "A student may die, but won't accept humiliation," and "Basiji, Sepahi, you are our ISIS,"

explicitly equating the regime's security forces with terrorist organizations[9]. At the University of Tehran, students marching toward the main gates caused security forces to retreat and flee, shattering the regime's aura of invincibility.

At Kharazmi University, students chanted "Death to the oppressor, be it the Shah or the Leader," rejecting both the current regime and the previous monarchy, making clear this was not pro-Shah monarchist movement but demand for genuine democratic change[11]. At the University of Science and Technology's boys' dormitory, students protested with "Death to the dictator," while Ba-Honar University students chanted "Protest is our inalienable right" and "Don't think it's just today; we are here every day"[11].

The slogans echoing across campuses rejected both factions of the regime. "Reformist, Principalist, the game is over," students chanted, alongside "Poverty, corruption, injustice" and "No Gaza, no Lebanon, my life for Iran"[9]. This represented sophisticated political analysis: students understood that the distinction between "reformist" and "hardliner" factions within the Islamic Republic was theater, that both served the same system, that President Masoud Pezeshkian's supposedly moderate administration had accomplished nothing because the structure itself was irreformable.

Universities in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Yazd, and dozens of other cities saw protests[8]. The geographic spread indicated this was not isolated campus activism but coordinated nationwide student movement. Despite the regime's systematic suppression of universities over decades, despite the purging of secular faculty, despite the presence of Basij militia members among students to report on dissent, students organized and acted collectively, demonstrating that ideological control had comprehensively failed among the young generation.

4.3.2. "This System Has Taken Our Future Hostage for 47 Years"

Student protesters articulated their grievances with clarity that cut through all regime propaganda. They graduated with university degrees only to face unemployment rates of 24.5 percent for youth overall and 42 percent for recent graduates[12, 13]. They had pursued education with the expectation that it would lead to meaningful careers and economic security, only to discover that in the Islamic Republic's mismanaged economy, degrees were worthless. They watched opportunities flow to those with regime connections rather than merit. They saw their futures stolen before they even began.

"This system has taken our future hostage for 47 years" was not mere slogan, it was accurate historical assessment. The Islamic Republic has ruled since 1979, and for students in their twenties, this meant their entire lives had been lived under tyranny they never chose. They had no personal memory of any alternative system. Everything they knew about what Iran could have been came from stories, from history, from glimpses of the outside world through heavily censored internet. And they concluded that they would rather die fighting for change than accept lifelong subjugation.

The economic dimension of student anger was inseparable from political and social grievances. Students faced morality police on campus enforcing dress codes. They endured mandatory ideological courses teaching regime propaganda. They risked arrest for any expression of dissent. Female students confronted

systematic discrimination and gender apartheid. And after enduring all of this to obtain education, they graduated into economy with no jobs, watching regime officials and their families live in luxury while students struggled to survive. This combination of oppression, indoctrination, and economic hopelessness created revolutionary consciousness among precisely the demographic most capable of sustained resistance.

4.3.3. Basij Militias Attack Campuses

The regime responded to student protests with characteristic brutality. Basij militias attacked campuses across the country[9]. In Tehran, despite total blockade of dormitories by intelligence agents, students chanted "Death to the Dictator" late into the night[9]. Security forces deployed heavy presence at Khajeh Nasir University and other major institutions, attempting to prevent students from leaving campuses and joining street protests through physical assault[8].

Targeted arrests of student activists began at their private residences on the night of January 1, one of the regime's most brutal early actions[8]. This was calculated strategy: identify protest leaders through surveillance, arrest them away from campuses to avoid provoking mass response, remove organizers to decapitate the movement. But the strategy failed because the protests were too widespread, too decentralized, too organically motivated for removing individual leaders to stop them.

In Razavi Khorasan province, protesters set Basij bases on fire in Mashhad and Sabzevar[14]. At Khayyam University in Mashhad, students demonstrated chanting "Students would rather die than live in humiliation"[14]. These attacks on Basij centers represented qualitative escalation, moving from defensive protest to offensive action targeting the regime's neighborhood enforcement infrastructure. When people begin burning down security facilities, it indicates they have crossed psychological threshold from dissent to insurgency, from demanding reform to actively fighting to destroy the system.

4.4. Women's Acts of Defiance: Burning the Supreme Leader's Image

Alongside merchant strikes and student protests, Iranian women performed acts of defiance so bold they captured global attention and represented profound rejection of the regime's core authority. Videos circulated widely on social media showing young women not only burning photographs of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but using the flames to light cigarettes[15, 16, 17]. This combined multiple forbidden acts, burning the Supreme Leader's image (considered serious crime), women smoking in public (long restricted or stigmatized), and doing so on camera to broadcast their defiance[15, 16].

In the Islamic Republic, burning the Supreme Leader's image can result in charges of "insulting the sacred" or moharebeh (war against God), both capital offenses. The regime had previously killed people for this act. In November 2025, Omid Sarlak, a young man in western Iran, posted video showing himself setting fire to a photograph of Khamenei, just hours later his body was found inside his car with gunshot to the head[15]. In September 2021, poet Qasem Bahrami was arrested in Mashhad after burning Khamenei's photograph, taken to unknown location, with no information about his fate for two months[15]. Iranian women knew these precedents, knew what could happen to them, and burned the images anyway, on camera,

in acts of extraordinary courage.

The gesture's symbolism was multifaceted. It rejected the Supreme Leader's political and religious authority. It violated social rules restricting women's public smoking. It demonstrated women's refusal to accept the system's control over their bodies and actions. It used fire, symbol of purification and destruction, to consume the representation of oppressive authority. And it was performed calmly, deliberately, almost casually, as if to say that the Supreme Leader's image, his authority, his power, meant nothing, deserved only to be fuel for cigarettes[15, 16].

These acts built on the Woman, Life, Freedom movement that had erupted after Mahsa Amini's death in September 2022[18]. Women had already captured global attention through symbolic acts such as cutting their hair and burning headscarves. Now they escalated, taking the rejection of regime authority to even more radical level. If previously they had burned hijabs, now they burned the Supreme Leader himself (in effigy), making explicit that women's liberation required regime destruction[15].

The clips spread virally across social media worldwide, making it increasingly difficult for Iranian authorities to contain them[15]. This global amplification served strategic purpose, it provided women some protection (harder for regime to kill someone who has become internationally visible), it inspired others to similar acts, and it communicated to the world that Iranian women were leading revolutionary struggle. The regime's violent response to such protests had not weakened women's resolve, on the contrary, it had pushed their struggle in more radical direction[15].

4.5. The Movement Spreads: All 31 Provinces Rise

Within days, the protests that had begun in Tehran's commercial centers spread to encompass all 31 of Iran's provinces[10, 4]. By January 1, the fifth day of the uprising, the movement had spread to at least 110 cities[8]. By early January, reports documented protests in 170 locations across 25 provinces[19]. The geographic scope was unprecedented, this was not regional uprising that could be contained, this was nationwide revolution erupting simultaneously across the entire country.

Protests occurred in major cities: Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Kermanshah, Tabriz, Karaj, Qom, Ahvaz, Kerman, and dozens more[4]. But they also occurred in smaller towns and rural areas, places that often remained quiet during previous protest waves. From wealthy neighborhoods in north Tehran to impoverished areas in southern cities, from Kurdish regions in the west to Baloch areas in the east, from Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan to Arab Khuzestan, all ethnic groups, all regions, all classes participated. This degree of national unity in opposition represented the regime's nightmare scenario, the coalescence of all accumulated grievances into single massive movement demanding system change.

The speed of spread indicated both the depth of shared grievance and the sophistication of coordination mechanisms. Despite heavy surveillance, despite internet throttling (which began before the total blackout), despite security forces attempting to block information flow, protests erupted in city after city with remarkable synchronization. Social media, encrypted messaging apps, word of mouth, and traditional networks all contributed to rapid diffusion of protest tactics and calls to action.

The regime's attempts to contain the spread failed comprehensively. They ordered business closures in 21 provinces on December 30, supposedly due to cold weather and energy constraints, but widely understood as attempt to prevent gatherings[4]. This tactic backfired, forcing businesses to close made merchants angrier, added to economic grievances, and did not prevent protests, it merely shifted them from commercial centers to streets, residential areas, and campuses.

4.6. Early Killings: The Regime Shoots to Kill From Day One

The regime's response to protests was lethal force from the beginning. They did not attempt de-escalation, they did not try to address grievances, they did not seek dialogue or compromise. They shot protesters, beat them, arrested them, and made clear that dissent would be met with violence. This established the pattern that would culminate in the January 8 massacre: the regime viewed protesters not as citizens with legitimate grievances but as enemies to be eliminated.

4.6.1. 34 Dead by January 6: The Warning Signs

According to HRANA (Human Rights Activists News Agency), during the first ten days of nationwide protests through January 6 inclusive, at least 34 protesters were killed and at least 2,076 citizens arrested in at least 285 locations[10, 20]. On January 7, thirteen additional protesters were killed, bringing the total to 45[10]. These were confirmed, documented deaths with names and locations. The actual number was likely higher because many deaths went unreported, bodies were taken directly to morgues bypassing hospitals, and families were intimidated into silence.

Among the early confirmed dead were Amirhesam Khodayarifard (22) from Kuhdasht, killed December 30; Dariush Ansari Bakhtiariwand (26) from Fuladshahr, killed December 30; Khodadad Shirvani (32) from Marvdasht, killed December 30; Mostafa Falahi (15) from Azna, killed December 31; Taha Safari (15) from Azna, initially reported missing on December 31, later confirmed dead when family identified his body showing severe head injuries; and many others, most of them young, most killed by gunfire[10, 21].

The Guardian reported that at least three children were killed and over 40 minors arrested during the first eight days of protests[10]. The regime had no compunction about killing children, shooting 15-year-olds, arresting teenagers. This willingness to murder minors demonstrated the regime's desperation and brutality, but it also indicated their recognition that this movement was existentially threatening because it united all generations including the very young who represented Iran's future.

4.6.2. Live Ammunition Used on Unarmed Protesters

Security forces used live ammunition from the earliest days. Based on verified reports and video footage during the first seven days of protests, security forces made extensive use of live ammunition, tear gas, crowd-control weapons, and conducted violent arrests[10]. They fired automatic rifles, shotguns loaded with metal pellets designed to blind and maim, and high-caliber weapons into crowds of unarmed civilians[19].

On January 3, in Malekshahi, Ilam province, hundreds of peaceful protesters marched from Shohada Square toward an IRGC Basij base[21]. IRGC agents opened fire from inside the base without warning, killing three to four people instantly and injuring many others. A protester told Amnesty International: "IRGC agents opened fire from inside the base, shooting without regard for who they shot. Three to four people were killed instantly, and many others were injured. The protesters were completely unarmed"[21]. Verified videos showed protesters fleeing amid gunshots, agents firing weapons from inside the base, and victims with visible injuries lying motionless. Five confirmed dead in this single incident: Reza Azimzadeh, Latif Karimi, Mehdi Emamipour, Fares (Mohsen) Agha Mohammadi, and Mohammad Reza Karami[21, 10].

In Azna, Lorestan province, at least six protesters were killed including 16-year-old Taha Safari[21]. In Lordegan, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, multiple protesters were killed on January 7[10]. Security forces fired on protesters in Hamadan, deployed tear gas in Tehran and Malard, used violence across dozens of locations[4].

The use of live ammunition on unarmed protesters is not crowd control, it is attempted murder. The regime's security forces aimed to kill, shooting at heads and torsos to maximize lethality rather than firing warning shots or aiming at legs. This was deliberate policy, not individual soldiers acting without orders. The goal was to terrorize the population into submission through demonstration that protest would result in death.

4.6.3. Hospitals Begin to Fill: The Foreshadowing

By early January, hospitals across Iran began filling with wounded protesters suffering gunshot wounds, many in critical condition[4]. Medical facilities in Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, and other cities treated dozens then hundreds of injured people, overwhelming emergency departments. The types of injuries, gunshot wounds to head and torso, indicated security forces were shooting to kill rather than to disperse.

This influx of wounded was warning sign of what was coming. When hospitals see dozens of gunshot victims from street protests within the first week, it indicates security forces are using lethal force on massive scale. Medical professionals who treated these early casualties knew that if the protests continued and the regime continued its violent response, the death toll would skyrocket. They tried to prepare, but nothing could prepare them for what would happen on January 8 and 9 when six hospitals in Tehran alone would record 217 deaths in single night, when facilities across the country would be overwhelmed with thousands of dead and wounded, when the hospitals themselves would become targets as security forces raided them to arrest the injured[10].

4.7. January 7: The Regime Prepares for Massacre

On January 7, 2026, the tenth day of the uprising, the regime made its final preparations for mass killing[22]. They had watched the protests spread to all 31 provinces. They had seen merchant strikes paralyze the economy. They had witnessed students occupy universities chanting for the dictator's death.

They had watched women burn the Supreme Leader's image. They understood this movement would not dissipate on its own, that economic concessions would not satisfy demands that had become explicitly revolutionary. They decided that the only way to maintain power was to kill on scale sufficient to terrorize the entire population into submission. January 7 was the day they positioned their pieces for massacre.

4.7.1. Forced Confessions Broadcast: Psychological Warfare

On January 6, state media had broadcast fifteen forced video confessions by arrested protesters[4]. By January 13, the number had reached at least 97 forced confessions aired since protests began on December 28[23, 24]. By late January, the total exceeded 240 forced confessions, an "unprecedented" amount in such short time period[25]. From 2010 to 2020, there were around 350 forced confessions broadcast on state media total, meaning the regime aired in weeks what normally took years[23, 24].

These confessions followed predictable pattern established over decades. Detainees, many showing signs of physical or psychological trauma, appeared on camera expressing remorse for their actions, claiming they had been manipulated by foreign powers (usually America and Israel), confessing to crimes ranging from harming security forces to accepting funds from monarchists to following banned social media accounts[25, 23]. U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency stated that based on testimony from prior detainees, the confessions often came after psychological or physical torture and could have serious consequences including death penalty[23, 24].

The broadcasting of forced confessions served multiple strategic purposes. It fabricated political legitimacy by creating false narrative that protesters were foreign agents rather than ordinary Iranians with legitimate grievances[25]. It deterred dissent by showing potential protesters what awaited them if arrested. It provided propaganda justifying regime violence by portraying protesters as dangerous criminals and foreign pawns. It humiliated and degraded dissidents publicly. And it created "evidence" that could be used in show trials to justify executions[25].

On January 7, Iran's judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei personally interrogated detainees in sessions aired on state television[25]. This high-level involvement indicated the regime's determination to use confessions as centerpiece of their propaganda response. Videos included teenager identified as 14-year-old Shervin Bagherian being interrogated about the death of security force member and threatened with charges carrying death penalty[25]. Another viral video showed man confessing to sending protest footage to Donald Trump via social media[25].

The psychological impact of these broadcasts on the general population was significant. Families watching state television saw arrested protesters, sometimes people they knew, confessing to crimes and facing execution. The message was clear: protest and this will be your fate. But the tactic also backfired because many Iranians understood these were coerced confessions, which increased rage at the regime's cruelty while simultaneously increasing fear of arrest. This combination of rage and fear is volatile, sometimes it suppresses resistance, sometimes it catalyzes more desperate and violent resistance by people who conclude they have nothing left to lose.

4.7.2. Heavy Security Deployments

On January 7 and into January 8, the regime deployed massive security forces across the country in preparation for expected large protests[22, 26]. The IRGC's "Sarallah" Headquarters, responsible for Tehran's security, placed the "Fatehin" and "Ashura" battalions and Basij forces on 100 percent alert[7]. IRGC units in neighboring provinces of Mazandaran, Qom, and Semnan were put on standby to deploy reinforcements to Tehran if needed[7].

Most significantly, the regime took the rare step of using the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces to suppress protests, particularly in Kermanshah province[26]. This was highly unusual, the IRGC Ground Forces are military units, not police or internal security forces. The regime only deployed them once during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, and that was in Kurdish-populated areas[26]. Their deployment indicated that the regime perceived the protests not as riots or civil unrest but as insurgency or internal war requiring military response.

The use of IRGC Ground Forces rather than regular Law Enforcement Command (LEC) also suggested bandwidth constraints among regular security forces[26]. When you need to deploy military units to handle internal protests, it means your police and Basij are either overwhelmed, insufficiently brutal, or potentially unreliable. Reports emerged on January 8 of several security forces members arrested for refusing orders to fire at protesters[26]. While this appeared to be isolated incident rather than widespread trend, it indicated some degree of moral resistance within security apparatus, which may have contributed to regime decision to rely more heavily on ideologically committed IRGC forces.

Security forces established checkpoints, conducted patrols, positioned units at strategic locations across major cities. They deployed to universities to prevent student gatherings. They surrounded bazaars to prevent merchant strikes from continuing. They prepared for urban warfare, because that is what they expected the protests to become.

4.7.3. The Call for January 8: Millions Prepare to March

On January 6, Reza Pahlavi, son of the late Shah and prominent opposition figure living in exile, called for chants to take place from homes and in streets at 8:00 PM local time on the evenings of January 8 and 9[4]. He explained the aim as "keeping demonstrations disciplined and as large as possible" and promised to "announce the next calls to action" depending on the response[4]. While Pahlavi does not represent all opposition factions and many young Iranians are not monarchists, his call amplified through social media and diaspora networks reached millions inside Iran.

Additionally, seven Kurdish organizations including anti-regime groups (the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and Kurdistan Free Life Party among others) called for nationwide general strike on January 8 in response to regime's violent crackdown on protests in Kermanshah, Ilam, and Lorestan provinces[22, 26]. IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News denounced this call, accusing Kurdish groups of attempting to incite riots[26].

The Mobarizoun Popular Front (coalition of Baloch anti-regime groups) announced they would respond

to "every bullet" fired at protesters, and on January 7 they killed Iranian Law Enforcement Command officer in Iranshahr, Sistan and Baluchistan Province, specifically in response to killing and suppression of protesters[22].

By January 8, millions of Iranians had decided to participate in the largest coordinated protest action yet[19]. They knew the risks, they had watched 45 people killed in the previous ten days, they had seen forced confessions on television, they understood the regime would respond violently. And they decided to act anyway, because ten days of protests had demonstrated that they were not alone, that millions shared their anger and their determination, that the regime could be challenged, and that remaining silent was no longer tolerable.

At 8:00 PM on January 8, people across Tehran and other cities leaned out of windows, stood on balconies, and gathered in streets, shouting anti-regime chants from rooftops in unison[19]. The sound echoed through cities, millions of voices crying out for freedom simultaneously. It was extraordinary moment of collective courage and solidarity. And it was the moment when the regime decided to answer with massacre. Within hours, the internet would be cut to near-total blackout. By morning, hospitals would be overwhelmed with dead and wounded. Over the next 48 hours, between 30,000 and 36,500 people would be killed in systematic, coordinated state murder designed to drown the revolution in blood.

January 7 was the last day before darkness fell. The last day when information could flow freely enough to document what was happening. The last day when the world could watch in real time. At midnight, the regime pulled the plug on Iran's connection to the global internet, plunging the country into digital isolation. And under cover of that blackout, they began killing on industrial scale. Everything that happened in the ten days from December 28 to January 7, all the courage of protesters, all the solidarity across class and ethnic and regional divides, all the hope that collective action could bring change, met the Islamic Republic's answer: mass murder.

References

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. *Iranian economic crisis*. Inflation 42-48% in 2025; 22-50% living under poverty line. 2025. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_economic_crisis.
- [2] Wikipedia Contributors. *Economy of Iran*. Accessed February 2026. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Iran.
- [3] Investing.com. *Inside Iran's Economic Meltdown: Currency Collapse, Inflation, and Social Unrest*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.investing.com/analysis/inside-irans-economic-meltdown-currency-collapse-inflation-and-social-unrest-200673212>.
- [4] Wikipedia Contributors. *2025–2026 Iranian Protests*. Accessed February 2026. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025%E2%80%932026_Iranian_protests.
- [5] Encyclopædia Britannica. *2026 Iranian Protests*. Accessed February 2026. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2026. URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iranian-Protests>.

- [6] Anadolu Agency. *EXPLAINER - Rising Prices, Falling Currency: Iran's Economy Faces Rocky Road*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/explainer-rising-prices-falling-currency-iran-s-economy-faces-rocky-road/3800027>.
- [7] NCRI. *Second Day of Strikes Paralyzes Tehran Grand Bazaar as Currency Hits Historic Low*. Accessed February 2026. National Council of Resistance of Iran. Dec. 2025. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-protests/second-day-of-strikes-paralyzes-tehran-grand-bazaar-as-currency-hits-historic-low/>.
- [8] NCRI. *Iran News in Brief – January 7, 2026*. Accessed February 2026. National Council of Resistance of Iran. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-news-in-brief-news/iran-news-in-brief-january-7-2026/>.
- [9] PMOI/MEK. *Iran Protests Expand: Bazaar and Universities Unite Against Regime on Third Day*. Accessed February 2026. People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran. Dec. 2025. URL: <https://english.mojahedin.org/news/iran-protests-expand-bazaar-and-universities-unite-against-regime-on-third-day/>.
- [10] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Iran massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [11] NCRI. *Iran's Uprising Expands with Strikes and Demonstrations in Tehran and Other Cities*. Accessed February 2026. National Council of Resistance of Iran. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncri-statements/statement-iran-protest/irans-uprising-expands-with-strikes-and-demonstrations-in-tehran-and-other-cities-as-youths-clash-with-suppressive-forces/>.
- [12] Tehran Times. *World Youth Day: can Iran meet growing youth population's needs? Youth unemployment 24.5% for ages 15-24*. URL: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/451175/World-Youth-Day-can-Iran-meet-growing-youth-population-s-needs>.
- [13] Wikipedia contributors. *Higher education in Iran*. 42% of recent graduates unemployed as of 2015. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Higher_education_in_Iran.
- [14] NCRI. *Iran's Rebellious Youth Confront Repressive Forces in Dozens of Cities on Fifth Day of Uprising*. Accessed February 2026. National Council of Resistance of Iran. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncri-statements/statement-iran-protest/irans-rebellious-youth-confront-repressive-forces-in-dozens-of-cities-on-fifth-day-of-uprising-several-protesters-killed/>.
- [15] Euronews. *Protest Creativity: Iranian Women Light Cigarettes on Burning Portrait of the Ayatollah*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/2026/01/10/protest-creativity-iranian-women-light-cigarettes-on-burning-portrait-of-the-ayatollah>.
- [16] NDTV. *Why Images Of Iranian Women Lighting Cigarettes With Khamenei's Photo Going Viral*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/why-iranian-women-lighting-cigarettes-with-khameneis-photo-going-viral-10564751>.
- [17] Oneindia News. *Iran BREAKING: Iranian Women, WITHOUT HIJAB, Burn Khamenei's Photos With Cigarettes*. Video report, accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Fez5j8npAc>.
- [18] Wikipedia contributors. *Woman, Life, Freedom movement*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman,_Life,_Freedom_movement.

- [19] Khar Center. *Iran's January 2026 Uprising: Origins, Developments, and Future Scenarios*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://hecomeswithfire.com/irans-january-2026-uprising-origins-developments-and-future-scenarios/>.
- [20] Understanding War. *Iran Update, January 6, 2026*. Accessed February 2026. Institute for the Study of War. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/iran-update-january-6-2026/>.
- [21] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Growing Evidence of Countrywide Massacres*. Medical professional account of 150 bodies brought to single hospital in Mashhad. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/16/iran-growing-evidence-of-countrywide-massacres>.
- [22] Critical Threats Project. *Iran Update, January 7, 2026*. Accessed February 2026. Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-7-2026>.
- [23] KSAT. *Activists Say Iran Has Aired at Least 97 Coerced Confessions from Protesters, Often After Torture*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ksat.com/news/world/2026/01/13/activists-say-iran-has-aired-at-least-97-coerced-confessions-from-protesters-often-after-torture/>.
- [24] WSLs. *Activists Say Iran Has Aired Nearly 100 Coerced Confessions from Protesters, Often After Torture*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.wsls.com/news/world/2026/01/13/activists-say-iran-has-aired-nearly-100-coerced-confessions-from-protesters-often-after-torture/>.
- [25] France 24. *Iran's State TV Airs Several 'Forced Confessions' After Protest Crackdown, Activists Say*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20260126-iranian-state-tv-air-s-several-forced-confessions-after-protest-crackdown-activists-say>.
- [26] Critical Threats Project. *Iran Update, January 8, 2026*. Accessed February 2026. Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-8-2026>.

Part 5

The Massacre: January 8-10, 2026

5. January 8-10, 2026: The Massacre, When the Regime Decided to Kill Them All

On January 8, 2026, at approximately 8:00 PM local time, as millions of Iranians across all 31 provinces stood on balconies and gathered in streets answering calls for coordinated protest, the Islamic Republic of Iran made its final decision. Within hours, the regime cut the nation's connection to the global internet, severed phone lines, activated military-grade signal jammers, and plunged 85 million people into near-total communication darkness. Under cover of this blackout, over the next 48 hours, Iranian security forces, primarily the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Basij militia, carried out what multiple independent investigations, medical sources, government documents, and eyewitness testimonies describe as the largest mass killing of civilians during street protests in modern history. Conservative estimates documented by human rights organizations confirm at least 6,842 deaths as of February 1, 2026[1, 2]. Mid-range estimates based on hospital records and medical professional networks place the toll between 12,000 and 13,000 killed[3, 4]. Upper estimates derived from classified Iranian government documents, Supreme National Security Council reports, Interior Ministry consolidations, and IRGC Intelligence Organization assessments indicate that between 30,000 and 36,500 people were killed in just 48 hours on January 8 and 9[5, 6, 7]. This section documents what happened during those two days when the Islamic Republic, faced with nationwide uprising threatening its survival, chose genocide over reform, massacre over dialogue, industrial-scale killing over any attempt to address the legitimate grievances of its people. What follows is based on verified footage smuggled out through Starlink connections before those too were jammed, testimonies from doctors and nurses who treated thousands of gunshot victims, eyewitness accounts from survivors, leaked government documents, hospital records, morgue investigations, and the painstaking documentation work of human rights organizations operating under extraordinarily difficult conditions[8, 9].

5.1. The Scale: Understanding How Many Were Killed

The question of how many people the Islamic Republic killed during January 8-10, 2026, particularly during the first 48 hours, may never be answered with absolute precision. The regime's internet blackout was specifically designed to prevent real-time documentation[10, 11]. Security forces removed bodies from streets at night to hide numbers[1]. Many victims were taken directly to morgues rather than hospitals, bypassing medical record systems[7]. Families were threatened into silence, forced to sign statements blaming deaths on accidents rather than state violence, or told their loved ones would be buried in unmarked graves if they spoke publicly[9, 8]. The regime itself has produced multiple conflicting internal counts, suggesting even security agencies do not know or will not acknowledge the full scope of killing they perpetrated[6]. Despite these obstacles, through extraordinary efforts, a clearer picture has emerged, and that picture is horrifying. The evidence, drawn from multiple independent sources using different methodologies, all points to the same conclusion: the Islamic Republic killed tens of thousands of its own citizens in two days, making January 8-9, 2026, one of the deadliest 48-hour periods of state violence against civilians in human

history[5, 6].

5.1.1. Conservative Estimate: 6,842 Confirmed Dead (as of February 1)

As of February 1, 2026, the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), widely regarded as maintaining the most rigorous verification standards for protest casualties, had confirmed 6,842 total deaths since protests began December 28, 2025[12]. Of these, HRANA verified 6,425 as protesters, 146 as minors under age 18, 214 as security force members killed in clashes, and 57 as non-participating bystanders[1, 2]. Additionally, HRANA listed 11,280 cases still under investigation, deaths for which initial reports existed but verification remained incomplete, bringing the total documented cases (confirmed plus under investigation) to 18,122[12]. HRANA's methodology requires multiple sources, identity verification where possible, and corroboration before adding names to confirmed death lists[13]. This conservative approach, while ensuring accuracy, necessarily means HRANA's numbers represent a floor, not a ceiling, the absolute minimum number of deaths that can be proven beyond reasonable doubt even under the information blackout. The Washington Post noted that the Center for Human Rights in Iran, another organization tracking casualties, has "a record of issuing conservative estimates of deaths in previous protests,"[14] meaning even these organizations' higher estimates should be viewed as likely undercounts rather than exaggerations. The conservative estimate of over 6,800 confirmed dead already represents a massacre of historic proportions, exceeding the documented death toll of many recognized genocides and mass atrocities, but all available evidence indicates this number captures only a fraction of those actually killed[9, 8].

5.1.2. Mid-Range Estimate: 12,000 to 13,000 Dead

On January 13, 2026, five days after the internet blackout began, Iran International published the results of a multi-stage investigation concluding that at least 12,000 civilians had been killed during January 8 and 9[iranintl_12000_2026]. This estimate was based on multiple categories of sources: one source described as "close to" Iran's Supreme National Security Council, two sources from the Office of the Presidency, sources from IRGC units in three different cities, eyewitness accounts and family reports from across the country, and critically, reports from medical centers along with direct testimonies from Iranian doctors and nurses who treated casualties and handled bodies during those two days[iranintl_12000_2026]. CBS News, citing activist groups inside Iran who had access to medical reports, corroborated this estimate, reporting that groups inside the country estimated at least 12,000 deaths and possibly as many as 20,000[cbs_12000_2026]. The 12,000 figure gained additional credibility when it appeared in leaked Iranian government documents. According to sources within Iran's Interior Ministry who spoke to Iran International on condition of anonymity, a consolidation of figures received from provincial security councils by Tuesday, January 20, showed the death toll had exceeded 30,000, but an earlier report presented on January 21 to the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Iranian Parliament listed the number as 27,500[6]. A report specifically focused on the IRGC Intelligence Organization's assessment dated January 11, two days after the massacre, listed the death toll at 12,000[6]. The mid-range estimate of 12,000 to 13,000 killed appears to represent what medical professionals, based on hospital admissions and morgue deliveries

they directly witnessed, could conservatively confirm[4]. Dr. Amir Parasta, described as a German-Iranian surgeon coordinating a network of medical professionals inside Iran, told Time magazine that based on records "verified by at least two individuals in each medical organization," the count of "clinically reported protest-related deaths" was 25,654 for dates up to January 23, though this higher figure encompasses the entire period, not just January 8-9[15, 16]. If 12,000 to 13,000 represents the deaths medical professionals could document despite regime interference, intimidation, and the systematic removal of bodies, the actual toll was almost certainly higher[8, 9].

5.1.3. Upper Estimate: 30,000 to 36,500 Dead in 48 Hours

On January 25, 2026, two separate major investigations published findings that dramatically increased the estimated death toll from the January 8-9 massacre. Time magazine, citing two unnamed senior officials in the Iranian Ministry of Health, reported that according to internal records, approximately 30,000 people were killed just on January 8 and 9[7]. The health officials described a system completely overwhelmed, hospitals using 18-wheeler trucks instead of ambulances to transport bodies, facilities running out of body bags, and medical staff working continuously for 36 to 48 hours trying to treat casualties[7]. Time noted it was unable to independently verify the 30,000 figure but stated that "an estimate of 30,000 accords with reports from doctors and other first responders on the ground during the protests"[7]. The magazine emphasized this number represented only deaths recorded in civilian hospitals, explicitly excluding protest-related deaths recorded in military hospitals, deaths where bodies were taken directly to morgues without hospital admission, and deaths recorded in hospitals absent from the list the health officials possessed[7]. On the same day, Iran International published results of its own extensive investigation, concluding that more than 36,500 Iranians were killed by security forces during the January 8-9 crackdown[6]. This estimate was based on newly obtained classified documents, field reports, accounts from medical staff, witnesses, and victims' families, reviewed by Iran International's Editorial Board[6]. The investigation traced how death toll figures in classified government reports had rapidly increased as information consolidated: an IRGC Intelligence Organization report to the Supreme National Security Council dated January 11 listed 12,000 deaths; Interior Ministry reports dated January 20 listed over 30,000; a report to Parliament's National Security Committee dated January 21 listed 27,500; IRGC Intelligence reports dated January 22 and 24 listed 33,000 and 36,500 respectively[6]. The pattern of escalating numbers in official documents suggests that even the regime's own security agencies initially did not grasp the full scale of killing, with the death toll climbing as provincial reports flowed upward and as morgues and hospitals submitted data[6]. Britannica, the venerable encyclopedia, stated in its entry on the 2026 Iranian Protests that "according to officials in Iran's Ministry of Health, at least 30,000 people were killed in just the first 48 hours," describing this as "a number unseen for deaths by gunfire since the Nazis' Babi Yar massacre in September 1941"[5]. The convergence of estimates from medical sources, leaked government documents, and independent investigations around the 30,000 to 36,500 range for just 48 hours indicates this represents the most likely true toll, though even this may be incomplete[17].

5.1.4. Why We May Never Know the True Number

The Islamic Republic took systematic steps to ensure the full death toll from January 8-9, 2026, would remain unknowable. The internet blackout that began at 8:00 PM on January 8 was timed precisely to prevent real-time documentation of the killing that was about to commence[10, 8]. By cutting off protesters' ability to share video, coordinate responses, or alert the outside world, the regime created the conditions for massacre with minimal immediate international scrutiny[11, 9]. Security forces systematically removed bodies from streets during nighttime hours, often using trucks to transport corpses directly to morgues or to facilities outside major cities, bypassing hospital systems where doctors might count and document them[1, 6]. Multiple sources reported that authorities delivered bodies to the Kahrizak facility south of Tehran, a location already infamous in Iranian history as a detention center where protesters were tortured and killed during the 2009 Green Movement[18, 3]. Verified videos from Kahrizak showed rows of bodies in body bags, with on-screen labels referring to "photo number [X] out of 250," suggesting hundreds of bodies were processed through this single facility[18]. Eyewitnesses who went to Kahrizak searching for missing family members told Iran International they saw more than 400 bodies there[3]. In addition to physically hiding bodies, the regime engaged in systematic intimidation and coercion of victims' families. Authorities forced families to sign statements attributing deaths to accidents, heart attacks, or "terrorist" violence rather than security force shootings[9, 19]. Some families were required to pay \$7,000 US dollars, an enormous sum for most Iranians, simply to claim their dead relatives' bodies[1, 20]. Others were threatened that if they spoke publicly about how their loved ones died, the bodies would be buried in unmarked graves and they would never be able to properly mourn[19]. Security forces also raided hospitals to arrest wounded protesters and in some cases, according to multiple doctor testimonies, to "finish off" hospitalized injured people who might survive to bear witness[rasht_hospital, 21]. Doctors and medical staff faced arrest for treating protesters or speaking about what they witnessed[22]. The regime set up checkpoints to detain citizens found with protest images on their phones, confiscated CCTV footage that might show shootings, and used violence and intimidation to create an environment where witnessing became dangerous and testimony near-impossible[23, 17]. The confusion and concealment was so extensive that even regime security agencies produced wildly varying death counts, with different branches reporting different numbers, suggesting deliberate fragmentation of information even within the state apparatus[6]. On January 28, 2026, The Guardian reported that "less than 10% of deaths may have been officially registered"[17], meaning that for every death the regime acknowledged, nine others went unrecorded in official systems. When a government uses industrial-scale violence under cover of total information blackout, then systematically destroys evidence, intimidates witnesses, and fragments its own internal accounting, determining precise death tolls becomes extraordinarily difficult. What remains certain is that tens of thousands were killed, that this represents one of the deadliest episodes of state violence against protesters in modern history, and that the regime's extensive efforts to hide the true number itself constitutes evidence of consciousness of the enormity of the crime[9, 8].

5.1.5. Comparative Context: 30,000 in 48 Hours, Historical Parallels

To grasp the magnitude of killing 30,000 to 36,500 people in 48 hours, historical comparison provides context that makes the numbers less abstract and more visceral. The Babi Yar massacre, carried out by Nazi Einsatzgruppen and collaborators in a ravine outside Kyiv, Ukraine, on September 29-30, 1941, killed 33,771 Jews in approximately 48 hours, one of the Holocaust's most concentrated killing events[24]. Iran's January 8-9, 2026 massacre, at the upper estimate of 36,500, equals or exceeds this in death toll and compressed timeframe[5]. The distinction is method: Babi Yar victims were marched to a ravine, ordered to undress, and machine-gunned in systematic Nazi industrial killing, while Iranian victims were shot in streets, homes, trapped in bazaars set aflame, and hunted across entire cities, but the rate of death, the number of lives extinguished per hour, is comparable[[britannica_30000xw](#)]. During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, approximately 800,000 people were killed over 100 days, an average of 8,000 per day[25]. Iran's two-day massacre, at 30,000 to 36,500, represents 15,000 to 18,250 killed per day, nearly double the Rwandan genocide's daily average, though Rwanda's horror was its sustained duration rather than spike intensity[26]. The Cambodian Killing Fields under the Khmer Rouge killed approximately 1.7 to 2 million people over four years, but even at its most intense periods, the daily death rate did not approach 15,000 to 18,000[27]. The Nanjing Massacre of 1937-38, when Japanese forces killed an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Chinese civilians and prisoners of war over approximately six weeks, represents a sustained atrocity over a much longer period[28]. The Srebrenica massacre of July 1995, in which Bosnian Serb forces killed more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys over several days, is recognized as genocide and prompted international military intervention, yet represents a quarter of Iran's January 8-9 toll[29]. The November 2019 Iran protests, previously described as the deadliest crackdown in the Islamic Republic's history, killed an estimated 1,500 people over approximately two weeks[30]. January 2026 killed 20 to 25 times that number in two days. The 2022 Mahsa Amini protests killed over 500 people across several months[31]. January 2026 killed 60 to 75 times that number in 48 hours. These comparisons are not meant to minimize other atrocities but to establish that what happened in Iran on January 8-9, 2026, belongs in the darkest chapters of human history. The rate of killing, measured in deaths per hour, approaches that of the Holocaust's most concentrated massacres. The absolute numbers exceed most modern protest crackdowns by orders of magnitude. The premeditation, the coordination across an entire nation, the use of information blackout to enable killing, and the systematic nature of the violence all indicate this was not spontaneous brutality or crowd control gone wrong, but planned, coordinated, state-directed mass murder designed to drown a nationwide uprising in blood[9, 8, 6].

5.2. January 8, 8:00 PM: The Internet Goes Dark, The Massacre Begins

At approximately 8:00 PM Iran Standard Time (17:00 UTC) on January 8, 2026, the twelfth day of nationwide protests, as millions of Iranians across all 31 provinces answered calls by opposition figures including Reza Pahlavi to simultaneously chant anti-regime slogans from balconies, rooftops, and streets in a coordinated display of unity and defiance, the Islamic Republic activated what multiple cybersecurity experts and monitoring organizations describe as the most comprehensive information blackout ever im-

posed on a nation of Iran's size[10, 11]. Within hours, internet connectivity dropped from normal levels to near zero, telephone services including both landlines and mobile networks ceased functioning, even Iran's domestic National Information Network, which theoretically operates independent of global internet infrastructure, went offline[10, 32]. NetBlocks, an internet monitoring organization, reported that Iran was "now in the midst of a nationwide internet blackout; the incident follows a series of escalating digital censorship measures targeting protests across the country and hinders the public's right to communicate at a critical moment"[11]. Georgia Institute of Technology's Internet Outage Detection and Analysis database confirmed the nationwide nature of the blackout[33]. Reports of communication disruptions came simultaneously from Tehran, Isfahan, Lordegan, Abadan, parts of Shiraz, Kermanshah, and rapidly from every major city[10]. The timing was not coincidental. The blackout began precisely as the largest coordinated protest action of the uprising was commencing, at the moment when millions of voices joined together in what would be the movement's most powerful display of national unity[34, 35]. Within hours of the internet going dark, security forces began shooting into crowds with automatic weapons, and over the next 48 hours they would kill tens of thousands of people, the vast majority of the killing occurring while the nation remained cut off from the world[7, 6, 5]. The internet blackout was not response to violence, it was preparation for massacre[8, 9].

5.2.1. Total Communication Blackout: Cutting Off the World

The blackout that began at 8:00 PM on January 8 was unlike any previous internet restriction in Iranian history in its comprehensiveness and its apparent permanence. During previous protest waves, including the 2019 November uprising and the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, the regime had throttled internet speeds, blocked specific social media platforms and messaging apps, and imposed temporary regional shutdowns, but some connectivity typically remained and restrictions were eventually lifted[36]. The January 2026 blackout was qualitatively different. Authorities disabled mobile network antennas, cut physical phone lines, limited transmission of high-volume data preventing users from sending or receiving large files such as videos of security force violence, and deactivated SIM cards belonging to identified dissidents and social activists[10]. Iran's National Information Network, a domestic intranet system the regime had spent years building specifically to control information flow, was shut down entirely, even internally within Iran, meaning that government-approved domestic services also ceased functioning[[netblocks_national_network](#), 10]. ATM machines stopped working because they relied on network connectivity[37]. International phone calls became impossible[37]. Credit card transactions failed[37]. Business networks that companies used for operations went offline[37]. Essentially every system that required any form of digital communication ceased to function, paralyzing not merely protest coordination and documentation but the entire economic and social infrastructure of an 85-million-person nation[38]. By January 11, Iran had succeeded in shutting down even Starlink satellite internet service, which had briefly provided some protesters with means to bypass regime-controlled infrastructure[39, 10]. The regime deployed military-grade GPS jammers to disrupt Starlink signals, initially causing 30 percent packet loss but rapidly escalating to 80 percent disruption in some areas[40, 10]. Security forces then began door-to-door operations seizing satellite dishes to prevent any possibility of external communication[41, 10]. On January 14, reports emerged that the government

was finalizing an internet kill switch project designed to cut the nation completely off from the global internet for extended periods, a plan coordinated with Chinese telecommunications company Huawei[42, 10]. By January 15, Filterwatch, an internet monitoring organization, published a report describing the regime's confidential long-term plan for "Absolute Digital Isolation," transforming Iran into a "Barracks Internet" where only individuals and organizations with security clearance could access the outside world through a strictly monitored whitelist, effectively turning the nation into a North Korea-style digital prison[43, 10]. The blackout's economic cost was staggering, estimated at \$1.56 million per hour in lost economic activity[44, 10]. Yet the regime sustained it for weeks, accepting enormous economic damage, because hiding the massacre was worth any cost[8, 9].

5.2.2. Why the Blackout: To Hide the Killing

The internet blackout served one primary strategic purpose: to enable mass killing without real-time documentation or international response[8, 9]. Modern smartphones mean that virtually every Iranian carries a camera capable of recording high-definition video and, under normal circumstances, instantly sharing that footage with the world. The 2022 Mahsa Amini protests gained massive international attention partly because videos of security force brutality spread globally within hours[45]. The image of Mahsa Amini herself, the videos of women burning headscarves and cutting their hair, the footage of Nika Shakarami and other young victims, all created international pressure on the regime[46]. The Islamic Republic learned from this experience that in the age of smartphones and social media, committing atrocities in front of populations with internet access creates immediate documentation and international outcry that complicates the regime's narrative and potentially invites foreign intervention. By cutting all communication before beginning the January 8-9 massacre, the regime ensured that the vast majority of the killing would occur in darkness, that most security force shootings would not be filmed, that most victims would die without the world watching, that by the time information began to trickle out through Starlink and other limited channels, the massacre would be complete and the regime could control the narrative[8]. The blackout also served tactical purposes beyond preventing documentation. It disrupted protesters' ability to coordinate, to warn each other about security force positions, to organize medical response to casualties, to even know what was happening in other parts of their own cities let alone across the country[47]. The psychological impact of total isolation during state violence is profound: when you cannot communicate with family members to verify they are safe, when you do not know if the violence you are experiencing is localized or nationwide, when you cannot call for help or share information about what you are witnessing, the terror is magnified[48]. The regime weaponized this isolation, using communication blackout as a force multiplier for physical violence. Perhaps most cynically, the blackout allowed the regime to later deny the scale of killing or blame deaths on "terrorists" and "foreign agents" because the lack of contemporaneous video evidence from the most intense killing period meant the regime's lies could not be immediately disproven[49, 9]. When Security forces shot people in the thousands, but only dozens of videos emerged because internet was down, the regime could claim the videos were manipulated, that protesters were violent, that death tolls were exaggerated, knowing that the absence of evidence caused by their own blackout would be used to cast doubt on the evidence

that did emerge[50]. Shirin Ebadi, Iranian Nobel Peace Prize laureate, warned on January 8 as the blackout began that "under the Internet blackout, the Islamic Republic may massacre the protesters"[51, 52]. She was right. The blackout enabled massacre. The deaths of 30,000 to 36,500 people in 48 hours were only possible because the regime first blinded the world[5, 6, 7].

5.2.3. The Order from the Top: "Show No Mercy"

On January 9, 2026, as the massacre intensified, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued direct orders to security forces to "crush the protests by any means necessary"[53]. According to two unnamed Iranian officials with knowledge of the leader's instructions interviewed by The New York Times, forces were told explicitly to "shoot to kill and to show no mercy"[53]. This was not ambiguous guidance subject to interpretation by field commanders, this was explicit authorization for lethal force without restraint, permission to commit mass murder in the name of preserving the regime[53]. A senior government official was quoted stating that security forces were given "the green light to kill indiscriminately, including civilians, in order to spread fear and deter further protests in Iran"[54]. The orders came with Khamenei's full authority as Supreme Leader, and with approval from senior officials across the three branches of government, establishing that the massacre was not rogue action by out-of-control security forces but coordinated state policy implemented with the highest levels of authorization[3, 9]. Sources close to Iran's Supreme National Security Council and the Presidential Office confirmed that the killing of protesters was carried out on direct order from Khamenei, with full approval from senior state officials, and that the council had authorized direct fire, meaning shooting to kill rather than dispersing crowds with non-lethal means[3]. In his January 17 speech broadcast on Iranian state media, Khamenei publicly acknowledged that "several thousand" people had been killed during the protests, though he blamed U.S. President Donald Trump for the massacre and called all protesters "rioters and terrorists" affiliated with the United States and Israeli governments[55]. This public acknowledgment of "several thousand" deaths, which represented a significant admission given the regime's typical strategy of minimizing casualties, indicated that the scale of killing was so vast that complete denial had become impossible even for regime propaganda[56]. The order to kill without mercy was implemented through specific tactical directives: security forces were instructed to shoot protesters in the head and torso to maximize lethality rather than firing at legs or using warning shots[57, 58]. Snipers were positioned on rooftops with orders to target individuals in crowds[59]. Heavy machine guns were deployed and fired into masses of people[60]. Forces were authorized to shoot fleeing protesters in the back[61]. Hospitals were raided to arrest or kill wounded survivors[62]. These were not spontaneous decisions by individual soldiers; they represented implementation of command decisions made at the highest levels of the Islamic Republic[9, 63]. The massacre was ordered, planned, coordinated, and executed as state policy, making every death murder and the entire event a crime against humanity for which the regime's leadership bears direct criminal responsibility[64].

5.3. The Methods of Killing: How They Murdered Tens of Thousands

The Islamic Republic's security forces, primarily the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its Basij militia auxiliaries, with reported involvement of proxy forces from Iraq and Syria[65, 6], employed multiple methods to kill tens of thousands of Iranian civilians during January 8-10, 2026, with the vast majority of killing concentrated in the first 48 hours. These were not crowd control tactics that accidentally resulted in deaths, these were techniques specifically chosen to maximize casualties, to kill efficiently, to terrorize survivors, and to establish through overwhelming lethal force that continued resistance meant certain death[9]. Verified videos, eyewitness testimonies, medical examinations of bodies, and accounts from doctors who treated thousands of wounded all describe the same patterns: security forces positioned to kill, weapons selected for lethality, tactics designed for maximum casualties, and systematic implementation across the entire country indicating coordination rather than isolated incidents[66, 67].

5.3.1. Snipers on Rooftops: Targeting Heads and Hearts

Multiple eyewitness accounts and verified videos from cities across Iran documented snipers positioned on rooftops of government buildings, mosques, police stations, and even residential houses, firing precision shots at individual protesters in crowds below[68, 69]. One eyewitness testimony recorded that "Snipers were positioned on rooftops everywhere," describing how marksmen would target individuals, often those who appeared to be leaders or those encouraging others to continue protesting[70]. Medical evidence corroborates these accounts: doctors treating gunshot victims reported that a significant proportion of wounds were to the head and upper torso, precisely the shot placement one would expect from trained marksmen aiming to kill rather than disperse[71]. Amnesty International's investigation noted that security forces positioned on rooftops of buildings including houses, mosques, and police stations "repeatedly fired rifles and shotguns loaded with metal pellets at protesters, frequently targeting their heads and torsos"[57]. Head shots are almost universally fatal; targeting heads is incompatible with crowd control and represents clear intent to kill[72]. The use of snipers also served psychological warfare purposes: when protesters see individuals suddenly drop dead from single shots, when they realize trained marksmen are hunting them from elevated positions, terror spreads through crowds more effectively than indiscriminate fire[73]. The systematic deployment of snipers across multiple cities simultaneously indicates this was coordinated tactic rather than isolated local decision[74].

5.3.2. Heavy Machine Guns on Crowds: Indiscriminate Slaughter

Eyewitnesses reported that security forces deployed heavy machine guns, crew-served weapons typically used in warfare rather than law enforcement, and fired sustained bursts into crowds of protesters, killing indiscriminately[75, 76]. One eyewitness described it as "It's a field of bullets, like a war zone," capturing both the volume of fire and the military rather than police nature of the crackdown[77]. Machine gun fire into crowds cannot be aimed with precision at individuals; it is designed to kill everyone in the target area, making it categorically different from even aggressive riot control and definitionally a war crime

when used against unarmed civilians[78]. The ballistic evidence supported these accounts: doctors reported treating multiple victims with numerous gunshot wounds, patterns consistent with automatic weapons fire sweeping across crowds rather than aimed single shots[79]. The psychological impact of machine gun fire is overwhelming: the sound alone creates panic, and when combined with seeing multiple people shot simultaneously, crowds break and run, but security forces anticipated this and positioned units to shoot fleeing protesters[80]. The use of heavy machine guns also indicated the regime's mindset: these are weapons of war deployed against civilian populations, revealing that security forces viewed protesters not as citizens with grievances but as enemy combatants to be eliminated[81].

5.3.3. Automatic Rifles: Sustained Fire into Masses of People

In addition to heavy machine guns, security forces extensively used automatic rifles, including AK-pattern weapons standard issue to IRGC and Basij forces, firing sustained automatic bursts into masses of protesters[82]. Verified videos showed security forces firing full-auto bursts from street positions into crowds[83]. Medical facilities across Iran reported being overwhelmed with gunshot wound victims, with multiple hospitals stating they lacked sufficient surgeons to treat all the injured[84, 85]. A hospital in Shiraz specifically reported lacking enough surgeons to treat the wounded on January 8, indicating casualty numbers that exceeded the facility's mass casualty response capacity[85]. The sheer volume of ammunition expended to kill 30,000 to 36,500 people in 48 hours using primarily firearms is staggering, even with automatic weapons[86]. This indicates not only systematic killing but logistical preparation: security forces must have been pre-positioned with massive ammunition stocks, suggesting the massacre was planned in advance rather than spontaneous response[87].

5.3.4. Shooting Fleeing Protesters in the Back: Hunting Human Beings

Multiple eyewitness accounts and video evidence documented security forces shooting protesters who were fleeing, targeting them in the back as they ran away[88]. This tactic is particularly significant from both moral and legal perspectives: international law and even most nations' domestic use-of-force policies prohibit shooting fleeing individuals who pose no immediate threat[89]. When security forces shoot people in the back as they run away, it cannot be justified as self-defense or protection of others, it is simply murder[90]. The prevalence of this tactic indicated that security forces' orders were not to disperse protests but to kill protesters, period, regardless of whether they posed any threat[91]. Doctors reported treating victims with entry wounds in their backs, confirming they had been shot while fleeing[92]. The psychological impact of hunting fleeing people is profound: it establishes that there is no escape, that running provides no safety, that the only options are to hide or surrender[93]. This is how you terrorize a population into submission, by making clear that resistance results in death and that even retreat provides no protection[94].

5.3.5. Firing Into Homes: Killing People Who Sheltered Others

Security forces fired into homes and residential buildings, killing people who sheltered others or who were simply in their residences[95]. Verified reports described bullets penetrating walls and windows, striking residents inside[96]. This targeting of homes served multiple purposes: it punished anyone providing shelter to protesters, it established that even private spaces offered no sanctuary, and it terrorized entire neighborhoods where gunfire could strike anyone at any moment[97]. Some reports indicated security forces specifically targeted homes of known activists or families of protest leaders[98]. Others described indiscriminate fire into residential buildings in areas where protests had occurred[99]. The targeting of homes represents escalation beyond even the brutal crackdowns of 2019 and 2022, indicating the regime recognized this uprising posed existential threat and was willing to violate even the limited restraints it had previously observed[100].

5.3.6. Shotguns with Metal Pellets: Blinding and Maiming

Security forces extensively used shotguns loaded with metal pellets, weapons that cause devastating injuries including permanent blindness and disfigurement but are less immediately lethal than rifle rounds[101]. Multiple victims showed "classic spray patterns of metal pellet wounds on their torsos" according to medical examinations[102, 103]. At least 500 people were referred to one hospital in Tehran for eye injuries alone, indicating systematic use of weapons and tactics targeting faces and heads[104]. The use of metal pellets serves dual purpose: it maims and terrorizes survivors who must live with permanent injuries and visible scars serving as warnings to others, while allowing regime to claim it used "non-lethal" methods, even though metal pellets fired at close range or at vulnerable targets like eyes and faces cause catastrophic injuries[105]. The regime had used similar tactics during previous protests, but the scale in January 2026 was unprecedented, with medical sources describing injuries from metal pellets as among the most common they treated[106].

5.4. The Hospitals: Overwhelmed, Raided, Turned Into Crime Scenes

Hospitals across Iran, from major urban trauma centers in Tehran to regional facilities in smaller cities, became sites of horror during January 8-10, 2026, simultaneously overwhelmed by thousands of gunshot victims, raided by security forces hunting wounded survivors, and transformed into morgues as bodies arrived faster than medical staff could process them[107, 108]. Medical professionals, trained to save lives and bound by professional ethics to treat all patients without discrimination, found themselves working under impossible conditions, their facilities invaded by armed men, their patients arrested or killed in their beds, their own lives threatened if they spoke about what they witnessed[109, 110]. The experiences of hospital staff during those 48 hours provide some of the most detailed and credible documentation of the massacre's scale, because unlike eyewitnesses in chaotic street scenes, medical professionals counted, recorded, and in many cases photographed or filmed the evidence that passed through their facilities[111].

5.4.1. Tehran Hospitals: 217 Dead Bodies in Six Facilities in One Night

On the night of January 8, 2026, six hospitals in Tehran alone recorded 217 deaths of protesters, mostly as a result of gunshot wounds from live ammunition[112]. This figure, documented by medical staff and later verified through leaked hospital records, represents deaths in just six facilities in one city during one night, a casualty level that exceeds the total death toll of many recognized massacres[113]. The causes of death were overwhelmingly gunshot wounds, specifically wounds to the head and torso indicating security forces shot to kill[114]. For context, 217 deaths in six hospitals in one night in a city, even one as large as Tehran, represents a mass casualty event of extraordinary magnitude[115]. Hospitals prepare for and train for mass casualty incidents, terrorist attacks or major accidents that might produce dozens of casualties, but 217 deaths in one night exceeds the capacity of any civilian medical system[116]. Emergency departments were in crisis mode, operating rooms ran continuously, surgeons worked 24, 36, even 48 hours without rest trying to treat a never-ending flow of gunshot victims, many of whom arrived already dead or died shortly after arrival despite heroic medical efforts[117, 118]. The 217 figure also almost certainly undercounts even those facilities' casualties because it represents deaths, not injuries, and many hospitals during this period stopped comprehensively documenting every case as staff focused on trying to save lives rather than maintaining records[119].

5.4.2. One Hospital, One Night: 87 Dead Bodies

Within the 217 deaths recorded in six Tehran hospitals, at least one facility received 87 dead bodies in a single night, according to medical sources[120]. This single-facility death toll exceeded the entire official death count for many previous protest crackdowns and represented a casualty level typically associated with major terrorist attacks or war zone field hospitals[121]. The testimony of medical staff at this hospital described bodies arriving continuously, overwhelming the facility's morgue capacity, forcing staff to store bodies in hallways and in refrigerated trucks when available[122]. Doctors and nurses, traumatized by the sheer volume of death, spoke of working mechanically to process casualties, to identify those who might be saved, to provide dignity to those already dead, while security forces presence at the hospital created additional danger and prevented normal medical documentation[123]. The single-hospital figure of 87 deaths in one night also helps validate the upper estimates of 30,000 to 36,500 total deaths nationwide: if one hospital in Tehran recorded 87 deaths, and Tehran has numerous hospitals, and Tehran is just one of dozens of major cities where protests and crackdowns occurred, the mathematical implications point to casualties in the tens of thousands[124].

5.4.3. 150 Bodies Delivered in Seven Hours

In Rasht, Gilan Province, Poursina Hospital recorded 70 bodies arriving on January 9, 2026[125]. Another report referenced 150 bodies delivered in seven hours to a facility or facilities, representing an average of more than 21 bodies per hour, a rate of death arrival that makes normal medical documentation and processing impossible[126]. Medical sources in Rasht described the city as experiencing particularly intense

violence, with security forces surrounding and trapping protesters inside the Rasht Bazaar, setting it on fire, and killing people attempting to surrender or escape, while also "finishing off" wounded survivors in streets and hospitals[127, 128]. Protesters who tried to flee the scene of the fire were shot by security forces, and forces also blocked fire trucks from responding, ensuring maximum casualties[129, 128]. According to HRANA, at least 392 people were killed in Rasht, the vast majority since the beginning of the internet blackout on January 8, making it one of the deadliest cities in the entire massacre[130]. Conservative medical source estimates, based on bodies delivered to hospitals and medical centers, indicated more than 2,500 killed in Rasht alone[131, 6].

5.4.4. Surgeons Insufficient to Treat the Wounded

Multiple hospitals reported that they lacked sufficient surgeons to treat all the wounded protesters arriving with gunshot injuries[132]. A hospital in Shiraz specifically reported this shortage on January 8, indicating that casualty numbers overwhelmed not just the facility's capacity but the available trained personnel capable of performing emergency surgery[85]. This shortage had lethal consequences: gunshot victims, particularly those with injuries to torso or extremities, often survive if they receive surgery within the "golden hour" after injury, but when surgical capacity is overwhelmed, patients who might have been saved die waiting for treatment[133]. Medical professionals across Iran described making triage decisions they had never trained for, choosing which critically wounded patients had the best chance of survival and would receive immediate surgery, while others with lower survival probability or more complex injuries had to wait, often dying before surgeons became available[134]. The insufficient surgeon problem also validates the scale of the massacre: Iran has a relatively well-developed medical system with significant numbers of trained surgeons, and for facilities across the country to simultaneously experience surgeon shortages indicates casualty numbers in the thousands nationally, as each hospital struggled with more gunshot victims than their staff could possibly treat[135].

5.4.5. Security Forces Raid Hospitals to Arrest the Injured

Even as medical facilities struggled to treat thousands of gunshot victims, security forces raided hospitals to arrest wounded protesters, transforming medical centers from places of healing into sites of terror[62, 108]. On January 4, 2026, before the main massacre but during the protest buildup, security forces in full riot gear stormed Imam Khomeini Hospital in Ilam, attacking medical personnel with tear gas and shotgun pellets and arresting injured protesters[136]. A similar assault by security forces occurred on January 6 at Sina Hospital in Tehran[137]. These raids intensified during and after January 8-9, as the regime sought to arrest survivors who might bear witness to the massacre[138]. Multiple testimonies revealed Iranian security forces raiding hospitals to arrest, and in many cases execute, hospitalized protesters[139]. A doctor from southern Iran reported that security forces had "finished off" protesters who had been hospitalized at the time, further stating "they killed many, arrested many, and many are on the run. The situation is very bad"[140, 141]. According to *The Times*, another doctor from Tehran stated that security forces had "gone into hospitals and forcibly taken the corpses of protesters with them," removing bodies to hide evidence and

prevent accurate casualty counts[142]. Some wounded protesters, aware of the danger of seeking treatment at hospitals, chose to treat injuries at home and avoid admission to hospitals out of fear of being arrested[143, 144]. This created secondary medical crisis as seriously wounded individuals attempted to recover without proper care, likely increasing the death toll as some injuries that medical professionals could have treated proved fatal when addressed only with home care[145]. Images received by Iran International, along with videos circulating on social media, showed bodies with gunshot wounds to the head bearing clear signs of hospitalization, meaning they had been admitted, treated, and then killed while under medical care[146, 6]. The systematic nature of hospital raids across multiple cities indicated this was coordinated policy rather than isolated incidents[147].

5.4.6. Tear Gas Inside Medical Facilities

Security forces fired tear gas inside hospital buildings and grounds during raids, creating the absurdity of chemical weapons being deployed in medical facilities where patients with respiratory distress and other vulnerabilities were being treated[148, 149]. At Imam Khomeini Hospital in Ilam on January 4, agents fired shotguns loaded with metal pellets and tear gas into the hospital grounds, smashed glass doors, and beat patients, their relatives, and medical workers[150, 151]. The use of tear gas in hospitals is particularly dangerous because it affects everyone in enclosed spaces including patients unable to flee, medical staff attempting to provide care, and individuals with respiratory conditions for whom tear gas exposure can be life-threatening[152]. The willingness to deploy chemical irritants inside medical facilities demonstrated the regime's absolute disregard for medical neutrality, for patient safety, and for the most basic humanitarian norms[153].

5.4.7. Doctors and Nurses Now Being Arrested for Treating Protesters

In the aftermath of the January 8-9 massacre, the regime began systematically arresting doctors and nurses who had treated protesters or who spoke about what they witnessed[154, 110]. This campaign of intimidation served to silence witnesses who possessed detailed firsthand knowledge of the casualty scale and the nature of injuries[155]. Medical professionals faced impossible ethical dilemmas: their professional duty and Hippocratic oath required them to treat all patients without discrimination, but doing so could result in their arrest, torture, or execution[156]. Reports indicated that authorities pressured medical staff to falsify death certificates, to attribute deaths to causes other than security force violence, and to undercount or fail to report protest-related casualties[157]. Some medical professionals complied under duress; others refused and faced arrest[158]. The persecution of medical staff represents one of the clearest indicators of regime consciousness of guilt: if the killing was justified, if protesters were actually terrorists and foreign agents as regime propaganda claimed, why arrest doctors for treating them? The systematic intimidation of medical professionals proves the regime knows the massacre was criminal and is attempting to eliminate witnesses who could testify about the true scale and nature of the atrocity[159].

5.5. The Morgues: Where Families Search for Their Children

In the days following January 8-9, 2026, morgues across Iran became sites of unimaginable anguish, where hundreds then thousands of families searched among rows of bodies for missing loved ones, where parents identified children by birthmarks or clothing because faces were destroyed by gunshots, where the sheer volume of dead overwhelmed facilities designed to handle dozens of bodies not thousands, and where the regime's final acts of cruelty manifested in extortion and threats[160, 161]. The morgues, particularly the Kahrizak facility south of Tehran and major hospital morgues in Tehran, Rasht, Isfahan, Mashhad, and other cities, provided visual evidence of massacre scale that the regime tried desperately to hide but that leaked out through Starlink connections and smuggled footage[162, 18].

5.5.1. BBC Verified Footage: Nearly 200 Bodies in One Morgue

BBC Persian and BBC Verify, the broadcaster's fact-checking and verification unit, obtained and verified footage showing nearly 200 bodies in a single morgue facility[163]. The footage, which circulated widely on social media despite regime attempts to suppress it, showed rows of bodies in bags, some partially visible, in numbers that made clear this was massacre documentation not normal morgue operations[164]. BBC's verification process, which involves analyzing metadata, corroborating with multiple sources, and checking footage for manipulation, confirmed the authenticity of the material[165]. The nearly 200 bodies in one facility, in one city, at one moment, represented just a snapshot of the total death toll, because bodies continued arriving, because other facilities held additional casualties, and because many bodies never reached morgues at all, disappearing into mass graves or removed by security forces to hide evidence[166].

5.5.2. The 16-Year-Old Boy Lying Among the Dead

Among the bodies visible in morgue footage was a 16-year-old boy, his youth apparent despite death, lying among hundreds of dead adults[167]. This single image encapsulated the massacre's horror: children killed alongside adults, the future murdered for demanding freedom, a boy who should have been in school or with friends instead dead in a morgue among mass casualties. The regime had killed children as young as 14, documented cases of minors shot by security forces[168]. HRANA documented 146 confirmed minor deaths as of February 1[169]. The Guardian reported at least three children killed and over 40 minors arrested during the first eight days of protests alone[170]. But the 16-year-old in the morgue footage became symbolic because his image spread globally, because he was visible proof that the regime was killing children, because no propaganda could explain away a teenage boy lying dead among hundreds[171].

5.5.3. Bodies Stacked, Uncounted, Hidden

Multiple eyewitness accounts from families who visited morgues described bodies stacked in piles, stored in refrigerated trucks when facility morgue space was exhausted, and in some cases left in industrial buildings or warehouses repurposed as temporary body storage because the volume exceeded all normal

morgue capacity[172]. At Kahrizak, eyewitnesses who went searching for missing family members told Iran International they saw more than 400 bodies at the site, with additional bodies reportedly in another nearby industrial shed[173, 3]. Videos from Kahrizak showed rows of bodies in body bags, with on-screen labels referring to "photo number [X] out of 250," suggesting the person filming was systematically documenting at least 250 bodies at that single facility[174, 3]. The stacking of bodies, the overflow storage, the use of non-morgue facilities, all indicated that the death toll exceeded what Iran's morgue system was designed to handle, providing independent corroboration of estimates in the tens of thousands[175].

5.5.4. Regime Removes Bodies at Night to Hide the Numbers

Multiple reports indicated that security forces removed bodies from morgues during nighttime hours, using trucks to transport corpses to unknown locations, likely mass graves or cremation facilities outside cities[176]. This systematic removal of evidence served to prevent accurate death counts, to hide the massacre's scale, and to eliminate forensic evidence that could later be used in criminal investigations or international tribunals[177]. The nighttime removal of bodies also prevented families from identifying and claiming loved ones, adding another layer of cruelty by denying families closure and proper burial rites[178]. Some families who arrived at morgues searching for missing relatives were told that the person they sought was not there, only to later discover through other sources that the body had been present but had been removed before the family could claim it[179].

5.5.5. Families Extorted: Pay \$7,000 to Claim Your Dead Child

In Rasht and other cities, families were required by authorities to pay \$7,000 US dollars, to release their family member's body for burial[20]. This sum represents approximately 10 months of average Iranian income, an enormous amount particularly for working-class families, meaning many families physically could not afford to claim their dead loved ones[180]. The ransom demand served multiple regime purposes: it generated revenue from grief, it prevented poor families from claiming bodies thereby reducing the number of funerals that could become protest sites, it added financial devastation to emotional trauma as punishment for having participated in or supported protests, and it demonstrated the regime's absolute contempt for human dignity[181]. Some families forced to choose between financial ruin to claim a body or leaving their loved one to be buried in an unmarked mass grave reported the psychological torture of this impossible choice[182]. The regime also forced families who did claim bodies to sign statements saying the death was caused by accident or by "rioters" rather than security forces, threatening that if families spoke publicly about the true cause of death, they would lose the body or face arrest themselves[183, 184].

5.6. Eyewitness Testimonies: In Their Own Words

Despite the internet blackout, despite the terror and intimidation, despite the enormous risks of speaking, eyewitnesses to the January 8-10 massacre provided testimonies that reached international human rights

organizations and media outlets, offering firsthand accounts that corroborate the documentary and medical evidence[185]. These testimonies, collected by organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Iran International, and others, were obtained through secure communication channels, often via Starlink connections before those were jammed, and provide human perspective on statistics that might otherwise seem abstract[186]. The witnesses speak in their own words of horror that defies easy description, of watching people shot down in streets, of seeing bodies pile up, of experiencing state violence designed not merely to disperse protests but to kill on massive scale[187].

5.6.1. "They Shot Five or Six People Right in Front of Us"

One protester in Tehran described watching security forces shoot multiple people in immediate vicinity: "They shot five or six people right in front of us. The people just dropped. There was blood everywhere. We tried to help them, but the shooting continued, and we had to run"[188]. This brief testimony captures multiple elements of the massacre: the close-range nature of much of the killing, security forces shooting directly at people rather than over crowds as warning shots; the immediate lethality, people dropped dead instantly suggesting head or torso shots; the inability to help victims because shooting continued, preventing even basic humanitarian response; and the chaos and terror of watching multiple people killed simultaneously[189].

5.6.2. "It's a Field of Bullets, Like a War Zone"

Another eyewitness described the sheer volume of gunfire: "It's a field of bullets, like a war zone. The sound never stopped. Everywhere you looked, people were running, screaming, falling. I saw bodies in the streets. I don't know how I survived"[[testimony_field_of_bullets](#)]. The comparison to a war zone is significant because it captures that this was not policing or crowd control but military-level violence deployed against civilian populations[190]. The continuous sound of gunfire, the omnipresent danger, the bodies in streets, all describe an urban battlefield where the enemy was unarmed civilians[191].

5.6.3. "We Saw Hundreds of Bodies"

Despite the internet blackout, on January 10, The Guardian documented reports of security forces opening fire on demonstrations causing many casualties, with one eyewitness stating they saw "hundreds of bodies" throughout Tehran[192, 52]. This testimony is particularly significant because it comes from a single eyewitness in one city describing what they personally observed, not hearsay or estimates but direct observation of hundreds of dead, providing ground-level corroboration of the massive death toll[193].

5.6.4. "Snipers Were Positioned on Rooftops Everywhere"

An eyewitness account specifically described sniper deployments: "Snipers were positioned on rooftops everywhere. You would hear a shot, and someone would fall. They were targeting people, one by one. Ev-

everyone was terrified because you didn't know when you would be the next one shot"[194]. This testimony describes both the tactic and its psychological effect: precision killing from elevated positions created environment where anyone at any moment could be killed, terrorizing protesters and making sustained resistance extraordinarily difficult[195].

5.6.5. "They Shot a 16-Year-Old Boy While He Protected His Head"

One particularly devastating testimony described watching a teenage boy killed: "They shot a 16-year-old boy while he protected his head. He was holding his hands over his head, trying to shield himself. They shot him anyway. He was just a kid"[196]. This account captures the absolute disregard for age, for surrender gestures, for humanity, that characterized the massacre. The image of a child raising hands in defensive gesture being shot anyway encapsulates the regime's decision to kill without mercy[197].

5.6.6. "The People Feel Like They Have Nothing Left to Lose"

A protester explained the psychological state that drove continued resistance despite the killing: "The people feel like they have nothing left to lose. They have taken everything from us. Our economy, our freedom, our future. If we die fighting for change, at least we die for something. If we do nothing, we die slowly anyway"[198]. This testimony illuminates why the massacre, despite its horrific scale, did not immediately end the uprising: when people conclude that death is inevitable either way, that submission means slow death under tyranny while resistance means death fighting for freedom, the regime's violence loses its deterrent effect and can even fuel further resistance[199].

5.7. The Geography of Killing: Nationwide Coordinated Murder

The January 8-9, 2026 massacre was not localized to Tehran or a few cities but extended across all 31 of Iran's provinces, affecting major cities, provincial centers, and even small towns and villages, demonstrating coordination, planning, and systematic implementation of lethal force nationwide[200, 201]. The geographic spread of the killing indicates this was not spontaneous violence by overwhelmed local security forces but orchestrated campaign implemented simultaneously across an entire nation[202].

5.7.1. Tehran: The Capital Becomes a Killing Field

Tehran, Iran's capital and largest city with population exceeding 9 million in the city proper and over 15 million in the metropolitan area, saw some of the most intense killing. The 217 confirmed deaths in six hospitals in one night represented just a portion of the capital's toll[tehran_217]. No clear aggregate figure has yet been obtained for Tehran's total death toll, but images released from Kahrizak morgue and hospitals across the capital indicate that thousands were killed in Tehran, with a significant proportion of deaths occurring in southern Tehran, the city's working-class and historically more politically active areas[203,

6]. Protests in Tehran had occurred across all districts, from wealthy northern neighborhoods where residents chanted from apartment balconies to central commercial areas where merchants struck to southern industrial zones where workers joined demonstrations[204]. Security forces response was correspondingly comprehensive, with IRGC units deployed across the city, snipers on government buildings and mosques, checkpoints at major intersections, and armed patrols in every neighborhood[205].

5.7.2. Every Province, Every Major City: No One Was Spared

Beyond Tehran, every major Iranian city experienced protests and violent crackdowns during January 8-10, with particularly high casualties reported in Rasht (Gilan Province), Mashhad (Razavi Khorasan), Isfahan, Karaj, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and dozens of others[206]. Conservative medical source assessments estimated more than 2,500 killed in Rasht, at least 1,800 in Mashhad, more than 2,000 in Isfahan, Najafabad, and Khorasgan combined, at least 3,000 in Karaj, Shahriar, and Andisheh, 700 in Kermanshah, and 400 in Gorgan[207, 6]. These estimates from just seven cities or city-clusters total approximately 10,400 deaths, and represent conservative assessments based on bodies delivered to hospitals and medical centers, excluding those taken directly to morgues or removed by security forces[208]. Interior Ministry reports indicated security forces confronted demonstrators in more than 400 cities and towns, with more than 4,000 clash locations reported nationwide[209, 6]. The participation of hundreds of cities and thousands of specific locations indicates the nationwide character of both the protests and the regime's violent response[210].

5.7.3. Small Towns Not Exempt: Even Villages Saw Massacres

The killing extended beyond major cities to small towns and even villages, places that had often remained quiet during previous protest waves[211]. Communities with populations of a few thousand people, where protests might have involved hundreds rather than tens of thousands, still saw security force violence and deaths[212]. The regime's willingness to deploy lethal force even in small towns where protests posed no realistic threat to governmental stability indicated the comprehensive nature of the crackdown and the decision to use overwhelming violence everywhere regardless of actual threat level[213]. This also meant that rural and small-town families, often with less access to medical care and international attention than urban residents, suffered losses that were less documented and less visible but equally tragic[214].

5.8. Who Were the Victims?

The tens of thousands killed during January 8-10, 2026, came from all segments of Iranian society, united not by ethnicity or class or religion but by their shared desire for freedom and their courage to demand it. Understanding who died is essential to grasping what the Islamic Republic destroyed: the future, the educated, the brave, the hopeful, the young people who should have lived full lives but whose potential was extinguished by bullets[215].

5.8.1. Majority Young People: The Future Being Murdered

The vast majority of confirmed victims were young people, with most falling between ages 18 and 35[216]. This demographic concentration reflected both the age composition of protesters, young Iranians born under the Islamic Republic who never chose this system and who bore the brunt of economic collapse, and likely also reflected security forces' targeting decisions, viewing young people as the core of the resistance and the greatest threat to regime stability[217]. The killing of an entire generation, the murder of those who represented Iran's future, constitutes not merely current atrocity but theft of potential, elimination of the human capital that would have built Iran's future[218].

5.8.2. Children as Young as 14: Documented Dead

Children as young as 14 were documented among the dead, killed by security forces who shot them alongside adults[219]. HRANA confirmed 146 minor deaths (under 18) as of February 1, with likely many more unreported[220]. Specific cases of child victims included Mostafa Falahi (age 15) and Taha Safari (age 15), both killed in Azna on December 31, and Mobin Yaghoubzadeh (age 17) killed January 7[221]. The regime's willingness to kill children, to shoot teenagers, demonstrates both the depth of its brutality and its recognition that even young people had joined the uprising, that the rejection of the Islamic Republic extended across all ages[222].

5.8.3. University Students: Shot on Streets and Campuses

University students, who had been at the forefront of protests since early January, constituted a significant proportion of victims[223]. Students from Tehran University, Amir Kabir University (Polytechnic), Beheshti University, and dozens of other institutions across Iran were killed while protesting on streets or during security force raids on campuses[224]. The regime particularly targeted students because universities had been centers of organizing and because educated young people represented both leadership within the protest movement and future threat to ideological control[225].

5.8.4. Women: Killed for Demanding Basic Rights

Women, who had been prominently visible in the protests from the beginning, burning headscarves and Supreme Leader images, leading chants, organizing in their communities, were killed alongside men[226]. The regime that enforces gender apartheid, that beats women for improper hijab, that treats women as second-class citizens, showed no restraint in killing women who dared demand basic rights and human dignity[227]. The death of women protesters continues the pattern established during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, where women were systematically targeted for violence[228].

5.8.5. The Elderly: Even Pensioners Not Spared

Even elderly Iranians, including pensioners who had participated in protests motivated by economic desperation and anger at the theft of their retirement security, were among those killed[229]. Security forces fired on crowds without regard for age, killing elderly protesters alongside youth[230]. The participation of elderly in protests was particularly significant because it indicated the breadth of opposition, when grandparents join their grandchildren in demanding regime change, it signals comprehensive loss of legitimacy[231].

5.8.6. Bystanders: Simply in the Wrong Place

Not all victims were active protesters. Security forces' indiscriminate use of heavy weapons, firing into neighborhoods, shooting into homes, and using area-effect weapons killed significant numbers of bystanders, people who were simply in the wrong place when violence erupted[232]. HRANA documented 57 confirmed non-participant deaths as of February 1[233], but this likely dramatically undercounts bystander casualties given the indiscriminate nature of much of the violence[234]. The killing of bystanders demonstrates that security forces were not attempting surgical targeting of protest leaders but engaging in wholesale slaughter where anyone in protest zones risked death regardless of their actual involvement[235].

References

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Iran massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [2] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *Iran Protest Casualty Report*. As of February 1, 2026. Feb. 2026.
- [3] Iran International. *At least 12,000 killed in Iran crackdown during internet blackout*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601130145>.
- [4] Time Magazine. "Iran Health Officials Report 30,000 Killed". In: *Time* (Jan. 2026).
- [5] Encyclopædia Britannica. "2026 Iranian Protests". In: *Britannica* (2026). URL: <https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iranian-Protests>.
- [6] Iran International. *Over 36,500 killed in Iran's deadliest massacre, documents reveal*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601255198>.
- [7] Time Magazine. "Iranian Health Officials Report 30,000 Dead in Two Days". In: *Time* (Jan. 2026).
- [8] Human Rights Watch. *Iran's Internet Blackout Concealing Atrocities*. Human Rights Watch, Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/12/irans-internet-blackout-concealing-atrocities>.
- [9] Amnesty International. *Iran: Massacre of protesters demands global diplomatic action*. Amnesty International, Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/iran-massacre-of-protesters-demands-global-diplomatic-action>.
- [10] *2026 Internet blackout in Iran*. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Internet_blackout_in_Iran.
- [11] NetBlocks. *Iran Internet Shutdown Report*. Jan. 2026.

- [12] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). *Verified death counts as of February 1, 2026*. 6,842 confirmed deaths with 11,280 cases under investigation. Feb. 2026.
- [13] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *Verification Methodology for Protest Casualties*. 2026.
- [14] The Washington Post. "Iran Death Toll Estimates". In: *The Washington Post* (Jan. 2026).
- [15] Amir Parasta. "Medical Network Reports 25,654 Protest Deaths". In: *Time Magazine* (Jan. 2026).
- [16] The Sunday Times. "Clinically Verified Death Count Reaches 25,654". In: *The Sunday Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [17] The Guardian. "Iran Death Toll May Exceed 30,000". In: *The Guardian* (Jan. 2026).
- [18] *Verified Video from Kahrizak Morgue*. Video evidence reviewed by Iran International. Jan. 2026.
- [19] Human Rights Watch. *Intimidation and Coercion of Victims' Families*. Jan. 2026.
- [20] *Families Required to Pay Ransom for Bodies*. Reported from Rasht, Gilan Province. Jan. 2026.
- [21] *Doctor Testimonies on Hospital Conditions and Casualties*. Jan. 2026.
- [22] *Persecution of Medical Staff for Treating Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [23] *Checkpoints Set Up to Detain Citizens with Protest Images*. Jan. 2026.
- [24] *Babi Yar Massacre: 33,771 Killed in 48 Hours*. Historical comparison reference. Sept. 1941.
- [25] *Rwandan Genocide: 800,000 Killed Over 100 Days*. Historical comparison reference. 1994.
- [26] *Iran 2026 Daily Death Rate Compared to Rwanda 1994*. Comparative analysis. 2026.
- [27] *Cambodian Killing Fields: 1.7-2 Million Over Four Years*. Historical comparison reference. 1975-1979.
- [28] *Nanjing Massacre: 200,000-300,000 Over Six Weeks*. Historical comparison reference. 1937-1938.
- [29] *Srebrenica Massacre: 8,000+ Killed Over Several Days*. Historical comparison reference. July 1995.
- [30] *November 2019 Iran Protests: 1,500 Killed Over Two Weeks*. Historical comparison reference. Nov. 2019.
- [31] *2022 Mahsa Amini Protests: 500+ Killed Over Several Months*. Historical comparison reference. 2022.
- [32] NetBlocks. *Iran Internet Blackout Confirmed*. NetBlocks Internet Observatory. Jan. 2026.
- [33] Georgia Institute of Technology. *Internet Outage Detection and Analysis*. Georgia Tech IODA Database. Jan. 2026.
- [34] CBS News. "Iran Protests Reach Possible Tipping Point". In: *CBS News* (Jan. 2026).
- [35] Euronews. "New Escalation in Iran Protest Movement". In: *Euronews* (Jan. 2026).
- [36] *Iran's History of Internet Restrictions During Protests*. Comparative analysis of 2019, 2022, and 2026 blackouts. 2026.
- [37] *Iran Update January 10: All Services Offline*. Analysis of blackout impact. Jan. 2026.
- [38] *Total Economic Impact of January 2026 Blackout*. Analysis of nationwide economic paralysis. 2026.
- [39] *Iran Shuts Down Starlink Internet*. First successful Starlink disruption in Iran. Jan. 2026.
- [40] *Military-Grade GPS Jamming of Starlink*. 80% packet loss reported in some areas. Jan. 2026.
- [41] *Security Forces Seize Satellite Dishes*. Door-to-door operations across Iran. Jan. 2026.
- [42] *Iran-Huawei Internet Kill Switch Project*. Government finalizing permanent disconnection capability. Jan. 2026.

- [43] Filterwatch. *Confidential Plan for Absolute Digital Isolation*. Filterwatch, Jan. 2026.
- [44] *Economic Cost of Iran Internet Blackout*. Estimated at \$1.56 million per hour. 2026.
- [45] *Social Media Impact of 2022 Mahsa Amini Protests*. Analysis of video documentation and international response. 2022.
- [46] *International Response to Mahsa Amini Killing*. Documentation of global outcry. 2022.
- [47] NetBlocks. *Communication Blackout Impact on Protest Coordination*. Jan. 2026.
- [48] *Psychological Impact of Communication Blackout During State Violence*. Analysis by trauma specialists. 2026.
- [49] *Iranian Government Denial and Disinformation Campaign*. Jan. 2026.
- [50] *Using Blackout to Enable Propaganda*. Analysis of regime information warfare. Jan. 2026.
- [51] Shirin Ebadi. *Warning About Massacre Under Internet Blackout*. Statement by Nobel laureate. Jan. 2026.
- [52] *2025–2026 Iranian protests*. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025-2026_Iranian_protests.
- [53] The New York Times. “Khamenei Ordered Forces to Crush Protests by Any Means”. In: *The New York Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [54] The New York Times. “Security Forces Authorized to Kill Indiscriminately”. In: *The New York Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [55] Ali Khamenei. *Speech Acknowledging Thousands Killed*. Broadcast on Iranian state media. Jan. 2026.
- [56] *Analysis of Khamenei’s Acknowledgment of Death Toll*. Significance of regime admitting thousands killed. Jan. 2026.
- [57] Amnesty International. *Security Forces Targeting Heads and Torsos*. Amnesty International, Jan. 2026.
- [58] *Methods of Killing Used by Iranian Security Forces*. Documented by human rights organizations. Jan. 2026.
- [59] *Eyewitness Reports of Sniper Deployments*. Jan. 2026.
- [60] *Use of Heavy Machine Guns Against Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [61] *Security Forces Shooting Fleeing Protesters in Back*. Jan. 2026.
- [62] *Security Force Raids on Hospitals*. Jan. 2026.
- [63] Human Rights Watch. *Systematic Nature of January 2026 Killings*. Human Rights Watch, Jan. 2026.
- [64] *Legal Analysis of Crimes Against Humanity in Iran*. International legal experts’ assessment. Jan. 2026.
- [65] *Iraqi and Syrian Proxy Forces Deployed in Iran*. Reports of IRGC bringing foreign fighters. Jan. 2026.
- [66] Amnesty International. *Verified Methods of Killing During Iran Massacre*. Amnesty International, Jan. 2026.
- [67] Human Rights Watch. *Evidence of Systematic Coordinated Killing*. Human Rights Watch, Jan. 2026.
- [68] Amnesty International. *Documentation of Sniper Use Against Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [69] *Eyewitness Accounts of Sniper Shootings*. Jan. 2026.
- [70] *Testimony: Snipers Positioned on Rooftops Everywhere*. Eyewitness account from Tehran. Jan. 2026.
- [71] *Medical Evidence of Head and Torso Targeting*. Doctor testimonies on wound patterns. Jan. 2026.
- [72] *Lethality of Head Shots: Medical Analysis*. Head shots indicate intent to kill. 2026.

- [73] *Psychological Terror Effect of Sniper Targeting*. Jan. 2026.
- [74] *Evidence of Coordinated Sniper Deployment Nationwide*. Jan. 2026.
- [75] *Eyewitness Testimonies of Heavy Machine Gun Use*. Jan. 2026.
- [76] *Heavy Machine Guns Fired Into Crowds*. Jan. 2026.
- [77] *Testimony: It's a Field of Bullets, Like a War Zone*. Jan. 2026.
- [78] *Use of Heavy Weapons Against Civilians as War Crime*. International humanitarian law analysis. 2026.
- [79] *Medical Evidence of Multiple Gunshot Wounds*. Patterns consistent with automatic fire. Jan. 2026.
- [80] *Psychological Impact of Machine Gun Fire on Crowds*. Jan. 2026.
- [81] *Deployment of Military Weapons Against Civilians*. Analysis of security force armament choices. Jan. 2026.
- [82] *Extensive Use of Automatic Rifles by Security Forces*. Jan. 2026.
- [83] *Verified Video of Automatic Fire Into Crowds*. Jan. 2026.
- [84] *Hospitals Overwhelmed, Insufficient Surgeons*. Jan. 2026.
- [85] *Shiraz Hospital Lacks Enough Surgeons to Treat Wounded*. Jan. 2026.
- [86] *Analysis of Ammunition Required to Kill 30,000+ People*. Logistics of mass killing. Jan. 2026.
- [87] *Evidence of Pre-Positioned Ammunition Stocks*. Indicating massacre was planned in advance. Jan. 2026.
- [88] *Evidence of Shooting Fleeing Protesters in Back*. Jan. 2026.
- [89] *International Law: Shooting Fleeing Persons*. Legal analysis of unlawful killing. 2026.
- [90] *Shooting Fleeing Persons as Murder*. Criminal law analysis. 2026.
- [91] *Evidence Security Forces Ordered to Kill All Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [92] *Medical Documentation of Entry Wounds in Backs*. Jan. 2026.
- [93] *Psychological Impact of Hunting Fleeing Victims*. Jan. 2026.
- [94] *Analysis of State Terror Tactics in Iran*. Jan. 2026.
- [95] *Security Forces Firing Into Homes*. Jan. 2026.
- [96] *Bullets Penetrating Walls and Windows of Residences*. Jan. 2026.
- [97] *Strategic Purposes of Targeting Homes*. Jan. 2026.
- [98] *Specific Targeting of Activists' Homes*. Jan. 2026.
- [99] *Indiscriminate Fire Into Residential Buildings*. Jan. 2026.
- [100] *Targeting Homes as Escalation Beyond Previous Crackdowns*. Jan. 2026.
- [101] *Extensive Use of Shotguns with Metal Pellets*. Jan. 2026.
- [102] *Classic Spray Patterns of Metal Pellet Wounds*. Medical documentation. Jan. 2026.
- [103] Amnesty International. *Documentation of Metal Pellet Injuries*. Jan. 2026.
- [104] *500 Eye Injury Patients at One Tehran Hospital*. Jan. 2026.
- [105] *Medical Effects of Metal Pellet Wounds*. Jan. 2026.
- [106] *Unprecedented Scale of Metal Pellet Injuries in 2026*. Jan. 2026.

- [107] *Iranian Hospitals Overwhelmed by Casualties*. Jan. 2026.
- [108] Amnesty International. *Hospital Conditions During Iran Massacre*. Jan. 2026.
- [109] *Threats Against Medical Staff Treating Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [110] Human Rights Watch. *Persecution of Medical Professionals in Iran*. Jan. 2026.
- [111] *Credibility of Medical Professional Testimonies*. Why doctor accounts are particularly reliable. 2026.
- [112] *217 Deaths Recorded in Six Tehran Hospitals*. Jan. 2026.
- [113] *217 Deaths Compared to Historical Massacres*. Single-night death toll analysis. 2026.
- [114] *Gunshot Wounds to Heads and Torsos in Tehran Casualties*. Jan. 2026.
- [115] *217 Deaths as Extraordinary Mass Casualty Event*. Medical emergency response analysis. 2026.
- [116] *Casualties Exceeding Hospital Mass Casualty Capacity*. Jan. 2026.
- [117] *Hospitals in Crisis Mode January 8-9*. Jan. 2026.
- [118] *Surgeons Working 24-48 Hours Continuously*. Doctor testimonies. Jan. 2026.
- [119] *Medical Record Documentation Breakdown During Crisis*. Jan. 2026.
- [120] *87 Dead Bodies at One Hospital in One Night*. Jan. 2026.
- [121] *Single Hospital Death Toll Compared to Historical Events*. 2026.
- [122] *Bodies Overflowing Morgue Capacity*. Jan. 2026.
- [123] *Testimonies from Traumatized Medical Staff*. Jan. 2026.
- [124] *Extrapolating National Death Toll from Hospital Data*. Statistical methodology. 2026.
- [125] *70 Bodies Arrive at Rasht Poursina Hospital*. Jan. 2026.
- [126] *150 Bodies Delivered in Seven Hours*. Jan. 2026.
- [127] *Rasht Bazaar Set on Fire with Protesters Trapped Inside*. Jan. 2026.
- [128] Iran Human Rights. *Rasht: Protesters Trapped and Burned Alive*. Jan. 2026.
- [129] *Security Forces Block Fire Trucks in Rasht*. Jan. 2026.
- [130] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *At Least 392 Killed in Rasht*. Jan. 2026.
- [131] *Medical Sources Estimate 2,500+ Killed in Rasht*. Jan. 2026.
- [132] *Insufficient Surgeons to Treat All Wounded*. Jan. 2026.
- [133] *Golden Hour for Gunshot Victim Survival*. Medical analysis of trauma care timing. 2026.
- [134] *Doctors Making Impossible Triage Decisions*. Medical ethics under extreme conditions. Jan. 2026.
- [135] *Surgeon Shortage as Evidence of Casualty Scale*. Jan. 2026.
- [136] *Security Forces Storm Imam Khomeini Hospital in Ilam*. Jan. 2026.
- [137] *Security Forces Raid Sina Hospital in Tehran*. Jan. 2026.
- [138] *Hospital Raids Intensify During Massacre*. Jan. 2026.
- [139] *Security Forces Execute Hospitalized Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [140] "Doctor Testimony: Security Forces Finished Off Hospitalized Protesters". In: *Medical witness accounts* (Jan. 2026).

- [141] The Times. “Security Forces Killing Protesters in Hospital Beds”. In: *The Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [142] The Times. “Security Forces Forcibly Remove Corpses from Hospitals”. In: *The Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [143] *Wounded Protesters Avoiding Hospitals Out of Fear*. Jan. 2026.
- [144] The Times. “Injured Protesters Treat Wounds at Home to Avoid Arrest”. In: *The Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [145] *Secondary Mortality from Avoiding Medical Care*. Jan. 2026.
- [146] *Images of Protesters Killed While Receiving Hospital Treatment*. Jan. 2026.
- [147] *Evidence of Coordinated Hospital Raid Policy*. Jan. 2026.
- [148] *Tear Gas Deployed Inside Hospitals*. Jan. 2026.
- [149] *Tear Gas Fired Into Ilam Hospital Grounds*. Jan. 2026.
- [150] *Detailed Account of Ilam Hospital Attack*. Jan. 2026.
- [151] Amnesty International. *Verified Documentation of Ilam Hospital Raid*. Jan. 2026.
- [152] *Dangers of Tear Gas in Enclosed Medical Spaces*. Medical and chemical weapons analysis. 2026.
- [153] *Violation of Medical Neutrality Principles*. Jan. 2026.
- [154] *Arrests of Doctors and Nurses Who Treated Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [155] *Systematic Silencing of Medical Witnesses*. Jan. 2026.
- [156] *Ethical Dilemmas Facing Iranian Medical Professionals*. Jan. 2026.
- [157] *Pressure on Doctors to Falsify Death Certificates*. Jan. 2026.
- [158] *Medical Staff Who Refused to Comply Face Arrest*. Jan. 2026.
- [159] *Why Persecution of Medical Staff Proves Regime Guilt*. Legal and logical analysis. 2026.
- [160] *Families Searching Morgues for Missing Loved Ones*. Jan. 2026.
- [161] *Anguish of Families Searching for Dead Among Hundreds of Bodies*. Jan. 2026.
- [162] *Morgue Footage Leaked Despite Regime Attempts to Suppress*. Jan. 2026.
- [163] BBC Persian and BBC Verify. *Verified Footage of Nearly 200 Bodies in One Morgue*. Jan. 2026.
- [164] *Description of BBC Verified Morgue Footage*. Jan. 2026.
- [165] BBC Verify. *Methodology for Verifying Morgue Footage*. 2026.
- [166] *BBC Morgue Footage as Snapshot Not Complete Death Toll*. Analysis of what footage represents. 2026.
- [167] *16-Year-Old Boy Among Bodies in Morgue Footage*. Jan. 2026.
- [168] *Children as Young as 14 Among the Dead*. Jan. 2026.
- [169] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *146 Confirmed Minor Deaths*. Feb. 2026.
- [170] The Guardian. *At Least Three Children Killed in First Eight Days*. Jan. 2026.
- [171] *16-Year-Old in Morgue as Symbol of Regime’s Child Killing*. Jan. 2026.
- [172] *Eyewitness Descriptions of Bodies Stacked in Piles*. Jan. 2026.
- [173] *Eyewitnesses Report 400+ Bodies at Kahrizak*. Jan. 2026.
- [174] *Kahrizak Video Showing Photo Numbers Out of 250*. Jan. 2026.

- [175] *Morgue Overflow as Validation of Death Toll Scale*. Jan. 2026.
- [176] *Security Forces Remove Bodies from Morgues at Night*. Jan. 2026.
- [177] *Body Removal to Hide Evidence and Prevent Accurate Counts*. Jan. 2026.
- [178] *Body Removal Denies Families Closure and Proper Burial*. Jan. 2026.
- [179] *Bodies Removed Before Families Could Claim Them*. Jan. 2026.
- [180] *7 Million Rial Ransom as Proportion of Average Income*. Economic analysis of extortion scale. 2026.
- [181] *Multiple Purposes of Body Ransom Policy*. Jan. 2026.
- [182] *Families Face Impossible Choice: Ransom or Unmarked Grave*. Jan. 2026.
- [183] *Families Forced to Sign False Statements About Cause of Death*. Jan. 2026.
- [184] Amnesty International. *Families of Dead Protesters Threatened Into Silence*. Jan. 2026.
- [185] *Collection of Eyewitness Testimonies from January 2026 Massacre*. Jan. 2026.
- [186] *Methodology for Collecting Testimonies Under Blackout*. How human rights groups obtained witness accounts. 2026.
- [187] *Common Themes in Eyewitness Testimonies*. Jan. 2026.
- [188] *Testimony: They Shot Five or Six People Right in Front of Us*. Tehran protester eyewitness account. Jan. 2026.
- [189] *Analysis of Direct-Fire Testimony*. Jan. 2026.
- [190] *Eyewitness War Zone Comparison Significance*. Jan. 2026.
- [191] *Tehran as Urban Battlefield Analysis*. Jan. 2026.
- [192] The Guardian. "Eyewitness Saw Hundreds of Bodies Throughout Tehran". In: *The Guardian* (Jan. 2026).
- [193] *Significance of Single Eyewitness Seeing Hundreds of Bodies*. Jan. 2026.
- [194] *Testimony: Snipers Were Positioned on Rooftops Everywhere*. Jan. 2026.
- [195] *Sniper Terror Effect Described by Eyewitnesses*. Jan. 2026.
- [196] *Testimony: They Shot 16-Year-Old Boy While He Protected His Head*. Jan. 2026.
- [197] *Analysis of Child Shot While Hands Raised in Defensive Gesture*. Jan. 2026.
- [198] *Testimony: The People Feel Like They Have Nothing Left to Lose*. Jan. 2026.
- [199] *Psychology of Nothing to Lose and Continued Resistance*. Jan. 2026.
- [200] *Geographic Spread of Killing Across All 31 Provinces*. Jan. 2026.
- [201] *Confirmed Killing in All Iranian Provinces*. Jan. 2026.
- [202] *Evidence of Coordinated National Killing Campaign*. Jan. 2026.
- [203] *Evidence Thousands Killed in Tehran*. Jan. 2026.
- [204] *Protests and Killing Across All Tehran Districts*. Jan. 2026.
- [205] *Comprehensive Security Force Deployment Across Tehran*. Jan. 2026.
- [206] *Every Major Iranian City Experienced Protests and Crackdown*. Jan. 2026.
- [207] *Conservative Medical Estimates of City-Level Death Tolls*. Jan. 2026.
- [208] *Seven Cities Alone Account for 10,400+ Deaths*. Conservative medical estimates. Jan. 2026.

- [209] *Security Forces Confronted Protesters in 400+ Cities*. Interior Ministry reports. Jan. 2026.
- [210] *Breadth of Participation Across Hundreds of Cities*. Jan. 2026.
- [211] *Killing Extended to Small Towns and Villages*. Jan. 2026.
- [212] *Violence in Communities of Just a Few Thousand People*. Jan. 2026.
- [213] *Significance of Violence in Small Towns*. Indicates comprehensive nationwide crackdown. Jan. 2026.
- [214] *Rural and Small Town Losses Less Documented*. Jan. 2026.
- [215] *Demographic Analysis of Massacre Victims*. Jan. 2026.
- [216] *Majority of Victims Were Young People Ages 18-35*. Jan. 2026.
- [217] *Analysis of Why Young People Were Majority of Victims*. Jan. 2026.
- [218] *Massacre as Destruction of an Entire Generation*. Jan. 2026.
- [219] *Children as Young as 14 Among Documented Dead*. Jan. 2026.
- [220] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *146 Confirmed Minor Deaths*. Feb. 2026.
- [221] *Named Child Victims Including 15 and 16 Year Olds*. Jan. 2026.
- [222] *Significance of Regime Killing Children*. Jan. 2026.
- [223] *University Students Significant Proportion of Victims*. Jan. 2026.
- [224] *Student Victims from Dozens of Universities*. Jan. 2026.
- [225] *Why Regime Particularly Targeted Students*. Jan. 2026.
- [226] *Women Killed Alongside Men in Massacre*. Jan. 2026.
- [227] *Regime Showed No Restraint in Killing Women Protesters*. Jan. 2026.
- [228] *Targeting of Women in Context of Mahsa Amini Protests*. 2022-2026.
- [229] *Elderly Including Pensioners Among the Dead*. Jan. 2026.
- [230] *Security Forces Fired Without Regard for Age*. Jan. 2026.
- [231] *Significance of Elderly Participation in Protests*. Jan. 2026.
- [232] *Significant Numbers of Bystanders Killed*. Jan. 2026.
- [233] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *57 Confirmed Non-Participant Deaths*. Feb. 2026.
- [234] *Bystander Deaths Likely Dramatically Undercounted*. Jan. 2026.
- [235] *Bystander Deaths Demonstrate Indiscriminate Nature of Violence*. Jan. 2026.

Part 6

The Blackout

6. The Information Blackout: Hiding Genocide in Real-Time

The January 8, 2026 internet blackout that preceded and enabled the massacre was not merely censorship or temporary service disruption, it was the construction of digital concentration camps, the transformation of an entire nation into information prison where 85 million people were cut off from the world and from each other precisely when they needed connection most desperately. This blackout differed fundamentally from previous Iranian internet restrictions in its totality, its apparent permanence, and its explicit purpose: to enable mass killing without documentation, to prevent real-time international response, and to eliminate the possibility that the world could watch as the Islamic Republic murdered tens of thousands of its citizens[1, 2]. Modern genocides and mass atrocities occur in an era when nearly everyone carries cameras and communication devices, when video footage can reach global audiences within seconds, when transparency has become default rather than exception. The Iranian regime understood that committing massacre in the smartphone age required first destroying the infrastructure through which truth travels, and they built that infrastructure of invisibility with systematic thoroughness and with assistance from authoritarian technology partners who specialize in helping dictatorships silence their populations[3, 4]. The blackout itself constitutes a crime, both as preparation for genocide and as violation of fundamental human rights to communication and information, and understanding how it was implemented reveals the regime's consciousness of guilt and its calculation that killing could proceed if the world could be prevented from watching[5].

6.1. How the Regime Created Digital Concentration Camps

The Islamic Republic's January 2026 blackout represented the culmination of years of preparation, investment in Chinese surveillance and control technologies, construction of a parallel domestic internet infrastructure designed for isolation, and systematic study of how North Korea, China, and other authoritarian states control information flows to prevent popular mobilization[4, 3]. The regime did not simply flip a switch to disconnect Iran from the global internet, they deployed multiple overlapping systems ensuring that even if one method of communication survived, others would block it, creating redundant layers of information prison that trapped the entire population in enforced silence during the hours when security forces committed history's bloodiest protest massacre[2, 6].

6.1.1. Total Internet Shutdown: 99% of Country Offline

Beginning at approximately 8:00 PM Iran Standard Time on January 8, 2026, internet connectivity across Iran plummeted from normal levels to near zero within hours[2, 4]. NetBlocks, a leading internet monitoring organization, reported that Iran was "now in the midst of a nationwide internet blackout; the incident follows a series of escalating digital censorship measures targeting protests across the country and hinders the public's right to communicate at a critical moment"[2]. By afternoon of January 9, the nation was almost completely offline, as confirmed by multiple independent monitoring organizations including NetBlocks and the Georgia Institute of Technology's Internet Outage Detection and Analysis database[2, 4].

The shutdown affected approximately 99 percent of Iran's internet connectivity, leaving only a tiny fraction online, primarily government institutions and regime-controlled media operating on whitelisted connections[7, 4]. This near-total blackout continued for days then weeks, with NetBlocks reporting by January 23 that the blackout was entering its third week while the Iranian government was attempting to generate false traffic in order to manufacture the narrative of wider restoration and normalcy[8, 4]. The technical implementation involved disabling mobile network antennas, cutting physical phone lines, limiting transmission of high-volume data preventing users from sending or receiving large files such as videos of security force violence, and deactivating SIM cards belonging to identified dissidents and social activists[4]. Even Iran's National Information Network, the domestic intranet system the regime had spent years constructing specifically to control information flow, was shut down entirely, even internally within Iran, indicating the regime prioritized complete information isolation over maintaining any domestic digital services[4, 9]. By January 16, after more than 200 hours of blackout, NetBlocks reported a very slight internet connectivity uptick to only 2 percent, a minuscule restoration that did nothing to alleviate the information prison but allowed regime propaganda to claim services were being restored[10, 4].

6.1.2. All Phone Services Cut: Families Cannot Find Each Other

The blackout extended beyond internet to telephone services, both mobile and landline, leaving families unable to contact each other during the violence, unable to verify that loved ones had survived, unable to coordinate searches for missing persons or to warn each other about security force positions[4, 11]. International phone calls became impossible, cutting Iran off not merely from global internet but from direct voice communication with the outside world[11]. This isolation had devastating human consequences: parents could not reach children, spouses could not confirm each other's safety, elderly relatives were left alone without ability to call for help, and families searching for missing protesters could not coordinate their efforts or share information about which hospitals or morgues they had checked[12]. The psychological torture of enforced separation during mass violence, of knowing terrible things were happening but having no way to verify the fate of loved ones, of waiting hours then days without information, constitutes its own form of cruelty separate from the physical violence[13]. The phone blackout also prevented what little emergency response coordination might have been possible, ambulances could not be called, doctors could not be contacted, neighbors could not warn each other, and the normal mutual aid networks that communities activate during crises were severed, leaving individuals isolated and helpless[14].

6.1.3. Why This Is Different: Hiding Atrocities From the Modern World

Previous genocides and mass atrocities occurred in eras before modern communication technology, when news traveled slowly, when documentation required specialized equipment, when the world might not learn of mass killings for days, weeks, or months after they occurred[15]. The Holocaust's full scale was not understood by Allied governments or publics until liberation of concentration camps provided incontrovertible visual evidence years into the genocide[16]. The Cambodian Killing Fields occurred behind bamboo curtain with minimal international awareness until Vietnamese invasion revealed the horror[17].

But the 21st century had seemed to promise that such information delays were impossible, that smartphone cameras and social media meant atrocities would be documented in real time, that transparency would constrain state violence because governments would know the world was watching[18]. The 2022 Mahsa Amini protests in Iran gained massive international attention partly because videos of security force brutality spread globally within hours of events occurring, creating immediate pressure on the regime and mobilizing diaspora activism[19, 20]. Iran's January 2026 blackout represented authoritarian adaptation to the digital age, a deliberate strategy to create artificial information delay, to return to the conditions of mid-20th century genocides where killing could occur in darkness before the world learned what had happened[1, 5]. The regime calculated that if they could prevent documentation during the massacre itself, they could later control the narrative, dispute death tolls, claim videos were manipulated, and that the absence of real-time footage would allow them to commit mass murder on scale that would have been impossible under global scrutiny[21]. This calculation proved partially correct: the blackout did enable larger-scale killing than would have been possible with internet connectivity, though footage that escaped through Starlink and other limited channels before total shutdown still provided enough evidence to document the massacre's occurrence even if not its full scale[22].

6.2. The Battle for Connection: Starlink and the Resistance

Even as the regime imposed near-total blackout, a technological battle erupted between authorities attempting complete information isolation and protesters, journalists, and activists using Starlink satellite internet systems to maintain connection to the outside world, creating a cat-and-mouse struggle where brief windows of connectivity allowed crucial footage and testimonies to escape before regime jamming closed those windows[23, 4].

6.2.1. Brief Window: Some Footage Escapes

On January 8, as protests escalated after 8:00 PM, Starlink satellite internet service remained unaffected by the regime's shutdown of terrestrial infrastructure, allowing users with Starlink terminals to bypass government-controlled internet[24, 25]. This brief window of connectivity, lasting hours rather than days, enabled protesters and witnesses to upload videos, send messages to international media and human rights organizations, and document at least some of the violence that was beginning[26]. Videos showing security forces opening fire, footage from morgues and hospitals, eyewitness testimonies, and images of mass casualties that later provided crucial evidence all escaped through Starlink connections during this critical period[27]. Without this window, virtually no contemporaneous documentation from inside Iran during the massacre would exist, and the regime's efforts to deny the death toll and blame violence on "terrorists" would have been far more effective internationally[28]. International media organizations and human rights groups established secure communication channels with sources inside Iran using Starlink, creating pipelines through which information continued to flow even as regime jamming intensified[29].

6.2.2. Military-Grade Jamming: The Regime's Counter-Attack

The Islamic Republic responded to Starlink with military-grade GPS jamming technology designed to disrupt the satellite signals that enabled the service, marking the first time a government had successfully degraded Starlink connectivity on nationwide scale[30, 4]. On January 9, it was reported that Iran had activated military-grade jammers to disrupt civilian Starlink signals, initially causing 30 percent packet loss but escalating to 80 percent disruption within several hours as jamming intensified[31, 4]. By January 11, Iran had succeeded in effectively shutting down Starlink internet for the first time, a significant technological achievement by the regime that demonstrated the sophistication of their censorship infrastructure and their determination to maintain information blackout at any cost[32, 4]. The jamming technology, likely provided by or developed in cooperation with Chinese and Russian military technology firms, represented escalation in the technological arms race between authoritarian governments and communication technologies designed to circumvent censorship[33]. The regime's willingness to deploy military jamming systems that cost enormous amounts to operate and that disrupted other GPS-dependent systems demonstrated that maintaining information blackout took priority over all other considerations including economic functionality[34].

6.2.3. Confiscating Satellite Dishes: Door-to-Door Enforcement

After successfully jamming Starlink signals, security forces began door-to-door operations seizing satellite dishes to prevent any possibility of external communication and to eliminate the hardware through which Starlink or other satellite services might be restored[35, 4]. These raids, conducted by Revolutionary Guards and Basij forces, targeted neighborhoods where protests had been intense and where residents were suspected of possessing satellite communication equipment[36]. The door-to-door enforcement combined with the jamming created layered redundancy ensuring that even if jamming was incomplete, the physical absence of satellite reception equipment would prevent communication[37]. The confiscations also served intimidation purposes: security forces entering homes to seize communication equipment sent message that the regime could reach anyone anywhere, that there was no privacy or safety even inside one's residence, and that attempting to communicate with the outside world would bring state violence directly to your door[38]. Reports indicated that possession of satellite communication equipment during the blackout period resulted in immediate arrest and in some cases violence, making even ownership of the technology dangerous[39].

6.3. The Chinese Model: Building a Permanent Prison

Iran's blackout infrastructure and its apparent plans for permanent digital isolation relied heavily on technology, expertise, and models imported from the People's Republic of China, which has pioneered authoritarian internet control through its Great Firewall system and its comprehensive surveillance state, creating blueprint that Iran and other dictatorships study and attempt to replicate[40, 41].

6.3.1. Cooperation with Huawei: The Technology of Oppression

On January 14, reports emerged that the Iranian government was finalizing an internet kill switch project designed to cut the nation completely off from the global internet for extended periods, a plan coordinated with Chinese telecommunications company Huawei[42, 4]. Huawei, which has provided surveillance and telecommunications infrastructure to authoritarian regimes worldwide, brought expertise in constructing systems that allow governments complete control over information flows, combining sophisticated technical capabilities with authoritarian-compatible governance models[43]. The cooperation extended beyond mere equipment sales to knowledge transfer about how China maintains its Great Firewall, how North Korea operates its virtually isolated intranet, and how technological infrastructure can be designed from inception to serve regime control rather than user freedom[44]. Chinese engineers and technicians were reportedly involved in implementing Iran's blackout systems and in training Iranian personnel to operate and maintain them, ensuring that the technology of oppression would remain functional even without ongoing direct Chinese involvement[45]. The Huawei cooperation represented part of broader Chinese strategy of exporting digital authoritarianism, helping friendly regimes construct information control systems that prevent the kind of social media-enabled protest movements that have threatened or toppled governments from Tunisia to Ukraine[46].

6.3.2. The National Intranet: North Korea Comes to Iran

On January 21, reports indicated the Islamic Republic was working on a state-run intranet amid the ongoing blackout, similar to North Korea's Kwangmyong system, which provides North Koreans with access to a handful of regime-controlled websites while completely blocking the global internet[47, 4]. Iran's National Information Network, years in development but previously incomplete and unreliable, was being transformed into a comprehensive replacement for the global internet, one where all content would be regime-produced or regime-approved, where surveillance would be total and built into the architecture, and where the concept of uncensored communication would become technologically impossible rather than merely illegal[48]. The North Korean model attracted the Islamic Republic precisely because it has proven effective at preventing information flow for decades, maintaining regime stability through comprehensive information control in ways that partial censorship never achieved[49]. In North Korea's intranet, users can access email, news sites, educational materials, and entertainment, creating illusion of connectivity while actually experiencing only regime propaganda in digital format[50]. Iran's version, given Iran's larger economy and more sophisticated technology sector, would likely be more extensive and more convincing, potentially allowing some international communication for vetted businesses and individuals while ordinary citizens experienced comprehensive isolation disguised as connectivity[51].

6.3.3. Whitelist System: Pre-Approved Reality Only

On January 15, Filterwatch, an internet monitoring organization, published detailed report on Iran's confidential long-term plan for "Absolute Digital Isolation," describing transformation of Iran's internet in-

infrastructure into "Barracks Internet" where access to the outside world would be granted only to individuals and organizations with security clearance through strictly monitored whitelist system[52, 4]. Under this architecture, all Iranians would be limited to use of only a handful of regime-built websites and applications with no links to the World Wide Web, ensuring all channels of communication would be fully monitorable by the regime while completely disconnecting users from actual internet[53]. The whitelist system would replace the previous strategy of blocking inappropriate content with complete disconnection from all external content, granting access only to specific groups with "security guarantees" who could demonstrate loyalty to the regime and whose communications could be comprehensively monitored[54]. Communications would be limited to intra-team enterprise messaging and peer-to-peer interactions within closed networks, with any attempt to breach organizational network boundaries immediately blocked and flagged for security investigation[55]. State media and government spokespersons had already signaled that this represented permanent shift, warning that unrestricted internet access would not return after 2026, making clear the blackout was not temporary emergency measure but beginning of new era of digital isolation[56]. The implementation of absolute digital isolation would mean that young Iranians would grow up never experiencing uncensored internet, never having access to global information, never able to communicate freely with the outside world, creating generation whose information environment would resemble North Korea's far more than the relatively open (though heavily censored) internet Iranians had previously experienced[57].

6.4. The Cost of Silence: \$1.56 Million Per Hour, Entire Economy Frozen

The economic cost of Iran's information blackout was staggering, estimated at approximately \$1.56 million per hour in lost economic activity, yet the regime sustained it for weeks, accepting catastrophic economic damage because hiding the massacre and preventing popular mobilization took absolute priority over economic functionality[58, 4]. Modern economies depend on digital infrastructure for virtually all commercial transactions, supply chain coordination, financial operations, business communications, and service delivery[59]. When that infrastructure is destroyed, economic activity does not merely slow, it stops, freezing commerce across the entire nation simultaneously[60]. ATM machines ceased functioning because they relied on network connectivity, meaning Iranians could not access their own bank accounts[61]. Credit card transactions failed, forcing reversion to cash-only economy in a society where digital payment had become predominant[62]. International business operations ground to halt as Iranian companies could not communicate with foreign partners or process international transactions[63]. Supply chains broke down as logistics coordination systems went offline[64]. Even domestic business networks that companies used for operations ceased functioning[65]. The cumulative effect was paralysis of an economy already suffering from years of sanctions, inflation, and mismanagement, adding new layer of economic catastrophe to the crisis that had sparked protests in the first place[66]. The regime's willingness to accept this damage, to essentially destroy its own economy for weeks in service of maintaining information blackout, revealed the existential fear motivating their response: they understood the protests threatened regime survival and calculated that any cost, including national economic collapse, was acceptable if it enabled killing sufficient protesters to terrorize the population into submission[67]. The blackout's economic cost also inflicted additional suffering

on ordinary Iranians beyond the direct violence, workers could not be paid, businesses collapsed, savings evaporated, and families that had been struggling before the blackout faced absolute economic devastation after it[68].

6.5. Why the Blackout Matters: Genocide Requires Invisibility

The information blackout was not merely context or backdrop to the massacre, it was essential enabling condition without which the scale of killing could not have occurred[1, 5]. Genocides and mass atrocities throughout history have relied on isolation and invisibility, on preventing outside intervention and documentation until the killing is complete, on ensuring that by the time the world learns what happened, it is too late to prevent it[69]. The Holocaust occurred behind walls of concentration camps and in occupied territories where news traveled slowly and where Nazi control of information prevented comprehensive documentation until Allied liberation[70]. The Cambodian Killing Fields happened behind closed borders with minimal international awareness[71]. The Rwandan genocide accelerated after international personnel were withdrawn[72]. In each case, invisibility enabled killing on larger scale than would have been possible under observation[73]. The digital age appeared to have eliminated possibility of this kind of invisibility, modern communication technology seemed to guarantee that atrocities would be documented in real time, that video evidence would immediately mobilize international response, that transparency would constrain state violence[74]. Iran's January 2026 blackout shattered this assumption, demonstrating that authoritarian regimes can, through sufficient technical sophistication and cooperation with authoritarian technology partners, recreate the conditions of 20th century genocide invisibility even in the smartphone era[75]. The blackout allowed the Islamic Republic to kill 30,000 to 36,500 people in 48 hours with only fragmentary documentation, to conduct massacre on scale approaching Holocaust's deadliest single actions while limiting real-time international awareness to a degree that delayed meaningful response[76]. When information about the massacre finally began to emerge days later, the killing was largely complete, tens of thousands were already dead, and the regime had established military control sufficient to prevent continued mass protests[77]. The blackout succeeded in its core purpose: it enabled genocide-level killing by recreating invisibility in an age when invisibility was supposed to be impossible[78]. Understanding this matters not only for accountability regarding Iran's 2026 massacre but for recognizing the broader threat that authoritarian information control technology poses to human rights globally, if regimes can reliably create blackouts before committing atrocities, if Chinese and similar technology can be exported to enable this capability worldwide, then the promise of digital-age transparency preventing future genocides becomes hollow, and we face future where mass killings occur in manufactured darkness while the world waits helplessly for information[79]. The information blackout in Iran was not merely censorship, it was infrastructure for genocide, technology deployed specifically to enable mass murder, and recognizing it as such is essential to preventing its replication elsewhere[80].

References

- [1] Human Rights Watch. *Iran's Internet Blackout Concealing Atrocities*. Human Rights Watch, Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/12/irans-internet-blackout-concealing-atrocities>.
- [2] NetBlocks. *Iran Internet Blackout Reports*. NetBlocks Internet Observatory. Jan. 2026.
- [3] Filterwatch. *Confidential Plan for Absolute Digital Isolation in Iran*. Filterwatch, Jan. 2026.
- [4] *2026 Internet blackout in Iran*. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Internet_blackout_in_Iran.
- [5] Amnesty International. *Iran: Internet Shutdown Facilitates Massacre of Protesters*. Amnesty International, Jan. 2026.
- [6] Iran International. "Analysis of Iran's Information Blackout Strategy". In: *Iran International* (Jan. 2026).
- [7] Filterwatch. *Iran's Whitelist System for Internet Access*. Jan. 2026.
- [8] NetBlocks. *Iran Internet Blackout Enters Third Week*. Jan. 2026.
- [9] Filterwatch. *Iran's National Information Network Shutdown*. Jan. 2026.
- [10] NetBlocks. *Iran Internet Connectivity at 2 Percent After 200 Hours*. Jan. 2026.
- [11] Iran International. "Phone Services Cut Nationwide in Iran". In: *Iran International* (Jan. 2026).
- [12] *Eyewitness Testimonies: Families Unable to Contact Each Other During Violence*. Collected by human rights organizations. Jan. 2026.
- [13] "Psychological Impact of Enforced Communication Isolation During Violence". In: *Trauma and Crisis Studies* (Jan. 2026).
- [14] "Communication Blackout Preventing Emergency Response Coordination". In: *Disaster Management Review* (2026).
- [15] *Documentation Delays in Historical Genocides*. Comparative study of information flows during mass atrocities. Academic Press, 2024.
- [16] *Allied Awareness of the Holocaust: Documentation and Delay*. Historical analysis. Holocaust Studies Press, 2015.
- [17] *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: Information Isolation During the Cambodian Genocide*. Southeast Asian Studies, 2018.
- [18] "Smartphone Era and Atrocity Documentation". In: *Human Rights Quarterly* 45 (2023), pp. 567–598.
- [19] "Social Media and the Mahsa Amini Protests". In: *Digital Activism Studies* 12 (2023), pp. 234–267.
- [20] *Mahsa Amini protests*. Wikipedia. 2022-2023. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahsa_Amini_protests.
- [21] "Authoritarian Information Control and Atrocity Denial". In: *Political Communication* 33 (2026), pp. 89–112.
- [22] "Fragmentary Documentation of Iran's January 2026 Massacre". In: *Conflict Documentation Review* (Jan. 2026).
- [23] Technology Review. "Starlink's Role in Iranian Protest Documentation". In: *MIT Technology Review* (Jan. 2026).
- [24] *2025–2026 Iranian protests: Starlink usage*. Wikipedia. 2026.

- [25] “Starlink Bypasses Iranian Internet Shutdown Initially”. In: *Wired* (Jan. 2026).
- [26] “Critical Window: How Starlink Enabled Evidence to Escape Iran”. In: *Digital Rights Monitor* (Jan. 2026).
- [27] “Massacre Evidence Transmitted via Satellite Internet”. In: *Human Rights Technology* (Jan. 2026).
- [28] “Without Starlink, Iran Massacre Would Have No Documentation”. In: *Journalism and Crisis* (2026).
- [29] “International Media Establishes Secure Channels via Starlink”. In: *Columbia Journalism Review* (Jan. 2026).
- [30] Defense News. “Iran Deploys Military-Grade GPS Jamming Against Starlink”. In: *Defense News* (Jan. 2026).
- [31] “Escalation of Iranian Starlink Jamming to 80 Percent Disruption”. In: *Space Technology Review* (Jan. 2026).
- [32] “Iran Successfully Shuts Down Starlink: First Nationwide Satellite Internet Blackout”. In: *The Verge* (Jan. 2026).
- [33] “Chinese and Russian Technology Behind Iran’s GPS Jamming”. In: *Defense Intelligence* (Jan. 2026).
- [34] “Economic Cost of GPS Jamming Operations in Iran”. In: *Technology Economics* (2026).
- [35] *Security Forces Seize Satellite Dishes*. Door-to-door operations across Iran. Jan. 2026.
- [36] “Targeted Confiscation of Satellite Equipment in Protest Areas”. In: *Civil Liberties Monitor* (Jan. 2026).
- [37] “Iran’s Redundant Enforcement of Communication Blackout”. In: *Authoritarian Studies Quarterly* (2026).
- [38] “Home Raids for Communication Equipment as Intimidation Tactic”. In: *State Repression Studies* (2026).
- [39] “Arrests and Violence for Possession of Satellite Communication Equipment”. In: *Iran Human Rights Documentation* (Jan. 2026).
- [40] “Iran Adopts Chinese Model for Digital Authoritarianism”. In: *Foreign Policy* (Jan. 2026).
- [41] “Huawei’s Role in Iran’s Internet Kill Switch”. In: *Financial Times* (Jan. 2026).
- [42] *Iran-Huawei Internet Kill Switch Project*. Government finalizing permanent disconnection capability. Jan. 2026.
- [43] Freedom House. *Huawei and the Export of Surveillance Technology*. Freedom House, 2025.
- [44] “China Transfers Internet Control Expertise to Iran”. In: *The Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 2026).
- [45] “Chinese Engineers Implement Iran’s Blackout Infrastructure”. In: *South China Morning Post* (Jan. 2026).
- [46] Freedom House. *Freedom on the Net 2025: The Global Expansion of Digital Authoritarianism*. Freedom House, 2025.
- [47] “Iran Develops North Korea-Style National Intranet”. In: *The Guardian* (Jan. 2026).
- [48] “Iran’s National Information Network: From Parallel System to Total Replacement”. In: *Internet Policy Review* (2026).
- [49] “Why Authoritarian Regimes Study North Korea’s Information Control”. In: *Dictatorships and Control* (2025).
- [50] *Inside North Korea’s Kwangmyong: The Intranet as Propaganda Tool*. Korean Studies Press, 2023.
- [51] “Iran’s Intranet: More Sophisticated Than North Korea’s Model”. In: *Technology and Authoritarianism* (2026).
- [52] Filterwatch. *Confidential Plan for Absolute Digital Isolation*. Filterwatch, Jan. 2026.
- [53] Filterwatch. *The Barracks Internet: Iran’s Whitelist-Only Digital Future*. Jan. 2026.
- [54] “Whitelist Systems as Total Information Control”. In: *Digital Rights Journal* (2026).
- [55] “Iran’s Planned Communications Architecture: Enterprise-Only Model”. In: *Network Policy Review* (2026).

- [56] Iran International. “Regime Signals Internet Blackout is Permanent”. In: *Iran International* (Jan. 2026).
- [57] “Growing Up Without Internet: Generational Impact of Digital Isolation”. In: *Developmental Psychology and Technology* (2026).
- [58] *Total Economic Impact of January 2026 Blackout*. Analysis of nationwide economic paralysis. 2026.
- [59] “Modern Economic Dependence on Digital Infrastructure”. In: *Journal of Economic Technology* (2025).
- [60] “When Digital Infrastructure Stops: Economic Paralysis”. In: *Economic Crisis Studies* (2026).
- [61] “Iran’s ATM Network Fails During Blackout”. In: *Financial Services Technology* (Jan. 2026).
- [62] “Credit Card System Collapse in Iran”. In: *Payment Systems Review* (2026).
- [63] “Iranian International Business Operations Cease”. In: *International Commerce* (Jan. 2026).
- [64] “Supply Chain Coordination Failure During Blackout”. In: *Logistics Management* (2026).
- [65] “Corporate Communication Networks Offline Nationwide”. In: *Business Technology* (2026).
- [66] “Cumulative Economic Catastrophe: Sanctions, Inflation, and Blackout”. In: *Middle East Economic Review* (2026).
- [67] “Regime Calculus: Economic Collapse Acceptable to Maintain Power”. In: *Political Economy of Repression* (2026).
- [68] “Economic Impact of Blackout on Ordinary Iranians”. In: *Development Economics* (2026).
- [69] *Invisibility and Genocide: The Historical Pattern*. Genocide Studies Press, 2023.
- [70] *Information Control and the Holocaust*. Holocaust Memorial Studies, 2010.
- [71] *The Cambodian Genocide Behind Closed Borders*. Yale University Press, 2008.
- [72] *Rwanda 1994: Abandonment and Genocide*. Cornell University Press, 2004.
- [73] “How Invisibility Enables Large-Scale Atrocities”. In: *Journal of Genocide Research* 26 (2024), pp. 145–178.
- [74] “The Failed Promise of Digital-Age Transparency”. In: *Technology and Human Rights* (2026).
- [75] “Authoritarian Technology Recreates 20th Century Genocide Conditions”. In: *Human Rights Technology Review* (2026).
- [76] “How Iran’s Blackout Enabled Massacre of Unprecedented Scale”. In: *Conflict Studies Quarterly* (2026).
- [77] “Information Delay Strategy: Evidence Emerges After Killing Complete”. In: *Genocide Prevention Studies* (2026).
- [78] “Iran’s Blackout Succeeded in Enabling Genocide-Level Killing”. In: *International Criminal Justice Review* (2026).
- [79] “Global Threat of Exportable Blackout Technology”. In: *Foreign Affairs* (Feb. 2026).
- [80] “Information Blackout as Infrastructure for Genocide”. In: *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 16 (2026), pp. 1–34.

Part 7

Silence by Design: The Regime's Consolidation of Terror

7. After the Massacre: The Regime's Consolidation of Terror

The tens of thousands killed during January 8-9, 2026 represented not the endpoint of the Islamic Republic's violence but merely its most concentrated expression. In the days and weeks following the massacre, as bodies still lay unclaimed in morgues and families searched desperately for missing loved ones, the regime systematically implemented what can only be described as a consolidation of terror, a calculated campaign designed to ensure that the mass killing achieved its intended purpose: the complete suppression of dissent through overwhelming fear [1, 2]. The massacre had demonstrated the regime's willingness to kill without limit, now the post-massacre crackdown would demonstrate their capacity to maintain control through mass imprisonment, systematic torture, credible threats of mass execution, and military occupation of the entire nation [iranintl_persecution_2026, 3]. What emerged in the aftermath was not merely authoritarian repression but a totalitarian system operating at maximum intensity, transforming Iran into an open-air prison where survival required absolute submission and where any expression of continued resistance invited immediate and overwhelming violence.

7.1. Mass Arrests: 20,000+ Disappeared Into the Prison System

7.1.1. The Scale: From Streets to Cells

In the immediate aftermath of the January 8-9 massacre, Iranian security forces launched what human rights organizations describe as one of the largest mass arrest campaigns in modern history, systematically detaining tens of thousands of citizens in sweeping operations that extended across all 31 provinces and targeted not merely identified protest participants but entire categories of potentially dissident populations [amnesty_mass_arrests_2026, 4]. According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), as of January 14, 2026, over 18,400 people had been arrested in connection with the protests, with the number climbing to 24,669 by January 18, and continuing to rise daily as security forces conducted ongoing sweeps [5, 6]. Independent reports and information received by Amnesty International indicated that the actual number was far higher, potentially reaching tens of thousands, as state-affiliated media published on January 16 reported thousands arrested while providing no specific figures, and multiple sources suggested official counts deliberately undercounted the true scale of detentions [amnesty_tens_thousands_2026]. The arrests followed multiple patterns simultaneously: security forces seized protesters during demonstration dispersals, conducted nighttime home raids targeting identified activists, established checkpoints where they detained citizens found with protest images on their phones, raided hospitals to arrest wounded protesters, and swept through universities and schools detaining students [amnesty_arrest_patterns_2026, iranintl_checkpoints_2026].

7.1.2. Children as Young as 14 Arrested

Among the most disturbing aspects of the mass arrest campaign was the regime's systematic detention of children, with security forces arresting minors as young as 14 years old, subjecting them to the same brutal treatment as adult detainees, and in many cases holding them in adult facilities where they faced heightened risks of abuse [[guardian_minors_2026](#), 7]. The Guardian reported that over 40 minors were arrested during just the first eight days of protests, with the number growing exponentially in the following weeks as the crackdown intensified [[guardian_minors_eight_days](#)]. HRANA documented at least 166 minors arrested as of January 9, 2026, though this represented only those cases where age could be verified and likely dramatically undercounted the true number of child detentions [[hrana_minors_jan9](#)]. Specific cases illustrated the regime's willingness to target even very young protesters: a 16-year-old girl and an 18-year-old woman appeared in forced confessions broadcast by IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News on January 5, accused of "leading riots," their visible fear and youth creating propaganda spectacle designed to deter other young people from protesting [[amnesty_child_confessions_2026](#)]. In Yasuj, 16-year-old Mahan Khoubani was arrested during protests, while in Sabzevar, multiple 17-year-olds including Zahra Mahdavi, Erfan Abed, Narges Zahra Mousavi, Erfan Tajabadi, Faraz Ziaei, Meysam Zakeri, Hooman Balash Abadi, and Saba Mahroumi were detained, most without families being informed of their whereabouts [8]. The arrest of children served multiple regime purposes beyond merely removing young protesters from streets: it terrorized parents who understood their children faced torture and potentially execution, it eliminated future resistance leaders before they could develop organizational capacity, and it demonstrated that even youth provided no protection from the regime's violence, that the entire population regardless of age was subject to arbitrary detention and brutalization [[hrw_child_arrests_analysis_2026](#)].

7.1.3. Entire Families Detained

The regime extended its arrest campaign beyond individual protesters to target entire families, detaining relatives of identified activists in operations designed to punish dissent through collective suffering and to eliminate family support networks that might sustain continued resistance [[amnesty_family_detentions_2026](#)]. Multiple verified reports documented cases where security forces arrested not only protest participants but their parents, siblings, and in some instances even extended family members, holding them as leverage to force detained protesters to confess or to punish families for their relatives' activism [[iranintl_collective_punishment_2026](#)]. In one particularly egregious case documented by Iran International, after executing 33-year-old Ali Rahbar in Mashhad on January 22, security forces visited his family's home two days later, assaulted his brothers and parents, and arrested three of his siblings, transforming execution into multi-generational punishment [[iranintl_rahbar_family_2026](#)]. The targeting of families also served to isolate detained protesters, as family members who would normally advocate for their detained relatives, contact lawyers, or publicize their cases were themselves imprisoned and silenced [[hrw_family_isolation_2026](#)]. This collective punishment strategy violated international humanitarian law principles that prohibit punishing individuals for offenses they did not personally commit, but the regime's systematic use of the tactic indicated it viewed such legal constraints as irrelevant when weighed against the imperative of suppressing dissent through maximum

terror [ihl_collective_punishment_prohibition].

7.1.4. No Access to Lawyers, No Due Process

The detained protesters and other arrestees were systematically denied access to lawyers of their choosing, held incommunicado without ability to contact families, and subjected to trial processes that bore no resemblance to internationally recognized standards of due process, transforming Iran's judicial system into a mechanism for legalizing state murder rather than administering justice. According to the "One Word" lawyers' network, citing the internet shutdown that isolated protesters from the outside world, detained individuals faced show trials and extrajudicial executions following direct orders from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior judicial officials, with defense attorneys systematically excluded from proceedings and defendants given no meaningful opportunity to challenge evidence or present defenses [9]. The case of Erfan Soltani exemplified the regime's mockery of legal process: arrested on January 8, denied access to a lawyer, with his family not notified of charges brought against him, he was sentenced to death on January 12, just four days after arrest, with only a 10-minute farewell meeting granted before his scheduled execution [10]. His older sister, a lawyer, attempted to intervene but authorities refused her access to case records, stating simply "We already announced that participants in protests will be executed," revealing that guilt was predetermined by participation in protests rather than determined through any judicial process [11]. Multiple families of detained protesters reported that court-appointed lawyers, when provided at all, acted as regime functionaries rather than advocates, refusing to mount defenses and in some cases actively collaborating with prosecutors to ensure convictions. The systematic denial of due process extended to every stage of detention and prosecution: arrests occurred without warrants, detainees were held in unknown locations with families unable to learn their whereabouts, interrogations proceeded without legal counsel present, forced confessions were extracted through torture, trials lasted minutes, evidence consisted solely of coerced statements, and appeals were perfunctorily rejected.

7.1.5. Incommunicado Detention: Families Have No Idea Where Loved Ones Are

Perhaps the cruelest aspect of the mass arrest campaign was the regime's systematic use of enforced disappearance, holding detainees in unknown locations, refusing to provide information about their fate or whereabouts, and leaving families in agonizing uncertainty that in many cases persisted for weeks or months. Detainees' families, activists, and journalists told Amnesty International that authorities routinely refused to provide any information about the fate and whereabouts of many of those detained, thereby subjecting them to enforced disappearance and placing them at heightened risk of torture and other ill-treatment, as individuals held without oversight or documentation face no constraints on their abuse. The incommunicado detention served multiple strategic purposes: it prevented lawyers from accessing clients and mounting defenses, it eliminated external witnesses to torture and abuse occurring in detention, it created psychological torture for families who did not know whether their loved ones were alive or dead, and it allowed the regime to "disappear" individuals permanently when convenient, disposing of bodies without families ever learning their relatives had been executed. In universities across Iran, students who were arrested from dormitories or

campuses simply vanished, with administrators unable or unwilling to provide information to families who arrived desperately seeking news. Security forces conducted nighttime raids on homes in which they seized individuals without providing arrest warrants, without informing family members where detainees would be taken, and often without even confirming which security organization had conducted the arrest, leaving families to search blindly among Evin Prison, IRGC detention centers, local police stations, and unknown intelligence service facilities. The systematic use of enforced disappearance violated the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, to which Iran is not party but which codifies customary international law principles that bind all states, but the regime's comprehensive disregard for international legal obligations made such violations routine rather than exceptional [12].

7.2. Torture: What Happens in the Prisons

7.2.1. Historical Pattern: Every Arrested Protester Is Tortured

Torture in Islamic Republic detention facilities is not aberration or the work of rogue elements but systematic policy implemented across all detention centers, documented consistently throughout the regime's 47-year history, and testified to by virtually every former political prisoner who has survived to speak. Human Rights Watch's 2004 comprehensive report on torture in Iran documented that "torture and ill-treatment of political detainees in Iran is widespread and systematic," with techniques including beatings, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, prolonged solitary confinement, suspension from ceilings, bastinado, rape, and psychological torture through mock executions and threats against family members [13]. This pattern continued unchanged through subsequent decades, with Amnesty International documenting during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests that detained protesters were subjected to torture including beatings, sexual violence, threats of summary executions, and deliberate denial of adequate food, water, and medical care. In the aftermath of the January 2026 massacre, reports emerged that the regime had intensified torture practices to unprecedented levels: on January 18, The Guardian reported that detainees were being subjected to torture and sexual assault while in custody, while Iran International reported that detainees were being injected with unknown chemical substances, raising fears that the regime was experimenting with new methods of breaking prisoners psychologically and physically [14, 15]. The universality of torture in Iranian detention created environment where arrested protesters faced absolute certainty of abuse, where the question was not whether torture would occur but only how severe it would be and whether the victim would survive it.

7.2.2. Methods: Physical and Psychological Breaking

The torture techniques employed in Iranian detention facilities combined physical brutality designed to inflict maximum pain with psychological methods calculated to destroy personality and will, creating comprehensive assault on human dignity that left survivors permanently traumatized even when they escaped physical killing. Physical torture methods documented by human rights organizations included severe beatings with batons, cables, and fists targeting all parts of the body, electric shocks applied to sensitive areas

including genitals, bastinado involving repeated striking of feet with cables until victims could not walk, suspension from ceilings or walls by wrists or ankles for extended periods, deliberate breaking of bones, burns, and in cases of female detainees and some male detainees, rape and other forms of sexual violence. Psychological torture proved equally devastating: prolonged solitary confinement lasting weeks or months that induced severe mental health deterioration, mock executions where prisoners were taken to execution sites and subjected to simulated killing before being returned to cells, threats against family members including statements that relatives would be arrested, tortured, or killed, forced witnessing of others' torture to create anticipatory dread, sleep deprivation through constant lighting and noise or through repeated interrogations at random intervals, and sensory deprivation through hooding, blindfolding, and isolation. The goal of torture extended beyond extracting confessions to breaking prisoners' sense of self, destroying their will to resist, and creating such profound trauma that even if released they would be incapable of continuing activism. Former detainees have testified that interrogators explicitly stated this purpose, telling prisoners "we will break you until you are nothing," and that torture continued even after confessions were obtained, indicating the objective was comprehensive dehumanization rather than merely securing testimony.

7.2.3. Sexual Violence as Weapon: Documented Throughout Regime History

Sexual violence including rape, sexual assault, threats of rape, and sexual humiliation has been documented as systematic tool of torture employed by the Islamic Republic throughout its history, targeting both female and male detainees though women face particularly severe and sustained sexual abuse. During the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, multiple credible reports documented security forces using rape and sexual assault against detained female protesters, with one former detainee testifying that interrogators explicitly threatened "we will rape you until you confess," and that such threats were frequently carried out. Male detainees similarly faced sexual violence: Mohammad Mehdi Karami, executed on January 7, 2023 for participation in 2022 protests, was reportedly subjected to sexual violence during detention, and his case was far from isolated [16]. The use of sexual violence served multiple purposes within the regime's torture infrastructure: it inflicted profound psychological trauma that many survivors considered worse than physical beating, it created shame that prevented victims from speaking about their experiences, it destroyed prisoners' sense of bodily autonomy and personal dignity, and it marked prisoners as permanently violated and humiliated. Following the January 2026 arrests, human rights organizations received reports of systematic sexual violence against detainees, with *The Guardian* on January 18 specifically noting that detainees were being subjected to sexual assault while in custody, and Iran-based sources telling international organizations that the sexual violence appeared more widespread and severe than in previous protest waves. The regime's use of sexual violence constitutes war crime under international law and crime against humanity when employed systematically, but the absence of accountability mechanisms meant perpetrators operated with complete impunity.

7.2.4. Forced Confessions: Breaking People to Lie on Camera

The extraction of forced confessions broadcast on state media represented culmination of the torture process, the point at which broken prisoners were paraded before cameras to recite regime-scripted statements designed to discredit protest movements, justify regime violence, and terrorize potential future protesters. Between December 28, 2025 and late January 2026, the regime broadcast an unprecedented number of forced confessions: at least 40 by January 7, at least 97 by January 13, and exceeding 240 by late January, a rate of production that indicated the regime had made forced confessions central to its propaganda response to the uprising [17, 18]. For context, between 2010 and 2020, approximately 350 forced confessions were broadcast on Iranian state media total, meaning the regime aired in a few weeks what normally took a decade, revealing both the intensity of the crackdown and the regime's desperation to control narrative. The confessions followed predictable scripts: detainees appeared on camera, often showing visible signs of abuse including bruises, appearing drugged or exhausted, speaking in monotone or stilted manner, admitting to crimes they clearly did not commit, claiming they were manipulated by foreign powers particularly America and Israel, expressing remorse, praising the regime, and in some cases explicitly calling on others to cease protesting. On January 7, 2026, Iran's judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei personally interrogated detainees in sessions aired on state television, asking leading questions and accepting clearly coerced answers, with his high-level involvement indicating the regime viewed forced confessions as critical propaganda tool. One viral video showed a man confessing to sending protest footage to Donald Trump via social media, an obviously absurd claim that no one could believe but that served the propaganda purpose of linking protests to foreign enemies. According to testimony from former detainees, confessions were extracted through extended torture until prisoners agreed to say anything to make abuse stop, with interrogators providing scripts that must be memorized exactly, and with failure to perform confession convincingly resulting in return to torture. The forced confessions violated prisoners' dignity, destroyed their reputations, created "evidence" that could be used in show trials, and provided content for domestic and international propaganda claiming protesters were foreign agents rather than Iranians with legitimate grievances.

7.2.5. The Goal: Total Dehumanization

The ultimate purpose of the Islamic Republic's torture system extended beyond extracting confessions or information to achieving complete psychological destruction of prisoners, transforming human beings with dignity, will, and agency into broken shells incapable of resistance, traumatized to the point where even if physically released they would never again challenge regime authority. Former political prisoners have consistently testified that interrogators explicitly articulated this goal, stating "we will break you completely," "you will forget who you were," and "when we finish with you, you will be nothing". The comprehensive nature of torture, combining physical pain, sexual violation, psychological abuse, solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, threats against family, and forced betrayal of one's beliefs through confession, created multi-layered assault on personhood that left survivors with severe and often permanent psychological damage including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, and in many cases suicidal ideation. The regime calculated that even protesters released without trial or after serving

sentences would be so traumatized that they would never return to activism, and that their visible trauma would serve as warning to others about the consequences of resistance. For those who never emerged from detention, who were executed or who "disappeared" permanently, the torture served to dehumanize them in their final days, ensuring that their last experiences on earth were of absolute powerlessness and degradation, a final punishment for daring to demand freedom.

7.3. The Execution Threat: "Enemies of God" Sentenced to Death

7.3.1. Moharebeh Charges: The Legal Framework for Mass Execution

The Islamic Republic's primary tool for legally justifying the execution of protesters was and remains the charge of moharebeh, translated as "waging war against God," a capital offense under Iranian law derived from the Quran Chapter 5, Verse 33, that the regime has systematically employed to transform political dissent into crime punishable by death. On January 13, 2026, in a televised statement from the office of the Tehran prosecutor, authorities declared that an undisclosed number of protesters would be charged with moharebeh, explicitly warning that this offense carried the death penalty and that trials would proceed rapidly. The legal definition of moharebeh under Iranian law is deliberately vague and expansive: according to Articles 278 and 375 of the 2013 Islamic Penal Code and Article 211 of the 1991 Islamic Penal Code, moharebeh is defined as "drawing a weapon on the life, property, or chastity of people or to cause terror as it creates the atmosphere of insecurity," language so broad that virtually any act of protest could be construed as meeting the definition [19]. More revealing, Article 17 of the Criminal Law of the Armed Forces stipulates that any individual who plans or acts to overthrow, change, or annihilate the Islamic Republic or forms a group with these goals is considered mohareb, making explicit that the charge functions primarily as tool for eliminating political opponents rather than addressing genuine security threats. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated on January 10 that "rioters must be put in their place," and Attorney General Mohammad Movahedi Azad explicitly warned that protesters were "enemies of God," a crime punishable by death, establishing from the highest levels of government that mass execution of protesters was policy rather than aberration [20]. Tehran prosecutor's office announced on January 9 that participants in "destructive acts" would be charged with moharebeh, noting that those using firearms or blades would specifically face the capital charge, though in practice the regime applied the charge to protesters who had engaged in nothing more violent than chanting slogans or blocking roads. The charge carried mandatory death penalty under Iranian law with punishment options including hanging, crucifixion, amputation, or exile, though the regime consistently chose hanging, often conducted publicly to maximize terrorizing effect.

7.3.2. Precedent: Eight Executions After 2022 Protests

The credibility of the execution threat in January 2026 derived from the regime's demonstrated willingness to execute protesters after previous uprisings, establishing pattern that made clear threats of mass execution were not bluffs but promises the regime fully intended to implement. Following the 2022 Mahsa

Amini protests, the Islamic Republic executed at least eight protesters after rushed trials widely condemned by international human rights organizations: Mohsen Shekari executed December 8, 2022, Majidreza Rahnavard publicly hanged from crane December 12, 2022, Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini executed January 7, 2023, and Saleh Mirhashemi, Majid Kazemi, and Saeed Yaghoobi executed May 19, 2023, all convicted of moharebeh following allegations involving attacks on Basij militiamen and all allegedly subjected to torture to extract confessions [21]. Mohsen Shekari was executed less than three weeks after his conviction, accused of blocking a road and allegedly stabbing a Basij militiaman, with his execution representing first killing carried out as direct result of 2022 protests and establishing the regime's willingness to move rapidly from arrest to execution [22]. Majidreza Rahnavard was publicly hanged from a construction crane just four days after Shekari's execution, with his body left hanging as warning, and with the public nature of the execution designed to terrorize the population into submission. Both Shekari and Rahnavard were allegedly tortured, with Shekari showing visible bruising on his face in confession video, and neither was allowed access to lawyers of their choosing. The pattern of executions following 2022 protests established that the regime would use capital punishment as weapon of political repression, that trials would be rushed shams denying all due process, that torture would be employed to extract confessions, and that public executions would be used to maximize terror, all of which provided blueprint for what detained protesters in January 2026 could expect.

7.3.3. Four Days from Arrest to Death Sentence: No Fair Trial

The speed with which the Islamic Republic moved from arrest to death sentence eliminated any possibility of fair trial, with protesters sentenced to execution in proceedings lasting days or even hours that bore no resemblance to meaningful judicial process. Erfan Soltani's case exemplified this mockery of justice: arrested on January 8, 2026, denied access to lawyer, with family not notified of charges, he was sentenced to death on January 12, just four days after arrest, scheduled for execution on January 14. Another protester, 19-year-old Amirhossein Ghaderzadeh, was sentenced to death by hanging on January 17, with execution scheduled for January 21, following similar rush proceedings that denied him adequate legal representation. The compressed timelines prevented any meaningful defense: lawyers, when allowed at all, had no time to review evidence, defendants had no opportunity to gather witnesses or prepare arguments, and appeals were perfunctorily rejected often within hours of being filed. Head of the Judiciary Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei explicitly ordered on January 19 that prosecutions must be rapid and punishments "deterrent," and two days later publicly boasted about ordering harsher charges against arrested protesters than those initially leveled by prosecutors, in flagrant violation of judicial independence and fair trial principles. In some cases documented by human rights organizations, trials lasted minutes, consisted solely of reading charges and accepting coerced confessions, and ended with immediate sentencing to death, with the entire judicial process from arrest to death sentence completed in under a week. This rush to execution served multiple purposes: it prevented international pressure from building around specific cases, it denied human rights lawyers time to mount legal challenges, it created atmosphere where any arrested protester could be executed within days, and it demonstrated that the regime viewed judicial process as irrelevant formality to

be completed as quickly as possible before killing protesters.

7.3.4. First Executions Announced: The Warning to Others

The regime began announcing and carrying out executions of January 2026 protesters within days of the massacre, moving with unprecedented speed to implement death sentences and demonstrating through action that execution threats were not mere intimidation but policy being actively implemented. According to rights group HRANA, Iran carried out at least 52 executions between January 5 and January 14, during the protest period, though these were nominally for non-political crimes including murder and drug offenses, the timing and pace indicated the regime was using execution as tool of terror during the uprising [23]. On January 22, 33-year-old Ali Rahbar was reportedly executed in Mashhad, becoming one of the first protesters confirmed killed specifically for participation in January 2026 demonstrations, with his execution serving as warning to tens of thousands of others in detention that their fates could be identical [24]. On January 20, reports circulated that Iranian conscript Javid Kholes had been sentenced to death and was being held in Isfahan Prison after refusing an order to fire on protesters, though this could not be independently verified, the report itself served to terrorize both protesters and security forces by suggesting that even those who refused to participate in killing would be executed. Iran's judiciary chief stated on January 18 that carrying out sentences quickly would serve as deterrent, making explicit that the purpose of executions was not justice but terror. The announcements of executions and imminent executions created psychological warfare environment where detained protesters and their families lived in constant fear that execution notices could arrive at any moment, where every day survived in detention felt like temporary reprieve that could end without warning, and where the regime's message became clear: we are killing protesters, we will continue killing protesters, and your only hope of survival is complete submission.

7.3.5. 20,000 People at Risk of Being Executed

With approximately 20,000 to 24,000 protesters detained by mid-to-late January, and with the regime explicitly announcing that moharebeh charges carrying death penalty would be applied to protesters, human rights organizations warned that tens of thousands of Iranians faced credible risk of execution in what would constitute mass killing through judicial process rather than street shootings. The scale of the execution threat was unprecedented in modern history outside of genocides: even during the 1988 prison massacres when the Islamic Republic executed an estimated 2,800 to 5,000 political prisoners, the killings occurred in secret and were not openly announced as judicial executions following trials. In January 2026, the regime was threatening to publicly try and execute protesters through nominally legal process, using courts as killing machinery operating at industrial scale. Iran International reported that up to 20,000 arrested protesters were being tortured into confessions and labeled "enemies of God" like Erfan Soltani, raising fears of mass executions that would dwarf even the 1988 massacres in scope. The logistics of executing tens of thousands of people presented practical challenges even for a regime experienced in mass killing: Iran's execution infrastructure, primarily consisting of hanging from construction cranes or gallows in prisons, could not process thousands of executions simultaneously, suggesting that if the regime proceeded with mass executions they would oc-

cur in waves over weeks or months, creating sustained terror campaign. International legal experts warned that judicial execution of thousands of political prisoners for exercising rights to freedom of expression and assembly would constitute crime against humanity under Rome Statute Article 7, specifically persecution and extermination, potentially triggering universal jurisdiction allowing prosecution in any country. The "One Word" lawyers' network explicitly called on the international community and Iranian judges to prevent show trials and extrajudicial executions, warning that the regime was preparing to kill on scale that would shock even observers accustomed to Iranian brutality.

7.3.6. Public Executions Planned: To Terrorize the Population

The Islamic Republic's history of public executions, including hanging protesters from construction cranes in city squares as spectacle designed to terrorize witnesses, indicated that executions of January 2026 protesters would likely be conducted publicly to maximize deterrent effect on population considering continued resistance. During 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, Majidreza Rahnavard was publicly executed by hanging from crane just four days after Mohsen Shekari's execution, with his body displayed prominently, establishing precedent that the regime would use public killing of protesters as terror tactic. Iran carries out more public executions than virtually any country on earth, hanging individuals from construction cranes, stoning women to death, and conducting executions in city squares or prison courtyards where crowds can watch, transforming state killing into public spectacle that serves no legitimate penological purpose but effectively terrorizes populations. On January 16, 2026, an imam leading Friday prayers in Tehran explicitly called for execution of detained protesters, providing religious justification for mass killing and indicating that public executions would be framed as implementation of divine law rather than political repression [25]. The regime's use of public execution specifically targets communities where protests were intense, hanging local residents in their home cities to send message to neighbors and relatives that continued resistance will result in death, and to destroy social solidarity by forcing communities to witness killing of their own members. The psychological impact of public executions extends far beyond those physically present to watch: in era of smartphones and social media, even executions regime attempts to control become widely documented and shared, meaning that single public hanging can terrorize millions who view footage or hear descriptions, though the regime also sometimes prohibits filming and confiscates phones of witnesses to control documentation. Human rights organizations warned that if the regime proceeded with mass public executions of January 2026 protesters, the spectacle would be designed not merely to deter future protests but to break Iranian society's spirit completely, to demonstrate that no act of resistance would be tolerated, and to establish through overwhelming visible violence that the population must choose between absolute submission and death.

7.4. The Nationwide Curfew: Military Occupation of Entire Country

7.4.1. Tanks in the Streets of Every Major City

In the aftermath of the January 8-9 massacre, the Islamic Republic deployed military force including tanks and armored personnel carriers into streets of major cities across Iran, transforming urban centers into occupied zones patrolled by heavily armed security forces in displays of military might designed to intimidate population and prevent any possibility of renewed protests. On January 15, an individual in Tehran told a Paris-based journalist that the regime had deployed tanks in the capital, with similar reports emerging from multiple other cities though the full extent of tank deployments remained unclear due to internet blackout and regime information control [26]. Amnesty International analyzed verified videos posted online showing tank trucks and what appeared to be repurposed civilian trucks mounted with large nozzles, likely to be used as water cannons, patrolling Borujerd in Lorestan province on January 17, providing visual confirmation of military-style equipment deployment. A resident in Tabriz told anti-regime media on January 15 that security forces were deployed in "all areas" of the city including "small neighborhoods far from the city center," indicating comprehensive military-style coverage rather than merely protecting government buildings or strategic locations. An unspecified foreign diplomat in Iran similarly told *The Washington Post* on January 14 that security forces were "all over the town," with the diplomat's description suggesting occupation-level deployment unprecedented even during previous Iranian protest crackdowns [27]. The deployment of tanks served primarily psychological rather than tactical purpose: Iran's protesters were overwhelmingly unarmed civilians who posed no threat requiring armored vehicles, but the visible presence of tanks sent message that the regime would employ unlimited military force against any resistance, that the state's coercive power was absolute, and that the population should abandon any thought of successful uprising against such overwhelming might.

7.4.2. Checkpoints, Armed Patrols, Shoot-on-Sight Orders

Security forces established dense networks of checkpoints at major intersections, on roads connecting cities, and even within neighborhoods, stopping vehicles and pedestrians to conduct searches, review mobile phones for protest-related content, and arbitrarily detain anyone deemed suspicious, creating pervasive surveillance and control infrastructure that extended regime power into every public space. Iran International reported on January 17 that security forces were setting up checkpoints in public areas to detain citizens found with protest images on their phones, transforming possession of documentation of regime violence into arrestable offense and making smartphones, the primary tools for documenting and sharing protest activity, dangerous liabilities. Residents told Iran International that patrols and checkpoints were ubiquitous, with increased police and military deployments across urban centers, particularly in major cities, creating environment where movement was constantly monitored and anyone traveling could be stopped and questioned at any moment. Multiple sources described the presence of armed patrols as suffocating, with security forces equipped with lethal firearms, including automatic rifles, positioned on foot and in vehicles throughout cities, ready to respond with force to any gathering or perceived challenge to control. In Tehran, daily

life slowed markedly, with many shops closed and streets quieter than usual, as residents avoided unnecessary travel or gatherings, understanding that any congregation could be viewed as illegal assembly and met with violence. Security forces routinely stopped people's cars arbitrarily and conducted vehicle and mobile phone searches, with informed sources telling Amnesty International that the authorities had restricted freedom of movement to unprecedented degree, transforming ordinary activities like driving to work or visiting family into risks requiring calculation of whether the necessity justified exposure to checkpoint harassment or arrest. Reports emerged from multiple cities including Sanandaj of security personnel speaking Arabic rather than Persian, corroborating earlier reports that the regime had deployed Iraqi Shia militia forces to assist in suppression, meaning Iranians in their own cities faced occupation by foreign forces brought in specifically to brutalize them. The presence of checkpoints created secondary effects beyond immediate control: they paralyzed commerce as businesses could not transport goods reliably, they prevented families from visiting hospitalized relatives or searching for detained loved ones, they blocked access to medical care for those needing treatment, and they created general atmosphere of siege where normal life became impossible.

7.4.3. 8 PM Curfew: Anyone Outside Risks Death

Though the regime never formally declared martial law or announced official nationwide curfew, security forces implemented what residents described as *de facto* curfew through enforcement that made venturing into streets after evening hours life-threatening gamble [28, 29]. Multiple residents told international media that from approximately 6:00 PM or 8:00 PM, depending on the city, everyone had to be home, with shops shut, companies closed, and security forces ordering people through loudspeakers to return to their homes and stay there. Security patrols warned that street gatherings of two or more people were prohibited and would result in arrests, effectively making it illegal to be outside with anyone else, even family members. One Tehran resident described conditions as "like a *de facto* curfew" even in absence of official declaration, noting that "for two days now, in Tehran, everyone has to be home from 6 PM, shops are shut, companies are closed, if anyone is on the streets, they're stopped, questioned, or detained". In Karaj, residents stated that because of dense presence of security forces, people could not even speak comfortably with one another, indicating that surveillance and intimidation extended beyond merely preventing movement to controlling social interaction itself. The enforcement of the curfew carried implicit threat of lethal violence: security forces had just killed tens of thousands of protesters in streets during January 8-9, demonstrating their willingness to shoot civilians without hesitation, and their presence after dark with automatic weapons and shoot-to-kill authorization meant that violating curfew could result in death. From dusk onwards, security forces ordered people through loudspeakers to return to homes and stay there, with the militarized tone and visible armament making clear this was command backed by force rather than request. The curfew trapped Iranians in their homes during hours when they would normally socialize, shop, work, or engage in evening activities, confining the entire population and making clear that public space belonged to security forces while citizens were permitted to exist only in private, controlled, isolated settings.

7.4.4. The Country as Open-Air Prison

The combination of mass arrests, military occupation, checkpoints, curfews, internet blackout, and pervasive surveillance transformed Iran into what human rights activists and residents themselves described as open-air prison, a nation of 92 million people confined, monitored, and controlled with intensity rarely seen outside of wartime occupation or totalitarian extremes. Every aspect of Iranian life came under regime control: movement required navigating checkpoints, communication remained impossible with internet and phone services cut or monitored, economic activity was paralyzed by closures and restrictions, social gatherings were prohibited, and even remaining in one's home provided no safety as nighttime raids could occur at any moment. The psychological impact of living in such environment was devastating: constant fear that any action could result in arrest, inability to trust neighbors who might be informants, isolation from family and friends due to communication difficulties and curfews, traumatic processing of massacre witnessed or experienced, grief for those killed that could not be openly expressed, and complete powerlessness in face of overwhelming state violence. Iranians who had lived through previous protest crackdowns, including 2009, 2019, and 2022, stated that January 2026's aftermath represented unprecedented level of control, that the regime had learned from previous experiences and was now implementing total lockdown more comprehensive than ever before attempted. The open-air prison was designed to be temporary measure to consolidate regime control after massacre, but statements by officials suggested the regime intended to maintain significant elements of the restrictions permanently, using January 2026 as justification for permanent militarization of society. International observers noted parallels to other situations where entire populations have been imprisoned by their governments, including North Korea's comprehensive control system, though Iran's size and the speed of implementation made the January 2026 crackdown historically unusual. For the 92 million people living in Iran, the aftermath of the January 2026 massacre meant that the only choice available was submission or death, that the regime had demonstrated through overwhelming violence that resistance would be met with killing, and that the price of survival was abandoning any aspiration to freedom for the foreseeable future.

7.5. The Regime's Justifications: How They Explain Murdering Tens of Thousands

7.5.1. "Rioters" and "Terrorists": Dehumanizing the Victims

Throughout the massacre and its aftermath, the Islamic Republic systematically employed dehumanizing language designed to strip protesters of moral status and justify killing them by portraying peaceful demonstrators demanding basic rights as violent criminals and foreign-backed terrorists rather than Iranian citizens with legitimate grievances. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in his January 17 speech broadcast on state media explicitly called all protesters "rioters and terrorists," affiliated with the United States and Israeli governments, denying the domestic Iranian character of the uprising and framing all resistance as foreign-orchestrated plot [30]. On January 3, when security forces killed at least 11 protesters, Khamenei stated

that "rioters should be put in their place," using language that suggested protesters were disorderly elements requiring violent suppression rather than citizens exercising fundamental rights. Head of the Judiciary Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei on January 5 ordered prosecutors to show "no leniency" to "rioters," instructing that penalties be "decisive" and "maximum," explicitly rejecting any mercy and framing protesters as enemies deserving harshest punishment [31]. The IRGC's provincial corps in Lorestan declared on January 3 that the period of "tolerance" was over, pledging to target "rioters, organizers and leaders of anti-security movements without leniency," making clear that the regime viewed even peaceful organization of protests as security threat requiring elimination. State media consistently referred to protests as "riots" and to protesters as "rioters," linguistic choice that suggested chaos and violence initiated by protesters rather than state-organized massacre of civilians, inverting reality to portray victims as aggressors and killers as defenders. The regime's propaganda apparatus produced continuous stream of claims that protesters had attacked security forces, killed Basij and police, destroyed public property, and terrorized civilians, using isolated incidents where protesters fought back or where security force members were killed to justify wholesale slaughter of thousands. Attorney General Mohammad Movahedi Azad's warning that protesters were "enemies of God" employed ultimate dehumanization within Islamic Republic's ideological framework, transforming political dissidents into theological threats that must be eliminated to protect religious community [20]. The dehumanizing language served to prepare domestic audience for mass killing by suggesting that those killed were not really human in moral sense, were not fellow Iranians deserving of sympathy, but were instead dangerous elements whose elimination protected society.

7.5.2. Blaming America and Israel: The Foreign Enemy Lie

The Islamic Republic's standard response to domestic opposition has been to blame external enemies, primarily the United States and Israel, claiming that internal dissent is manufactured by foreign powers rather than arising organically from Iranian grievances, and the January 2026 response followed this pattern with Supreme Leader Khamenei explicitly blaming U.S. President Donald Trump for the massacre. In his January 17 speech, Khamenei acknowledged that "several thousand" people had been killed but blamed Trump for the deaths, reversing causality to suggest that American encouragement of protesters caused the regime to kill them rather than acknowledging that the regime chose to respond to protests with lethal force. Throughout the protests, regime officials and state media claimed that the United States and Israel were orchestrating unrest, providing funding to protesters, coordinating demonstrations through social media, and seeking to overthrow the Islamic Republic through hybrid warfare rather than direct military action. Revolutionary Guards and Intelligence Ministry statements consistently attributed protests to foreign manipulation, claiming that ordinary Iranians would not protest without external instigation, thereby denying agency to millions who demonstrated and implicitly suggesting that authentic Iranians support the regime. The regime broadcast forced confessions in which detained protesters claimed to have received instructions or funding from foreign entities, with one viral video showing protester confessing to sending footage to Donald Trump, creating narrative that protesters were foreign agents rather than citizens. Iran's Permanent Representative to the UN sought in a January 19 briefing to diplomats in Geneva to portray protests as foreign-engineered "se-

curity threat," attempting to avoid international scrutiny by framing the massacre as legitimate response to external aggression rather than domestic atrocity. The blame directed at America and Israel served multiple propaganda purposes: it mobilized nationalist sentiment by suggesting Iran was under attack from historic enemies, it provided excuse for brutal crackdown by framing it as national defense rather than oppression, it avoided acknowledging regime failures that motivated protests, and it suggested to international audience that the conflict was geopolitical rather than human rights issue. The narrative's absurdity was evident to anyone familiar with Iranian society: the protests spanned all 31 provinces, involved millions of participants from all classes and backgrounds, articulated specifically Iranian grievances about economic hardship and political repression, and occurred despite regime controlling all major communications infrastructure that would be necessary for foreign orchestration. Nevertheless, the regime repeated the foreign blame narrative incessantly through all state media and official statements, calculating that constant repetition would convince some portion of domestic audience and provide talking point for international defenders.

7.5.3. "God's Will": Religious Justification for Massacre

The Islamic Republic's unique character as theocracy claiming divine mandate enabled it to employ religious justification for massacre that secular authoritarian regimes cannot access, framing mass killing not merely as necessary for order but as implementation of God's will, transformation that made murder sacred duty rather than crime. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's position as "God's representative on earth" under the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* meant that his orders, including orders to kill protesters, carried religious authority that regime loyalists viewed as binding divine commands rather than political decisions subject to moral questioning. The use of *moharebeh* charges, "waging war against God," transformed political dissent into theological crime, making execution not punishment for secular offense but defense of religion itself, religious duty that must be performed to protect Islamic community from its enemies. Imams and religious officials throughout Iran provided religious sanction for killing, with Tehran's Friday prayer imam on January 16 explicitly calling for execution of detained protesters, framing judicial murder as implementation of Quranic principles rather than political repression. The Quran verse cited to justify *moharebeh*, Chapter 5 Verse 33, prescribes severe punishments including death and crucifixion for those who "wage war against Allah and His Messenger and spread corruption in the land," language the regime interpreted to include anyone opposing the Supreme Leader's rule. Regime media and officials consistently framed protesters as not merely political opponents but as enemies of Islam itself, corrupters who threatened the religious foundations of society, apostates who had abandoned faith by challenging divinely-ordained governance. This religious justification created environment where security forces who killed protesters believed they were performing religious service rather than committing murder, where executioners hanging protesters from cranes viewed themselves as instruments of divine justice, and where regime supporters could reconcile mass killing with their Islamic faith by understanding it as defense of religion rather than political violence. For the millions of Iranians who remained deeply religious but opposed the regime, the use of Islamic language to justify massacre created profound spiritual crisis, forcing them to either accept that their religion commanded such brutality or to reject the regime's interpretation of Islam, with many choosing the latter

and experiencing the massacre as further evidence that the Islamic Republic had corrupted and weaponized religion. International Islamic scholars and clerics outside Iran condemned the regime's use of religious justification, arguing that no interpretation of Islamic law could legitimately permit mass killing of unarmed civilians demanding basic rights, but the regime ignored external religious opinion and continued employing theological language to sacralize violence.

7.5.4. State Television Propaganda: Rewriting Reality

Iranian state television and regime-controlled media engaged in comprehensive propaganda campaign designed to rewrite the reality of the massacre, minimize death tolls, justify killings, vilify protesters, and create alternative narrative in which the regime heroically defended the nation against foreign-backed terrorism rather than murdering tens of thousands of its own citizens. State media consistently claimed that death tolls cited by international organizations and independent media were exaggerated or fabricated, with the Iranian government eventually putting official death toll at 3,117 stating that 2,447 were civilians and security forces while the rest were "terrorists," a figure dramatically below the 30,000 to 36,500 estimated by credible sources. Television broadcasts showed selective footage of protests emphasizing any instances of violence by protesters while omitting extensive documentation of security forces shooting unarmed civilians, creating distorted picture designed to make viewers believe protesters were violent aggressors. State media extensively covered funerals and memorial services for security force members killed during protests, presenting them as martyrs who died defending the nation, while simultaneously preventing families of killed protesters from holding public funerals or even acknowledging their relatives' deaths. Forced confessions were broadcast repeatedly, with state television airing the coerced statements of detained protesters admitting to foreign manipulation, receiving funding from hostile powers, and regretting their participation, all designed to discredit the protest movement and suggest participants were dupes or traitors rather than citizens with legitimate grievances. State television produced documentary-style programs claiming to expose foreign plots to overthrow the Islamic Republic, using manipulated footage, out-of-context social media posts, and fabricated "evidence" to construct narrative that protests were externally orchestrated rather than domestically generated. Reporters on state media described cities as calm and normal even as residents experienced military occupation and curfews, creating Orwellian disconnect between televised reality and lived experience that was designed to prevent Iranians in one city from knowing what was happening in others due to internet blackout. The propaganda campaign extended internationally, with regime-affiliated media producing English-language content for foreign audiences claiming that Western media was conducting disinformation campaign against Iran, attempting to preemptively discredit accurate reporting about the massacre. For Iranians with access to information from outside state media, through Starlink connections before jamming or through satellite television, the disconnect between regime propaganda and documented reality was stark, but the propaganda succeeded in reaching portions of population who relied solely on state media and who could be convinced that protests were smaller, more violent, and more foreign-influenced than they actually were.

References

- [1] Amnesty International. *Iran: Authorities Unleash Heavily Militarized Clampdown to Hide Protest Massacres*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/iran-authorities-unleash-heavily-militarized-clampdown-to-hide-protest-massacres/>.
- [2] Wikipedia Contributors. *2026 Iran Massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [3] The Guardian. *Iran Detainees Subjected to Torture and Sexual Assault*. Jan. 2026.
- [4] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA). *Documented arrests during 2025-2026 protests*. Over 18,400 arrests documented as of January 14, 2026. Jan. 2026.
- [5] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *Over 18,400 People Arrested as of January 14, 2026*. Jan. 2026.
- [6] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *24,669 Protesters Detained by January 18*. Jan. 2026.
- [7] Amnesty International. *What Happened at the Protests in Iran*. Children as young as 14 arbitrarily arrested. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2026/01/what-happened-at-the-protests-in-iran/>.
- [8] Iran Human Rights Society. *Iran 2026 Protests Arrests: Verified List of Detained Names*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://en.iranhrs.org/iran-2026-protests-arrests-verified-list-of-detained-names/>.
- [9] Iran International. *Lawyers Network Warns of Show Trials and Executions*. Jan. 2026.
- [10] Wikipedia Contributors. *Death Sentence of Erfan Soltani*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_sentence_of_Erfan_Soltani.
- [11] Chosun Ilbo. *Iran Executes Protester for War Against God Charge*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.chosun.com/english/world-en/2026/01/15/DUE7FPJYBFFTVCFMIJI5MCAUE4/>.
- [12] United Nations. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*. 2006.
- [13] Human Rights Watch. *Torture, Detention, and the Crushing of Dissent in Iran*. Human Rights Watch, 2004. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/iran0604/5.htm>.
- [14] The Guardian. *Detainees Subjected to Torture and Sexual Assault*. Reports of unknown chemical substances being injected. Jan. 2026.
- [15] Iran International. *Detainees Being Injected with Unknown Chemical Substances*. Jan. 2026.
- [16] Wikipedia Contributors. *Death Sentences During the Mahsa Amini Protests*. Mohammad Mehdi Karami executed January 7, 2023. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_sentences_during_the_Mahsa_Amini_protests.
- [17] Human Rights Activists News Agency. *Forced Confessions Broadcast Count*. At least 40 by January 7, 97 by January 13. Jan. 2026.
- [18] France 24. *Iran's State TV Airs Several Forced Confessions After Protest Crackdown*. Activists report over 240 confessions by late January. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20260126-iranian-state-tv-air-s-several-forced-confessions-after-protest-crackdown-activists-say>.

- [19] National Council of Resistance of Iran. *Iran Hangs Protester on Eve of World Day Against Death Penalty*. Moharebeh legal definition under Islamic Penal Code. Dec. 2022. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-protests/iran-genocidal-regime-hangs-protester-on-the-eve-of-world-day-against-death-penalty/>.
- [20] CBS News. *Iran Attorney General Warns Protesters Are Enemy of God*. Jan. 2026.
- [21] Wikipedia Contributors. *Death Sentences During the Mahsa Amini Protests*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_sentences_during_the_Mahsa_Amini_protests.
- [22] Amnesty International. *Iran: Horrifying Execution of Young Protester Exposes Authorities' Cruelty*. Mohsen Shekari executed December 8, 2022. Dec. 2022. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/iran-horrifying-execution-of-young-protester-exposes-authorities-cruelty/>.
- [23] Iran International. *Iran Carried Out at Least 52 Executions During Protests*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601163543>.
- [24] Wikipedia Contributors. *2026 Iran Massacres*. Ali Rahbar executed January 22, 2026. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [25] Wikipedia Contributors. *2025-2026 Iranian Protests*. Tehran Friday prayer imam calls for protester executions. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025-2026_Iranian_protests.
- [26] Critical Threats Project. *Iran Update, January 15, 2026*. Reports of tank deployments in Tehran. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-15-2026>.
- [27] The Washington Post. *Foreign Diplomat Reports Security Forces All Over Iranian Cities*. Jan. 2026.
- [28] Iran International. *De Facto Curfew: Residents Describe Tightened Security in Iran*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202601148255>.
- [29] Radio Zamaneh. *Undeclared Martial Law in Tehran: Propaganda, Curfew*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://en.radiozamaneh.com/37657/>.
- [30] Wikipedia Contributors. *2026 Iran Massacres*. Khamenei January 17 speech calling protesters rioters and terrorists. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [31] Amnesty International. *Iran: Deaths and Injuries Rise Amid Authorities' Renewed Protest Bloodshed*. Judiciary chief orders no leniency January 5. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/iran-deaths-injuries-authorities-protest-bloodshed/>.

Part 8

A Modern Holocaust

8. Why "Holocaust" Is Not Hyperbole: The Historical and Moral Comparison

The word "holocaust" carries immense weight. It evokes humanity's darkest chapter, the systematic murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany, a crime so profound that the world pledged "never again." To invoke this term in describing events in Iran in January 2026 is not to diminish the Holocaust's unique horror, but to recognize that we are witnessing atrocities of comparable scale, systematic coordination, and moral depravity. The comparison is not rhetorical flourish, it is empirical reality. When a regime murders between 30,000 and 36,500 civilians in 48 hours using coordinated state apparatus specifically designed for mass killing, when it does so with ideological justification that dehumanizes victims as enemies deserving death, when it operates under total information blackout to hide its crimes, when it follows decades-long pattern of escalating violence against its own population, the comparison to Holocaust is not only appropriate, it is necessary[1, 2]. History provides a framework for understanding present atrocities. The Holocaust taught us what to look for: systematic state murder, ideological justification for killing, infrastructure purpose-built for death, escalating patterns of violence, and world's willful blindness. Iran in 2026 exhibits every one of these characteristics. To refuse this comparison is to fail the very lesson the Holocaust was meant to teach us.

8.1. Defining Terms: Massacre, Atrocity, Genocide, Holocaust

Precision in language matters when discussing mass killing. These terms exist along a spectrum of horror, each with specific meaning that helps us understand the nature and scale of crimes against humanity. A massacre is the deliberate killing of a significant number of people, typically civilians, who are not in a position to defend themselves. Massacres can be isolated incidents or part of broader conflicts. An atrocity is a shockingly cruel or brutal act, often involving extreme violence or suffering inflicted on victims. Atrocities may occur during war or in peacetime, and they violate fundamental human dignity and rights. Genocide, as defined by the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, is acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group[3]. These acts include killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions calculated to bring about physical destruction, imposing measures to prevent births, or forcibly transferring children.⁴

The term holocaust, derived from the Greek "holokauston" meaning "sacrifice by fire," has come to specifically refer to the Nazi genocide of European Jews during World War II. However, the term is also used more broadly to describe any large-scale destruction or slaughter, particularly when involving fire or complete annihilation. The Holocaust (capitalized) refers specifically to the Nazi genocide, in which ap-

⁴Although the murderous Iranian regime frames the victims as political dissidents, the systematic mass killings, deliberate targeting of identifiable civilian communities, and decades of sustained persecution demonstrate an intent to eradicate a distinct segment of the population. These actions therefore meet the substantive threshold of genocide under the Genocide Convention.

proximately six million Jews were systematically murdered between 1941 and 1945, along with millions of others including Roma, disabled persons, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents[4, 5]. What distinguishes the Holocaust from other genocides is not merely the numbers, though they are staggering, but the systematic, bureaucratic, industrial nature of the killing, the explicit ideological program aimed at total annihilation of a people, and the state apparatus dedicated entirely to this purpose[6].

The Iranian regime's actions in January 2026 constitute massacre by any definition, killing thousands of defenseless civilians. They constitute atrocity, involving extreme brutality including shooting people in the head, firing into crowds, raiding hospitals, and extorting families for bodies. The question of whether they constitute genocide in the strict legal sense depends on interpretation of intent: is the regime attempting to destroy the Iranian people as a group, or is it attempting to destroy political opposition? The regime itself frames protesters as "moharebeh" (enemies of God), constructing them as a category deserving annihilation, which suggests genocidal intent against a politically and ideologically defined group[7, 8]. Whether we classify January 2026 as holocaust depends on whether we reserve that term exclusively for the Nazi genocide or recognize it as applicable to other systematic, ideologically justified, state-organized mass murders of comparable scale and nature. This document argues for the latter interpretation, not to diminish the Holocaust's unique place in history, but to recognize that humanity's capacity for such evil did not end in 1945, and that the mechanisms, patterns, and moral bankruptcy that enabled the Holocaust are present in Iran today.

8.2. The Numbers: 30,000+ in 48 Hours Compared to History's Darkest Days

Numbers alone do not capture the full horror of mass killing, but they provide essential context for understanding scale. The death toll from January 8 to 9, 2026, in Iran ranks among the highest rates of killing in human history. Conservative estimates place the number at over 6,000 killed in those two days. Mid-range estimates suggest 12,000 to 13,000. Upper estimates, based on hospital records, government sources, and medical professionals, suggest between 30,000 and 36,500 people were murdered in just 48 hours[1, 2, 9]. To understand what this means, we must compare it to history's most infamous mass killings.

8.2.1. Babi Yar (Sept 1941): 33,771 Jews in 48 Hours

On September 29 to 30, 1941, Nazi Germany's Einsatzgruppe C, along with German police units and local collaborators, murdered 33,771 Jews at Babi Yar, a ravine outside Kyiv, Ukraine[10, 11, 12]. Over two days, Jewish residents of Kyiv were ordered to assemble at the ravine under the pretense of resettlement. Upon arrival, they were forced to undress, marched to the edge of the ravine in small groups, and shot by machine gun fire. The wounded were buried alive under layers of earth as the Germans undermined the ravine walls to cover the bodies[11, 10]. This massacre was one of the largest single mass killings during the Holocaust, and it has been called "the largest single massacre in the history of the Holocaust" to that date, only surpassed overall by the later October 1941 Odessa massacre of more than 50,000 Jews and by Aktion Erntefest of November 1943 with 42,000 to 43,000 victims[10].

The methodology at Babi Yar was systematic: specific military and police units assigned the task, logistical coordination to transport and concentrate victims, use of machine guns for efficient mass killing, immediate burial to hide evidence, and completion within two days to minimize witness testimony and psychological burden on perpetrators. The killing was not spontaneous violence or combat casualties, it was premeditated, coordinated, industrial-scale murder of unarmed civilians whose only "crime" was their ethnic and religious identity.

8.2.2. Iran January 8 to 9, 2026: Up to 36,500 in 48 Hours

Based on reports published in Time magazine on January 25, 2026, citing German-Iranian surgeon Amir Parasta, hospital records documented 30,304 protest-related deaths registered in civilian hospitals for January 8 and 9 alone[2, 1]. This figure explicitly excluded deaths recorded in military hospitals, deaths where bodies were taken directly to morgues bypassing hospitals, and deaths recorded in hospitals not included in the reporting network[2]. Iran International estimated the total at above 36,500 on January 25[1]. The Guardian reported on January 28 that the death toll could be more than 30,000, and that less than 10 percent of deaths may have been officially registered[9, 1].

If the upper estimates are accurate, and substantial evidence suggests they are, then the rate of killing in Iran on January 8 to 9, 2026, exceeded even Babi Yar. In 48 hours, the Islamic Republic killed more civilians than the Nazis killed at Babi Yar in the same timeframe. This occurred in 2026, not 1941. In the age of smartphones and satellite imagery, not in an era before modern human rights documentation. Under a regime that claims religious and moral authority, not under explicitly racist fascist ideology that the world had condemned.

The methodology in Iran parallels Babi Yar in disturbing ways: specific military and paramilitary units (IRGC, Basij) assigned the task, logistical coordination including deployment of troops across all 31 provinces, use of machine guns and automatic weapons for mass killing, immediate removal of bodies to hide evidence, total information blackout cutting internet and phone communications to minimize documentation and international awareness, and compressed timeframe to accomplish maximum killing before domestic or international pressure could intervene[13, 8, 14].

8.2.3. The Cambodian Killing Fields: Rate of Death Comparison

The Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979 resulted in the deaths of approximately 1.5 to 2 million people out of a population of roughly 8 million, representing between 20 and 25 percent of Cambodia's population[15, 16]. The Documentation Center of Cambodia mapped 23,745 mass graves containing approximately 1.3 million suspected victims of execution, with direct execution believed to account for up to 60 percent of the genocide's death toll[15]. The remaining victims died from starvation, disease, and exhaustion resulting from Khmer Rouge policies[15, 16].

Over the course of approximately four years, the Khmer Rouge killed between 1.5 and 2 million people. This represents an average of approximately 1,000 to 1,400 deaths per day sustained over years. The killing

was methodical, grinding, relentless, conducted primarily through execution at killing fields and through deliberate starvation and forced labor. The psychological impact of living under this regime, knowing that at any moment you could be taken to a killing field, was part of the genocidal process.

In Iran on January 8 to 9, 2026, the rate of killing reached 15,000 to 18,000 per day for those two days[2, 9]. This is more than ten times the average daily death rate during the Cambodian genocide. While the Cambodian genocide lasted years and killed more people in total, the concentrated intensity of killing in Iran for those 48 hours exceeded Cambodia's worst days. As noted by one human rights organization, "The death in Rwanda accumulated at nearly three times the rate of the Jewish dead during the Holocaust. It was the most efficient mass killing since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki"[17]. By this measure, Iran's January 8 to 9 massacre represents one of the most concentrated episodes of mass killing in human history.

8.2.4. Rwanda 1994: 800,000 in 100 Days vs. Iran's Trajectory

The 1994 Rwandan genocide resulted in the murder of approximately 800,000 to 1,000,000 people, primarily Tutsi, over the course of approximately 100 days from April to July 1994[18, 19, 17]. This represents an average of approximately 8,000 deaths per day. The killing was conducted primarily with machetes, clubs, and small arms by militias, soldiers, police, and ordinary civilians who participated in the slaughter of their Tutsi neighbors[18]. The efficiency of this genocide was horrifying: approximately three-quarters of the Tutsi population in Rwanda was murdered in just over three months[19].

The Rwandan genocide is notable for several characteristics that have parallels to Iran 2026. First, the killing was systematic and coordinated, with orders flowing from the highest levels of government through local administrators to communities across the country. Second, the perpetrators used dehumanizing language to justify killing, referring to Tutsi as "cockroaches" and "snakes" that needed to be exterminated, just as the Iranian regime calls protesters "moharebeh" (enemies of God) and "terrorists"[7]. Third, the international community watched the genocide unfold, received reports from human rights organizations and journalists on the ground, and failed to intervene despite having the capability to do so. Fourth, the genocide was enabled by information control, with perpetrators using radio broadcasts to coordinate killing and spread propaganda while cutting communications that might have enabled victims to warn others or call for help.

If we compare daily death rates, Iran's January 8 to 9 rate of 15,000 to 18,000 per day significantly exceeded Rwanda's average of 8,000 per day. If we extrapolate Iran's two-day killing rate over 100 days (which did not happen, but serves as thought experiment), it would result in 1.5 to 1.8 million deaths, more than double Rwanda's total. The question facing the world in late January 2026 was whether Iran's January 8 to 9 massacre was one-time event or the beginning of sustained genocidal campaign. The fact that the regime arrested over 20,000 people and threatened them with execution for "moharebeh" suggested that mass killing could resume at any time[1, 20].

8.3. The Systematic Nature: Evidence of Coordinated State Murder

What distinguishes massacre from genocide, what elevates killing from the realm of atrocity into the category of crimes against humanity on the level of the Holocaust, is the systematic, coordinated, state-organized nature of the killing. Random violence, riots, even civil war casualties, while horrific, differ fundamentally from government deciding to murder its own population using the full apparatus of state power. The evidence from Iran in January 2026 overwhelmingly demonstrates that the killings were systematic, coordinated state murder.

8.3.1. Orders from the Highest Authority

Multiple sources confirmed that the killing of protesters was carried out on the direct order of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, with full approval from senior state officials[7]. Sources close to Iran's Supreme National Security Council and the presidential office reported that the council authorized live fire against protesters, executed mainly by the IRGC in what was described as a deliberate, organized operation exceptional in scale and intensity[7]. This is not the action of rogue units or individual commanders exceeding authority, this is policy set at the absolute apex of power.

The Supreme Leader's role in ordering mass killing has historical precedent. In 1988, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, then Supreme Leader, issued a fatwa ordering the execution of thousands of political prisoners[21, 22, 23]. These executions took place throughout Iran over approximately five months beginning in July 1988, carried out in at least 32 cities[21, 22]. Estimates range from 2,800 to 5,000 according to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, to 30,000 according to opposition groups and some former officials[21, 22, 23].⁵

Ayatollah Montazeri, who was Deputy Supreme Leader at the time of the 1988 massacres, stated that the regime had planned these executions for years[7, 22]. The same pattern appears in January 2026, the deployment of security forces across all provinces, the cutting of internet and communications, the positioning of snipers and heavy weapons, all indicate advance planning rather than reactive response to protests. When Supreme Leader Khamenei on December 10, 2025, told Iranians to "reduce consumption of food, water, energy and fuel" rather than addressing economic collapse, and when forced confessions began airing weeks before the massacre, the regime was already preparing both the justification and the infrastructure for mass killing[24].

8.3.2. Simultaneous Crackdown Across Entire Nation

The killings on January 8 to 9 occurred simultaneously across all 31 of Iran's provinces[1, 13]. This geographic coordination required central planning and command. Local security forces cannot independently

⁵The discrepancy in estimates for the 1988 massacres reflects the regime's success in hiding the true scale of killing. Reza Malek, a former intelligence officer, claimed that documents he had seen indicated 33,700 prisoners were executed. Mohammad Maleki, former president of University of Tehran, stated in 2016 interview that 32,400 to 33,400 were executed[22]. The regime's systematic concealment of deaths in both 1988 and 2026 serves the same purpose: to minimize domestic and international outrage.

decide to massacre protesters in dozens of cities at the same time, this requires orders from national command authority, coordination of military and paramilitary units, distribution of weapons and ammunition, and synchronized timing to maximize impact before news can spread.

The regime deployed IRGC Ground Forces, regular military units normally used for external defense, to suppress protests, particularly in Kermanshah province[14]. This deployment required authorization at the highest levels because using military forces against domestic protesters violates even Iran's own laws and norms. The IRGC Ground Forces had only been deployed once during the 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, and that was in Kurdish-populated areas[14]. Their widespread deployment in January 2026 indicated the regime perceived existential threat requiring military rather than police response.

Reports from Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, Kermanshah, and dozens of other cities described similar tactics: snipers positioned on rooftops, heavy machine guns deployed against crowds, security forces firing automatic rifles into masses of people, shooting at those who fled[1, 25, 8]. This tactical uniformity across geographic distance demonstrates central coordination, training, and command.

8.3.3. Specific Targeting: Shoot-to-Kill Orders, Head and Torso Shots

Medical professionals who treated gunshot victims confirmed that security forces were shooting to kill rather than to disperse or control crowds. The majority of gunshot wounds were to the head, neck, and torso, areas of the body where wounds are most likely to be fatal[1, 8]. One hospital received 87 dead bodies in a single night, another facility recorded 217 deaths in Tehran on January 8 alone[1]. Doctors described treating sustained gunshot wounds indicating automatic weapons fire, not single shots or warning fire.

Eyewitnesses described seeing snipers positioned on rooftops systematically shooting protesters[25]. Snipers are trained marksmen who aim at specific targets, their deployment indicates intent to kill specific individuals rather than disperse crowds. The use of heavy DShK machine guns, military weapons designed for anti-aircraft and anti-vehicle use, against civilian protesters demonstrates intent to cause maximum casualties[7]. These weapons fire large-caliber rounds capable of penetrating multiple bodies, they are not crowd control tools, they are instruments of mass killing.

The regime's security forces also shot people who were fleeing, shooting them in the back[1]. This eliminates any claim that the killing was defensive or reactive, people running away pose no threat, shooting them is pure murder. Security forces fired into homes where people had sheltered protesters, killing people inside residential buildings[1]. They raided hospitals to arrest the wounded, firing tear gas inside medical facilities, preventing doctors from treating injured protesters[1]. All of this demonstrates systematic effort to maximize deaths and prevent survival.

8.3.4. Pre-Planned Information Blackout

At 8:00 PM on January 8, 2026, Iran's internet connectivity dropped to near-total blackout, with approximately 99 percent of the country offline[13]. All phone services were cut[1]. This was not technical failure or infrastructure collapse, this was deliberate action by the regime to hide what was about to happen.

The timing, precisely coordinated with the largest planned protest action, demonstrates premeditation.

The regime had prepared for this blackout. They had worked with Chinese technology companies, including Huawei, to build infrastructure capable of shutting down internet access while maintaining government communications[13]. They had deployed military-grade jamming equipment to block Starlink satellite internet that some protesters were using to bypass censorship[13]. They had sent forces door-to-door confiscating satellite dishes[13].

The purpose of the blackout was clear: to prevent documentation of the massacre, to prevent victims from calling for help, to prevent coordination among protesters, to prevent international community from watching in real time, and to prevent domestic population in areas not yet experiencing killing from learning what was happening and either fleeing or preparing resistance[13]. This information blackout served the same function as the isolation of concentration camps, it created spaces where the regime could kill with impunity, knowing that by the time the world learned what had happened, thousands would already be dead.

8.3.5. Preparation of Execution Lists

Following the massacre, the regime announced that over 20,000 people had been arrested[1]. Within days, authorities began broadcasting forced confessions on state television, ultimately airing at least 97 forced confessions in just two weeks, then increasing to over 240 by late January, an unprecedented number[26, 27, 20]. By comparison, from 2010 to 2020, approximately 350 forced confessions were broadcast total[26, 27].

These confessions served to build cases for mass executions under charges of "moharebeh" (war against God), a capital offense[7, 26]. Iran's judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ejei personally interrogated detainees in sessions aired on state television[20]. Videos showed teenagers, including one identified as 14-year-old Shervin Bagherian, being interrogated about deaths of security personnel and threatened with charges carrying the death penalty[20].

The preparation of execution lists, the forcing of confessions to create legal pretense, the public broadcasting of these confessions to terrorize the population, all parallel Nazi methods. The Nazis also used show trials, forced confessions, and public executions to legitimize genocide. The difference is that the Nazis ultimately abandoned the pretense of legality and simply killed, while the Iranian regime maintains the theater of Islamic jurisprudence even as it prepares to execute thousands.

8.4. The Infrastructure of Killing: Comparing State Apparatus

Both Nazi Germany and the Islamic Republic of Iran built state infrastructures specifically designed for systematic repression, surveillance, and killing of their own populations. The parallels in organizational structure, methods, and purpose are striking and demonstrate that the capacity for industrial-scale state murder is not unique to one ideology or historical period, but emerges whenever totalitarian systems combine absolute power with dehumanizing ideology and face populations they view as threats to their rule.

8.4.1. Nazi SS and Einsatzgruppen vs. IRGC and Basij

The Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS) was a paramilitary organization under Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party that grew from a small bodyguard unit to a powerful organization with nearly 1 million members by 1945[4]. The SS controlled the concentration camp system, operated the death camps, ran the Gestapo secret police, and included the Einsatzgruppen, mobile killing units that followed the German army into occupied territories and murdered Jews, Roma, communists, and others[4, 11]. The Einsatzgruppen were responsible for massacres including Babi Yar, killing approximately 1.5 million people through mass shootings before the construction of death camps made murder even more efficient[11, 10].

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) serves analogous function. Established after the 1979 revolution, the IRGC is a branch of Iran's military answering directly to the Supreme Leader rather than to civilian government[7]. The IRGC's mission is to protect the Islamic Republic's political system, which in practice means suppressing internal dissent and projecting power abroad through proxy forces. The IRGC controlled an economic empire worth billions, operated intelligence services, commanded paramilitary forces, and deployed against Iranian civilians during protests[14, 7].

The Basij is a paramilitary volunteer militia mobilized by the IRGC, with membership estimated in the millions[7]. The Basij serves as neighborhood enforcers, informants, and shock troops deployed to attack protesters. During the January 2026 uprising, protesters set fire to Basij bases in Mashhad and Sabzevar in response to Basij violence[28]. The Basij's role parallels that of the Nazi SA (Sturmabteilung) in the early years of Hitler's regime and the SS later, providing ideologically committed enforcers willing to use violence against civilians.

Both the SS/Einsatzgruppen and the IRGC/Basij operate outside normal legal constraints, answer to supreme ideological authority rather than democratic oversight, combine military capability with political-ideological mission, operate networks of prisons and detention centers where torture is systematic, recruit members based on ideological commitment rather than merely military competence, and function as instruments of state terror against populations deemed enemies.

8.4.2. Concentration Camps vs. Evin Prison and Detention Centers

The Nazi concentration camp system began in 1933 with camps like Dachau, initially used to imprison political opponents, communists, and others deemed threats to the regime[4]. By December 1934, SS chief Heinrich Himmler formalized SS control over the concentration camp system under Theodor Eicke[4]. These camps evolved from detention centers into forced labor camps and eventually into extermination camps where millions were murdered. The camps served multiple purposes: isolating and terrorizing opponents, providing slave labor, and ultimately enabling genocide.

Iran's prison system, centered on facilities like Evin Prison in Tehran, serves similar functions. Evin has been described as a "university of torture" where political prisoners are held, interrogated, tortured, and sometimes executed[7]. The Islamic Republic operates detention centers across all provinces where arrested protesters are held incommunicado, without access to lawyers, subjected to torture to extract confessions,

and face trials lasting minutes before receiving death sentences[27, 26].

The 1988 prison massacres demonstrated the Iranian regime's willingness to use its detention system for mass murder. Following Khomeini's fatwa, "Death Commissions" were formed throughout the country to implement orders for executing all political prisoners loyal to opposition groups[22, 23]. These commissions interrogated prisoners, often asking a few questions to determine loyalty, and sending those who refused to denounce their beliefs to immediate execution. Between 2,800 and 5,000 people (according to human rights groups) or up to 30,000 people (according to opposition sources and some former officials) were executed within months[21, 22, 23].

In January 2026, with over 20,000 people arrested and authorities broadcasting forced confessions while charging protesters with "moharebeh" carrying the death penalty, the infrastructure for repeating 1988 on even larger scale existed and was being activated[1, 20]. The parallel to concentration camps is not that Iranian prisons use gas chambers (they do not), but that they function as sites where the state concentrates political opponents, strips them of legal rights, tortures them, and kills them outside any legitimate legal process.

8.4.3. Gestapo vs. Iran's Intelligence Services

The Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo), Nazi Germany's secret state police, was consolidated under SS chief Heinrich Himmler and his deputy Reinhard Heydrich in 1934[4]. The Gestapo operated outside legal constraints, arresting people without charge, torturing suspects, and operating a network of informants that made Germans afraid to speak openly even to family members. The Gestapo's power derived from its authority to arrest and detain indefinitely, its freedom from judicial oversight, and its integration with the broader SS apparatus.

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the IRGC Intelligence Organization function as modern Gestapo. These agencies conduct surveillance of Iranian citizens, infiltrate opposition groups, arrest dissidents, operate interrogation centers where torture is routine, and coordinate with Basij informants embedded in workplaces, universities, and neighborhoods[7]. The regime's ability to arrest student activists at their private residences on the night of January 1, 2026, demonstrated sophisticated surveillance and intelligence gathering[29].

Both the Gestapo and Iranian intelligence services create atmosphere of pervasive fear where citizens cannot trust neighbors, colleagues, or even family members might be informants. This fear is instrument of control, making organized resistance difficult and isolating dissidents. Both systems use torture systematically to extract information and confessions. Both operate outside meaningful legal oversight. And both serve regimes that view significant portions of their own populations as enemies to be monitored, controlled, and if necessary, eliminated.

8.4.4. Propaganda Machines: Goebbels vs. Iranian State Media

Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda, controlled all media in Germany, using radio, film, newspapers, and public events to spread Nazi ideology, demonize Jews and other target groups, and maintain public support for the regime[4]. Goebbels understood that controlling information was essential to maintaining totalitarian power. The Nazi propaganda machine portrayed Jews as threats to German society, communists as traitors, and opposition as foreign-controlled enemies.

Iranian state television and radio, the only broadcast media permitted in Iran, serve identical function. The regime controls all domestic broadcast media, censors print media, blocks internet access to external news sources, and uses state television to broadcast propaganda[27, 26]. The forced confessions aired on state television in January 2026, including references to America and Israel as puppet masters of protests, replicate Nazi techniques of blaming foreign enemies for domestic discontent[20, 27].

On January 17, 2026, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself acknowledged in a speech broadcast by state media that "several thousand" people were killed during the protests[1]. This rare admission of mass killing (though vastly understating the true number) served propaganda purpose: framing the deaths as necessary defense of the Islamic Republic against foreign-backed terrorism rather than acknowledging regime murder of civilians demanding freedom.

Both Nazi and Iranian propaganda systems create alternate reality in which the regime is perpetual victim defending against existential threats, in which mass violence is reluctant necessity rather than chosen policy, and in which those killed are not innocent victims but dangerous enemies. Both systems use repetition, emotional manipulation, and information monopoly to make their lies appear true. And both demonstrate that totalitarian regimes understand that controlling the narrative is as important as controlling the territory.

8.5. The Ideology: Dehumanization and Religious Justification

Genocide requires more than capability and opportunity, it requires ideology that justifies mass murder, that convinces perpetrators they are not committing evil but fulfilling moral or religious duty. Both Nazi Germany and the Islamic Republic of Iran constructed elaborate ideological frameworks that dehumanize victims, elevate perpetrators, and transform murder into righteous act. Understanding these ideologies reveals how states convince ordinary people to become killers and how societies permit atrocities they would otherwise recognize as monstrous.

8.5.1. Nazi Racial Theory vs. Islamic Republic's "Enemies of God"

Nazi ideology was built on racial theory positing hierarchy of human value, with "Aryan" Germans at the top and Jews, Roma, Slavs, and others categorized as inferior or parasitic races threatening German racial purity and national strength[4]. This ideology, combining pseudo-scientific racism with nationalist mysticism and social Darwinism, provided framework for genocide: if Jews were not fully human, if they

were existential threat to German survival, then eliminating them was not murder but self-defense and racial purification.

The Islamic Republic's ideology is religious rather than racial, but it serves identical dehumanizing function. The regime divides humanity into believers who accept the Islamic Republic's authority (true Muslims) and enemies: "moharebeh" (those who wage war against God), "mofsed-e-filarz" (those who spread corruption on earth), apostates, and foreign agents[7, 30]. These categories, drawn from selective interpretation of Islamic law, designate certain people as not merely criminals but as enemies of God himself, deserving of death not as punishment but as religious purification.

The charge of "moharebeh" is particularly significant because it transforms political dissent into religious crime punishable by death. Protesters demanding economic justice, women burning hijabs, students chanting for freedom, all can be designated "moharebeh" and sentenced to execution[7, 26]. Just as Nazi racial theory made it possible for ordinary Germans to participate in genocide believing they were protecting their nation, Islamic Republic's religious framework makes it possible for IRGC soldiers and Basij militia members to shoot protesters believing they are defending Islam and serving God's will.

Both ideologies share critical characteristics: they divide humanity into categories of human and subhuman or godly and ungodly, they claim that eliminating the designated enemy group is existential necessity, they elevate perpetrators as righteous defenders of higher truth, they provide bureaucratic and legal frameworks that give murder appearance of legitimacy, and they are promoted by totalitarian states with monopoly on information and education, making dissent from the ideology itself dangerous.

8.5.2. The Holocaust's "Final Solution" vs. Iran's Systematic Elimination of Dissent

The Nazi "Final Solution," formalized at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, was systematic plan to murder all Jews in Nazi-controlled territory[4]. This represented escalation from persecution and ghettoization to industrial genocide, the construction of death camps specifically designed for efficient mass murder, the bureaucratic coordination of deportations from across Europe, and the mobilization of state resources toward goal of complete annihilation of a people.

The Islamic Republic has never announced a "final solution" for dissidents in comparable explicit terms, but its behavior demonstrates systematic effort to eliminate all meaningful opposition to clerical rule. The 1988 prison massacres targeted political prisoners who refused to renounce their beliefs, attempting to physically eliminate organized opposition[21, 22]. The crackdowns in 1999, 2009, 2019, and 2022 each killed hundreds while arresting thousands[7, 31]. The January 2026 massacre killed thousands in days and was followed by mass arrests and execution threats against 20,000 more[1, 20].

This pattern reveals strategy: periodic mass violence to terrorize the population into submission, systematic arrest and torture of activists to destroy opposition networks, execution of leaders to decapitate movements, forced confessions to discredit dissidents, and economic immiseration to keep the population focused on survival rather than resistance. While the Islamic Republic has not built gas chambers, it has built infrastructure and deployed methods designed to systematically eliminate dissent, killing enough people to

terrorize the rest into silence.

The progression from 1,500 killed in November 2019 to 500+ killed in 2022 to potentially 30,000+ killed in January 2026 represents escalation analogous to Nazi Germany's progression from persecution to ghettoization to systematic extermination[7, 1]. Each crackdown establishes new threshold of acceptable violence, each massacre that goes unpunished by international community gives regime permission to kill more the next time, and each round of killing fails to suppress resistance because people conclude that slow death under tyranny is no better than quick death fighting for freedom.

8.5.3. How Both Regimes Made Murder a Religious/Ideological Duty

The Nazis elevated participation in genocide to ideological duty through several mechanisms. SS members swore personal loyalty to Hitler and underwent ideological indoctrination emphasizing racial struggle and Jewish threat. Participants in mass shootings and death camp operations were told they were performing difficult but necessary service for the German nation. Those who expressed moral qualms were not punished but were offered transfer to other duties, yet most continued killing because the ideological framework and social pressure of the organization made refusal psychologically difficult[4].

The Islamic Republic similarly transforms murder into religious duty. IRGC members and Basij volunteers are indoctrinated in the principle of "Velayat-e Faqih" (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which holds that the Supreme Leader is God's representative on Earth and that obedience to him is religious obligation[7]. When the Supreme Leader orders killing of "moharebeh," he is not giving military command but issuing religious ruling that creates moral obligation to kill.

Security forces who shot protesters in January 2026 were not merely following orders, they were, in the regime's framework, fulfilling religious duty to defend Islam against enemies of God. This ideological framing serves multiple purposes: it motivates perpetrators by elevating murder to sacred act, it provides psychological distance from the humanity of victims by categorizing them as enemies of God rather than fellow citizens, it creates moral framework in which refusing to kill appears as religious failure rather than ethical stance, and it binds perpetrators to the regime by making them complicit in crimes that they have been taught to view as righteous.

Both the Nazi and Iranian systems demonstrate that when states combine totalitarian power with absolutist ideology, whether racial or religious, and when they control education and information to prevent exposure to alternative moral frameworks, they can convince ordinary people to commit extraordinary evil while believing themselves righteous. This is perhaps the most terrifying lesson: the capacity for genocide is not limited to obviously monstrous people, but can be activated in ordinary humans when ideology and power structure create conditions where murder appears as duty.

8.6. The Pattern of Escalation: From Persecution to Mass Murder

Genocide does not appear spontaneously. It develops through stages: discrimination, persecution, dehumanization, isolation, and finally systematic killing. Comparing the trajectories of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1941 and the Islamic Republic from 1979 to 2026 reveals strikingly similar patterns of incrementally increasing brutality, each step preparing the ground for the next, each atrocity that goes unpunished making the next greater atrocity thinkable.

8.6.1. Nazi Germany 1933 to 1941 vs. Islamic Republic 1979 to 2026

When Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, he did not immediately begin industrial genocide. The progression was gradual: In 1933, the Nazis opened the first concentration camps like Dachau to imprison political opponents, began boycotts of Jewish businesses, and passed the first laws restricting Jewish participation in German society[4]. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws formally stripped Jews of citizenship and prohibited marriage between Jews and non-Jews. In 1938, Kristallnacht saw coordinated destruction of Jewish property and murder of 99 Jews, with thousands arrested and sent to concentration camps[4, 6]. In 1939, World War II began, and the Nazis began forced deportation of Jews to ghettos in Poland. In 1941, the Nazis began systematic mass shootings of Jews in occupied Soviet territories, including Babi Yar[11, 10]. In 1942, the Wannsee Conference formalized the "Final Solution," and death camps became operational[4].

This eight-year progression from discrimination to genocide was not inevitable, but each step made the next easier. Once Jews were stripped of legal rights, they had no recourse when property was confiscated. Once they were ghettoized, they were isolated from German society, making mass deportation easier. Once mass shootings began in the context of war, building death camps seemed merely an efficiency improvement rather than moral rupture.

The Islamic Republic followed remarkably similar trajectory. In 1979 to 1980, the new regime began arresting, torturing, and executing political opponents, initially targeting monarchist officials, then expanding to leftists, liberals, and religious minorities[7, 32]. In the early 1980s, the regime engaged in mass violence against the MEK and other opposition groups, with thousands executed in the conflict following bombings that killed regime officials[32, 22]. In 1988, the prison massacres killed between 2,800 and 30,000 political prisoners in months[21, 22, 23]. In 1999, security forces attacked student dormitories during protests. In 2009, the Green Movement protests saw hundreds killed and thousands arrested. In November 2019, approximately 1,500 protesters were killed in two weeks[7]. In 2022, the Mahsa Amini protests resulted in over 500 deaths and 20,000 arrests[33]. In January 2026, between 6,000 and 36,500 were killed in days[1, 2].

Over 47 years, the Islamic Republic progressively increased the scale and intensity of violence against Iranians who challenge its rule. Each massacre that the international community failed to punish taught the regime that it could kill with impunity. Each escalation of violence that failed to provoke meaningful international response emboldened further escalation.

8.6.2. Incrementally Increasing Brutality

Both regimes increased brutality incrementally, testing domestic and international tolerance for violence and adjusting their methods accordingly. The Nazis began with individual arrests and harassment, progressed to organized violence like Kristallnacht, then to mass deportations and ghettoization, then to mass shootings, and finally to industrial extermination in death camps. Each step was tolerated by German society and by international observers who either approved, remained silent, or offered only rhetorical condemnation[4, 6].

The Islamic Republic began by executing dozens of former regime officials, claiming they were criminals of the old order. It progressed to killing political activists, claiming they were terrorists. It advanced to mass executions of prisoners, claiming religious necessity. It evolved to shooting protesters in streets, claiming they were rioters. It escalated to killing hundreds in single crackdowns, then thousands in single crackdowns. At each stage, the regime gauged domestic and international reaction and, finding insufficient consequences, proceeded to greater violence.

This incremental escalation serves strategic purpose: it gradually accustoms both perpetrators and observers to increasing levels of violence, it provides experience and infrastructure that make mass killing more efficient, it identifies and removes individuals within security forces who might refuse to kill, selecting for those willing to commit atrocities, it creates precedent that each new atrocity is not revolutionary change but merely continuation of established practice, and it slowly moves the boundary of what is considered shocking, making eventually possible what would have been unthinkable at the beginning.

8.6.3. Each Massacre Establishes New Threshold of Acceptable Violence

The 1988 prison massacres established that the Islamic Republic was willing to murder thousands of its own citizens without trial or legal process. The world's muted response established that such killing would not result in meaningful consequences. This emboldened the regime.

The November 2019 killing of approximately 1,500 protesters established that the regime would use live ammunition against street protesters on large scale. Again, the world responded with statements of concern but no meaningful action. The threshold of acceptable violence moved higher.

The 2022 Mahsa Amini protests, which killed over 500 people including children and resulted in mass arrests, torture, forced confessions, and executions, again demonstrated regime willingness to kill protesters systematically. And again, the international response was inadequate[33, 30].

By January 2026, the regime understood that it could kill on massive scale with minimal international consequence. The world had established pattern: human rights organizations would document the killing, international media would report briefly, governments would issue condemnations, perhaps some sanctions would be imposed, and then attention would move to other crises. This pattern created environment where the regime calculated that killing 30,000 people in 48 hours would provoke outrage but not intervention, and that this massive demonstration of willingness to use unlimited violence might finally break the resistance movement[2, 9].

8.6.4. Impunity Enables Escalation

The fundamental lesson from both Nazi Germany and the Islamic Republic of Iran is that impunity enables escalation. When perpetrators of mass violence face no consequences, they learn that they can kill with impunity. When the international community responds to atrocities with words but not action, it gives implicit permission for greater atrocities.

The world's failure to stop Nazi Germany early, when intervention would have been relatively easy, allowed the Holocaust to occur. The world's failure to meaningfully punish the Islamic Republic for four decades of escalating violence enabled the January 2026 massacre. And the world's inadequate response to that massacre, as we will examine in later sections, virtually guarantees further mass killing unless this pattern is broken.

8.7. The World's Response: Then and Now

How the international community responds to genocide reveals as much about our collective morality as the genocide itself reveals about the perpetrators. The world failed the Jews during the Holocaust, failed Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge genocide, failed Rwandans in 1994, and is failing Iranians in 2026. The failures are hauntingly similar: initial disbelief that such atrocities could be occurring, geopolitical calculations that prioritize strategic interests over human rights, information control that makes it easier to deny knowledge of what is happening, and moral cowardice that prefers convenient ignorance to costly action.

8.7.1. 1930s to 1940s: The World Didn't Want to Believe

During the 1930s, as Nazi persecution of Jews escalated, the international community largely failed to respond meaningfully. When Germany passed the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, other nations condemned the discrimination but maintained diplomatic and economic relations. When Kristallnacht occurred in 1938, there was international outrage, but no country was willing to take significant action or to accept large numbers of Jewish refugees[4, 6].

Even as reports of mass killings emerged during World War II, many international observers were skeptical. The scale of murder seemed unbelievable, the industrial nature of genocide unprecedented, and the political will to act limited by war exhaustion and geopolitical calculation. The Allies had intelligence about death camps but chose not to bomb the rail lines leading to Auschwitz or the gas chambers themselves, prioritizing military objectives over rescue of Jews.

After the war, as the full scope of the Holocaust became undeniable, the world proclaimed "never again," established the United Nations, created international human rights frameworks, and pledged that humanity had learned its lesson. Yet genocide continued: Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and now Iran, each time accompanied by same pattern of inadequate response.

8.7.2. 2026: The World Doesn't Want to Look

In January 2026, the world has access to information that was unimaginable in the 1940s. We have satellite imagery, social media, encrypted communications that sometimes bypass regime censorship, human rights organizations with sophisticated documentation methods, and global media that can report in real time. And yet, the massacre in Iran has received inadequate attention and provoked insufficient action.

The difference between 1940s and 2026 is not access to information, it is will to act on that information. We can watch videos of Iranian security forces shooting protesters. We can read eyewitness testimonies. We can see photographs of morgues filled with bodies. We can examine hospital records documenting thousands of deaths. We know what is happening. We choose not to respond adequately.

The reasons for this failure are complex: Iran is geopolitically significant in ways that complicate intervention, the world is weary of Middle East conflicts after decades of war, the information overload of modern media means atrocities compete for attention with countless other stories, and the international institutions created to prevent genocide have proven ineffective when confronted by powerful states willing to use violence. But underlying all these practical considerations is simple truth: the world doesn't want to look because looking creates moral obligation to act, and acting is difficult, costly, and politically inconvenient.

8.7.3. The Failure of "Never Again"

"Never again" has become hollow phrase. It is invoked at Holocaust memorial ceremonies, taught in schools, inscribed on monuments. But it has not prevented genocide. It has not stopped mass killing in Iran. The pledge of "never again" implied that humanity, having witnessed the Holocaust's horror, would develop systems and summon will to prevent future atrocities. We created those systems: the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, international human rights law. But we have lacked will to use them when confronted by regimes willing to kill.

The failure of "never again" in Iran is particularly shameful because this is not hidden genocide in remote region. This is happening in country of 85 million people, in cities with universities and hospitals and modern infrastructure, documented in real time by victims using smartphones, reported by international media. If "never again" cannot be operationalized under these conditions, the phrase means nothing.

8.8. Why This Comparison Matters: Preventing Future Atrocities

Comparing Iran 2026 to the Holocaust is not merely academic exercise in historical analysis. It serves critical practical purpose: to shock the world into recognition of what is happening, to provide moral and historical framework for demanding action, to identify patterns that could help prevent escalation to even greater atrocity, and to honor the memory of Holocaust victims by refusing to allow similar horrors to unfold unchallenged.

When we say "Iran's holocaust," we make claim that cannot be dismissed as regional political crisis or internal law enforcement matter. We assert that this is crime against humanity on scale and of nature

that requires international response. We invoke historical precedent that obligates action rather than mere observation.

The Holocaust taught us that genocide develops through recognizable stages, that totalitarian ideologies create frameworks for dehumanization and mass murder, that systematic state killing requires infrastructure and coordination that can be identified and disrupted, that early intervention could prevent escalation to full genocide, and that the world's silence in the face of atrocity makes us complicit. These lessons apply directly to Iran in 2026. The question is whether we will apply them in time to prevent the Islamic Republic from killing tens or hundreds of thousands more, or whether we will once again wait until the killing is done and then build memorials and promise "never again" to the next generation of victims.

References

- [1] Wikipedia contributors. *2026 Iran massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [2] Time Magazine. *Iran Death Toll Estimates: 30,000+ Killed January 8-9*. Report published January 25, 2026, citing hospital records. Jan. 2026.
- [3] United Nations. *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. 1948. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide-convention.shtml>.
- [4] St. Louis Holocaust Museum. *Holocaust Timeline: 1933 to 1945*. 2024. URL: <https://stlholocaustmuseum.org/learn/timeline/>.
- [5] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. *Introduction to the Holocaust*. 2024. URL: <https://www.ushmm.org>.
- [6] European Commission Education Resources. *Stages of the Holocaust*. Erasmus+ Project Resource. 2020.
- [7] Wikipedia Contributors. *Political Repression in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_repression_in_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Iran.
- [8] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Growing Evidence of Countrywide Massacres*. Medical professional account of 150 bodies brought to single hospital in Mashhad. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/16/iran-growing-evidence-of-countrywide-massacres>.
- [9] The Guardian. *Iran Protest Deaths May Exceed 30,000*. Report published January 28, 2026. Jan. 2026.
- [10] Wikipedia Contributors. *Babi Yar*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babi_Yar.
- [11] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. *Mass Shootings at Babyn Yar (Babi Yar)*. 2024. URL: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kiev-and-babi-yar>.
- [12] Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. *The Babi Yar Massacre*. 2024. URL: <https://hmd.org.uk/resource/the-babi-yar-massacre/>.
- [13] Wikipedia Contributors. *2025–2026 Iranian Protests*. Accessed February 2026. Wikipedia. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025%E2%80%932026_Iranian_protests.
- [14] Critical Threats Project. *Iran Update, January 8, 2026*. Accessed February 2026. Critical Threats Project, American Enterprise Institute. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-january-8-2026>.

- [15] Wikipedia Contributors. *Cambodian Genocide*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambodian_genocide.
- [16] University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. *The Cambodian Genocide*. 2024. URL: <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/cambodia>.
- [17] Survivors Fund. *Rwanda Genocide Statistics*. 2024. URL: <https://survivors-fund.org.uk/learn/statistics/>.
- [18] Wikipedia Contributors. *Rwandan Genocide*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rwandan_genocide.
- [19] Human Rights Watch. *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*. 1999. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/>.
- [20] France 24. *Iran's State TV Airs Several 'Forced Confessions' After Protest Crackdown, Activists Say*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20260126-iranian-state-tv-air-s-several-forced-confessions-after-protest-crackdown-activists-say>.
- [21] Human Rights Watch. *Iran's 1988 Mass Executions*. 2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/08/irans-1988-mass-executions>.
- [22] Wikipedia Contributors. *1988 Executions of Iranian Political Prisoners*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1988_executions_of_Iranian_political_prisoners.
- [23] Iran 1988 Organization. *The 1988 Massacre: 30,000 Political Prisoners Executed*. 2024. URL: <https://iran1988.org/1988-massacre/>.
- [24] Wikipedia contributors. *Iranian economic crisis*. Inflation 42-48% in 2025; 22-50% living under poverty line. 2025. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_economic_crisis.
- [25] Khar Center. *Iran's January 2026 Uprising: Origins, Developments, and Future Scenarios*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://hecomeswithfire.com/irans-january-2026-uprising-origins-developments-and-future-scenarios/>.
- [26] KSAT. *Activists Say Iran Has Aired at Least 97 Coerced Confessions from Protesters, Often After Torture*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ksat.com/news/world/2026/01/13/activists-say-iran-has-aired-at-least-97-coerced-confessions-from-protesters-often-after-torture/>.
- [27] WSLs. *Activists Say Iran Has Aired Nearly 100 Coerced Confessions from Protesters, Often After Torture*. Accessed February 2026. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.wsls.com/news/world/2026/01/13/activists-say-iran-has-aired-nearly-100-coerced-confessions-from-protesters-often-after-torture/>.
- [28] NCRI. *Iran's Rebellious Youth Confront Repressive Forces in Dozens of Cities on Fifth Day of Uprising*. Accessed February 2026. National Council of Resistance of Iran. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncri-statements/statement-iran-protest/irans-rebellious-youth-confront-repressive-forces-in-dozens-of-cities-on-fifth-day-of-uprising-several-protesters-killed/>.
- [29] NCRI. *Iran News in Brief – January 7, 2026*. Accessed February 2026. National Council of Resistance of Iran. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/iran-news-in-brief-news/iran-news-in-brief-january-7-2026/>.

-
- [30] Amnesty International. *Human Rights in Iran*. 2024. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/iran/report-iran/>.
- [31] Wikipedia contributors. *Woman, Life, Freedom movement*. 2024. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman,_Life,_Freedom_movement.
- [32] Wikipedia Contributors. *History of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. 2025. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Iran.
- [33] Nazenin Ansari and Arash Azizi. *The Islamic Republic's War on Iranians*. Mar. 2025. URL: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-islamic-republics-war-on-iranians/>.

Part 9

The Price of Global Silence

9. The International Community's Shameful Response

The massacre of tens of thousands of Iranian civilians in January 2026 occurred not in secret, not in some remote region beyond the reach of modern communications, but in full view of the international community. Human rights organizations documented the killings in real time. Medical professionals smuggled out hospital records showing thousands of deaths. Eyewitness testimonies reached international media despite the regime's information blackout. Satellite imagery captured the deployment of military forces. The evidence was overwhelming, verifiable, and impossible to dismiss as propaganda or exaggeration [1, 2]. And yet, the world's response was characterized by strongly worded statements, emergency meetings that produced no action, sanctions that did not prevent killing, and a fundamental unwillingness to use available leverage to stop the slaughter [3, 4]. This section examines how each major actor in the international community, the United Nations, the United States, Europe, human rights organizations, and media, responded to Iran's holocaust, why their responses were inadequate, and what this failure reveals about the hollowness of "Never Again" as operative principle rather than memorial slogan.

9.1. The United Nations: Strongly Worded Statements, Zero Action

The United Nations, created in the aftermath of World War II specifically to prevent future atrocities and to provide international framework for collective security and human rights protection, proved comprehensively ineffective in responding to Iran's January 2026 massacre [5]. The organization's various bodies issued statements, held emergency meetings, and expressed concern, but translated none of this activity into meaningful action that might constrain the Iranian regime's violence or provide protection to Iranian civilians.

9.1.1. Human Rights Council: Meetings That Mean Nothing

On January 15, 2026, the UN Security Council convened in emergency session on Iran, requested by the United States, amid escalating concern over reports that hundreds, then thousands had been killed during weeks of nationwide anti-government protests [3]. Assistant Secretary-General Martha Ama Akyaa Pobee and civil society representatives briefed the Council, describing how demonstrations fueled by soaring inflation, rising food prices, and currency collapse had triggered deadly widespread crackdown with thousands injured and detained [5]. The UN called for independent investigations into all killings and warned against possible use of death penalty against protesters [3]. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk issued statement on January 13 urging Iranian authorities to halt all forms of violence and repression against peaceful protesters and to restore full access to internet and telecommunications services [6]. He highlighted Iranians' right to demonstrate peacefully and called for accountability for serious violations [6].

These statements, while morally appropriate, had zero practical effect on the regime's behavior. The Iranian government ignored the calls for restraint, continued the internet blackout for weeks, proceeded with mass arrests and torture of detained protesters, and announced plans to execute thousands under charges of

moharebeh [7]. The UN Human Rights Council's response revealed fundamental impotence: it could document atrocities, express concern, make recommendations, but it lacked both authority and will to compel compliance or impose consequences for non-compliance [8].

By late January 2026, coalition of 46 civil society and human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, called on the UN Human Rights Council to urgently convene special session, warning of unprecedented escalation in mass unlawful killings of protesters amid nationwide internet shutdown [8]. The organizations requested extension of mandate of Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran to enable continued investigations, urged enhanced joint interactive dialogue, and stressed need for concrete avenues to pursuing comprehensive justice and ending impunity driving state policy of lethal repression [8]. As of early February, these calls had not yet resulted in special session, and even if one were convened, past experience suggested it would produce report, recommendations, and no enforceable action.

9.1.2. Security Council: Paralyzed by Geopolitics

The UN Security Council, the body with actual authority to authorize sanctions, peacekeeping operations, or in extreme cases military intervention under Responsibility to Protect doctrine, proved completely paralyzed by geopolitical considerations [5]. While the United States requested the emergency session and used its platform to condemn Iranian violence, permanent Council members Russia and China have historically blocked meaningful action against Iran, viewing it as strategic partner and as bulwark against American influence in Middle East.

The January 15 Security Council meeting became forum for competing narratives rather than mechanism for action. Iran participated under rule 37, describing American statements threatening military intervention as "flagrant violation of fundamental principles of international law enshrined in UN Charter, in particular prohibition of threat or use of force under Article 2(4) and principle of non-intervention in internal affairs of states under Article 2(7)" [5]. The letter urged Council to condemn all forms of incitement to violence, threats to use force, and interference in Iran's internal affairs by the US [5]. This rhetorical equivalence, treating Iranian regime's mass killing of its own citizens as comparable to American threats to intervene, exemplified how the Security Council becomes forum for deflection rather than accountability.

The Council's paralysis reflected broader dysfunction: the veto power held by permanent members means that any action requiring Council authorization can be blocked by single state with strategic interest in protecting target government. This structural flaw has prevented effective UN response to atrocities from Syria to Myanmar to Sudan, and it operated again in Iran. Russia and China would not permit Security Council resolution authorizing sanctions or intervention, so the emergency session became theater, visible activity substituting for meaningful action [5].

9.1.3. Why the UN Has Failed Iranians

The UN's failure to protect Iranians reflects both structural limitations and political unwillingness among member states. Structurally, the UN has no independent enforcement capacity, it relies entirely on member states to implement decisions, provide troops for peacekeeping, enforce sanctions, and fund operations. When major powers disagree, as they did regarding Iran, the UN cannot act unilaterally. The veto power in Security Council institutionalizes this paralysis, ensuring that any crisis involving strategic interests of permanent members will not receive robust UN response [5].

Politically, the UN's failure reflects member states' prioritization of sovereignty norms over human rights obligations. Despite Responsibility to Protect doctrine, despite decades of rhetoric about "Never Again," the international community remains deeply reluctant to intervene in what regimes characterize as internal matters, even when those internal matters involve systematic murder of thousands. Iran successfully framed international criticism as violation of its sovereignty and interference in internal affairs, and this framing resonated with many UN member states who fear that robust intervention against Iran might set precedent that could someday be applied to them [5].

The UN also failed because documentation without enforcement is merely chronicle of atrocities, not prevention. The various UN bodies, Fact-Finding Missions, Special Rapporteurs, Human Rights Council, produced reports detailing Iranian crimes. These reports are comprehensive, well-researched, and devastating in their findings [8]. But they gather dust in archives while the regime continues killing because the UN system contains no mechanism to translate documentation into accountability when powerful states block enforcement.

9.2. The United States: Rhetoric Without Action

The United States, possessing more global power projection capability than any other nation and claiming commitment to human rights and democracy promotion as core foreign policy values, responded to Iran's massacre with dramatic rhetoric that ultimately translated into minimal meaningful action [9, 10].

9.2.1. Warning Tweets and Empty Threats

President Donald Trump, who had returned to office in January 2025, responded to early reports of killings with social media posts that mixed genuine concern with characteristic bombast. On January 2, 2026, Trump warned that if Iran "violently kills peaceful protesters" the US "will come to their rescue," declaring "we are locked and loaded and ready to go" [9, 10]. On January 13, Trump posted: "Iranian Patriots, KEEP PROTESTING, TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS!!! Save the names of the killers and abusers. They will pay big price. I have cancelled all meetings with Iranian Officials until senseless killing of protesters STOPS. HELP IS ON ITS WAY" [9, 10].

These statements created both hope and danger. They gave Iranian protesters reason to believe American intervention might actually occur, potentially encouraging continued resistance that led to more deaths.

They also prompted Iranian regime to accelerate crackdown, viewing it as race against time before possible American action. According to media reports, Pentagon presented Trump with range of possible targets for military strike, including facilities used in Iran's nuclear programme and ballistic missile sites [5]. Both UK and US reduced number of personnel stationed at Al-Udeid airbase in Qatar on January 14, while Iran closed its airspace for several hours same day, moves that had previously preceded military action in region [5].

Ultimately, no military intervention occurred. By late January, as protests were suppressed through overwhelming violence and regime consolidated control, Trump's threats proved empty. White House Press Secretary stated on January 12 that "diplomacy is always first option for president," while noting that airstrikes were "one of many, many options on table" [5]. Congressional Research Service analysis noted uncertainty about whether or how US military intervention could constrain repressive capabilities of Islamic Republic's large and ideologically-motivated security forces, and cautioned that American strikes could have unpredictable consequences [10].

9.2.2. Sanctions That Don't Stop Massacres

The Trump administration's actual response consisted primarily of sanctions, which while symbolically significant, had no discernible effect on regime's willingness or ability to kill protesters. On January 12, Trump announced that any country "doing business" with Iran would pay 25 percent tariff on any trade with US, "effective immediately" [5]. On January 15, US imposed sanctions on five Iranian officials accused of being involved with crackdown on protests [5]. These sanctions targeted individuals already subject to various existing sanctions regimes, making incremental additions that imposed little new cost.

The fundamental problem with sanctions as response to active massacre is timing: sanctions, even when comprehensive and well-enforced, take months or years to inflict sufficient economic pain to change regime behavior. During January 8 to 9, 2026, when Iranian security forces were killing tens of thousands, sanctions announcements had zero effect on the killing. Even if sanctions eventually contributed to economic pressure that might spark future unrest, they provided no protection to people being shot in streets that week.

Moreover, Iran had decades of experience adapting to sanctions through smuggling networks, front companies, and support from sanctions-busting partners including China, Russia, and various private actors. Comprehensive sanctions imposed after US withdrawal from nuclear deal in 2018 had devastated Iranian economy but had not changed regime's fundamental behavior or deterred it from killing 1,500 protesters in November 2019 or 500 in 2022 [7]. The notion that additional targeted sanctions in January 2026 would convince regime actively engaged in massacre to halt killing was fantasy.

9.2.3. Why America Has Leverage and Refuses to Use It

The United States possesses numerous tools beyond military intervention that could meaningfully pressure Iranian regime, yet deployed few of them. America could have provided unlimited free Starlink internet access to Iranians, working with SpaceX to ensure regime jamming was defeated and that Iranian people

could document atrocities and coordinate resistance [11]. Instead, Starlink service was eventually jammed by military-grade Iranian equipment, and US did not intervene to restore it [11].

America could have announced immediate asylum and protection for any Iranian who reached US embassy in neighboring country, creating incentive for regime officials to defect and establishing that America would provide safe haven. Instead, US immigration policy toward Iranians remained largely unchanged. America could have frozen all regime assets in US banks and worked with allies to do same globally, imposing immediate financial cost. Instead, sanctions remained targeted rather than comprehensive.

Most significantly, America could have led multilateral effort to refer Iran to International Criminal Court, to expel Iran from UN bodies, to coordinate comprehensive global sanctions, and to provide material support to Iranian opposition. Instead, American response was unilateral, transactional, and ultimately performative, threatening dramatic action while delivering incremental measures.

The reasons for American restraint were complex: legitimate uncertainty about military intervention's efficacy, war-weariness after two decades of Middle East conflicts, competing foreign policy priorities particularly regarding China, domestic political pressures discouraging new military commitments, and assessment that Iranian regime would survive and that accommodation might eventually be necessary [10]. These calculations, while rational from realist foreign policy perspective, meant that American response prioritized avoiding costs and risks over protecting Iranian civilians being massacred.

9.3. Europe: Condemning While Trading

European nations and European Union institutions responded to Iran's massacre with characteristic pattern: strongly worded condemnations paired with continued economic engagement and fundamental unwillingness to impose costs that might affect European interests [4].

9.3.1. Joint Statements of "Concern"

On January 9, 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz issued joint statement expressing deep concern about reports of violence, strongly condemning killing of protesters, and stating that "Iranian authorities have responsibility to protect their own population and must allow for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly without fear of reprisal" [5]. European Union High Representative Kaja Kallas on January 9 denounced Tehran for its "disproportionate" and "heavy-handed" response, stating "The Iranian people are fighting for their future. By ignoring their rightful demands, regime shows its true colours" [4].

European Parliament passed resolution on January 16 expressing "unequivocal condemnation of and outrage at brutal repression and mass murders perpetrated by Iranian regime," extending "full solidarity with people of Iran and its brave and legitimate protest movement," and demanding regime "unconditionally end use of violence against peaceful protesters, immediately halt all executions and cease murder and repression of civilians" [12]. The resolution called for immediate release of imprisoned demonstrators, recognized

"vast wave of protests as unequivocal sign of unsustainability of this system," and extended "full solidarity to Iranian diaspora" [12].

These statements were morally appropriate and politically significant, they represented official recognition by major democratic powers that Iranian regime was committing atrocities. However, they contained no enforcement mechanisms, threatened no specific consequences, and translated into minimal concrete action beyond symbolic gestures.

9.3.2. Economic Interests Trump Human Rights

European Commission spokesperson, when asked what decisive action EU was prepared to take beyond statements and diplomacy, responded that EU policy toward Iran was "critical engagement, critical where necessary while remaining ready to engage when interests align" [13]. On sanctions, spokesperson explained EU was "looking into possible new, more severe restrictive measures" but emphasized that "decisions on EU sanctions are ultimately for Member States requiring unanimity in Council" [13]. This procedural complexity served as excuse for inaction: because sanctions require unanimity, single member state with economic interests in Iran could block meaningful measures.

Europe maintained significant trade relationships with Iran despite sanctions, particularly in sectors where European companies had competitive advantages. Various European nations had invested heavily in Iranian energy infrastructure, pharmaceutical markets, and consumer goods sectors. While US secondary sanctions had forced withdrawal of some European companies, others continued operating through subsidiaries or creative legal structures. European governments were reluctant to impose comprehensive sanctions that would require European companies to abandon Iranian market entirely, creating economic costs for Europe while benefiting American and Asian competitors.

European nations also prioritized maintaining diplomatic channels with Iran for multiple strategic reasons: Iran's role in Syria, concerns about nuclear program, broader Middle East stability, and competition with American influence. This led to pattern where Europe condemned Iranian domestic repression while simultaneously seeking engagement on strategic issues, sending mixed message that undermined pressure campaign.

9.3.3. The Hypocrisy of European Values

European nations pride themselves on commitment to human rights, with EU institutions regularly criticizing authoritarianism globally and making human rights central to stated foreign policy values [4]. Yet response to Iran massacre revealed limits of this commitment: when human rights principles conflicted with economic interests or strategic calculations, interests prevailed.

European Parliament resolution called for "effective pressure on regime" and urged "EU to take similar action" to American targeted sanctions [12], but these parliamentary statements had limited binding effect on member state governments. European Commission spokesperson, when asked whether Commission favored regime change resulting from widespread demonstrations, noted that "regime change has not been part of

our EU consolidated policy vis-à-vis Iran" [4]. This diplomatic caution, while perhaps prudent from realist perspective, meant Europe was unwilling to support Iranian people's explicit demands for revolutionary change.

The hypocrisy was visible in comparative responses: European nations that imposed immediate comprehensive sanctions on Russia following Ukraine invasion, that led humanitarian interventions in Libya, that regularly suspended trade agreements with nations over human rights concerns, proved unwilling to take comparable action against Iran massacring its own people. The difference appeared to be that Ukraine invasion violated European security directly, while Iranian domestic atrocities occurred in Middle East and affected primarily Iranian nationals rather than Europeans.

9.4. Human Rights Organizations: Documenting While People Die

International human rights organizations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and numerous others, responded to Iran's massacre with extraordinary courage, sophisticated documentation, and comprehensive reporting that created detailed evidence of crimes against humanity [1, 2]. Their work was essential for creating accountability record. It was also, tragically, insufficient to prevent or stop killing.

9.4.1. The Courage of Amnesty, HRW, and Others

Amnesty International analyzed dozens of videos and photographs from 10 cities across nine provinces, consulted independent pathologist regarding images showing fatal or severe injuries, spoke with informed sources including medical workers and protesters, and produced detailed documentation of systematic unlawful killings [1]. Human Rights Watch interviewed 21 people including witnesses, relatives of victims, journalists, human rights defenders, and medical professionals between January 12 and 14, analyzed 51 verified photographs and videos, and consulted Independent Forensic Expert Group of International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims [2].

These organizations operated under extraordinarily difficult conditions: the internet blackout made communication with sources inside Iran nearly impossible, the information that did emerge had to be verified through multiple independent sources, sources faced grave danger if identified, and the sheer scale of killing overwhelmed normal documentation capacity [1]. Despite these obstacles, Amnesty and HRW produced comprehensive reports within days documenting evidence of coordinated nationwide escalation in security forces' unlawful use of lethal force, patterns indicating shoot-to-kill orders, systematic targeting of heads and torsos, raids on hospitals, and scale of casualties reaching thousands [1, 2].

The courage of human rights workers, both international staff and local activists inside Iran, cannot be overstated. Iranian activists who collected evidence, documented casualties, and transmitted information to international organizations faced arrest, torture, and execution if discovered. International organizations' staff worked under threat, knowing their local sources were risking everything. The resulting documentation represents extraordinary achievement of human rights methodology under crisis conditions.

9.4.2. But Documentation Is Not Rescue

The fundamental limitation of human rights organizations is that they can document atrocities but cannot prevent them. Amnesty and HRW issued urgent calls for international action: Amnesty urged "UN Member states to recognize that systemic and continuing impunity has emboldened Iranian authorities" and called for convening special sessions at UN Human Rights Council and Security Council, establishment of international justice mechanisms, and referral to International Criminal Court [1]. HRW stated "UN member states should urgently convene special UN Human Rights Council session to put human rights and accountability in Iran front and center of international response" [2].

These calls were appropriate and necessary. They were also, as of early February 2026, largely unheeded. Special sessions had not been convened with sufficient urgency or scope, ICC referral had not occurred due to Security Council paralysis, and international justice mechanisms remained proposals rather than operational institutions. While human rights organizations documented crimes, thousands continued to be killed, tens of thousands remained imprisoned facing torture and execution, and regime consolidated control.

A journalist from Tehran told Amnesty: "Tell the world that unspeakable crimes are being committed in Iran, Tell the world that if they do nothing, they will turn the country into graveyard" [1]. This desperate plea captured the frustration: the world knew, human rights organizations had documented comprehensively, evidence was overwhelming, and yet documentation did not translate into rescue. The reports served crucial purpose for eventual accountability and historical record, but they did not save lives during the massacre.

9.4.3. The Frustration of Activists Who Cannot Stop Killing

Human rights activists and organizations experienced profound frustration watching their painstaking documentation fail to produce intervention that might stop ongoing killing. Center for Human Rights in Iran director Hadi Ghaemi stated: "Hundreds of families in Iran are still grieving their dead from state's massacres during Woman, Life, Freedom protests, this regime has shown it will slaughter as many civilians as it needs to quiet streets, international community must speak out against this carnage" [14].

The pattern had repeated across previous Iranian protests: human rights organizations documented regime violence comprehensively, issued urgent appeals for international action, produced evidence-based reports meeting highest standards of verification, and watched helplessly as international response proved inadequate and regime faced no meaningful consequences that deterred future violence. This cycle of documentation and impunity demoralized activists who understood their essential work was necessary but insufficient.

Coalition of 46 civil society organizations, in joint statement calling for UN emergency session, emphasized this frustration: "As mass repression of protests and dissent dramatically intensifies in Iran amidst almost complete communications shutdown, organizations call for urgent and concrete actions" [8]. The emphasis on "concrete actions" rather than statements reflected understanding that moral condemnation without enforcement enabled continued killing.

9.5. The Media: Inadequate Coverage of an Ongoing Atrocity

International media coverage of Iran's January 2026 massacre, while more extensive than many previous crackdowns due to scale of killing, remained inadequate relative to magnitude of atrocity, relegated stories to secondary placement after initial reporting, and failed to sustain attention in manner that might create public pressure for governmental action.

9.5.1. Buried Stories, Brief Mentions

Major international news organizations, including BBC, CNN, The New York Times, The Guardian, and others, reported on Iran protests and killings, but coverage patterns revealed how modern news cycles marginalize even large-scale atrocities. Initial reports on January 8 to 10, as protests escalated and internet blackout began, received significant attention. Stories about death toll estimates in late January, as evidence of mass killing emerged, generated headlines. But sustained daily coverage comparable to major geopolitical crises did not materialize.

Stories about Iran frequently appeared below the fold, as secondary items rather than leading coverage. Television news devoted limited airtime relative to other ongoing stories. Online news platforms featured Iran stories prominently for days but then moved them to deeper pages as algorithm-driven content prioritization responded to user click patterns showing declining engagement. This meant readers who did not actively seek Iran coverage would encounter only occasional updates rather than comprehensive ongoing reporting.

The internet blackout significantly hindered journalism: without ability to communicate with sources inside Iran, verify claims in real time, or obtain fresh footage and photographs, news organizations struggled to maintain narrative momentum. Stories became repetitive, citing same human rights reports and eyewitness testimonies without new compelling material. This limitation, deliberately created by Iranian regime through information blackout, succeeded in constraining international attention.

9.5.2. Compare Coverage: Iran vs. Other Crises

Media coverage of Iran's January 2026 massacre pales compared to coverage of contemporaneous crises that dominated international attention. Israel-Gaza conflict received intensive daily coverage with correspondents on ground, live footage, detailed casualty accounting, and sustained analysis. Ukraine war remained major focus with reporters embedded with military units, regular updates on battlefield developments, and extensive political coverage. US domestic politics commanded enormous attention. Iran competed for coverage against these established narrative priorities and largely lost.

Quantitative analysis of coverage showed this disparity: major news networks devoted hours of daily coverage to Israel-Gaza and Ukraine but only minutes to Iran. Print newspapers ran Iran stories on front page for several days but then moved them to international sections. Online platforms saw Iran-related articles receive lower engagement metrics than stories about established crises, creating feedback loop where

editorial decisions reflected perceived audience interest that was itself shaped by prior coverage patterns.

The comparative coverage revealed uncomfortable truth: media attention reflects combination of geopolitical importance to Western audiences, availability of compelling visual content, presence of international reporters able to file regular dispatches, and perceived relevance to readers' lives. Iran, behind information blackout with limited reporter access and perceived as perpetual crisis that regularly produces violence without resolution, received treatment as chronic situation rather than acute emergency requiring sustained coverage.

9.5.3. Why Iran's Holocaust Isn't "Trending"

On social media platforms that increasingly drive news agenda, Iran protests failed to achieve sustained "trending" status that creates self-reinforcing attention cycle. While hashtags related to Iran protests periodically trended on Twitter/X, Instagram, and TikTok, they competed with entertainment content, other news events, and algorithm-driven content that platforms prioritize for engagement.

The reasons Iran massacre did not dominate social media were multiple: internet blackout meant less organic content from Iran itself, with users inside country unable to post updates creating gap in user-generated content that typically drives social media engagement. Visual content that did emerge, while powerful, was graphic and disturbing, leading platforms to limit its distribution under content moderation policies designed to protect users from traumatic material. This well-intentioned moderation ironically served regime's interests by suppressing documentation of atrocities.

Social media algorithms prioritize recent, rapidly-engaging content, meaning ongoing crises lose visibility compared to novel events. After initial days of Iran protest content, algorithms effectively buried Iran-related posts in favor of newer trending topics. Users who did not explicitly follow Iran-related accounts or actively search for content received diminishing exposure as platform recommendation systems determined Iran was no longer "hot" topic.

The attention economy's logic, where content competes for finite user attention measured in milliseconds of engagement, meant that even mass killing on historically unprecedented scale could not maintain visibility against constant stream of new content. This represented failure of modern information ecosystem to provide sustained attention to atrocities, suggesting that social media's promise to make atrocities more visible was undermined by platforms' engagement-optimizing algorithms.

9.6. Social Media: Scrolling Past a Genocide

Social media's role in Iran's January 2026 massacre was paradoxical: platforms provided crucial tools for documentation and mobilization that enabled protesters to coordinate and share evidence, yet same platforms' structural characteristics, algorithmic content distribution, attention economy dynamics, enabled users and publics globally to scroll past genocide without sustained engagement.

9.6.1. The Viral Video Problem: Atrocity as Content

Videos of Iranian security forces shooting protesters, images of morgues filled with bodies, testimonies from survivors, all circulated on social media and some achieved viral status with millions of views [1]. This visibility represented success of documentation efforts by activists and human rights organizations. It also revealed disturbing dynamic: atrocity footage on social media is consumed as content, viewed for seconds or minutes, processed emotionally in moment, and then users scroll to next item in infinite feed.

The viral video format rewards shocking, visceral content that generates immediate emotional response, but same format discourages sustained engagement or deeper analysis necessary for understanding context and mobilizing action. User who watches 30-second video of Iranian protester being shot experiences momentary horror, perhaps shares video or leaves comment expressing outrage, and then continues scrolling. This micro-engagement, repeated millions of times, creates illusion of attention without producing the sustained focus that drove effective advocacy in pre-social-media era.

Videos of atrocities also face content moderation challenges: platforms restrict graphic violent content to protect users, but this restriction prevents documentation from reaching wide audiences [15]. Platforms introduced warning screens requiring users to click through before viewing disturbing content, creating friction that reduced view counts. Some platforms removed graphic Iran protest videos entirely as violations of community standards, eliminating evidence. Meta began hiding Instagram followers of Iranian residents on January 18 after reports that Iranian security bodies were extracting large volumes of user data, protection measure that also reduced visibility of Iranian activists' content [15].

9.6.2. Algorithmic Burial of Iranian Content

Social media platforms' algorithmic content distribution, which determines what users see in feeds, worked against sustained visibility of Iran crisis. Algorithms optimize for engagement metrics, prioritizing content that generates clicks, comments, shares, and time-on-platform. While initial Iran protest content performed well on these metrics due to novelty and shock value, sustained coverage faced algorithmic headwinds.

Content recency biases meant older Iran posts were buried by newer content, even when older posts contained important context or updates. Platform recommendation systems, which suggest content to users based on predicted interests, learned from early engagement patterns: if users clicked on entertainment content after briefly engaging with Iran posts, algorithms interpreted this as preference for entertainment over crisis coverage and adjusted recommendations accordingly. Network effects amplified this pattern: as Iran content became less visible in feeds, fewer users engaged with it, creating data that algorithms interpreted as declining interest, producing further reduced visibility in self-reinforcing cycle.

Reports emerged that some Iran-related content faced deliberate suppression: Iranian users and diaspora activists documented instances where their posts about protests received dramatically lower reach than typical posts, suggesting platform algorithms or manual moderation flagged Iran content as problematic [15]. While platforms denied systematic suppression, statistical anomalies in engagement patterns sug-

gested some form of throttling or shadow-banning occurred, whether through automated systems flagging politically sensitive content or through platform decisions to reduce distribution of potentially inflammatory material.

9.6.3. The Attention Economy and Human Death

The fundamental problem revealed by social media's response to Iran massacre is that attention economy, where platforms profit from maximizing user engagement time and advertising exposure, is structurally incompatible with sustained focus on atrocities that require weeks or months of attention to generate political pressure for intervention. Platform business models depend on keeping users engaged through constantly refreshing content that triggers emotional responses, curiosity, or entertainment, patterns that work against deep engagement with complex ongoing crises.

Users, confronted with infinite content options and platforms designed to optimize for maximum engagement, face cognitive overload that makes sustained attention to any single issue difficult. The massacre in Iran, competing with entertainment content, social network updates, political news from multiple countries, and countless other attention demands, lost battle for sustained visibility despite representing one of deadliest state killings in modern history. Users could recognize atrocity in moment, feel appropriate moral horror, and still scroll past to next item without that recognition translating into action or sustained engagement.

This dynamic meant social media, despite providing documentation tools that human rights organizations found invaluable, failed to mobilize global public pressure that might force governmental action. Previous social movements that achieved success through social media, Arab Spring, MeToo, Black Lives Matter, benefited from combination of factors including geographic proximity to Western audiences, clear actionable demands, sustained organizing infrastructure beyond platforms, and momentum that overcame algorithmic barriers. Iran 2026 lacked several of these elements, and result was that documentation existed, millions saw evidence, and collective action failed to materialize at scale necessary to pressure governments into meaningful intervention.

9.7. Individual Nations That Have Remained Silent

Beyond major powers and international institutions, numerous individual nations remained conspicuously silent regarding Iran's massacre, including nations that regularly position themselves as human rights advocates. Canada issued statements of concern but took minimal concrete action. Australia condemned violence but implemented no significant new measures. Japan, despite having economic relationships with Iran, remained largely quiet. Gulf Arab states, which have complex hostile relationships with Iran, focused responses on geopolitical dimensions rather than human rights. Turkey maintained diplomatic silence reflecting its balanced approach to regional relations.

These silences reflected calculation that Iran crisis did not directly affect national interests, that speaking out would complicate diplomatic or economic relationships without producing benefit, and that in absence

of coordinated international response, individual national statements would be futile gestures. The pattern of silence from dozens of nations that regularly cite human rights in foreign policy rhetoric demonstrated that human rights concerns are subordinate to interests when conflicts arise.

9.8. Why Everyone Is Failing: Geopolitics, Oil, and Moral Cowardice

The comprehensive failure of international community to adequately respond to Iran's January 2026 massacre stemmed from combination of factors: geopolitical complexity where Iran's strategic position and relationships with Russia and China created powerful constituencies opposing intervention, economic interests including oil markets and trade relationships that nations were unwilling to sacrifice, structural limitations of international institutions designed to respect sovereignty and requiring consensus that authoritarian powers could block, psychological fatigue and attention overload in era of multiple simultaneous crises, and fundamental moral cowardice, unwillingness to accept costs and risks that effective intervention would require.

Iran's possession of significant military capabilities, including ballistic missiles and regional proxy forces, its geographic position controlling Strait of Hormuz through which substantial global oil supply flows, its relationships with major powers Russia and China who would oppose intervention, and its demonstrated willingness to use extreme violence created perception that meaningful intervention would be prohibitively costly and risky. These assessments, while containing elements of truth, functioned as excuses for inaction, ways to avoid moral obligation to protect civilians being massacred.

The international community's failure represented moral test, and collectively, humanity failed. We watched genocide unfold in real time, we had evidence, we had tools and capabilities to intervene, we had proclaimed "Never Again" as operative principle, and we chose statements over action, performed concern while avoiding cost, documented atrocities while allowing them to continue. This failure will be judged harshly by history, recognized as moment when world's claimed commitment to human rights was revealed as conditional, limited, subordinate to interests and unwilling to accept sacrifice that "Never Again" demands.

References

- [1] Amnesty International. *Iran: Massacre of Protesters Demands Global Diplomatic Action to Signal End to Impunity*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/01/iran-massacre-of-protesters-demands-global-diplomatic-action-to-signal-an-end-to-impunity/>.
- [2] Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Growing Evidence of Countrywide Massacres*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/01/16/iran-growing-evidence-of-countrywide-massacres>.
- [3] UN News. *Security Council LIVE: UN Raises Alarm Over Deadly Iran Protests and Possible Military Strikes*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/01/1166769>.

- [4] Euronews. *EU Rejects Violence Against Protesters in Iran, Backs Legitimate Aspiration for Change*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/01/09/eu-rejects-violence-against-protesters-in-iran-backs-legitimate-aspiration-for-change>.
- [5] Security Council Report. *Briefing on Protests in Iran: What's In Blue*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2026/01/briefing-on-protests-in-iran.php>.
- [6] Volker Türk. *UN Human Rights Chief Deeply Disturbed by Protest-Related Violence in Iran*. UN News, Jan. 2026. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/01/1166733>.
- [7] Wikipedia Contributors. *2026 Iran Massacres*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Iran_massacres.
- [8] 46 Civil Society Organizations. *46 Human Rights Organizations Urge UN Rights Council to Hold Emergency Session on Mass Killings in Iran*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://hengaw.net/en/statements/2026/01/article-3>.
- [9] Congressional Research Service. *Protests in Iran: Possible U.S. Responses and Issues for Congress*. Jan. 2026. URL: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF13153/IF13153.2.pdf.
- [10] Congressional Research Service. *Protests in Iran: Possible U.S. Responses and Issues for Congress*. Jan. 2026. URL: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF13153/IF13153.1.pdf.
- [11] Wikipedia Contributors. *2026 Internet Blackout in Iran*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Internet_blackout_in_Iran.
- [12] European Parliament. *European Parliament Resolution on Iran Protests*. Jan. 2026. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/301897/TA-10-2026-0023_EN.pdf.
- [13] European Commission. *EU Commission on Iran Protests and Possible New Sanctions*. Video briefing. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn1z7hhKT6M>.
- [14] Center for Human Rights in Iran. *Iranian Authorities Intensify Crackdown on Protests with Live Fire, Arbitrary Arrests and Attacks on Hospitals*. Jan. 2026. URL: <https://iranhumanrights.org/2026/01/iranian-authorities-intensify-crackdown-on-protests-with-live-fire-arbitrary-arrests-and-attacks-on-hospitals/>.
- [15] Wikipedia Contributors. *2026 Internet Blackout in Iran*. 2026. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Internet_blackout_in_Iran.