

Iranian government kills hundreds in bid to suppress the worst protests in decades

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According to reports from international rights organizations, opposition groups and local journalists, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's security forces have killed more than 400 people since the eruption of mass protests by workers and youth on November 15. The upheavals were triggered by an overnight hike in gas prices and widespread economic hardship. A further 2,000 people have reportedly been wounded and 7,000 arrested during the government crackdown.

Given the government's five-day internet blackout and the hostility of the Western media towards Iran, it is difficult to know how accurate these figures are and the veracity of the claims and counterclaims as to who was behind the brutal suppression of the protests.

The government acknowledged that 12 people had been killed after three days of protests, while Amnesty International claimed that at least 161 people had been killed across 10 provinces, mostly as a result of live fire. According to the *New York Times*, which has close links to the US military and security apparatus, the death toll from the government's crackdown during the last two weeks was between 180 and 450.

Interior minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli said that 731 banks, 140 public spaces, nine religious centres, 70 gasoline stations, 307 vehicles, 183 police cars, 1,076 motorcycles and 34 ambulances were attacked and damaged. He said that there had been protests in 29 out of 31 provinces and 50 military bases had been attacked. If true, it implies a level of coordination unseen in previous demonstrations in 2009 and 2017-18, or indeed elsewhere in protest movements in the Middle East.

Hamed, an actor living in a suburb in west Tehran, speaking to the *Financial Times* about the protesters carrying out the attacks, said, "They were like a gang, marching in the streets with faces covered, destroying specific targets like banks" and they looked like "professionals with sophisticated tools." He added that some of them "must have been led by foreign forces." The IRGC claimed that some of the protesters were carrying tools not

normally available in Iran. But others suggested the attacks could only have taken place if the IRGC had directed at least some of the protesters in order to provide a pretext for the clampdown.

While the protests began in response to a new rationing system that allows just 60 litres (16 gallons) per month to each passenger vehicle (more for taxis and commercial vehicles) for 15,000 rials per litre—a 50 percent increase, and 30,000 rials per litre, a 300 percent increase on purchases over the 60 litres—they soon spread to encompass broader social, economic and political demands. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets, setting up roadblocks.

With Iran's petrol prices among the cheapest in the world, many people use their cars as unofficial taxis to earn extra cash to supplement their meagre incomes that have been eaten away by inflation following Washington's unilateral imposition of sanctions and—crucially—the threat of secondary sanctions against countries trading with Iran. Since then, sales of crude oil have fallen from 2.8 million barrels a day (bpd) to less than 500,000 bpd, gutting foreign exchange earnings.

This, together with years of austerity, imposed by successive governments with the support of all factions of Iran's political establishment, has led to soaring inflation, mass unemployment, shrinking incomes and ever-deepening social inequality. It has driven many young people out of the city centres into the outer suburbs and satellite towns, where most of the unrest took place. It highlights the utterly reactionary character of the bourgeois clerical regime that has escalated its attacks on the working class as it has sought to reach some accommodation with the imperialist powers.

At first, the government claimed the price rise was necessary to combat smuggling and was in line with IMF recommendations. Although Iran's central bank had denied that it has sought a loan from the IMF, it soon switched tack when the scale of the protests became apparent. Conceding that there was popular and justifiable anger, government ministers insisted that the real purpose of the gas price hike was to provide greater financial support for impoverished

families via a system of monthly cash payments, initially introduced in 2011, that would ultimately benefit nearly 60 million people, more than 70 percent of Iran's 82 million population.

There are evidently enormous divisions and nervousness within the ruling elite over how to handle the protests. Initially, some of Rouhani's social conservative rivals opposed the price hikes, but after Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei expressed his support for Rouhani, they backed down.

Khamenei described the violence as the work of a "very dangerous conspiracy," while Rouhani's government blamed "thugs" linked to Iranian dissidents in exile and the country's main external enemies—the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), set up in 1979 to defend the country's bourgeois clerical regime, said that the US had supported the protests by deploying "psychological warfare" and "local mercenaries" in an effort to exert maximum pressure on Tehran.

Some of the worst violence reportedly took place in the southern city of Mahshahr in Khuzestan Province, close to Iran's largest industrial petrochemical complex and gateway to Bandar Imam, a major port, where IRGC forces surrounded, shot and killed 40 to 100 demonstrators—mostly unarmed young men—in a marsh where they had sought refuge. Mohamad Golmordai, the city's member of parliament, angrily attacked the government in an outburst that led to a fight in the parliament that was broadcast on Iranian state television and went viral on social media. He said, "What have you done that the undignified Shah did not do?" This was a reference to the bloody suppression of the protest movement in 1978 that brought down the Shah's tyrannical regime the following year.

Mir Hussein Moussavi, leader of the opposition green movement and presidential candidate in the 2009 election blamed Khamenei for the killings. Moussavi had claimed that the election results had been rigged, triggering mass demonstrations, and has been under house arrest since 2011. He too compared the repression to the 1978 massacre by the Shah's forces.

There is no doubt that the US, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Israel are seeking to exploit the escalating crisis confronting Iran. The stated objective of the US "maximum pressure" campaign of unilateral sanctions, amounting to an economic blockade, is to drive the country's oil exports down to zero, while denying it access to the world banking system. This economic act of war is designed to secure the downfall of Iran's nationalist regime, reduce its influence in the region and install a government that will take its orders from Washington, thereby isolating

China and Russia.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu however has been pressing the Trump administration for months to take a more militaristic stance against Iran.

The White House announced that President Donald Trump had spoken to Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the phone on Sunday to discuss Iran and other regional issues. This was only the second time the two have spoken since Netanyahu's far-right-wing religious bloc failed to win an overall majority in Israel's September 17 election, the second this year.

In October, Netanyahu accused Iran of "seeking to tighten its grip in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen and in the Gaza Strip. It is incessantly arming itself, equipping its offshoots with dangerous weaponry, assaulting freedom of navigation in international shipping lanes. It has downed a large American unmanned aerial vehicle and carried out a blatant and unprecedented attack on oil fields in Saudi Arabia." He added that Israel will "always remember and follow the basic rule that guides us: Israel will defend itself by itself in the face of every threat."

Several high-ranking US military officials have either visited Israel or held discussions with their counterparts in the Israeli army over Iran and the growing tensions over Tehran's role and influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Netanyahu is hoping to secure a meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Lisbon later this week. Last week, Pompeo threatened to impose further sanctions on Iran for "human rights" abuses in suppressing the protests.

His threat follows the remarks of US Central Command chief Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, who claimed that, despite the US build-up of military might in the Gulf, the threat from Iran continued to increase. Such remarks, which have no basis in reality, point to the rising danger of a war in the region that would draw in all the major powers.



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