Imperialist powers ratchet up pressure on Tehran as Iranian protests continue

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Protests across Iran following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16—after her arrest in Tehran for "improperly" wearing a hijab by the country's morality police—have been continuing under the slogan "Women, life, freedom!".

Protests are particularly broad in the northwestern Kurdistan province, from which Amini hailed.

They have been fueled by popular anger over the country's terrible social and economic conditions created in large part by the brutal sanctions regime imposed by the imperialist powers. Last week, the Iranian rial fell to its lowest-ever level against the dollar, with inflation running at 42 percent.

Iran's oil exports have plummeted, slashing the country's most important source of income. The Ministry of Labour has reported that 30 million of Iran's 84 million population live in "absolute poverty," while a report by the Iranian Labour News Agency maintains that 70 percent (59 million) live below the poverty line.

The anti-government demonstrations and rallies have continued in the face of intimidation, mass arrests, and lethal force. However, having made no appeal to the working class in Iran's oil, petrochemical and manufacturing sectors, the largely leaderless movement made up of students from the universities and high schools has attracted little active support from workers or the bazaar merchants and traders.

As the *Financial Times* noted on Monday, in comparison to the mass protests that brought down the Shah in 1979, "This time around protesters have urged all groups — including merchants in the bazaars, teachers and workers in the oil sector — to stage strikes in the hope that this would turn the latest unrest into a revolution and lead to the replacement of the theocracy with a modern, secular government. But workers have responded cautiously." A *Guardian* editorial also noted, "Nor are there any signs of splits at the top, which might respond to growing pressure from the grassroots."

In its March budget, President Ebrahim Raisi's government, responding to demonstrations by education and health workers and pensioners, raised public sector wages, including for civil servants and soldiers, by 20 percent. The minimum wage was increased by 60 percent, the allowances given to disabled veterans of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war by 25 percent and pensions by 20 percent, while state-affiliated charity organisations upped the monthly stipends to poor families by 30 percent.

Facts about the protests are hard to come by and what information exists is highly politicised. More than 400 protesters have been killed, including 47 children, since September. This is according to HRA, an Iranian human rights group that has received funding from the US National Endowment for Democracy that is directly funded by the US government, and Hengaw, a Kurdish Iranian human rights group based in Norway. But none of these figures can be independently verified.

The Iranian authorities, while acknowledging dozens of deaths, have disputed these figures and say that "approximately 60" members of its security forces have been killed in the protests.

Around 15,000 people have reportedly been detained, with more than 1,000 indictments issued just in the Tehran province, according to the United Nations. Although 277 of Iran's law makers were reported as having urged the judiciary to "show no leniency" to protesters, some have since claimed that they did not support the statement and that the letter was a "fake".

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau leapt on this, rushing to express his solidarity in a tweet, later deleted, with the protests and to condemn what he falsely asserted was the regime's supposed sentencing of almost 15,000 people to death.

The regime has blamed "foreign adversaries," particularly the US and Israel, for instigating the protests,

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claiming that Washington and its allies are using their regional allies, including Iraqi Kurds, to arm and support demonstrators. Tehran has carried out a series of attacks on anti-regime Kurdish groups inside Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq that it says have been supporting protesters in the Kurdish areas of northwestern Iran that have seen the most extensive protests.

On Tuesday, the government announced that 40 foreign nationals had been arrested for their role in the unrest. It follows an earlier announcement in September that nine Europeans had been arrested for their involvement.

The authorities have also accused foreign-based Farsi broadcasters such as BBC Persian and the London-based and Saudi-funded *Iran International* of "fomenting unrest" and placed the country's news outlets and social media under tight government control.

Washington, London, Paris, Ottawa, Berlin and the other major powers have indeed seized on the protests as a stick to beat the Tehran regime with and possibly to orchestrate regime change in pursuit of their geostrategic interests.

They have stressed that the unrest in Iran makes it more difficult if not impossible to reach an agreement on the stalled negotiations in Vienna around the 2015 nuclear accords. At the same time they point to Iran's announcement that it will enrich uranium to 60 percent, in breach of the agreed level of 3.67 percent, although well below the 90 percent level considered to be needed for military purposes.

US President Joe Biden, in remarks earlier this month at an election campaign rally later walked back by his officials, promised to "free Iran," adding that the protesters would "free themselves pretty soon." His remarks follow military threats and actions, including his efforts to establish an anti-Iran alliance of the Gulf states, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Israel.

Tel Aviv, Washington's attack dog, has stepped up its aggressive air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, while carrying out acts of sabotage within Iran.

Germany and Iceland, with the support of 44 other states, have convened a special session of the UN's Human Rights Council for Thursday,focusing on "the deteriorating human rights situation" in Iran. The meeting will provide cover for the imperialist powers to impose additional sanctions against Iranian officials and institutions.

Even before the latest round of protests, the Biden administration had imposed several rounds of sanctions against Iran since June, targeting commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's morality police, law enforcement vorces, prisons, a provincial governor and other Iranian officials involved in Tehran's crackdown, including asset freezes and travel bans. Canada, the UK and the European Union (EU) have followed suit.

French President Emmanuel Macron has been particularly vocal, meeting with Iranian women activists in France on November 14. He called the protests a "revolution," the first Western leader to do so, in a reprise of the designations in 2011 that heralded Western militarist interventions in Libya and Syria. Speaking at the G20 summit in Bali, he accused Iran of increased aggression towards France, with its "arbitrary detention" of at least seven French nationals, including intelligence officers, and destabilising the region with its strikes on Iraqi Kurdistan. He indicated he might ask the EU to designate Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) a terrorist organisation.

The UK's Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, speaking at a security conference in Bahrain, accused Iran of spreading "bloodshed and destruction," referring to the Iranian drones supplied to Moscow for its war in Ukraine that NATO claims were used to hit key infrastructure sites. Tehran counters that the drones were dispatched before Moscow's invasion in February. Cleverly also said that the Royal Navy had twice seized missiles being smuggled out of Iran this year.

Last week, Ken McCallum, the head of Britain's spy agency MI5, claimed Iranian intelligence agents had been targeting people in the UK. He said there had been at least 10 threats since January to kidnap or even kill British or UK-based people perceived as enemies of the regime. On Saturday, the *Times* reported that London's Metropolitan Police had stationed Armed Response Vehicles outside *Iran International*'s headquarters, following threats by Tehran against its journalists.

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