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3.1.2. Protesters

COMMON ANALYSIS
Last update: January 2025

A protester is a person who publicly advocates for a given issue by standing in public spaces, taking part in demonstrations, shouting, carrying signs, etc.8.

The analysis below is based on the following EUAA COI report and query: Country Focus 2024, 3.9, 4.2; COI Human Rights, 1.1. Country Guidance should not be referred to as source of COI.

Even though the Constitution of Iran allows public demonstrations, they must adhere to Islamic principles and require government authorisation. This effectively bans gatherings critical of the government, leading to the suppression of unauthorised protests through detentions and use of lethal force. Since the foundation of the Islamic Republic, several large-scale protests with respective agendas such as economic grievances, contestation of election results, and denunciation of human rights violations, were violently repressed by the Iranian authorities. Following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, nationwide protests erupted highlighting discrimination against women and ethnic minorities.

Step 1: Do the reported acts amount to persecution?

Some acts to which protesters could be exposed are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution. Notably, the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests were violently suppressed by the authorities, with sources reporting on mass arrests, killings of protesters and bystanders, and beatings. Security forces reportedly used excessive force, such as unlawful use of live ammunition, including handguns, and automatic weapons. The death penalty was wielded by the Iranian authorities as a tool of political repression against protesters. Mass arrests during major demonstrations, such as the 2019 fuel price protests and the 'Women, Life, Freedom' movement, have resulted in high number of deaths, thousands of detentions, and numerous cases of torture. Expeditious trials and executions took place in response of the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests. Many protesters were charged with severe crimes carrying heavy penalties, including the death penalty. Others were charged with serious crimes like *moharebeh* ('waging war against God') and *efsad fil-arz* (spreading corruption on Earth), often leading to execution or long prison sentences. Use of torture, including to extract confessions and violations of due process were common. There were reports of arrests of children, with some subjected to torture, sexual assault, and denial of due process. Despite a general amnesty announced in February 2023, some protesters and activists remained at risk of re-arrest and severe punishment. Some

family members of protesters, particularly those killed or detained during protests, are increasingly targeted by the authorities in an attempt to silence them. The government has resorted to harassing, threatening, and even detaining the families of protesters in an effort to suppress dissent.

The severity and/or repetitiveness of other acts that protesters could be subjected to and whether they occur as an accumulation of various measures, should also be considered. For example, some protesters faced two separate trials for the same offence. Other protesters have seen their freedom of movement being restricted.

Step 2: What is the level of risk of persecution?

The legal framework allows for discretionary punishments under *ta'zīr,* encompassing a wide range of offences such as insulting religious figures and spreading propaganda against the government. Protests critical of the regime are met with violent crackdowns by security forces, including live ammunition and mass arrests. The 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests in 2022 highlighted widespread grievances and were violently suppressed, resulting in hundreds of deaths and reports of torture and arbitrary detention. Despite occasional amnesties, the government selectively excludes certain individuals from leniency, indicating ongoing targeting of dissenters. International observers consistently document these abuses, confirming the precarious and oppressive environment for protesters in Iran.

The individual assessment of whether there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for protesters and their family members to face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as:

- **Visibility, including being known to the authorities**: visibility to the authorities is a critical factor impacting the risk of persecution. Protesters who use government-controlled technologies, such as state-run internet service providers or social media platforms like Instagram, and particularly those with high numbers of followers, face a higher risk. Iranian authorities have ramped up their surveillance capabilities, particularly through the use of state-controlled technologies such as mobile data and internet services. The government's surveillance capabilities became more evident since the 2022 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests, with many protesters being identified and later persecuted for their participation. Those with high numbers of followers on social media platforms have seen their mobile services cut off or social media accounts suspended.

- **Frequency of participation in demonstrations**: the frequency with which an individual participates in protests directly influences the risk of persecution. While not all protesters are arrested, those who are involved in several demonstrations, especially large-scale or anti-regime protests, are often viewed as organisers or ringleaders, and face a higher risk of being identified and targeted.

- **Political background**: individuals with a known political stance against the regime, especially those with past affiliations with opposition movements like the Green Movement (2009) or anti-regime protests, face a higher risk. The government perceives anti-state protests

as ‘riots’ and protesters can at times be considered as organisers, depending on their profile.

- **Geographical area of activities**: individuals having protested in areas affected by more extensive and long-lasting protests face a higher risk. Those areas include the capital Tehran, Kurdish regions, and Sistan and Baluchistan, and the cities of Divandareh, Garmsar, Hamedan, Kerman, Marivan, Mashhad, Mehrshahr, Rasht, Saghez, Sanandaj, and Shiraz. The highest numbers of deaths were reported in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities: Sistan and Baluchistan province, provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah, and parts of Western Azerbaijan. Past security threats, such as separatism, terrorism, and drug trafficking, had led to militarisation in minority-populated provinces. It enables the government to respond swiftly and violently to any protest or dissent.

- **Ethnic and religious background**: protesters belonging to an ethnic and/or religious minority face a higher risk, as some protesters were targeted by the security forces based on discriminatory grounds, such as ethnicity.

- **Gender**: in regard of the general situation of women in Iran, and because specific protesters have been targeted by the security forces based on their gender, female protesters face a higher risk than their male counterparts. Women, especially those from ethnic and religious minorities, have been subjected to gender-based violence, including rape and torture. Iranian authorities have reportedly increased online surveillance of women involved in the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement and have charged some of them under national security laws for opposing the compulsory hijab. Please refer to Women and girls.

Step 3: Is there a ground for persecution?

Where well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated for an applicant under this sub-profile, this is highly likely to be for reasons of (imputed) political opinion, as protesters would be seen as being critical of the authorities.

See other contents related to Political dissent and opposition:

- 3.1.1. Members and sympathisers of opposition parties and movements (perceived as) critical of the Iranian authorities
- *3.1.2. Protesters*
- 3.1.3. Human rights defenders, activists, and lawyers
- 3.1.4. Journalists and other media workers (perceived as) critical of the Iranian authorities

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  Adaptation based on Cambridge Dictionary.

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