

Iran, Challenged: Women-led Protests, Women-led Responses | Event Report

8 December 2022 | European Parliament

Key Recommendations to the EU:

- **Exert greater diplomatic pressure on the Iranian government** to cease its repression of legitimate protests. Consider recalling European ambassadors from Iran to express greater outrage at the current events.
- **Urgently investigate any claims that European weapons or technologies are being used by Iranian authorities**, and condemn any Member States found to be complicit.
- **Collaborate with engaged organizations to campaign for leniency** from the Iranian authorities for individuals at greatest risk of death sentences and excessive punishment. Promote and highlight any existing campaigns for these particular individuals at risk.
- **Create an International Forum for Iranian Women** that includes diverse civil society and community representatives, political leaders, activists, lawyers, journalists, representatives from feminist movements and ordinary citizens, both from within Iran and the diaspora. The aim of the forum should be formulating recommendations to European policy makers and to the international community, and express a multitude of positionalities and priorities, including but not limited to women's rights in Iran.
- **Provide targeted funding and capacity-building training to diaspora Iranians in Europe** in order to support efficient forms of advocacy, data collection and fact-finding, as well as facilitate Iranians' abroad logistic and financial support to Iranians facing the brutality of the regime.
- **Exert greater diplomatic pressure on the Iranian government to cease its repression of legitimate protests.** Consider recalling European ambassadors from Iran to express greater outrage at the current events.
- **The IRGC have had a direct role in severe violations of human rights**, including the killing, torture and repression of the Iranian people. We urgently call on European leaders and EU institutions to designate IRGC as a terrorist organization and sanction key government officials and their family members for alleged human rights violations.

Speakers:

- **Hilde Vautmans** | Member of the European Parliament – Renew Europe Group
- **María Soraya Rodríguez Ramos** | Member of the European Parliament – Renew Europe Group
- **Dr. Shirin Ebadi** | Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

- **Lesia Radelicki** | Cabinet of EU Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli
- **Ambassador Arnout Pauwels** | Permanent Representation of Belgium to the European Union
- **Dr. Azadeh Zamirirad** | Deputy Head of Research Division – German Institute for International



DISCUSSION PAPER:

This discussion paper explores some of the main policy outcomes proposed at the BIC's event, 'Iran, Challenged: Women-led Protests, Women-led Responses'. The paper places emphasis on options that engage with Iranian protesters contextually, such as targeted campaigning for individuals at greatest risk or reprisal as well as methods to raise the voices of the Iranian diaspora in Europe.

INTRODUCTION:

On Thursday 8 December 2022, the Brussels International Center organised an event at the European Parliament called 'Iran, Challenged: Women-led Protests, Women-led Responses', hosted by MEPs Hilde Vautmans and MEP Soraya Rodriguez Ramos.

The event discussed the protests in Iran that have erupted since the death of Mahsa Amini, including the level of repression inflicted by the Iranian government. During the discussion, several important aspects were raised regarding how the international community, including the European Union, can better support the demands of protestors. This paper explores those elements in more detail.



The EU has indeed been quick to condemn the actions of the Iranian regime, and the decisiveness and unity shown by the European Parliament in expressing condemnation was noted as being significant by MEP Vautmans. However, on a simple level, the EU has not exhausted its standard policy options towards the Iranian regime. For instance, Dr. Ebadi commented that European Member States could opt to recall their ambassadors from Iran and revert to a basic level of charge d'affaires diplomatic relations.

Dr. Zamirirad also urged the EU to investigate allegations that European arms and technology are being used by the Iranian government to oppress protestors. Both suggestions seem to be relatively reasonable, though one of the EU's greatest strengths is its ability to enact 'shadow', ie. unofficial, dialogue with actors such as the Iranian government, as discussed by Ms. Tschampa.

Indeed, the EU does have to navigate how to act towards Iran such that it is the government itself that is affected, and not ordinary citizens, and this is where the EU's policy to enact targeted sanctions against actors, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, rather than blanket economic sanctions has garnered praise. However, how should the EU enact policy to, as Ms. Radelicki said, bring Iranian women to the decision-making table in this situation?

Perhaps an answer can be found through another route, that is connecting with women, and others, protesting on the ground. This idea can be in general terms, divided into two parts: campaigning for individual protestors at greatest risk through telling their testimonies and experiences, and giving Iranian voices a platform to be heard in Europe and elsewhere through engaging with the Iranian diaspora.





CAMPAIGNING FOR INDIVIDUAL PROTESTORS AT RISK

The scale of the arrests in Iran is very shocking and panelists at the European Parliament spent much of their time remarking on the abhorrent scale of the oppression within Iran. Estimates by UN human rights experts placing the figure at more than 140,000 arrests across the country since protests began. Official figures by the Iranian authorities are scarce, but for at least one province, Tehran, there are official statistics of 160 people sentenced between five and ten years in prison, 80 people between two and five years, and another 160 people sentenced up to two years. In this sense, the scale of the oppression is remarkable.

However, it is still imperative for the international community to focus its campaigning efforts for particular individuals. There are, after all, some people more vulnerable than others. For example, Dr. Ebadi spoke of the specific, horrifying details of torture and oppression that authorities conducted against particular protestors, including those who have been put to death. Two death sentences have been carried out so far, of 23-year old Majidreza Rahnavard, and 23-year old Mohsen Shekari, both hanged publicly seemingly as a means of intimidation.

In the latter case, Shekari was arrested following his participation at a protest in Tehran on 25 September 2022. Rahnavard was arrested on 19 November 2022, following what the Iranian authorities allege was his participation within an assault that occurred during protests on 17 November. Several injustices affected the trial process both for Shekari and Rahnavard below.

Firstly, the access to suitable lawyers was reportedly non-existent. Secondly, there is evidence that the suspects were subject to torture to extract confessions. Thirdly, the trials were all conducted behind closed doors, indicating a lack of accountability for the process. Lastly, the speed at which these death sentences were carried out is shocking, and an indication of the intimidatory nature of the sentence. For instance, for Shekari, the turnaround time between his sentencing, 1 November 2022, and execution date, 8 December 2022, was 37 days. For Rehavard, the turnaround time for his sentence was even more extreme, between his sentencing on 29 November 2022, to his death on 12 December 2022, was only 13 days.

Given the extreme risks that some protestors are thus facing, panelists at the event noted that we need to make targeted international campaigns for specific individuals in order to pressure the Iranian authorities to halt such extreme sentences, a policy advocated for by Dr. Zamirirad. Amnesty International is leading the way with such campaigns, identifying six people who could be awaiting or undergoing trial with death penalty charges, and overall 20 people specifically at risk of executions for alleged offences connected to the protests. One of the six is footballer Amir Nazr-Azadani, who faces possible execution for publicly calling for women's rights and basic freedoms within Iran. Of course, the success of campaigning will be outcome dependent, but Nazr-Azadani at least has the backing of Fifpro, the international footballer's union, who, like Amnesty, are publicly campaigning for leniency.

International policymakers could thus collaborate with NGOs and other organizations, who have greater familiarity with the contextual specificities of each individual case, to put specific pressure on the Iranian authorities on an individual case-by-case basis. As a more generalized objective, at a minimum, authorities should put greater pressure upon the Iranian authorities to refrain from issuing death sentences for protestors altogether.

ENGAGING THE IRANIAN DIASPORA

The Iranian diaspora in Europe is estimated to around 1.2 million Iranian residents and European citizens of Iranian origin, making up almost 30% of the Iranian diaspora across the world. Since the beginning of the protests chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom" in September of this year following the brutal killing of 22-year old Mahsa Amini for violating the strict dress code imposed on women by the morality police, the Iranian diaspora has been mobilizing across different European cities. Diaspora Iranians have organized protests in solidarity with fellow Iranians subjected to ferocious repression, pressured their governments to take sanctions against the Mullahs' regime, supported

grassroots movements through donation and advocacy campaigns and kept track of those arrested, forcibly disappeared, sentenced, and killed.

Iranians across the world have also been investing different platforms, from individual social media accounts to major western newspapers, in order to change the narrative surrounding the protests' demands and the Iranian people as a whole, highlighting Iranians' anger is not solely about the mandatory headscarf wearing for women but a rejection of decades of despotism and repression under religious pretexts.

During the event, panelists insisted on the importance of the diaspora's role in supporting the call for change in Iran. All highlighted the necessity for the EU to put in place channels of direct and continuous communication with the Iranian diaspora. The EU's support should not only be in the form of funding for grassroots organizations in the diaspora, specifically women and human rights organizations as suggested by Dr. Zamirirad, but equally with capacity-building efforts to help Iranian communities abroad organize efficiently, as advocated by Ambassador Pauwels.

One form this transcontinental solidarity network could take is by following the example of the Afghan Women Leaders Forum, a feminist endeavour facilitated by the EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity. Indeed, MEP Rodriguez proposed the creation of an international forum for Iranian women. The forum could offer a platform for Iranian women of different backgrounds to express their views and demands to EU policy makers, and to the international community more broadly. Unlike for Afghan women however, women taking part in the forum should not be expected to formulate demands to the Iranian regime as many Iranians made clear the ongoing State violence in Iran is beyond reforming. Rather, the platform could enhance opposition voices and ensure diverse women are included in the process. Additionally, it should encourage European policy makers to take urgent action against the Iranian regime and pressure the said regime to curb its deadliest policies, specifically sentencing protesters to death and executing them in a matter of weeks. So far, the Iranian State has announced the morality police was dissolved, yet this was not confirmed by the ministry of interior, as reminded by MEP Rodriguez.

