

Iran's Brutal Crackdown

IRGC Violence and the Rising Death Toll in Nationwide Protests



Since late **December 2025**, Iran has been gripped by some of the most widespread and intense protests in decades. What began as demonstrations against a deepening economic crisis, including rampant inflation and the sharp devaluation of the currency, quickly expanded into broad public dissent against the ruling political system. There were calls for political change and challenges to the authority of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Across cities and towns in every province, crowds took to the streets to express anger over hardship and perceived corruption. Iranian authorities responded with a forceful security crackdown involving the IRGC, the paramilitary Basij militia, and the national police forces. In many locations, security forces have attempted to suppress demonstrations with live ammunition, metal pellet shotguns, tear gas, water cannons, beatings, mass arrests, and communication blackouts that have cut internet and phone service across the country.

In recent days, senior Iranian officials, including Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, a former IRGC commander, have publicly warned that if the United States were to carry out military strikes against Iran in response to the government's crackdown on protests, Tehran would **retaliate against both U.S. and Israeli targets**. Qalibaf stated that **American military bases across the region and Israel itself would be considered "legitimate targets"** in the event of U.S. action, signalling a significant escalation in Tehran's deterrence messaging.

These warnings were issued against the backdrop of repeated threats by U.S. leadership, including President **Donald Trump**, indicating that Washington is considering military options if Iranian

authorities continue lethal crackdowns on demonstrators. Tehran has consistently framed such rhetoric as foreign interference in its internal affairs and has rejected it as justification for outside military intervention.

Eyewitness accounts and independent monitoring groups report that IRGC and Basij members have fired directly into crowds, killing and injuring unarmed protesters, including teenagers and bystanders. Human rights organisations documented multiple incidents where security forces opened fire without justification, leading to deaths in cities such as Lorestan, Ilam, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Esfahan. In some cases, security operatives even targeted hospitals where injured protesters were being treated.

Conflicting figures have emerged about the full scale of the violence. Independent rights groups and Iranian-based monitors estimate that **hundreds to thousands of civilians** have been killed as a result of the crackdown. A report by the Human Rights Activists News Agency noted that as of mid-January 2026, the death toll among protesters had surpassed **2,000**, including civilians and a smaller number of government affiliates, with more than 16,700 people detained nationwide.

Some estimates from diaspora media and activist networks suggest an even higher toll, with claims that **up to 12,000 people** may have been killed over a concentrated period of intense repression on 8th to 9th January 2026, though these figures are difficult to independently verify given the Iranian government's communications blackout and restrictions on reporting.

The Iranian government has at times sought to minimise the scale of casualties or to shift blame, with state officials framing protesters as "terrorists" or foreign-backed actors responsible for violence. Tehran has also claimed that some security personnel were killed in clashes.

Among the documented individual cases of killings, the deaths of **Rasoul and Reza Kadyourian**, two young brothers shot by the armed forces of the IRGC in early January 2026 during protests in Kermanshah province, have drawn particular attention. After their deaths, authorities reportedly tried to pressure the family to declare them as members of the Basij, highlighting ongoing efforts to control narratives about the violence.

International reactions have ranged from condemnation by United Nations human rights officials who described reports of mass killings and human rights abuses as "horrifying" to broader geopolitical tension with global powers weighing responses, including sanctions and diplomatic measures.

The IRGC's role in suppressing dissent reflects its central position within Iran's political and security apparatus. Originally formed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution to protect the regime from internal and external threats, the IRGC has evolved into a powerful force with economic, military, and political influence. In recent years, it has been frequently deployed to enforce internal security and shape domestic political outcomes, often with severe consequences for civil liberties.

As protests continue under heavy restrictions, the full human cost of Iran's security crackdown remains difficult to quantify. But mounting evidence suggests that lethal force has been used repeatedly against largely unarmed demonstrators, setting the stage for one of the deadliest episodes of internal unrest in the Islamic Republic's history.