Iran: When a Regime Sacrifices Its Own People

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The Iranian regime rules through sacrifice and fear. As the streets seethe and repression tightens, every option—intervention or inaction—carries major risks, for Iran itself and for regional stability.

Shiite Martyrology

When Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared that he could not accept that hundreds of thousands of deaths had been "sacrificed in vain" for the Islamic Revolution, he revealed far more than a ritual phrase of remembrance. The figure is almost certainly grossly exaggerated, but the intent is unmistakable: the survival of the Islamic Republic would justify, if necessary, an equal—or even greater—human toll. In this worldview, life is not a value; it is a currency.

This vision is rooted in a Shiite martyrology elevated by the regime into a state ideology. Ashura, the annual commemoration of Imam Hussein's martyrdom, offers a vivid display each year, with public acts of self-flagellation and mortification. During the Iran–Iraq War, this culture of sacrifice took a tragically literal form: tens of thousands of children were sent to clear minefields so the regular army could advance.

The message is clear: the objective—the establishment and expansion of political Shiite Islam—outweighs human life.

True to this logic, Tehran patiently built an "axis of resistance" stretching from Iraq to Yemen, via Syria and Lebanon. But Iran fought there to the last… Arab. The proxies, militias, and mercenaries who bled the Fertile Crescent were not Iranian. Today, that so-called axis of "resistance" has become an axis of misery and devastation—ruined, delegitimized, and largely disconnected from the aspirations of the peoples it claims to defend. And yet, at home, the regime retains a formidable grip.

Iran's Repressive Machinery

That grip rests first on a chillingly effective apparatus of repression. The security forces—chief among them the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—enjoy vast privileges: salaries higher than those of the regular army, control over a large share of the national economy, a sprawling empire of more than 8,000 companies, and ports and import channels that largely bypass customs oversight. This economic power is reinforced by carefully cultivated ideological loyalty.

The regime has also built a web of social and symbolic clienteles—"martyrs' families," the "dispossessed," loyalists of the Imam's line, theology students, religious chanters—whose material survival depends directly on state largesse. Clerics, too, are sustained through stipends and generous envelopes distributed from the very top of the state.

The Basij militia serves as the armed enforcer of this architecture. An ideologically driven paramilitary force, it operates with near carte blanche to crush dissent. During major student protests in Tehran, many young demonstrators chanting slogans against the Supreme Leader faced arbitrary arrests and torture, all under the shadow of death sentences handed down by a swift and merciless judiciary.

And yet.

What Can Be Done?

The current wave of unrest marks a rupture. It cuts across all layers of Iranian society. Dozens of mosques and banks have been set ablaze—a symbolic threshold never crossed during the movements of 2009, 2019, or 2022. The veneer of fear is cracking.

In response, official propaganda falls back on familiar reflexes: blaming the West for every real or imagined ill. For a regime obsessed with survival, a foreign intervention would almost be a godsend—a perfect way to rally a population steeped for decades in chants of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel."

International sanctions, meanwhile, hit the people far more than the rulers. The Revolutionary Guards capture most oil revenues—particularly via

China—while corruption rots every level of the state. Economic sanctions deepen Iranian misery without seriously shaking the regime or its enforcers.

If the Islamic Republic is to falter, it will be from within. Restoring and securing means of communication—internally and with the outside world—is crucial to amplifying the protesters' demands and sowing doubt within the ranks of the security forces before they fire on the crowds.

The Pros and Cons of Military Intervention

In the event of a military intervention targeting primarily the Revolutionary Guards, support for the regular army would offer the best chance of avoiding chaos. Even so, centrifugal pressures would intensify among Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch minorities. It would be naïve to expect a rapid collapse of the regime: it will not yield without resistance, and the ensuing repression could be even bloodier. Abroad, one would also have to anticipate the activation of Iranian terrorist networks that have so far remained dormant in the West.

Conversely, an ineffective U.S. intervention—or no intervention at all—would deal a severe blow to American credibility. Many Iranian protesters would feel betrayed, having been urged by Donald Trump to "hold on" with promises that help was on the way.

Regionally, regime change—or at least a durably weakened Iran—would be welcomed with relief by Sunni Arab states and by Israel. Turkey, by contrast, would see it as a major source of concern: any weakening of Tehran would revive the specter of Kurdish autonomy, which Ankara is determined to prevent at all costs. Saudi Arabia, for its part, could reap an indirect economic benefit: keeping large volumes of Iranian oil off global markets would help sustain—or even raise—crude prices.

Eternal Iran vs. the Mullahs' Regime

Iran is not its regime. It is a millennia-old civilization, shaped by multiple invasions yet still marked by a palpable Iranian and Zoroastrian substratum. This tension between a deep identity and an imposed ideological straitjacket finds a striking echo in poetry. The poet Bahar captured it powerfully by

invoking Mount Damavand, the majestic volcano overlooking Tehran. He calls on the mountain to awaken and sweep away tyranny and corruption with fire and lava.

Like Damavand, Iran is rumbling. The question is whether the eruption will ignite the hearts of the forces of repression—and whether it will finally be liberating.