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Iran's troubled regime tries to cling to power as Trump ratchets up pressure

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Analysis by Mitchell McCluskey



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a meeting in Tehran, Iran January ...



As **furious protests** enter their third week and bring Iran to the precipice of change, the country's theocratic government is trying to survive by harshly cracking down on the widening demonstrations.

Iran's ruling clergy have weathered huge protests many times before. But the longstanding regime's grasp on power now appears more tenuous than ever as the

swelling opposition movement demands substantive change.

The protests initially centered on economic grievances but have since evolved into a broader movement against the regime that has controlled Iran for decades.

“There’s systemic mismanagement, corruption, and repression. This is why people want the Islamic Republic gone,” Washington Institute Senior Fellow Holly Dagues told CNN.

While the regime faces mounting internal pressure from outraged protesters, US President Donald Trump has added his own voice of warning to the Iranian leadership.

Trump has repeatedly expressed support for the protest movement and called for an end to Iran’s Islamist regime, which has long been adversarial to the US.

“Iran is looking at FREEDOM, perhaps like never before,” Trump posted to social media on Saturday. “The USA stands ready to help!!!”

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The president is weighing a series of potential military options in Iran, but has not made a final decision on how US intervention would manifest, US officials have told CNN.

“There seem to be some people killed that aren’t supposed to be killed,” Trump told reporters on Sunday evening aboard Air Force One. “These are violent, if you call

we're looking at it very seriously.”

“The military is looking at it, and we're looking at some very strong options. We'll make it determination,” Trump said.

But some analysts caution a military intervention by the US may have limited impact.

“The regime is brittle, but it's quite brutally intact,” Dr HA Hellyer, Senior Associate Fellow at Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), told CNN.

Economic crisis

Over the years, Iran has seen waves of protests resulting in little societal or political change. But now the anger is mounting as defiant Iranians grow increasingly weary and impatient.

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Since coming to power in 1989 — a decade after a huge revolution swept the authoritarian US-backed Shah of Iran from power and ushered in an Islamic Republic — Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has navigated an array of political and security challenges.

Khamenei has maintained the backing of some loyalists and state institutions, but his repressive policies have been met with waning public support.



Iranians gather while blocking a street during a protest in Tehran, Iran on January 9, 2026.
(Khoshiran/AFP/Middle East Images/Getty Images)

Frustration over Iran's struggling economy has festered. Iran continues to face heavy international sanctions, including the reactivation of so-called “snapback” sanctions related to its nuclear program.

Leaders from countries that imposed sanctions often say that the measures are intended to bring pressure on the government and leaders of Iran.

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However, researchers say the Western sanctions have also **crippled** Iran's middle class – the base of the country's reform movement – who see few opportunities for economic growth.

At the same time, Iranian leadership is in a **vulnerable state** after several of its points of leverage were neutered.

Israeli attacks weakened Iran's regional armed proxy groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah while US strikes dealt significant damage to the country's **nuclear program**, which the government spent billions to develop.

Iran also lost a critical ally when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was **ousted** in December 2024.

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These developments led to a “situation that is unsustainable to the Islamic Republic,” Dagres said.

“Now, they're dealing with these foreign issues and these domestic issues with historically high anti-regime sentiment that won't go away until this regime is gone,” Dagres added.

Amid the disorder, the regime turned to a familiar playbook of crushing dissent.

Thousands have been arrested and hundreds killed as security forces violently cracked down on the protest, the organization Human Rights Activists in Iran

reported.

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Iran has also imposed widespread internet and telephone blackouts during the protests, limiting visibility into the situation on the ground.

Left with few options, the regime is making efforts to reinforce its support.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has **urged** his country's citizens not to join what he called "rioters and terrorists" participating in demonstrations across Iran.

Pezeshkian has **blamed** the unrest on foreign-linked "terrorists," who he said were burning bazaars, mosques and cultural sites.

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"If the people have concerns, it is our duty to resolve their concerns, but the higher duty is that we must not allow a group of rioters to come and disrupt the entire society," he said in a televised speech on Saturday.

Security apparatus intact

State television has broadcast images of regime loyalists marching in some cities.

The government called for a nationwide march on Monday in support of the regime and in opposition to what authorities described as recent acts of desecration and insults against Islamic symbols, including the Quran, by protesters.

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But any heavy-handed response to the protests could make the regime vulnerable to strong reaction from US and its allies.



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian speaks with Fox News Channel's Martha MacCallum during an interview on September 25, 2025 in New York City. *(John Lamparski/Getty Images)*

Earlier this month, Trump **warned** that the US is “locked and loaded” if Iran kills peaceful protesters.

After recent US action in Venezuela and the **killing** of Qasem Soleimani, the top general of Iran's revolutionary guard, during Trump's first term, Iran is compelled to seriously consider Trump's threats, Ali Vaez, Iran Project Director at the International Crisis Group, told CNN.

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But the increasing defiance of Iranians marching throughout the country may pose a greater existential threat to the regime.

“At least having their own streets under their control is what they see as essential for their own survival, even if it invites a US strike,” Vaez said.

Hellyer however noted that for now Iran's powerful security establishment remains intact.

“There hasn't been any serious elite or security defections as of yet. And if you don't have that, then any sort of intervention from the United States is not likely to actually be very helpful in the short to medium term.”

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“There's a lot of hollowing out, of course. There's severe economic challenges, if not complete collapse. There's a very broad protest coalition, of course, but it (the regime) is held together and it's held together by very cohesive and very coercive forces,” said Hellyer.

The reformist-led government **attempted** to alleviate the economic pressure by offering direct cash handouts of almost \$7 per month.

And some officials have struck a conciliatory tone when responding to the unrest.

Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni said that security forces show “maximum restraint,” but he admitted that there were “some shortcomings.”

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He also told state television that a “better economic future” is in store for Iranians.

In televised remarks on Sunday, Pezeshkian told the protesters that the government “must listen to your protest and address your concerns.”

The opposition, which has fervently called for regime change, may find this time ripe for such a push when the leadership appears vulnerable to external pressure.



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