

Tehran after the protests: patrols, propaganda and despair

Scars of a crackdown, which have brought anti-regime demonstrations to an end for now, are visible across Iran's capital

Bitá Ghaffari in Tehran

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In Haft-Hoz Square, the shoppers and commuters that typically fill this bustling commercial hub of eastern Tehran have been replaced by black-clad riot police. At least one masked sniper is visible, perched on top of one of the armoured vehicles that now dot the square.

At the centre of the scene is the charred shell of a municipal bus, burned down in the protests that tore through [Iran](#) this month. Draped across its blackened remnants is a banner bearing a blunt message reminding citizens of the cost of the unrest: "This was paid for with your taxes."

A [brutal crackdown](#) has brought weeks of anti-regime [demonstrations](#) to an abrupt end, with human rights groups overseas saying thousands were killed. But the scars left by the most severe violence to sweep the country since the 1979 Islamic revolution are still visible across Tehran, a city of 10mn now enveloped by an eerie silence.

Many shops have reopened but are devoid of customers, with those who can fleeing the city for the long weekend and others opting to stay home. An internet blackout, in place for more than a week, continues to sow confusion and obstruct daily life.

The show of force around Haft-Hoz, one of the protest hotspots, is an unobvious warning of what could await those who attempt to rise up again — and a reminder that, even if demonstrations have stopped, few expect things to go back to the way they were.



Security forces have maintained a heavy presence © Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto/Getty Images



The demonstrations began in Tehran and later spread around the country © Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images

“We can’t even start to think about getting back to normal,” said Sara, a teacher, who, like others interviewed, used a pseudonym for her safety. “We feel empty and abandoned. These protests were the result of so much desperation and anger built up over the years.”

“There is no easy path forward,” she said. “But I’m sure we will find a way to make our voices heard.”

For now, residents of Tehran are left to try to pick up the pieces of their lives. Ahmad, a tall, wiry man in his late 50s, travelled from the capital to his birthplace of Hamedan for the funeral of a cousin, who he said was shot and killed at the height of the unrest late last week.

Through tears, he took out his phone to show photos of the grave, laden with flowers, recounting how hundreds came to pay their respects. “After we buried him,” he said, “the rain started pouring so heavily that I thought even the heavens were weeping”.

The demonstrations began in Tehran in late December, with shopkeepers in the centre of the city closing their businesses to protest against dire economic conditions. They soon spread around Iran, spiralling into a broader movement against the Islamic republic itself.

“We all waited for something big to save us, but nothing happened,” said Hossein, a 45-year-old electrician, speaking near his shop in downtown Tehran. “We are now left with quiet, deserted streets, cut off from the world, with many families having someone killed, injured, arrested or shot in the eye with metal pellets.”



The regime claimed the protesters were paid and armed by outside powers © UGC/AP



Human rights groups overseas say thousands were killed in the protests © UGC/AP

Attempts to get life in the city back on track are hampered by the lack of internet and the fact that many cash machines remain inaccessible, blocked by metal bars installed to prevent damage.

Kaj Square, an affluent neighbourhood in western Tehran and another scene of protests, was quiet and gloomy this week, despite typically being lively in the evenings. There, too, security forces maintained a heavy presence. A large mosque had badly burned, with parts of the structure completely destroyed.

Not far away in Shahrak-e Gharb, a branch of the well-known coffee chain Saedinia was sealed with an official closure notice. The chain had been shut down after posting Instagram messages encouraging people to join demonstrations.

After initially seeking to acknowledge protesters' economic concerns, the regime portrayed the growing demonstrations as a movement engineered to foment violence using Iranians paid, armed and trained by outside powers, most notably Israel. It also held funerals for dozens of security force members killed during the protests.



A banner in Tehran says 'this is not a protest' © Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images



A billboard in the capital says 'Know me, I am Iran' © Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA/Shutterstock

Alongside the burned husks of buses, fire engines and ambulances — which officials have left in place as reminders of the actions of those they have called “rioters” — the regime has staged rallies with its supporters in central Tehran, drawing tens of thousands of participants.

As in the wake of Israel’s 12-day war against Iran in June, which briefly helped unify the otherwise polarised country, authorities have displayed patriotic slogans and banners with figures such as Arash the Archer, a hero from Persian mythology, on the streets of Tehran.

One banner, which has been stretched across main roads, celebrates “the holy unity of Tehran’s residents against Zionist-American terrorism”. Anti-government graffiti has been scrubbed from walls.

Yet for many people, their hatred of the regime has only deepened. They also feel betrayed by Iranian opposition figures overseas such as Reza Pahlavi, the US-based son of the deposed shah, who urged demonstrators on but could do little to rein in the chaos.



'The opposition abroad hijacked our protests,' said one woman opposes Reza Pahlavi, pictured, son of the deposed shah, who urged on demonstrators © AFP via Getty Images



Many cash machines remain inaccessible © AP

US President Donald Trump too encouraged the demonstrators, repeatedly threatening to intervene militarily to protect protesters. No help materialised — and the demonstrators are now wondering what, if anything, they have achieved.

“The opposition abroad hijacked our protests,” said one woman who joined in the rallies and opposes Pahlavi. “Otherwise, things were moving forward and we might have gained concessions from the regime. Instead, the violence and crackdown pushed people back with nothing to show but deaths and destruction.”

While a previous round of protest in 2022, known as the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, led to the end of the requirement that women wear hijabs in public, this time most protesters did not have clear demands beyond calling for the end of the regime.

And with the country under suffocating US sanctions, there is little prospect of a reprieve to the dire economic conditions that brought them to the streets in the first place.

“Before the unrest, people weren’t shopping because they had no money,” said a woman selling clothes in [Tehran’s Grand Bazaar](#), the historic market that was one of the early meeting places for protesters. “After the unrest, they’re scared by the heavy security. Opening or closing the shop feels meaningless.”

For the teacher Sara, who gives classes digitally, the lack of internet has cut off her income. But, far from rushing to get back online, she finds herself dreading the day it is reinstated — for fear of what other unknown traumas will come out.

“That’s when we will realise how many people were killed,” she said. “The reality may be even more gruesome than what we know now, and I don’t want to face it. We are left with more anger and desperation in a sad city.”

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Bitá Ghaffari