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The situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States

Report¹

Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy

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Summary

Iran has been the scene of unprecedented protest movement against the Islamic regime since the death of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022. Facing an existential threat, the regime reacted with extreme brutality to silence the legitimate demands of protesters. The report calls for political support to Iranians who stand up to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Iran.

Many Iranians living in Europe support the protest movement against the regime. They are often faced with threats, intimidation, violence and abductions by the Iranian State structures of repression, and even fall victims of assassination. The persecution of dissenting civil society voices and human rights defenders both in Iran and abroad by the Iranian regime is a threat to the security of European societies.

The situation in Iran and its domestic and foreign policy threaten regional, European and global security. European countries, however, have so far not designed a co-ordinated strategy to counter the Iranian policy to destabilise international order, and its subversive activities against European democracies.

The report concludes that the Council of Europe should play a significant role in guiding and supporting its member States when it comes to building up co-ordinated human rights-based relations with Iran. The draft resolution suggests ways to strengthen solidarity with Iranian civil society and protect Iranians in Europe, and principles for a coherent policy vis-à-vis Iran.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 15688](#), Reference 4713 of 2 March 2023.



Contents	Page
A. Draft resolution	3
B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Max Lucks, rapporteur	5
1. Introduction	5
1.1. Origin and procedure	5
1.2. Scope and purpose of the report	6
2. Situation in Iran following mass protests ongoing since 2022	6
2.1. Mass protests of unprecedented scale	6
2.2. Persecution of opponents by the authorities	7
2.3. Emerging civil society	8
2.4. Need for international solidarity	10
3. The impact of Iranian foreign policy on the regional situation	10
3.1. Relations of Iran with, and impact on, three Council of Europe member States (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye)	10
3.2. Iran's policy in the Middle East	11
3.3. Global implications	12
4. Iranian influence abroad	13
4.1. Structures of Iranian influence on political decision-making processes abroad	13
4.2. Iranian terrorist threat abroad	13
5. Proposals for action	14
5.1. Impose and enforce sanctions that hurt Iran's power elite	14
5.2. End the obsession with the nuclear issue – the West's key strategic mistake	15
5.3. Need for a comprehensive diplomacy towards Iran	15
5.4. Understand the collateral damage of a renewed nuclear-only deal	15
5.5. A more robust policy towards Iran: deterrence and imposition of costs	15
5.6. Transatlantic coordination needed so that Europe is taken seriously by Tehran	16
5.7. No diplomacy on the back of civil society: do no harm to the revolutionary process	16
6. Conclusions	16

A. Draft resolution²

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its [Resolution 1678 \(2009\)](#) “Situation in Iran”, and reiterates its deep concern with regard to the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and its foreign policy.
2. For more than two years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the scene of mass anti-government protests that have spread across the country following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young woman who died in custody of Iran's “morality police” on 16 September 2022. Her death led to an unprecedented protest movement under the motto “Woman, Life, Freedom”, against the Islamic regime as a whole. Faced with an existential threat, the regime reacted with extreme brutality, using violence and torture, kidnappings and death sentences to silence the protesters’ legitimate demands.
3. The Assembly pays tribute to the victims of the Iranian regime and expresses political support to, and solidarity with civil society groups and courageous Iranians who stand up against repression and mobilise to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Iran.
4. Ever since the establishment of the “Islamic Republic” in 1979 the people of Iran have been denied basic human rights. Many opponents of the regime had to flee the country and were granted asylum and citizenship in Council of Europe member States. As a result, there are large Iranian communities in many European countries, which maintain relations with relatives and friends in Iran.
5. Many Iranians living in exile in Europe, and European citizens of Iranian origin or descent, are opposed to the regime in Iran and support the protest movement against it. They are often faced with threats, intimidation, violence, abductions by the Iranian State structures of repression operating abroad, and even fall victims of assassination attributable to them.
6. The persecution of dissenting civil society voices and human rights defenders both in Iran and abroad by the Iranian regime is a serious human rights issue and a threat to the security of European societies.
7. Iran is a direct neighbour of three Council of Europe member States: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye, and has a significant impact on regional stability and security in the South Caucasus.
8. With its support to Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Assad regime in Syria, and its fierce stance against Israel and the denial of its right to exist, Iran is one of the most influential stakeholders, and a major actor contributing to the destabilisation of the Middle East.
9. As a provider of weapons to the Russian Federation, and given its political rapprochement with that country both on bilateral and multilateral levels, as well as its strategic ambitions in the Mediterranean, Iran is a threat to European security.
10. The Assembly therefore believes that the situation in Iran and its domestic and foreign policy have a direct impact on, and pose a serious threat to, regional, European and global security.
11. European countries, however, have so far not designed a co-ordinated strategy to counter the Iranian policy to destabilise international order, and its subversive activities that threaten European democracies, including as regards the protection of Iranian communities in Europe.
12. The Assembly believes that the Council of Europe, as the key European institution protecting and promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, should play a significant role in guiding and supporting its member States when it comes to building up co-ordinated human rights-based relations with Iran.
13. The Assembly therefore calls upon governments and parliaments of member and observer States of the Council of Europe, as well as parliaments enjoying observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly to raise awareness of the human rights situation in Iran and to consider, possibly in consultation with Iranian communities in Europe, ways to strengthen solidarity with, and support to, Iranian civil society organisations and individuals who stand up to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Iran and, *inter alia*, to:
 - 13.1. send, at all levels, a stronger message of political support to and solidarity with Iranians standing up for democracy and human rights;
 - 13.2. introduce and enforce targeted sanctions against Iran’s power elite, namely individuals and companies linked to the regime;

2. Draft resolution adopted by the committee on 9 September 2024.

- 13.3. ensure accountability under international law, by introducing targeted sanctions against, and initiating international legal prosecution of Iranian human rights violators;
 - 13.4. ensure access to international protection for all those Iranians who manage to escape and cannot return to the country because of fear of persecution;
 - 13.5. dispatch independent observers, including the staff of their embassies, to attend trials of protesters who are detained;
 - 13.6. provide Iranian citizens with free internet access during the regime's blackout thereof during protests, and to facilitate access to internet via virtual private networks (VPNs);
 - 13.7. promote international exchanges with Iranian civil society and its constituent women's, student and labour movements.
14. The Assembly urges the governments and other public authorities and relevant agencies of member States to introduce a coherent and co-ordinated policy to ensure the protection of and the respect for fundamental rights of Iranians who are citizens of, refugees in, or otherwise under the jurisdiction of Council of Europe member States, including double-nationals being held as hostages and used as instruments for pressure, against activities of Iranian special services. Security measures for the Iranian diaspora in Europe, in particular the key opposition figures, must be improved, including in terms of digital and physical security; intelligence gathering on Iran's proxy groups must be strengthened.
15. The Assembly further calls upon governments and other relevant authorities of the Council of Europe member States to elaborate a coherent and co-ordinated policy vis-à-vis Iran that should be based on the following principles:
- 15.1. an active and comprehensive diplomatic engagement vis-à-vis Iran should not be limited to the nuclear deal and address all issues in a broad and comprehensive manner, the human rights situation must be made a central topic of discussion;
 - 15.2. an option of downgrading diplomatic and trade relations should be on the table;
 - 15.3. Europe should develop its own deterrence capacity and be ready to impose costs;
 - 15.4. sanctions should be imposed and enforced to specifically target Iran's power elite;
 - 15.5. in case of renewal of the nuclear deal, advantages and the collateral damage should be considered;
 - 15.6. an active transatlantic co-ordination is needed;
 - 15.7. there should be no diplomatic deals which are harmful to civil society;
 - 15.8. engagement with Iranian citizens should be strengthened;
 - 15.9. dialogue with civil society groups should be developed as well as efforts to overcome the fragmentation of opposition, possibly by facilitating the setting-up of a co-ordination platform for Iranian opposition abroad;
 - 15.10. a joint strategy should be established among the member and observer States of the Council of Europe to push for the release of citizens held as hostages;
 - 15.11. opposition and democratic forces from Iran should be brought together and their voices made heard;
 - 15.12. a mechanism to investigate and register alleged human rights violations in Iran should be established as a complementary tool to the fact-finding mission of the United Nations Human Rights Council;
 - 15.13. the option to qualify Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and possibly other entities, as terrorist organisations should be considered.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Max Lucks, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1.1. Origin and procedure

1. For two years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the scene of mass anti-government protests that have spread across the country following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman who died in the custody of Iran's "morality police" on 16 September 2022 after being detained and reportedly mistreated for wearing an "improperly" fitting headscarf. Her death led to an unprecedented and ongoing uprising of revolutionary nature against the Islamic regime as a whole.
2. This protest movement, the largest one since the 1979 "Islamic Revolution", is a sign of a mature civil society in this country. From Kurdistan to Sistan and Baluchistan, civil society is ready to speak out against political oppression and human rights abuses. Women are playing a leading role in the movement, as well as ethnic minorities such as Kurds.
3. The Iranian regime's response has been one of extreme brutality, marked by violence, torture, kidnappings and death sentences to silence the legitimate demands of protesters. As a result, in November 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Council decided to establish an ongoing documentation mechanism for human rights violations in Iran.
4. As all this is happening in a State that is a direct neighbour of three Council of Europe member States, the Parliamentary Assembly cannot afford to remain silent. In January 2023, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held a hearing on the situation in Iran and heard testimonies from several Iranian and international experts. Further to this hearing, I initiated a motion for a resolution "The situation in Iran"³ inviting the Assembly, *inter alia*, to express political support for Iranian civil society groups and individuals who mobilise to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Iran, to help them raise awareness of the situation in Iran in national parliaments, and to look at Iran's destabilising role in the region.
5. One additional reason for us to take action is related to the fact that there is a large Iranian diaspora in many Council of Europe member States. In fact, following the "Islamic Revolution" in 1979 and the war between Iran and Iraq, several Council of Europe member States granted asylum and citizenship to many persons fleeing Iran. As a result, strong transnational links exist between the Islamic Republic of Iran and member States of the Council of Europe; developments in Iran, and the policy of the Iranian authorities, have an impact on our countries. At the same time, most Council of Europe member States maintain relations with Iran.
6. It has to be recalled that "murder commandos" linked to the Iranian regime have been active in Europe for many years. One prominent example is the "Mykonos Incident": the assassination of four leading Kurdish politicians in a restaurant called "Mykonos" in Berlin on 17 September 1992. More recently, in November 2022, an arson attack was carried out on a synagogue in the German city of Bochum, which can now also be traced back to Iranian State authorities, by the judgement of the Higher Regional Court.
7. The motion for a resolution "The situation in Iran" was referred to the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on 2 March 2023 and I was appointed rapporteur on 26 April 2023. In September 2023, the committee heard my introductory statement; then I presented an outline report in October 2023, where I proposed to change the title to "The situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States".
8. On 5 March 2024, the committee held a hearing with the participation of two eminent experts of Iranian origin now living and working in Europe: Ms Nargess Eskandari-Grünberg, Mayor of the City of Frankfurt am Main and Head of the Department for Diversity, Anti-Discrimination and Social Cohesion, and Mr Ali Fathollah-Nejad, Director of the Center for Middle East and Global Order (CMEG), Berlin. Subsequently, I asked Mr Fathollah-Nejad to provide a written contribution on several specific issues to be developed. I am sincerely grateful that he has agreed to my request and made a precious contribution despite his very important workload due to the recent developments in, and related to, Iran. This report is largely based on that contribution.

3. [Doc. 15688](#)

9. I carried out a fact-finding visit to London on 21-22 May 2024. On this occasion, I met with Mr Fabian Hamilton, member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons, Mr Jonathan Hingston, senior committee specialist, International Development Committee of the House of Commons, Mr Alexander Pinfield, head of Iran unit, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, as well with the leading experts dealing with Iran at research and advocacy groups such as Amnesty International, Article 19 and United Against Nuclear Iran. I wish to thank the United Kingdom delegation for the organisation of this visit, and all my interlocutors for their valuable input.

10. In the framework of the meeting in Oslo on 30-31 May 2024, the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy held another hearing with the participation of two prominent Norwegians of Iranian origin: Mr Mahmoud Farahmand, member of the Norwegian Parliament, and Mr Reza Amiry-Moghaddam, human rights activist, neuroscientist, professor at the University of Oslo (online). I am grateful to our Norwegian colleagues for their useful contribution.

1.2. Scope and purpose of the report

11. As per the motion at its origin, my report touches upon both the situation in Iran following mass protests ongoing since 2022, and the impact of the Iranian foreign policy on the regional situation.

12. The Iranian secret service still persecutes critical civil society activists and political opponents who express views which differ from the regime's doctrine and propaganda.

13. At the same time, as I stated at the meeting of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on 12 September 2023, I also intend to focus my report on the dangers and threats faced by Iranians living in exile in Europe and European citizens of Iranian origin or descent who are critical to the regime in Iran, as a result of the activities of Iranian State structures of repression abroad.

14. It is broadly believed that the Iranian intelligence service is responsible for assassinations, abductions, and espionage activities abroad, including in Council of Europe member States. In fact, the persecution of critical civil society voices and human rights defenders abroad/in exile by the Iranian regime is a serious human rights issue and a threat to our societies.

15. Accordingly, the title of the report was modified as follows: "The situation in Iran and the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member States".

16. Summing up, I intend to present a broad analysis of Iran, comprising the countless human rights violations by the regime, its destabilising role for peace and freedom in the world and its threats to dissident voices in exile. I believe that a common and coherent strategy is needed to address the threats posed by Iran.

17. The Council of Europe member and observer States should realign their foreign policy towards Iran, and their relations with this country. My report is intended to provide guidelines for these relations, which would include the protection of Iranian opposition in our member States, condemnation of human rights situation in Iran, and countering Iran's destabilising role in the region and globally.

2. Situation in Iran following mass protests ongoing since 2022

2.1. Mass protests of unprecedented scale

2.1.1. A broad social base

18. The mass protests which started in autumn 2022 under the motto "Woman, Life, Freedom" constituted the culmination of Iran's long-term revolutionary process. They transcended social and ethnic boundaries. Not only the lower and middle classes took part in them, but also members of the upper class (for example sport and TV celebrities). In terms of ethnicity, there was participation of and solidarity between people from different ethnic backgrounds, Persians and non-Persians alike. For example, after the outbreak of protests in Kurdistan, people from neighbouring Azeri-speaking Tabriz joined in, chanting, "Tabriz is awake and supports Kurdistan!" (in Azeri). The same solidarity was seen across other Iranian regions and ethnicities. A leaked confidential regime memo noted that 84% of Iranians were sympathising with the uprising that called for regime change.

19. Four groups were at the forefront of the protests: (i) women; (ii) the youth (15–24-years-old, Iran's "Generation Z"); (iii) students; and (iv) marginalised ethnic groups. All these groups suffer disproportionately from unemployment and are also exposed to various other forms of State discrimination. School children, teachers and university professors also took part in the protests, with the latter two groups also going on strike to demand the release of their students detained during the protests.

20. Women in Iran face structural discrimination, which is reflected, among other things, in the fact that they are twice as affected by unemployment as men (both in general and among young people), while their participation rate in the labour market is only one-fifth of that of men – despite an equivalent level of education. In addition, there is gender-specific legal discrimination (or gender apartheid), socio-cultural repression (for example the obligatory hijab as State control over women's bodies and lifestyles) and political discrimination (*de facto* exclusion of women from high political offices within a patriarchal political system).

21. The youth also suffer disproportionately from unemployment and socio-cultural restrictions imposed on them by an octogenarian Islamist elite. At the beginning of October 2022, less than a month after the beginning of the uprising, the average age of most of the demonstrators who were detained was only 15, according to the deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Ali Fadavi.

22. Students took part in the uprising with protests at over 150 universities in all 31 provinces, despite the brutal reaction of the security forces and years-long repression of independent student organisations. They also suffer from above-average unemployment (two-fifths of the unemployed are graduates) and various forms of political discrimination. Even before the 1979 revolution, Iranian universities had been a central site of dissent.

23. Last but not least, Iran's marginalised ethnic and religious groups, such as the Kurds, Baluchis, Bahais or the remaining Jewish community of Iran, face disproportionate socio-economic, confessional and political discrimination.

2.1.2. A regime seriously worried

24. At the end of November 2022, a revealing secrete report from the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency was leaked. It showed serious concerns of high-ranking regime officials about the protests and what strategies the country's leadership was pursuing to counter them. The revelations made it clear that the regime representatives estimate that potentially 10% of the population (i.e. over 8 million people) could take to the streets to protest against the Islamic Republic. According to the only official estimate by the ministry of the interior, 45 000 people took part in street protests and 18 000 in university protests at the height of the movement in early November.

25. However, independent estimates based on the ratio of people detained by the authorities in different cities pointed to a much higher number of 600 000 to 700 000 demonstrators. The well-known scholar of social movements, Asef Bayat, even mentioned three times this number, namely two million demonstrators. In contrast, according to the ministry of interior, 50 000 people had taken part in the *Dey* protests at the turn of the year 2017/18 and 200 000 in the *Âbân* protests of November 2019, which arguably triggered the country's long-term revolutionary process, as even the lower classes – long considered to be the regime's loyal social base – had demanded an end to the Islamic Republic.

26. During the 2022 protests, Hassan Rahimpour-Azghadi, a member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, asserted that they should be perceived by the authorities as an "death alarm".

2.2. Persecution of opponents by the authorities

27. The people of Iran have been denied their basic human rights since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Women are specifically targeted, and sexual violence against them is commonplace.

28. There is overwhelming evidence that, since the beginning of mass protests on the streets in September 2022, citizens have been exposed to an unprecedented and excessive military presence and its disproportionate violence. According to Iranian human rights organisations, more than 500 demonstrators have been killed since the protests began, and more than 20 000 people have been arrested. There are also reports of young people being systematically and deliberately shot in the eye.

29. At the hearing on 5 March 2024, Ms Nargess Eskandari-Grünberg shared information and provided evidence on systematic large-scale persecution of protesters by the Iranian regime, including murder and executions. According to her testimony, a year and a half since the start of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” Revolution in Iran, there has not been a single day without a shocking news coming from Iran. The regime is using any means to maintain its power.

30. Ms Eskandari-Grünberg mentioned the case of Nika Shakarami, a young woman who protested after the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini. As a consequence of her resistance, this teenage girl was raped, beaten to death and thrown from a building. Pejman Fatehi and Mohammad Faramarzi were executed in January 2024 despite the efforts made by their wives and Pejman Fatehi’s 5 years old son Sabbah from Germany to save them. The regime has not yet released the bodies of their loved ones to their families. Instead, they were buried in an unknown place. Disappearance is part of the strategy of the regime.

31. According to the Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, there have been 823 executions in Iran in 2023. The number of unreported cases may be far higher. Many prisoners in Iran are at imminent risk of execution. Amnesty International researchers confirmed the sharp increase in executions since 2021 (by 172%); they also noted that there was a disproportionate use of death sentences against the Baluchi minority.

32. At the hearing on 31 May 2024, Mr Amiry-Moghaddam made a presentation on death penalty in Iran. He confirmed that 834 people were executed in 2023, including women, child offenders and protesters, while only 125 were announced by the Iranian authorities. The main charges were blasphemy, murder, and rape. He pointed to the relation between the number of executions and the timing of political protests. Thus, when protests were ongoing, the number of executions grew, as the regime supposedly sought to instil fear in society. There was a dramatic increase in 2022-2023, due to the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests.

33. While the European countries showed strong reaction to the execution of protesters, there was no such reaction to drug-related executions. Following the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law, the number of executions decreased but it was again on the rise after the Covid-19 pandemic and the beginning of new protests. Mr Amiry-Moghaddam called on members to question their governments on the support they provide to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as the latter co-operated with the Iranian regime, thus leading to executions.

34. Executions and murders in prisons and detention centres are not the only means by which the Islamic Republic seeks to impose death on the Iranian society. Depriving people of hope for life is another way of eliminating active people and making them depressed and passive. The fact that the suicide rate in Iran has risen by more than 40% in the last ten years is no coincidence. The Iranian population is suffering from the devastating effects of economic, political and social crises, due to the mismanagement and corruption of the government, as well as the State’s sponsorship of global terrorism.

35. Ms Eskandari-Grünberg stressed that all those who criticise the Iranian regime find themselves and their families being threatened, interrogated and intimidated. Dissidents in Europe are also threatened and put under pressure if they speak out against the regime.

2.3. Emerging civil society

36. The unprecedented protest movement continuing in Iran since the death of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022 reveals the existence of a mature civil society, willing to manifest dissent against political oppression and human rights violations, with women taking on a leading role. This movement is now referred to as “Woman, Life, Freedom”. Despite the brutal response of the Iranian regime, using violence, abductions, torture and capital punishment to silence the protesters’ legitimate requests, the Iranian society does not give in and shows resistance.

37. According to Ali Fathollah-Nejad, the current protest movement is the third wave of protests that hit Iran in 2017-2018 and in November 2019. The social base of the regime is shrinking due to the corruption of the elites. The structural causes of instability which started in 2018 and then culminated in autumn 2022 are still present. The four significant crises that Iran is faced with are (i) a deteriorating socio-economic situation, (ii) the inability of the regime to move ahead with reforms, (iii) an ecological crisis and (iv) the gender gap resulting in a multi-faceted discrimination against women. As a result, the long-term revolutionary process is set to continue. The officially announced 40% turnout in the last elections held in March 2024 is a sign of the growing gap between the regime and the society.

38. Amid reflections on the revolutionary process and in view of a post-Islamic Republic Iran, Iranian civil society groups have begun to raise their voice and share their vision.

39. Firstly, on 11 December 2022, the Neighborhood Youth Alliance of Iran or United Youth of Iran (UYI) published⁴ a manifesto comprising 43 articles, the demands of which can be considered representative of the aspirations of Iranian society as a whole: the overthrow of the Islamic Republic; the “formation of an inclusive, democratic government” that is secular (namely separates State and religion), that respects ethnic, gender, political and religious diversity, and is committed to international conventions and charters, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; the formation of political parties, the “freedom of action within the framework of the law, respect for the territorial integrity of the country, fundamental human rights, transparency and [...] democracy”; a future government that is committed to the well-being of its citizens, especially those who are unable to take care of themselves without government support, provides free education and healthcare for all, protects the environment and ensures that the rich pay their taxes in proportion to their income; the right of the Iranian people to self-determination, the equality of citizens before the law, full gender equality, freedom of belief and religion, freedom of speech, freedom to form trade unions and other associations, and personal freedoms; and, last but not least, a new Iranian foreign policy based on safeguarding national interests, maintaining world peace and non-interference.

40. Secondly, five months after the protests began, and coinciding with the 44th anniversary of the 1979 revolution, 20 independent Iranian trade unions, feminist groups, and student organisations published a joint charter⁵ calling for “fundamental economic, social, and political reforms.” In their statement, they define the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement as “the beginning of a social, modern and humane revolution to liberate the people from all forms of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, tyranny and dictatorship”. From the outset, the charter notes that the end of the country’s “economic, political and social crisis” is “unimaginable within the existing political framework”. It then lists the “minimum demands” on socio-economic, political and environmental issues, which also reflect the interests of various social movements, and advocates a “revolution against any form of religious and non-religious tyranny imposed over the last century”. Indeed, both documents can arguably be seen as blueprints for much-needed socio-economic, political, and environmental change, as well as for a post-Islamic Republic constitution. Above all, these manifestos were formulated by social forces whose role in the revolutionary process will be decisive.

41. Thirdly, by the spring of 2023, a series of messages of solidarity had been conveyed by activists and civil society groups in Iran in support of radical change. Eight months after the protests began, activists from the “Woman, Life, Freedom” as well as the women’s movements issued a statement expressing their solidarity with the nationwide workers’ protests that took place at the end of April. They described the workers’ protests as a possible basis for a general strike, which they saw as the “key to victory” against the “criminal government”. While describing workers as the most oppressed part of society, they went on to stress: “We believe that the workers’ movement and the women’s movement are inextricably linked and still have a long way to go in the fight against discrimination and inequality [...]” The declaration was also signed by teachers, trade unionists, and political, civil and trade-union activists, as well as former political prisoners. In addition, on the occasion of the International Workers’ Day on 1 May, a Charter of Freedom, Prosperity and Equality for Civil Society Activists was published, with the proclaimed aim of bringing the labour movement and its specific demands under the flag of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement.

42. As a way forward, a look at the experiences of the countries of the “Arab Spring” can also offer important lessons for the Iranian struggle for democracy. Above all, the case of Sudan before its revolution in 2018/2019 could serve as a model. The indispensable force of the revolutionary movement there was the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an underground civil society network of associations of teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers and other professionals, as well as feminist groups. In the Iranian context, such an association would ideally include representatives of the three major components of Iranian civil society, namely the women’s, workers’ and student movements, but also the youth and marginalised ethnic groups, as well as professional associations (bus drivers, truck drivers, lawyers, doctors, etc.).

4. ["Revolutionary Youth Groups In Iran Publish Manifesto For Future"](#), *Iran International*, 11 December 2022

5. ["Trade Unions Issue Charter Of Minimum Demands"](#), *Iran Wire*, 16 February 2023.

2.4. Need for international solidarity

43. Iranian human rights defenders, civil society groups and activists show courage and determination as they stand up for the values of democracy against oppression. The international community should support Iranian people's demands and have a long-term strategy towards Iran. The few improvements achieved in Iran over the last 20 years, such as the abolition of stoning as a death penalty, were made under international pressure.

44. There is an urgent need for co-ordinated European action of support and solidarity with the Iranian people. Such action could include:

- introducing targeted sanctions against the power elite, namely individuals and companies connected to the regime. Many individuals close to the regime live and have financial interests in Europe. Imposing sanctions on them would reduce the number of terrorist operations conducted by Iran at home and abroad;
- ensuring accountability under international law by introducing targeted sanctions against, and initiating international legal prosecution of Iranian human rights violators. Independent observers should attend trials of protesters who had been detained, and embassies should send staff to attend trials;
- exerting international pressure and raising awareness to prevent politically imposed death sentences against supporters of the movement in each individual case;
- providing Iranian citizens with free internet access during the regime's routine blackout thereof during protests, for example via Starlink. Virtual private networks (VPNs) remain crucial for Iranians; providing access to these services by cloud hosting of VPNs should be facilitated;
- enabling international exchange with Iranian civil society and its constituent women's, student and labour movements.

3. The impact of Iranian foreign policy on the regional situation

3.1. Relations of Iran with, and impact on, three Council of Europe member States (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye)

45. Iran's foreign policy has a significant impact on the South Caucasus region, especially on relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye – three member States of the Council of Europe. These ties are shaped by historical connections, geopolitical interests and security dynamics.

46. Relations between Iran and Armenia: Tehran and Yerevan have traditionally maintained a friendly relationship, underpinned by their joint interest in counterbalancing Turkish and Azerbaijani influence in the region. In its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia saw Iran as an ally. Both States also engage in co-operation on energy and infrastructure projects.

47. Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan are complex, marked by ethnic, religious and geopolitical tensions. The presence of a large Azeri-speaking population in the north-west of Iran (mainly in East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, West Azerbaijan provinces) coupled with the secular, nationalist government in Baku are sources of ideological and geopolitical tensions. Crucially, Iran views Azerbaijan's close ties with Israel as a security threat, especially due to its geographical proximity to its own borders.

48. Despite these tensions, Iranian-Azerbaijani relations have also been marked by pragmatism, especially in the fields of energy and border security. Both countries share resources in the Caspian Sea and co-operate on infrastructure projects such as transport corridors linking Iran to Russia. However, Baku's relations with Israel remain a point of contention that has the potential to destabilise the region should tensions between Iran and Israel escalate.

49. Iran and Türkiye share a long history of both co-operation and rivalry, shaped by their roles as regional powers. Their relationship is affected by the Sunni–Shia divide and the rivalry over representing the “Islamic world” as well as geopolitical competition for influence, especially in conflicts such as Syria and Iraq. Despite this rivalry, economic ties remain strong, with Ankara being a major buyer of Iranian natural gas.

50. Iranian-Turkish co-operation also extends to security issues, especially in dealing with Kurdish movements that both sides label as terrorists and thus consider a threat to their territorial integrity. Recent signs of opening from Ankara vis-à-vis Damascus may both be seen as a possibility for co-operation between Iran and Türkiye over Syria, or yet pave the way for some sort of Iranian–Turkish rivalry in the country.

51. Worryingly, many Iranian dissidents based in Türkiye still face persecution from the Iranian regime and its agents there, while Ankara also engages in deportations of Iranians whose lives could be endangered in Iran.⁶

52. In light of the above, Iran's foreign policy has an important part to play in maintaining the balance of power in the South Caucasus. Relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Türkiye have a significant impact on regional stability and security.

3.2. Iran's policy in the Middle East

53. It is obvious that the Iranian regime is the most influential stakeholder deciding on war and peace in the Middle East. Iran's military and financial support is crucial for the terrorist organisation Hamas, which, through its terrorist attack against Israel on 7 October 2023, killed the highest number of Jewish people in one day since the end of the Shoah. With the support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Assad regime in Syria, Iran is a major factor contributing to the destabilisation of the Middle East.

54. The attack against Israel conducted by Iran on 13 April 2024 was an act of direct aggression on the sovereign territory of another State carried out with drones and ballistic missiles, and yet another case showing Iran's provocative and destabilising role in the region. Europe needs a coherent and consistent strategy to counter Iran's aggressive stance towards its neighbours and also towards its own population.

55. The "Axis of Resistance" is a network in the Middle East, largely led, financed, militarily equipped and ideologically supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, consisting of semi-State paramilitary groups and Assad's Syria. It is thus the materialisation of Tehran's aim to export the "Islamic Revolution" regionally. This is directed in particular against the chosen enemies of the "Islamic Ummah" (community): Israel and the United States of America, which are referred to as "little" and "great Satan" respectively in Iranian regime jargon.

56. From Tehran, the "Axis of Resistance" is largely co-ordinated by the so-called Beyt (a quasi-court) of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, a kind of parallel government. Iran's regional policies are implemented by the IRGC's external arm, the so-called "Qods Brigade" or "Jerusalem Brigade" (or IRGC-QF). For decades, its commander in chief was the notorious General Qasem Soleimani, who was killed by US drones near Baghdad airport in early 2020. The current Iranian Minister of the Interior, in office since 2021, was also an IRGC brigadier general and the first commander of the Qods Brigade.

57. Regional partners of Iran, in addition to the Assad regime in Syria, include above all the Lebanese Hezbollah, by far the most militarily professional organisation within the "Axis". Hezbollah was able to gain important combat experience in Syria in supporting Assad. It is also the organisation that provides military training and equipment to other parts of the "Axis," such as the Houthis in Yemen or Hamas in Gaza. Shia militias in Iraq supported by Iran, mainly organised in the alliance of the so-called Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Ansarallah movement in Yemen (also known as the Houthis), as well as the "Islamic Jihad" and Hamas in Gaza are also part of the Iran-led "Axis".

58. Supreme Leader Khamenei considers this "axis" to be Iran's "strategic depth". He sees this as a kind of forward defence, which assesses the offensive presence of Iran and pro-Iranian forces as indispensable for the purpose of defence.

59. In fact, the "Axis" goes beyond the so-called "Shia Crescent", a concept popularised in the course of the Iraq War in 2003. With regard to the (Sunni) Palestinian organisations, the unifying basis is above all Islamic fundamentalism as well as a radical hostility towards Israel, which even extends to the extinction of the "Jewish State".

60. Despite the bellicose rhetoric against Israel and the US, the Islamic Republic of Iran is well aware that it must not risk direct war. Such a move would seriously jeopardise the regime's security and even its survival – which is a red line for Tehran. Against this background, Iran prefers to act not directly, but indirectly against its enemies. Acting through regional proxies makes it possible to outsource one's own responsibility and thus to create a kind of strategic ambiguity. This is why drone or rocket attacks by the Houthis against the Saudi and Emirati energy infrastructure, by Hezbollah against Israel, or by pro-Iranian Shia militias in Iraq and Syria against the US military presence there are difficult to be directly attributable to Tehran. Yet, there is a high probability that, they are either ordered, co-ordinated or at least green-lighted by their Iranian patron.

6. ["Activists Seeking Refuge in Turkey Face Deportation, Severe Persecution in Iran"](#), Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), 21 December 2023.

61. Iran is pursuing a strategy of destabilising the region in its neighborhood, ignoring human rights and international law concerns. There is clear evidence that the Iranian regime is actively and intentionally contributing to the destabilisation of the Shingal region in Iraq, thereby preventing the safe return of the Yazidi minority to the region.

62. This policy of regional destabilisation, sabotage and provocation promoted by Iran has continued unabated since the leadership in Tehran assumed that a robust response, especially from the United States, would fail to materialise. Due to the reality and perception of a relative US withdrawal from the Middle East region, some Persian Gulf Arab monarchies were forced to come to terms with Tehran in order to be spared Iranian-co-ordinated attacks in the future. The prime example of this is the Saudi–Iranian détente deal of March 2023.

3.3. Global implications

63. The Iranian regime is a threat to the entire world as it leads proxy wars across its borders and supports terrorist groups.

64. In providing support to Russia, regarding for example the delivery of combat drones, Iran contributes not only to the destabilisation of its own region but it also directly supports Russia in its criminal war of aggression against Ukraine, thereby undermining peace in Europe.

65. Traditionally, the Islamic Republic's "strategic depth" primarily included the geographical area of its "Axis of Resistance", namely ranging from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territories all the way to Yemen and the Strait of Bab al-Mandab. Now the Mediterranean is to be added, according to the IRGC's top leadership. In fact, a radius of 5 000 kilometres would include almost all continental Europe and the entire Mediterranean. Until now, Iranian officials had spoken of a self-imposed – but neither technical nor permanent – limitation of 2 000 km in their covert military threats against Europe, which would allow Iranian ballistic missiles to reach EU member States in Eastern Europe (especially Greece or Bulgaria). Lighter Iranian warheads with a range of 3 000 km could, however, reach as far as central Europe, including Vienna.⁷ All of this should raise the European Union's alarm bells.

66. In addition, Iran's military support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has been on the rise, while it has been supporting Moscow to illicitly evade Western, including European, oil and gas sanctions.⁸

67. In the wake of the war of aggression against Ukraine, the partnership between Iran and Russia has deepened further, as both countries see a common denominator in their resistance against the West. Iran not only supplies Russia with drones,⁹ which are used on a large scale against Ukraine to keep the Ukrainian air defences busy, wear them down and attack Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, but recently it even supported Moscow in building a factory in Tatarstan (an autonomous republic west of the Ural Mountains),¹⁰ where Russia can independently manufacture drones and thereby mitigate some of the effects of Western sanctions on the supply of weapons. In return, Iran also militarily benefits from Russia, as it has obtained the S-300 missile defence system or combat helicopters.

68. With this partnership, both Tehran and Moscow benefit in terms of the technical optimisation of the weapons systems and their strategic use – after all, they have been tested extensively on the battlefields of Syria and now Ukraine. This manifested itself, for example, in Iran's unprecedented direct attack on Israel on 13 April 2024, which showed many parallels to Russian attacks in Ukraine.¹¹ Furthermore, the deepening military co-operation between Iran and Russia underlines their strategic orientation characterised, on the one hand, by their hostility towards the United States and its allies (including the European Union), and on the other hand, by co-ordinated military and political efforts to strengthen their regional and global influence.

7. www.politico.eu/article/iran-ballistic-missile-capabilities-growing-threat-europe/.

8. On the latter, see www.politico.eu/article/iran-russia-cooperation-dodging-oil-sanctions/.

9. www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-has-received-hundreds-iranian-drones-attack-ukraine-white-house-2023-06-09/.

10. www.wsj.com/world/the-russian-drone-plant-that-could-shape-the-war-in-ukraine-7abd5616.

11. www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/why-you-cant-be-iran-hawk-and-russia-dove.

4. Iranian influence abroad

4.1. Structures of Iranian influence on political decision-making processes abroad

69. In order to project its influence on foreign countries, Iran uses a broad spectrum of ways and means. In addition to official diplomatic and trade missions, it includes, *inter alia*, the following elements.

70. Firstly, there is a web of State-linked agents deployed to monitor the activities of dissidents and who also often engage in intimidating and physically attacking them, even threatening their lives.

71. For instance, since the 2022 protests in Iran, Tehran-linked spying activities in Germany, home to an estimated 300 000 Iranians, on diaspora Iranians and dual citizens have been on the rise. According to a parliamentary report provided by the German Government, dissident Iranians are seen by the Islamic Republic as a “threat to the continued existence of the regime”. The report also adds that, according to German domestic intelligence services, there are 160 individuals with a connection to Germany who are seen to be linked to the IRGC and to be engaged in “extensive spying activities”, in particular against (pro-)Israeli and (pro-)Jewish targets.¹²

72. Secondly, Iran uses a network of think-tank pundits and researchers, some of whom are directly linked to Tehran, engaged to spread a narrative about Iranian domestic politics and foreign policy that is in line with the interests of the Islamic Republic rather than the one consistent with social reality in Iran or that is sober if not critical on Iran’s foreign conduct, which would be indispensable for European policy making on Iran.

73. A prime example of this is the Iran Experts Initiative (IEI), a network of pundits at major think-tanks in Europe and the US, advocating Western rapprochement and accommodation with Tehran and highly sceptical towards imposing economic sanctions, and diplomatic and political pressure upon the Islamic Republic. The IEI was not only in close contact and, in some instance worked in co-ordination with the Iranian Foreign Ministry’s think-tank Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), but it was the latter that in 2014 initiated the IEI and chose its core members. The IEI became a subject of controversy when reports suggested that some of its members had connections with the Iranian Government, and attempted to influence Western policy discussions in favour of Tehran’s interests, and even offering to draft articles on behalf of Iran. In short, the mission of IEI, “an influence network formed and guided by Tehran”, has been described to further Iranian “soft power” in the West as well as to project a positive image of Tehran there. This raised concerns about the potential for conflicts of interest or about the spread of pro-Islamic Republic narratives under the guise of independent and diplomacy-oriented expertise.¹³

4.2. Iranian terrorist threat abroad

74. At the hearing on 31 May 2024, Mr Farahmand recalled that the prosecution of dissidents in Iran had a systematic nature and had been ongoing since the 1979 revolution. Most of the Iranian revolutionary figures, including Khomeini, had lived in exile in the West before the revolution, and were seen by Western intellectuals and politicians as saviours of the Iranian people. The regime that came to power in 1979 arrested former political figures and ministers and accused them of treason against Iran and Islam; they were executed brutally. The Iranian clergy seemed to have a list of those they wanted to prosecute, including Iranians in exile. Mr Farahmand then recalled several most outrageous killings committed by the Iranian agents abroad.

75. Once the Western countries started to react to those killings, Iran launched a counter-operation: kidnapping and taking hostages. There had been several cases of abductions of European and American citizens to Iran in the past. Ms Eskandari-Grünberg referred to the case of Habib Chaab, an Iranian Arab political activist with Swedish citizenship, who was abducted in 2020 when visiting Türkiye, and smuggled to Iran where he was executed in May 2023. She also recalled the case of the German citizen Jamshid Sharmahd who was kidnapped in Dubai and could be executed at any time. This was a manifest failure of Europe to fulfil its duty to offer protection to EU citizens.

76. Following the 2022 uprising, the Iranian Government stepped up its operations in the West, targeting Iranian journalists and other prominent figures. The Iranian diaspora has faced regular death threats. The Jewish community is another main target of Iranian terrorist actions in Europe.

12. www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article243710081/Iran-betreibt-umfangreiche-Ausspaeungsaktivitaeten-in-Deutschland.html.

13. “Inside Iran’s influence operation”, *Semafor*, 25 September 2023; “Inside Tehran’s Soft War: How Iran Gained Influence In US Policy Centers”, “How Iran used its ties to a top global NGO”, *Semafor*, 2 February 2024; “Iran’s influence network: Covert Ties Between Iran And The International Crisis Group”, *Iran International*, 2 February 2024.

77. On 29 March 2024, Pouria Zeraati, an Iranian-British journalist was stabbed outside his home in Wimbledon, London.¹⁴ Mr Zeraati works at Iran International, a Persian-language news television channel based in London and aimed at Iranian viewers. The channel had faced threats from the Iranian Government in the past, which led to the closure and relocation of the offices to the US in early 2023.

78. The spate of recent incidents including stabbings and violence is a serious danger. Many of these attacks have been conducted by proxies, and the lack of response from European countries sets a poor precedent that emboldens further Iranian action.

79. The threat level is enhanced by the ability of the Iranian authorities to nurture radicalism in European countries, with student associations hosting IRGC commanders, and activities taking place in mosques, on university campuses, and in schools. European governments need to take concerted action to reduce this threat.

5. Proposals for action

80. The security threats and challenges posed by Iran require a paradigm shift in European policy towards Iran, which is long overdue.¹⁵ At present, Iranian threats against maritime security in the Mediterranean are adding a new urgency. The aim would essentially be to counter the Iranian perception of a weak and conciliatory Europe, thus changing the regime's cost-benefit calculation that would lead to Iranian course corrections vis-à-vis Europe and its interests. This paradigm shift could include the following components.

5.1. Impose and enforce sanctions that hurt Iran's power elite

81. In the European debate on sanctions against Iran, the effectiveness of sanctions is not being adequately considered. Europe should design its sanctions regime against Iran so robustly that it significantly harms the power elite of the Islamic Republic. The EU sanctions packages imposed in the wake of the revolutionary "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in autumn 2022 were an important political success, achieved only thanks to the political pressure from individual member States. However, the sanctions do not sufficiently impact the power elite of the Iranian regime. They could also include an EU listing of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation. At Germany's initiative, a legal opinion from the European External Action Service has shown that listing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation is legally possible. What is needed now is a united effort within the European Union to enforce this listing. In other words, sanctions should target central figures and institutions of the power elite, rather than only second- or third-rate actors, as well as regime-linked oligarchs abroad.

82. There is one main reason for the noticeable European reluctance on sanctions so far: the European Union's obsession with Iran's nuclear issue and the fear that harsh sanctions would discourage the Iranian leadership from returning to the negotiating table under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, there is a failure to recognise that the decision for or against nuclear diplomacy is largely determined by the economic interests of the Islamic Republic's power elite. When an easing of sanctions is needed in order to stabilise the regime, Tehran signals a willingness to negotiate – as seen in the run-up to the 2015 nuclear deal and now with Iran's new president Masoud Pezeshkian. It is precisely for this reason that the 2019 US designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organisation has not buried an Iranian desire to resume nuclear diplomacy in the future.

83. In addition, the E3 (Germany, France and the United Kingdom) could activate the JCPOA's so-called "snap-back" mechanism due to Iran's violation of the agreement because of the escalation of its nuclear programme. This would automatically re-introduce comprehensive United Nations sanctions. The mere threat of this could be effective, as the Islamic Republic has feared this step for years, as it would also cut into the economic sinecures of the elite.

84. And, finally, the European Union could prevent Iranian oil from reaching Europe indirectly.¹⁶ In early July 2024, Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji stated that Iran was exporting crude to 17 countries, including European ones (without mentioning them).¹⁷

14. "Stabbed Iran International journalist Pouria Zeraati 'feeling much better'", *bbc.com*.

15. See Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Islamic Republic in Crisis and the Need for a Paradigm Shift in the EU's Iran Policy", *Chaillot Paper*, Paris: European Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2023.

5.2. End the obsession with the nuclear issue – the West's key strategic mistake

85. Europe's focus on the nuclear issue carries significant strategic disadvantages. It allows the Islamic Republic to set the pace through its strategy of "nuclear escalation", while Europe or the West are condemned to a reactive mode. The aim of this Iranian strategy – prior to the 2015 JCPOA as well as today – is to induce alarmism in the West so that it will rush to the negotiating table as rapidly as possible to deliver concessions to Iran.

86. In fact, the "nuclear scare" constitutes a central means of intimidation for the Iranian regime¹⁸ which is using the spectre of a "nuclear Iran" as an important means of exerting pressure on the West to prevent it from taking a more robust stance against it.¹⁹

5.3. Need for a comprehensive diplomacy towards Iran

87. Given the strategic mistake of the obsession with the nuclear issue and the wider threats posed by Tehran's policies, any negotiation with the Islamic Republic should be conducted more broadly and comprehensively than before. This means putting the range of Iranian challenges outlined above on the diplomatic agenda.

5.4. Understand the collateral damage of a renewed nuclear-only deal

88. A renewed nuclear deal would include the easing of sanctions against Iran. The question is where Iran's resulting economic dividends would go. The experience in the wake of the JCPOA's implementation in January 2016 suggests that its economic dividends – mostly derived from revitalised oil exports and trade with Europe and elsewhere – (i) benefit predominantly State and semi-State entities, namely the regime, given the political economy of the Islamic Republic; and (ii) are used by Iran's rulers for the benefit of their own priorities, for example: (a) to strengthen the repressive apparatus; (b) to contain the revolutionary process by financially co-opting employees of the vast State apparatus who might consider taking the side of the people; (c) to fund Iran's missile, drone and nuclear programmes, all controlled by the IRGC; and (d) to finance the "Axis of Resistance", thereby accelerating regional destabilisation, with unforeseeable consequences for the Middle East and Europe.

5.5. A more robust policy towards Iran: deterrence and imposition of costs

89. It is essential that Europe swiftly develops a deterrence against Iranian threats. In addition to transatlantic co-ordination, in which the US would form the military backbone, elements of European deterrence would include the threat and subsequent implementation of downgrading diplomatic and economic relations with Tehran in the event of Iranian defiance, the imposition of sanctions on the power elite, and the activation of the JCPOA's "snap-back" mechanism – in other words, the use of all its instruments of power. In short, costs must be clearly conveyed to Iran's leadership, along with the political will to impose them.

90. Crucially, the most effective means of power at Europe's disposal, the "snap-back" mechanism, will expire quite soon – namely in January 2026, ten years after the implementation of the JCPOA, at a time when United Nations Security Council [Resolution 2222](#) endorsing the latter will also end.²⁰ Until then, the European signatory States would be able to reinstate UN sanctions as a result of a "significant non-fulfilment of the obligations under the JCPOA". Under the JCPOA, any of the signatories, namely including the E3, has the right to lodge a complaint with the UN Security Council for non-compliance with the JCPOA provisions, thereby initiating a 30-day procedure to reinstate the multilateral sanctions against Iran that were suspended by UN Security Council [Resolution S/Res/2231 \(2015\)](#). In such a case, even the veto powers of Russia and China cannot block this. There are sufficient grounds for determining an Iranian violation, such as the enrichment of uranium to almost weapons-grade levels in February 2023.²¹

16. See <https://en.otaghiranonline.ir/news/44628>; <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/201888/Germany-imports-oil-from-Iran-despite-US-sanctions>; www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2023/06/13/2910135/germany-resumes-petroleum-imports-from-iran-despite-sanctions-eurostat; www.tehrantimes.com/news/495809/Despite-sanctions-2-EU-members-imported-Iranian-oil-in-2023.

17. www.iranintl.com/en/202407025959.

18. See also www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/putins-greatest-weapon-remains-the-scare-tactic.

19. See also the analysis by a former advisor to the IAEA.

20. www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/joint-comprehensive-plan-action-jcpoa-glance.

21. Gambrell, J., "Iran acknowledges accusation it enriched uranium to 84%", *Associated Press*, 23 February 2023. See also Henderson, S., "Iran enriched uranium to 84 percent — but can it make a nuclear bomb?", *The Hill*, 20 February 2023.

5.6. Transatlantic coordination needed so that Europe is taken seriously by Tehran

91. In order to exert decisive influence on Tehran's behaviour and reduce the security threats, Europe ultimately lacks the means of power that are available to the US: namely, dominance in the banking and financial system as well as in the military sphere. The leadership of the Islamic Republic knows this very well: as a result, it allows itself a great deal of arrogance against Europe but is much more cautious towards Washington. This step is particularly necessary with regard to so-called hostage diplomacy. Meanwhile, Tehran's traditional objective is to divide the West, coaxing Europe to form a counterweight to the US in order to mitigate pressure against it.

92. Despite much talk of a Western community of values and interests, there have been hardly any efforts on the European side to coordinate with Washington regarding Iran strategy or policy. Regardless of the question of who the next U.S. president will be, there would be enough common denominators across the Atlantic regarding Iranian challenges that could form the basis for a transatlantic policy on Iran.

5.7. No diplomacy on the back of civil society: do no harm to the revolutionary process

93. Given the Islamic Republic's profound loss of popular legitimacy, a deal that ultimately ends up benefitting the authoritarian State could be seen as a stab in the back of the Iranian democracy movement. In this vein, the president of the Munich Security Conference Foundation argued that in the face of popular protests, the European Union should not exercise restraint in imposing tougher sanctions on Tehran for its serious human rights violations, regardless of the prospect of renewed diplomacy.²²

6. Conclusions

94. The Council of Europe, as the key European institution protecting and promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, should play a significant role in guiding and supporting its member States when it comes to building up a co-ordinated approach to relations with Iran.

95. The volatile global and regional security situation, which has a particular impact on human rights defenders, calls for a renewed commitment to common values among all member States in order to strengthen the protection of the Iranian opposition abroad.

96. Awareness of transnational repression within governments is in sharp decline and should be raised to protect their own populations. This includes training for all officials who deal with vulnerable populations or who may come into contact with transnational repression in their work, including members of law enforcement agencies, migration offices and the Foreign Office, including diplomatic personnel.

97. The Council of Europe should not only improve the safety of the numerous Iranian diaspora in Europe; it should also aim to create, through its structures and institutions, a mechanism to continuously support and engage with Iranian civil society and opposition.

98. More generally, the Council of Europe member States should devise common protective measures and policies against Iranian activities that are contrary to human rights.

99. Existing laws and policies against the intelligence activities of foreign States that engage in transnational repression must be revised and harmonised so that these States can be held accountable.

100. Any direct or indirect support, but especially the export of technologies that can be used to monitor and repress people, must be stopped.

101. The Council of Europe Committee on Counter-terrorism (CDCT) adopts the Council of Europe's counter-terrorism strategy. This authority could be expanded to include the phenomenon of transnational repression in order to set standards on the human rights protection of opposition members between the member States of the Council of Europe.

102. The Council of Europe should support the networking of the member and observer States that are affected by hostage taking by the regime in Iran. A joint strategic approach is needed in this respect.

22. Bayat, B., "No deals with the mullah regime" (in German), *Der Standard*, 2 January 2023; Ischinger, W., "Two Geostrategic Challenges for 2023: Ukraine and Iran", *Politico*, January 5, 2023.

103. The democratic voices in Iran need to come to an understanding with each other. The Council of Europe should attempt to bring the various voices of the democratic opposition in Iran into dialogue with one another.

104. In view of the developments in the Middle East, including the Iranian missile attack on Israel on 13 April 2024, there is a strong need for a coherent and resolute European strategy aiming, *inter alia*, at preventing further Iranian missile and drone attacks against Israel and Iran's immediate neighbourhood and disrupting the Iranian regime's capacity to strengthen its proxies in the region and create new ones.