



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

Protests and Polling Insights From the Streets of Iran: How Removal of the Hijab Became a Symbol of Regime Change

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Foreword

The people of Iran have shown extraordinary bravery and courage over the past two months.

They should know they have the support of millions of people around the globe who admire the stand they have taken for freedom.

While these protests are indeed unprecedented in their scale and longevity, they are a continuation of an anti-regime trend that began in 2017 – and one which unifies all sections of Iranian society. My Institute has been committed to raising global awareness of the growing chasm between the Iranian people and the increasingly hardline Islamist regime that has ruled over Iran for 43 years.

As Iranian protestors continue to risk their lives in greater numbers for the most basic freedoms, my Institute launches a new series of papers – in partnership with the research foundation, the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) – that will confirm beyond doubt that these protests are about so much more than the right to – or not to – wear the hijab.

The evidence is overwhelming. The Iranian people have undergone a secularisation and liberalisation faster than any society in the Islamic world, despite having lived under the rule of Islamists for decades. When polled in June 2020 and again in February 2022, our paper shows that Iranians – whether young or old, women or men, living in rural or urban areas – overwhelmingly disagree with the mandatory imposition of the hijab. And 84 per cent of those who oppose the compulsory hijab also want to live under a secular state; an aspiration that has proved impossible under this theocratic regime.

Despite the ongoing internet blackouts, killings and arrests, and credible accounts of kidnappings, torture and intimidation, the Iranian people are actively resisting and bravely continuing their protests on the streets. They show no signs of relenting. I have always said, and I stand by this more so today, that the single most liberating event for the Middle East will come when the Iranian people finally have their freedom.

For the ordinary people of Iran, the values that many may describe as “Western” are in fact their own. Neither they nor their country should be defined by the Islamic Republic. As a great people, whose history and civilisation are rich and varied, it is they and they alone who should define their own future.

This is why I firmly believe it is in our interests today, in the West, to show our deep solidarity with the protestors risking their lives for what we so often take for granted. It is time we in the West recalibrate our policy in a way that draws a clear distinction between the people of Iran and the Islamic Republic. Our efforts should serve the former.

Tony Blair, Executive Chairman

Executive Summary

Anti-regime protests across Iran have gripped the attention of the international community. In this spotlight, Iranians have proved persistent in their resistance. Through these protests, the country is entering a new phase in which the inevitable, steady and intergenerational secularisation of the Iranian people is coming head to head with the totalitarian Islamist regime of the mullahs, who have ruled the country for 43 years. In the past two months, the world has witnessed the violence that is an inevitable by-product of this new dynamic, but the international community must understand the relationship between Iranians and the regime better than it currently does.

This paper is the first in a new series by the Tony Blair Institute in collaboration with the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN). Combining a network of contacts on the ground and cutting-edge digital-polling methods, together we bring the international community a view from the Iranian streets like never before. This new study shows trends in polling over two years to help explain the mass protests today. Through analysis of the unpublished demographic splits of multiple polling surveys conducted by GAMAAN, which were put to the people of Iran in the months and years leading up to the current protests, we reveal the widespread agreement of the people on sensitive subjects such as the compulsory hijab, political orientation and Western action in Iran. In addition, we are publishing, for the first time, the cross-tabulations of GAMAAN's polling surveys which will enable us to better profile the views of the respondents and gain a more comprehensive view of Iranian society. To kickstart this series on the Iranian protests, we focus here on the symbol that has sparked the most recent outrage: the compulsory hijab.

More than two months have passed since 22-year-old Mahsa Amini's tragic death at the hands of the regime's "morality police", which sparked a wave of unrest across almost every province of Iran. The people show no signs of relenting and the protests – which have reverberated to the chants of the slogan, "Women, Life, Freedom" – continue to spread, despite internet blackouts, killings, arrests and accounts of kidnappings, torture and intimidation.



But how have protests against the compulsory hijab triggered and sustained such visceral unrest in Iran? The real answer to this question lies in a deeper understanding of how opposition to the compulsory hijab has become a powerful symbol of resistance against the regime. In this first paper, we explore the data trends that can help explain this.

- **Young people are not the only group who oppose the compulsory hijab.** Polling found that 78 per cent of respondents aged between 20 and 29, 68 per cent between 30 and 49, and 74 per cent aged over 50 are against the mandatory imposition of the hijab.
- **Men support Iranian women and stand against the mandatory imposition of the hijab.** Through polling Iranians, we found that 71 per cent of men and 74 per cent of women disagree with the mandatory imposition of the hijab.
- **Iranian society has experienced mass secularisation, which cuts across Iran's rural-urban divide.** Only 26 per cent of urban Iranians pray five times a day while 33 per cent of rural Iranians follow the same Islamic prescription. Similarly, only 28 per cent of rural Iranians and 21 per cent of urban Iranians believe in the practice of wearing the hijab.
- **The anti-regime protest movement in Iran is fundamentally secular.** Among Iranians who want regime change, 76 per cent also consider religion unimportant in their lives.
- **Protests against the compulsory hijab are about regime change.** Of those who are against the compulsory hijab, 84 per cent also want to live in a secular state. As a secular state is impossible

under the Islamic Republic, this is indicative of the demand for regime change among the people.

Mahsa Amini's death has made her a symbol of resistance not just for the cause of women and girls, but of young men, old men and all Iranians suffocated by decades of brutality, corruption and negligence at the hands of a totalitarian Islamist regime. As Iranian women flocked bravely to the streets in solidarity with Amini's family and in protest against compulsory hijab, they did so in the knowledge they had the support of the overwhelming majority of Iranians.

Despite this, there remains some hesitation among Western onlookers about how best to respond as they attempt to interpret the protests from afar. The paranoia and authoritarian rule of the Islamic Republic has created a highly securitised environment within Iran, one that Western governments have been unable to penetrate for years. The consequence has been an inability to engage meaningfully with Iran's underground civil society. Contact in Iran has been exclusively with the state. This disconnect from the Iranian streets has obscured perceptions of ordinary Iranians. This is not limited to governments but is also reflected in the international mainstream-media coverage of the Iranian protests. As a result, Western governments and mainstream media are struggling to answer some of the most fundamental questions about the protests: What are the demands of the Iranian people? How widespread are these demands? Are these protests just about the compulsory-hijab law? Are protesters aiming for reform or regime change? Is dissent among Iranians linked to the reimposition of sanctions and the withdrawal by the United States from the 2015 nuclear agreement?

The uncertainty surrounding these central questions has led many in the West to treat the current protests as sporadic and new. However, what we are witnessing in Iran today is quite the opposite. These protests are indeed unprecedented in their scale and longevity, but they are the continuation of a consistent trend that began in 2017. For the past five years, protests on Iran's streets have brought together the young and the old, the poor and the wealthy, the rural and the urban. The anti-regime mood on Iranian streets for the past five years has been palpable, captured through the slogans that explicitly reject Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the 83-year-old hardline Islamist cleric who has ruled for more than 30 years.

Why Has the West Been Caught Off-Guard?

For the past decade, the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme has dominated both the policy and media agenda on Iran. After reaching the 2015 nuclear agreement with Tehran (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), the West became exclusively focused on preserving the deal. This preoccupation gained further momentum – not least among European policymakers – following the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the reimposition of sanctions on Iran in late 2018 under former US President Donald Trump. Thereafter, Western policymakers and mainstream media viewed Iran almost exclusively through the prism of Trump's withdrawal from the

JCPOA and the reimposition of sanctions. This has included dissent in Iran.

Since 2017, when the new wave of exclusively anti-regime dissent on the Iranian streets began, the West has been flooded with inaccurate representations of these protests. Prominent commentators in the West communicated Iranian dissent as a product of economic deprivation caused by Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reimposition of sanctions. A misunderstanding of the perspectives being expressed on the streets of Iran has been further compounded by analysis stating that Iranians have no desire for regime change or revolution, but instead are seeking reform.¹ The demands of Iranian protestors, such as opposition to the compulsory hijab, have also been dismissed as being limited to certain "radical" demographics.² These prevailing narratives have focused more on political decision-making in the West than on the realities on the ground in Iran.

The detachment of the West from the people of Iran has been exacerbated by a lack of accurate primary-source intelligence coming from the Iranian streets, caused by restrictive access and an inability to engage with Iran's underground civil society. Misrepresentations of Iranian dissent have been reinforced by skewed polling data. Unreliable or misleading polling data is commonplace in deeply authoritarian contexts where traditional methodologies – namely, face-to-face or telephone interviews – can result in the wrong conclusions.³ In the case of Iran, such methods have direct implications for the safety and security of participants because any criticism of the regime risks severe punishment or imprisonment. Consequently, participants either provide untruthful answers or do not engage with conventional polling surveys, resulting in skewed samples made up of those who are uncritical of the regime and therefore have nothing to fear.

For example, in 2021, Gallup reported that 72 per cent of Iranians approved of Ebrahim Raisi, the hardline Islamist president, shortly after he took office.⁴ However, according to the official state-backed results of the 2021 election, which are known to be exaggerated,⁵ only 48 per cent of Iranians voted and of those who did, 72 per cent voted for Raisi. This means the poll conducted by Gallup either only sampled the 48 per cent of Iranians who voted in the election, or the polled participants were careful not to answer truthfully for fear of the consequences of voicing their dissent. In October 2021, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft claimed that an Iranian opinion poll "found virtually no evidence of widespread discontent with the ruling regime itself to suggest that the Islamic Republic is on or close to the verge of collapse".⁶ This finding is at odds with the fact that the Iranian population has been protesting the Islamic Republic almost consistently since 2017 – including only months before the survey was conducted.

There is a clear lack of accurate intelligence about people on the Iranian streets. Conventional polling and analysis have produced insufficient knowledge of the relationship between the Islamic Republic and Iranian society, which has in turn impacted international policy towards Iran, not least regarding the

ongoing protests. To fill this gap, the Tony Blair Institute has launched a series of papers on the Iran protests in partnership with GAMAAN to reflect the real mood on the Iranian streets.

About the Tony Blair Institute's Partnership With GAMAAN

This series is based on bespoke polling conducted by the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) between June 2020 and February 2022. To generate reliable data and overcome self-censorship and social-desirability bias, GAMAAN adopts a modern and innovative approach using digital tools and alternative methods to capture the real opinions of Iranians. Instead of conventional face-to-face or telephone-based polling methods, GAMAAN uses encrypted online surveys with large and varied samples that produce an accurate representation of Iranian society, allowing Iranians to answer questions about sensitive subjects truthfully, without fearing for their safety. For the June 2020 survey, GAMAAN polled 39,981 respondents on questions relating to religion. For the February 2022 survey, GAMAAN polled 16,850 respondents on questions relating to political systems. More details on the samples can be found in the final chapter.

In addition to GAMAAN's polling, the Tony Blair Institute has developed on-the-ground intelligence in Iran through a network of contacts on the streets. Through this network, the Institute has been analysing and forecasting protest trends in Iran for the past five years, including the ongoing nationwide uprising. This series combines intelligence from our network, which we have used as part of our research, with data from polls conducted in Iran in 2020 and 2022 by GAMAAN, with more to come in 2023.

By presenting data from the past two years through GAMAAN's surveys, it is our hope that Western policymakers can recognise the events unfolding in Iran today are far from a flash in the pan. This new data, and more to come in this series, will help policymakers regain their conviction and find a consensus on a confident recalibration of policy that advances the interests of the Iranian people.

What Does Opposition to the Compulsory Hijab Signify?

Women have been leading the ongoing protests against the Islamic Republic. This is unsurprising given that women were and have remained the primary targets of the clerical regime's Islamisation project, which began with the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Unhappy with the liberal freedoms given to women under the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the Islamists set out to “restore” the role of women in an Islamic society. This was primarily centred on positioning women as subjects of their male guardians and instructing them to fulfil their domestic role as wives and mothers. The second-class status of women was enshrined into the Islamic Republic's civil law. Among other legal prescriptions still in force today, women are not able to travel abroad or obtain a passport without the written permission of their “male guardian”, divorced women are forced to forfeit custody of their children, the testimony of a woman in court is worth half that of a man's, women are prohibited from singing and dancing, and they are banned from attending football stadiums.⁷ But perhaps the most visible symbol of women's second-class status in Iran is the enforcement of the compulsory hijab.

Opposition to the compulsory hijab has a long history in Iran. Only weeks after the Islamic Revolution, on 8 March 1979, 100,000 women protested the prescription of the compulsory hijab by former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.⁸ But this opposition has escalated in the past decade as women have been more visibly challenging discriminatory prescriptions against them. From 2014 onwards, this protest movement consolidated further online through organisations like My Stealthy Freedom, set up by Iranian women's-rights activist Masih Alinejad. My Stealthy Freedom's campaigns “White Wednesdays” and “My Camera is My Weapon” encouraged women in Iran to upload videos of themselves removing their compulsory hijab in public and record the regime's violent enforcement of its so-called morality codes, respectively.⁹ This not only provided an avenue for Iranian women to challenge the Islamic Republic, it also started to bring international exposure to the regime's policy of gender apartheid.

Over time, these collective efforts were sowing the seeds of Iran's underground feminist movement. This underground movement manifested itself on the Iranian streets in the new wave of anti-regime protests from 2017, during which removal of the hijab became a symbol of dissent against the Islamic Republic. Women have since been at the forefront of anti-regime protests, with objection to the compulsory hijab becoming more prominent.

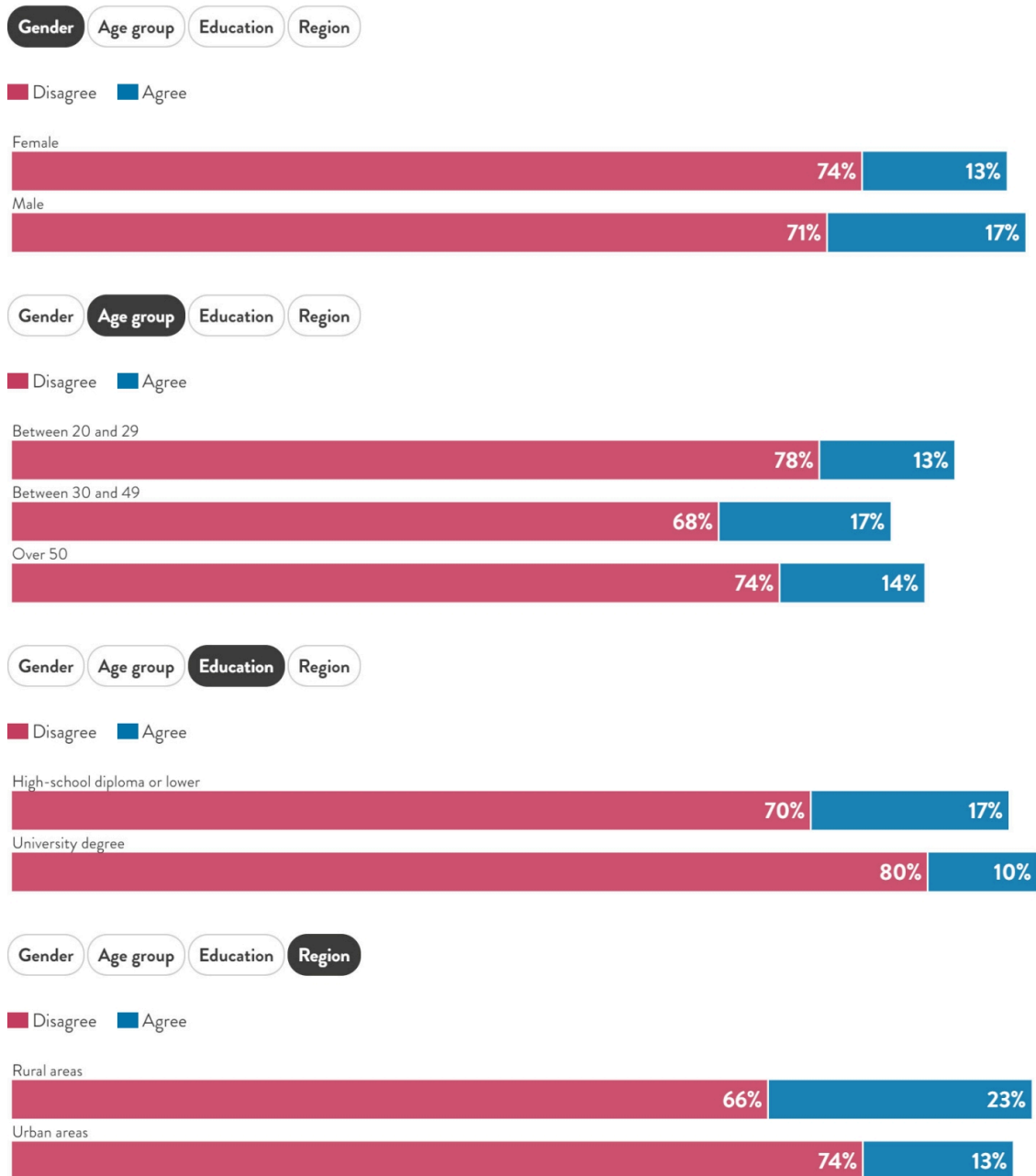
In Iran, women can be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison and receive lashings as well as fines for “bad hijab” – defined as a woman’s hair showing. Video footage is frequently uploaded online of Iranian women being brutally beaten by the regime’s so-called morality police for simply showing a strand of hair.¹⁰ Ironically, despite more exposure of compulsory-hijab dissent in Iran, prominent analysts based in the West began to diminish the relevance of the mandatory hijab in everyday life as well as the degree of opposition to it in Iran and the severity of its imposition by the regime. For example, in 2019, Hoda Katebi, an Iranian-American writer whose work has featured on the BBC, and in the *New York Times* and *Vogue*, discounted the significance of the imposition of compulsory hijab by referring to the regime’s so-called morality enforcers as the “fashion police”, who target women for “fashion faux pas”.¹¹ Likewise, in April 2018, Barbara Slavin, director of the Future of Iran Initiative at the US-based think-tank Atlantic Council, suggested the compulsory hijab in Iran today is “token fashion” and is now “less suffocating” for Iranian women.¹² Similarly, a 2016 piece published in the *New York Times* by Azadeh Moavaneh, then Project Director for Gender and Conflict at the US-based think-tank Crisis Group, claimed that “a majority of Iranian women, regardless of the law, wear the head scarf by choice”.¹³

However, as the ongoing protests in Iran reveal, anti-compulsory-hijab sentiment has never been so prevalent. This new paper by the Tony Blair Institute with polling conducted by GAMAAN captures – for the first time – the extent and societal breadth of the opposition among the Iranian population to the wearing of the compulsory hijab.

Young people are not the only ones who oppose the compulsory hijab. International mainstream-media reports on the ongoing protests have portrayed anti-compulsory-hijab dissent as a predominantly Generation Z movement. Images of young Iranian women removing their headscarves have dominated coverage of the ongoing protests. The BBC, the *Telegraph*, the *Washington Post*, the *New Yorker*, *Financial Times* and *Al Jazeera* are among the outlets that have reduced such dissent to a Generation Z movement.¹⁴ This impression has been bolstered by reports from the Iranian authorities, who have tried to downplay support for the widespread unrest by claiming that the protestors are, on average, aged 15.¹⁵ The disproportionate focus on Generation Z has implied there is a disconnect in values between generations, not least over compulsory-hijab laws. This unintentionally disregards the protests of the past decade and overlooks the overwhelming objection to the compulsory hijab by older generations in Iran.

While the youth, both millennials and Generation Z, are at the forefront of challenging the regime on the streets – not least through removal of the compulsory hijab – their actions are not without the support of older generations. GAMAAN’s polling reveals all age groups in Iran are unified in their opposition to the compulsory hijab. With unprecedented solidarity, **78 per cent** of Iranians aged between 20 and 29, **68 per cent** between 30 and 49, and **74 per cent** aged over 50 are against the mandatory imposition of the hijab. Our data are supported by extensive footage across social media of women of all ages removing their compulsory hijabs in support of the anti-regime protests.

Figure 1 – Respondents of different ages, regions, education levels and genders were asked whether the hijab should be mandatory in public



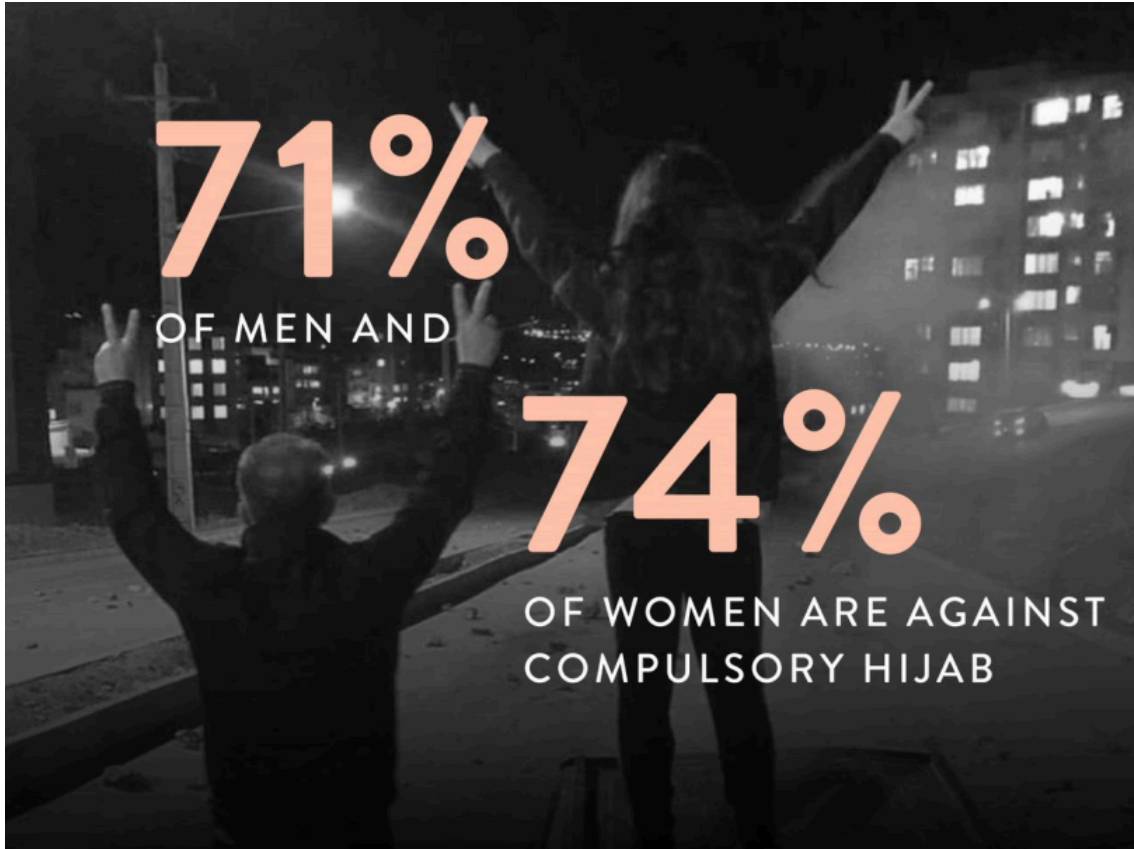
Source: GAMAAN

Anti-compulsory-hijab attitudes cut across class and Iran’s rural-urban divide. In 2017, when the removal of the compulsory hijab began to symbolise anti-regime dissent, prominent commentators based in the West reported that such activism was restricted almost exclusively to middle-class Iranians in major urban cities. These depictions continue to lean into outdated stereotypes of Iranian society, which portray rural and working-class Iranians as conservative and therefore supportive of the regime and its policies. For example, commenting in a 2018 Deutsche Welle report, British-Iranian scholar

Kameel Ahmady stated, “the hijab is not an issue for women in smaller cities and rural areas and the concern is limited to modern women in larger cities”.¹⁶ Despite this stereotypical representation, our data reveal rural and urban respondents stand in solidarity against the compulsory hijab. Among Iranians who live in cities, 74 per cent disagree with the mandatory enforcement of the hijab; of those who live in rural areas, 66 per cent are opposed. The outcome of the polling is consistent with the ongoing pattern of unrest in Iran, which has seen protests led by women in both urban and rural geographies.¹⁷ These shared attitudes are also present across Iran’s class divide. It is important to note that education level is often indicative of social class in Iran. Like the rural-urban divide, academics based in the West have misconstrued support for the compulsory hijab based on social status and class. For example, a 2018 article written by Tahereh Hadian-Jazy for the Atlantic Council claimed, “Iran’s hijab protests are a middle-class phenomenon”.¹⁸ These representations are once again being disseminated in relation to the ongoing protests. In October 2022, the *Financial Times* reported that the sentiment being driven by protesters can predominately be traced to the “urban middle classes who [come from] ... privileged and educated families”.¹⁹ Narratives in the West have differentiated between economic protests and anti-compulsory-hijab protests in Iran, with the former portrayed as a rural, working-class issue and the latter as one restricted to the urban middle classes. However, our data contradict this.

The data show that Iranians educated to secondary and tertiary levels are aligned: 70 per cent of those educated to school level or lower and 80 per cent to university level disagree with the compulsory hijab. This sentiment can be seen in the current protests, where we have witnessed women burning their headscarves in both middle-class suburbs such as Sharak-e Gharb and working-class areas like Nazi Abad in Tehran.²⁰

Men support Iranian women and stand against the mandatory imposition of the hijab. Images of women and girls taking off their hijabs in public have become a symbol of anti-regime dissent in Iran and continue to be so during the ongoing protests. While women have been at the forefront of dissent in Iran since 2017, it is important to recognise that anti-compulsory-hijab sentiment is not solely held by female protesters. In fact, our data show that nearly equal proportions of men (71 per cent) and women (74 per cent) disagree with its mandatory imposition. Iranian men overwhelmingly support a woman’s right to choose whether or not to wear the hijab. Our data also reveal the progressive attitudes held by Iranian men and how they reject the clerical regime’s misogynistic prescriptions too. Iranian men have been taking to the streets with Iranian women, even cutting their own hair in protest of the mandatory imposition of the hijab. Compulsory hijab is not just a women’s rights issue; it represents one of the key pillars of the regime’s authoritarian rule over all Iranians.



Ultimately, anti-compulsory-hijab sentiment is central to the ongoing protests and, as GAMAAN's polling reveals, is held by every demographic of Iranian society. While only 13 per cent of women and 17 per cent of men support its compulsory enforcement, the regime has been doubling down on its efforts to violently impose the mandatory headscarf. This is indicative of the widening gap between the state and society in Iran. Against this backdrop, Khamenei has further relied on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – the clerical regime's ideological army – to uphold the regime while simultaneously enforcing a hardline Islamist order on Iranian society.²¹ However, this battle of values between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian population is not restricted to the compulsory hijab. Rather, opposition to the compulsory hijab is a symptom of the mass secularisation and liberalisation of Iranian society currently in evidence on Iran's streets in the form of nationwide uprisings.

How Secularisation Is Widening the Gap Between State and Society

Since the early 1990s, Iranian society has experienced a gradual process of secularisation and liberalisation. Despite living under a theocracy, the importance of religion is diminishing for the people of Iran. Today, the gap between the secular, liberal-minded population and the hardline Islamist regime has reached unprecedented levels. Dissent has manifested itself on the Iranian streets, with the trend of anti-regime unrest intensifying in size, scale and frequency, and this has in turn been met by the use of more violence by the regime to sustain power. This is evidenced by the pattern during the past 30 years: in 1999, student protests took place in three cities and left seven people dead; an uprising in 2009 was concentrated in ten cities and resulted in the death of 100 civilians; and a decade on, in November 2019, protests took place in more than 100 towns and cities, with the regime killing as many as 1,500 civilians in a few days.



More importantly, since 2017, the new trend of unrest has been distinctively anti-regime, which is illustrative of Iranian society's secular shift. While increasing opposition to the compulsory hijab is particularly indicative of the divergence between state and society, the people have been rejecting all

Islamist policies enforced by the regime through protest. As the Islamic Republic continues to drive forward the Islamisation process of Iranian society, the majority of Iran's population is actually becoming increasingly irreligious. Yet the secular shift of Iranian society has not been recognised globally. This explains why Western policymakers and international media were caught off-guard by the latest protests as well as the secular and liberal demands of the Iranian people. In turn, there has been a great deal of scepticism in the West about the extent of the secularisation of Iran's population. Lack of access resulting from the authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic has meant that Western policymakers and international media have relied on inaccurate intelligence and skewed polling to understand the levels of religiosity among the people of Iran.

Mainstream Western media, including Sky News and the *Wall Street Journal*, has consistently referred to Iran as a “deeply conservative nation” with a “conservative culture”.²² These characterisations are not restricted to the media. For example, female politicians from Europe have willingly travelled to Iran and worn the mandatory hijab on the basis that it was out of “respect for the culture of Iran”.²³ This out-of-touch understanding of Iranian society is bolstered by skewed polling data collected using traditional methods that do not allow Iranians to answer honestly. Conventional methodologies used by major polling agencies rely on face-to-face or telephone interviews, which simply do not work in deeply authoritarian contexts such as the Islamic Republic. This is particularly the case when asking about contextually sensitive topics, such as the belief in Islam and support for sharia law. On this, truthful opinion – namely, opposition – can lead to severe punishment under Iran's regime. As a result, such polling is skewed either by misleading answers or a distorted sample because those who disagree refuse to engage. Therefore the data only represent segments of society that are supportive of the regime. For example, in 2020, the World Values Survey reported that 96.6 per cent of Iranians believe in Islam and in 2013, Pew Research Centre claimed that 83 per cent of Iranians favour the use of sharia law.²⁴ Conventional polling methods have resulted in the portrayal of Iranians as overwhelmingly religious. But this contradicts the Institute's intelligence on the ground in Iran, which has been analysing this secularisation and forecasting the trajectory of mass unrest on the Iranian streets since 2017/2018.²⁵

To measure the secular shift in Iranian society, in particular across different demographics, the polling asked Iranians the extent to which they believe in and observe prescribed Islamic practices. The most significant questions relate to the belief in wearing the hijab and the practice of praying five times a day. While some have claimed the wave of secularisation is predominantly driven by certain demographics, our data prove that religion is becoming less and less important across Iranian society.

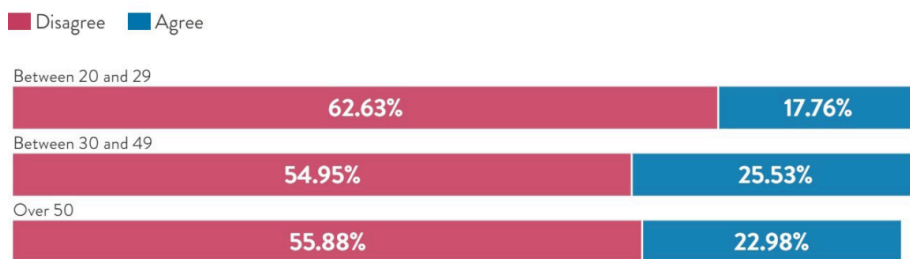
Although young people are propelling the secular shift, older generations are becoming similarly irreligious. Despite the diminishing importance of religion in the country, the West still holds on to Orientalist stereotypes of Iranian society as innately religious. In 2020, France 24 described Iranian society as divided. The international news channel portrayed Iran's older generations as religious and the

younger ones as dissenters who scorn the country's strict rules and yearn for change as well as a better relationship with the West.²⁶

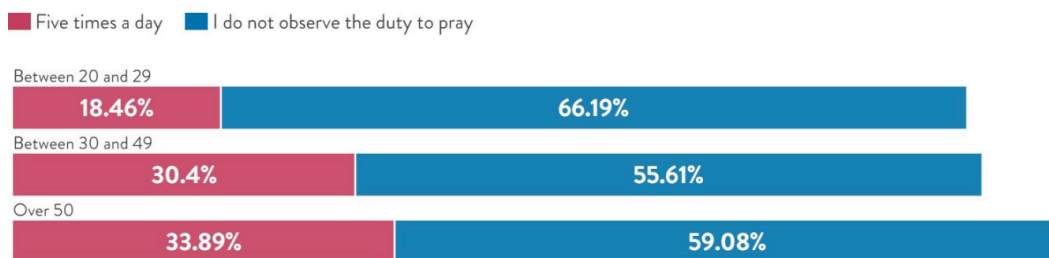
Despite this, the data reveal a decline in religiosity across all age groups. The overwhelming majority of Iranians no longer pray five times a day or believe in wearing the hijab. The data reveal the belief in wearing the hijab is only held by a small minority and therefore the practice is not considered intrinsic to Iranian culture. Only 18 per cent of respondents aged between 20 and 29, 26 per cent between 30 and 49, and 23 per cent aged over 50 believe in the practice of wearing the hijab. This pattern is also reflected in the proportion of people across Iranian society who engage in the practice of prescribed prayer. Of those polled, only 18 per cent of respondents aged between 20 and 29, 30 per cent between 30 and 49, and 34 per cent aged over 50 pray five times a day. Contrary to depictions of a generational divide on this matter, the diminishing belief in these religious obligations has taken place across all generations in Iran. This includes the generation regarded as being part of the Islamic Revolution in 1979; 59 per cent of respondents aged over 50 – the so-called revolution generation (*nasl-e enghelab*) – do not pray five times a day.

Figure 2 – Respondents of different ages were asked if they believed in the practice of wearing the hijab and how often they performed prescribed prayers

Practice of wearing the hijab (age)



Perform prescribed prayers (age)



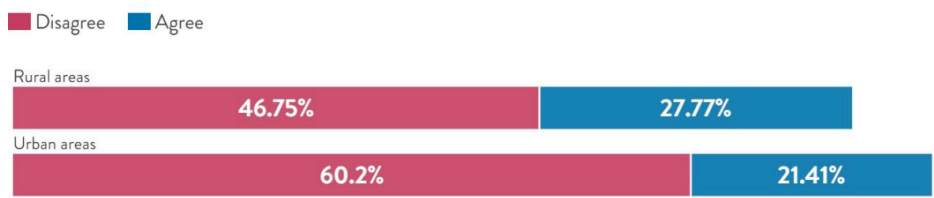
Source: GAMAAN

The secular shift has happened across Iran's rural-urban divide and all social classes. Conventional narratives in the West have framed the rural provinces of Iran as religiously conservative and therefore regime “strongholds” where the Islamic Republic’s religious prescriptions are supported. This is also

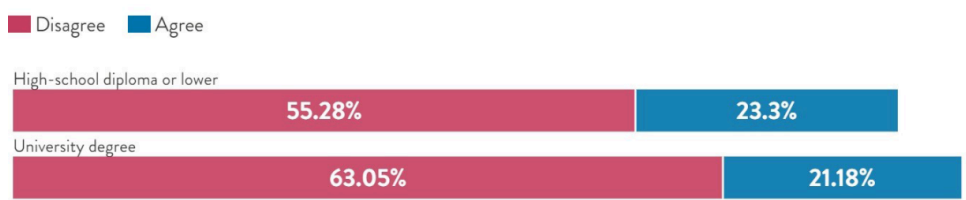
applicable to the lower and less-educated classes who have traditionally been portrayed as the core constituency of the Islamic Republic – otherwise known as the “downtrodden” class (*mostazefin*). In fact, the 1979 Islamic Revolution has often been referred to as the “downtrodden” revolution whereby working-class and rural Iranians aspired to live under Islamic values. The idea that rural and less-educated Iranians are deeply religious while urban, educated Iranians are not has become the basis of the West’s dichotomous understanding of Iranian society. This is most commonly depicted in the West through women’s dress codes. For example, the practice of wearing the black “chador”, a burka without the face covering, which is regarded as the most conservative form of mandatory hijab, is stereotypically portrayed as common in rural Iran. In 2015, the *Telegraph* reported that “in conservative rural Iran, however, drab black ‘chadors’ are the norm”.²⁷ This religious dichotomy is consistently reaffirmed by some commentators based in the West. For example, at a Rethinking Iran seminar held by Johns Hopkins University in 2021, Tara Kangarlou, a global-affairs journalist, claimed that “the more you move to rural areas, the more religious people you have”.²⁸ Elsewhere, Kangarlou has described “modern, educated, urban segments [of Iranian] society [as] not religious”.²⁹

Figure 3 – Respondents from different regions and with different education levels were asked if they believed in the practice of wearing the hijab

Practice of wearing the hijab (region)



Practice of wearing the hijab (education)



Source: GAMAAN

The polling, however, reveals that Iran’s mass wave of secularisation has taken place across all social classes and the rural-urban divide. Iranians from rural and urban areas are not so different when it comes to religiosity – they overwhelmingly do not believe in the practice of wearing the hijab. Support for this religious prescription stands at 28 per cent in rural Iran and 21 per cent among urban Iranians, a mere 7 per cent difference. Similarly, GAMAAN’s polling has revealed that religion is considered equally unimportant among Iranians with differing levels of education. The belief in the practice of wearing the

hijab is supported by 21 per cent of Iranians with university degrees compared with a similar figure of 23 per cent for those with high-school diplomas.

Iran’s declining religiosity is also reflected in the small minority of Iranians who practice prescribed prayer five times a day. Only 26 per cent of urban Iranians pray five times a day and only 33 per cent of rural Iranians follow this Islamic prescription. Ultimately, support for the religious prescriptions enforced by the Islamic Republic is dwindling equally among rural and urban Iranians. Likewise, 26 per cent of Iranians with university degrees pray five times a day while the figure for Iranians with high-school diplomas is only 28 per cent. These indicators have shown that the ongoing secularisation of Iranian society transcends both rural-urban and class divides.

Figure 4 – Respondents from different regions and with different education levels were asked how often they performed prescribed prayers

Perform prescribed prayers (region)

■ Five times a day ■ I do not observe the duty to pray



Perform prescribed prayers (education)

■ Five times a day ■ I do not observe the duty to pray



Source: GAMAAN

Our data are supported by the new trend in unrest that dates back to 2017 when anti-regime-protest hotspots were found primarily in rural Iran, led by working-class Iranians. These protests have been conventionally depicted as being driven by economic grievances rather than being attributable to a secular and liberal shift – the appetite for the latter exclusively associated with Iran’s urban middle classes. While working classes have certainly felt the brunt of Iran’s declining economy, our data reveal there has been unprecedented support for secular values among rural and working-class Iranians. This explains in part why protests in Iran have been distinctively anti-regime since 2017, explicitly calling for the collapse of the Islamic Republic – rather than focusing on economic security.

The out-of-touch conventional depictions of Iranian society as fragmented along religious lines have shaped the West’s calculations and its hesitancy to accept the degree of secularisation in Iran. In turn,

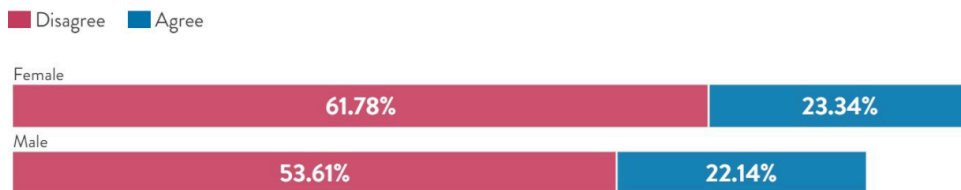
this misunderstanding of Iranian society has caused Western governments to question the degree to which the protest movement on the Iranian streets – and the support for it across all the country’s provinces – is secular in nature. Polling conducted by GAMAAN, coupled with the Institute’s on-the-ground evidence and analysis, should remedy these anxieties among Western policymakers.

Today Iranian men and women equally consider religion less important than they did in the past. In the context of the ongoing unrest, Western media has depicted Iranian women as challenging “Iran’s conservative culture” and “societal prejudices”.³⁰ This narrative, however, does not recognise the secular and liberal values of Iranian men. It is important not to conflate the Islamist outlook of the all-male clerical regime with the views of Iranian men – who, as the polling reveals, are just as secular as Iranian women.

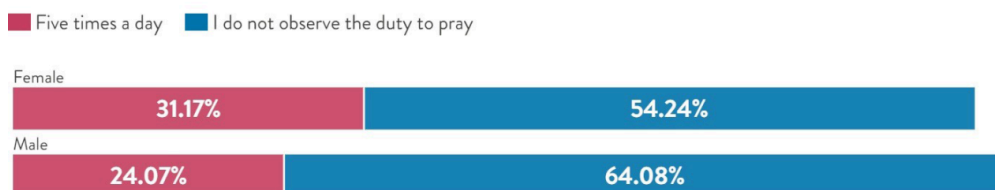
Our data indicate that Iranian men and women are equally uninterested in adhering to conservative Islamic religious practices. In almost complete alignment, only 23 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men believe in the practice of wearing the hijab. Men and women are similarly disinterested in praying five times a day, with only 31 per cent of women and 24 per cent of men observing the religious prescription. This hand-in-hand secularisation of men and women in Iran not only exposes the widespread disregard for such religious prescriptions but it reveals that only a minority of Iranians are practising Muslims. In fact, Iranians are more frequently referring to themselves as “Muslim by birth” (*moslamon zadeh*). The regime’s authoritarianism in the name of Islam and the violent imposition of Islamic law has not only caused dissent towards the regime, but has also resulted in apathy towards religion, with an associated secularising effect.

Figure 5 – Women and men were asked whether they believed in the practice of wearing the hijab and how often they performed prescribed prayers

Practice of wearing the hijab (gender)



Perform prescribed prayers (gender)



The findings of GAMAAN’s polling are reinforced by what we are witnessing on the ground in Iran. Today, members of Iranian society are placing greater significance on Iran’s pre-Islamic culture and secular holidays that are recognised internationally, such as Yalda Night, Cyrus the Great Day and Valentine’s Day.³¹ Despite the regime’s increased efforts to outlaw such practices and Islamise every aspect of Iranian culture, the number of Iranians celebrating these secular practices continues to grow each year. This has been most visible over the past four decades in the failed efforts of the clergy to make the Islamic New Year the main holiday in Iran. Nowruz, the pre-Islamic and secular Iranian New Year, remains the most celebrated festival. International policymakers should not underestimate the contribution of the cultural divide between the Islamic Republic and the people of Iran as a factor driving the ongoing anti-regime unrest on the streets of Iran.

The declining importance of religion is extensive and evident across all segments of society. Yet Western policymakers and international media continue to view Iranian society through an Orientalist lens. Continuous depictions of Iran as a religious and conservative country have led the West to misjudge the extent of the demands and liberal values of the Iranian people as well as the nature of dissent since 2017. The polling clearly reveals that Islamic values and practices are not held or followed by the overwhelming majority of Iranians – confirming society’s secular shift.

This unprecedented secularisation of the Iranian people is evident on the streets, with protestors no longer wanting to live under a theocracy. Iranians who are supportive of regime change are overwhelmingly irreligious. The polling reveals that 76 per cent of Iranians who want regime change also consider religion to be unimportant in their lives. This confirms that the anti-regime motivations behind the Iranian protests have been secular at their very core for the past five years. Religious law is the central DNA of the theocratic regime and its very existence. This is why Iranians are not seeking reform – but outright regime change.



Still, Western policymakers and international media have focused on the anti-compulsory-hijab sentiment of the protests and questioned whether Iranians are seeking only to reform hijab laws. What has not been recognised is that the compulsory hijab is much more than a piece of cloth in the Islamic Republic; it represents a central pillar of the regime and is the most visible manifestation and symbol of the Islamist ideology – one that is central to its existence. The regime itself recognises this. In 2015, during the presidency of the so-called reformist Hassan Rouhani, Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, a senior cleric of the regime, claimed: “If the hijab doesn’t exist, the Islamic regime will be destroyed.”³² Both the clerical regime and the people of Iran consider the compulsory hijab fundamental to the Islamic Republic. It is for this precise reason that removal of the compulsory hijab in the ongoing protests has become a symbol of regime change.

Why Removal of the Compulsory Hijab Is Symbolic of Regime Change

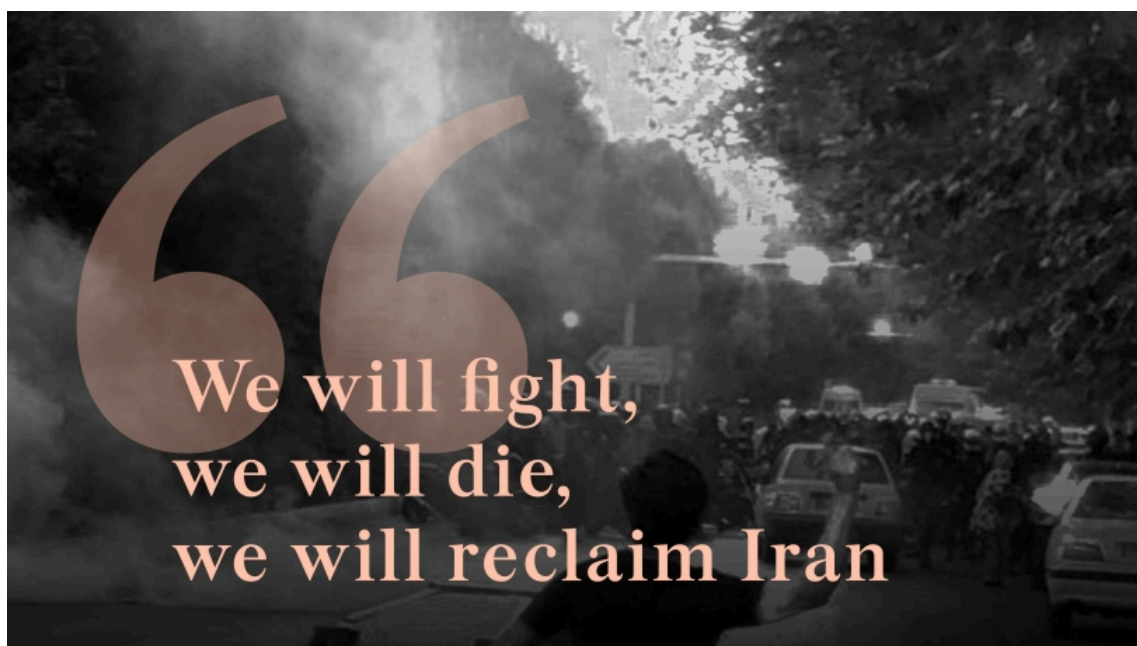
Not only has removal of the compulsory hijab become symbolic of regime change, the secular and liberal demands of the Iranian people have been encapsulated by the main slogan of the ongoing protests: “Women, Life, Freedom”. It is precisely these three things that the regime has sought to erase over the past 43 years. The Iranian people are clear that their demands cannot be actualised under the Islamic Republic because of the regime’s religious and ideological foundations.

The Islamic Republic’s entire existence is contingent on the Shia Islamist doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (clerical guardianship of the state), and enforcement and expansion of sharia law. Under this doctrine, which was created by Khomeini and enshrined in the constitution in 1979, the supreme leader is constitutionally mandated to rule with absolute authority as “God’s representative on Earth” and as the deputy of the twelfth divinely ordained Shia imam, whom Shia Muslims believe was withdrawn into occultation in 874AD. According to this Shia doctrine, the purpose of the Islamic Republic is to prepare for the return of the twelfth imam by Islamising society and expanding Islam’s borders through the forceful and widespread exporting of the Islamic Revolution.³³ The eradication of non-Islamic ideals – not least secularism and liberalism – is at the crux of this regime’s existence and purpose. The theocratic regime is therefore not only opposed to secularisation but actively hostile towards it, with clerical leaders considering themselves mandated by God to destroy it.



The secular demands of the protesters will therefore never be fulfilled by the Islamic Republic – and this is clearly apparent in the ongoing anti-regime protests. While some commentators in the West have suggested that a change in the mandatory-hijab law may placate protestors, GAMAAN’s polling underlines that the Iranian people’s anti-compulsory-hijab stance is just the tip of the iceberg.³⁴ Their secular demands are not solely focused on the compulsory hijab; rather they are a challenge to the Islamic Republic in its entirety. Iranians who oppose the compulsory imposition of the hijab also want regime change enabled through the creation of a secular government. GAMAAN’s polling reveals that 84 per cent of those who are against the compulsory hijab also want to live in a secular state. As a secular state is impossible under the Islamic Republic, regime change is the only route to this being achieved. Therefore, anti-compulsory-hijab sentiment is inextricably linked to regime change. This has been demonstrated by the new trend in unrest that began in 2017 when removal of the hijab became emblematic of anti-regime dissent. What we are seeing on the streets today is a continuation of this sentiment, but on a larger scale. All the signs indicate that the protest trend in Iran will continue on its upward trajectory.

An overwhelming majority of the Iranian people do not agree with the compulsory imposition of the hijab. The importance of religion is diminishing in Iran, where there is little support for the practice of wearing the hijab and of praying five times a day. Yet the Islamic Republic continues to violently impose its Islamist policies on a secularising and liberalising population. The widening gap between state and society is playing out on the streets of Iran where the secular demands of the Iranian population are the antitheses of the Islamic Republic’s foundations. But what does regime change mean in the context of Iran? Why regime change instead of reform? What are the protestors striving to achieve through regime change? How widespread is the support for anti-regime protests across Iranian demographics? And how broad is the support for secular democracy?



Polling Methodology

This paper draws on two polling surveys by the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) in partnership with the Tony Blair Institute: one conducted in June 2020 on religion; and another conducted in February 2022 on political systems.

The 2020 religion survey was conducted using different online platforms between 6 and 21 June 2020. The final refined sample included 39,981 respondents aged over 19 who reside in Iran. The refined sample was weighted based on interlocking variables, including sex, age group, level of education, province, urban/rural areas and respondents' voting behaviour in the 2017 presidential election. The effective sample size after weighting was 1,911. Based on this effective sample size, the results can be generalised to the target population with a 95 per cent credibility level and credibility intervals of 5 per cent. The survey findings reflect the views of literate Iranian residents aged over 19 who comprise 85 per cent of Iran's adult population. The overall survey results and further details on the methodology can be found [here](#).

The 2022 political-systems survey was conducted using different online platforms between 17 and 27 February 2022. The final refined sample included 16,850 respondents aged over 19 who reside in Iran. The refined sample was weighted based on interlocking variables, including sex, age group, level of education, province, urban/rural areas and respondents' voting behaviour in the 2017 presidential election. The effective sample size after weighting was 1,498. Based on this effective sample size, the results can be generalised to the target population with a 95 per cent credibility level and credibility intervals of 5 per cent. The survey findings reflect the views of literate Iranian residents aged over 19 who comprise 85 per cent of Iran's adult population. The overall survey results and further details on the methodology can be found [here](#).

Raw data sets with demographic splits are available on request.

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