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The Debrief

December 2022

Welcome to The Debrief, from the editors at Factual. Each month, we reflect upon an impactful yet underreported story that has significant regional or global implications. We'll examine how the story has progressed and how Factual's coverage has shifted to ensure we are always supplying our members with the most up-to-date, accurate, factual reporting.

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People around the world have gathered at solidarity protests to show their support for demonstrators in Iran, including at this one in Melbourne, Australia, in September. ([Image](#): Matt Hrkac/Flickr)

On the ground

Covering the crackdown on Iran's anti-government protests means relying on a variety of sources to make up for a tightly-controlled media landscape.

Since the [death of a Kurdish woman](#) in police custody in Tehran sparked a wave of anti-government protests across Iran, reports of security forces' violent crackdown on demonstrators across the country have [continued to trickle out](#).

Now in their third month, the protests – Iran's largest since [the Green Movement](#) that followed the 2009 presidential election – have so far claimed the lives of [more than 400 civilians](#) according to human rights groups, while thousands more have been detained.

For media organizations, covering the protests continues to present its own challenges, hampered by Iran's [tightly-controlled national media](#) and the difficulties in balancing often conflicting reports from government-affiliated sources and independent organizations based abroad.

"It's pretty challenging to try to verify what is actually happening on the ground, because there is no free media in Iran," said Factal Editor and Middle East specialist Ahmed Namatalla. ***"The government has eliminated almost every single opposition outlet that used to exist."***

In the absence of reliable local media, journalists have been left weighing up and trying to verify reports from government-controlled outlets and eyewitness reports – often in the form of videos from active protests – to figure out what is going on. Complicating the picture are independent Iranian media outlets based outside the country that openly pursue their own agenda in direct opposition to the government, according to Namatalla.

"What makes this so difficult is that you have a government with a long track record of disseminating verifiably false information. And on the other side, you have opposition organizations who ... often disseminate information that is not verifiably true, and they're quick to put out information that advances their cause," he said.

In the case of Iran, [human rights groups](#) have stepped into the void to provide more credible reporting, with several organizations regularly publishing accounts of violent clashes that corroborate eyewitness reports.

In the meantime, security forces have continued to violently suppress protests despite [broad international condemnation](#) and [additional sanctions](#), including against the heads of the country's morality police. But after the initial unrest spread from Tehran to other parts of the country, demonstrators' resolve now seems to be weakening somewhat due to the regime's brutal tactics.

"It's clear that the protests are losing momentum at this point," Namatalla said. ***"Especially as the government continues its crackdown, whether on the streets or in the courts, where several anti-government protesters were [sentenced to death](#) [in mid-November]. That is***

clearly having a deterring effect.”

Many international media outlets have honed in on the hijab as the galvanizing factor in the protests, airing videos of women tearing off head scarves and cutting their hair in protest. In reality, the initial unrest over Amini’s death sparked local conflicts that are about more than women’s rights – and often tap into issues facing Iran’s [many ethnic minorities](#), in particular.

In Iran’s southeast, the alleged rape of a young girl by a local police officer roused some of the country’s two million ethnic Baluch people. But there and in Iran’s northwestern Kurdistan province, protesters have also taken to the streets because of long-standing grievances including broader discrimination and the lack of economic opportunity, according to Namatalla.

“It’s important to recognise this nuance and to not paint the protests in Iran with one brush,” he said. ***“[This] may have been sparked by the death of a young woman in a police station. But it speaks to wider issues in Iranian society.”***

Still, protesters have been united in their opposition to a repressive government. Even with demonstrations dying down in some parts of the country, some believe the unrest [at least has the potential](#) to boil over into a more sustained change of the status quo.

“No one was able to predict the Arab Spring, but people could clearly see the signs and the build up to 2011 – be it in Tunisia or Egypt,” Namatalla said. ***“[In Iran], any one of these incidents that we track could be the next spark, you just don’t know which one it is. It could be a month from now or it could be 10 years from now. But there is a clear trajectory.”***

Further reading:

- If you want to follow Factal's ongoing coverage of the unrest that has rocked Iran since September, check out [our arc](#).
- The Guardian has an [interactive map](#) tracking the spread of the demonstrations from Tehran to other parts of the country in the initial weeks after Amini’s death.
- For more on the broader context that underpins this latest wave of protests, listen to this [NPR interview](#) with the research director of the National Iranian American Council.



Protests abroad and the wider media coverage of the continuing unrest in Iran have focussed on women's rights, but experts say this is only part of the picture. (*Image: Taymaz Valley/Flickr*)

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