

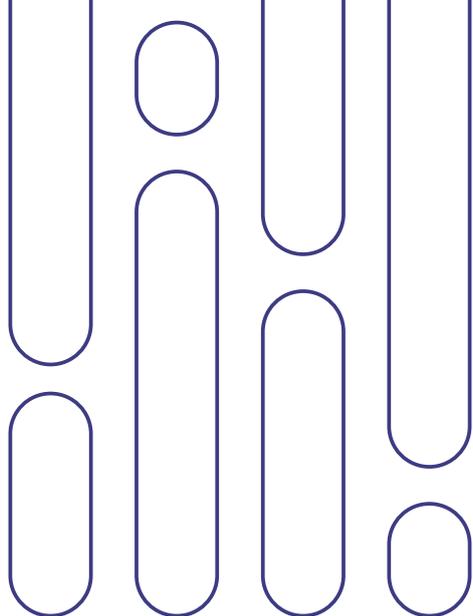
POSITION PAPER

Poisoning Schoolgirls: Narratives and Potential Ramifications for the Iranian Regime

March 16. 2023



RASANAHA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



CONTENTS

Characteristics and Dimensions of the Crisis	3
Parties Involved and Recriminations	6
Consequences and Impacts	9
Conclusion	10

Iran has turned into a country shackled with challenges and burdened by continued crises. This is due to the Iranian regime's policies and lack of focus on addressing crises in order to improve the living conditions of the Iranian people. Despite domestic crises, the Iranian regime has embarked on absurd expansionist extraterritorial misadventures and antagonized several countries in the region and beyond. The last of these crises is the controversial poisoning of schoolgirls. The real reason behind this spate of poisonings remains unknown and the crisis is still snowballing. This crisis necessitates providing an analysis of its characteristics, dimensions, the parties involved, final outcomes and possible trajectories as well as insights into the overall implications for the Iranian regime.

Characteristics and Dimensions of the Crisis

The poisoning crisis began nearly three months ago after the first incident of poisoning at a school in the city of Qom was reported. After this, it was reported that 18 schoolgirls were taken to hospital on November 30, 2022. Since then, the poisoning cases have increased to include hundreds of schools. The following lines shed light on the characteristics of the crisis and its timing:

- **Cases predominantly among schoolgirls:** The primary distinguishing characteristic of this crisis is that the majority of poisonings happened among schoolgirls. It is important to emphasize here that, since the killing of Mahsa Amini, women have taken the lead in standing up to the Iranian regime's repressive practices. Women and schoolgirls have played a significant role in the mass protest movement that has shaken the pillars of the regime, which is facing heightened domestic pres-

asures. Moreover, the participation of schoolgirls exceeded the Iranian regime's redlines with the protest movement including all segments, brackets and factions of Iranian society. The protests have created cracks within the political system, and they have targeted the inner circle around the supreme leader. Protestors, including schoolgirls, set fire to Khomeini's home and to pictures of Qassem Soleimani, a general who once commanded huge popularity and was considered a national hero and was killed in a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport in early 2020

- **Widening scope of cases:** The scope of poisonings among schoolgirls has spread in recent days across preparatory and secondary schools. Poisonings have occurred in almost [230 girls' schools](#) across the country since the crisis began in late November 2022. According to official statistics, the number of poisonings among schoolgirls has risen to 900. Meanwhile, a member of Iran's fact-finding committee, which is investigating the poisoning of schoolgirls, stated that the committee is looking at [5,000 poisonings](#), the majority of which are young schoolgirls.

Poisonings have escalated, reaching a new high with university students affected. These cases include the poisoning of female students at Mohaghegh Ardabili University. Additionally, 29 female students in the city of Urmia were reportedly poisoned. Poisonings were also reported among Islamic Azad University students, 13 female students in Borujerd, 21 female students at the Technical and Vocational University, and 21 female students at Tehran University. It is worth noting that schools and universities have been hotspots of the large protests against the Iranian regime, and they have played a critical role in the protest movement's expansion.

• **Symptoms and duration of the poisonings:** The majority of schoolgirls, many of whom were rushed to hospital, felt sick, dizzy and fainted. In addition, they experienced headaches, rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath and appeared pale. Several of those poisoned reported inhaling a foul smell. Some of them made a connection in the video clips they posted online between the smell of gas that causes poisoning and the gases that were widely used during the protests following Amini's death, which caused similar poisonings. Many of those affected recovered within 24 hours. Some believe that nitrogen gas was used in these cases of poisoning. The confirmed reason behind these poisonings remains unknown until today.

• **The duration of the poisonings were sufficient for making things clear:** Since the poisonings began three months ago, Iranian government officials have had enough time to explain the confirmed reason for the poisonings, how long they would last, and how they spread from high school students to university students. Many observers have blamed the Iranian regime, raising questions about its delayed response to the series of poisonings. They also raised questions about the actual perpetrators of the poisonings to the point of accusing the Iranian regime itself. They posited whether or not the poisonings were sanctioned by the supreme leader to punish and intimidate the schoolgirls who had actively participated in the protest movement. This point is especially significant given that the supreme leader stated in a speech during the protests against the killing of Amini, namely in October 2022, that a mild punishment for youngsters could make them understand that they had made a mistake in protesting against the regime.

It is important to note that this crisis comes at a time when the Iranian regime is facing diminishing intervals between mass

popular protests that have exhausted it and created more security, economic and living challenges for it. Iran is presently caught in a vicious cycle of ongoing and escalating problems that the regime is unable to resolve as a result of its failed domestic and foreign policies as well as its stubbornness and inflexibility in the context of relations with the West. For example, the stalled nuclear talks in Vienna is a missed opportunity to alleviate domestic pressures by lifting the sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy.

Parties Involved and Recriminations

In light of the ambiguity surrounding the poisoning of Iranian schoolgirls, there are a host of narratives about the cases in Iranian schools:

- **Pointing the finger of blame at the Iranian regime:** Some Iranian circles at home and overseas opposition elements have accused the regime of involvement in the poisonings. Some of these circles consider the poisonings as meticulously orchestrated by Iranian security and intelligence services as a retaliatory measure against schoolgirls and women in order to scare and intimidate them and prevent them from participating in the upcoming protests. This comes particularly after the major role played by women in general and schoolgirls in particular in the protests that broke out in September 2022 following the death of Amini. In this respect, Sunni prayer leader in Zahedan Molavi Abdul-Hamid said in response to the poisonings that “the culprits of the poisoning crime” are likely to be “regime insiders,” pointing out that these cases are aimed to “repress the recent protests.”

At the beginning of the poisoning crisis, Iranian officials made

contradictory statements about the reasons behind it, with some of them even denying it even happened. Others stated that it is a scheme led by the Iranian opposition overseas to tarnish the regime's image. Others blamed Israel for the crisis, and a fourth group said that internal parties opposed to the education of girls were behind the poisonings. Even after the regime had realized the scope and enormity of the crisis, it did not take swift measures to identify those responsible for the spate of poisonings. So far, Iranian authorities have not announced the results of the investigation it said it was conducting into the poisonings. Given the contradictory statements and complacency when it comes to investigating the matter, opposition elements quickly embraced the narrative that the regime poisoned the schoolgirls. Furthermore, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's comments on the poisoning of schoolgirls represented another springboard for opposition elements to accuse the regime of being behind the poisonings. First, the supreme leader's comments on the crisis were belated — three months after the crisis broke out. Second, he seemed unconcerned about the poisonings. He did not set aside time to discuss the issue that was causing much concern in Iranian society. He instead addressed the matter during Tree Day celebrations after speaking extensively about the value of trees and their role in environmental preservation. Finally, Khamenei appeared to query if the poisonings occurred when he [stated](#), "If the crime is proven to have occurred, the heaviest penalty would be inflicted on the culprits."

- **The regime accuses its enemies of being behind the poisonings:** Several Iranian officials have floated conspiracy theories. Some of them have accused dissenter groups of being behind the poisonings with the aim of dragging the Iranian street

into rekindling a new wave of anti-regime protests. The Iranian president, for his part, [described](#) the poisonings as “a conspiracy aimed to create chaos in the country given the enemies’ tireless seeking to instill fear and insecurity among schoolgirls and their parents.” As usual, the Iranian regime has attempted to divert attention by blaming foes for the crisis, a tactic which is failing to convince the Iranian people, who are now fully aware of the regime’s lies and deception.

- **The involvement of a hardline religious group opposed to the education of girls:** Iranian circles, particularly inside Iran, floated a third narrative. They said that a hardline religious group opposed to the education of girls — like the Taliban in Afghanistan — is behind the widespread poisonings that gripped schools in various Iranian cities. This comes especially as the poisonings began in the city of Qom, then spread to the rest of Iran — occurring in 230 schools until now.

In this regard, hawza teacher [Fazel Maybodi](#) said, “It’s said that a religious group named Hazara Kara is behind the poisonings and that it’s a group that believes girls shouldn’t go to school beyond third grade.” A number of academics in Iran allege that the Taliban is the mastermind of the poisonings. However, the widespread poisoning incidents across 25 provinces raise doubts about the veracity of these claims, especially given the fact that Iranian security and intelligence services are deployed in various Iranian cities. If a hardline group is found to be involved in the poisonings, it cannot be ruled out that it is connected to the regime and possibly supported by it. Considering the aforementioned, the regime might be able to get out of this bind by blaming the hardline group or even the Taliban and perhaps holding bogus trials to quell public outrage in Iran.

Consequences and Impacts

The following observations are important in the context of the poisoning cases:

- **These poisoning cases have harmed the regime's image and reflect the crisis facing the Iranian leadership:** The Iranian regime is essentially and directly responsible for protecting and defending Iranians. Failure to perform this role, or involvement in the poisonings, further erodes the regime's legitimacy and standing in the Iranian street, even among its incubators.
- **The poisonings have gone beyond the regime's control:** What backs up this is the ambiguity surrounding the crisis and the widening scope of the poisonings. Moreover, in panic, the regime announced tightening the penalty against any party involved in the poisonings, even a death sentence has not been ruled out.
- **The poisonings have exposed the weakness and inefficiency of the Iranian regime's security services:** For over three months, since the first incident was reported in November 2022 in Qom, the regime has not announced the party behind these incidents nor has it revealed any culprits either inside or outside the country. It is unacceptable at the popular level that the regime remains incapable of providing a logical or scientific explanation for what is happening. The poisonings have put the Iranian regime in an awkward position in front of the Iranian people, particularly if we take into account the wide-ranging security breaches that have targeted Iranian infrastructure and military and nuclear sites, not to mention the assassination of senior figures and cyberattacks. All of these incidents demonstrate the extent to which the Iranian regime has deteriorated as a result of four decades of inability to adapt and modernize

security and intelligence apparatuses.

• **The poisoning cases contribute to increasing internal and external pressures on the Iranian regime:** While public protests remain intrinsically related to the deterioration of Iranians' lives and security in the country, the poisoning cases may provoke Iranians to rise up against the regime, especially during the Nowruz celebrations this month. This could be a timely occasion for the enraged Iranian street to rearrange its ranks and continue its protests against the schoolgirl poisonings. They could also give rise to a wave of international condemnation and pressure, particularly from human rights and international organizations. The international community has several justifications — including Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war, its ongoing nuclear violations and arrest of dual nationals — to put more pressure on the Iranian regime and employ such events to harm its legitimacy.

Conclusion

Regardless of the party or parties involved in the schoolgirl poisonings, these cases, along with others, reflect the weakness of the Iranian regime at this stage. They also point to the ineffectiveness of Iran's security services. While security apparatuses are busy repressing people and attempting to cement the regime's standing on the one hand and enhance their economic interests on the other — at the expense of people's interests, security and safety — it is hard for clerics to perpetuate the status quo in the long run.

However, the Iranian regime still possesses a card which it could employ to contain the ongoing domestic tensions: easing tensions with the United States, the West and regional powers.

The regime could return to the negotiating table, accept a settlement that ends all differences and resolves complicated issues, including the nuclear program and renounce its hostile behavior in the region and globally. This could help the regime overcome its crises and setbacks, given that none of the outside actors have the desire to support any process that leads to regime change, nor are they willing to use military force — except in cases of extreme necessity. Moreover, the domestic opposition is disorganized and over the past decades the regime has succeeded in suppressing any force capable of offering a credible alternative to the Iranian people.

