

Iran's Regime Has Survived War, Sanctions and Uprising. Environmental Crises May Bring It Down.

Decades of water depletion, dam building and repression of scientists and environmentalists have driven Iran toward ecological crises that are fueling protests rocking the country.

By [Katie Surma](#) January 14, 2026

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The anti-government protests sweeping across Iran, from major cities to rural towns, are fueled by anger over economic collapse and political repression. But beneath the headlines of currency devaluations and street clashes lies a deeper, more permanent driver of dissent: **ecological calamity.**

Decades of ignoring scientists, persecuting activists and greenlighting corrupt development schemes have triggered a water crisis so severe that President Masoud Pezeshkian warned in November that Tehran's residents may eventually have to evacuate the capital city, which is sinking as dried-up aquifers give way.

The devastation extends far beyond Tehran. Lake Urmia, once one of the world's largest salt lakes, has shriveled to less than 10 percent of its volume, while the iconic Zayandeh River has sat dry for years. Wildfires have [ravaged](#) the parched Hyrcanian forests, a UNESCO World Heritage site. In the oil-rich Khuzestan province, home to Iran's Arab minority, state-led water diversion has devastated the local economy and inflamed ethnic grievances.

Iranians, and many experts, [blame](#) the government, one of the world's most repressive regimes.

Environmental issues tie "into all the other grievances that activists and citizens and protesters have over economic and political issues," said Eric Lob, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie

Middle East Program and an associate professor at Florida International University. “It’s all interconnected.”

The human cost is staggering. Crumbling infrastructure, poorly designed irrigation systems and overdrawn aquifers have left farmers unable to plant crops and cities forced to ration supplies. Tens of thousands of people, including children, die prematurely each year from severe air and water pollution. Water shortages and power outages have shuttered businesses and left ordinary Iranians “worried about whether they’ll have enough water for drinking, bathing and cleaning,” Lob said.

Water stress has also become a source of political contention and a tool of political control, he said. Ethnic minority regions on Iran’s periphery have seen their water supply diverted to central provinces dominated by the Persian majority, creating environmental “winners and losers” and deepening resentment.

In Khuzestan, for example, national government policies have diverted water from the Karun River to central plateau provinces, reinforcing perceptions that Tehran prioritizes politically connected agriculture and industrial interests over local needs.

Gregg Roman, executive director of the Middle East Forum, pointed to recent protests over water access in the Sistan and Baluchestan province, where demonstrators in 2023 marched with signs reading “Sistan is thirsty for water, Sistan is thirsty for attention.”

“These aren’t separate from the current uprising,” Roman said of past water protests. “They’re precursors. **Economic and environmental grievances are inseparable when your tap runs dry and your crops die.**”

Student groups have also identified Iran’s ecological emergencies as driving unrest.

“Today, crises have piled up: poverty, inequality, class oppression, gender oppression, pressure on nations, water and environmental crises. All are direct products of a corrupt and worn-out system,” student activists said in a December [statement](#).

The current protests, which erupted in late December, are the largest since 2022-2023. The government has responded with a communication blackout, cutting off [internet](#) access nationwide, and violent crackdowns. Human rights organizations estimate thousands have been killed, and even more arrested. Iran has a history of executing protestors, often by public hanging.

Lob [traced](#) a direct line between today’s uprising and the regime’s historical environmental failures.

Since the 1979 revolution, he said, the government has used rural development projects to increase political legitimacy and popular support—a process that gave rise to a “water mafia” within the military establishment and the construction of hundreds of dams across the country.

“Organizations close to the government and military were able to get contracts for these projects,” Lob said. “The goal was power and profit-seeking over environmental protection and sustainability.”

This profit-driven mismanagement, compounded by climate change-driven [drought](#), international sanctions and limited investment, has led to land subsidence so severe that infrastructure such as roads and buildings is cracking. In Tehran, the crisis reached a breaking point this winter as reservoirs plummeted below 10 percent capacity.

“The state can no longer ignore the reality on the ground that people have sounded the alarm on for years,” Lob said.

Repression in Iran

Niloufar Bayani thought that tracking endangered wildlife would help save Iran’s critically endangered Persian cheetah. Instead, it landed her in one of the country’s most notorious prisons.

Inside Evin Prison, Bayani was held in solitary confinement and interrogated in 12-hour stretches as officials pressed her to confess to espionage. Interrogators threatened her with sexual assault, injections of hallucinogenic drugs and the arrest and torture of her 70-year-old parents, showing her images of torture devices to underscore their threats.

After six years of detention, Bayani and seven of her colleagues were released in 2024—the group’s leader, Kavous Seyed-Emami, died in Evin Prison just weeks after his arrest.

The detentions and death have become a stark example of how Iran’s environment, and those working to protect it, are entangled with a repressive security state, even as the nation’s environmental crises deepen.

“Scientists and activists have been repressed by the state because what they were saying was inconvenient,” Lob said.

Among them is [Kaveh Madani](#), a water management expert forced into exile after his proposed solutions to Iran’s water crisis, including reducing reliance on dams, threatened the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ interests. In 2024, government security forces arrested poet [Peyman Farahavar](#), later sentencing him to death over his writing critical of environmental destruction. And last year, the crackdown expanded to include grassroots activists Sabah and Ramin Salehi, cousins who were arrested for their work protecting the Zagros forests.

“These individuals were trying to do their jobs—articulating the urgency of the issue and raising public awareness—and they were punished for it,” Lob said. (AA note: and this is exactly what Trump is trying to do – silence all critics and climate scientists with threats).

Iran’s environmental crises are not unique to the country, or even the region.

From neighboring Iraq to arid parts of the United States, including California and the Southwest, governments are grappling with dwindling water supplies and the political and socioeconomic consequences of how they are managed, Lob said.

In Iran, the problem is magnified by an agriculture sector that [consumes](#) the majority of the nation’s water, often inefficiently. Analysts say years of inadequate oversight and short-term fixes have deepened the crisis, particularly for farmers and rural communities whose livelihoods depend on reliable water access.

“Water rights, pollution and climate impacts are apolitical on their face but lead directly to questions about governance, corruption and regime legitimacy,” said Roman.

Article link: https://insideclimatenews.org/news/14012026/iran-environmental-crisis-water-shortage-protests/?utm_source=InsideClimate+News&utm_campaign=bf952ec808-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2026_01_17_11_12&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_29c928ffb5-bf952ec808-327834825

(AA note: Silencing their climate and environmental scientists has brought them disaster. I wonder if there is any chance Republicans may finally see the light and care enough about their own children and grandchildren to protect our scientists and listen to them.)