

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

February 9, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas  
Secretary of Homeland Security  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
245 Murray Lane, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Mayorkas:

I write to you today about the extraordinary risks Iranian dissidents and their family members face amid an intensifying crackdown on innocent protesters. The number of arrests and detentions – at least 18,000 in several months – is alarming, as is the Iranian regime’s use of the death penalty against young protesters in an effort to quash all political dissent. I strongly urge you to accelerate visa processing for Iranians seeking to enter the United States. I also strongly urge you to establish a robust entry program for Iranian dissidents and their family members, including the creation of a humanitarian parole pathway. As the regime escalates its repressive tactics at home, we must open every possible avenue for dissidents fleeing the Islamic Republic.

Iranians first took to the streets to protest the brutal murder of Mahsa Amini on September 16. They have continued those protests throughout the country for more than 140 days, gathering in opposition to a government that demonstrates no regard for fundamental human rights. The regime’s tactics – including deliberately blinding protesters, using ambulances to detain civilians, and issuing death sentences on trumped up charges – violate every known international human rights standard. Iranian women have faced the brunt of the crackdown, including credible reports of sexual violence and torture by security forces. Iranian Kurds now live under a virtual military occupation within their own country, with regime thugs raiding their homes and firing live ammunition into crowds.

Despite the dangers, Iranians of all backgrounds continue to speak up both at home and abroad. Athletes have risked their professional careers and personal freedom to express solidarity with those marching in the streets. The regime has retaliated against these players, arresting female athletes who remove their headscarves and male players who publicly support the protests on the world stage. Dozens of Iranian artists, actors, filmmakers, journalists, musicians, poets, and singers, who oppose the crackdown have also been seized and silenced. The UN special rapporteur for human rights in Iran reported in November that at least 14,000 people have been arrested since the start of the protests; that number likely undercounts the real number of those detained.

I appreciate the Administration’s recent efforts to hold the Islamic Republic accountable, including imposing sanctions against the morality police and senior officials responsible for the

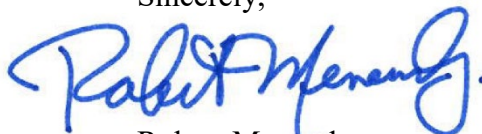
crackdown. I also appreciate your efforts to align our allies and partners on similar sanctions, as reflected in recent actions by Canada, the EU, and the U.K. The vote at the UN Human Rights Council to investigate human rights violations committed by the regime against protesters is a long overdue, but welcome, step by the international community. And the removal of Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women is an illustration of American diplomatic leadership.

But more must be done to shelter from retaliation those Iranian dissidents and their family members that choose to leave Iran. The Department of Homeland Security possesses broad discretionary authority to grant parole to fully-vetted individuals for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. Dissidents and their family members living in Iran face extreme risks to their freedom and personal safety. And as we know too well with respect to the Iranian regime, dissidents living abroad are increasingly at risk from the credible threat of kidnapping, rendition, and assassination. As the leading state sponsor of terrorism, Iran has shown no compunction in going after dissidents across international borders, including in our own country.

The Administration should replicate the successful model of Uniting for Ukraine to provide Iranians fleeing the regime a swift and generous pathway to the United States. Such a pathway would help Iranians find immediate safety in the United States while they determine their best next step. I would welcome consultations if the Administration intends to consider or implement such a plan.

The United States can and should provide shelter to Iranian dissidents who choose to flee a repressive regime that threatens their lives and those of their family members. The bravery, courage, and resolve of the Iranian people in the face of an unrelenting authoritarian regime deserve no less.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez  
Chairman