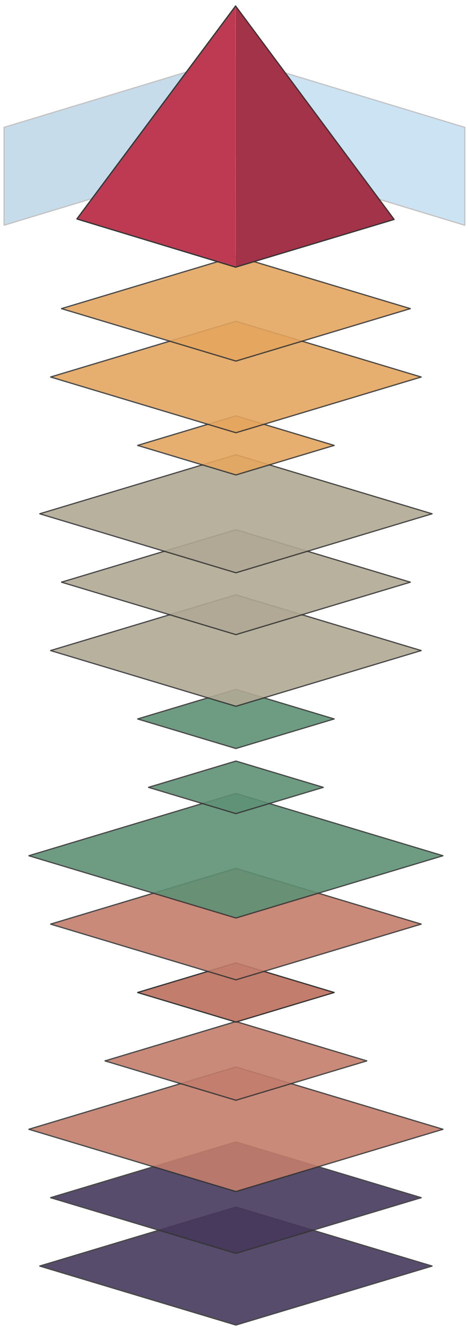
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

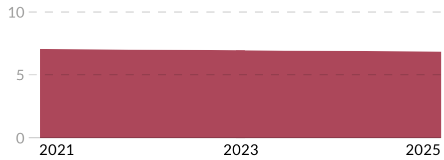
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

IRAN



6.88 ↘0.15 CRIMINALITY SCORE

23rd of 193 countries ↘9
8th of 46 Asian countries ↘2
5th of 14 Western Asian countries ↘1



CRIMINAL MARKETS	7.37	↘0.00
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	8.00	0.00
HUMAN SMUGGLING	8.50	0.00
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	4.50	0.00
ARMS TRAFFICKING	9.00	0.00
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	8.00	↗0.50
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	8.50	↗0.50
FLORA CRIMES	4.50	0.00
FAUNA CRIMES	4.00	0.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	9.50	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	8.50	↘0.50
COCAINE TRADE	4.50	↘1.00
CANNABIS TRADE	6.00	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	9.50	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	8.50	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	9.00	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	6.40	↘0.30
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	4.50	↘0.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	7.50	0.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	9.50	0.00
FOREIGN ACTORS	5.50	↘0.50
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	5.00	↘0.50

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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Funded by the European Union

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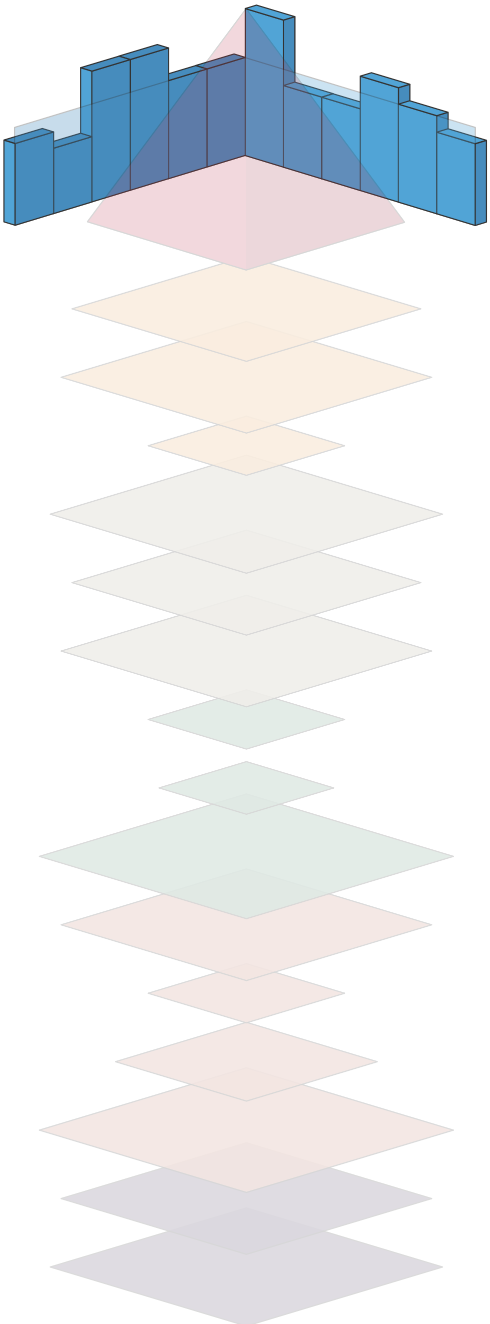
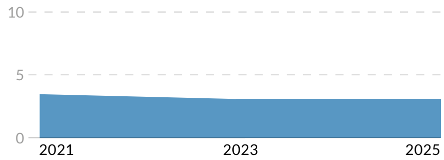


3.08 ↘0.04

RESILIENCE SCORE

163rd of 193 countries ↗3
38th of 46 Asian countries ↗1
11th of 14 Western Asian countries ↗1



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	**2.50**	0.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	**2.00**	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	**4.00**	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	**4.00**	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	**3.00**	0.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	**3.00**	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	**4.50**	↘0.50
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	**2.50**	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	**2.50**	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	**3.50**	0.00
PREVENTION	**3.00**	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	**2.50**	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Iran remains a pivotal hub for human trafficking, functioning as a source, transit and destination country. Its strategic location and extensive, often porous, borders facilitate widespread trafficking activities. Reports highlight the systematic involvement of state-embedded actors – notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij militia – in the recruitment of vulnerable populations into paramilitary operations in regional conflicts, like Syria. These individuals, such as minors and undocumented Afghan and Pakistani nationals, are often coerced with promises of financial compensation and residency permits which are frequently unfulfilled. Women and children are particularly susceptible to exploitation. Iranian and non-Iranian women and girls are trafficked internally and abroad, including to the Gulf states and Europe, for sexual exploitation. Homeless children from both Iranian and Afghan backgrounds are forced into labour, highlighting the prevalence of internal trafficking. Furthermore, reports indicate the presence of transnational trafficking of organs, with recent investigations uncovering illicit transplants conducted in Iran for foreign recipients.

Human smuggling is deeply entrenched, particularly involving Afghan nationals fleeing conflict and economic hardship. Iran serves both as a destination and a transit route for people smuggled from Afghanistan, often en route to Türkiye and Europe. Smuggling operations are widespread in border provinces like Sistan and Urumiyeh, and the associated costs vary based on route and risk level. A complex smuggling economy has developed, involving local actors, corrupt officials and sometimes the private sector, which benefits from access to cheap labour. Afghan migrants are sometimes forced to transport narcotics during their journey, indicating an overlap with drug trafficking markets. Notably, violent incidents involving Iranian border forces targeting Afghan migrants have drawn international criticism.

Extortion and protection racketeering are less prevalent than other criminal markets in Iran, but anecdotal evidence suggests localized incidents in major cities. These acts involve criminal groups and are typically linked to economic pressures and state complicity. International dimensions have also emerged, such as extortion schemes in neighbouring countries traced back to handlers in Iran.

TRADE

Arms trafficking continues to be a notable dimension of Iran's regional engagement. Reports suggest that the IRGC, particularly its Quds Force, have played key roles in facilitating arms transfers to allied non-state groups in the region, including Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis. These transfers include a range of weaponry such as drones and ballistic missiles, often raising international concern regarding sanctions compliance. In recent years, Iran's arms transfers have reportedly extended to regions in Africa and Latin America, and there are indications of collaboration with Russian counterparts involving the transfer of unmanned aerial vehicles. Additional reporting has noted Iran's support for efforts to move weapons into the West Bank via Jordan and Syria. Internally, the circulation of unauthorized firearms has contributed to instability in certain border regions, notably in Sistan-Baluchistan. Iranian arms manufacturing capabilities, which span both commercial and covert channels, are reported to operate with limited transparency. Some sources allege the use of civilian transport infrastructure for arms shipments. There is an emerging trend of Iran transferring military technology rather than complete systems, allowing partner groups to produce weaponry locally. Although Iranian authorities reject claims of involvement, a range of external assessments continue to raise concerns about potential links between state-affiliated entities and international arms trafficking networks.

Iran hosts a significant market for counterfeit goods, encompassing a range of products from luxury brands and automotive components to pharmaceuticals and everyday consumer items. The country's strategic location, combined with economic pressures and Western sanctions, has reinforced its role as both a source and a transit hub in the global counterfeiting landscape. Demand for counterfeit foreign-branded goods remains high, particularly due to the perception of cost savings and social prestige. This has contributed to the increased domestic proliferation of counterfeit clothing, shoes and medical supplies, including pharmaceuticals that have been traced to markets such as Afghanistan and the EU. The counterfeiting of saffron and automotive parts also presents notable public health and economic challenges. Furthermore, the ongoing prohibition on alcohol has spurred an underground market for counterfeit beverages, which has been linked to a rise in methanol poisoning incidents. Foreign criminal actors, including Kurdish Kolbar smugglers and networks affiliated with Hezbollah as well as groups in Iraq and Syria are also reportedly active in this market, adding a transnational dimension to Iran's counterfeit goods trade.

The illicit trade in excisable goods is also substantial, exacerbated by sanctions and corruption. The IRGC is implicated in large-scale smuggling operations, using its control over ports and airports to facilitate tax evasion and illicit imports. Border regions, particularly with Türkiye and Iraq, are key routes for smuggling tobacco, alcohol and electronics. Kurdish smuggling networks, including the Kolbars, play a significant role in cross-border trade. Cigarette smuggling accounts for a major portion of the contraband market, with millions of cigarette packs intercepted annually. Enforcement is weak and inconsistent, and the underground alcohol market remains robust despite prohibition, fuelled by high domestic demand.

ENVIRONMENT

Although crimes involving flora and fauna are present in Iran, they remain relatively limited in scale compared to other illicit markets in the country. Illegal logging and the unsanctioned collection of medicinal and ornamental plants are key concerns. Despite a national logging ban, illegal timber harvesting continues, particularly in the Hyrcanian forests. Corruption and limited enforcement capacity exacerbate deforestation. The illegal trade in orchid tubers, sought after in regional markets, is a significant issue, with traffickers using deceptive practices to smuggle these products. Protected plant species like the Persian maple are critically endangered due to illicit exploitation. As for fauna crimes, Iran's biodiversity, including rare sheep species and large predators like the Persian leopard, attracts poachers and wildlife traffickers. Endangered species are traded both domestically and internationally, with destinations including Gulf countries and Europe. Social media platforms have facilitated the online trade of exotic pets and wildlife products. Cultural practices and alternative medicine trends also contribute to demand for illegal wildlife products.

Crimes involving non-renewable resources are driven by Iran's central role in global oil production and exports. Despite sanctions, Iran has sustained and even expanded its crude oil exports, primarily through sophisticated smuggling techniques such as ship-to-ship transfers and route spoofing, especially towards China. Notable incidents include the transfer of oil using Dubai-based tankers, with destinations including Oman, Yemen, Somalia and China. Smuggled refined oil and derivatives often travel along similar routes as other illicit activities, including drug and human trafficking. The IRGC is again a central actor, using revenues to support geopolitical aims and proxy groups. Fuel smuggling remains rampant in Iran and across its borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan. Additionally, gold smuggling, particularly along the border with the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, persists as a significant challenge, further undermining transparency in resource trade.

DRUGS

Heroin trafficking remains one of Iran's most entrenched and impactful drug markets. Situated within the Golden Crescent, Iran is a primary transit route for heroin originating in Afghanistan and destined for Europe. It also has one of the world's highest rates of opiate consumption. Recent years have seen major seizures, and Iranian authorities claim to have intercepted thousands of tonnes over the past decade. However, some reports indicate that state-embedded actors, including elements within the IRGC, may have links to the heroin trade and could be leveraging it to advance broader strategic objectives. Despite harsh legal penalties, including capital punishment, heroin trafficking and consumption persist, with strong links to other markets such as arms and synthetic drugs. By contrast, the cocaine market is limited in scale but exists primarily among affluent youth and urban populations. While there are allegations of IRGC links to cocaine trafficking through connections with Latin American cartels, these remain unsubstantiated. The high cost of cocaine, combined with the availability of cheaper alternatives like opium and methamphetamine, limits its domestic prevalence.

Cannabis is the second most used drug in Iran, primarily in the form of hashish historically sourced from Afghanistan. In recent years, domestic production has increased, with higher-potency products targeting urban consumers. While penalties remain severe, enforcement appears inconsistent, and some reports suggest state-embedded actors may benefit from the trade. Hashish seizures have been reported at both domestic and international levels, and Iran continues to serve as a transit route for cannabis resin moving toward the Gulf and European markets.

Synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine, have seen a significant surge in recent years. Iran acts as a source, transit and destination for these substances. Afghan methamphetamine in particular dominates the market, with a significant rise in its consumption, making it a destination country. Iran remains a major source for high-quality methamphetamine found in markets like Europe and Australia. Corrupt officials and well-connected networks, including groups like the Panjak Cartel, are reportedly involved in the production and export of synthetic drugs. Seizures have increased, especially along eastern borders, and synthetic drugs are contributing to addiction crises in neighbouring countries such as Iraq.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes are thought to be consolidated in Iran, particularly through state-sponsored hacking groups with ties to the IRGC. These actors conduct operations targeting political adversaries and critical infrastructure in Western Asia, Europe and North America. Attacks have included data theft and ransomware. Iranian institutions are also targeted, with hacktivist groups and foreign actors exposing government vulnerabilities. In recent years, several prominent cyberattacks crippled infrastructure and leaked sensitive data, including parliamentary documents. Iran's collaboration with Russian and North Korean actors has enhanced its cyber capabilities. Operations often blur the lines between state strategy and organized crime. While politically motivated, many cybercrimes generate substantial revenue, particularly those involving ransomware. Iran's cyber ecosystem is increasingly integrated into global criminal networks, with malware and hacking services procured from international cybercrime forums.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Iran are highly prevalent and deeply institutionalized. Embezzlement, fraud and large-scale tax evasion are frequently linked to government-backed entities and state-owned enterprises. The opaque nature of financial governance, especially around foundations known as Bonyads, facilitates systemic corruption. Cyber-enabled financial crimes, including phishing and identity fraud, are also increasing. Sanctions have paradoxically driven innovation in illicit finance, with actors exploiting informal markets and loopholes to move capital.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Iran's criminal landscape includes limited but notable instances of mafia-style groups, although comprehensive evidence of widespread traditional organized crime structures remains scarce. Among the more prominent actors fitting this profile is the Zindashti Cartel, which has been linked to serious crimes such as drug trafficking, assassinations and the abduction of dissidents, primarily operating with alleged support from powerful political figures. While other references to mafia-type organizations exist in public discourse, systematic documentation is limited. Criminal networks are characterized by regional entrenchment and strategic specialization. These groups tend to operate with flexible structures, focusing on activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling and cybercrime. The eastern, western and central parts of the country serve as focal points for these networks, which exploit Iran's geographical advantages. Despite persistent allegations of influence in the political sphere, there is no verified evidence that criminal networks have significantly shaped national electoral processes. The overall structure and operations of these networks have remained consistent in recent years, underscoring their embeddedness in Iran's illicit economy.

State-embedded actors are widely viewed as central to Iran's organized crime landscape. Among these, the IRGC and affiliated institutions are frequently cited in reporting on illicit activities, ranging from drug and arms trafficking to financial and cyber-enabled crimes. These actors reportedly maintain connections with both domestic and international militant and criminal groups. The IRGC's reach into both formal and informal sectors of the economy has raised concerns about its ability to operate with limited oversight. Additionally, state-linked cyber groups have been reported to engage in cyber-dependent crimes, including hacking, espionage and cyberattacks, particularly targeting foreign institutions. In contrast, foreign criminal actors do not maintain a strong operational presence within Iran, largely due to the dominance of state-embedded actors over key criminal markets. However, Iran's geographic position and porous borders enable collaboration between local and foreign criminal networks. Cross-border smuggling involving drugs, fuel and people is prevalent in regions like Baluchistan and the western Kurdish areas, often in partnership with Afghan and Iraqi actors. There is also increased participation from networks linked to Syria and Pakistan, particularly in operations connected to IRGC-affiliated militias. Though some diaspora communities, such as Afghans and Iraqis, may engage in small-scale smuggling, they do not exert notable control over broader criminal markets.

The private sector in Iran also plays a comparatively modest role in the broader economy, in part due to the prevailing dominance of state-affiliated institutions and the blurred boundaries between public, semi-public and private enterprises. A complex regulatory environment, combined with external sanctions and preferential treatment for public entities, places considerable strain on private businesses. In this context, some private actors may resort to informal or non-compliant practices, such as operating within black markets or engaging in tax evasion, to remain viable. The pervasive influence of the IRGC further complicates the distinction between legitimate private enterprise and illicit activity, as private firms are often drawn into arrangements that support sanctioned-evading operations. Several sectors, including shipping, aviation and technology, have reportedly become involved in such activities. In addition, charitable organizations known as Bonyads have been cited in connection with significant financial irregularities, including embezzlement and tax evasion. Although Iran's relative isolation reduces the extent of transnational private-sector collaboration, limited transparency in regulatory oversight fosters conditions that may facilitate complicity in organized crime.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Iran's political leadership and governance landscape is defined by a dual structure combining a semi-elected president and an unelected supreme leader, creating inconsistencies in decision-making, particularly on issues such as organized crime. While there are periodic reformist attempts, these efforts are often constrained by more powerful conservative state elements such as the IRGC and the Guardian Council, which maintain substantial discretionary powers and limited oversight. These institutional dynamics limit the country's capacity for cohesive and accountable governance, especially in addressing organized crime. Recent leadership changes have seen a reformist president elected in 2024 after the unexpected death of the previous president. Although the new administration has signalled intentions to improve transparency and reduce factionalism, analysts suggest that entrenched institutional structures are likely to limit the president's ability to enact significant reforms. Iran's broader political environment continues to be influenced by regional geopolitical dynamics and allegations of corruption and electoral malpractice, which raise concerns about the integrity of governance. The presence of semi-autonomous bodies such as the IRGC further complicates governance and reform efforts. The IRGC has been implicated in illicit activities, including trafficking and smuggling, which undermines institutional efforts to counter organized crime. Meanwhile, domestic efforts to control the flow of information through bodies such as the Supreme Council of Cyberspace and plans to expand the National Information Network suggest increasing state control, which could restrict civil liberties and access to information.

Iran's accountability and transparency mechanisms are limited. Oversight institutions such as the Supreme Audit Court and the General Inspection Organization have restricted capacity to hold powerful state entities to account, including the supreme leader and the IRGC. Many accountability mechanisms apply predominantly to the elected president, whose actual influence over security and economic policy is limited. Public access to government information is highly restricted, and while a legal framework for access exists, numerous exemptions and limited procedural safeguards diminish its effectiveness. Overall, corruption remains pervasive. Although some anti-corruption institutions exist, they are often perceived as tools for political infighting rather than genuine reform. High-profile corruption cases with allegations of embezzlement involving senior officials and widespread nepotism continue to emerge, and even when prosecuted, influential people reportedly receive preferential treatment. The lack of judicial independence and political stability further undermines efforts to promote transparency and accountability in government institutions.

In the international arena, Iran has made efforts to participate in cooperative mechanisms despite its generally isolated foreign policy stance. Iran is a member of several international conventions, including the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and various drug control treaties. Iran has recently engaged with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and INTERPOL on multiple issues, including drug and wildlife trafficking. Regional cooperation initiatives with countries such as Afghanistan and Kazakhstan reflect a degree of engagement on transnational organized crime. However, Iran has not ratified key agreements such as the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime or the Arms Trade Treaty, and it remains outside the Financial Action Task Force framework. Its geopolitical positioning and internal political dynamics continue to constrain the depth and consistency of its international cooperation.

National laws targeting organized crime are robust in terms of the severity of penalties. Iran's anti-narcotics legislation, for instance, mandates severe penalties, including capital punishment, though there have been reforms to reduce executions for non-violent offences. Recent amendments also target public drug and alcohol consumption. Wildlife protection laws and intellectual property legislation have been updated, with further reforms under parliamentary review. Nevertheless, these laws are weakened by poor enforcement and systemic corruption. Moreover, recent cyber regulation proposals have raised concerns over civil liberties. Legal frameworks exist but are often hindered by a lack of effective implementation mechanisms.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Iran's judicial system operates under a dual framework that includes both civilian and Revolutionary Courts. While civilian courts allow for legal representation and appeals, Revolutionary Courts handle national security-related cases with limited due process, often resulting in expedited judgments. The judiciary is widely perceived to lack independence, particularly given that the supreme leader appoints top judicial officials. Although efforts have been made to prosecute corruption, these often target lower-tier actors. Reports of overcrowding, withholding of medical care and mistreatment in prisons remain prevalent, despite recent mass pardons issued in politically sensitive contexts.

Iran's law enforcement agencies are structured around multiple bodies, including the Anti-Narcotics Police, the Ministry of Intelligence and the Basij militia, which functions under the IRGC. While specialized units exist, enforcement efforts are often oriented toward intelligence gathering rather than dismantling organized crime networks. Reports of excessive force, arbitrary detention and torture during protests have drawn criticism from human rights organizations. The lack of modern equipment and insufficient focus on organized crime-related enforcement further hinder effectiveness.

Iran's territorial integrity is challenged by its geography and regional security threats. The combination of geopolitical factors, natural environments and increased hostility towards the regime in Tehran in Iran's peripheries may make it difficult for Iran to fully control flows across its borders. The long and porous border with Afghanistan, combined with difficult terrain and limited infrastructure, creates opportunities for trafficking and irregular migration. Border regions, especially those inhabited by ethnic minorities, are less secure and have seen increases in insurgent activity. Corruption within border security forces has also been reported. Recent initiatives to build physical barriers along borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan aim to improve control, though the effectiveness of these measures is subject to ongoing challenges.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Iran faces considerable challenges in its anti-money laundering framework. The country remains on the Financial Action Task Force blacklist due to deficiencies in legislation and enforcement. Although some legislative reforms have been introduced, issues such as unclear ownership structures and ambiguous financial channels persist. Iran's continued support for groups deemed terrorist organizations by other states has further complicated compliance efforts. Despite efforts to enhance regulatory compliance, powerful domestic institutions, including the IRGC, have hindered progress on international standards.

The broader economic regulatory environment in Iran is heavily shaped by international sanctions and domestic structural constraints. State-affiliated entities, including the IRGC, hold significant influence across major sectors, contributing to an uneven playing field and reducing economic competitiveness. Sanctions have facilitated the growth of informal economic mechanisms such as front companies, sanctions-evasion practices and limited financial transparency. The banking sector continues to face systemic challenges, including allegations of mismanagement, nepotism and weak regulatory oversight. Reports suggest that some state-run banks have been involved in activities such as money laundering and embezzlement, which negatively affect financial integrity and economic equity. Broader issues such as persistent inflation, economic disparity and institutional opacity continue to hinder efforts to improve economic governance, despite occasional reform initiatives.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Iran's support systems for victims and witnesses of organized crime are limited. While drug addiction treatment has shifted from punitive to more health-centred approaches in recent years, resources remain insufficient, particularly for women. Clinics offer harm reduction services, but compulsory treatment and limited infrastructure reduce their effectiveness. In the area of human trafficking, Iran has been criticized for inadequate victim identification and support services. Victims are sometimes prosecuted for crimes related to their trafficking, and mechanisms to encourage witness testimony are hindered by threats of retaliation and weak protections.

Preventive strategies against organized crime lack cohesion. While Iran has partnered with international bodies such as the UNODC, domestic implementation of preventive measures remains uneven. Severe punitive approaches continue to dominate, especially in drug and trafficking cases. Training programmes and community awareness initiatives are underdeveloped, and local-level engagement is minimal. Reports also indicate continued official complicity in trafficking crimes, undermining prevention efforts.

Civil society and independent media in Iran operate under substantial constraints, limiting their role in countering organized crime. Although non-state actors have shown initiative in areas such as drug prevention, their effectiveness is curtailed by pervasive surveillance, censorship and periodic government crackdowns. The academic and media environments are subject to significant control by state institutions, and journalists face risks, including arrest and intimidation, for reporting on politically sensitive or criminal issues. Despite social media platforms being officially banned, they remain widely used as informal outlets for public discourse. However, the state maintains strict control over the flow of information and censorship practices reduce transparency and hinder civil society's impact. Restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association are considerable. Some media outlets remain prohibited, and reports suggest that NGOs and environmental activists have faced suppression. Academic institutions also experience limitations on autonomy and expression, impacting the potential for independent research or civic engagement. Civil society actors operating from abroad have reportedly been targeted by state-linked actors, further underscoring the challenging environment for organized crime prevention efforts. These cumulative restrictions significantly limit the ability of civil society to function as a check on illicit activity or contribute meaningfully to accountability mechanisms.

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