

Iran's War on Protesters: Death, Detention, and Darkness

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This resource examines Tehran’s methods at suppressing protests—particularly violence, detentions, executions, and obstruction of communications. It focuses on (1) demonstrations in 2017–21 against regime mismanagement, economic problems, and the government’s downing of a civilian airliner; (2) protests in 2009 against the outcome of the disputed presidential election that year; and (3) protests by Iranian university students in 1999. Consistently, the regime has killed and injured protesters; detained, imprisoned, and tortured them; and impeded Iranians’ access to the internet and social media.

Violence

1999

At least [three](#) students were killed and more than 200 injured by Iranian forces in response to the 1999 demonstrations. Most infamously, plainclothes police and paramilitaries [stormed](#) a University of Tehran dormitory, throwing students out of windows and [beating](#) students with batons and sticks. Iran’s current president, [Hassan Rouhani](#), played a key role in the regime’s crackdown on the demonstrators. Rouhani, who then served as secretary of the Supreme National Security Committee, spoke at a huge counter-demonstration to [praise](#) the security forces’ suppression of the protests. He [warned](#) that detained protesters would be tried for the crimes of being "enemies of the state" and "corrupt of the earth," both of which carry the death penalty. Rouhani added that the Iranian system would not permit any challenges to the constitutional authority of the supreme leader.

2009

The government or its agents killed at least around [80](#) and as many as [several hundred](#) Iranians during the 2009 protests. The most prominent victim was 26-year-old [Neda Agha-Soltan](#), whose death after being shot by Iranian security forces was captured on video that went viral. Riot police and Iran’s [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#)—particularly the IRGC’s paramilitary wing, the Basij—[shot](#) protesters with live ammunition and rubber bullets, fired tear gas and pepper spray at them, and hit them with [clubs, batons, and baseball bats](#).

2017–2018

Mass demonstrations focused on the state of Iran’s economy and regime mismanagement took place in Iran in late December of 2017 and January of 2018, and protests have continued across Iran on a smaller scale since then. In August 2018, Human Rights Watch (HRW) [reported](#) at least 30 persons had been killed in protests during the year.

Police in Tehran reportedly used [water cannons](#) and [tear gas](#) to disperse demonstrators in the winter of 2017–18, while plainclothes officers [beat](#) women and men. State television said that “security forces” had used [“strong resistance”](#) to prevent purportedly armed protesters from taking control of police and military bases but provided no details.

On December 31, 2018, Iranian security forces [badly beat and arrested](#) a group of protesters, including women who were so “beaten up that one of them [could not] stand on her feet, and another [who] lost her balance because of a head injury.” In November 2019, Radio Farda [reported](#) that videos showed IRGC members firing machine guns at demonstrators and Basij snipers picking off protesters from the rooftops

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of government buildings. Amnesty International [stated](#) then that videos showed security forces firing weapons, water cannons, and tear gas, and beating protesters with batons.

2019-21

In November of 2019, large numbers of Iranians throughout the country again took to the streets to protest the government's steep increase in the price of gasoline, as well as rationing thereof. According to the [U.S. Department of State report on Human Rights Practices for 2020](#), the November 2019 protests resulted in the killing of at least 304 persons.

Iranian security forces—especially the Basij, a volunteer paramilitary organization subordinate to the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#)—have been [accused](#) of “committing numerous human rights abuses, including acts of violence against protesters and participants in public demonstrations,” according to the State Department.

As protests gripped Iran in November of 2019, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [reportedly](#) said at a gathering of top regime officials—including [President Hassan Rouhani, a purported moderate](#)—“Do whatever it takes to end [the unrest]. You have my order.” He also told the officials that he would hold them accountable for any consequences if they did not stop the demonstrations. According to a Reuters [report](#) from December 23, 2019, about 1,500 people had been killed.

In the Khuzestan province's Mahshahr county in late 2019, for example, the IRGC [allegedly](#) shot at protesters without prior warning. When demonstrators ran away, the IRGC followed them to marshlands nearby, encircled them, and machine-gunned them, killing at least 100.

In January of 2020, widespread protests broke out again after the government accidentally shot down a civilian airliner—killing all 176 onboard, including over 60 Iranians—and initially denied responsibility, ascribing the crash to a mechanical error. The authorities—including police special forces, the IRGC's Basij volunteer militia, and officers in plain clothes, [fired on demonstrators](#) with live ammunition, rubber bullets, and airgun pointed pellets; deployed tear gas and pepper spray against them; and punched and kicked them, as well as beating them with batons. Amnesty International [reported](#) that they had received and verified videos of women lying on the ground, covered with blood from beatings or bullet wounds. Frequently, injured protesters did not go to hospitals because Iranian security forces were deployed there to make arrests.

A man from the city of Shiraz [reported](#) that when he went to a solidarity vigil for the plane crash victims, he witnessed the heavy deployment of security forces, who established a “terrifying and intimidating atmosphere to frighten people away.” He added, “They were swearing at and beating everyone with batons all over their bodies, it didn't matter if they were just passing by. It didn't make any difference to them if they beat young or old, man or woman.”

In the spring of 2020, thousands of inmates across the country [protested](#) against their mistreatment, and particularly their exposure to COVID-19 due to the abjectly unhygienic state of Iranian prisons. The authorities retaliated by firing bullets and tear gas, killing about 35 and injuring hundreds.

Iranian Regime Threatens Retaliation Against Protestors

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Senior Iranian regime officials and their associates have publicly threatened to retaliate against protesters:

- The head of Tehran’s Revolutionary Court, Mousa Ghazanfarabadi, [warned](#) during the winter 2017–18 protests that protesters could be charged with waging war against God, an offense punishable by death in Iran. The Associated Press reported that the judge added that trials of protesters will start soon, “on charges of acting against national security and damaging public properties.” Ghazanfarabadi also noted that going to unsanctioned rallies is illegal.
- Senior Iranian cleric Ahmad Khatami, who leads Friday prayers in Tehran, in December of 2017, [called for the death penalty](#) for protesters “chanting slogans against the values of the Islamic Republic.”
- Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazli [said](#) in December of 2017, “Those who damage public property, violate law and order, and create unrest are responsible for their actions and should pay the price.”
- The IRGC’s deputy chief of security in Tehran, General Esmail Kowsari, warned in late December of 2017 that protesters would face Iran’s “[iron fist](#)”—or, alternatively translated, “[a hard punch in their faces](#)”—if they persisted. He later [added](#) that the regime will not allow the “insecure situation to continue in Tehran. If this situation continues, the officials will definitely make some decisions and at that point this business will be finished.”
- The [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) warned in a [statement](#) during the winter 2017–18 protests, “The Iranian nation...will not allow the country to be hurt.”
- Deputy Interior Minister Hossein Zolfaghari [cautioned](#) on January 1, 2018, that “From tonight the unrest will be controlled more seriously.”
- Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, a purported moderate, [threatened](#) in January of 2018 that “The nation will themselves respond to the rioters and lawbreakers... Our nation will deal with this minority who chant slogans against the law and people’s wishes, and insult the sanctities and values of the revolution.” Rouhani earlier [warned](#) that “The government will show no tolerance for those who damage public property, violate public order and create unrest in society.”
- The IRGC [said](#) in [November 2019](#) that “Iran’s sworn and evil enemies” had once again attempted to “sow discord” through the protests, and “if necessary we will take decisive and revolutionary action against any continued moves to disturb the people’s peace and security.”
- On November 17, 2019, Rouhani [warned](#) Iranians that security forces were watching and identifying them everywhere via closed-circuit cameras, and that films showed “only a few” protesters.
- Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said in mid-November of 2019 [that](#) the protesters were “thugs,” and “The officials responsible for maintaining security should carry out their responsibilities.”
- On November 17, 2019, he [warned](#) that “Until now we have shown tolerance toward these individuals... but today a really small number engaged in activities in some cities that we decided if this issue continues, despite self-control, police and security forces will discharge their duty.”

Detention, Imprisonment, and Executions

1999

The regime detained at least [1,200–1,400](#) students during the 1999 protests. Some of those detained were [beaten and tortured](#) and forced to sign confessions. Several detainees were sentenced to prison and at least one of them [died](#) there under suspicious circumstances. Several detained individuals, such as student [Sa’id Zeinali](#), remain missing.

2009

The Iranian regime admitted to detaining [4,000](#) protesters during the 2009 demonstrations. The actual number of detentions remains unknown. Those detained [included](#) dissident politicians and clerics, journalists, bloggers, lawyers, students, and other activists. Iran's chief of police admitted that detainees were [tortured](#), with [reports](#) alleging rape, beatings, sleep deprivation, and other atrocities. Several detainees [died in custody](#).

At least [100](#) protesters and dissidents were subjected to show trials and [sentenced](#) to lengthy prison terms or, in several cases, [death](#). The rate of [executions](#) by the Iranian regime [surged](#) after the crackdown. Some demonstrators were executed for unrelated, trumped-up charges. For example, a Dutch-Iranian protester was [executed](#) for drug smuggling.

2017–21

Economy and Regime Protests

Iranian authorities [reportedly](#) arrested almost 5,000 protesters in December 2017 and January 2018. These men and women were demonstrating against the Iranian regime's mismanagement of the country. Detainees [claimed](#) their captors beat and tortured them, including via sleep deprivation and denial of food. [At least five](#) detained protesters [died in custody](#), with the regime claiming three of them took their own lives.

According to the [U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018](#), "Human rights organizations reported at least 30 deaths of protestors [in Iran] during the year, thousands of arrests, and suspicious deaths in custody."

In June 2018, the IRGC's paramilitary force, the Basij, [suppressed protests](#) by the long-persecuted Iran Sufis against the recent arrest of one of their own. The Basij killed at least one Sufi, and 300 others were arrested.

Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that the Iranian authorities arrested more than 50 protesters during widespread demonstrations over the sagging Iranian economy in August 2018, and Iran's judiciary convicted at least 24 of them "on vaguely defined national security charges," imposing sentences ranging from six months to six years. A different [report](#) claimed that another five female protesters were also sentenced to prison.

In November 2018, the Iranian authorities reportedly [arrested](#) several dozen labor union protesters and brought others in for questioning. One labor activist, Esmail Bakhshi, [claimed](#) that he was beaten and tortured in prison.

In December 2018, the regime [reportedly](#) detained an undetermined number of protesting steel mill employees.

The government [claimed](#), as of November 18, 2019, that it had arrested about 1,000 "rioters" in the November 2019 protests. Amnesty International reported, however, that the regime arrested [over 7,000 people](#), including children, in mere days during the protests. Some were arrested at their homes or

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workplaces—or their schools, in the case of children. Others were arrested while in hospitals as they sought treatment for their wounds. In some cases, the authorities also arrested or harassed family members of Iranians hiding to avoid arrest.

Three or more protesters or bystanders were [condemned to death](#) as of August 26, 2020. Many others were condemned to lengthy prison terms, and over 12 of those were whipped as well. Many were convicted by kangaroo courts during secret trials lasting as short as a few hours. Some of these individuals were required to hire lawyers preapproved by the regime, and sometimes were able to meet with their lawyers only shortly before or during the start of trials.

The regime also [tortured](#) many detained Iranians. Methods of torture included beatings and floggings, extended placement into “painful stress positions,” weeks or months in solitary confinement, waterboarding, pepper-spraying or electric shocks—including to detainees’ testicles—threats of arresting and torturing family members of those arrested, and denial of health care.

One of the two most prominent cases of detention and execution related to the protests was that of [Ruhollah Zam](#), an Iranian activist and former journalist who [lived in exile](#) with [refugee status](#) in France and openly sought the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. He ran Telegram channels to disseminate logistical information for anti-regime protests and encourage viewers to join demonstrations. Zam’s channels—particularly AmadNews—disseminated times and places of upcoming rallies to its subscribers, who numbered more than a million. He also published controversial materials undermining the regime, including documents revealing government corruption and malfeasance. (For more information about Zam and his abduction, see the “Obstruction of Communications” section below.)

The other leading case of arrest and capital punishment was that of professional wrestler [Navid Afkari](#), who was executed in September 2020, purportedly for murdering a law enforcement officer during protests in 2018. He was charged with and convicted of participating in illegal protests, insulting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and “waging war against God.”

White Wednesdays in Iran

Since December 2017, the regime has [arrested more than 35 women](#) for removing their head-scarves to protest legally mandated head-covering. The activists have faced charges that include “inciting prostitution and corruption.” One of the activists, Shaparak Shajarizadeh, was sentenced to two years in prison and an 18-year suspended sentence after a prolonged detention in which she was reportedly tortured and beaten and put in solitary confinement. Shajarizadeh, who fled Iran after her sentencing, claims she was told that she would serve her entire 20-year sentence if she engaged in further activism.

Obstruction of Communications

1999

Authorities [closed](#) the Iranian newspaper “Salaam” and parliament [passed](#) new laws limiting freedom of the press.

2009

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The Iranian regime severely curtailed access to mobile communications and the internet in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election. Tehran first [shut down](#) internet access entirely and then restored it with diminished bandwidth. Iran also operated filters that [blocked access](#) to social media like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and blocked proxy servers that Iranians used to evade internet controls.

The regime also impeded journalists' reporting on the protests, including by [preventing](#) those foreign correspondents from covering rallies, [denying visas](#) to foreign journalists, [jamming](#) satellite transmissions by the BBC's Farsi-language network, [closing](#) Arabic TV network Al Arabiya's Iran office, and [censoring](#) some Iranian newspapers.

As with the 2017–18 demonstrations, Tehran reportedly [sent Iranians text messages](#) to warn against joining the protests. Also, During the 2009 presidential election, CIOC "helped the Iranian Government censor websites and identify opposition activists." On June 17, 2009, CIOC demanded that website managers block any "inciting" content to quell "threats and rumors." Like in 2018, the CIOC website, [gerdab.ir](#), started a campaign to track protesters throughout Iran and called on the public to help identify these individuals.

2017–21

Iran has officially [banned](#) Facebook and Twitter since 2009. Iran has a [Basij "Cyber Council," Cyber Police, and a Cyber Army](#)—all presumed to be controlled by the IRGC—tasked with monitoring, identifying, and countering citizens' activities on officially banned social networking sites such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

One of the key government agencies used to monitor, suppress and identify ordinary Iranians is the IRGC's Center for Investigating Organized Crime (CIOC, a.k.a. Gerdab ["whirlpool"] a.k.a. Cyber Crime Office). CIOC is [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. The regime deploys CIOC is deployed by the regime as a tool of chilling propaganda, to explicitly warn the Iranian people that they are under constant, aggressive surveillance. CIOC also scrutinizes forwarded emails to identify elements critical of the regime.

CIOC's website, [gerdab.ir](#), is the only website officially acknowledged as belonging to the IRGC. [gerdab.ir](#) runs a "hotline" where Iranians are encouraged to report on fellow citizens for activities the regime considers as subversive. During 2018, [gerdab.ir](#) launched a campaign to track down protesters in various cities and called for the public to help identify these individuals.

According to Reporters Without Borders, the regime [arrested an estimated 40 journalists](#) during 2018, many for reporting on the protests that began in late December 2017. Authorities reportedly attempted to censor national and international media outlets from covering the protests and to intimidate Iranian citizens from disseminating information about the protests and the regime's response. During the winter 2017–18 demonstrations, the regime also [suspended](#) access to social-media platforms like Telegram, which Iranians were using to share information about the protests. Some [reports](#) indicated that Tehran sent Iranians [text messages](#) warning against participating in demonstrations.

The Iranian government went further and virtually shut down internet access in the country during the late-2019 and early-2020 demonstrations, impeding reporting about the authorities' violence against demonstrators. Iranian Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi [stated](#) on November 18 that Iran's national security council ordered the shutdown. As of November 19, 2019,

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Iranians' internet connectivity to the outside world had fallen to four percent of normal levels, and Iran's largest mobile network operators had gone offline, according to the NGO [NetBlocks](#). The organization [reported](#) that the service disruption was "the most severe disconnection tracked by NetBlocks in any country in terms of its technical complexity and breadth."

The regime also [blocked access](#) to the social-media applications WhatsApp and Instagram, which protesters have used to disseminate the times and locations of demonstrations. The exceptions to this internet shutdown included regime officials like Iran's supreme leader, who continued to tweet while the internet was effectively shut down for the rest of the country.

In late 2019, Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) [announced](#) that it had arrested exiled journalist [Ruhollah Zam](#), whose Telegram channel was used to disseminate information about ongoing protests, after he was "guided into the country" via a "complicated intelligence operation." The IRGC [posted](#) news of Zam's arrest on his Telegram channel, as well as a photo of Zam in captivity, with the caption "This is just the beginning."

The IRGC [claimed](#) Zam was being guided and safeguarded by American, Israeli, and French intelligence agencies, and called him "one of the main people of the enemy's media network and psychological warfare." On October 23, 2019, an IRGC spokesperson [claimed](#) that the Guards had "already captured many of [Zam's] contacts inside the country." Media and others tied to the IRGC have [said](#) that finding Zam's network of sources is more important than capturing the activist himself. The regime [forced](#) Zam to "confess" on Iranian television to engaging in "counter-revolutionary" actions at the direction of France.

Zam's was [tried](#) in February 2020 in Tehran's Revolutionary Court. [Judge Abolqassem Salavati](#), who is [nicknamed](#) "the Hanging Judge" or "the Judge of Death" for imposing harsh sentences, including capital punishment, in political cases, presided over the trial. Zam was reportedly charged with either [15](#) or [17](#) counts, [including](#) "sowing corruption on earth" insulting "the sanctity of Islam," and "conspiring with the US Government against the Islamic Republic of Iran"—all of which carry the death penalty—as well as having "committed offences against the country's internal and external security," "complicity in provoking and luring people into war and slaughter," "espionage for the French intelligence service," "spying for Israeli intelligence services via the intelligence services of one of the countries in the region," "establishment and administration of the Amad News channel and the Voice of People," and "insulting Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei."

An Iranian judiciary spokesman [announced](#) on June 30, 2020, that Zam had been convicted and sentenced to death for 13 counts, which were grouped together and treated as cases of "sowing corruption on earth." He was also sentenced to life in prison for "[several other charges](#)," which were unnamed. On December 12, 2020, Iran's state television reported that Ruhollah Zam was executed.