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Iran: Arrests Amid Economic Protests

Attempt to Suppress Growing Social Movements

(Beirut) – [Iranian authorities](#) have arrested several prominent activists on baseless accusations amid labor union strikes and ongoing protests against rising prices, since May 6, 2022, in dozens of small towns, Human Rights Watch said today. Those arrested include a prominent sociologist and four labor rights defenders.

News outlets close to the intelligence apparatus [have accused](#) the detained activists of having contact with suspicious foreign actors, without providing any evidence of an alleged wrongdoing. On May 11, the Intelligence Ministry [issued a statement](#) saying that it had arrested two European citizens who it said met with teachers' unions activists and "intended to abuse the demands of unions and other groups in society."

"The arrests of prominent members of civil society in Iran on baseless accusations of malicious foreign interference is another desperate attempt to silence support for growing popular social movements in the country," said [Tara Sepehri Far](#), senior Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Instead of looking to civil society for help in understanding and responding to social problems, Iran's government treats them as an inherent threat."

According to the Human Rights Activists News Agency ([HRANA](#)), an independent human rights monitoring agency, since May 6, in at least 19 cities and towns, people [have gathered](#) to protest the news of rising prices for essential goods in the coming months. Parliament members have been reported saying two people were killed during the protests. Unconfirmed sources report higher numbers. Human Rights Watch has not been able to confirm these reports.

On May 9, the authorities arrested labor activists Anisha Assadollahi and Keyvan Mohtadi after raiding their home, [HRANA reported](#). On May 12, the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company (SWTSBC) [reported](#) that intelligence agents had arrested Reza Shahabi, a member of its governing board. [HRANA](#) reported that Reyhani Ansari, another labor rights activist, was also arrested on the same day. Telegram channels [close](#) to intelligence services [claimed](#) that Shahabi and Assadollahi were arrested on "accusation of cooperating with a foreign team intending to overthrow" the government, without providing evidence for this accusation.

On May 16, Mehr News agency reported that the authorities had [arrested](#) an outspoken sociologist, Saeed Madani, who previously spent five years in [prison for his peaceful activism](#), on the accusation of "meeting suspicious foreign actors and conveying their operating guidelines to entities inside the country." On January 4, the authorities at Imam Khomeini airport in Tehran had [prevented](#) Madani from leaving the country to start his fellowship program at Yale University. The authorities have since prevented him from leaving Iran and interrogated him several times.

On May 17, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Television channel [aired](#) a video identifying the two Europeans arrested as Cecile Kohler, 37, and Chuck Paris, 69. Kohler is [reportedly](#) an official in a French teachers union.

During the last week of April, the authorities [arrested](#) dozens of teachers union activists after the Coordinating Council of the Iranian Teachers Associations [called](#) for nationwide protests to demand reforms of the pay scale system on May 1, a day before National Teachers' Day. Several of those arrested remain in detention, including Mohammad Habibi, the Iranian Teachers Trade Association's (ITTA) spokesperson, Rasoul Bodaghi, Jafar Ebrahimi, and other prominent members of ITTA.

Over the past four years, there have been widespread protests to make economic demands, and protests and strikes organized by the country's major unions [have been](#) on the rise in Iran in response to declining living standards across the country.

Security forces have responded to these protests [with excessive force, including lethal force](#), and arrested thousands of protesters, using prosecution and imprisonment based on illegitimate charges as the main tool to silence prominent dissidents and human rights defenders. The authorities have shown no willingness to investigate serious human rights violations committed under their control.

Since the start of protests on May 6, the authorities have heavily [disrupted](#) internet access in multiple provinces. A number of videos circulated on social media show the presence of security officials and appear to show the use of teargas. Unofficial sources [published](#) the names of five people they said were killed during the protests in the Khuzistan, Chaharmahal, and Bakhtiari provinces. Human Rights Watch has not been able to confirm the deaths.

“Iranian authorities have long sought to criminalize solidarity among members of civil society groups inside and outside the country,” Sepehri Far said. “The intention is to prevent accountability and scrutiny of state actions that civil society provides.”

ecoi.net summary: 
Several prominent activists
arrested amid labour union
strikes and protests against
rising prices

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Austrian Red Cross Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)	Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583 F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589 info@ecoi.net	Contact Imprint & Disclaimer F.A.Q. Data Protection Notice
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