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World Report 2023



Authorities brutally repressed widespread protests in 2022 demanding fundamental rights, with security forces unlawfully using excessive and lethal force against protesters.

Iran's government arrested and sentenced scores of peaceful human rights activists on vague national security charges, while failing to investigate reports of abuse or torture by police and security forces.

Security agencies targeted ethnic and religious minorities and violently enforced discriminatory dress codes for women.

Freedom of Assembly and Expression, Right to Participate in the Conduct of Public Affairs

Iranian authorities have severely restricted freedoms of assembly and expression. During the year, security forces responded to widespread protests with excessive and lethal force and arrested thousands of protesters.

The [death](#) on September 16 of Mahsa (Jina) Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman from Sanandaj in western Iran, in the custody of the morality police after being arrested for wearing an “improper” *hijab* sparked demonstrations across the country, including in schools and universities. Authorities claimed Amini died because of a medical condition that led to her going into a coma within a couple of hours of her arrest, a claim her family denied.

Human Rights Watch documented security forces using shotguns, assault rifles, and handguns against protesters, in largely peaceful and often crowded settings. On September 30, security forces opened fire on demonstrators in the town of Zahedan (Sistan and Baluchistan province), killing and injuring dozens. As of November 14, human rights groups were [investigating](#) the reported deaths of 341 protestors, including 52 children.

Earlier in 2022, labor union strikes and ongoing protests against rising prices escalated and were also met with force. According to [Human Rights Activists News Agency \(HRANA\)](#), between May 2021 and 2022, over 69 workers' rights activists had been arrested, dozens more summoned for

interrogations, and many subjected to violence and torture. Authorities have shown no willingness to investigate serious human rights violations committed under their control.

In December 2021, thousands of teachers [protested](#) in the streets across hundreds of cities and towns demanding fair wages, better healthcare, and the release of jailed teachers. A video circulated on Twitter showed security forces attempting to [violently disperse](#) the protesters in front of the parliament.

Authorities have also increased [repression](#) against student activists; several were [convicted](#) to [prison terms](#) or threatened with being barred from continuing their education, a punishment the government uses to curtail and punish peaceful student activism.

On May 24, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Imam Ali's Popular Student Relief Society (IAPSRs) [posted](#) on its Twitter account that the Branch 28 court of appeals upheld a March 2021 sentence shutting the group. The IAPSRs is one of the most prominent Iranian NGOs working on poverty reduction, child marriage, and the death penalty for children.

Branch 55 of the International Relations Court at Shahid Beheshti Judicial Complex [ordered](#) the dissolution of the group, accepting the Interior Ministry's assessment that IAPSRs had "deviated" from its original mission and "insulted religious beliefs." The court [cited](#) "questioning Islamic rulings" and "promoting falsehood by publishing statements against the Islamic Republic of Iran" as evidence of "deviation."

Authorities have disrupted mobile and internet connections to quash protest movements. In May, authorities imposed a [near-total shutdown](#) of mobile and home broadband data in some cities in Khuzestan Province, amid reported street protests against a potential hike in the price of bread.

Authorities also heavily disrupted internet access in large parts of the country and blocked or periodically [disrupted](#) access to social media and messaging platforms after countrywide protests began in September following Amini's death. The Iranian parliament has also moved to ratify the general outlines of the draconian "[Regulatory System for Cyberspace Services Bill](#)," which violates an array of human rights in Iran, including the right to freedom of expression and to privacy.

In October, a ranking Iranian judicial figure [threatened legal action](#) against two UK-based Persian news outlets, accusing them of inciting "terrorist acts" for their reports on the protests over Amini's death.

Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society Activists

Scores of human rights defenders remain behind bars while authorities continue to harass, arrest, and prosecute those seeking accountability and justice, including human rights lawyers Nasrin Sotoudeh, Mohamad Najafi, and Amirsalar Davoudi.

In the aftermath of protests related to Mahsa Amini's death, Iranian security apparatus arrested hundreds human rights defenders, students, women's rights activists, lawyers, journalists, and summoned and interrogated dozens of actors, athletes, and other public figures in connection to their expressed supports of the demands of the protestors.

In January, Branch 26 of Tehran's revolutionary court [sentenced](#) Narges Mohammadi, the rights defender, to six years in prison for "assembly and collusion to act against national security," and to two years in prison and 74 lashes for "acting against national security and disrupting public order." The summary trial was held behind closed doors, and she was denied access to a lawyer. Despite [Mohammadi's announcement](#) that she would comply with the summons to serve her latest sentence after being on a temporary release on medical grounds, security officers [forcibly arrested](#) her on April 12 at her home and returned her to Garchak Prison. She was still recovering from open-heart surgery at the end of February.

Seven members of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, a local NGO focused on preserving biodiversity, [remained behind bars](#) on the charge of “collaborating with the hostile state of the US.” Iranian authorities [have failed](#) to produce any evidence to support their charges, nor have they investigated allegations of torture against them.

In June, Iranian authorities [intensified their crackdown](#) on civil society with a new wave of politically motivated arrests and sentences against journalists and activists, including Vida Rabani, Ahmad Reza Haeri, Amir Salar Davoudi, and Masoud Bastani. This was followed by the arrests of reformist critic, Mostafa Tajzadeh, and two film directors, Mohammad Rasoulof and Mostafa Al-Ahmad, on July 9, 2022, followed on July 11 by another film director, Jafar Panahi.

According to [HRANA](#), on July 12, authorities arrested at least seven family members of people [killed](#) during the bloody 2019 government [crackdown](#) on widespread protests. At time of writing, there was no information about charges against them.

On August 16, an appeals court [upheld](#) a decision issued against five human rights defenders [charged](#) with “establishing an illegal group” and “propaganda against the state” for attempting to hold the government accountable for its [mismanagement of the Covid-19 crisis](#). Before their arrest, all seven rights defenders were preparing to file a complaint against the country’s national task force against Covid-19. Articles 170 and 173 of the constitution protect every citizen’s right to complain before a court when regulation of the government conflicts with laws or norms.

Due Process Rights, Fair Trial Standards, and Prison Conditions

Iranian courts, and particularly revolutionary courts, regularly fall far short of providing fair trials and use confessions likely obtained under torture as evidence in court. Authorities have failed to meaningfully investigate numerous allegations of torture against detainees and routinely restrict detainees’ access to legal counsel, particularly during the initial investigation period. They have issued over 1,000 indictments in connection with widespread protests in September and November. As of November 14, at least 9 people had been charged with *moharabeh* (“enmity against God”) or *isfad fil arz* (“corruption on earth”), both of which could carry the death penalty.

Authorities continue to endanger the lives of activists and rights defenders by continuing to imprison them and denying them access to immediate and sufficient medical care. In January, Bektash Abtin, a writer and poet, and Adel Kianpour, a prisoner in Ahvaz, [died](#) under unclear circumstances. In April, Mehdi Salehi, a prisoner on death row for his alleged role in 2017 and 2018 protests, [died](#) in prison and his family was pressured to bury him quickly. Amnesty International [published](#) a report documenting the apparent deliberate denial of access to medical care to more than 90 prisoners over the past 10 years.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Intelligence Organization continued to arrest Iranian dual and foreign nationals on vague charges such as “cooperating with a hostile state.” The travel ban on Iranian-American Baker Namazi [was dropped](#) in October 2022 on medical grounds. Namazi’s son, Siamak, who was sentenced in 2015 on vague espionage charges, received a furlough from Evin prison for a week.

Right to Life and Executions

Iran continues to be one of the world’s leading implementers of the death penalty. This includes carrying out capital punishment of those convicted for crimes committed as children, as well as under vaguely defined national security charges and occasionally non-violent offenses.

Iranian law considers acts such as “insulting the prophet,” “apostasy,” same-sex relations, adultery, drinking alcohol, and certain non-violent drug-related offenses as crimes punishable by death. The law also prescribes the inhumane punishment of flogging for more than 100 offenses, including “disrupting public order,” a charge that has been used to sentence individuals to flogging for their participation in protests.

According to rights groups, 306 executions [have been documented](#) since the Iranian New Year on March 21, 130 of them for drug-related charges and 151 of them based on the Islamic principle of *qisas*, or “retribution in kind” punishments. The United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, in his [July 2022 report](#) to the General Assembly, also raised concerns over the increase in drug-related executions. In September, families of prisoners on death row gathered outside prisons in Tehran and Karaj to peacefully protest what appeared to be a rise in the number of executions in the previous four months.

Women’s Rights, Children’s Rights, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity

On August 15, a [new presidential decree](#) sanctioned women for showing their hair on social media, with female government employees facing dismissal from their jobs if they have profile pictures without their *hijab*. In September, the secretary of Iran’s Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice [announced](#) plans to enforce dress codes through digital surveillance of public spaces .

On July 16, artist Sepideh Rashno [was arrested](#) for not complying with compulsory *hijab* laws. She later appeared on state TV apologizing while looking pale and unwell. HRA [reported](#) prior to the televised confession that Rashno was taken to the hospital for internal bleeding. Iranian authorities have a long record of [coercing](#) detainees into making false televised confessions.

Two months later came the death of Mahsa Amini, 22, sparking country-wide protests. Amini’s death came two days after her arrest on the same charge that her *hijab* was “improper.”

Women face discrimination in personal status matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and decisions relating to children. Under the [civil code](#), a husband has the right to choose the place of living and can prevent his wife from having certain occupations if he deems them against “family values.” It also allows girls to marry at 13 and boys at age 15, as well as at younger ages if authorized by a judge. Under the [Passports Law](#), a married woman may not obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written permission of her husband, who can revoke such permission at any time.

While cases of [femicide](#) are [increasingly reported](#) in media and social media, Iran has no law on domestic violence to prevent abuse and protect survivors.

Under Iranian law, non-marital sex is criminalized with flogging if unmarried, or death if married, impacting women in particular as pregnancy serves as evidence of sexual relations and women who report sexual violence can find themselves prosecuted if authorities believe it to be consensual. Same-sex conduct is also punishable by flogging and, for men, the death penalty. Although Iran permits and subsidizes sex reassignment surgery for transgender people, no law prohibits discrimination against them.

In November 2021, Iran’s parliament passed a [population law](#) that limited access to sexual and reproductive rights, including by outlawing sterilization and free distribution of contraceptives in the public healthcare system unless a pregnancy threatens a woman’s health, and further limits already restricted access to safe abortion.

The law is part of a shift of Iran’s population planning from providing family planning and access to contraception, once seen as a success story by international organizations, to increasing

population growth by undermining women's access to sexual and reproductive health care.

Treatment of Minorities, Refugees, and Migrants

Iranian law denies freedom of religion to Baha'is and discriminates against them. Authorities continue to [arrest and prosecute](#) members of the Baha'i faith on vague national security charges and to close businesses owned by them. Iranian authorities also systematically refuse to allow Baha'is to register at public universities.

The government also discriminates against other religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, and restricts cultural and political activities among the country's Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch ethnic minorities. Minority activists are regularly arrested and prosecuted on arbitrary national security charges in trials that grossly fall short of international standards.

It appears that over the past year authorities have continued the [crackdown](#) against Kurdish political activists. On September 28, IRGC forces [launched](#) drone missile attacks against the bases of Kurdish opposition forces (Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran or KDPI) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Decades of mismanagement and neglect in development policies have resulted in economic stagnation in areas inhabited by minorities such as Sistan-Baluchistan, Kurdistan, and Khuzestan. For years, Sistan-Baluchistan and Kurdistan have had some of the highest unemployment rates in the country. The government has also restricted the use of minorities' language and cultural activities.

Iran hosts a [long-staying population](#) of about 780,000 registered Afghan refugees and another estimated 2.1 million undocumented Afghans. The government of Iran is responsible for refugee registration and settlement. Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, Iranian border authorities [have reportedly](#) pushed back thousands of Afghan nationals to Afghanistan without any assessment of their individual needs for international protection.

Climate Change and Environmental Policies and Impact

As one of the world's top 10 emitters of greenhouse gases, Iran is contributing to the climate crisis, which is taking a mounting toll on human rights around the globe. Most of its emissions are from the [energy sector](#): 88 percent of Iran's electricity comes from fossil fuels. Iran is the [tenth largest](#) producer of crude oil and the third largest producer of natural gas but also has significant renewable energy potential.

Energy costs are heavily subsidized, one of the factors leading to a high energy intensity per capita. Iran has taken few steps to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, regularly citing international sanctions as a barrier to transitioning towards cleaner energy. Iran is one of six countries that has not yet ratified the Paris Agreement.

There are longstanding concerns across Iran, and Khuzestan in particular, over mismanagement of water resources and pollution from oil development. For decades, environmental experts [have warned](#) that development projects in oil-rich Khuzestan, including the construction of hydroelectric dams, irrigation schemes, and water transfers to neighboring provinces are causing environmental harm and water shortages, affecting a range of rights.

Climate change is a serious threat to Iranian livelihoods, including from increased temperatures, more frequent and intense forest fires, dust storms, inland flooding, and sea level rise. In 2022, there were [water protests](#) in response to increased droughts and the government's mismanagement of water resources, which the authorities have responded to with [arrests](#) and [violence](#). The

increasing frequency and intensity of droughts is projected to continue diminishing agricultural productivity, compromising food security.

Key International Actors

Despite several rounds of indirect negotiations between Iran and the United States for a return to compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the US has maintained its broad sectoral economic and financial sanctions on Iran.

Tehran continues to [deny](#) supporting the Houthi armed group in the Yemen conflict. The US has claimed Iran has offered [significant](#) “lethal” support.

On July 14, a Swedish court convicted an Iranian citizen of war crimes and murder for his role in the mass execution of political prisoners by Iranian authorities in 1988.

In September, Russia [began](#) using Iranian Shahed-136 loitering munitions in strikes on military bases and energy [infrastructure](#) inside Ukraine.

Following the protests, the US and European Union sanctioned several Iranian authorities and entities for serious human rights violations. On September 23, the US Department of Treasury [issued](#) a general license, updating, and expanding existing exemptions under US sanctions that would make it easier for technology companies to provide additional services that can help ensure safe communications for Iranian users.

On September 30, at the UN Human Rights Council, Chile delivered a [joint statement](#) on behalf of several countries urging Iran to conduct prompt, thorough, independent, impartial, and transparent investigations into the death of Mahsa Amini and to refrain from disproportionate use of force against peaceful protesters.

On November 24, the UN Human Rights Council held a special session, discussing Iranian authorities’ use of excessive and lethal force against protesters.

In December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that condemned Iran’s human rights abuses, including the excessive use of force against protesters.