

## Iran's Human Rights Record Follows Downward Spiral

Shaul M. Gabbay<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Global Research Institute, Denver, CO, United States

Correspondence: Shaul M. Gabbay, Global Research Institute, Denver, CO, United States.

Received: June 10, 2022

Accepted: July 11, 2022

Available online: July 11, 2022

doi:10.11114/ijsss.v10i4.5634

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v10i4.5634>

### Abstract

Officially, Iran is an Islamic Republic; in practice, the government is totalitarian in nature. Since the time a revolution swept the country in 1979 and removed the ruling monarchy, a heavy blanket of oppression and religiosity has constrained the population. Although the majority of Iranians chose to overthrow the preceding government, a monarchy, its replacement by an Islamic clergy quickly morphed into an overlord, responsible for the death of some 8,000 political opponents during their first five years in power. Freedoms long enjoyed in the Persian Empire dried up overnight, leaving an eighty-three million strong population living in a straitjacket that defies the very morality it claims to live by. Repression quickly became widespread, resulting in a loss of freedom or the ability to change governments, leave home without a head covering (*hijab*) for women, oppose government actions or decisions, enable change and the like. Minorities suffer most and have the least ability to change their reality. Gay men and women live in utter fear, and often denial. The application of torture is well documented and increasingly brutal. The downward trajectory of human rights is increasing at a fast pace, and protests are on the rise. Some studies suggest signs that a deep and widening swath of Iranian public has had enough, and another revolution is on the horizon. Until then, however, repression continues to be the order of the day. Foreign governments and other entities of influence must hold Iran accountable for its increasingly horrific record on human rights.

**Keywords:** Iran, human rights, torture, minority, LGBTQ, repression, protestors

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Iran's Blatant Disregard for Human Rights

International human rights law as codified by the United Nations and agreed to by its 193 members is a broad and comprehensive body of law covering civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights. (United Nations, 2022). While global adherence to this code is flawed and perilously uneven in countries worldwide, few governments disregard its tenets more blatantly than the Islamic Republic of Iran. As recently as 2019, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the Iranian government for its massive human rights violations, specifically mentioning "discrimination against women, arbitrary arrests, and violations of rights of religious and ethnic minorities." (Iran International, 2020)

#### 1.2 Torture and Killing of Innocent by Government Actors

That language is weak tea and woefully incomplete compared to the reality of the situation as documented by scores of government state departments, respected watchdog agencies, and international journalists. Their reporting documents the Iranian government's application of extreme violence, including the use of torture and deadly force against the groups named above as well as against activists, political opponents, members of the LGBTQ community, members of the media, and many others. The US State Department is forthcoming in its annual reports, citing a host of egregious actions perpetrated, condoned, or allowed by government authorities. Highlights include "arbitrary killings by the government; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment by government actors; life-threatening prison conditions; unlawful recruitment of children; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; lack of accountability for violence against women; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons; and the worst forms of child labor." (US State Department, 2021)

#### 1.3 Human Rights Record Worsening

Most concerning is the continued downward trajectory of Iran's human rights record over several years. Worsening the

situation further, the Covid pandemic provided unwarranted cover for the Iranian government's actions, and multiple agencies have indicated an "extremely poor" human rights record in 2021. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed concern for Iran's increasingly "brazen" acts extending outside its own borders, citing a plot by Iranian intelligence services to kidnap an Iranian American journalist from her home in Brooklyn, New York. (The Iran Primer, 2022) Without an increase in constant monitoring and direct interference by members of the international community, Iranians are likely to experience a worrisome further decline in human rights as Iranian authorities continue utter disregard for their citizens' human rights.

## 2. Iran's Authoritarian Regime Quashes Human Rights

### 2.1 A Rigid Theocracy

A country's human rights standard is determined by its government; unfortunately, certain types of governments tend to abuse those rights egregiously. The Republic of Iran, distinctly and inarguably authoritarian, is a theocratic republic utilizing a Shia Islamic political system known as *velayat-e faqih*, translated as *guardianship of the jurist*. The so-named 'Supreme Leader' is Iran's head of state, and he (the constitution bars women from holding the position) holds constitutional authority over the judiciary, government-run media, and other key institutions. While legislative and executive branches do exist in Iran, they each function under the indirect influence of the Supreme Leader, resulting in elections which are considered neither free nor fair by the outside world. The Guardian Council, an unelected body whose role is to disqualify unsuitable candidates—namely those candidates considered to be "insufficiently loyal" to the clerics—is largely responsible for suppressing dissent. Thus, despite the ruse of national elections, one religious cleric largely controls the lives of over 83 millions individuals.

### 2.2 No True Choice in Leadership

Despite their placating overtures to the world, Iran can in no way be considered a country where individuals have a choice in their leadership, a fact that is contrary to the UN declaration which clearly specifies 'selection of one's leadership' as a basic human right. (Iran is a UN member.) Consider Iran's global freedom status in 2021 compared to other countries in the world, as measured by the Freedom House, a bipartisan, highly respected American NGO devoted to the support and defense of democracy worldwide. They awarded Iran a freedom score of 14 out of 100 (14%). Iran's political rights earned a score of only 4 out of 40, (10%), and their civil liberties were gauged at 10 out of 60 (16.7%). Other freedom categories are equally grim. (Freedom House, 2022).

The utter lack of the Iranian people's ability to choose their government is precisely what allows their leadership to abuse—at some level—nearly all human rights in the country. The supreme leader holds complete authority over all security agencies, allowing physical force and violence to be employed in an effort to control the actions of all citizens. This is a harrowing situation; one that inhibits the freedom to live one's life as one wishes. Next, we'll examine the specific manifestations of these abuses to freedom.

### 2.3 A False Promise

In 2013 Iranians elected a new president, Hassan Rouhani. Touted as a reformer carrying a message of hope and prudence, Iranians finally saw a ray of light at the end of their long tunnel. However, as the sardonic saying goes, it was the light of an oncoming train. Despite his pledges to reform, Rouhani had little ability to do so, working under the thumb of the omnipresent supreme leader. Killings, disappearance, and torture of opponents continued unabated. An NGO based in the UK that works with torture victims worldwide reported in 2017: "For the past 21 years Iran has been the second highest country of origin for survivors who are referred to [us] for forensic documentation of torture...in 2016 alone, 140 Iranians were referred to us." (Freedom from Torture, 2018)

After Rouhani's re-election in 2017, one Iranian journalist wrote: "Don't be fooled by Hassan Rouhani. He's deeply complicit in an evil system." (Takeyh, 2017) His words were precient. When fuel prices shot up in 2019, Iranians took to the street in a four-day protest that morphed into an expression of general discontent over government repression and corruption. The government responded by shutting down the internet and ramping up a crackdown. According to Amnesty International, at least 304 people were killed, many by a bullet to the head, and no one was held accountable. Other sources claim over 1500 protestors were killed. (Ghasseminejad, 2020 ) Families of the dead were also threatened; *do not speak about what happened to your loved one, or face consequences*. Not ending there, hundreds more were arrested, with dozens imprisoned and sentenced to flogging. Three were issued death sentences for "taking part in destruction and burning aimed at the countering the Islamic Republic of Iran." (Human Rights Watch, 2020)

## 3. Human Rights Violations

### 3.1 A Wide Array of Infractions

Amidst the slew of human rights violations mentioned above, and many others too numerous to mention, the most

significant in terms of sheer numbers and level of abuse are the following:

### 3.1.1 Opposition to Political Control

The preponderance of documented torture cases in Iran are connected in some way to the government's efforts to hold onto absolute power. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (often referred to as the Islamic Revolution) that unseated the western-backed monarchy and installed an Islamic Republic, Iran has seen its share of opponents to the regime. During that pivotal moment in time, protestors took the streets to express their vehement opposition to a totalitarian, religious-based leadership. Crackdowns were swift, leaving approximately 2500 dead at the hands of new governing forces. Thousands more were detained, and many were tortured. With their heavy-handed response, the new regime sent a strong message to the Iranian people: *do not resist us or you will suffer and/or die.*

Those early protests and resulting crackdowns were only the beginning. In 2009 Iran held presidential elections that the opposition claimed were rigged. When protests erupted, security apparatuses violently attempted to silence them. A formal investigation and report by the U.N. General Assembly human rights committee condemned Iran for its flagrant human rights abuses. According to the report, among those abuses were "harassment, intimidation and persecution, including by arbitrary arrest, detention or disappearance of opposition members, journalists and other media representatives, bloggers, lawyers, clerics, human rights defenders, academics and students." The report went on to specify that numerous deaths and injuries occurred as a result of such actions, and condemned reports of abuse of prisoners "including rape and torture." (Charbonneau, 2009)

### 3.1.2 Transgressing Religious, Social, or Moral Norms

As a theocracy, Iran punishes Iranian citizens who act in ways not sanctioned by clerics' strict religious and moral dictates. Many actions are illegal according to Iran's penal code, which reflects the ruling clerics' interpretation of Sharia law, based on the Jafari or Twelver Shia school of jurisprudence.

Infractions are punished according to codified laws. Behavior which may be perfectly acceptable in Western democracies, such as sex outside marriage, same-sex physical acts, or changing one's religion, are all illegal in Iran, and the latter two can warrant the death penalty. As egregious as these laws and resulting penalties are, Iranians are at least aware of these laws, and when they break them they often do so with full knowledge and therefore accept the associated risk. This is troubling enough, but the additional vindictive, castigating behavior exhibited by members of Iran's own government when a citizen breaks a religious social norm is an additional affront to Iranian's human rights.

Examples of such abuse are numerous. If an Iranian writes, sings, states, or expresses in any manner an insult against Islam they not only face legal charges but are often targeted by security services in a brutal, punishing manner. If arrested and charged with "blasphemy," a crime Iranian law describes as "spreading corruption on earth," a prisoner can be flogged repeatedly and put to death. However, oftentimes such prisoners linger in prison cells for years, experiencing constant beatings, rape, and torture by guards and other prison authorities.

### 3.1.3 Being an Ethnic or Religious Minority

Despite the fact the Iranian constitution grants equal rights to all its citizens, including ethnic minorities, government agents continue to discriminate against them openly. This targeting takes many forms, including extended pretrial detention periods during which torture is a common feature. The amount of torture and abuse reported for minorities is harsher and longer than for majority groups, as are jail sentences and other punishments.

Ethnic minorities suffer in a multitude of other ways as well. Azeri, Kurdish, Ahwazi Arab, and Lors report lack of access to economic aid, university admissions, business licenses, jobs, housing, land rights, and even access to natural resources on land they do own. (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

Many ethnic minorities are also religious minorities, making their life in Iran doubly difficult. The largest of these groups are ethnic Kurds who are Sunni Muslims, in contrast to the majority Shia Muslim population. Kurds in Iran speak a different language, Kurdish, which is protected under the Iranian constitution. Nevertheless, Kurdish-language publications are frequently banned; and many Kurdish journalists and publishers are "disappeared" by government agents (U.S. Department of State, 2021) and their whereabouts are rarely discovered.

### 3.1.4 Being Female

Women experience a range of varying realities in Iran; some are highly educated and hold positions of power in the government and work in professions such as medicine, law, and higher education, while others suffer from living under the strict control of their male relatives. Many women suffer severe human rights abuses in Iran. One of the harshest of these is the prevalent use of rape. Though rape is illegal, and perpetrators are subject to severe penalties including death, the crime is rarely reported to authorities. The reasons for this are many, the primary one being public humiliation and reprisals, including sexual attacks by law enforcement and other government employees. Many women stated they did

not report being raped because they feared official retaliation or punishment, including “charges of indecency, immoral behavior, or adultery, which carries the death penalty.” (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Between fear of sexual attacks by officers to whom they report rape, fear of being charged themselves, and social ostracism, they remain silent. Perhaps the greatest impediment of all is the law requiring four Muslim men or a combination of three men and one woman to have actually witnessed the rape in order to gain a conviction. As a result, an estimated 80% of rapes are never reported.

Further, Iranian law does not prohibit domestic abuse or marital rape. Additionally, in past years women have been frequently attacked with acid if suspected of immoral behavior. Rather than protecting women from such attacks, the government instead prosecuted activists who called for accountability. On several occasions activists were arrested and sentenced to prison for actions such as advocating restrictions on the sale of acid.

Women are frequently attacked or arrested by so-called “morality police” for not wearing their hijabs (headscarves) properly, for allowing their ankles or arms to show, or for appearing without a male protector such as a brother or father to chaperone them.

Each year in Iran, between 375-450 women are killed at the hands of their male relatives in “honor killings.” (US State Department, 2021). These occur when a father or brother (or uncle or even mother) kills their female relative for behavior they consider immoral in an effort to restore family honor. In their rare instances when the state steps in to punish the murderer, they are given light sentences of three to ten years. In fact, legal guardians (fathers, but not mothers) are by law exempt from capital punishment for murdering their children.

### 3.1.5 Being Gay

Iran is considered by many to be the most homophobic country in the world. Same-sex relationships are officially illegal, and the death penalty for committing homosexual acts is enforced. Since the 1979 revolution, Amnesty International estimates from 4,000 to 6000 lesbians and gay men have been executed. (Encarnation)

Beyond that, every day unbearable treatment is afforded those in the LGBTG community. While gay women are arrested and imprisoned, gay men suffer most at the hands of security services. Seemingly inconsequential actions such as a man plucking his eyebrows can result in arrest. One such case earned a sentence of 45 lashes—inflicted with a rod or whip—which left a young man unable to move properly for a month. The flagellation was brutal enough; however, the torture used by arresting officers or security personnel in prison is extreme, including rape and other types of sexual torture.

Unfortunately, gay men, or those who “act gay,” suffer ridicule and beatings throughout life from classmates, teachers, parents, and others. The culture that propagates such treatment of its LGBTQ community is modeled by its leaders and crafted by its laws. One young man who sought and won asylum in the US described his own experience as a gay man as one involving constant harassment by the police since the time, he was fourteen, particularly for the way he walked and talked. He was arrested many times in high school, initially for his choice of clothing which included short sleeves, and his haircut which they described as ‘flamboyant’. On this third arrest, he was blindfolded and taken away to a location where three officers raped him with a baton, after which each officer raped him personally. When interviewed by immigration agents he said he considers himself lucky he was not hung like other gay men.

## 4. Cruel and Degrading Torture

### 4.1 Large Percentage of Population Affected

It is impossible to accurately determine the exact numbers of Iranian citizens who have suffered from government torture. Many organizations attempt to do so, however. Freedom from Torture, an NGO based in the UK, treats and rehabilitates torture survivors and forensically document their injuries. As a result of this work, they have issued two formal reports on torture in Iran, each covering a multi-year period. Their reports clearly depict the brutal methods used by Iranian authorities to control Iranian citizens. (Freedom from Torture, 2018)

A few of their key findings are: 1) Torture is used by the Iranian government to control activities “associated with religious, ethnic or political dissent” putting large sections of the population at risk; 2) Abuses are current and stretch back decades; 3) The ongoing use of torture in interrogation and intimidation tactics by police, intelligence services, and prison security services indicate acceptance of the practice by the government; 4) The widespread use of “horrific physical abuses includes high levels of sexual torture amongst both men and women”; 5) There is frequent use of psychological torture.

### 4.2 Forced Secrecy

Equally troubling are the tactics used to prevent torture victims from sharing their experiences after release. Survivors are threatened with retribution to their family members or themselves if they discuss the use of torture with anyone.

This is monitored through ongoing surveillance by Iranian security services and extends to their lives beyond Iran's borders. Former prisoners live in fear throughout their lives as they are always at risk. (Freedom from Torture, 2018)

According to US State Department findings, commonly reported methods of torture and abuse in prisons included "threats of execution or rape, forced vaginal and anal examinations, sleep deprivation, waterboarding, suspension, forced ingestion of chemical substances, deliberate deprivation of medical care, electroshock including the shocking of genitals, burnings, the use of pressure positions, and severe and repeated beatings." (U.S. Department of State, 2021)

## **5. Is Change Coming?**

### *5.1 Have Iranians Had Enough?*

Though conditions in Iran have failed to improve in the area of human rights since the Islamic Revolution, and many argue the trajectory of the struggle is moving in the wrong direction and worsening with each succeeding year, others suggest this dire situation augers for a better future, or at least, a different future.

### *5.2 Shifting Trends*

A study from Columbia University's Journal of International Affairs noted an interesting trend among street protests in Iran. The authors of the study argue that protests in very recent years are drifting closer to revolution. Focusing on the large protests of 2017 mentioned earlier, researchers examined key elements of the protests including geography, demography, violence levels, organization cohesion, and slogans of protest to argue that the 2017 event was "a change point: a structural break from reform to revolution." (Ghasseminejad, 2020)

When comparing 2017 protests to earlier protests, specific findings included a widened geographic spread with protests occurring in over eighty cities, erupting in many smaller cities and towns. This occurred despite the fact that while economic struggle was the complaint at the heart of all protests, economic indicators nationwide were far better than they had been during earlier protests.

There was also a telling change in the slogans protestors displayed and shouted during the 2017 protests, whereby messages shifted to a new level—from criticism of the Islamic Republic to outright rejection of it—a major upleveling. Another factor was the increased breadth of the organization, which spread horizontally to include more leadership, rather than vertically, which would suggest a smaller base of protestors.

Levels of violence used by police in 2017 revealed the Iranian power structure's growing concern over the tone, strength and breadth of the protests as compared to events of 1999 and 2009. As stated in above, Reuters' reporting claimed more than 1500 protestors were murdered by government forces in 2017. In 2009 that number was four, and in 2009 the number lay somewhere between 70 and 112.

"Taken together, the aforementioned ... measures not only prove that demonstrators have pushed past reform, but also that they are actively seeking revolution. Accordingly, these measures can be interpreted as sign-posts of what may come or intensify in years ahead." (Ghasseminejad, 2020)

## **6. Conclusion**

Iran is a totalitarian government that uses coercion and violence to control its population. Religious beliefs and moral structures demanded by government leadership and codified by law, while not at necessarily at odds with the majority of its population (Shia Muslim Persians), are imposed with such rigidity and held in place with such vicious cruelty and inflexibility they have created an oppressive atmosphere causing an increasingly large percentage of the population to rebel.

As the outside world evolves to include greater inclusivity of difference and becomes less tolerant of strict religious dogma and unbending moral imperatives, and as Iranians grow more desirous of individual freedoms they witness in other countries, the stirrings of revolution may be rising. The outright abuse authorities employ for both majority and minority populations within the country is increasingly becoming known to its citizens via internet and other communication sources. As human right standards in the west continue to improve, and human rights in Iran deteriorate further, the center will not hold. Change appears inevitable.

The question, however, is how long will such change take to transpire, and how intensely will Iranian people suffer in the meantime? For Iranians who remain outside the mainstream in terms of political beliefs, ethnicity, religion, behavior, gender or gender norms, suffering and death threaten. An ongoing lack of personal freedoms, a dearth of personal lifestyle choice, and a host of other oppressions remain. Torture will continue to occur and is likely to increase as Iranians strive for more personal freedom and authorities increasingly clamp down.

The current reality of daily existence in Iran, while difficult-to-intolerable depending on one's situation, is likely to worsen in coming years. Hope remains that a revolution is fomenting, and eventually Iranians will be free of the

oppression so many currently experience.

### References

- Charbonneau, L. (2009, November 20). U.N. Panel Condemns Iran for Post-Election Crackdown. *Reuters News Now*.
- Encarnation, O. G. (2017, February 13). Trump and Gay Rights: The Future of the Global Movement. *Foreign Affairs*.
- Freedom from Torture. (2018). *Turning a Blind Eye: Why the International Community Must No Longer Ignore Torture in Iran*. London: Freedom from Torture .
- Freedom House. (2022). *Freedom in the World 2022*. Washington, DC: Freedom House .
- Ghasseminejad, T. K. (2020). Evolution Toward Revolution: The Development of Street Protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Journal of International Affairs*.
- Human Rights Watch. (2020). *Iran: No Justice for Bloody 2019 Crackdown*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Iran International. (2020, November 19). *UN Resolution Condemns "Blatant" Human Rights Violations in Iran*.
- Takeyh, R. (2017, May 27). Iran's President Isn't a Reformer: He's an Enabler. *Politico*.
- U.S. Department of State. (2021). *2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iran*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.
- United Nations. (2022, 1 30). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved 1 30, 2022
- United States Institute of Peace. (2022). *The Iran Primer*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace.
- US State Department. (2021). *2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practice: Iran*. Washington, D.C.: US Department of State.

### Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution license](#) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.