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# Responses to Information Requests

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22 February 2021

### IRN200457.E

Iran: Treatment by the authorities of anti-government activists, including those returning from abroad; overseas monitoring capabilities of the government (2019–February 2021)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

## 1. Treatment of Anti-Government Activists in Iran

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a retired professor at York University, who has published books and articles in English and Persian on the leftist movement in Iran, religious fundamentalism, secularism, multiculturalism, and the diaspora, stated that "[i]n general, the government does not tolerate any dissent" (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). An April 2020 country report on Iran by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) notes that while Iranians are able to criticize the government in public conversation and online, "this freedom is not unlimited — a number of well-established 'red line' topics are off-limits and critical commentary may lead to prosecution under national security legislation" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.81). Based on information from "[l]ocal

sources," the same source describes insulting the Supreme Leader in front of individuals who are not "close family and friends" as an example of crossing the "red lin[e]" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.82).

The 2020 annual report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), covering the events of 2019, notes that "Iran's judiciary and security agencies continue to use vaguely defined provisions in the penal code to arrest and prosecute activists for peaceful assembly and free expression" (HRW Jan. 2020, 284). The UN Secretary-General's report on the human rights situation in Iran, published in January 2020, notes that "[r]eports of individuals arrested for peacefully expressing political opinions are of serious concern" (UN 17 Jan. 2020, para. 34). The same source reports that in June 2019, 14 individuals published an open letter calling for constitutional reform and the resignation of the Supreme Leader, and that 10 of these individuals were "reportedly" arrested (UN 17 Jan. 2020, para. 34). Amnesty International's 2020 annual report on human rights in Iran, covering the events of 2019, indicates that "[a]uthorities detained at least 16 people who signed open letters in July [2019] demanding fundamental changes to the country's political system; some were charged with 'insulting the Supreme Leader'" (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 3). A 10 September 2019 HRW article reports that, from 31 July 2019 to the date of publication, the courts sentenced "at least 13 activists to prison sentences of more than a decade for peaceful dissent," including sentences ranging from 14 to 19 years for 6 labour activists, a 24-year sentence for a compulsory hijab protester, and a 23-year sentence for a satirist (HRW 10 Sept. 2019).

A December 2019 Freedom House article on internet surveillance and censorship observes that authorities "have continued to hand down harsh punishments to activists and others who express dissent online" (Freedom House 2 Dec. 2019). The same source provides the example of a lawyer who, in June 2019, was sentenced to 30 years in prison, which will be reduced to 15 years under Iran's penal code, and 111 lashes for activities including the creation of a Telegram [instant messaging service] channel to record human rights violations (Freedom House 2 Dec. 2019).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, who studies authoritarian regimes with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa and has written about Iran, stated that "there is no rule of law" in Iran and that most judges and lawyers are "regime affiliates" (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The 2020 HRW annual report indicates that access to legal counsel for detainees is "routinely restricted" and courts, especially the revolutionary courts, "regularly fall far short of providing fair trials and use confessions likely obtained under torture as evidence in court" (HRW Jan. 2020, 287). A 2020 annual report by Freedom House, which covers the events of 2019, notes that "[t]he authorities routinely violate basic due process standards, particularly in politically sensitive cases" and that "[a]ctivists are arrested without warrants, held indefinitely without formal charges, and denied access to legal counsel"

(Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. F2). The same source reports that lawyers who work on behalf of dissidents have been imprisoned and barred from practicing law (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. F2). Freedom House provides the example of a "prominent" human rights lawyer who had been serving a five-year sentence since June 2018 and was "reportedly sentenced to an additional 33 years in prison and 148 lashes for her activities" (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. F2).

The 2020 annual report by Freedom House states that detainees have been subjected to beatings and torture while in custody (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. F3). Amnesty International's 2020 annual report notes that "[t]orture and other ill-treatment, including prolonged solitary confinement, remained widespread and systematic, especially during interrogations" (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 4).

## 2. November 2019 Protests

Sources report that a [50 percent (BBC 20 Nov. 2019)] increase in the price of gasoline triggered protests across Iran in November 2019 (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020; Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021; BBC 20 Nov. 2019). According to sources, protests took place in 100 cities and towns (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.89; Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020; BBC 20 Nov. 2019).

### 2.1 Arrests

Sources report that thousands of people were arrested during the protests (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 1; Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. E1). The Australian DFAT report cites authorities in Iran as indicating that 7,000 individuals were arrested (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.89). Based on estimates by human rights groups, a November 2019 HRW article similarly reports that security forces arrested "up to" 7,000 people (HRW 27 Nov. 2019). However, the same source also cites the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) [1] as stating that "as many as 3,980 people may have been arrested" (HRW 27 Nov. 2019). A November 2019 BBC article reports that Iran's judiciary spokesman announced on 20 November 2019 that 100 protest leaders and "prominent figures" had been detained in "various parts of the country" (BBC 22 Nov. 2019). The Australian DFAT report cites Iranian authorities as indicating that most of the protesters arrested were released (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.89). A May 2020 report by the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) [2] on the State response to protests in November 2019 and January 2020 similarly states that the "majority" of those arrested "appear" to have been released on bail after detention (CHRI May 2020, 39).

The November 2019 HRW article indicates that videos on social media "show people who have been arrested and handcuffed being beaten by Iranian police and men in civilian clothing" (HRW 27 Nov. 2019). The 2020 Amnesty International annual report states that "[m]any [of the detained protesters] were subjected to enforced disappearance, torture or other ill-treatment including through being punched, kicked, flogged and beaten" (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 1). Based on firsthand accounts, the May 2020 CHRI report indicates that "detainees — including juvenile detainees — were beaten while in detention, forced to make self-incriminating statements and 'confessions,' and held in inhumane facilities and under inhumane conditions" (CHRI May 2020, 35). The same source reports that the authorities withheld the location of detainees from their families and adds that "families had to struggle to locate loved ones who were detained" (CHRI May 2020, 35).

The May 2020 CHRI report notes that "[t]here has been relatively little information regarding trials and convictions for those individuals arrested in connection with the protests" (CHRI May 2020, 39). A July 2020 HRW article indicates that courts in Iran had "reportedly" issued or upheld "at least" four death sentences since late June 2020 in connection with protests that occurred during the past two years (HRW 10 July 2020). The same article also reports that on 27 June 2020, the head of the judiciary of Isfahan province stated that eight people who had been arrested during the protests in December 2017, January 2018, and November 2019 had been sentenced on the charge "sowing corruption on earth," which HRW describes as "a vaguely defined national security charge that can carry the death penalty" (HRW 10 July 2020).

Amnesty International reported that in February 2020 three men were convicted of charges including "enmity against God" in connection to acts of arson during the November 2019 protests and were sentenced to death (Amnesty International 28 Feb. 2020). Citing a report by HRANA, the July 2020 HRW article states that on 24 June 2020, Iran's Supreme Court upheld the death sentences of three men who were arrested after participating in the November 2019 protests and charged with "'taking part in destruction and burning, aimed at countering the Islamic Republic of Iran'" (HRW 10 July 2020). Sources report that in July 2020 Iran's Supreme Court suspended the executions of the three men who had been sentenced to death for their participation in the November protests (*The Guardian* 19 July 2020; DW 19 July 2020). Sources add that Iran's Supreme Court agreed to retry the three men (AFP 5 Dec. 2020; Reuters 5 Dec. 2020).

## 2.2 Injuries and Deaths

According to the 2020 HRW annual report, authorities "brutally repressed" the November protests (HRW Jan. 2020, 284). The 2020 Amnesty International annual report notes that "[s]ecurity forces used lethal force unlawfully to crush protests" (Amnesty

International 18 Feb. 2020, 1). According to the Australian DFAT report, people who were protesting the increase in gas prices in November 2019 "were vilified and put down with force" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.80).

Sources report, based on interviews with witnesses and families of victims and reviews of videos of the November 2019 protest, that security forces used ["unlawful" (HRW 25 Feb. 2020)] lethal force (HRW 25 Feb. 2020; CHRI May 2020, 12, 17). According to sources, police (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.89) or state security forces (CHRI May 2020, 12) fired live ammunition into crowds at the protests (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.89; CHRI May 2020, 12), "hitting both protesters and bystanders" (CHRI May 2020, 12).

Freedom House reports that thousands of people were injured in the protests and that fatality estimates range from "more than 300" to 1,500 (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. E1). According to the Assistant Professor, members of Iran's government reported that around 300 people were killed in the protests, while NGOs estimated that between 300 and 1,000 people were killed (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). An Amnesty International May 2020 report on the deaths of protesters during the November 2019 protests notes that, after verifying information it received from interviews with witnesses and victims' families and friends and from human rights activists, journalists, medical staff, and video footage, "Amnesty International has recorded 304 deaths resulting from the use of lethal force by security forces" during the protests that took place from 15 to 19 November 2019 (Amnesty International 20 May 2020, 1-2). A December 2019 Reuters article reports that, according to three Iranian interior ministry officials, "[a]bout 1,500 people were killed during less than two weeks of unrest" including "at least 17 teenagers and about 400 women," as well as members of the security forces and police (Reuters 23 Dec. 2019). The same source notes that, according to two of the Iranian officials, these figures are based on information collected from security forces, morgues, hospitals, and coroner's offices (Reuters 23 Dec. 2019). A March 2020 Amnesty International report on the killings of minors during the November 2019 protests states that "at least 23 children were killed by Iranian security forces" and that "at least" 22 of these were shot (Amnesty International 4 Mar. 2020, 4).

### **3. Treatment of Individuals Who Criticize the Ukraine Airlines Flight 752 (PS752) Incident**

Sources report that on 11 January 2020, Iran acknowledged that it shot down PS752 due to "human error" after initially denying doing so (Al Jazeera 11 Jan. 2020; *The Guardian* with Reuters and AP 11 Jan. 2020). A May 2020 HRW article indicates that protests broke out across Iran after the government's admission (HRW 8 May 2020). A January 2020 BBC article states that the protests "mainly" involved university students and other people from the middle

class and were concentrated in Tehran and other cities such as Isfahan (BBC 16 Jan. 2020). The May 2020 CHRI report notes that the protests were "[c]entered largely but not exclusively in several universities" (CHRI May 2020, 43).

Sources report that Iranian security forces used live ammunition on protesters in Tehran on 12 January 2020 (CHRI 14 Jan. 2020; *The Guardian* 13 Jan. 2020; *The Washington Post* 13 Jan. 2020). Amnesty International reports that video footage, photographs, and testimonies from victims and eyewitnesses indicate that on 11 and 12 January, security forces "fired pointed pellets from airguns, usually used for hunting, at peaceful protesters[,] causing bleeding and painful injuries" (Amnesty International 15 Jan. 2020). The same source states that "[s]ecurity forces also used rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper spray to disperse protesters as well as kicking and punching them, beating them with batons and carrying out arbitrary arrests" (Amnesty International 15 Jan. 2020). The May 2020 CHRI report states that "direct threats were made by state security and intelligence agents against students participating in peaceful sit-ins, hospitalized protesters who had been injured by security forces, and against their families" (CHRI May 2020, 46).

According to sources, Iran's judiciary stated on 14 January 2020 that 30 people had been arrested in the protests (AP 14 Jan. 2020; Reuters 14 Jan. 2020). The May 2020 CHRI report indicates that arrests made during the protests included "significant numbers of students at universities engaged in peaceful sit-ins" (CHRI May 2020, 45). The May 2020 HRW article reports that since late April 2020, courts in Iran "have sentenced at least 13 people to prison terms, apparently solely for peacefully protesting" the downing of the Ukrainian airlines flight (HRW 8 May 2020).

The retired Professor indicated that the government has threatened individuals who have publicly criticized the PS752 incident, including one of the "leading" organizers of a memorial ceremony for the victims (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The Assistant Professor reported that two individuals who attended a ceremony for the victims of PS752 were arrested and sentenced, with one person being sentenced to five years and the other to two years (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The same source further stated that both individuals were activists and observed that when someone is sentenced for one crime, the data the authorities already have on the person is used to charge them with other crimes as well (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021).

## **4. Treatment of the Family Members of Anti-Government Activists in Iran**

Amnesty International's 2020 annual report indicates that "[s]everal family members of human rights defenders were subjected to interrogation and other forms of harassment" (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 2). An October 2019 letter signed by 13 human rights organizations states that they "are deeply concerned about arrests of family members of activists, journalists and political prisoners by the Iranian government" (Abdorrahrman Boroumand Center, et al. 2 Oct. 2019). The letter also notes that in September 2019, a US-based journalist and women's rights activist indicated that Iranian intelligence officers had arrested her brother in Tehran and that the agents "reportedly stated that they were detaining [the brother] to question him about his sister's activities and the ties" between him and his sister (Abdorrahrman Boroumand Center, et al. 2 Oct. 2019). A September 2019 Deutsche Welle (DW) article reports that Iranian intelligence officials detained three family members of a women's rights activist, including her brother (DW 26 Sept. 2019).

Freedom House notes that authorities "reportedly harassed" the families of "some" of the individuals who were killed in the November 2019 protests (Freedom House 4 Mar. 2020, Sec. E1). Similarly, the May 2020 Amnesty International report states that "[i]ntelligence and security officials in Iran have embarked on a campaign of harassment and intimidation of the families of those killed during the protests to prevent them from talking openly about th[e] deaths" of their family members (Amnesty International 20 May 2020, 3). The May 2020 CHRI report states that "CHRI has obtained numerous, consistent, firsthand accounts indicating that the Iranian authorities routinely threatened the families of detainees and those killed" to stop them from speaking to the media (CHRI May 2020, 13). The same source reports that families were "pressured" to provide false information about how their relatives were killed (CHRI May 2020, 13).

The retired Professor noted that the authorities have threatened family members of individuals who spoke out about PS752 and added that the parents of these individuals have been threatened and "summoned" (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The Assistant Professor indicated that people who attended a ceremony for PS752 "might have their families pressured" (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021).

## 5. Treatment of Anti-Government Activists Upon Return to Iran

For information on the treatment of failed refugee claimants by Iranian authorities, see Response to Information Request IRN200133 of March 2020.

When asked how anti-government activists are treated when they return to Iran, the retired Professor responded that "those who have been very active or are known cannot go back" (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The same source indicated that there is a "higher risk" for individuals who are politically active and that "[o]rdinary Iranians might be fine" (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The source added, however, that "it really depends on the case"; "in

general, if someone is known, they will face risks" (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The Assistant Professor stated that people who attended protests and then went abroad and were not politically active while abroad will not face "consequences" when they return unless there are "open files" and charges or sentences; if there are "open files" and charges or sentences, though, the person will be arrested (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The same source indicated that a person who was politically active abroad but stayed anonymous can return; however, "there is no way" for a person who was politically active under their real name to return (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of HRANA stated that "[t]here have been multiple reports of dissidents who have been arrested upon their return to Iran and even lured into return[ing] to Iran" to then be arrested (HRANA 2 Feb. 2021). Sources report that in December 2020 Iran executed a journalist, who ran the news site Amad News and had been living in exile in France, when he was "lured" to conduct an interview (AFP 2 Feb. 2021) or was promised a meeting (Azizi 12 Jan. 2021) in Iraq with Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an important figure in Shia Islam; upon arrival in Iraq, the journalist was arrested and handed over to the Iranian authorities (Azizi 12 Jan. 2021; AFP 2 Feb. 2021).

Sources indicate that Iran does not recognize dual citizenship (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021; AFP 17 July 2019). The retired Professor noted that there have been individuals with "multiple citizenships" who have returned and been imprisoned (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). A July 2019 Agence France-Presse (AFP) article indicates that a "rising number" of dual citizens of western nations are being detained (AFP 17 July 2019).

## 6. Overseas Monitoring Capabilities of the Iranian Government

When asked whether Iran monitors overseas anti-government activities, the retired Professor responded that Iran's government "sends people as agents to other countries" (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The Assistant Professor indicated that the government "will try to find [anti-government activists] inside and outside of the country" and that the intelligence agency will help gather information (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The same source noted that Iran uses refugees to monitor other refugees outside of the country (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). A December 2019 Associated Press (AP) article reports that in December 2019 an Iraqi man was charged with spying and was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for collecting information about Iranian refugees in Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands (AP 20 Dec. 2019).

The Assistant Professor explained that people are "forced and coerced into working with Iranian security authorities" and that authorities will use personal information to pressure them (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The same source indicated that "sometimes"



prisoners are promised that they will be released if they collaborate (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Assistant Professor also noted that Iran's government monitors political opponents abroad to find out about their activities (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The same source noted that the authorities "usually focus on important people, but they are interested in any information that they can use to put pressure on people," such as information about a person's consumption of alcohol or romantic relationships (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The retired Professor indicated that Iran's government spies on the opposition and Iranians abroad (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). The same source stated that Iranian authorities "will threaten people" to induce them to cease their activities abroad and that Iran's government has "tried to" assassinate Iranians abroad (Retired Professor 25 Jan. 2021). A September 2020 article by Andrew Hanna, a research analyst at the US Institute of Peace (USIP) [3], and Garrett Nada, the managing editor of the Iran Primer [4], notes that from the 1979 revolution to September 2020, Iran "had reportedly assassinated at least 21 opponents abroad and killed hundreds in bombings of foreign military, diplomatic, and cultural facilities" (USIP 21 Sept. 2020). The source notes that during this same period there were 59 "attacks" or "plots," including 20 that "targeted Iranian dissidents" (USIP 21 Sept. 2020). Sources report that in November 2019 an Iranian "dissident" was shot and killed in Istanbul (Reuters 27 Mar. 2020; USIP 21 Sept. 2020; *Daily Sabah* 31 Mar. 2020). Citing a Turkish police report published in March 2020, a March 2020 Reuters article indicates that the Iranian who was killed "worked in cyber security at Iran's defense ministry and had become a vocal critic of the Iranian authorities" (Reuters 27 Mar. 2020). A March 2020 article by *Daily Sabah*, a Turkey-based pro-government newspaper (*The New York Times* 21 Mar. 2018), reports that the victim "was a former intelligence operative for Iran before he moved to Turkey and launched social media accounts exposing corruption involving Iranian officials" (*Daily Sabah* 31 Mar. 2020). Based on information from two senior Turkish officials, the March 2020 Reuters article indicates that two intelligence officers based in the Iranian consulate in Turkey "instigated the killing" (Reuters 27 Mar. 2020). According to the article by Hanna and Nada, Turkish and US officials stated that Iran "appeared to be behind the assassination" (USIP 21 Sept. 2020).

The Assistant Professor indicated that Iranian authorities "focus on political opponents abroad" and that there have been cases of activists being kidnapped and returned to Iran (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). The same source noted that the authorities "will try to kidnap" "high-ranking activists" (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). A December 2020 *Washington Post* article reports that in October 2020 an "exiled Iranian opposition figure" traveled from Sweden to Turkey and that two days later Iran's state media reported that he had been arrested and had "confessed to his involvement in a deadly attack on a military parade two years" earlier in Iran (*The Washington Post* 13 Dec. 2020). The same source notes

that in December 2020 Turkey arrested "several" people in connection with the abduction (*The Washington Post* 13 Dec. 2020). A December 2020 Reuters article indicates that in December 2020 Turkish authorities reported that they had detained "11 people involved in the abduction and smuggling to Iran of an Iranian dissident wanted by Tehran in connection with a deadly 2018 attack in southwestern Iran" (Reuters 14 Dec. 2020).

The Assistant Professor stated that the authorities will "hack" for information on a "mid-rank" activist and will monitor "an ordinary Iranian," "because any information is useful" (Assistant Professor 23 Jan. 2021). Based on a report by the cybersecurity company Check Point, a February 2021 article by *Arab News*, an English-language newspaper published in Saudi Arabia (*Arab News* n.d.), reports that "Iran is running two surveillance operations in cyberspace, using various methods to spy on more than 1,000 dissidents" and that "[p]eople in Iran, the UK, the US and 10 other countries have been tracked by Iranian hackers" (*Arab News* 9 Feb. 2021).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

## Notes

[1] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) is a non-profit news organization established by a group of Iranian human rights activists that reports "daily news of human rights violations in Iran" (HRANA n.d.).

[2] The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), formerly the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, is a non-profit organization headquartered in New York aiming to "protect and promote human rights in Iran" (CHRI n.d.).

[3] The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) is a "national, nonpartisan, independent institute," founded and funded by the US Congress, which works abroad to prevent and end conflicts (USIP n.d.a).

[4] The USIP's Iran Primer is a book and website with articles written by 50 experts on Iran (USIP n.d.b).

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