

# Arrests, torture and executions: Iran's autumn of discontent

Sun, 2020-10-11 22:34

LONDON: In the face of the Middle East's worst COVID-19 outbreak and economic ruin, Iran's violent crackdown and persecution of anti-government protesters is an attempt to deter future protests, analysts have said. But in their view, the regime's disregard for human rights could very well be a sign of weakness rather than strength.

The world was appalled in September at the cruel hanging of Navid Afkari, an Iranian wrestling champion. He sought a fair trial until the end, but was deprived of legal representation and detained alongside his two brothers. The brutal mistreatment meted out to Afkari and his sudden execution were intended to send a clear message to normal Iranians, said Mansoureh Mills, Iran researcher at Amnesty International.

"The Iranian authorities are flexing their muscles," he told Arab News. "At a time when the general mood among Iranians is shifting away from the death penalty and the world is looking in horror at Iran's increasing use of it against protesters, dissidents and members of minority groups, the Iranian authorities are using executions, like that of Navid Afkari, as a tool of political control and oppression to instill fear among the public."



Protesters wave the Lion and Sun flag of the National Council of Resistance of Iran and the white flag of the People's Mujahedin of Iran, two Iranian

opposition groups, as they demonstrate outside the Iranian embassy in London on Sept. 12, 2020 against the execution of Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari in Iran. (Photo by Justin Tallis / AFP)

More than 7,000 people were arrested during the 2019 demonstrations alone and at least 30 other protesters have already received death sentences, wrote Iranian democracy activists Shirin Ebadi, Abbas Milani and Hamid Moghadam in a recent opinion piece, titled "Iran deserves a red card for its human rights abuses," for US news website The Hill.

A report released by the rights group Amnesty International in September detailed the catalog of horrors that detained protesters face in Iranian prisons. Prisoners spared the death penalty were regularly subjected to torture, including "beatings, floggings, electric shocks, stress positions and sexual violence," the report said.

Tehran's treatment of women's rights campaigners has been particularly harsh. For example, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced 57-year-old Nasrin Sotoudeh, a leading Iranian human rights lawyer, to 38 years in jail and 148 lashes on charges of "disrupting public order and colluding against the system" for her work defending the rights of women. Amnesty has called the sentence an "outrageous injustice."



Supporters of Amnesty International campaign for the release of Iranian lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh by celebrating a birthday party in front of the Iranian embassy in The Hague on May 31, 2019. (AFP)

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Since 2009, the regime has imprisoned or attempted to prosecute at least 60

lawyers for defending political prisoners, according to Human Rights Watch. The regime is also accused of trumping up spy charges against foreign visitors to effectively hold them hostage, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian dual national jailed in 2016, and British-Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who has been detained since 2018.

As COVID-19 swept through Iran's overcrowded jails earlier this year, Zaghari-Ratcliffe was temporarily released from the notorious Evin prison and placed under effective house arrest with her parents in Tehran, where she awaits fresh charges. Moore-Gilbert was recently moved from Evin to Qarchak, which is widely regarded as the worst women's prison in Iran, known for its extrajudicial killings, torture and other rights violations.

Even the families of dissidents outside Iran are unsafe. Masih Alinejad, an outspoken US-based critic of the Islamic Republic, has said her family inside Iran has been regularly targeted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Her brother was imprisoned and tortured, while her mother has faced a pattern of harassment. At one point, her mother "threatened to pour gasoline on herself and set herself on fire" during a confrontation with IRGC officers, Alinejad said.

## IRAN'S CRACKDOWN ON PEACEFUL ACTIVISM

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- **Feb. 4:** Iranian Amir Rahimpour handed death sentence for alleged CIA spying.
  - **Mar. 11:** Iranian chess referee Shohreh Bayat forced seeks asylum in UK after being photographed at tournament wearing loose hijab.
  - **Mar. 28:** Young inmate Daniel Zeinolabedini beaten to death by guards in Mahabad prison.
  - **Apr. 9:** 35 prisoners killed by guards in Iranian prisons during COVID-19 safety protests.
  - **May. 16:** French-Iranian Fariba Adelkhah sentenced to 6 years in jail on espionage charges.
  - **May. 20:** Iranian dissident Shahla Jahanbin given just 2 months to recover from surgery before starting 3-year jail term for demanding Khamenei resignation.
  - **Jun. 13:** Iranian human rights campaigner Narges Mohammadi denied medical help for lung condition while in jail.
  - **Jun. 30:** Iranian journalist Ruhollah Zam sentenced to death for allegedly inspiring protests.
  - **Jul. 28:** Jailed British-Australian Kylie Moore-Gilbert moved to notorious Qarchak prison.
  - **Aug. 5:** Anti-regime protester Mostafa Salehi executed after 'deeply flawed' trial.
  - **Aug. 11:** Lawyer and lecturer Shahram Shirkhani sentenced to 10 years jail for alleged spying.
  - **Sept. 8:** New charges brought against detained British-Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe.

This mistreatment of protesters, Mills said, can be directly linked to the declining economic and political control that Tehran exerts over the population.

Since the beginning of 2020, the value of the Iranian rial has plummeted to new lows each passing month. In October, it dropped to its lowest-ever value. Worse yet for the regime, the US is moving forward with the re-imposition of “snapback” sanctions lifted as part of the nuclear deal. Meanwhile, with pressure mounting on European countries to take a harder line against Iran, one of the regime’s few remaining economic lifelines could soon vanish.

“Whenever the political and economic situation in the country declines, the Iranian authorities clamp down even further on the public and erode human rights even more – Tehran has shown it will do everything in its power to crush protests and silence dissent,” Mills said.

Iran’s spiraling economic crisis could herald yet more repression and violence by Tehran in an attempt to control the volatile domestic situation, Mills added. But far from dampening the appetite of ordinary Iranians for regime change, he believes widespread repression and the flippant use of execution have, and will continue to, enrage the population.

“The anger at Navid Afkari’s execution among Iranians is palpable,” he told Arab News. “Since his death, graffiti has appeared in Iran’s streets criticizing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and calling for revenge for his killing, and people are urging protests against his execution.”

Mills’s prediction of unrest and anti-regime anger is echoed by Ali Safavi, a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee for the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an Iranian dissident group that views itself as Iran’s government-in-waiting.

Safavi says much like the protests of 2018 and November 2019, which were both triggered by economic grievances among the Iranian populace and morphed into anti-regime movements, the deteriorating economic and social foundations in Iran will catalyze further uprising.



NCRI spokesman Ali Safavi. (AFP)

In trying to prevent this, Safavi said, the regime is “caught between a rock and a hard place. While it needs to repress and execute to survive, it is fully cognizant of its fragile and vulnerable state, and is very worried about the massive social backlash of executions.”

The case of dissident campaigner Shahla Jahanbin epitomizes the regime’s problem. She penned a letter to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei earlier this year imploring him to resign. In response, Jahanbin was sentenced to nearly four years in jail and forced to return to prison just months after receiving back surgery. But her cruel treatment at the hands of the Islamic Revolutionary Court has failed to suppress the anger of Iran’s youth against the regime – it only fuels it, Safavi said.



Shahla Jahanbin

“The regime is terrified of the eruption of another uprising,” he added. But Tehran’s nightmare scenario may already be playing out. Footage obtained by Arab News shows unidentified individuals setting fire to the entrance of the Shiraz court where Afkari was handed his death sentence. A later video also shows an explosive device detonating in the heavily fortified entrance to Lorestan province’s central prison administration office.

Both attacks took place at night and caused only material damage, but were met with an immediate deployment of security forces. Safavi said this demonstrates the fear of the regime and its vulnerability in the face of the Iranian public.

The only way out of the cycle of repression, public backlash and more repression, according to Bob Blackman, a UK Conservative Party MP, is for the international community to send a clear message to Iran that “we are not going to put up with their human rights abuses.”

He told Arab News that European countries must abandon their attempts to appease Iran by rescuing the nuclear deal, and instead follow in the US administration’s footsteps with new sanctions against the regime. “We have to be strong and firm about this,” he said.

Blackman also noted the uncertainty and potential unrest caused by Iran’s sky-high coronavirus death toll – over 20,000 by official accounts, though many suspect the true figure may be far higher. He said concerns over personal safety amid the pandemic may be discouraging Iranians from taking to the streets against the government, but this reluctance to gather in protest will not last forever.

The issue in Iran, Blackman said, is increasingly a question of how much abuse normal Iranians are willing to put up with in their daily lives, and what they will resort to when it becomes too much to bear.

“What we do know is that the Shah (Iran’s pre-revolutionary ruler) was deposed after a long campaign of civil disobedience – it took a long time,” Blackman added.

“The anti-regime protests in Iran that continue to take place reflect the genuine sentiments of the Iranian people. These protests are a continuation of those beginning in November and proceeding through December, reforming again and again in the face of harsh repression.”

The consensus among rights groups, politicians and Iranians abroad is that Tehran’s executions and violent repression create a vicious cycle of more unrest, more human rights abuses, and therefore, more unrest.

Blackman said this cycle will continue until the international community abandons its strategy of appeasement and accepts the reality of the situation: The Islamic Republic cannot be trusted and will not change.

The general consensus among Iran analysts is that human rights abuses, executions and instability will continue until Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani and the IRGC’s grip on Iran is replaced by a representative and democratically elected government.

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Iranian diplomat warned of retaliation over Belgian bomb plot trial

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## [Fires brought under control in Syria, Lebanon](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-10-11 22:03

DAMASCUS: Dozens of fires that ravaged parts of Syria and Lebanon in recent days were brought under control on Sunday, authorities in the two countries said.

In Syria, blazes fueled by high temperatures broke out Friday in the provinces of Homs, Tartus and Latakia, where at least three people died, according to the health ministry.

Several families had to flee residential areas near the fires, according to media reports.

Syrian Agriculture Minister Mohammed Hassan Qatana said "a total of 156 fires" had broken out, most of them in Latakia and Tartus in the west of the

country, state news agency SANA reported.

He said they were brought under control on Sunday.

SANA reported that firefighters and civil defense personnel backed by army helicopters were still active in the areas.

Latakia governor Ibrahim Khader Al-Salem, quoted by SANA, said that "civil defense teams, supported by army units and the population, are now in control of all the fires in the province."

Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous said recovery work was underway, along with efforts to support those who had been forced to flee their homes.

In neighboring Lebanon, more than 100 forest fires that had raged since Thursday were also completely under control, a civil defense source told AFP. Authorities have yet to reveal the full extent of the damage from the fires in both countries.

But SANA published pictures showing burnt trees, including olives that had been ready for harvest.

Lebanon's official National News Agency said swathes of forests were devastated and pine trees destroyed.

In Israel, fires fueled by the heatwave were brought under control overnight Friday-Saturday, the firefighting service said.

"After more than 30 hours of firefighting, we have brought the main fires under control... (but) we remain vigilant," the fire service there said in a statement on Saturday.





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Three dead as forest fires burn in Syria, Lebanon  
Lebanon orders lockdown for 169 towns, villages

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## [UAE reports 1,096 coronavirus infections, two deaths](#)

Sun, 2020-10-11 18:53

DUBAI: The UAE on Sunday recorded 1,096 new COVID-19 cases and two deaths. The Ministry of Health and Prevention said the total number of cases since the pandemic began has reached 106,229, while the death toll rose to 445. The ministry also said 1,311 cases recovered from COVID-19 over the previous 24 hours, bringing the total to 97,284.

Meanwhile, Dubai Health Authority met with police and education chiefs to

discuss the impact of the pandemic and the level of intervention taken by the authority to stem its spread.

Dubai Economy issued fines to six businesses and a warning to one shop for not adhering to anti-COVID-19 measures.

Sharjah Police said they issued 5,432 fines in September to people violating the restrictions.

“The most common violations were not wearing masks and failing to comply with social distancing in closed public places like shopping malls or in public transport,” the police statement said.

Elsewhere, Kuwait recorded 548 new COVID-19 cases, bringing the total to 111,116. The death toll reached 658 after three new fatalities were registered.

تعلن [#وزارة\\_الصحة](#) عن تأكيد إصابة 548 حالة جديدة، وتسجيل 546 حالة شفاء، و 3 حالات وفاة جديدة بـ [#فيروس\\_كورونا\\_المستجد](#) COVID-19 ، ليصبح إجمالي عدد الحالات 111,116 حالة [pic.twitter.com/yYe5EnErLP](https://pic.twitter.com/yYe5EnErLP)

– [@KUWAIT\\_MOH](#) [October 11, 2020](#) وزارة الصحة – الكويت

Oman’s health ministry said the total number of cases had reached 105,890 and the death toll stands at 1,038.

[#Statement](#) No. 202

October 11, 2020 [pic.twitter.com/WLqZYBz0Ad](https://pic.twitter.com/WLqZYBz0Ad)

– [@OmaniMOH](#) [October 11, 2020](#) وزارة الصحة – عُمان

In Bahrain, two deaths were reported, bringing the death toll to 275, while 327 new infected cases were confirmed.

Out of 9086 COVID-19 tests carried out on 11 October 2020, 327 new cases have been detected among 104 expatriate workers, 214 new cases are contacts of active cases, and 9 are travel related. There were 441 recoveries from [#COVID19](#), increasing total recoveries to 71249 [pic.twitter.com/FYNBnyNq4s](https://pic.twitter.com/FYNBnyNq4s)

– [@MOH\\_Bahrain](#) [October 11, 2020](#) وزارة الصحة | مملكة البحرين



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UAE company nears end of Chinese Covid-19 vaccine trial  
Saudi Arabia records lowest number of new COVID-19 cases since April

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## [Turkish Cypriots vote for new leader amid east Med tensions](#)

Sun, 2020-10-11 17:14

NICOSIA: Voters in the Turkish-held north of Cyprus, a breakaway state recognized only by Ankara, voted Sunday for a new leader amid charges of interference by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The presidential vote in the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern

Cyprus was held amid heightened tensions on the divided island and in the wider eastern Mediterranean.

The election in the TRNC pits the incumbent and favorite, Mustafa Akinci, who supports the eventual reunification of Cyprus as an EU member, against nationalist Ersin Tatar, who is backed by Erdogan.

"This election is crucial for our destiny," Akinci said after casting his ballot, likening the effect of alleged Turkish political meddling to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on public health.

The vote comes three days after Turkish troops angered the Republic of Cyprus, an EU member, and many Turkish Cypriots by reopening public access to the fenced-off seaside ghost town of Varosha for the first time since Turkish forces invaded the north in 1974.

That move sparked demonstrations in the majority Greek-speaking Republic of Cyprus, which exercises its authority over the island's southern two thirds, separated from the north by a UN-patrolled buffer zone.

Almost 200,000 of the about 300,000 residents are registered to vote in the TRNC, which was established after the north of the island was occupied by Turkey in reaction to a coup to annex Cyprus to Greece.

One voter, Esat Tulek, aged 73 and a retired public servant, said the election was important because "we're actually choosing the president who will be negotiating with the Greek Cypriots about the future of Cyprus."

The election comes amid tensions in the eastern Mediterranean over the planned exploitation of hydrocarbons between Turkey on the one hand, and Greece as well as its close ally Cyprus on the other.

Erdogan announced on Tuesday, together with Tatar, the partial reopening of Varosha, a beachside resort that once drew Hollywood stars before it was abandoned by its Greek-Cypriot inhabitants during the Turkish invasion. The move to allow visitors back into the abandoned and overgrown area was condemned by Akinci and other candidates, who saw it as Turkish interference in the election.

It was also heavily criticized by the Republic of Cyprus, the European Union and the United Nations, whose peacekeepers monitor the 180-kilometer (112-mile) buffer zone across the island.

Kemal Baykalli, founder of the non-government group Unite Cyprus Now, told AFP that "the main issue of this election is how we will define our relationship with Turkey."

Eleven candidates are in the running, and the front-runner is Akinci, 72, a Social Democrat who favors loosening ties with Ankara, which has earned him the hostility of Erdogan.

"There are two situations that are not normal," Akinci said after voting.

"One is about our health, there is a pandemic.

"And the second one is our political health, communal health, and I'm talking here about the intervention of Turkey," which he accused of using their facilities in TRNC "like an election office."

The negotiations aimed at reunification stalled during Akinci's term of office, notably on the question of the withdrawal of tens of thousands of Turkish soldiers stationed in the TRNC.

Turkey supports the nationalist Tatar, 60, currently "prime minister" of the breakaway north, who on Sunday insisted to reporters that "the TRNC and its people form a state."

"We deserve to live on the basis of equal sovereignty," Tatar said to

applause from his supporters.

Yektan Turkeyilmaz, a researcher at the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien, said many Turkish Cypriots felt “wounded in their honor and identity” by what they considered to be interference from Ankara.

Another voter, Aysin Demirag, a 59-year-old yoga teacher, said the Varosha reopening, “under pressure from Turkey, organized as a show with days to go before the elections, was really a bad decision.”

The election is being held amid an economic crisis, deepened by the pandemic, which has largely shuttered the tourism sector and led to the closure of Ercan airport in north Nicosia and the crossing points to the south of the island.

Voting at 738 polling stations, held with precautions against the spread of COVID-19, was to close at 6:00 p.m. (1500 GMT), with result due to be released in the evening.

If no candidate wins at least 50 percent of the vote, the two leading candidates will face off in a second round on October 18.





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Ghost town reopening upends Turkish Cypriot election  
Turkish Cypriot FM quits in protest at move to reopen ghost resort

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## **[Bahrain's King Hamad: Establishing just peace in region depends on activating Arab initiative](#)**

Sun, 2020-10-11 17:20

LONDON: Establishing comprehensive and just peace in the region depends on



activating the Arab initiative, Bahrain's King Hamad said on Sunday.

Bahrain is working to support the initiative by all means with its allies to end the Arab-Israeli conflict, Bahrain News Agency (BNA) reported the king as saying.

King Hamad continued by saying that backing the initiative is the country's "declared and explicit position toward the Palestinian issue to reach a two-state solution that enhances world security and peace."

The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative offered normalisation of relations by the Arab world with Israel in return for a full withdrawal by Israel from the territories occupied since 1967, arrival at a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem and the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.



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King Hamad: Bahrain committed to independent Palestinian state  
Israel, Bahrain tourism ministers speak, discuss joint ventures with UAE