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Recent reports of deteriorating Human Rights in Iran

Compiled by Graeme Swincer¹, May 2016

Introduction and Summary

Recently, both Amnesty International and the United Nations have published their annual reports on the Human Rights situation in Iran. These are cited below with summary information and key quotations. Further background is provided by the earlier reports (more than a year old now) that are listed below as articles 4-7. Documentation of the dynamic political and human rights context of Iran between 2009 and 2013 can be found at <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/research-material/iran/>.

It is clear that Iran's designation and reputation as the nation that is most cruel to its own citizens continues to be reinforced. For several years Mr Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations special rapporteur on Iran has been accusing the Islamic Republic of Iran of fomenting a "culture of impunity" that runs roughshod over basic human rights. He said that he had "*catalogued a wide range of human rights violations*" and asserted that "*these violations are products of legal incongruities, insufficient adherence to the rule of law, and the existence of widespread impunity.*" What is most disturbing is that there seem to be few signs of improvement. Women, perceived dissidents, ethnic and religious minorities and youth are all vulnerable to discrimination and worse. The overwhelming body of evidence points to a continuation of flagrant breaches of human rights in the past year.

1. Amnesty International Report 2015/16: Iran (Islamic Republic of Iran)²

Summary:

The authorities severely curtailed the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, arresting and imprisoning journalists, human rights defenders, trade unionists and others who voiced dissent, on vague and overly broad charges. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remained common and was committed with impunity; prison conditions were harsh. Unfair trials continued, in some cases resulting in death sentences. Women and members of ethnic and religious minorities faced pervasive discrimination in law and in practice. The authorities carried out cruel punishments, including blinding, amputation and floggings. Courts imposed death sentences for a range of crimes; many prisoners, including at least four juvenile offenders, were executed.

¹ Retired agricultural scientist, international development programs coordinator, and cross cultural consultant, trainer and researcher.

² Amnesty International Report 2015/16: The State of the World's Human Rights, page 190

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/2552/2016/en/>

"Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all. Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards".

Quotations:

Freedoms of Expression, Association and Assembly

“The authorities continued to severely restrict freedoms of expression, association and assembly. They blocked Facebook, Twitter and other social media websites, closed or suspended media outlets including the Zanan monthly women’s magazine, jammed foreign satellite television stations, arrested and imprisoned journalists and online and other critics, and suppressed peaceful protests.”

“Opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnavard and Mehdi Karoubi remained under house arrest without charge or trial. Scores of prisoners of conscience continued to be detained or were serving prison sentences for peacefully exercising their human rights. They included journalists, artists, writers, lawyers, trade unionists, students, women’s and minority rights activists, human rights defenders and others.”

Torture and Other Ill-treatment

“Detainees and prisoners continued to report acts of torture and other ill-treatment, particularly during primary investigations mainly to force “confessions” or gather other incriminatory evidence.”

“A new Code of Criminal Procedures, which entered into force in June, introduced some safeguards including central electronic registers of detainees held in each province. However, the new Code did not provide adequate protection against torture and failed to bring Iranian law into conformity with international law and standards. The Code failed to guarantee individuals adequate access to an independent lawyer from the time of arrest, a legal requirement for protection against torture and other ill treatment.”

“Detainees and sentenced prisoners were denied adequate medical care; in some cases, the authorities withheld prescribed medications to punish prisoners, or failed to comply with medical doctors’ recommendations that prisoners should be hospitalized for treatment. The authorities also frequently subjected detainees and prisoners to prolonged solitary confinement amounting to torture or other ill-treatment.”

“Prisoners were kept in severely overcrowded and insanitary conditions with inadequate food and exposed to extreme temperatures.”

Cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment

“Courts continued to impose, and the authorities continued to carry out, punishments that violate the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment. These were sometimes carried out in public and included flogging, blinding and amputations.”

Unfair Trials

“Many trials, including some that resulted in death sentences, were grossly unfair. Prior to trial, the accused were frequently detained for weeks or months during which they had little or no access to lawyers or their families, and were coerced into writing or signing “confessions” that were then used as the main evidence against them in unfair proceedings. Judges routinely dismissed defendants’ allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in pre-trial detention without ordering investigations.”

“Special courts, including the Special Court for the Clergy which was effectively established outside the law, and the Revolutionary Courts, continued to function without observing international fair trial standards. The judiciary was not independent and courts remained susceptible to pressure from security authorities, such as the Ministry of Intelligence and Revolutionary Guards, to convict defendants and impose harsh penalties.”

Freedom of Religion and Belief

“Members of religious minorities, including Baha’is, Sufis, Yaresan (Ahl-e Haq), Christian converts from Islam, Sunni Muslims, and Shi’a Muslims who became Sunni, faced discrimination in employment and restrictions on their access to education and freedom to practise their faith. There were reports of arrest and imprisonment of dozens of Baha’is, Christian converts and members of other religious minorities, including for providing education

for Baha'i students who are denied access to higher education.”

Discrimination – Ethnic Minorities

“Iran’s disadvantaged ethnic groups, including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Kurds and Turkmen, continued to report that the state authorities systematically discriminated against them, particularly in employment, housing, access to political office, and the exercise of cultural, civil and political rights. They remained unable to use their own language as a medium of instruction for primary education. Those who called for greater cultural and linguistic rights faced arrest, imprisonment, and in some cases the death penalty.”

“Security forces disproportionately repressed 193 protests by ethnic minorities including Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks and Kurds. Between March and April, the authorities were reported to have carried out many arrests in the Arab-populated Khuzestan province. . . .”

Women’s Rights

“Women remained subject to discrimination under the law, particularly criminal and family law, and in practice. Women and girls also faced new challenges to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The law also risks further entrenching domestic violence as a private “family matter”. . . . Women and girls remained inadequately protected against sexual and other violence, including early and forced marriage. The authorities failed to adopt laws criminalizing these and other abuses, such as marital rape and domestic violence. Compulsory “veiling” (hijab) laws also continued to empower police and paramilitary forces to target women for harassment, violence and imprisonment.”

Death Penalty

“The authorities continued to use the death penalty extensively, and carried out numerous executions, including of juvenile offenders. Some executions were conducted in public. The courts imposed numerous death sentences, often after unfair trials and for offences such as drugs offences that did not meet the threshold of most serious crimes under international law. The majority of those executed during the year were sentenced on drugs charges; others were executed for murder or after being convicted on vague charges such as “enmity against God”.

2. **Annual Report of the UN Secretary-General “Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran”³, February 2016**

This 16 page report is entirely consistent with the Amnesty International report cited above and it provides additional detail and highlights the issues of (a) persecution, arbitrary detention, torture and execution of a variety of “dissident” groups (b) the continuing disregard of women’s rights and (c) mistreatment of religious and ethnic minorities.

The introduction includes the statement

“Since the most recent report of the Secretary-General submitted to the General Assembly (A/69/306), the application of the death penalty, including in relation to political prisoners and juvenile offenders, has continued at a very high rate. Reports of the arbitrary detention and prosecution of journalists, human rights defenders and women rights activists have continued. Individuals have increasingly been targeted for their alleged contacts with United Nations human rights mechanisms, and members of minority groups have continued to face persistent discrimination and persecution. Women’s rights remain a priority concern, particularly underage marriages and the underrepresentation of women in the labour force and in decision-making positions.”

³ <http://shaheedoniran.org/human-rights-at-the-united-nations/un-general-assembly/secretary-general-reports/>

On the issue of minorities the report notes that the Secretary-General *“remains concerned at reports about the situation of religious and ethnic minorities, which continue to endure abuses and discrimination.”* He notes that these groups *“continue to face persecution, including arrest and imprisonment, the denial of economic opportunities, expulsion from educational institutions, deprivation of the right to work, and closure of businesses and the destruction of religious sites, such as cemeteries and prayer centres.”* Furthermore *“individuals seeking greater recognition for their cultural and linguistic rights risk facing harsh penalties, including capital punishment.”*

The first of the final recommendations is very strong:

“The Secretary-General remains deeply troubled by the continuing large number of executions, including of political prisoners and juveniles, and reiterates his call upon the Government to introduce a moratorium on the use of the death penalty and to prohibit the execution of juvenile offenders in all circumstances.”

3. Human rights in Iran are still atrocious⁴

While Iran reopens to the West, repression still prevails at home

The Economist, Middle East and Africa, 24 Mar 2016

This article provides a summary with commentary on the report published by the UN's Human Rights Council in February 2016, which in turn was based on the report of the UN Secretary-General that was presented to the General Assembly, cited above.

The report notes that *“at least 966 executions are said to have been carried out in 2015, one of the highest rates in the world, up from 750 in 2014”* and adds that *“some sources . . . put the figure above 1,000”*. The report *“particularly laments the execution of juveniles; at least 16 have been hanged in the past two years for crimes committed when they were under 18; at least 160 young offenders are on death row”*.

“The report also criticises Iran for inflicting corporal punishment on alleged miscreants, with amputations of limbs, floggings (often in public), stoning and blinding. At least 47 executions were carried out in public, says the UN council, often with children present. The report says that

“no improvement was observed regarding the situation of religious and ethnic minorities.”

“The council’s report also notes that “the death penalty can be imposed for minor drug-related offences, such as possession of only 30 grams of amphetamines”.

4. Iran's human rights situation worsening, says UN special rapporteur⁵, by Hassan Rouhani, Agence France-Presse in Geneva, 17 March 2015

This commentary is important in documenting the disturbing trend of worsening human rights in Iran, noted over a year ago.

⁴ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21695716-while-iran-reopens-west-repression-still-prevails-home-human-rights>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/16/un-rapporteur-human-rights-situation-in-iran-worsening>

5. **Iran's human rights record worsens as talks with West proceed: UN official**⁶
Benjamin Weinthal⁷, FoxNews.com, 16 March 2015

Weinthal gives expert commentary and perspective on the early 2015 report from Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations special rapporteur on Iran.

Quotations:

"Iran has violated the rights of women, Christians and members of other religious groups and ethnic minorities on a massive scale, even as it seeks to negotiate with the West, according to a new UN report that details an explosion of executions, including state-sanctioned killing of juveniles."

"Imprisonment and executions of Christians has continued -- even at an accelerated pace -- since the election of self-proclaimed moderate President Hassan Rouhani, according to Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations special rapporteur on Iran. Nearly 100 Christians are currently imprisoned "due to their Christian faith and activities," Shaheed wrote. Christians who converted from Islam and are active in the underground house-church movement often come in for the most severe prosecution, he said."

"The report is a sober reminder that Iran's government, which exports terrorism and seeks nuclear weapons, is also an egregious human rights violator," U.S. Sen. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., told FoxNews.com. Far from being moderate, the Iranian regime persecutes women, Christians, Baha'is, and other ethnic and religious minorities, and systematically denies its citizen many freedoms that we take for granted."

"Shaheed has aggressively chronicled Iran's abysmal human rights record, even as the U.S. and Western nations negotiate with Tehran over its nuclear weapons program."

"With every report that Dr. Shaheed releases, it becomes more and more evident how systematic human rights violations are structured under the Iranian dictatorship," said Saba Farzan, executive director of Foreign Policy Circle, a strategy think tank in Berlin."

6. **Surge in Executions and Human Rights Violations in Iran: Evidence of Rouhani's 'Moderate' Rule?**⁸ by Majid Rafizadeh, President of the International American Council, 4 April 2014

Quotations

"Nevertheless, every report independently conducted by human rights watch groups; the United Nations, Amnesty International as well as the official statistical numbers revealed by the Iranian government, indicate not only that Rouhani has not delivered on his promises (not even keeping the status of human rights similar to that of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's era), but that the condition of human rights has significantly worsened in Iran."

Recent reports by Amnesty International and UN watch groups have blasted Iran for the increase in persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, the cracking down on oppositional political figures, the mistreatment of political prisoners, arbitrary detention and unfair trials."

7. **Amnesty International assessment of the implementation by states of previous UPR recommendations: 20th Session of the UPR Working Group, 27 October – 7 November 2014**⁹

IRAN

Quotations

"Amnesty International regrets Iran's rejection of recommendations to . . . eradicate torture

⁶ <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/03/16/iran-human-rights-record-worsens-even-as-talks-with-west-proceed-un-official/>

⁷ Benjamin Weinthal reports on human rights in the Middle East and is a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/majid-rafizadeh/surge-in-executions-and-h_b_5088955.html

⁹ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/IOR41/026/2014/en/6d0f19b7-8cff-41b6-ab89-52fd09be272a/ior410262014en.pdf>

of detainees, and to amend laws that are used to arbitrarily restrict rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.”

“Amnesty International also regrets Iran’s failure to date to implement many of the recommendations that it had accepted, including . . . to respect religious freedom, to ensure that all due process guarantees in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are respected in law and in practice, to enhance freedom of expression, association, and assembly, and the right to express dissent, including for journalists, human rights defenders, and the media, to take measures to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment . . . “