



“THEY ARE SHOOTING BRAZENLY”

IRAN’S MILITARIZED RESPONSE TO MAY 2022 PROTESTS

RESEARCH
BRIEFING

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Cover picture is an image capture from a video taken during the protests in Abadan on 27 May 2022 showing a security official wielding a shotgun. Multiple security forces in body armour and helmets are seen standing behind the security official and at least two of them appear to hold pepper-ball guns. © Private

The title of this research briefing, “They are shooting brazenly”, is a quote by a member of the public and was taken from a video from Abadan that circulated on 29 May 2022, which shows a member of the security forces firing a shotgun.

This research briefing documents how Iranian security forces used unlawful force, including live ammunition, birdshot, teargas and watercannon, to crush largely peaceful protests that erupted in the southwest of Iran in May 2022. The briefing reiterates the need for the UN Human Rights Council to establish an independent investigative and accountability mechanism to collect, consolidate, preserve, and analyze evidence of the most serious crimes under international law committed in Iran, including in the context of protests, to enable future prosecutions.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the beginning of May 2022, widespread protests over rising food prices erupted in the Khuzestan province and then spread to Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, both in southwestern Iran. Further widespread protests took place between 23 and 31 May 2022 in the city of Abadan, Khuzestan province, following the deadly collapse of an unfinished building. Iran's security forces resorted to unlawful force to ruthlessly crush these protests against the backdrop of localized internet shutdowns and mobile network disruptions by the authorities to conceal their crimes and limit peoples' access to information and ability to communicate with each other and the outside world. The campaign of violent repression involving the use of live ammunition, birdshot, tear gas and water cannon left at least four people dead and more injured.

The multiple rounds of protests in Iran during May 2022 reflect deepening outrage among people in the country about state corruption, high inflation, high levels of unemployment, low or unpaid wages, food insecurity and loss of livelihood, as well as political repression and systemic impunity over protest killings and other crimes under international law. Consistent with well-documented patterns of the Iranian authorities' response to people expressing their legitimate grievances, security forces swiftly and brutally crushed the demonstrations, while labelling the protesters "rioters" or "counterrevolutionaries".

To investigate the authorities' unlawful use of force, Amnesty International reviewed and analysed extensive video footage, official statements and state media reports, and spoke to human rights defenders and journalists in contact with affected individuals and communities.

Amnesty International found that, during the protests over rising food prices in May 2022, security forces used force and firearms without any regard for the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality. Audiovisual evidence examined by the organization indicates that security forces fired weapons loaded with live ammunition and birdshot on multiple occasions. In at least one of these occasions, Amnesty International was able to confirm the involvement of the special forces (*yegan-e vijeh*) of the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (known by its Persian acronym *Faraja*) in firing live ammunition. Security forces also misused tear gas and water cannons, and beat protesters.. In all the video footage reviewed by Amnesty International, protesters posed no imminent threat of death or serious injury to security forces or others, which is the threshold required for the use of lethal force under international law and standards. While a minority of protesters engaged in stone-throwing and acts of arson and vandalism, security forces responded with unnecessary or excessive force, preventing the vast majority of protesters who remained peaceful from exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. Unnecessary or excessive use of force is unlawful under international law.

Amnesty International was able to verify the deaths of at least three people in connection with the protests of 12-17 May 2022 in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. A member of parliament also reported on 14 May 2022 the death of another person in connection with the protests over rising food prices in Khuzestan province.

Other protesters and bystanders, including children, sustained painful injuries amounting to torture due to security forces unlawfully firing birdshot, according to video footage circulated on social media and reviewed by the organization. Birdshot (and other ammunition that contains multiple projectiles) is inherently indiscriminate and designed to cause a level of widespread harm and injury that is, in all circumstances, unnecessary and excessive for the achievement of legitimate objectives such as containing violence by certain individuals and ensuring the security of others and their use violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment.

The organization's research also shows that, between 23 and 31 May 2022, in separate peaceful protests that took place in the city of Abadan against the collapse of an unfinished building that killed at least 43 people, security forces unleashed unlawful force on protesters and bystanders. Audiovisual evidence reviewed by Amnesty International indicates that security forces fired shotguns at peaceful mourners and protesters on multiple occasions. In at least one video analysed by Amnesty

International, the sounds of single shots heard are likely from discharging live ammunition, while in three other videos the type of ammunition fired is not clear. This use of force by Iran's security forces was wholly unlawful as the protests of 23-31 May 2022 in Abadan were peaceful in nature and the use of force by security forces was aimed at dispersing, intimidating and punishing peaceful mourners and protesters, none of which are legitimate law enforcement objectives.

In handling both sets of protests, the Iranian authorities adopted a militarized response, deploying heavily armed forces. This contravenes international law and standards under which the primary responsibility of law enforcement officials in the handling of public assemblies is to facilitate and protect the exercise of the right to freedom of peaceful assembly. According to international law and standards, even if some protesters engage in violent actions, law enforcement officials must ensure that those who remain peaceful can continue protesting without undue interference and intimidation from security forces.

During both sets of protests in May 2022, the Iranian authorities also swiftly imposed localized internet shutdowns and disrupted mobile networks, deliberately blocking millions of people from being able to communicate freely with the outside world and hiding the nature and scale of violations being committed by security forces.

Consistent with long-standing patterns of systemic impunity, the Iranian authorities have refused to conduct any effective, independent, transparent and thorough investigations into evidence indicating that, during the protests of May 2022, security forces unlawfully fired live ammunition and birdshot at crowds of people, misused tear gas and water cannons, and beat protesters. Nor have they taken any steps to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for killing and injuring protesters and bystanders.

The crisis of systemic impunity in Iran has facilitated the continuous cycle of protest bloodshed by the Iranian authorities in recent years and requires a robust response by the international community to adopt concrete measures ensuring that those reasonably suspected of crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations against protesters and bystanders do not evade justice.

Amnesty International renews its calls on the Iranian authorities to:

- immediately cease the use of lethal force during protests when protesters pose no imminent threat of life or serious injury to security forces or others;
- immediately cease the unlawful use of birdshot ammunition, which violate the absolute prohibition on torture or other ill-treatment given the widespread harm to physical integrity and the mental trauma that this conduct causes to protesters and bystanders and the fact that they are deployed for the purposes of crushing protests and deterring protesters and the wider public from exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression as well as inflicting painful injuries and suffering on protesters to intimidate and punish them;
- ensure that prompt, thorough, independent and impartial criminal investigations are conducted into the unlawful use of force used in the May 2022 protests, including an investigation into the causes and circumstances of the reported deaths and injuries, and ensure that those suspected of criminal responsibility are prosecuted in proceedings that conform to international fair trial standards and do not involve seeking or imposing the death penalty;
- repeal or amend, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law, current legislation, particularly the Islamic Penal Code, which criminalises peaceful assembly, and the Law on the Use of Firearms by Armed Forces in Necessary Incidents, which regulates the use of firearms in the context of assemblies deemed "illegal" and allows security forces to use firearms without regard to the high threshold imposed by international law and standards on their use to protect against an imminent threat of death or serious injury.

Given the continuous cycle of protest bloodshed in Iran, which is fuelled by a crisis of systemic impunity, Amnesty International renews its call on the UN Human Rights Council to:

- urgently establish an independent international mechanism to collect, consolidate, preserve, and analyse evidence of the most serious crimes under international law committed in Iran, that meets general standards of admissibility in criminal proceedings, to facilitate future fair and independent criminal proceedings.

Amnesty International also urges the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to:

- stress the need for accountability measures on Iran at the international level and support calls for the establishment of the abovementioned investigative and accountability mechanism.

2. METHODOLOGY

In the context of its investigations into the unlawful use of force by Iranian security forces during the protests of May 2022, Amnesty International conducted an extensive search for video footage and was able to collate over 80 videos reported to have been filmed during the protests and uploaded to social media platforms since 12 May 2022. Twenty-three videos were reviewed by Amnesty International's Crisis Evidence Lab and used in the analysis provided in this briefing. Of these videos, 13 related to the protests that took place over rising food prices in various locations across Iran between 12 and 17 May 2022, and 10 related to the protests that took place over the deadly collapse of a building in Abadan, Khuzestan province, between 23 and 31 May 2022. A further three videos which were in relation to the protests over rising food prices and published on 15 and 16 May 2022 by independent Persian-language news outlets, namely two by BBC Persian and one by Radio Farda, were also used in the analysis for this briefing.

Of the 16 videos related to the food protests of 12-17 May 2022 that Amnesty International used in the analysis provided in this briefing, most (14) were from various cities in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province including Babaheydar, Chelicheh, Hafshejan, Farsan, Golpayegan, Jonaqan, Shahrekord and Soreshjan. The remaining two videos were from the towns of Andimeshk and Izeh in Khuzestan province. As such, Amnesty International focused its investigation on the use of force by Iran's security forces during the protests of 12-17 May 2022 on the provinces of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari and Khuzestan, where all the reported deaths during the protests of 12-17 May 2022 occurred.

The video verification methodology included conducting a reverse image search to establish when the content first appeared online and ascertain that the content related to the events in question. In some cases, Amnesty International's researchers and the Crisis Evidence Lab were also able to verify the location where the video was captured. Amnesty International's weapons expert analyzed the videos reviewed to identify the types of weapons and munitions used.

To investigate the deaths reported during the protests of 12-17 May 2022 in the provinces Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari and Khuzestan, Amnesty International obtained information from two journalists and one human rights defender outside Iran who had, in turn, spoken to informed sources including relatives and residents of affected areas inside Iran. Amnesty International also conducted internet searches to locate independent and state media articles and social media posts about the deceased and compared this information with the information received directly from the aforementioned sources. Amnesty International obtained funeral posters for two of the deceased persons and a picture of the gravestone of a third deceased person.

Amnesty International also reviewed statements made by officials and members of parliament.

On 7 June 2022, Amnesty International issued a public call on its Persian-language social media platforms inviting people with information on the May 2022 protests to contact the organization on a dedicated number on the mobile messaging app, WhatsApp. Despite these and other outreach efforts, the organization was unable to directly access primary sources. The organization believes that these research limitations are, to a great extent, related to well-founded fears of reprisals against family members and the Iranian authorities' systematic repression of civil society and independent media in Iran. The challenges were further exacerbated by the fact that the events concerned took place in relatively remote and/or poor areas where those affected may lack the means to communicate via instant messaging applications.

Amnesty International is also concerned that deliberate internet shutdowns imposed by the Iranian authorities during the May 2022 protests resulted in limited video footage being shared with the outside world. The organization's previous research into protests in Iran has shown that evidence of crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations is lost during internet shutdowns.¹ Witnesses from previous protests told the organization they had deleted such evidence from their mobile phones, fearing that security forces would detain and prosecute them if they found such content on their mobile devices.

Security forces also arrested scores of protesters and used the unrest opportunistically to increase their crackdown on civil society; however, these violations are outside the scope of this research briefing, which focuses on the use of force against protesters.

Amnesty International shared its findings and recommendations with the Iranian authorities on 25 July 2022 and sought comments and clarifications, but, consistent with past practice, no response was received in time for publication.

3. CYCLES OF PROTEST BLOODSHED

The Iranian authorities' violent repression of protests in May 2022 is part of a wider pattern of unlawful force used against protesters and reflects the country's long-standing crisis of systemic impunity where crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings committed by security forces in the context of protest crackdowns, have gone uninvestigated and unpunished.

During the nationwide protests of December 2017 and January 2018, dozens of protesters, including children, were killed by Iran's security forces across the country. On 14 January 2018, the spokesperson for the judiciary admitted that 25 individuals had been killed during the protests, but Amnesty International believes that the real number may be higher given the authorities' historic pattern of denying and distorting the truth about protest killings.²

The prevailing impunity afforded to the security forces and the muted response of the international community following the December 2017 and January 2018 protests emboldened the Iranian authorities to escalate their unlawful use of lethal force in the subsequent mass protests of November 2019, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people, including children, in less than five days.³

Since the November 2019 protests, the authorities have continued to kill and injure protesters and bystanders during their crackdown of protests with complete impunity.

¹ Amnesty International, *A Web of Impunity: The killings Iran's internet shutdown hid*, November 2020, [iran-shutdown.amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/3546/2021/en)

² Amnesty International, "Iran: International action needed to break authorities' cycle of protest bloodshed" (Index: MDE 13/3546/2021), 20 January 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/3546/2021/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/3546/2021/en); Amnesty International, "Iran: Stop increasingly ruthless crackdown and investigate deaths of protesters", 4 January 2018, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/01/iran-stop-increasingly-ruthless-crackdown-and-investigate-deaths-of-protesters](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/01/iran-stop-increasingly-ruthless-crackdown-and-investigate-deaths-of-protesters)

³ Amnesty International, "Iran: Details of 321 deaths in crackdown on November 2019 protests" (Index: MDE 13/2308/2020), 29 July 2022, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2308/2020/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2308/2020/en). This document was originally published on 20 May 2020 and was subsequently updated with new information on 16 November 2021 and, more recently, on 29 July 2022. See also Amnesty International, *'They shot our children': Killings of minors in Iran's November 2019 protests* (Index: MDE 13/1894/2020), 4 March 2020, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1894/2020/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1894/2020/en); Amnesty International, *A Web of Impunity: The killings Iran's internet shutdown hid*, November 2020, [iran-shutdown.amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org)

In January 2020, security forces used unlawful force against peaceful protesters who had gathered across Iran following the authorities' admission that they had shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane on 8 January 2020. During protests that took place in Tehran on 11 and 12 January 2020, security forces fired pointed pellets from airguns at peaceful protesters, causing bleeding and painful injuries. They also used rubber bullets and pepper spray to disperse protesters, kicked and punched them, and beat them with batons. Security forces also fired tear gas into the entrance hall of a crowded metro station in Tehran to stop people leaving the station from joining the protest and causing injuries to people from inhaling tear gas in a confined space.⁴

In July 2021, security forces deployed unlawful force, including through firing deadly automatic weapons, shotguns loaded with birdshot and other inherently indiscriminate ammunition and tear gas, to crush mostly peaceful protests that took place in Khuzestan over severe water shortages in the province. Security forces killed at least 11 protesters and bystanders, including a teenage boy, and injured scores of others.⁵

In August 2021, security forces in the city of Naqadeh, Western Azerbaijan province, resorted to unlawful use of force, including birdshot and tear gas, against peaceful protesters from Iran's Kurdish minority, leaving dozens of people injured. One man was fatally shot in the pelvis with a pistol by a plain-clothes individual walking behind a group of riot police who were chasing protesters, suggesting that the person was operating alongside, or at least with the acquiescence of, security forces.⁶

In November 2021, security forces in Esfahan, Esfahan province, violently quashed peaceful protests held by thousands of people including farmers against water shortages and the drying up of the famous Zayandeh Rood River that runs through the city. Security forces unlawfully fired weapons, including tear gas and birdshot, at protesters who had gathered in the dry riverbed to express their grievances. Videos of the violent crackdown shared on social media showed protesters with birdshot injuries all over their bodies, including their eyes. According to information obtained by Amnesty International, dozens of people, including children, were blinded or sustained other serious eye injuries.⁷

Instead of bringing the perpetrators of these serious human rights violations to justice, the authorities have continued their longstanding pattern of state cover-up and denial, praising security forces for ending unrest swiftly and propagating false narratives and propaganda videos to deny or distort the truth about the nature and scale of crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations committed by security forces against protesters and bystanders.⁸ The authorities also continue to dismiss complaints by victims' families and subject the relatives of those killed during successive protests to intimidation, harassment, interrogations, arbitrary arrest and detention, unjust prosecutions, and lengthy prison sentences to prevent them from speaking out and punish them for seeking truth and justice.⁹

4. PROTESTS OVER RISING FOOD PRICES

At the beginning of May 2022, the Iranian authorities eliminated an official subsidized exchange rate for the import of wheat and other essential foods and considerably increased the price of bread and other food items. The sudden and significant increase in the price of basic foods triggered thousands

⁴ Amnesty International, "Iran: Scores injured as security forces use unlawful force to crush protests", 15 January 2020, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iran-scores-injured-as-security-forces-use-unlawful-force-to-crush-protests](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iran-scores-injured-as-security-forces-use-unlawful-force-to-crush-protests)

⁵ Amnesty International, "Iran: Security forces use live ammunition and birdshot to crush Khuzestan protests", 23 July 2021, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/iran-security-forces-use-live-ammunition-and-birdshot-to-crush-khuzestan-protests-2](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/07/iran-security-forces-use-live-ammunition-and-birdshot-to-crush-khuzestan-protests-2)

⁶ Amnesty International, "Iran: Security forces use ruthless force, mass arrests and torture to crush peaceful protests", 11 August 2021, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/iran-security-forces-use-ruthless-force-mass-arrests-and-torture-to-crush-peaceful-protests](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/iran-security-forces-use-ruthless-force-mass-arrests-and-torture-to-crush-peaceful-protests)

⁷ Amnesty International, *Iran: Human rights in Iran: Review of 2021/2022*, (Index: MDE 13/5366/2022), 29 March 2022, [amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran](https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran)

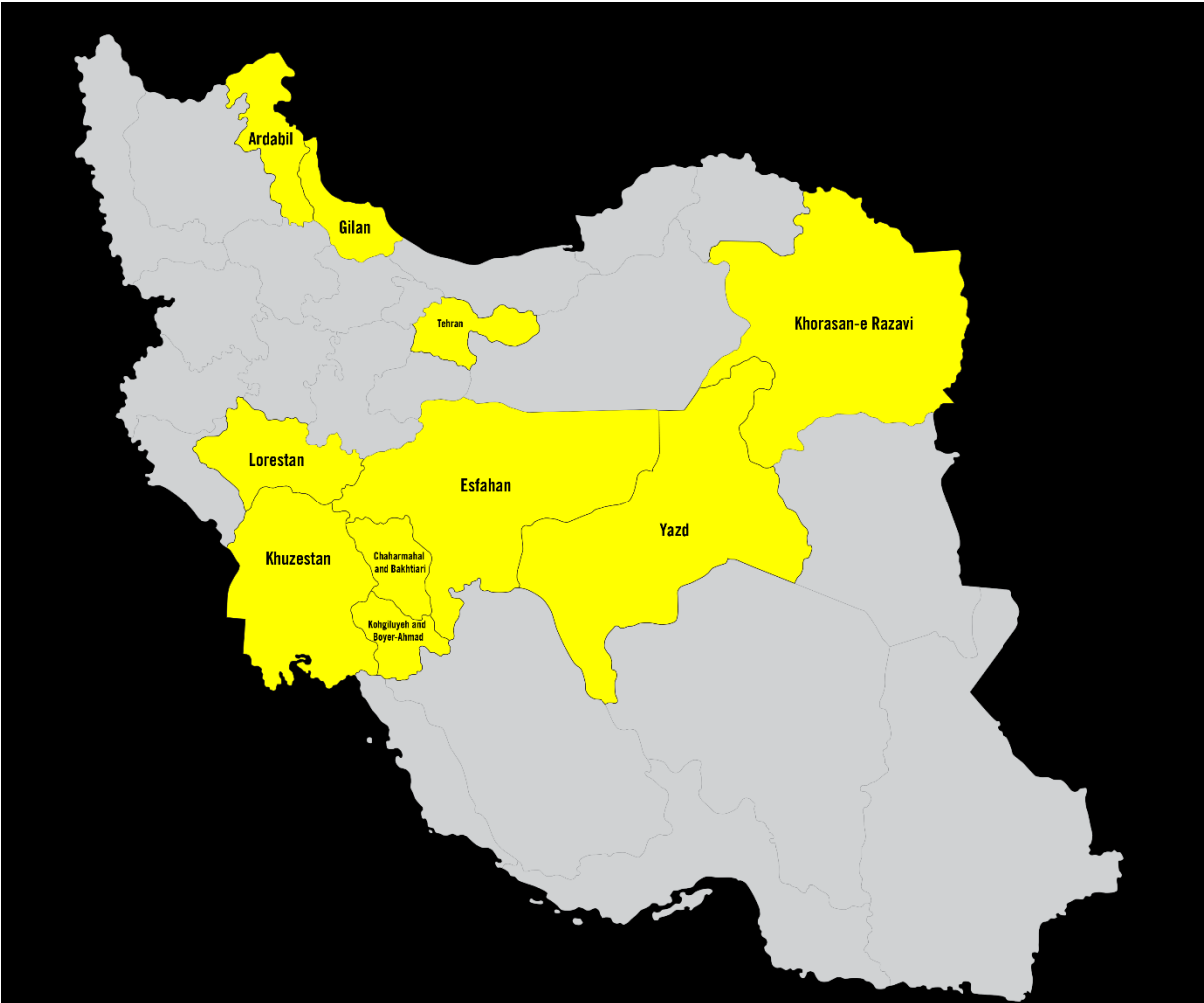
⁸ Amnesty International, *Trampling Humanity – Mass arrests, disappearances and torture since Iran's 2019 November protests* (Index: MDE 13/2891/2020), 2 September 2020, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2891/2020/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/2891/2020/en)

⁹ Amnesty International, "Iran: Authorities violating absolute prohibition of torture through harassment of witnesses involved in Iran Atrocities Tribunal" (Index: MDE 13/5441/2022), 7 April 2022, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/5441/2022/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/5441/2022/en); Amnesty International, *Iran: Human rights in Iran: Review of 2021/2022*, (Index: MDE 13/5366/2022), 29 March 2022, [amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran](https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran)

of people already beleaguered by widespread poverty to take to the streets in various parts of the country.

From around 5 May 2022 onwards, sporadic protests over rising food prices took place in various cities across Khuzestan province, which has a significant population from the Ahwazi Arab ethnic minority, including Ahvaz, Behbahan, Hamidiyeh, Izeh, Mahshahr and Susangerd. Almost as soon as the protests began, the authorities swiftly and deliberately imposed a near total internet shutdown in some affected cities and severely slowed down mobile and landline internet in others. Over the following days, the protests grew larger and expanded to other cities in Khuzestan province including Dezful and Andimeshk. Meanwhile, the authorities continued to severely disrupt or completely cut off mobile internet in areas affected by protests, which is the main means of access to the internet for most people in Khuzestan province.

From around 12 May 2022 onwards, the protests over rising food prices spread to other parts of the country. Among the locations most affected were various towns in the southwestern province of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, including Babaheydar, Chelicheh, Hafshejan, Farsan, Jonaqan, Shahrekord and Soreshjan. Other provinces which witnessed protests included Ardabil, Esfahan, Gilan, Khorasan-e Razavi, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Lorestan, Tehran and Yazd.¹⁰



Map showing some of the provinces in Iran which witnessed protests during May 2022. These included Ardabil, Esfahan, Gilan, Khorasan-e Razavi, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Lorestan, Tehran and Yazd © Amnesty International

¹⁰ Human Rights Activist News Agency, «صدها بازداشتی و دهها کشته و زخمی»، 20 May 2022, hira-news.org/periodical/a-117

Although the protests were initially triggered by rising food prices, across the country the protests quickly became a platform for speaking out against political repression as well. People chanted slogans calling for the downfall of the Islamic Republic system and some tore down or burned banners depicting the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the president, Ebrahim Raisi.

According to independent Persian-language media outlets from outside Iran, the Supreme National Security Council and the Ministry of Intelligence quickly instructed state media outlets to suppress reporting of the protests.¹¹ During and following the protests, authorities, state media and some members of parliament downplayed the scale of the protests and, in what appeared to be a coordinated strategy to undermine the legitimate grievances of protesters, authorities pushed the narrative that the protests had been orchestrated by “counter-revolutionary” movements.¹²

On 13 May 2022, in response to the protests, Iran’s Interior Minister, Ahmad Vahidi, said “The public did not respond to calls [for protests and] did not support the group of shameless monarchists and hypocrites (*monafeqin*)”, a pejorative epithet used by the Iranian authorities since the 1980s for members and supporters of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), an opposition group based outside Iran that advocates the overthrow of the Islamic Republic system. Ahmad Vahidi claimed that “only several protests involving a few dozen people” had taken place across the country, which he said were swiftly shut down by law enforcement commanders.¹³



Map of the cities of Abadan, Andimeshk and Dezful in Khuzestan province and the cities of Babaheydar, Chelicheh, Farsan, Hafshejan, Jonaqan, Shahrekord and Soreshjan in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, which were the site of mass protests in May 2022 © Amnesty International

4.1 UNLAWFUL USE OF FORCE IN CHAHARMAHAL AND BAKHTIARI PROVINCE

As the protests over rising food prices spread to Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province from around 12 May 2022, the authorities responded by deploying significant numbers of heavily armed security forces in the streets of various towns, including Babaheydar, Chelicheh, Hafshejan, Farsan, Jonaqan, Shahrekord and Soreshjan, to create a climate of fear and intimidation and suppress protests.

¹¹ BBC Persian, «واکنش ایران به حمایت آمریکا از معترضان: نوزدگی بیش از حد است», 16 May 2022, [bbc.com/persian/iran-61465355](https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-61465355)

¹² Khabar Online, «وزیر کشور: مردم ما به فراخوان‌های دشمنان پاسخ ندادند / فقط چند جا چند نفر تا چند ده نفر تجمع کردند», 14 May 2022, khabaronline.ir/news/1630859

¹³ Khabar Online, «وزیر کشور: مردم ما به فراخوان‌های دشمنان پاسخ ندادند / فقط چند جا چند نفر تا چند ده نفر تجمع کردند», 14 May 2022, khabaronline.ir/news/1630859

Amnesty International found that during the protests that took place in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province between 12 and 17 May, security forces used force and firearms against protesters and bystanders without any regard for the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality (see section 7 “International standards on use of force and firearms”).

At least three people - Sa’adat Hadipour, Behrouz Eslami and Jamshid Mokhtari – were killed in the province in the context of protests that took place in the towns of Hafshejan, Babaheydar and Jonaqan, respectively, but Amnesty International has been unable to establish the exact circumstances of their deaths. Others, including children, sustained serious injuries resulting from birdshot.

Amnesty International reviewed and analysed 14 videos connected to the violent crackdown of the food protests in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. The footage shows security forces dressed in anti-riot gear and with shields, batons, rifles, shotguns and other weapons stationed at key intersections, chasing running protesters and patrolling the streets, in some cases on motorcycles. The audio-visual evidence reviewed by the organization strongly indicates that, between 12 and 17 May 2022, security forces fired live ammunition during the protests on multiple occasions. Evidence reviewed by the organization also indicates that security forces unlawfully fired birdshot, misused water cannon, and inflicted beatings amounting to torture or other ill-treatment.

In all video clips reviewed by Amnesty International, protesters posed no imminent threat of death or serious injury that would meet the threshold for the use of lethal force under international law and standards. Extensive video evidence indicates that protesters were mostly peaceful, though, in some places, some protesters put up roadblocks with burning tyres, engaged in stone-throwing and arson and damaged state vehicles or public property. According to state media reports and footage which circulated online, during the protests in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province, the headquarters of Basij, a paramilitary volunteer militia operating under the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and/or state-run religious seminaries in several cities, including Babaheydar, Hafshejan, Farsan, Jonaqan and Shahrekord, were targeted by stone throwing and acts of arson and/or vandalism.¹⁴ Amnesty International stresses that according to international law and standards governing the use of force and firearms, damage to public property does not justify a lethal response to protesters who are not posing an imminent threat of death or serious injury to members of security forces or others.

The organization also stresses that violence by a few individuals must not be met by an unnecessary and excessive response from security forces which treats the entire assembly as violent and disregards the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality governing the use of force. Amnesty International’s research shows that this is what happened during the protests of 12-17 May 2022 in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, where security forces deployed excessive and unnecessary force, inflicting painful injuries amounting to torture and other ill-treatment on protesters and bystanders, and preventing those who remained peaceful from exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Unnecessary or excessive use of force is unlawful under international law.

4.1.1 EVIDENCE OF LIVE AMMUNITION AND DOCUMENTED DEATHS

In two videos¹⁵ related to protests in the city of Babaheydar and one further video¹⁶ related to the protests in the city of Hafshejan, all of which were published online on 14 May 2022, the sound of weapons being repeatedly fired can be heard. Based on analysis of these videos by Amnesty International’s weapons expert, it is likely that the shots heard are from weapons firing live ammunition. While the identities of the shooters cannot be confirmed, the person recording one of the videos from Babaheydar can be heard saying that there is an “attack” on the headquarters of the Basij, in Babaheydar and that the security forces are firing weapons. In the video, several protesters

¹⁴ Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, «لژوم هوشیاری مردم در مقابل فضا سازی رسانه های معاند», 17 May 2022, iribnews.ir/fa/news/3447015; Hawzah News, «تصاویری از آتش زدن دفتر بسیج در جوققان چهارمحال و بختیاری», 13 May 2022, ir.voanews.com/a/iran-protest-economy-junqan/6570152; VOA, «اراذل و اوباشی که در هفتجان به جان مردم افتادند», 17 May 2022, bit.ly/3zsHRTx; VOA, «حمله چند معترض با کوکتل مولوتف به ساختمان حوزه علمیه شهرکرد در اعتراض به وضعیت معیشتی و سرکوب», 17 May 2022, ir.voanews.com/a/iran-protest-economy-/6576847.html; Iran International, Twitter post post, 14 May 2022, [Twitter post, 14 May 2022, https://twitter.com/iranintl/status/1525581877570052098](https://twitter.com/iranintl/status/1525581877570052098); «معترضان ضدحکومتی به پایگاه بسیج در باباییندر شهر فارسان حمله کردند و نیروهای امنیتی به سمت آنها شلیک کردند»

¹⁵ Twitter post, 14 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3QeDHEp>; Twitter post, 14 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oMTley>

¹⁶ Twitter post, 14 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3SrYkim>

appear to throw stones towards the building of the Basij headquarters, as shots are heard in the video, after which the protesters are seen fleeing away in the opposite direction. International law and standards do not permit the use of lethal force in response to such acts of stone-throwing that did not present a risk to the life of any person.

Amnesty International knows of one victim, Behrouz Eslami, who was killed in Babaheydar on 14 May 2022.

The Iranian authorities and state media reports also confirmed that an individual named Sa'adat Hadipour was killed in Hafshejan on 14 May 2022.¹⁷

BEHROUZ ESLAMI



Funeral poster of Behrouz Eslami killed in Babaheydar on 14 May 2022 ©Private

Behrouz Eslami was killed in Babaheydar on 14 May 2022. Amnesty International obtained the funeral poster of Behrouz Eslami, which corroborated his death. The organization was also able to identify the Instagram accounts of three of his relatives, who wrote several posts following his death, referring to him as a “martyr” from Babaheydar who “sacrificed his life” for the cause of “freedom”. Such descriptions have been frequently used in Iran by the families of those killed by security forces during protests.

¹⁷ Aftab News, «واکنش نماینده شهر کرد به اعتراضات مردم: سعادت هادیپور، بسیجی بود/ می‌خواستند کشته‌سازی کنند», 15 May 2022, aftabnews.ir/fa/news/771581

SA'ADAT HADIPOUR



Sa'adat Hadipour killed in Hafsehjan on 14 May 2022 ©Private

Sa'adat Hadipour was killed in Hafsehjan on 14 May 2022. During a parliamentary session on 15 May 2022, Ahmad Rastineh, the member of parliament for Shahrekord, claimed that Sa'adat Hadipour was a member of the Basij and that he was killed during an attack on the headquarters of the Basij in Hafshejan, in what he referred to as “the culmination of a planned, large-scale effort by the hypocrite, seditious and counterrevolutionary current to coopt popular protests...to produce a distance between the public and the revolution by creating fear and terror and...to lead the protests towards violence.”¹⁸

State media outlets meanwhile reported on 15 May 2022 that “some hooligans acting on the orders of the enemies of Iranian people” fatally shot Sa'adat Hadipour in the back of his head, while he was on his way home.¹⁹

The state media reports included a video clip which featured Sa'adat Hadipour's visibly distressed father and uncle stating that he was a member of the Basij and killed while he was on his way home. The relatives did not say that he was killed by protesters. Given the Iranian authorities' well-documented patterns of intimidating relatives of individuals killed during protests and producing and broadcasting coerced statements from them to distort the reality of human rights violations perpetrated by security forces, Amnesty International has serious concerns that the family members of Sa'adat Hadipour were forced to make their statements under conditions of duress.²⁰

In three²¹ other videos analyzed by Amnesty International, which circulated online between 15 and 17 May 2022 and covered the towns of Chelicheh, Jonaqan and Shahrekord, single shots and loud bangs are audible, which could be from firing live ammunition, birdshot, tear gas launchers, or other types of ammunition. In the video from Chelicheh, which circulated online on 15 May 2022 and was analyzed by the organization's Crisis Evidence Lab, the sound of multiple shots being fired is heard while protesters run away from significant numbers of security forces in riot gear charging towards them. At least one member of the security forces is seen raising a weapon and aiming it in the direction in which the protesters run, out of view of the camera, at around chest or head level. Amnesty International is unable to identify the exact weapon used.²² In the video from Shahrekord, published by BBC Persian on 16 May 2022, repeated loud bangs are heard as protesters scream and run away.²³ In the video from Jonaqan, which circulated on 17 May 2022, a significant number of security forces wearing anti-riot gear are seen walking in the street, while the sound of a loud bang is heard.²⁴

Although the identities of the shooters are not clear in two of the abovementioned videos from Jonaqan and Shahrekord, in at least three other videos from the protests in Chaharmahal and

¹⁸ Aftab News, «واکنش نماینده شهرکرد به اعتراضات مردم: سعادت هادیپور، بسیجی بود/ می‌خواستند کشته‌سازی کنند», 15 May 2022, aftabnews.ir/fa/news/771581

¹⁹ Young Journalists Club, «فرزندم بسیجی بود و افتخار می‌کنم که خودم بسیجی ام+فیلم», 15 May 2022, yjc.news/fa/news/8136334

²⁰ Amnesty International, 'They shot our children': Killings of minors in Iran's November 2019 protests, (Index: MDE 13/1894/2020), 4 March 2020, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1894/2020/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1894/2020/en)

²¹ Twitter post, 15 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Seew6H>; Twitter post, 17 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oGGeeO>; BBC, 16 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3JkmeYG>

²² Twitter post, 15 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Seew6H>

²³ BBC, 16 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3JkmeYG>

²⁴ Twitter post, 17 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oGGeeO>

Bakhtiari province, those filming can be heard identifying the shooters as the security forces.²⁵ In two of the videos, namely Andimeshk and Farsan, both of which circulated online on 13 May 2022, the persons filming are heard explicitly stating that security forces are firing towards protesters.²⁶ In the third video, from Babaheydar, shared online on 14 May 2022, the person filming says that the security forces are shooting.²⁷ Given this information, coupled with the existence of video footage showing extensive deployment of armed security forces across the streets and the absence of any evidence indicating protesters as being in possession of firearms, there is no reason to doubt that, consistent with long-standing patterns in the country, those firing weapons during the protests belonged to Iran's security forces.

Amnesty International knows of one victim, Jamshid Mokhtari, who was killed during the protests in Jonaqan on 17 May 2022.

JAMSHID MOKHTARI



Gravestone of Jamshid Mokhtari, killed in Jonaqan on 17 May 2022 ©Private

Jamshid Mokhtari was killed in Jonaqan on 17 May 2022. Amnesty International was able to identify his Instagram account, which now appears to be managed by a member of his family. The account includes a post, dated 20 May 2022, about his death, which states “Dear dad, for what crime were you killed?”²⁸ The account has also published a picture of the gravestone of Jamshid Mokhtari, which includes his picture and confirms that he died on 17 May 2022 at the age of 38.

A human rights defender outside Iran shared with Amnesty International a screenshot of his written conversation with a relative of Jamshid Mokhtari on 18 May 2022, who reported that security and intelligence officials came to Jamshid Mokhtari's family home on the morning of 18 May 2022 and took away his body for several hours, in an apparent effort to intimidate his family.

Amnesty International also reviewed a video shared online on 17 May 2022, in which a man's voice is heard saying, “Today is 17 May 2022. Special forces [of the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran] (*yegan-e vijeh*) have descended onto the town of Jonaqan and a young man named Jamshid Mokhtari was killed.” The video, which circulated online on 17 May 2022, shows significant numbers of security forces walking in a street while dressed in anti-riot gear and holding shields.²⁹

In one other video, which, according to the person filming, was recorded on 13 May 2022, during the protests in the city of Farsan, three uniformed police officials from the Law Enforcement Command of

²⁵ Twitter post, 13 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/300ANFd>; Twitter post post, 14 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3QeDHEp>; Twitter post post, 13 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3bnjuNS>

²⁶ Twitter post post, 13 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/300ANFd>; Twitter post, 13 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3bnjuNS>

²⁷ Twitter post, 14 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3QeDHEp>

²⁸ Jamshid_Mokhtari, Instagram post, 20 May 2022, [instagram.com/tv/CdxQlqgAQle](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CdxQlqgAQle)

²⁹ Twitter post, 17 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oGGeEO>

the Islamic Republic of Iran (known by its Persian acronym *Faraja*)³⁰ are seen firing weapons towards targets who are out of the view of the camera.³¹ According to analysis by Amnesty International’s weapons expert, based upon the magazine and foldable stock, the weapons that the security forces are seen using in this video are rifles firing live ammunition. The person recording the video states in Persian that security forces have used tear gas and fired live ammunition.

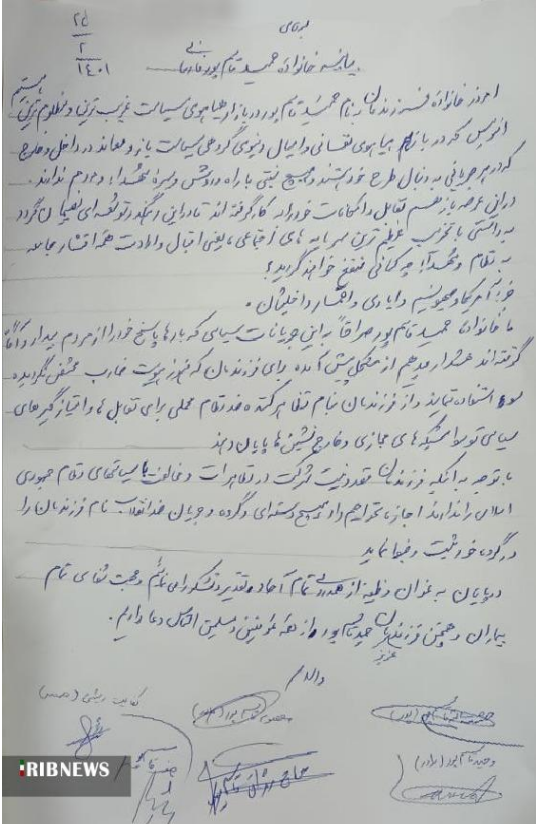
Amnesty International knows of one victim, Hamid Ghasempour, who was critically injured during the protests in Farsan on 13 May 2022, and, according to an uncorroborated report received by the organization, he died several hours or days after he was taken to a hospital. On 17 May 2022, state media outlets published the picture of a handwritten statement, dated 15 May 2022, which was signed by Hamid Ghasempour’s father, mother, wife and brother, and indicated that he was injured during the protests, but was alive.³² However, a local resident reported to a journalist outside Iran on 15 May 2022 that Hamid Ghasempour had died around 24 hours after he fell into a coma after sustaining a head injury, resulting from the use of gunshot. Amnesty International was provided with a screenshot of the journalist’s written conversation with the local resident but was unable to obtain additional testimony or documentary evidence to corroborate the report of Hamid Ghasempour’s death.

An extract of the statement attributed to Hamid Ghasempour’s family reads as follows: “We, the family of Hamid Ghasempour, explicitly warn... against the exploitation of the problem that has befallen our child, [noting] that the identity of the attacker has not yet been established.”

The statement notes that Hamid Ghasempour “did not intend to participate in the protests and oppose the policies of the Islamic Republic” and that his family “will not allow any anti-Revolutionary faction, group or movement to appropriate his name”.

The statement claims that “political currents” who seek to present Hamid Ghasempour as an “anti-establishment protester” are after “scoring points” and advancing the interests of “virtual networks and those living abroad”.

Amnesty International remains concerned that the statement issued in the name of Hamid Ghasempour’s family on 17 May 2022 was written under coercive circumstances, given the tone and content of the statement, which echoes the authorities’ narrative on the protests, and the Iranian authorities’ long-standing pattern of extracting coerced statements from victims of human rights violations and their families.



Statement attributed by Iranian state media to relatives of Hamid Ghasempour indicating that he was injured during the protests in Farsan on 13 May but was alive ©IRIB

4.1.2 TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT RESULTING FROM BIRDSHOT

Video footage circulated on social media and reviewed by Amnesty International shows that other protesters and bystanders, including children, sustained painful injuries amounting to torture due to security forces unlawfully firing birdshot.

³⁰ Amnesty International was able to ascertain the institutional affiliation of the officials based on their distinct uniforms and the official vehicle next to which they stood, which also bore the logo of *Faraja*.
³¹ Twitter post, 13 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3bnjuNS>
³² Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, «بیانیه خانواده حمید قاسم پور فارسانی مصدوم نآرامی‌های اخیر», 15 May 2022, iribnews.ir/fa/news/3446925

Birdshot (and other types of ammunition that contain multiple projectiles) is inherently indiscriminate and designed to cause a level of widespread harm and injury that is, in all circumstances, unnecessary and excessive for the achievement of legitimate objectives such as containing violence by certain individuals and ensuring the security of others, and their use violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment.

Two videos, which circulated online on 15 May 2022 and which the persons filming say were from Shahrekord and Chelicheh, show classic spray patterns of birdshot wounds to the backs, buttocks and/or heads of those injured.³³



Screenshot taken from a video circulated online on 15 May 2022, showing the birdshot injuries sustained by a protester in Shahrekord. The video also shows injuries to his head. ©Private



Screenshot taken from a video circulated online on 15 May 2022, showing the birdshot injuries sustained by a protester in Chelicheh. The video also shows injuries to his lower back and buttocks. ©Private

³³ Twitter post, 15 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ONNq3q>; Twitter post, 15 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Q6HCTF>

A third video, which circulated online on 16 May 2022, shows a child crying out in pain from wounds on his bleeding foot while being comforted by several men on and off the camera.³⁴ The person filming says the child is seven or eight years old and has been shot with metal pellets (*sachmeh*).³⁵ He states:

“This is the work of the police [officials from the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (known by its Persian acronym *Faraja*)] and the Basij [a paramilitary volunteer militia operating under the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps] in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari. They did not even show mercy to a seven [or] eight-year-old-child.”



Screenshot taken from a video circulated online on 16 May 2022, showing the injuries sustained by a child during the crackdown of protests in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province. ©Private

4.1.3 OTHER INSTANCES OF POLICE VIOLENCE

Evidence reviewed by Amnesty International also shows security forces misusing batons for the purposes of intimidation and punishment and in a manner that amounts to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or torture. Security forces also unlawfully used water cannons and tear gas to disperse peaceful protesters or misused them in a manner that affected bystanders and peaceful demonstrators, contrary to international law and standards that they should only be used for dispersal if violence has become widespread and reached such a scale that security forces cannot contain the threat by targeted means which can directly affect the violent individuals only.

One video, which circulated online on 15 May 2022 and is reported to have been filmed in Shahrekord, shows a member of the security forces beating a woman³⁶ while another video, also reported to have been filmed in Shahrekord and circulated online on 17 May 2022, shows several members of the security forces dressed in anti-riot gear and with shields, batons and rifles repeatedly and punitively kicking and beating a man who is already restrained while throwing him into a pickup truck.³⁷ Beatings with batons, as means of intimidation or punishment, constitute torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. Under international law and standards,

³⁴ Twitter post, 16 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3POPO6s>

³⁵ Amnesty International was unable to determine, from the video footage, the exact cause of the injury to the boy's foot or the circumstances in which the injury took place.

³⁶ Twitter post, 15 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3JipzHX>

³⁷ Twitter post, 17 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Jn1xeN>

batons can only be used in response to violent individuals posing significant risks of imminent violence and when the threat the individual presents cannot be countered by less harmful means.³⁸

Video footage, which circulated online on 16 May 2022 and reported to have been filmed in Chelicheh, also shows unlawful use of water cannon on at least one occasion to intimidate and disperse peaceful protesters and bystanders.³⁹

4.2 UNLAWFUL USE OF FORCE IN PROTESTS IN KHUZESTAN PROVINCE

Audio-visual evidence reviewed by Amnesty International and reports by independent media outlets and human rights groups indicate that during the protests that took place over rising food price in Khuzestan province in mid-May 2022, security forces deployed unnecessary or excessive force.

In one video from Andimeshk, which circulated online on 13 May 2022, multiple individual single shots are audible.⁴⁰ The same video also shows extensive misuse of tear gas by the security forces to intimidate and unlawfully disperse protesters. The person filming the video is heard saying “These are the sounds of the security forces of Khamenei [Iran’s Supreme Leader] firing at people. Can you see? They are launching tear gas at peoples’ heads”.⁴¹

Another video from Izeh shows an unidentified pyrotechnic⁴² fired towards a crowd of people who are walking away from the direction in which it was launched.⁴³

Statements made by a member of parliament for Dezful, Khuzestan province, Ahmad Avai, who reported the death of one person during the protests in Khuzestan province, support concerns that the authorities’ crackdown once again led to loss of life. In an interview on 14 May 2022 with the state-affiliated Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA), he denied reports on the occurrence of any deaths in Dezful but stated that an individual was killed in Andimeshk. The next day, on 15 May 2022, Ahmad Avai backtracked and told Tasnim News Agency, a state media outlet, that the statement he gave to ILNA the previous day had been “distorted and inaccurately portrayed”. He claimed that “in this [original] interview, I did not have any confirmation about casualties or the killing of a citizen or protester, and I only emphasized that some of the claims made online must be clarified.”⁴⁴ In response, ILNA released the audio recording of the interview, to which Amnesty International has listened, and therein he is heard clearly stating that one individual had been killed in Andimeshk.⁴⁵

According to reports circulated on social media, the individual who was killed during the protests in Andimeshk on 13 May 2022 was a 21-year-old man named Omid Soltani, but Amnesty International has not been able to obtain any evidence to verify his name or establish the causes and circumstances of his death.

According to Ahwazi Arab human rights activists outside Iran, an older bystander named Pishali Ghalebi Hajivand was also shot dead in Dezful on 13 May 2022. Amnesty International has been unable to obtain evidence to verify the exact circumstances surrounding his death.

³⁸ Amnesty International, *Blunt Force: Investigating the misuse of police batons and related equipment*, [amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2021/09/blunt-force](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2021/09/blunt-force)

³⁹ Twitter post, 15 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Seew6H>

⁴⁰ Amnesty International was unable to determine the type of ammunition fired.

⁴¹ Twitter post, 13 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/300ANFd>

⁴² A pyrotechnic is anything that burns. Given the poor quality and short length of this video, it is impossible to identify the exact weapon and ammunition used. It could be fireworks, improvised ammunition, a functioning or malfunctioning tear gas grenade, smoke grenade, or another weapon.

⁴³ BBC, 16 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3JkmeYG>

⁴⁴ Tasnim News Agency, «نماینده دزفول: مصاحبه‌ام تحریف شده؛ نگفتم فردی در اندیمشک کشته شد»، 15 May 2022, tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/02/25/2710912

⁴⁵ ILNA, «یک نفر در اندیمشک کشته شده است/ تجمع‌کنندگان از حاشیه شهر دزفول آمده بودند+ فایل صوتی», 14 May 2022, bit.ly/3AGPQOm. Amnesty International accessed the webpage in which this audio recording of Ahmad Avai was published on the website of ILNA on 25 May 2022 and again on 11 July 2022. For several weeks between these dates, the webpage appeared to have been entirely removed from the news agency’s website. The audio recording is also available here: ILNA, 14 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3blLdOV>

PISHALI GHALEBI HAJIVAND



Funeral poster of Pishali Ghalebi Hajivand, reported as having been killed in Dezful on 13 May 2022 ©Private

Ahwazi Arab activists have reported that Pishali Ghalebi Hajivand was shot dead in Dezful on 13 May while looking out of the window of his home and published a video which they say is from the aftermath of his death and shows chaotic scenes of people screaming while a man lies still on the floor of a house.

Amnesty International has obtained the funeral poster of Pishali Ghalebi Hajivand. It has also reviewed a post on the Telegram channel of his tribe, which refers to him as a “martyr of the path of justice”, a formulation used in

Iran in connection with deaths resulting from state violence. The organization has been unable to obtain testimonial or documentary evidence to verify the exact circumstances surrounding his death.

5. UNLAWFUL USE OF FORCE IN ABADAN PROTESTS

On 23 May 2022, a large section of a 10-storey commercial building, the Metropol complex in Abadan, that was under construction collapsed, leading to the death of at least 43 people and injuring dozens of others.⁴⁶ According to state media reports, structural building experts had repeatedly forewarned that the building could collapse due to its weak structures, but the authorities had ignored the warnings and permitted construction of the building to continue.⁴⁷ Hundreds of people peacefully took to the streets between 23 and 31 May to mourn, show solidarity with victims’ families, and demand truth and justice for those killed.

Audiovisual evidence indicates that security forces responded by unlawfully using force, including firing shotguns to disperse peaceful protesters. In at least one video examined by Amnesty International, audible single shots were likely from discharging live ammunition.⁴⁸

As with protests over rising food prices earlier in May, the authorities also attempted to smear protesters and undermine their legitimate grievances by pushing the narrative that the protests had been co-opted by counterrevolutionaries. On 1 June 2022, in a televised interview with Tasmin News Agency, Abdolrahim Mousavi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces stated that “After every accident, enemies and opportunists appear at the scene”.⁴⁹

In a video posted online on 29 May 2022, a member of the security forces threatens a peaceful crowd of people chanting by warning over a loudspeaker that: “From a legal perspective, you will bear the responsibility for any consequences resulting from your gathering”, in a statement indicative of the authorities criminalizing the right to peaceful assembly and justifying the use of force.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Islamic Republic News Agency, «تعداد جانباختگان ساختمان متروپل آبادان به ۴۳ نفر افزایش یافت», 7 June 2022, irna.ir/news/84780510

⁴⁷ Khabar Online, «رئیس ساختمان متروپل در آبادان پیشبینی شده بود», 23 May 2022, bit.ly/3vhaxMF

⁴⁸ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3zK4RNY>

⁴⁹ Mashregh News, «دیگان ویژه در آبادان چه می‌کند؟ +فیلم», 1 June 2022, mashreghnews.ir/news/1382564

⁵⁰ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3zNA0A5>

Meanwhile, state media claimed that some protesters engaged in acts of vandalism without providing any further detail or evidence but Amnesty International's investigation into the protests in Abadan do not support these claims.⁵¹ In all the videos related to the protests in Abadan that were reviewed by Amnesty International, people are seen engaging in peaceful protest. As shown by videos shared on social media and reviewed by the organization, the authorities extensively deployed heavily armed security forces in Abadan, with some wearing anti-riot gear and others in plain clothes. In the videos, security forces are seen advancing towards peaceful protesters, in some cases on motorcycles, and repeatedly firing weapons. This use of force by Iran's security forces was unlawful as the protests of 23-31 May 2022 in Abadan were peaceful in nature and the use of force by security forces pursued no legitimate objective and was aimed at dispersing, intimidating and punishing mourners and peaceful protesters.

The use of shotguns by security forces is evidenced in at least two videos⁵² examined by Amnesty International's weapons expert; the type of ammunition loaded in the shotguns is unclear. In one of the two videos, shared on social media on 29 May 2022, more than a dozen members of the security forces wearing anti-riot gear are seen in the street, including on motorbikes; one of the officials raises a shotgun while walking and fires two shots in different directions out of the view of the camera. The person filming the security forces is heard saying "They are shooting brazenly".⁵³ The second video, shared on social media on 27 May 2022, shows a security official firing a shotgun while walking and shouting at people who are out of the view of the camera. Multiple security forces in body armour and helmets are seen standing behind the security official and at least two of them appear to hold pepper-ball guns.⁵⁴ In both videos, the way the security officials aim and fire their shotguns indicates that they shot at chest or head level.

In four other videos,⁵⁵ shared on social media on 29 May 2022, the sounds of individual shots can be heard. According to Amnesty International's weapons expert, in at least one of the four videos, the single shots which are heard are likely from discharging live ammunition,⁵⁶ while in the remaining three videos the type of ammunition fired is not clear. While the identity of those shooting is not visible in these four videos, in one video, the person filming uses adjectives that are typically used by members of the public in Iran to describe and denounce abusive security forces.⁵⁷ These elements, coupled with other footage, which indicates the peaceful nature of protesters on the one hand and the extensive deployment of armed security forces on the other, provides strong indications that consistent with long-standing patterns, those firing weapons were members of Iran's security forces.

Two of the four aforementioned videos, which circulated on 29 May 2022, support concerns that the use of force resulted in injuries to protesters. In one video, the person filming cries out in pain immediately after the sound of an individual shot being fired is heard.⁵⁸ It is clear from his reaction and the response of the person with him that he has been injured. The second video shows chaotic scenes of people standing and running amid the sound of weapons being firing while an individual is seen falling to the ground immediately after a shot is heard.⁵⁹

Concerns that the security forces inflicted injuries upon protesters mourning those deceased in the building collapse is further supported by a video, circulated online on 30 May 2022, in which a person

⁵¹ Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, «تخریب اموال عمومی از سوی برخی افراد معترض در آبادان», 27 May 2022, iribnews.ir/fa/news/3457101

⁵² Twitter post, 27 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Shka7Z>; Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Jjhl7>

⁵³ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Jjhl7>

⁵⁴ Twitter post, 27 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Shka7Z>. A pepper-ball projectile, when fired onto a surface, bursts and creates a cloud of pepper irritant that rapidly disperses into the air to incapacitate an individual or group of individuals. Exposure to the irritant is supposed to cause an immediate debilitating, but non-lethal, reaction in the eyes, nose, throat and chest.

⁵⁵ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3zK4RNY>; Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3cWJakB>; Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oM1pMm>; Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3bqOWe6>

⁵⁶ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3zK4RNY>

⁵⁷ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3bqOWe6>

⁵⁸ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3oM1pMm>

⁵⁹ Twitter post, 29 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3cWJakB>

is seen with blood stains on his trousers; based on the spray pattern of the blood, the injury may have been caused by birdshot. The person filming the injured individual is heard saying that “officials fired directly [at people] ... to stop us from mourning.”⁶⁰

6. IMPUNITY FOR PROTEST BLOODSHED

The Iranian authorities have refused to conduct any investigations into evidence indicating that, during the protests of May 2022, security forces unlawfully fired live ammunition and birdshot at crowds of people, misused tear gas and water cannons, and beat protesters. Nor have they taken any steps to investigate and bring to justice those responsible for killing and injuring protesters and bystanders. This reflects the country’s long-standing crisis of systemic impunity where crimes under international law and other serious human rights violation including extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings, as well as enforced disappearances and torture, go uninvestigated and unpunished.

In recent years, the UN Secretary General and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran have repeatedly called on the Iranian authorities to conduct prompt, impartial, transparent and effective investigations into the serious human rights violations committed in the context of protests and ensure accountability. These calls have been persistently ignored by the Iranian authorities, who have repeatedly refused to extend an invitation to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran (hereafter the Special Rapporteur on Iran) and other relevant UN experts, including the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, to visit the country.

In his August 2020 report, the UN Secretary General wrote that he was “deeply concerned at the reported lack of investigation by the Iranian authorities of widespread reports of excessive force during the November 2019 and January 2020 protests and at a lack of accountability for those who ordered and carried out these human rights violations.”⁶¹

In his May 2021 report, the UN Secretary General once again “urge[d] the Government to ensure a prompt, transparent and effective investigation by an independent and impartial body into the use of excessive and lethal force during protests ... and to prosecute and hold accountable public officials, including law enforcement officials, found responsible for issuing or carrying out the relevant orders.”⁶²

In his August 2021, the UN Secretary General wrote that “the competent Iranian authorities have neither conducted prompt and impartial investigations into the disproportionate and lethal use of force by State agents” and once again called on them to investigate the use of excessive and lethal force during protests.⁶³

In a similar vein, the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran has consistently raised serious concerns about the lack of accountability for the use of unlawful force against protesters and others by Iran’s security forces. In his January 2021 report, he wrote that “more than one year on, the Government has failed to conduct an impartial, independent and transparent investigation into the use of excessive and lethal force during nationwide demonstrations in November 2019... Impunity for those actions and a lack of accountability prevail.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Twitter post, 30 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3zNeqM7>

⁶¹ UN Secretary General, Report: *Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 5 August 2020, UN Doc. A/75/287, undocs.org/A/75/287, paras 23 and 61(d).

⁶² UN Secretary General, Report: *Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 14 May 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/47/22, undocs.org/A/HRC/47/22, paras 12 and 73 (d).

⁶³ UN Secretary General, Report: *Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 4 August 2021, UN Doc. A/76/268, undocs.org/A/76/268, paras 18 and 60 (d).

⁶⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 11 January 2021, UN Doc. A/HRC/46/50, undocs.org/en/A/hrc/46/50, para. 14.

Likewise, in his July 2021 report, the Special Rapporteur on Iran repeated his concerns about impunity and reiterated his “alarm that while no credible investigation into those responsible for the events of November 2019 has been undertaken, the authorities continue to prosecute individuals who participated in the protests... The Special Rapporteur finds it unfathomable that the Government has not fulfilled its obligation under international law to conduct prompt, transparent and independent investigations into instances of excessive force and continues to prosecute individuals for exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. He urges the international community to call for accountability.”⁶⁵

In his January 2022 report, the Special Rapporteur on Iran once again raised serious concerns that “the use of unlawful force by security, law enforcement and other State agents continued at an alarming scale in the context of peaceful assemblies... without subsequent investigations or accountability.” The Special Rapporteur warned that “[t]he atmosphere of impunity surrounding arbitrary deprivation of life by State agents sends an affirmation that there will be no consequences for such illegal acts.”⁶⁶

7. INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS ON USE OF FORCE AND FIREARMS

The use of force in the context of assemblies is governed by a number of international human rights treaties and instruments including the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.⁶⁷ Security forces must not use firearms except to defend themselves or others against an imminent threat of death or serious injury, and only when less extreme and harmful means are insufficient to achieve these objectives.⁶⁸ Firearms must never be used as a public order management tool for dispersing protesters.⁶⁹

In any instance where police and other security forces may decide it is necessary to use force to contain violence by protesters and secure the safety of others, they must distinguish between individuals who are engaged in violence and those who are not, carefully consider the risks of escalating an already tense situation, and carefully aim proportionate force only at those engaged in violence.

Security forces must at all times comply with the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality:

- Legality means that the use of force must be governed by law that is sufficiently clear and makes clear when the authorities will or will not use force. The use of force needs to serve a legitimate objective. Suppressing peaceful protests or punishing protesters are never legitimate objectives. If some protesters engage in violent actions, this does not turn an otherwise peaceful protest into a non-peaceful assembly. Police should ensure those who remain peaceful can continue protesting.
- Necessity means using only the minimum level of force strictly needed to achieve a legitimate objective, and attempting to use non-violent means first, whenever this is feasible. Security forces must never use force for the purpose of punishment.
- Proportionality means that law enforcement objectives, even if legitimate, cannot be achieved at any cost. Any harm law enforcement officials might cause must not outweigh the harm they want to legitimately prevent. The type and level of force used to pursue a legitimate

⁶⁵ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 16 July 2021, UN Doc. A/76/160, undocs.org/en/A/76/160, para. 12.

⁶⁶ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, para. 10.

⁶⁷ UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, adopted on 7 September 1990 (hereafter UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force). See also Amnesty International, *Use of Force: Guidelines for the implementation of the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials*, August 2015, [amnesty.org.uk/files/use_of_force.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/use_of_force.pdf) (hereafter Use of Force Guidelines)

⁶⁸ UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force, Principle 9 (previously cited).

⁶⁹ Amnesty International, *Use of Force Guidelines*, Guideline 7.4.3, p. 159 (previously cited).

objective and the potential injury or pain that may arise from it must be proportionate to the threat posed by an individual or group of individuals.

Birdshot, by nature, does not allow for such a differentiated response in full respect of the principles of necessity and proportionality. It is inherently inaccurate, carries a great risk of causing significant injury including to persons other than the targeted persons, and causes a level of widespread harm, which would be in all circumstances excessive and disproportionate to the legitimate objective pursued by the authorities. Amnesty International considers that the security forces' use of birdshot violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment given the serious harm to physical integrity and the mental trauma that this conduct causes to protesters and the fact that it is deployed for the purpose of inflicting severe harm and suffering on protesters to intimidate and punish them and to crush protests.

Tear gas and water cannon by their very nature have a high probability of affecting not only those individuals who are engaged in violence, but also bystanders and peaceful demonstrators. They may therefore only be used for dispersal if violence has become widespread and so reached such a scale that security forces cannot contain the threat by targeted means which can directly affect the violent individuals only.⁷⁰

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The increasing militarization of the policing of protests in Iran has led to a pattern of widespread use of unlawful, including lethal, force against protesters and bystanders that has become all too commonplace in the country in recent years. Since the nationwide protests of December 2017-January 2018, the authorities' brutal response to protests has led to the death of hundreds of people, including children, and to thousands of debilitating injuries, resulting, among other things, from the use of live ammunition as well birdshot that violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment.

No official has been investigated and held to account and no amendments to legislation and policies regulating the use of force and firearms in the policing of protests have been made, reflecting the country's chronic crisis of systemic impunity where crimes under international law and other serious human rights violation not only go uninvestigated and unpunished, but are praised and encouraged by the authorities.

Despite repeated appeals by the UN, the Iranian authorities have refused to respect the human rights of people in Iran to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and end their ruthless militarized response to protests. Instead, they have continued to cover-up the real death tolls from successive protests and to deny and distort the truth about the circumstances surrounding the killing and injuring of protesters and bystanders, while resorting to self-congratulatory statements about the ability of their security and intelligence forces to end unrest and restore calm swiftly.

In his January 2022 report to the UN Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur on Iran cited structural impediments for accountability in Iran, asserting that “[i]nstitutional impunity and the absence of a system for accountability for violations of human rights permeate the political and legal system”⁷¹ and that “conditions for ensuring accountability are missing at the legislative and executive levels, and the judiciary acts as a repressive organ instead of an independent body towards which individuals can seek recourse. In addition, parallel institutions have gradually gained a central role in governance, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, answerable only to the Supreme Leader.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Amnesty International, Chemical irritants in law enforcement: An Amnesty International position paper, June 2021, 4.1, p. 9.

⁷¹ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, para. 48.

⁷² UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, para. 50.

In the same report, the Special Rapporteur on Iran stated that “[t]he lack of an independent judiciary and its politicization is a major contributing factor to failings of accountability”⁷³ and that “the maintenance of the system of governance and the political ideology takes precedence over protecting and respecting the rights of individuals.”⁷⁴ He concluded that “[w]ithin this configuration, there is no meaningful way by which the population can ... hold decision makers accountable.”⁷⁵

Amnesty International believes that this crisis of systemic impunity, coupled with an insufficient response from the UN Human Rights Council, the European Union and their member states and other actors in the international community, given the scale and severity of violations committed in Iran, has emboldened the Iranian authorities to continue to commit shocking human rights violations and led to what the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran has referred to as “alarmingly high numbers of injuries and death[s]” during protests.⁷⁶

Since rightful outrage among people in Iran about state corruption, high inflation, high levels of unemployment, low or unpaid wages, food insecurity and loss of livelihood, as well as political repression and systemic impunity is likely to lead to more protests in the future, Amnesty International warns that the number of deaths and injuries will continue to rise until officials suspected of using unlawful force against protesters and bystanders are investigated, and if there is relevant admissible evidence, prosecuted, and until security forces are instructed at the highest levels of the establishment to refrain from the use of unlawful force to crush protests.

Amnesty International echoes the concerns raised by the Special Rapporteur on Iran that given the total absence of conditions for ensuring accountability at the domestic level, the international community must fulfil its “important role in ensuring accountability”.⁷⁷ In the wake of the repetitious pattern of crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations committed in the context of protest suppression, the organization reiterates the dire need for the establishment of an independent international investigative and accountability mechanism to break the cycle of impunity and deter recurrence.

8.1 RECOMMENDATIONS TO IRANIAN AUTHORITIES

USE OF FORCE

- Immediately cease the use of lethal force during protests when protesters pose no imminent threat of life or serious injury to security forces or others, in compliance with international law and standards on the use of force and firearms which provide that security forces may use lethal force only in order to protect their lives or the lives of others;
- Immediately cease the unlawful use of birdshot, which violates the absolute prohibition on torture and other ill-treatment and should not be used in any policing situations;
- Guarantee the right to peaceful assembly and ensure that security forces at all times act in full conformity with the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, by giving clear instructions that force may be used only when strictly necessary and only to the extent required to achieve a legitimate objective and that the potential injury or pain that may arise must not outweigh the harm they want to legitimately prevent;

⁷³ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, para. 52.

⁷⁴ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, para. 49.

⁷⁵ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, paras. 49.

⁷⁶ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 13 January 2022, UN Doc. A/HRC/49/75, undocs.org/en/A/HRC/49/75, paras. 59.

⁷⁷ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report, 16 July 2021, UN Doc. A/76/160, undocs.org/en/A/76/160, para. 8.

- Ensure that prompt, thorough, independent and impartial criminal investigations are conducted into the unlawful use of force in the May 2022 protests, including an investigation into the causes and circumstances of the reported deaths and injuries, and ensure that those suspected of criminal responsibility are prosecuted in proceedings that conform to international fair trial standards and do not involve seeking or imposing the death penalty.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

- Repeal or amend, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law and standards, current legislation, particularly the Islamic Penal Code, which criminalises peaceful assembly, and the Law on the Use of Firearms by Armed Forces in Necessary Incidents, which regulates the use of firearms in the context of assemblies deemed “illegal” and allows security forces to use firearms without regard to the high threshold imposed by international law and standards on their use to protect against an imminent threat of death or serious injury.

ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

- End the practice of restricting access to internet and mobile services during protests, which violates the rights of people in Iran to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and respect the human rights of people to freely share information with others inside and outside the country and express their opinions.

CO-OPERATION WITH UN HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS

- Extend invitations to and accept requests for visits from the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, and allow them unrestricted access to victims injured during protests, families of victims killed during protests, and human rights defenders, ensuring that no individuals face reprisals for communicating with UN human rights mechanisms.

8.2 RECOMMENDATION TO THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

- Establish an independent international mechanism to collect, consolidate, preserve, and analyse evidence of the most serious crimes under international law committed in Iran, that meets general standards of admissibility in criminal proceedings, to facilitate future fair and independent criminal proceedings.

8.3 RECOMMENDATION TO THE OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

- Call on the international community including member states of the UN Human Rights Council to recognize, in line with the conclusions of the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran, that conditions for ensuring accountability are absent at the domestic level in Iran and to support accountability efforts at the international level including through the establishment of an independent investigative and accountability mechanism.

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