

Human Rights Update: Kurds in Iran, 2018

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Background

The information provided in *Human Rights Update: Kurds in Iran, 2018* relies on reports from Iranian and international Human Rights organisations, and media sources. It provides updates to the [2017 statement](#) by Kurdish Lobby Australia.

In the last year, Iranian authorities have made two notable improvements. Prison sentences related to drug possession have become more lenient, and on July 21, a law was passed to allow [people from religious minorities](#) to run for municipal elections. Yet, in the March 2018 Human Rights Council [report](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights expressed deep concern regarding:

‘reports of individuals from the Kurdish community having been persecuted, arrested, and sentenced to death for their political affiliation or beliefs. According to the information received, as of 31 October, 2017, 1,828 Kurds have been detained by the authorities on charges related to various activities such as environmental activism, eating in public during the month of Ramadan, working as border couriers engaged in smuggling illicit goods, or for celebrating the results of the referendum held in neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan. Information received indicates that 114 of these detainees were charged with political or security-related crimes, often for engaging in civic activism or because of their membership in Kurdish political parties. Some face long prison sentences, lashes and/or heavy financial penalties. Among these prisoners, there are individuals who are workers, teachers, kolbars (border couriers), artists, and human rights activists. In 2017, information received indicates that at least 64 Kurdish prisoners were executed by the

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authorities, and at least 16 Kurdish political prisoners were reportedly subjected to torture or ill treatment, with 31 going on hunger strikes to protest the circumstances surrounding their arrest and detention. 15 were denied basic rights such as visitation by their family members, and 15 others were deprived of adequate medical care.' (p. 17).

In 2018, Iranian authorities continue to arrest, shoot and/or give the death penalty to protesters, activists, kolbars (Kurdish cross-border couriers) and others. Kurds are particularly targeted, and the provinces in which they live are heavily militarised, as they are the second largest ethnic minority in Iran; they practice different faiths, with the majority being Sunni Muslim; and Kurds are seen as trouble makers because of their on going struggle to achieve cultural and political rights for an estimated [10 to 12 million Iranian Kurds \(13 to 17.5 percent of the population\)](#). As [Asso Hassan Zadeh](#) writes, 'What the Kurds of Iran are asking for is ... recognition of their distinct identity, the end of discriminatory and repressive policies, autonomy in their own region, and equal access to power and resources at the country level. ... Iranian Kurds are not asking for secession from Iran. They struggle for the realization of their national rights in a democratic and federal Iran.'

Iranian Prisons and Revolutionary Courts

The arrest and sentencing of political prisoners, called [security prisoners](#) in Iran, is a significant human rights issue. In [Iranian prisons](#), prisoners suffer from overcrowding, limited hot water, inadequate food, insufficient beds, poor ventilation and insect infestations. Often families are not told of the whereabouts of their imprisoned family member. Solitary confinement, denial of medical treatment, and gaining a confession under torture are common practices.

Political prisoners go before a Revolutionary Court. Revolutionary Court judges are frequently appointed on the basis of their political opinions and affiliation with intelligence bodies, and often lack legal qualifications. Revolutionary Court trials are closed and usually last a [few minutes](#).

Kurds arrested during protests

In October 2017, Kurds in Iran celebrated the results of the referendum on independence held in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) on September 25. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, hereafter called Revolutionary Guards, conducted mass arrests of those rallying in the streets. A Kurdish woman in Saqqez, [Zamana Zewey](#), was sentenced to 50 lashes because she participated in the celebrations. She was charged with 'disturbing national security'. Another Kurdish woman, [Runak Aghayi](#), is serving a six-month prison sentence in Mahabad Prison for participating in a rally.

In the ten days of protests that started in Mashhad on December 28, and spread to [140 cities](#), 5,000 people were arrested, at least 50 people were killed, and at least 14

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protesters subsequently died in prison. Protests occurred in all Kurdish-majority cities.

- In Hamadan, on the first day of protest, Revolutionary Guards opened fire on demonstrators, killing six people. The government claimed the security forces were not responsible for the deaths. More deaths occurred on subsequent days.
- In Kermanshah, 350 protesters were arrested in the first few days of protests.
- Throughout January, Revolutionary Guards and Ministry of Intelligence officers continued to arrest protestors in Kermanshah, Urmia, Mahabad, Sanandaj, Mariwan, and Bokoan. It was as if the security forces had waited to see how the protests unfolded and collected images to identify ringleaders, so they could proceed to arrest protesters when the world's eyes had shifted to another crisis.
- Among those arrested was a [15-year old boy](#). In February, he was sentenced to five years in prison for lowering the Iranian flag during the protests. His case is under review.
- In Urmia, Kurdish student, [Ibrahim Khalidi](#), was sentenced to five years in prison for acts 'against national security'.

Hundreds of Kurds who took part in these protests remain in prison. After Newroz celebrations in March 2018, Iranian intelligence arrested 'tens' of organisers.

Deaths in prison

The following people were arrested during the December – January protests, and died in prison, or while reporting to police.

- At the end of January, a Kurdish activist in Kermanshah, Ghulim Raza Moahady, died from being tortured by Iranian intelligence.
- In the first week of March, a Kurdish student, Qubad A'dami, died whilst being tortured. His family were told he had committed suicide by drugging himself.
- The Revolutionary Court gave Kurdish student [Meryem Fereci](#), a three-year prison sentence. Later, this sentence was commuted to 'supervised freedom'. Fereci had to report daily to police in Tehran, where she studied. On July 14, nine days after she disappeared, police found her tortured and burnt body.

Other political arrests

Kurds are estimated to make up [half of all political prisoners](#) in Iran. The Hangaw Organisation for Human Rights claims that in 2018, at least 39 Kurds have received a combined sentence of 132 years in prison for alleged links with Kurdish opposition groups or 'acting against the religion'. Other 'crimes' are environmental activism,

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collecting donations for victims of the November earthquake, writing about Kurdish issues and culture, or advocating for workers' rights.

In May 2018, the following Kurds were arrested, and in some cases sentenced by a Revolutionary Court, for being members of illegal political parties.

- In Sardasht (West Azerbaijan), an 18-year old Kurd, Milad Khazi, was sentenced to ten years in prison.
- Iranian Intelligence in Qory Qala, Rawansar, arrested two Kurdish women in their twenties, [Rezan Bawaysti and Fatima Bawaysti](#), for allegedly belonging to 'Islamic' parties. Their families were not told of their whereabouts.
- In [Urmia](#), Hamed Sepehri and Jafar Amini, were sentenced to 18 months in prison for spreading 'propaganda against the Islamic regime'.
- In Kermanshah, [Osman Jalali](#) was arrested by Jwanro intelligence office for being a past member of a political party, and Mehdi Imam Abbasi was arrested by West Gilan intelligence office. Their whereabouts are unknown.

Environmentalists protesting environmental damage are being arrested for being 'a threat to the state'. A contributing factor is that Revolutionary Guards, or individuals within the Revolutionary Guards, run the construction companies that are building the dams and other infrastructure that can cause the damage. The Kurdistan Human Rights Association reported that in January 2018, two Kurdish students were called into an intelligence office for organising 'unlawful' meetings on ways to protect Urmia Lake from further environmental degradation. In April 2018, two Kurdish environmentalists from Botan, who were members of an environmental group called Wilat, [Hamed Sepehri and Jafar Ebrahii](#), were charged with 'spreading propaganda against the state'. Sepehri received a one-year and Ebrahii received a six-month prison sentence. A member of the environmental organisation Zhiva in Paveh, [Erfan Rashidi](#), was arrested on July 5 and transferred to an unknown location. He was released on bail in late July.

In early 2018, two young Kurdish men, [Shahram Farhadi](#) and Mohammad Naeempour, were arrested while collecting donations to help victims of the earthquake in November 2017. They were charged with 'spreading propaganda against the state'. In February, a Sanandaj court sentenced Farhadi to four years in prison, and Naeempour to two years in prison.

Kurdish writers subject to arrest, lashes and/or prison sentences include [Ali Reza Sepahi Layin](#), who has been repeatedly arrested for 'spreading propaganda' and 'disturbing the public'. In May, an Urmia court gave Kurdish media activist, [Faroch Abdi](#), a three-year prison sentence for 'propaganda' and 'disrespect to the leader of Iran'. In Khurasan, a collector and publisher of Kurdish songs, [Noor Mohammad Afshar](#), also known as Ardalan, was sentenced to a year in prison for 'disturbing national comfort'.

A teacher from Sardasht, [Bakhtiar Aref](#), was arrested in February 2015, and on October 30, 2017, received a prison sentence of 18 months. Aref was sentenced by

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the Revolutionary Court on the charge of ‘membership in the Iranian Call and Reform Organization’.

Death penalty for political prisoners

In the first six months of 2018, at [least ten Kurdish activists received the death penalty](#). In late January, two Kurds were sentenced to death for being members of illegal Kurdish political parties. One was 23-year old [Ramin Hossein Panahi](#), a member of Komala (a left wing Kurdish party), who was [shot](#) and arrested in Sanandaj in June 2017. He was accused of being armed at the time of his arrest and was subsequently charged with being a member of an armed opposition group. His lawyer, Hossein Ahmadi Nejaz, claims Panahi was unarmed and does not belong to a militant group. In prison, Panahi was refused medical attention for his gunshot wound, beaten and kicked, and was denied access to his lawyer. After he was tried and sentenced to death in January 2018, he went on a week-long hunger strike. [His case](#) came to international attention when UN Human Rights officials¹ and Amnesty International appealed for his death sentence to be [cancelled](#). His execution date keeps being set and then delayed, a torture in itself. On May 29, [eight visitors](#) to [Panahi](#) were arrested. They included three family members: his brother Afshin and brothers-in-law Ahmad and Zobeir Panahi. On [June 21](#), Panahi was moved to an unknown location.

A less well-known case is that of Kurdish bus driver, [Mohammad Salas](#), who was executed at Rajai Shahr prison on June 18, 2018. The only evidence presented in court was his confession that he gave from a hospital bed, where he was being treated for broken ribs, nose and teeth, all having been broken during his time in [prison](#). His crime was that he was a Sufi of the Gonabadi Dervish religious minority.

Overuse of the death penalty

According to the [Iran Human Rights](#), 517 people received the death penalty in 2017. Of these, 240 were convicted of murder, and 112 were Kurds. Between January 1 and July 10, 2018, Iran carried out 108 executions. In the week July 17 – July 23, 2018, [ten Iranian Kurds were executed](#) in Urmia, Kermanshah and Birjand. All had been convicted of murder. Among them was a 65-year old man who had been in prison for ten years. Those hung in Urmia were Kamal Sultani from Bukan, and Faruq Dariyayi and Mahmoud Hamzazada from Oshnavieh (Shno).

¹ The expert group included the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, the Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, Dainius Puras, and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Nils Melzer.

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Between 2014 and 2017, Iran executed 25 people for crimes they committed when [underage](#). In 2018, [87 juveniles](#) are on death row. No longer among them is [Abolfazi Chezani Sharahi](#), who was executed on June 27, 2018, for fatally stabbing a man during a fight in 2013, when he was 14 years old. In prison, he was subject to solitary confinement four times, each time before the execution date, only to have the date delayed. Others on death row include a Kurdish woman, [Jamile Sadiqi](#), who has spent 15 years in Sanandaj Central Prison for allegedly killing her husband.

Shooting Kurdish kolbars (cross-border couriers)

The northwest provinces of Iran, where most Kurds live, are extremely poor, and have a high rate of unemployment. Many thousands of Kurds earn a living taking goods across the border into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). These kolbars run the risk of treading on a land mine, falling off a mountain, being shot or having their animals shot by Iranian border guards, even if they have paid the necessary licence fee. In 2016, Iranian border guards shot and killed 42 kolbars. In 2017, Iranian border security guards shot and killed 150 kolbars.

As a result of two kolbars being shot and killed on September 4, 2017, protests erupted in cities across the Kurdistan region of Iran. A de-facto state of emergency was declared, hundreds of security forces were deployed to the cities, and in some areas, power, phone and internet lines were cut. Protesters were surrounded and many were arrested and taken to unknown locations.

In April 2018, Iran closed the semi official border crossing of Siranband-Baneh into the KRI. [Tens of Kurdish](#) businessmen and shop keepers, as well as kolbars in the cities of Marivan, Saqqez and Baneh shut their businesses and shops, or went on strike in protest. On April 24, a number of them were arrested. The business closures and demonstrations continued into May. That thousands of kolbars were prevented from making the border crossing led to increased food prices and unemployment. In Baneh, shopkeepers, business owners and kolbars [laid empty tablecloths](#) in the streets, and in front of the governor's office, with slogans written on them like 'No bread dad: I'm a kolbar.' The government cut the internet to limit news of the protests and protesters continued to be arrested. Businesses were raided. [Kolbars'](#) goods were set on fire, and their horses killed. Many were caught at the border, where they were prevented from travelling into Iraqi Kurdistan or back into Iranian Kurdistan. On May 8, [15 Kurdish MPs](#) in the Majlis threatened to resign if the border crossing was not re-opened. In mid-June, the border was partially opened after new customs duties were levied on all cross border trade.

In the first two weeks of [May 2018](#), Iranian border security shot and killed at least four kolbars. Another lost his life falling down the mountain. Another 14 were injured. Of these, nine were shot, three fell from heights, and two trod on landmines laid during the Iran-Iraq war and Ruhollah Khomeini's Holy War against the Kurds.

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Assassinations

Since 2015, several Kurdish militant groups have resumed an armed struggle in their demand for human, cultural and political rights. This has resulted in intermittent clashes with Iranian security forces in the border region and in Iranian Kurdish cities. For instance, on January 3, 2018, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) killed six members of the Revolutionary Guards in clashes near the Iranian town of Piranshahr.

Since the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018, Iranian Kurdish militants have increased their activity. Over a two-week period at the end of June – beginning of July there were [multiple clashes](#), resulting in ‘dozens’ of Iranian security forces being killed. On July 8, KDPI killed and wounded at least four Revolutionary Guards in a village near Bokan, in Western Azerbaijan. On [July 20](#), the Iran-based Kurdistan's Free Life Party (PJAK) killed at least 11 Revolutionary Guards ([PJAK claims 15](#)) and wounded another eight in a village near Mariwan in the province of Kurdistan. In late July there was talk of the different groups uniting under [one command structure](#), and the USA using these groups to destabilise Iran.

As a result of these developments, the Islamic Republic of Iran has resumed assassinating Kurds who seek refuge in the KRI, including human rights activists, and those belonging to Iranian Kurdish political parties and armed groups. On [March 1](#), a car bomb killed Salah Rahmani, a KDPI commander, and his son outside Erbil. On March 7, another KDPI commander, Qader Qaderi, was found dead with 20 bullets in his body near Rania in Sulaimani province. On July 18, a long time member of the Kurdistan Human Rights Association, [Iqbal Muradi](#), was gunned down in the Sulaimani district of Penjwen on the border with Iran, despite Muradi being unarmed and not a militant. His son, Zaniar, and nephew, Loqman Muradi, are political prisoners on death row in Iran.

Muradi’s assassination came a day after the [Iranian army shelled the Haji Omran area inside Erbil governorate in the KRI](#), where a U.S. base is located. The artillery bombardment killed two KDPI members, and caused the evacuation of three KRI villages. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) called on the Iranian government to stop bombing inside the KRI. There is a real danger that Kurds will be caught up in the escalating tensions between the USA and Iran.

Political arrests occurring outside the Kurdistan Region

Human rights issues impact all Iranians – including women, environmentalists, workers and those suffering from a lack of water because of drought, vested interests and mismanagement. [Women](#) opposed to the state imposition of wearing the hijab protest in ‘White Wednesdays’. They gather in Enghelab Avenue near Tehran Square, take off their hijabs, and post images of themselves with free flowing hair on social media, such as Instagram. [Twenty-nine women](#) were arrested in February for removing their hijabs at ‘White Wednesdays’. On July 10, one of the women, [Shaparak Shajarizadeh](#), received a two-year prison sentence and an 18-year

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suspended sentence. The Mashhad writer, Farhad Jafar, was [arrested](#) in early June for supporting ‘the girls of Enghelab Avenue’. On June 13, Nasrin Sotoudeh, a well-known human rights lawyer who has defended women arrested for taking off their hijabs, was arrested and taken to Evin Prison. Prosecutors are asking for her to receive a five-year prison sentence.

Dancing is also forbidden in public spaces. By the first week of July, dozens of [videos of women dancing in the street](#) had been posted on social media. For this, Maedeh Hojabri, Elnaz Ghasemi and Shadab (last name unknown) were detained for [three days](#). They were then subject to a public shaming on Iranian TV.

Seven non-Kurdish environmentalists, who have been arrested [belonged to the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation](#). They were accused of ‘transferring intelligence to foreigners’. One was Canadian-Iranian Kavous Seyed Emami, a professor of sociology at Imam Sadegh University. He was put into solitary confinement in Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison. Sixteen days later he was found hanged. His family and colleagues were not told of his arrest and death until February 9, 2018. They were told he had committed suicide. Others arrested with Emami include Hooman Jokar, vice chairman of the board and head of the cheetah desk at Iran's Department of the Environment, and Morad Tahbaz, an Iranian American businessman and board member. A [report by Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation \(2018\)](#) names other environmental activists arrested in 2017.

Trade unions are illegal in Iran. In late May – early June, workers in [Ahvaz Steel National Group](#), a company that has been subject to embezzlement and dubious takeovers in recent years, went on strike for three weeks because they had not been paid their salaries for months. At least 60 workers were arrested during the strike.

Government employees detained without charge can have their salary suspended, as was the case for [Mohammed Habibi](#), a member of the Iranian Teachers Trade Union Association. Revolutionary Guards arrested him in front of his students in March 2018, after Habibi gained a reputation for peacefully advocating teachers’ rights. He faces charges of ‘assembly and collusion against national security’, ‘propaganda against the state’ and ‘disturbing public order’. [Other imprisoned teacher advocates](#) include Mahmoud Beheshti and Esmail Abdi.

In the fifth century city of Kazerun, located in Fars province, people began protesting on May 16 about proposed changes to municipal boundaries that would [partition Kazerun](#) and redistribute scarce water supplies. Scores of protesters were arrested. When others demanded their release, police opened fired, killing [several protesters](#). In response, protesters set fire to a local police station.

Aftermath of November 2017 Earthquake

On 12 November 2017, a 7.3 magnitude earthquake hit the Kurdistan regions on either side of the Iran-Iraq border, although the scale of human casualties and damage were higher in Iran. According to Iranian authorities, 630 people lost their

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lives and 8,100 people were injured as a result of the earthquake. Local eyewitnesses believe the casualties were much higher.

As well as losing loved ones, many families lost their homes and income. Five percent of all people who had their house destroyed or severely damaged were given tents supplied by the Iranian government. Those living in tents had no access to running water, electricity or sewerage services. In the first weeks, people from all over Iran sent clothing, blankets and other necessities to those affected. However, police and government officials blocked all people from visiting the afflicted areas, and there were many incidences of police and government officials confiscating donated items. During the winter, those living in tents had to endure sub-zero temperatures and flooding.

KLA launched an earthquake appeal, the donations being personally delivered in late December 2017 to earthquake victims in the Sar Pole Zahab area. After the KLA member's visit, there were heavy snows. He was informed that at least two children living in tents in and around Sar Pole Zahab died from cold. In 2018, Iranian authorities have done little to help earthquake victims. Some people have relocated to other cities. Others continue to live in mobile homes and must share toilets and other facilities. There are reports of youths committing suicide.

Recommendations

Countries that remain engaged with Iran, such as Australia, are in a good position to discuss each issue raised in this report with Iranian officials. Australians could suggest the benefits of removing the death penalty for political prisoners, that any confession gained under torture be deemed inadmissible in a court of law, that all political, cultural and environmental activities that do not advocate violence be made legal, and that Iranian border guards need to stop shooting kolbars. Kolbars who commit a crime need to be fairly tried in a court of law. There is also a need to improve conditions inside prisons, and government responses to natural disasters, including drought and earthquakes. Continuing along the path of repression and inaction creates resentment, and potential for some to embark on an armed struggle. Australia is in a good position to offer assistance in areas such as water resource management and responding to disasters.

Another matter that could be discussed is the implementation of Article 15 in the Iranian Constitution, which allows minority languages to be used as languages of study. Incremental changes could include minority languages being introduced as electives in the academic stream of high school, and a mother tongue becoming the language of tuition in vocational schools where a particular minority attends classes.

Given the recent political reform allowing members of religious minorities to run in municipal elections, the next step would be to allow elections for provincial governors. With the escalation of international tensions, and Iran facing severe water shortages it may be timely to suggest that to tackle current and future challenges, Iranian authorities need to have more trust in the Iranian people.