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Fikra Forum

While Iran Releases some Prisoners, Ahwazi and Other Prisoners Face Imminent Death

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Brief Analysis

Iran's coronavirus outbreak has left the government struggling to respond, to the point that the regime has announced the release of 85,000 prisoners to reduce the risk of coronavirus spread in overcrowded prisons. However, this amnesty policy has excluded a significant majority of Iran's prison population, no less likely to experience the terrifying combination of inhumane prison conditions and their ability to quickly spread disease—including coronavirus.

Among them are tens of thousands of male and female Ahwazi political prisoners detained in the regime's massively overcrowded jails. After the amnesty announcement raised the hope of these prisoners' families, hopes were quickly dashed upon discovering that no Ahwazis were included in the amnesty. The resulting tensions have now boiled over, with lethal results.

Ahwazi prisoners, attempting a prison escape resulting in dozens of fatalities, have highlighted the dangerous condition's of Iran's prisons. Moreover, their attempted flight is one example of the on-the-ground realities of Iran's struggle with coronavirus, countering the current regime narrative that the epidemic is now under control.

On March 30 and 31, the Iranian regime security personnel reportedly killed and wounded dozens of Ahwazi prisoners attempting to flee dangerous conditions in two prisons in the southern region of Ahwaz. with many more detainees wounded. So far, fifteen prisoners from Sepidar prison and twenty in Sheyban have been reported killed.

Lethal Conditions

When the regime's judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Ismaili announced the release of 10,000 prisoners released in honour of the Persian New Year Nowruz, and that half would be 'security prisoners'—a term used for 'threats to

Iran's national security' and a common charge for activists and dissidents—many in the Ahwaz region hoped that some of the region's many political prisoners would be freed.

Conditions in Iran's prisons were dire even before the threat of coronavirus, but activists had become increasingly concerned with the ability of overcrowding to facilitate the spread of coronavirus. Ahwaz activists reported on reports of dangerous conditions among the hundreds of political prisoners detained in Wards 5 and 8 of the regime's infamous Sheyban Prison a few kilometres outside the region's capital city of Ahwaz. Similar reports came from female Ahwazi political prisoners detained in the massively overcrowded women's section of the regime's notorious Sepidar Prison.

According to reports from the prison and the accounts of former detainees such as Ahwazi labour rights activist Sepideh Gholian, the situation for prisoners began deteriorating rapidly as coronavirus spread, including floods of raw sewage and rarely functioning water supply.

While Ahwazi reportedly protested regularly at the lack of basic sanitation and disinfectants and the poor diet in the prisons, warning that these provided a perfect environment for the spread of disease, these protests were ignored by the regime.

Just last week, [Amnesty International](#) issued a statement expressing grave concern over the wellbeing of detainees in light of the coronavirus pandemic. The statement urged the Iranian regime to free prisoners without imposing heavy bail conditions which poor families are unable to meet.

As the COVID-19 virus indeed began spreading through the prisoner population, no efforts were made to address its spread. Early on, [three Ahwazi detainees were identified as infected with the virus](#), all in the political prisoners' section of Sheyban prison—activists Milad Bahglani and Hamid Reza Makki, and photographer Mehdi Bahri.

Despite knowing the dangers of the highly infectious potentially lethal pandemic, prison authorities were reportedly extremely late in isolating and obtaining medical help for the three infected detainees, greatly increasing the likelihood that they passed the virus on to other prisoners and staff.

Protest and Retaliation

In the days leading up to the uprising, prisoners in Sepidar grew more desperate as reports increasingly circulated of detainees being diagnosed with the potentially lethal virus and no signs that prisoners would not be released under the amnesty measures. The regime [reacted](#) to these protests by deploying large numbers of security forces from other provinces of Iran as a precautionary measure.

Feeling they had no option left but to attempt to escape even as they knew that prison personnel would not hesitate to shoot to kill, desperate prisoners in Sepidar Prison set light to blankets and other items on March 30. The fires were an effort to provide a smoke cover to reduce visibility before attempting to scale the prison walls. In response, security forces stormed the prison cells, firing tear gas and live ammunition.

Similar horrific scenes were reported at the equally afflicted Sheyban Prison located in the regional capital on April 1, where coronavirus and the denial of any amnesty or furlough by prison officials led prisoners to use the same methods as their peers in Sepidar.

Detainees in Wings 6, 7, 9 and 10 set fire to their cells and attempted to break down the first gate of the prison, infamous for its torture and 'disappearance' of political prisoners. The authorities responded by shooting and killing five prisoners at point blank range, as well as wounding many more.

According to reports from the region, desperately worried family members of the inmates in both cases rushed to the prisons after hearing about the fires and reports of heavy fire to find out about their loved ones. On arrival, [reports from the region](#) indicated these family members were subjected to tear gas and gunfire with [live](#)

ammunition from prison guards stationed around the prison's perimeters, with activists reporting that three were severely injured.

A mobile phone video from the attack published on Twitter shows one of the Ahwazi detainees' distraught mothers outside Sheyban Prison screaming and weeping for her son, while another shows prisoners' bodies being transferred via ambulance from the prison.

Families have now confirmed 15 deaths of Ahwazi prisoners from the Sepidar prison, either shot or burned to death. Those murdered prisoners identified include 30-year-old Mohammad Salamat of Ahwaz City, Sayed Reza Khersani, Shahin Zoheiri, Ali Khafaji, Majid zobeidi and 29-year-old Mohammad Tamoli tourfi. The families of the political prisoners reported calls from regime agents to "come and gather your son's dead bodies," which they were told to bury secretly. Regime functionaries also demanded that the murdered men's family members pay for the costs of the damage to the prisons caused by their loved ones' escape attempts. Families were also warned not to speak out about the killings to human rights organizations or NGOs.

After the attempted prison break, prisoners such as the prominent political prisoner Mohammad Ali Amouri were moved to solitary confinement regime intelligence service's notorious black site prisons, with Iranian regime intelligence services accusing Amouri of being the ringleader of the protest. Prison authorities have further increased the risk of infection by refusing to test the prisoners who shared a cell with Baghlani and Makki for coronavirus.

For those with relatives still in the prisons, family members are reportedly frantic with worry that their already abused relatives will be tortured into making false confessions and given even longer prison sentences to make an example of them and attempt to deter future uprisings.

Ahwazi rights groups in exile have called on the UN and the international human rights community to save Ahwazi prisoners, since Iranian authorities are refusing to take even the most basic measures to protect them against infection. Compounding the issue are the impossibly high bails set at a price that is impossible for impoverished families to raise.

In response to the latest revelations, Raed Baroud, a Palestinian-Scottish activist, voiced disgust at the regime's hypocrisy given the Iranian regime's frequent references to the rights of Palestinian prisoners. "The mullahs keep talking about their care for Palestinian prisoners, but they use Palestinians' suffering as a cloth to wash our Ahwazi, Syrian, and Iraqi brothers' blood off their hands. While nations in the rest of the world are working to save their citizens' lives in the coronavirus pandemic, Iran's regime is treating its innocent citizens worse than livestock, imprisoning those who dare to call for freedom and allowing them to die of this terrible disease. Shame on that barbaric regime and on the world that's complicit in its crimes against humanity."

Yet while several relatives and other locals were able to disseminate videos showing the prisons and the attacks by regime personnel against onlookers on the roadway, international human rights organizations and governments have been slow to react, much less condemn the regime for its actions. More immediately, however, the relatives of prisoners alive and dead are all seeking swift protective action for those who remain, including non-Iranian oversight of prison conditions, the prompt provision of medical treatment, and inclusion of Ahwazi political prisoners in general amnesty or on reasonable bail.

International human rights bodies must pressure the Iranian authorities for the immediate release of all political prisoners, and all prisoners who have not committed serious crimes in Iran in order to prevent the spread of the epidemic in prisons. Iran's willingness to release some political prisoners demonstrates a potential pressure point to expand these amnesties if enough international pressure is mounted.

In the words of an Ahwazi dissident and writer Ghazi Heidari, now in exile previously detained and tortured for his

human rights activism, “The regime’s murder of these poor prisoners shows that the only way the regime wants Ahwazis to leave its prisons is in a coffin.”

If international bodies do not condemn these atrocities, the regime will see the international preoccupation with coronavirus as a way to mask its abuse of prisoners and refusal to prevent mass infections within its prison systems in Ahwaz and throughout Iran. So far, those released in amnesty have masked Iran’s continued human rights abuses against those political prisoners still trapped in Iran’s jails. In the midst of a crisis, the international community must take this opportunity to pressure Iran on this crucial issue. ❖



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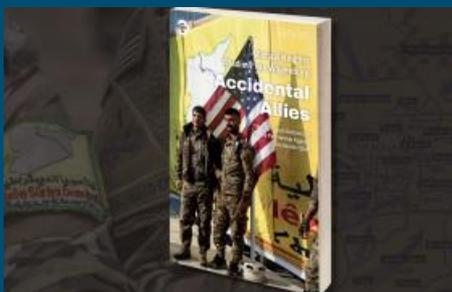


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