

Iran's Fear of the Popular Figure: The Execution of Navid Afkari

by [Nir Boms \(/experts/nir-boms\)](#), [Shayan Arya \(/experts/shayan-arya\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Nir Boms \(/experts/nir-boms\)](#)

Dr. Nir Boms is a co-founder of CyberDissidents.org and a research fellow at the Dayan Center for Middle East Studies.

[Shayan Arya \(/experts/shayan-arya\)](#)

Shayan Arya is an Iran expert and Human Rights activist and a member of the Constitutionalist Party of Iran (Liberal Democrat).



Brief Analysis

Navid Afkari, a 27 year-old Iranian wrestling champion who won numerous medals, had rarely lost a fight in his life. There was, however, one struggle he could not win. Following torture and a forced confession, Navid was executed earlier this month following a verdict by the Iranian Supreme Court.

Navid Afkari, along with his two brothers Vahid and Habib, were found guilty of participating in the nationwide protest that engulfed Iran in August 2018, along with several other charges that included insulting the supreme leader, waging war against God, and murder. Vahid and Habib were handed prison sentences of 54 years and 27 years respectively. Both were also sentenced to 74 lashes and are still behind bars.

Navid's execution demonstrates that Iran's decision earlier this year to commute the execution sentence of three young men represented an exception rather than a potential shift inside the country. Iran had halted the executions of three young protestors—Amirhossein Moradi, Mohammad Rajabi, and Saeed Tamjidi—under the pressure of an online campaign that attracted millions of tweets and a hashtag protesting their sentence.

In this case, the relative anonymity of these three men may have been a factor in this decision. In contrast, Navid's celebrity status allowed the government to make an example of him. He and his brothers were only a few among thousands of demonstrators who took to the streets to protest the country's worsening economic situation and rising levels of inflation. Navid's presence as a celebrity in a protest was a red line for the Iranian government.

As a result, Navid's final days were reportedly torturous and cruel. "For around 50 days I had to endure the most horrendous physical and psychological tortures," he said in a [letter smuggled from his prison cell \(https://english.mojahedin.org/i/iran-navid-vahid-habib-afkari-sangari-protests-torture-execution-human-rights-20200831\)](https://english.mojahedin.org/i/iran-navid-vahid-habib-afkari-sangari-protests-torture-execution-human-rights-20200831). "They would beat me with sticks and batons, hitting my arms, legs, abdomen and back. They would place a plastic bag on my head and torture me until I suffocated to the very brink of death."

A [forensic pathologist has since confirmed \(https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4404/\)](https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4404/) that the prison injuries were indeed from torture. This confirmation did not convince the [Supreme Court](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/immunity-through-impunity-systemic-racism-in-iran>) against accepting Navid's almost certainly forced confession to stabbing a security employee from a local water supply company during a protest. The court dismissed the forensic evidence of torture as inconclusive, and Navid was hanged in Adelabad prison in the city of Shiraz on September 12.

In his memoir detailing the brutalities of the Iranian regime, Ayatollah [Hossein Ali Montazeri](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hossein-Ali-Montazeri)—(<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hossein-Ali-Montazeri>) once Khomeini's designated successor later turned dissident—describes the regime's longstanding approach to popular opposition, one in which Navid's execution fits nicely. In the memoir, Montazeri quotes Supreme Leader Khomeini as saying, “in the Islamic Republic, no one can become a rallying flag for the people,” a response to Montazeri's request for respect towards Grand Ayatollah Shariatmadari, who was opposing some of Khomeini's policies. Both Shariatmadari and Montazeri would later be put under house arrest for the rest of their lives.

Khamenei has followed in Khomeini's footsteps. In the past several decades, the popular singer [Fereydoun Farokhzad](https://en.radiofarda.com/a/farrokhzad-unsolved-murder/28665547.html) (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/farrokhzad-unsolved-murder/28665547.html>), Iranian poets such as Mohamad Mokhtari, and scholars such as [Ali Akabr Saeedi Sirjani](https://iranian.com/main/2010/sep/ali-akbar-saidi-sirjani.html?site=archive) (<https://iranian.com/main/2010/sep/ali-akbar-saidi-sirjani.html?site=archive>) have all allegedly been exiled, imprisoned, or killed by the Iranian government in an apparent attempt to prevent any popular figure from becoming a threat to the regime. The government even imprisoned filmmaker and journalist [Mohamad Nourizad](https://iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/writer-and-activist-mohammad-nourizad-was-arrested) (<https://iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/writer-and-activist-mohammad-nourizad-was-arrested>), a former friend of Khamenei, after Nourizad expressed criticism of the regime. According to tapes he has smuggled out of prison, he is contemplating suicide.

A recent Human Rights Watch [country report on Iran](https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/iran) (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/iran>) stated, “In 2019, Iran's judiciary dramatically increased the cost of peaceful dissent, sentencing dozens of human rights defenders to decades-long prison sentences.” Human Rights Watch stated in its report that “Security forces and the judiciary have responded to these protests with arbitrary mass arrests and serious due process violations. While at least 30 people, including security forces, have been killed during the protests, officials have not conducted credible investigations into protesters' deaths, or into security agencies' use of excessive force to repress protest.”

The Iranian government's harsh reaction, however, is not surprising. The state finds itself in a difficult position, one that fueled the protests in the first place. Iran's significant investments in Syria are being targeted by [Israel](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/diplomatic-openings-amid-israels-syria-strikes) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/diplomatic-openings-amid-israels-syria-strikes>) on an almost daily basis, while Iran and its proxies remain unable to respond. The Iranian peoples' perception is that the regime has failed miserably in Syria and spent [billions of dollars](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/iran-has-spent-as-much-as-30-billion-in-syria-lawmaker-says) (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/iran-has-spent-as-much-as-30-billion-in-syria-lawmaker-says>) on a failed foreign experiment that the country should have used for its own benefit.

Beyond Syria, other regional developments cast doubt over the future of Iran's presence in the Middle East. More than four decades since its inception, the Islamic Republic in Iran finds itself isolated. It now sees that its dream of leading a Muslim coalition against the United States and Israel has become increasingly unattainable.

In a critical blow, Arab countries—starting with the UAE and Bahrain—have begun normalizing their relationships with Israel, a move unthinkable a decade ago. One should not underestimate the demoralizing effect of normalization on the Iranian regime.

In the midst of this crisis, the regime is reverting to old tactics of oppression. Those executed in Iran since Hassan Rouhani became president include a young man with diagnosed mental illness, minors, over a hundred women, and an alleged criminal who received no legal representation. Unfortunately, Navid will probably not be the last person

silenced after fighting for change in Iran. Though less prominent, these cases are no less distressing and include several Iranians executed for crimes committed as minors, including Shayan Saeedpour, who had a long documented history of mental illness. Iran has executed its citizens on charges of drinking alcohol, such as Morteza Jamali, or Hossein Jalalvand, who was executed without any private charges or complaints being brought against him. Since 2013, when President Rohani came to office, 108 women have been executed, helping to bring the total of executions to over 100 during the first six months of 2020 alone.

Looking ahead, Navid Afkari should be remembered as a champion for change who believed in a better future for Iran and the Middle East as a whole. His legacy should remind us that the Iranian people have had enough of “revolutionary” promises and that they seek a different future. Their fight, like that of Navid, still carries hope for a different future, and they need all the help they can get. ❖

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