



IRAN HUMAN RIGHTS 

DRUG EXECUTIONS: THE POLITICALLY COSTLESS VICTIMS OF THE DEATH PENALTY IN IRAN



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Cover: 130 of the 305 people executed for drug-related charges in Iran in 2023



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World Day Against the Death Penalty
10 October 2023
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INTRODUCTION

“Death Penalty: an Irreversible Torture” is the theme of the 21st World Day Against the Death Penalty. To mark the occasion, Iran Human Rights is highlighting the use of the death penalty in the name of the “war on drugs” which has claimed at least 3,990 lives in Iran since 2010. In fact, in the last 14 years (2010-10 October 2023), more people have been executed for drug-related charges than any other death penalty charges in Iran. Of the 7530 executions recorded by IHRNGO since 2010, 53% were for drug-related charges.

Under the jurisdiction of the notorious Revolutionary Courts also responsible for political executions, drug defendants are systematically tortured to force confessions, denied access to lawyers and tried in sham trials without due process. Those executed for drug-related charges are from the most marginalised and impoverished communities. The death penalty is a tool of political repression and voiceless drug defendants are cannon fodder used as its ammunition. They are the politically low cost victims whose secret group hangings barely make news.

While drug execution numbers dropped to an average of 26 per annum following an Amendment to Anti-Narcotic Laws due to international pressure in 2017, they reversed in practice in 2021 and have continued to rise with at least 305 drug executions recorded in 2023 as of 10 October. In 2023, drug executions outnumber all other charges once again. Globally, Iran remains the world’s top executioner for drug offences. Of the 285 drug executions recorded in 2022 by Harm Reduction International worldwide, 98.4% took place in Iran.¹

However, the international community at large, has remained silent about this exponential rise. In publishing this report, Iran Human Rights urges Member States to withdraw funding of UNODC projects on drug-trafficking in Iran, and to make all collaborations and funding contingent upon an immediate halt to all drug-related executions.

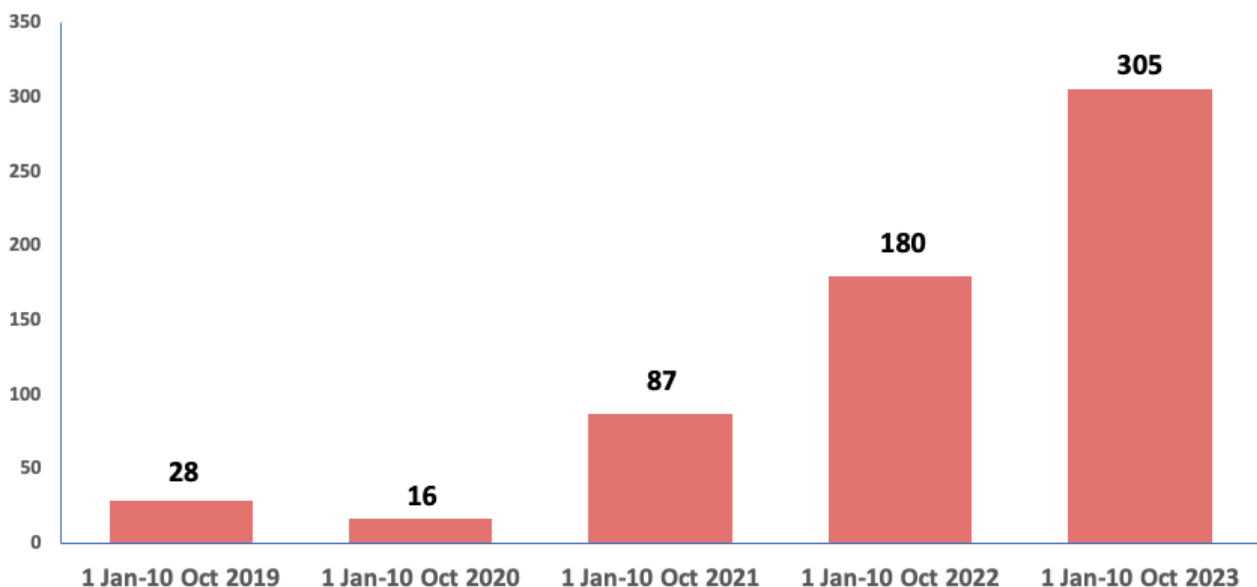
Director, Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam said: *“Islamic Republic authorities have repeatedly admitted that the death penalty doesn’t deter drug trafficking. Yet, they continue to carry out executions because they need to instil societal fear to prevent more protests. Those executed for drug charges are among the most marginalised groups in society and the low-cost victims of the regime’s killing machine.”* He added: *“The Islamic Republic authorities use the UNODC cooperation to legitimise the drug-related executions. The UN must not allow one of its agencies to be complicit in what is regarded as serious human rights violations according to the international law.”*

FACTS & FIGURES

The following statistics are drug-related executions recorded by Iran Human Rights between 1 January 2010-10 October 2023:

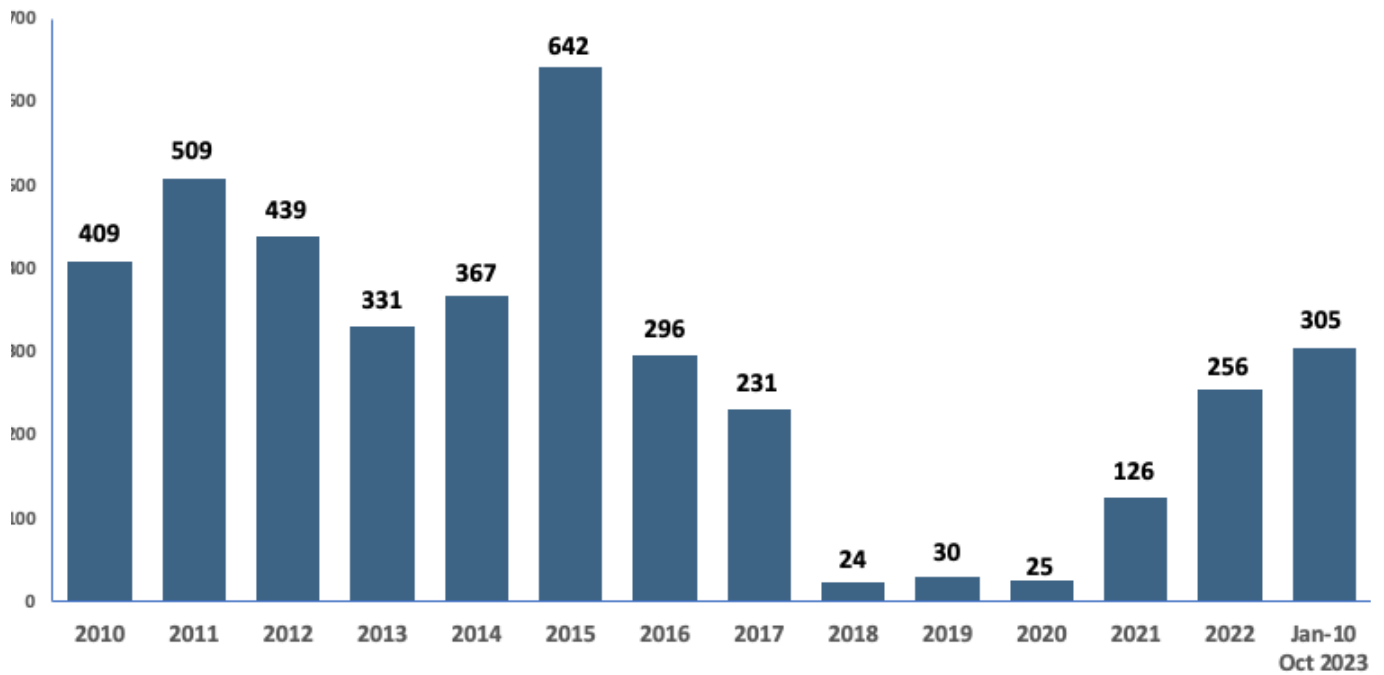
- At least 3,990 people were executed for drug-related charges between 2010-10 October 2023
- At least 766 people have been executed for drug-related charges since the 2017 Amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Laws
- Only 3% of drug executions recorded by IHRNGO since the 2017 Amendment were announced by official sources compared to 20% for all executions
- At least 8 juvenile offenders have been executed for drug-related charges since 2010
- At least 94 women have been executed for drug-related charges since 2010
- At least 274 Baluch people have been executed for drug-related charges since 2021, 40% of all drug executions in that time period. This is while they only represent 2-5% of Iran's population

Comparison of Drug-related Executions: 1 January-10 October



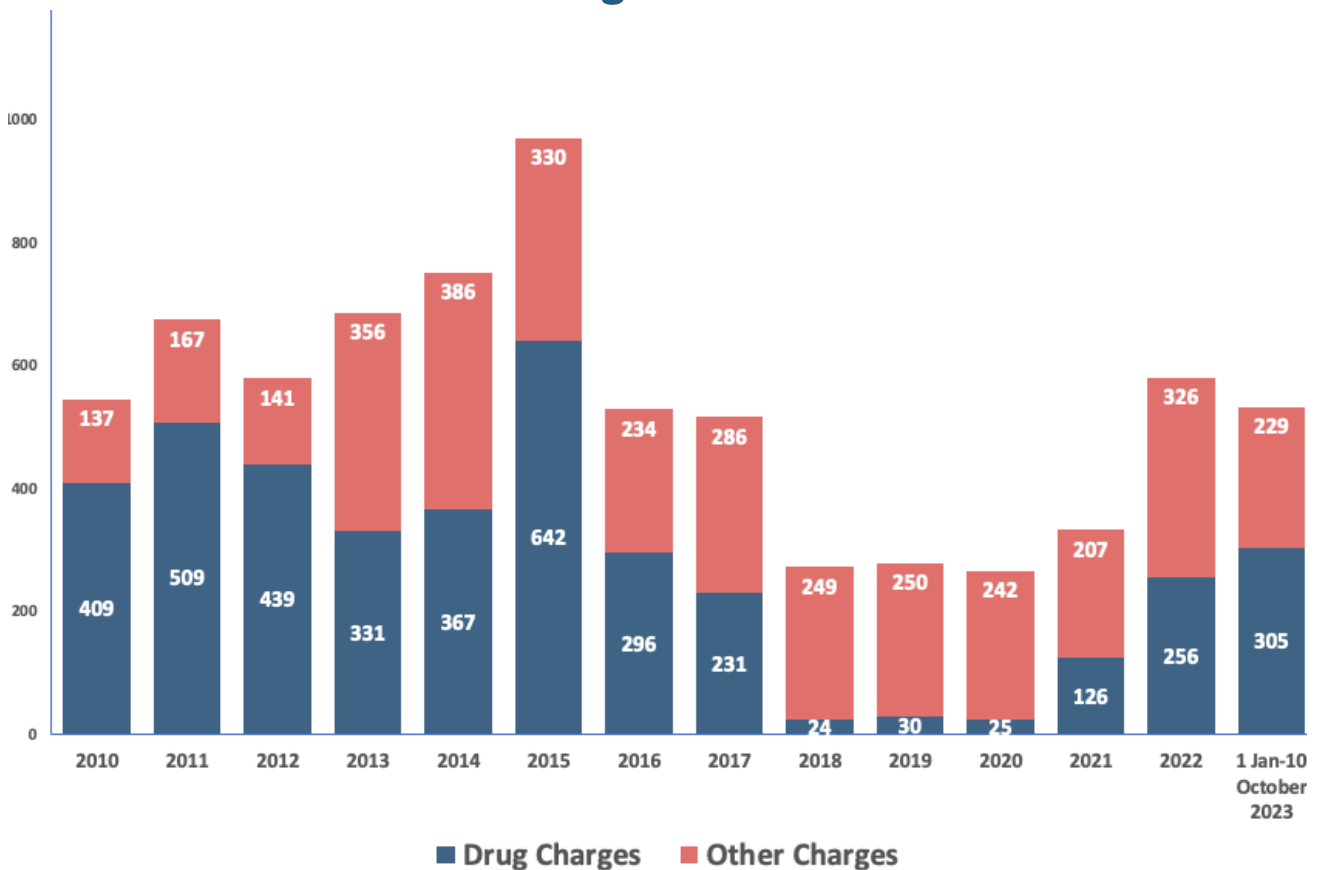
A comparative chart of drug-related executions between 1 January-10 October in the last five years. There has been a 69% increase in drug executions in 2023 (1 Jan-10 October) compared to the same period in 2022, and the number of drug-related executions in 2023 were close to 20 times higher than 2020.

Drug-related Executions: 2010-2023



The 2017 Amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Laws led to a drop in executions between 2018-2020 but reversed in practice in 2021 and have been rising at an alarming rate since.

All Executions v Drug Executions: 2010-2023



Drug-related charges under the jurisdiction of the Revolutionary Courts, have led to the most number of executions since 2010.

OVERVIEW

The death penalty as a punishment for drug-related offences was first introduced by the Islamic Republic in 1980 and has since sent countless people to the gallows across Iran. Since Iran Human Rights started systematically recording the death penalty in Iran in 2008, drug-related charges have led to more executions than any other charges, including murder. The Anti-Narcotics Laws have undergone several amendments throughout the decades with the most recent in 2017 creating hope that it would eventually lead to a complete halt in drug-related executions. The Amendment which was the result of international pressure, did lead to a decline in male drug executions (average of 26 annually between 2018-2020) and a complete drop in female executions until 2021. However, the outcome was not guaranteed due to forewarned shortcomings.² In 2021, drug executions increased fivefold compared to 2020, with five women executed. In 2022, that number more than doubled to 256 drug-related executions including three women. As of 10 October 2023, at least 305 people have been executed for drug-related charges in Iran, compared to 180 in 2022, 87 in 2021, 16 in 2020 and 28 in 2019 in the same period.

By using the death penalty against drug defendants, Iran is in breach of its international treaty obligations, namely the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 6 of the ICCPR sets out the inherent right to life and emphasises that the death penalty may only be applied for “*most serious crimes*.” In the General Comment on Article 6, the United Nations Human Rights Committee stated that “*The term ‘the most serious crimes’ must be read restrictively and appertain only to crimes of extreme gravity, involving intentional killing.*”

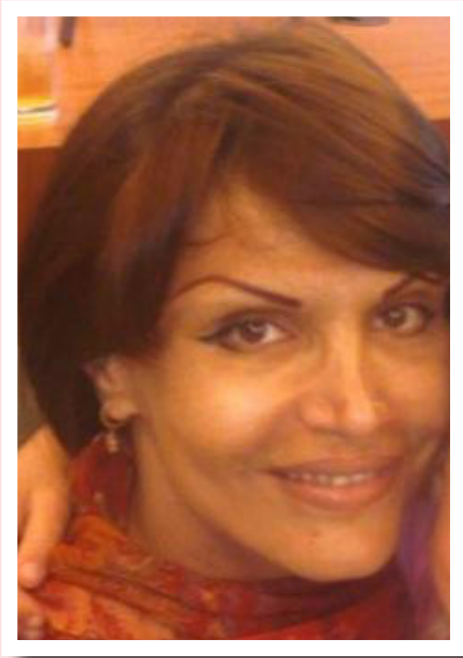
Article 7 of ICCPR bans “torture [and] cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”, and Article 14 provides for fair trial and due process and specifically mentions the importance of an impartial judicial system, access to a lawyer, and not compelling individuals to testify against themselves or to confess guilt. Drug defendants are systematically subjected to physical and psychological torture to force self-incriminating confessions. Drug charges are also under the jurisdiction of the Revolutionary Courts, which notoriously convict defendants in sham trials, without access to lawyers, due process or fair trial rights.

The lack of transparency is also greater in drug executions compared to other executions. Only 16 of the 305 drug executions in 2023, and 3% of drug executions between 2021 and 2023 were reported by official sources, compared to 20% of all executions. It is important to note that the numbers presented in this report are an absolute minimum. Only officially reported and unofficial executions confirmed by two independent sources, are included in IHRNGO’s statistics.

Baluch ethnic minorities are grossly overrepresented in drug execution numbers. In February 2016, Iran’s vice-president for women and family affairs stated in an official interview that “*We have a village in Sistan and Baluchestan province where every single man has been executed*” in reference to drug executions.³

CASES

It is impossible to name all the victims of Iran's drug executions in such a limited report. As such, the following are just a few cases that shed a small light on the injustices suffered by drug death row prisoners in the last 14 years.



ZAHRA BAHRAMI

2009 protester executed for drug charges

Zahra was a dual national protester who was arrested in the aftermath of the 2009 nationwide protests. She was originally sentenced to *moharebeh* (enmity against god) but was later tortured to confess to drug-related charges in a fabricated case that ended with her execution in Evin Prison on 29 January 2011.⁴ She was 46 years old.



SAEED SEDIGHI

Sentenced in 30-minute trial

Saeed Sedighi was a shop owner who was arrested for drug charges and subjected to torture to force confessions. He met his lawyer in person 15 minutes before his trial which lasted less than 30 minutes. Despite an international campaign to save his life, he was executed with nine others in Evin Prison on 22 October 2012.⁵ His case was the first drug death penalty case in Iran to gain international attention and support.



MAHMOUD BARATI

Drug death row prisoner's brother framed while trying to save his life

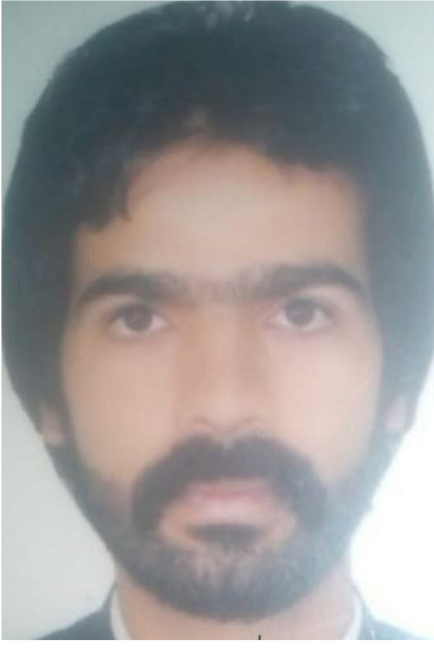
Mahmoud Barati was a primary school teacher and worked for a local taxi company on the side when his brother, Ahmad was arrested and sentenced to death for possession of 500g of crack cocaine in Robat Karim in the summer of 2006. As the older brother, Mahmoud set out to save him with his mother and sister. When he discovered the identity of the friend who had given the drugs to Ahmad to sell, he spent months trying to convince him to come forward with the truth to save his brother. However, the friend was arrested with 5.5kg of crack cocaine himself. Thinking Mahmoud had snitched, he told authorities that he had bought the drugs from Mahmoud and his mother and sister as revenge. Under torture, interrogators told Mahmoud he needed to confess for his mother and sister to be released and he could take back the confession in court. Yet, his pleas of innocence were ignored at trial. Realising that Mahmoud had not turned him in, the friend wrote a letter to the court which was also ignored. Before his own execution, the friend wrote another letter in an effort to save Mahmoud, to no avail. Mahmoud was executed in Qezel Hesar Prison on 7 September 2015.⁶



KHEZR GHAVIDEL

Death sentence commuted 10 months after execution

KheZR Ghavidel was arrested in Urmia on charges of carrying methamphetamine with two other people in 2013. Sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court, his case was still pending a decision at the Supreme Court when he was executed in Urmia Central Prison on 10 September 2020.⁷ Ten months later, in June 2021, the Supreme Court overturned his death sentence and commuted his co-defendants' sentences to 30 years' imprisonment.⁸ KheZR's family were told to file complaints as they would be entitled to receive diya (blood money). They told IHRNGO that *"even if they paid us billions of tomans, it still wouldn't make up for what was taken from us."*⁹



NEMATOLLAH BARAHOUYI

Baluch prisoner transferred to execution without prior notice

Nematollah Barahouyi was a Baluch father of three daughters. He had spent two years on death row when on 6 November 2022, he was woken up and told he was being taken for execution without any prior notice. He was killed by prison guards when he resisted. However, his lifeless body was still hanged in Zahedan Central Prison to declare his cause of death as execution.¹⁰ In 2022, Baluch people made up 30% of all drug executions.



MOHAMMAD RASOUL SHEHBAKHS

Executed despite Supreme Court overturning death sentence 4 times

Mohammad Rasoul Shehbakhsh was a Baluch 44-year-old who was arrested for drug charges after being shot eight times in the abdomen and legs. He was sentenced to death by the Revolutionary without a lawyer. His sentence was overturned by the Supreme Court four times but Judge Ghorbani from Branch 1 of the Kerman Revolutionary Court told him, “*you have to be executed.*” He was executed along with another Baluch man only identified as Akhtar Mohammad (surname unknown) in Kerman Central Prison on 8 January 2023.¹¹

MOVEMENT AGAINST DRUG EXECUTIONS

Drug death row prisoners are amongst the most voiceless victims of the death penalty in Iran and without an independent judiciary, there is no recourse to justice. Unlike murder defendants who have private plaintiffs (victim's family) that can be convinced to grant forgiveness, drug defendants' families have no way of saving their loved ones. However, a justice movement has begun to take shape amongst the families of drug death row prisoners in the past year that has begun gaining support from civil society.



On 6 September 2022, prior to the start of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” nationwide protests, families of drug death row prisoners protested outside the Judiciary building and parliament for two weeks. The protests were violently crushed with protesters arrested and only ended with the start of the nationwide protests.¹²

On 11 September 2022, 32-year-old Farhad Ghahremani whose father, Mohammad Taghi Ghahremani was executed in 2011, was arrested after giving an impassioned speech outside the Judiciary building. He said: *“I’ve felt this pain myself, I don’t want my compatriots to be executed, they shouldn’t be executed!”*¹³ He was detained in Evin Prison and injured during the attack at the prison 15 October,¹⁴ and transferred to the Greater Tehran Penitentiary shortly after without receiving any medical treatment for his injuries. He was tried via video conference without a lawyer on 28 November. His charges included “assembly and collusion against national security” and “disrupting public order and peace.” He was sentenced to six months imprisonment and 25 lashes and released after serving his sentence on 26 February 2023.



On 16 January 2023, families of drug death row prisoners gathered outside the Judiciary building in Tehran again to stop the execution of their loved ones behind bars. They held signs that read, “No to drug executions” and “Don’t execute (my dad).”

On 10 May 2023, Families of death row prisoners gathered outside Qezel Hesar Prison in Karaj after at least three people were transferred to solitary confinement in preparation for their scheduled executions. Per IHRNGO sources, state forces beat protesting families with batons and clubs, fired bullets in the air, tear gas and paintball at them. One family member was hospitalised for injuries sustained from being beaten with a club.¹⁵ Hossein Panjak, Abdolhossein Emami Moghaddam and Babak Aghayi were executed hours later.¹⁶



The families of drug death row prisoners again gathered outside the Judiciary building in Tehran on 24 May 2023 to protest against drug executions. They held placards that read: “No to drug executions”, “Don’t execute my dad” and “No to death penalty.”

WHAT CAN BE DONE

- Call on Iran to establish a moratorium on the use of the death penalty and to move towards the abolition of the death penalty.
- Advocate for major reforms within the country’s judiciary system, which does not currently meet minimum international standards, including ending the practice of forced confessions, torture and the existence of the Revolutionary Courts
- Determine bilateral and international funding and cooperation, in particular the UN Office on Drug and Crime, for the achievement of clear results in terms of compliance with human rights standards and ensure that any investment, funding, trade and cooperation programme in Iran is not used to participate in, facilitate or support the commission of executions, or any other violation of human rights law.

ENDNOTES

1. <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2022/>
2. See page 20 of the 2017 Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran: https://iranhr.net/media/files/Rapport_iran_2018-gb-090318-MD2.pdf
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/26/all-adult-males-in-one-iranian-village-executed-for-drug-offences-official-says>
4. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/666/>
5. <https://iranhr.net/fa/articles/1811/>
6. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/2309/>
7. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4422/>
8. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4793/>
9. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/4793/>
10. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5577/>
11. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5692/>
12. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5476/>
13. Subtitled footage of his speech: <https://x.com/IHRights/status/1649654627602710528?s=20>
14. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5519/>
15. Video of the attack: <https://x.com/IHRights/status/1656246188197175297?s=20>
16. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5891/>

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