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HUMAN
RIGHTS

A VILLAGE OF GRAVES: WIDESPREAD AND SYSTEMATIC DRUG EXECUTIONS IN IRAN



DECEMBER 2025

*This report is dedicated to the thousands executed for drug offences in Iran;
those who have heroically reported their stories despite the risk to their own
lives—often while awaiting the gallows themselves;
and the “No Death Penalty Tuesdays” abolitionist movement.*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As 2025 draws to a close, Iran is ending the year with more reported executions than in any other year since the late 1980s. While the final execution numbers for 2025 are still being verified, an arduous process due to Iran's lack of judicial transparency, the available evidence already shows that more than 700 of the at least 1,500 people executed were for drug-related offences. Those executed are overwhelmingly from the most marginalised sectors of Iranian society, including people living in poverty, ethnic minorities, foreign nationals and individuals with little or no access to effective legal defence.

Commenting on the report, Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, Director of IHRNGO, stated: "People sentenced to death for drug offences are the most voiceless and weakest victims of the Islamic Republic's killing machine. These executions are not part of a 'war on drugs'; they are a central part of the Islamic Republic's war on its own people. By executing people on such a scale, the authorities seek to instil fear and prolong the life of a system that lacks legitimacy. The international community, and in particular the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), has a duty to act and ensure that cooperation with Iran does not enable or legitimise these killings carried out under the pretext of drug control." He added: "The large-scale and systematic executions of people for drug offences, carried out without due process and with the aim of instilling societal fear, must be investigated by the United Nations as crimes against humanity".

According to data collected by IHRNGO, Islamic Republic authorities have executed at least 5,356 people for drug-related charges between January 2010 and 30 November 2025. Amongst those executed were 121 women and at least seven child offender (under 18 years old at the time of their alleged offences).

Despite the 2017 amendment to Iran's Anti-Narcotics Law, introduced under international pressure and presented as a reform to reduce executions, the practice has continued at scale. Since January 2018, at least 2,132 people have been executed for drug-related offences, demonstrating that the amendment has failed to bring about a lasting reduction in the use of the death penalty for drug offences.

The report also documents the extraordinary lack of transparency surrounding executions in Iran. Over the past 15 years, Iranian authorities have officially announced only 10–30% of all executions. The situation is even more opaque in drug-related cases: since 2018, authorities have acknowledged just 2.4% of drug executions recorded by IHRNGO, compared to 23.44% of executions for other charges. The vast majority of cases documented in this report are therefore based on executions independently verified by IHRNGO through two independent sources.

Executions for drug-related offences have taken place in all 31 provinces of Iran. Notably, fewer than half of all recorded drug-related executions have occurred in border provinces, challenging official narratives that frame executions primarily as a response to cross-border trafficking.

One of the most striking findings of the report concerns the village of Sartarhan Chah Kheyr in Lorestan province. With a population of fewer than 400 inhabitants, the village has seen around 70 people executed for drug-related offences between 2010 and 2025, while around 100 others, including three women, are currently on death row. Through geolocation and independent verification,

IHRNGO confirmed that dozens of those buried in a local cemetery were executed for drug charges. Several gravestones bear the same surnames, illustrating a pattern in which multiple members of the same family or community are sentenced to death and executed over time.

Beyond the numbers, the report documents systematic violations of due process in drug cases, including torture-tainted confessions, denial of access to lawyers, trials lasting only minutes in Revolutionary Courts, and executions carried out despite unresolved legal challenges. It also highlights the disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, particularly Baluch people, who account for 24% of all recorded drug executions since 2021 while representing only 2–5% of Iran’s population, as well as the execution of at least 111 Afghan nationals during the same period.

Published at the close of a year marked by rising repression, this report underscores how executions for drug offences have become a central feature of Iran’s use of the death penalty — carried out largely in silence, and borne disproportionately by those with the least power to defend themselves.

BACKGROUND: ANTI-NARCOTICS LAWS, EXECUTIONS AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Iran’s regulation and criminalisation of narcotics has historically paralleled international developments, though it has been more punitive in law and enforcement. The death penalty for drug-related offences was first introduced in 1959 through an amendment to the 1955 Law on the Prohibition of Poppy Cultivation and Opium Consumption.¹ Available historical sources from the late Pahlavi period indicate that executions for drug-related offences did occur, particularly in the early 1970s. For example, according to Amnesty International’s 1976 Briefing on Iran, in 1974 the Iranian government “announced that 239 drug smugglers or pedlars had been executed in the past two and a half years.”² Other secondary sources referring to intelligence reports indicate that more than 90 drug smugglers were executed between 1969 and 1971.³ No comprehensive or independently verifiable total exists for the period from 1959 to 1979, and these figures should therefore be treated as minimum estimates based on official claims.

After the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic adopted a markedly more punitive and expansive approach to criminalisation, embedding the death penalty within its emerging system of “revolutionary” justice. The 1980 Law on the Intensification of Punishment for Narcotics Offenders and Related Security and Treatment Measures abolished rationing, prohibited poppy cultivation and introduced sweeping confiscation and punitive measures.⁴ Articles 2, 6, 7, 11 and 13 sanctioned the death penalty for a wide range of drug-related offences, including possession of, or carrying, growing, producing, selling, attempting to sell and providing premises for the use of narcotics.

This early post-revolutionary period coincided with the Islamic Republic’s broader efforts to rapidly consolidate power, amid internal dissent and the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq war. Amnesty International’s contemporaneous reporting indicates that executions for drug offences were already being carried out on a large scale. Amnesty reported that “several hundred” convicted drug offenders were executed in 1980, and that more than 200 were executed by September 1981.⁵ Amnesty also reported that more than 200 people convicted of drug trafficking were executed between September and December 1983.⁶ These executions took place alongside the mass execution of political prisoners.

Exact annual figures are not available due to the lack of transparency and the reliance on official press announcements.

The end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1988, followed closely by the mass executions of political prisoners in the summer of 1988, marked another decisive turning point. In this context, the authorities moved to further institutionalise and expand the use of the death penalty for drug offences through the 1988 Anti-Narcotics Law. The Law created the National Headquarters for Combating Drugs, expanded criminalisation and entrenched the death penalty for trafficking, possession and distribution above certain thresholds. It also broke down offences for each drug type in more detail and introduced public execution in the defendant's place of residence if their offences amounted to *efsad-fil-arz* (corruption on earth) under Article 9.⁷

The immediate years following the adoption of the 1988 Law saw a dramatic surge in executions for drug offences. According to Amnesty International between January 1989 and July 1990 over 1,100 people were executed for drug-trafficking, in some cases combined with other charges.⁸ Many executions were carried out in public with victims being hanged from cranes in public squares or from a gibbet mounted on the back of a lorry which could then be driven through the streets with the bodies still dangling.⁹ In 1990, Amnesty recorded 441 executions for drug-related offences out of 737 total recorded executions, stressing that these figures represented minimum numbers and that the true totals were likely higher.¹⁰ For 1991, Amnesty recorded at least 775 executions overall, noting that Iranian press reports stated that the majority were for drug-smuggling offences, although no precise breakdown was provided.¹¹ This period illustrates how drug-related executions increasingly replaced political executions as a central instrument of state repression in the post-war period.

Subsequent amendments were added in 1997 and 2010, which introduced even harsher sentences. The 2010 Amendment, adopted in the aftermath of the 2009 Green Movement protests, introduced the death penalty for possession of as little as 30 grams of heroin and expanded the list of covered substances. Altogether, the Anti-Narcotics Law, including the 1997 and 2010 Amendments, imposed the death penalty for 17 drug-related offences, including: a fourth conviction for certain offences; planting opium poppies, coca plants or cannabis seeds with the intent to produce drugs; smuggling more than 5 kilograms of opium or cannabis into Iran; buying, possessing, carrying or hiding more than 5 kilograms of opium or related substances (punishable upon a third conviction); and smuggling into Iran, dealing, producing, distributing or importing more than 30 grams of heroin, morphine, cocaine or their derivatives.

The 2017 amendment, adopted under significant international pressure and in the context of cooperation with the UNODC, led to a temporary decline in the number of drug-related executions. However, this trend has reversed in practice since 2021, with drug-related executions rising every year from an average of 26 per annum between 2018–2020 to at least 503 in 2024 and at least 697 between January and 30 November 2025.

TIMELINE OF DRUG REGULATION AND CRIMINALISATION IN IRAN

- 
- 1910 | Opium Restriction Law**
Introduced regulation of opium
 - 1926 | Public Penal Code**
Criminalised drug use for the first time
 - 1928 | Opium Monopoly Law**
Placed opium production under state control
 - 1928 | Law on Punishing Opium Smuggling**
Criminalised smuggling and possession
 - 1932 | Amendment to Opium Monopoly Law**
Tightened state control by restricting cultivation to government-supervised farms and criminalising opium cafes
 - 1955 | Law on Prohibition of Poppy Cultivation and Opium Consumption**
Banned cultivation and free use
 - 1959 | Law Amending the Law on the Prohibition of Poppy Cultivation and Opium Use**
Introduced the death penalty for the first time
 - 1969 | Opium Rationing Policy for Registered Addicts**
Allowed legal opium for registered users
 - 1980 | Law on the Intensification of Punishment for Narcotics Offenders and Related Security and Treatment Measures**
Abolished rationing, prohibited poppy cultivation and introduced sweeping confiscation and punitive measures
 - 1988 | Anti-Narcotics Law**
Expanded criminalisation and entrenched the death penalty for trafficking, possession and distribution above certain thresholds
 - 1997 | Amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law**
Expanded the scope of drug offences and entrenched harsh, quantity-based penalties
 - 2010 | Amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law**
Introduced the death penalty for possession of as little as 30 grams of heroin and included new categories of drugs
 - 2017 | Amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law**
Introduced mechanism to limit the use of the death penalty

SCALE AND PATTERNS OF DRUG EXECUTIONS (2010–30 NOV 2025)

According to IHRNGO data, Iranian authorities have executed at least 5,356 people for drug-related charges between January 2010 and 30 November 2025. These include 121 women and seven child offenders. Drug-related executions account for more than 52% of all executions carried out in this period.

At least 2,132 people were executed after January 2018, following the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law, which was intended to reduce the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences. Due to the lack of transparency in Iran's judicial system, the majority of executions are not officially announced by the authorities. Over the past 15 years, the authorities have, on average, announced only 10–30% of all executions. As a result, the majority of executions included in this report are based on cases verified by IHRNGO through two independent sources. The level of transparency is even lower for drug-related executions. Since 2018, the authorities have officially announced only 2.4% of all recorded drug-related executions.

Executions for drug-related offences have been carried out in all 31 provinces of Iran. The highest numbers have been recorded in Tehran/Alborz, particularly in Ghezelhesar Prison, as well as in prisons located in Khorasan Razavi, Isfahan, Fars, Sistan and Baluchistan, South Khorasan, West Azerbaijan and Kerman provinces. Fewer than half of all recorded drug-related executions have taken place in border provinces.

- At least 5,356 people were executed for drug-related charges between 2010 and 30 November 2025
- At least 2,132 people have been executed for drug-related charges since the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law
- Only 2.4% of drug executions recorded by IHRNGO since the 2017 Amendment were announced by official sources compared to 23.44% for all executions
- At least seven child offenders have been executed for drug-related charges since 2010. Of those, three were Afghan nationals, one was a Pakistani national and three were Baluch minorities
- At least 121 women have been executed for drug-related charges since 2010

Drug-related Executions in Iran 2010-2025

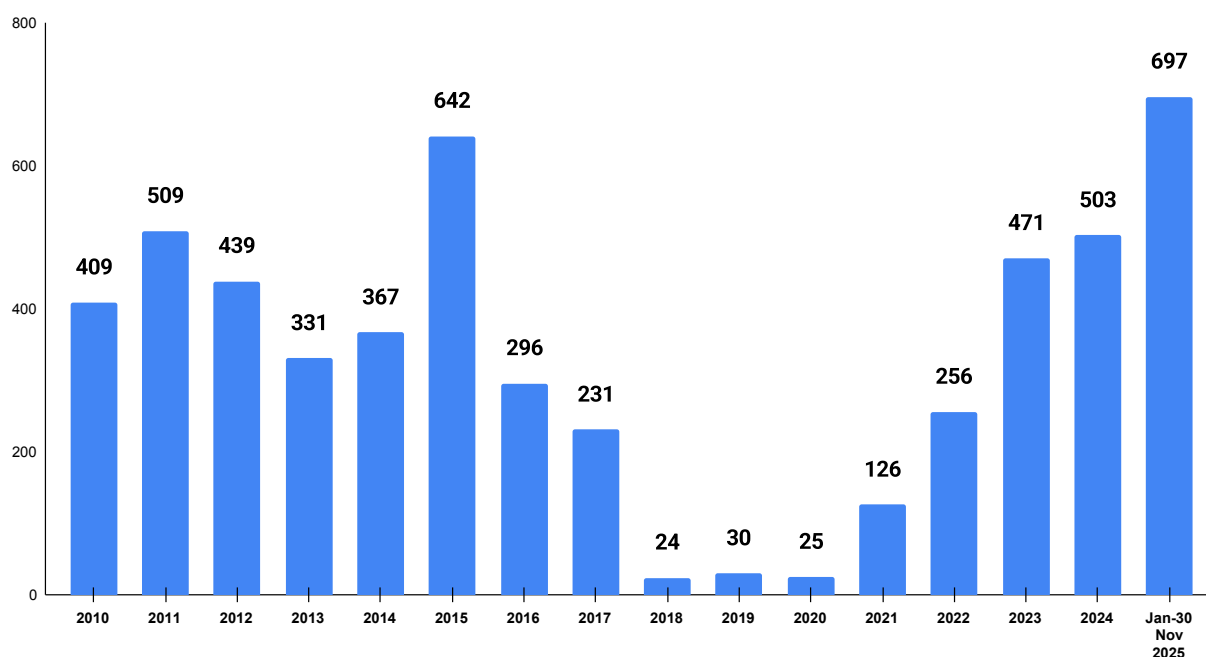


Figure 1: Drug-related executions recorded by IHRNGO between 2010 and 30 November 2025.

Drug Executions v Executions for Other Charges 2010-Nov 2025



Figure 2: Executions for drug-related charges have accounted for more than half of all executions since 2010.

Geographic Distribution of Drug Executions: 2016-Nov 2025



Figure 3: The majority of drug-related executions have been carried out in non-border provinces between 2016 and 30 November 2025.

WHO IS BEING EXECUTED?

In Iran, the death penalty disproportionately impacts people with the least power to defend themselves, especially those living in poverty, facing discrimination or pushed to the margins of society. This is especially true in drug cases, where many of those sentenced are low-level couriers or small-scale sellers rather than major traffickers, and ethnic minorities are overrepresented. With limited access to effective legal representation, violations of due process rights and proceedings that can be rushed and opaque, drug executions in particular end up amplifying existing social and economic inequalities.

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.¹²

IHRNGO has recorded the disproportionate impact of drug executions on Baluch minorities. Since 2021, at least 488 Baluch people have been executed for drug-related offences, 24% of all drug executions in that time period. This is while they only make up 2 to 5% of Iran's population. Similarly, IHRNGO has recorded the executions of at least 111 Afghan nationals since the Taliban takeover in 2021, accounting for 5.4% of all drug-related executions in that time period.

Available cases indicate that, over time, multiple members of the same family or community have been sentenced to death or executed for drug-related offences.

SARTARHAN CHAH KHEYR VILLAGE: 70 EXECUTIONS & 100 ON DEATH ROW

The village of (Sartarhan) Chah Kheyr is located in the Western Sartarhan Rural District, in the Tarhan District of Kuhdasht County, Lorestan Province. The villagers are Lak, an ethnic minority group that share cultural and linguistic characteristics with the Kurdish and Lor People.¹³ No reliable information is available about the number of Lak people in Iran.

In the 2006 government census, Chah Kheyr's population was reported as 544 people living in 99 households.¹⁴ In 2011, the village population was reported as 537 inhabitants.¹⁵ According to the 2016 census, the population had declined to 388 people in 99 households, including 204 women and 184 men.¹⁶ Overall, the village experienced a population decline of approximately 28% over a five-year period.



*The village of Sartarhan Chah Kheyr is located in the Tarhan District of Kuhdasht County, Lorestan Province.
(Source: Google Maps)*



Satellite image of Sartarhan Chah Kheyr village with Sartarhan Geravand Cemetery. (Source: Google Earth)

Despite its small population, according to information obtained by IHRNGO, at least 70 people from the village have been executed and a hundred more people including three women, are currently on death row. Of the 70 executions, 36 were reported to have been buried in Sartarhan Geravand Cemetery, located to the southwest of Chah Kheyr village. Through geolocation of photos of the graves and independent verification, IHRNGO has been able to confirm that 27 men and one woman buried at the cemetery were executed on drug-related charges. Two others buried at the cemetery died of a heart attack and suicide when they were informed of their scheduled executions. Authorities failed to transfer the two men to medical facilities outside the prison in time. Two other men who were not on death row, also died by suicide and heart attack behind bars while serving prison terms. IHRNGO was unable to independently verify the executions of four others.



Left photo: Aerial footage of the Sartarhan Geravand cemetery with Chah Kheyr village in the background. (Source: Instagram video of Mohsen Amrayi's funeral)

Right photo: Sartarhan Geravand Cemetery (Source: Google Earth)

The executions took place between 2010-2025, with 21 carried out in Ghezelhesar Prison, Alborz province. The remaining 34 executed villagers were reportedly buried in Kermanshah and Tehran, which IHRNGO has not been able to independently verify.

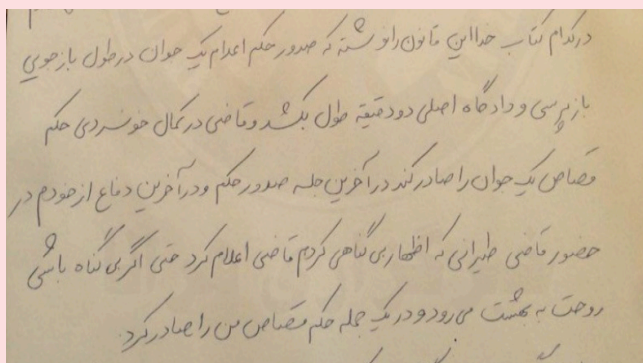
Informed sources told IHRNGO: “In the village, almost every family has at least two members who have either been executed or are under a sentence of death. While some of them had lawyers, it was no different to those without lawyers. They took their money and did nothing.”

According to the sources, a further 100 people from the village, including three women, are currently on death row for drug-related offences in Malayer, Boroujerd, Kermanshah and Alborz province prisons.

The stories behind the graves



Reza Hosseini Geravand is one of executed villagers buried at the cemetery. Raised by a widowed mother, Reza later moved to Tehran. At 28, he married Azadeh and was working to build a bright future whilst also supporting his elderly mother. On the day of his arrest two years into the marriage, Reza got ready for work. As he stepped outside his house, he was violently attacked by security forces at his door. Tear gas and excessive force were used in the altercation that ensued. Authorities were looking for their next door neighbours, from whose home drugs were discovered. Believing he was being arrested for the altercation, Reza was taken away. Held incommunicado for 70 days, he was tortured to confess to the drugs discovered at his neighbour’s house. When his wife finally saw him eleven months later, she said he looked like an old man.



Reza Hosseini Geravand's handwritten last will and testament from prison.

In a two-minute trial in the presence of a court-appointed lawyer, Reza was asked his name, age and where he was from. “As soon as he said Kuhdasht, he was told no further explanation was required,” his wife said. In his last will and testament written from prison, Reza wrote: “When I declared my innocence, Judge Tayerani said, ‘Even if you’re innocent, your soul will go to heaven’ and issued my sentence.” After spending three years on death row and in his own words, “without the charges against me ever being proven,” Reza was hanged in Ghezelhesar Prison on 3 May 2016, aged 34.¹⁷



Gravestones of the 28 people who were executed, and of the two death row prisoners who died due to the denial of medical treatment, one after a heart attack and the other by suicide upon being informed of their impending executions. Several of the people have the same surnames, indicating that they may have been relatives.

DUE PROCESS VIOLATIONS

In the absence of separation of powers, Iran's judiciary is neither independent nor impartial. Most notably, the Head of Judiciary is selected by the Supreme Leader and the Chief of the Supreme Court and all judges are selected by the Head of Judiciary based on their ideological loyalty. This is especially egregious in Revolutionary Courts which have jurisdiction over drug-related offences according to Article 303(c) of the Code of Criminal Procedure.¹⁸ As the cases in this report demonstrate, drug defendants are subjected to due process violations at every stage of so-called legal proceedings. Confessions extracted under coercion and torture are the primary method of proving guilt, defendants are systematically denied access to effective counsel and Revolutionary Court judges issue death sentences without evidence and in breach of not only Iran's international obligations, but also the Islamic Republic's own laws.

Iran is a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)¹⁹ which limits the use of the death penalty to "*the most serious crimes*," interpreted by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comments as "*crimes of extreme gravity involving intentional killing. Crimes not resulting directly and intentionally in death, such as attempted murder, corruption and other economic and political crimes, armed robbery, piracy, abduction, drug and sexual offences, although serious in nature, can never serve as the basis, within the framework of Article 6, for the imposition of the death penalty.*"²⁰ Imposing the death penalty for drug-related offences, is therefore in itself, a direct violation of Article 6.

Furthermore, the ICCPR guarantees fundamental due process protections, including the right to liberty and protection from arbitrary arrest (Article 9), the presumption of innocence (Article 14(2)), the right to a fair and public hearing by a competent and independent tribunal (Article 14(1)), the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defence and to legal counsel of one's choosing (Article 14(3)), the right not to be compelled to confess or testify against oneself (Article 14(3)(g)), the prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment (Article 7), and the right to have a conviction reviewed by a higher tribunal (Article 14(5)). These same principles are reflected in Iran's domestic legal framework, including Iran's Constitution,²¹ which prohibits arbitrary arrest (Article 32), torture and coerced confessions (Article 38), and guarantees access to legal counsel (Article 35), as well as in the Code of Criminal Procedure, which provides for the right to counsel from the outset of proceedings (Articles 48 and 190), requires that the charges be communicated and recorded as part of lawful arrest and detention procedures (Articles 49 and 50), regulates pre-trial detention and judicial oversight (Article 237), and recognises the right to appeal convictions, including in serious cases (Articles 427 and 428).

However, as the cases in this section demonstrate, the due process guarantees in law are systematically breached in practice. Furthermore, Article 32 of the Anti-Narcotics Law provides that death sentences in drug cases become final and enforceable only after confirmation by the Head of the Supreme Court or the Prosecutor-General, creating a special review mechanism that replaces the ordinary appellate process and significantly narrows the scope of meaningful judicial oversight available to defendants in capital drug cases.



Ali Savari, a 50-year-old man, was arrested for drug-related offences in 2010 and sentenced to death. His sentence was later commuted to a prison term and according to relatives, he was due to be released. In 2018, after authorities discovered that Ali was in contact with relatives belonging to the opposition group, Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (Harkat an-Nidal al-Arabi li-Tahrir al-Ahwaz), Ali and seven others were taken for interrogations. A

relative told IHRNGO: “Ali was hung from the ceiling and beaten with a stick, metal batons and whatever they had. They were tortured for an entire day. The next day, they were transferred to the office to be tortured again. One of the officers hit Ali on the head twice with a baton, Ali fell to the ground and didn’t move. They took him to the hospital, but he was already dead. After his death, they tortured other prisoners to testify that Ali had overdosed and then they were all transferred to solitary confinement.” In the video published online, Ali’s lifeless body bore the evidence of torture, with two holes in his head and electric shock marks on his body.²²

Mohammad Miranzehi, Ahmadshah Saghzehi and brothers **Shah Mohammad** and **Eid Mohammad Miranzehi** were four Afghan nationals arrested three days after a border armed conflict they were unaware of. In August 2018, Mohammad told IHRNGO: “They subjected us to the cruelest forms of torture to confess to involvement in the armed conflict and killing an officer. When we refused, they said if we accept drug trafficking from Afghanistan, they would stop our death sentence. When we refused again, they suggested an abduction case. We proclaimed our innocence before the judge, stating that we had been forced to confess under torture.” Yet, Branch 2 of the Birjand Revolutionary Court, presided over by Judge Nabavi, sentenced them to death on charges of armed drug trafficking. They were hanged in Birjand Central Prison on 2 October 2018.²³



Abdullah Sufi (Golmir Rigi) and **Mohammad Nabi Soleimani (Rigi)**, two Baluch minorities, were arrested by the border police on 18 June 2019 while in a taxi on their way home. They were not in possession of any drugs and had repeatedly denied the charges under

interrogation and in court. Ignoring the lack of evidence, Judge Vaziri issued their death sentences. They were executed in Torbat Jam Prison on 15 November 2022.²⁴

In the summer of 2020, **Ahmad Ali Mehripour**, a father and labourer, drove his sister to Tehran and decided to stay the night at a friend’s house to return home the next day. However, the house was raided in the morning, with all three occupants arrested. According to his family, Ahmad’s name was not on the arrest warrant or any related documents. Despite his family’s efforts to plead his innocence, he was sentenced to death for the drugs found at the house he was staying at. Ahmad Ali was hanged in Ghezelhesar Prison on 30 August 2025.²⁵



When **Rahim Ghanbarzahi**, a Baluch man, was arrested in 2017, his family were unable to afford a lawyer. It is not clear whether he had a court-appointed lawyer. He was sentenced to death on drug-related charges. Despite arriving for the last visit hours before his execution after a long journey, prison officials prevented his parents from saying goodbye to their son. Rahim was hanged in Shiraz Central Prison on 28 August 2022.²⁶

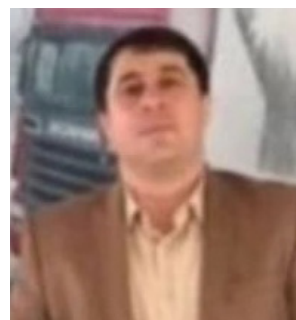


Many prisoners sentenced to death for drug offences have never seen their lawyer, although the law requires all prisoners to be represented by a defence lawyer in court. In an interview with IHRNGO about drug executions, Iranian human rights lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, who has been living in exile since the mid-2000s, testified that when she still worked as a lawyer in Iran, she had been approached by “an individual from an institution with control over the judiciary” to collaborate by signing blank power of attorney forms. When she questioned her role, she was told that they would be used in certain cases and that she would not be seeing the clients at any stage of the legal proceedings.²⁷



Mohammad Rasoul Shehbakhsh (Notizehi), a Baluch minority, was arrested after being shot eight times in the abdomen and legs. Despite his sentence being overturned by the Supreme Court four times, Judge Ghorbani, the presiding judge at Branch 1 of the Kerman Revolutionary Court, told him: “you have to be executed.” He was secretly executed in Kerman Central Prison on 8 January 2023.²⁸

Mohammadreza Badavi, a 48-year-old Kurdish father of four, **Reza Molayi**, a 48-year-old Kurdish man, and **Mehdi Hosseini**, a 46-year-old Azeri-Turk man were arrested in a joint case in 2019. According to informed IHRNGO sources, “No drugs were ever discovered. They were sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court based on *elme qazi* (knowledge of the judge).”²⁹ Yet, the Western Azerbaijan Chief Justice stated that they were “members of a drug-smuggling gang” and that “a tonne of drugs” had been attributed to them.³⁰ They were hanged in Urmia Central Prison on 9 November 2025.³¹



L to R: Reza Molayi and Mohammadreza Badavi

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 2020.³² Ten months later, in June 2021, the Supreme Court overturned his death sentence and commuted his co-defendants’ sentences to 30 years’ imprisonment. 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.”³³



IRAN'S RESPONSE TO CRITICISM

At the 4th Cycle of Iran's Universal Periodical Review in 2025, as well as the 46/51 recommendations regarding the death penalty broadly, nine recommendations urged limiting the death penalty to the “*most serious crimes*” in line with Article 6 of the ICCPR, while four recommendations specifically called for ending executions for drug-related offences.

Iran defended its use of the death penalty for drug offences as a necessary response to security threats, highlighting the country's geographic position on a major trafficking route from Afghanistan to Europe, portraying Iran as a frontline state in efforts to block the flow of narcotics. They cited the deaths of nearly 4,000 law-enforcement personnel and injuries to many thousands more in anti-narcotics operations as evidence that drug trafficking posed a grave threat to public order and amounted to the “most serious crimes.” It further pointed to the 2017 amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law and presented this reform as evidence that the overall number of drug-related executions had declined in recent years.³⁴

If, as authorities claim, nearly 4,000 law-enforcement personnel have been killed in the context of anti-narcotics operations, any individual alleged to have caused such deaths should be charged and prosecuted for “intentional killing” (murder) in accordance with *qisas* (retribution-in-kind) laws. Their execution on the basis of drug-related offences rather than on charges reflecting the alleged lethal conduct is incompatible with the requirements under international human rights law. Furthermore, as this report demonstrates, while the 2017 amendment did lead to a temporary decline in drug-related executions, it has reversed in practice since 2021.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Drug-related capital cases in Iran are governed by three key legal instruments. The Anti-Narcotics Law (ANL), first enacted in 1988 and amended in 1997, 2011 and 2017, defines the substantive drug-related offences and prescribes the penalties including the circumstances in which the death penalty may be imposed. The 2013 Islamic Penal Code (IPC)³⁵ provides the general framework for criminal liability including rules on sentencing, mitigation and aggravation of penalties and the imposition and implementation of death sentences. The Code of Criminal Procedure, adopted in 2014 and in force since 2015, regulates criminal proceedings and first introduced the right of appeal in drug-related death penalty cases.³⁶ Together these instruments constitute the substantive and procedural framework governing drug-related capital cases in Iran.

Section Two of the IPC establishes four categories of punishment: *hadd* (fixed punishments for which *Sharia* or Islamic law has set the measure, degree and method), *qisas* (retribution-in-kind), *diya* (compensatory) and *ta'zir*. Article 18 of the IPC defines *ta'zir* as “a punishment that does not fall under the categories of *hadd*, *qisas* or *diya*.” Drug-related offences are therefore classified as *ta'zir* crimes. *Ta'zir* punishments apply to acts prohibited by Islamic law or breaches of state regulations; their type, severity, and rules for mitigation, suspension, or waiver are determined by statute rather than being predefined in unchangeable religious law, making them subject to reform. Article 18 also directs courts to consider the offender's motive, mental state, the manner and consequences of the offence, post-offence conduct and personal circumstances. Article 19 classifies *ta'zir* punishments into eight degrees. Articles 37–39 allow mitigation of *ta'zir* sentences for factors such as motive,

mental state, age, criminal history, cooperation, restitution or remorse and permit exemption for first-time minor offenders. Article 115 further permits waiver or reduction of *ta'zir* sentences where the offender repents before final judgment for lower-degree offences or cooperates. For higher-degree offences, including death-eligible drug crimes, it allows courts to reduce but not automatically waive the sentence.

The Anti-Narcotics Law is the principal law governing drug-related capital offences in Iran. It criminalises cultivation of opium poppy, coca or cannabis for drug production (Article 2), large-scale possession and trafficking of traditional substances such as opium and hashish (Articles 4-5), trafficking and possession of synthetic drugs such as heroin, morphine, cocaine, methamphetamine and MDMA (Article 8), armed smuggling (Article 11), leadership or financing of trafficking networks (Article 18) and forcing minors or persons with mental incapacity to commit drug crimes (Article 35).

Before the 2017 amendment, the death penalty was mandatory in many cases based largely on quantity or repetition. These included cultivation on a fourth conviction (Article 2(4)), import, production or trafficking of more than 5 kilograms of opium or other traditional substances (Article 4(4)), possession or trafficking of the same above 5 kilograms on a third conviction (Article 5(4)), import or trafficking of more than 30 grams of heroin or other synthetic drugs (Article 8(6)) or a fourth conviction under Article 9 when accumulated quantities reached 30 grams.

The 2017 amendment (Article 45) narrowed eligibility for capital punishment. Even where the underlying offence is otherwise death-eligible, a defendant will be considered *mofsed-fil-arz* (corrupter on earth) and sentenced to death only if at least one aggravating factor is present: (a) use of weapon to confront law-enforcement officers (b) leadership, organisation or financing of a trafficking network or use of minors or persons with mental incapacity (c) a prior final conviction for a drug offence punishable by death, life imprisonment or more than fifteen years' imprisonment or (d) very large quantities exceeding 50 kilograms for substances under Article 4 or 2 kilograms for heroin and other Article 8 hard drugs and 3 kilograms for some other Article 8 substances. In the absence of such factors the maximum penalty is up to 30 years' imprisonment together with heavy fines and confiscation of crime-related assets.

Torture or Cruel, Degrading or Inhuman Treatment as Legal Punishment

As well as prescribing the death penalty, the ANL also authorises corporal punishment in the form of flogging for a wide range of drug-related offences, often with no meaningful minimum-quantity threshold. For so-called traditional substances such as opium or hashish, Articles 4 and 5 allow for up to 50 lashes for possession, purchase or sale of any amount up to 50 grams, thereby encompassing even trace quantities. For synthetic substances such as heroin or methamphetamine, Article 8 prescribes 20-50 lashes for quantities of up to 5 centigrams (0.05 grams), again with no lower limit. Beyond these quantity-based provisions, flogging is also mandated for acts regardless of the quantity involved: use by non-addicts (Article 19: 20-74 lashes for Article 4 substances and 50-74 lashes for Article 8 substances); possession of seeds, pods or leaves (Article 3: 1-70 lashes, intent required for cannabis seeds); repeated cultivation of opium poppy, coca or cannabis (Article 2: 30-70 lashes on the second offence and 1-70 lashes on the third); maintaining a venue for drug use (Article 14: 20-74 lashes); and manufacture, sale or possession of drug-use equipment (Article 20: 10-50 lashes and 5-20 lashes, respectively). These provisions permit courts to impose flogging for minimal quantities of controlled substances or even for personal use.

Confiscation of Assets and Fines

The Anti-Narcotics Law empowers courts to order confiscation of property and assets derived from narcotics offences at multiple stages. Under Article 28, all property acquired through drug-related smuggling and the assets of fugitive accused persons may be confiscated in favour of the state. Confiscation is also mandated alongside capital or long-term sentences in serious trafficking cases (for example under Articles 4, 5, 8 and 45), and courts must, under Article 36, specify the precise assets to be confiscated in their judgments. Vehicles used to transport narcotics or captured in armed clashes may likewise be confiscated (Articles 28 and 30). These provisions allow for the extensive seizure of assets linked, or alleged to be linked, to drug offences, often as an automatic consequence of conviction.

The ANL also prescribes fines ranging from 10,000-100 million tomans, increasing with the type and quantity of drugs and repeated offending. Should a defendant fail to pay the fine, imprisonment in lieu applies at a statutory conversion rate of 1000 tomans per day (adjustable to 2,000-5,000 tomans per day for good conduct), which is capped at 10 years.³⁷

2017 Amendment and Its Reversal in Practice

As IHRNGO noted at the time, the 2017 Amendment's major shortcoming was its failure to address due process and fair trial guarantees.³⁸ As Figure 1 on page 9 demonstrates, while there was a temporary drop in drug-related executions between 2018-2020, it has effectively reversed in practice since 2021, with drug-related executions consistently rising every year from an average of 26 per annum between 2018-2020 to at least 503 in 2024 and at least 697 between January-30 November 2025.

On 21 October 2025, the spokesperson of Iran's Parliament (Majles) Judiciary and Legal Commission said a proposed bill to amend the Anti-Narcotics Law would remove the death penalty from eight drug-related offences, significantly narrowing the scope of capital punishment in narcotics cases.³⁹ However, no text of the proposed amendments, timeline for adoption or details of the specific provisions to be changed have been made public, leaving the scope and practical impact of the announced reforms unclear.

The resurgence in executions, particularly for drug-related offences, must be understood within Iran's broader political context and the state's reliance on the death penalty as a tool of political repression and social control. Following the nationwide protests of November 2019, which were met with unprecedented repression,⁴⁰ the Covid-19 lockdowns abruptly curtailed public unrest and temporarily limited large-scale mobilisation. Public protests resurfaced with the Isfahan water demonstrations in 2021⁴¹ and escalated dramatically during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" nationwide protests of 2022, the largest and most wide-reaching challenge to the Islamic Republic in decades.⁴² In this climate of continuing political volatility, executions function as an instrument of intimidation, signalling the state's capacity for absolute control over life and death in response to social and political instability.

IRAN'S COOPERATION WITH THE UNODC

UNODC's Stated Mandate

Under the Country Partnership Programme (CPP) for the Islamic Republic of Iran (2023-2026), the UNODC's mandate is to provide an overarching strategic framework for comprehensive technical partnership, financial assistance and cooperation to support national policies, measures and efforts to prevent and combat drugs, crime and corruption, and to strengthen crime prevention and criminal justice.

The CCP is structured around four sub-programmes: (1) Border Management and Illicit Trafficking, supporting and enhancing national capacities on border management, drug control and illicit chemical precursors including NPS control, seizures, specialist training and provision of equipment, and strengthening regional and international engagement; (2) Crime, Corruption and Criminal Justice, supporting national policies and efforts to prevent and combat crime and corruption and to strengthen crime prevention and criminal justice in consultation with national counterparts; (3) Drug Prevention, Treatment, Rehabilitation and HIV Care, aiming to reduce drug demand and related health and social harms through evidence and rights based, comprehensive and integrated treatment and care services for drug use disorders and HIV/AIDS, including harm reduction and support for women, families, communities and people in prison; (4) Alternative Development and Sustainable Livelihoods, promoting partnerships to advance sustainable livelihoods and alternative development in border areas.⁴³

Additionally, the Mini Dublin Group (MDG), which is comprised of the 27 Member States of the European Union, Australia, Canada, Japan, Norway, the United States, the European Commission and UNODC, is also an external partner to the CCP. It “has the main tasks of compiling local situation reports, facilitating coordination on drug policy and assistance, conducting a dialogue with the host country on drug control, drawing up recommendations, and implementing the orientations of the Central Dublin Group and regional chairs.” The Mini Dublin Group in Tehran consists of “representatives from the embassies of the member states, while other countries take part as observers, and is currently chaired by Germany. The UNODC Country Office in the Islamic Republic of Iran provides MDG with expertise and technical and secretariat support.”⁴⁴

How Iran Uses UNODC Cooperation for Legitimacy

Iranian authorities introduced the 2017 Amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law mainly due to international pressure. Crucially, European states like Ireland⁴⁵ and Denmark⁴⁶ were unwilling to fund any further projects due to the high number of drug-related executions.

The 2017 amendment led to a significant drop in the number of drug-related executions, from an annual average of 403 to an average of 26 executions in the proceeding three years. The number of commuted death sentences as a result of the amendment could have been as high as 6,000, according to Islamic Republic lawmaker Hassan Norouzi.⁴⁷ However, as previous sections have demonstrated, this trend has been reversed in practice 2021.

Since the reversal in 2021⁴⁸, IHRNGO together with dozens of international and Iranian organisations have called on the UNODC to make their funding contingent on a moratorium on the drug executions.⁴⁹

However, despite acknowledging the rise⁵⁰ and expressing their opposition to the death penalty,⁵¹ in March 2023, the organisation signed a new agreement to enhance its cooperation with Iran.⁵² This cooperation includes a sub-programme on “Border management and illicit trafficking”, which aims to provide “technical training and support designed to upgrade and enhance the capacities and technical knowledge of law enforcement, Anti-Narcotic Police and Customs”.⁵³ Such support can lead to more arrests, convictions based on torture-tainted confessions in grossly unfair trials and executions.

Moreover, Iranian authorities use their cooperation with the UNODC as an argument to justify the execution of alleged drug offenders. UNODC’s silence on the execution of hundreds annually, in addition to its support of Iran’s law enforcement and providing political legitimacy for executions, makes it complicit in the executions.

The UNODC continues its cooperation with the Islamic Republic without regard to the high number of drug-related executions. In December 2024, the UNODC, in coordination with the Drug Control Headquarters (DCHQ) of the Islamic Republic of Iran, organised a five-day specialised training on “Investigation of Crimes related to Drug Trafficking” for a group of senior police officers of the Iranian Anti-Narcotics Police in Tehran.⁵⁴

In a UNODC meeting in Iran on 17 February 2025, the UNODC Country Representative described “the ongoing cooperation and joint initiatives between the UNODC and Drug Control Headquarters as highly positive and commendable. He affirmed his and the UNODC’s commitment to expanding collaboration and securing additional financial resources to support Iran’s programs.”⁵⁵

According to the Tehran Times’ report of the meeting, “[t]o enhance the operational capacity of the Iranian Anti-Narcotics Police, the UNODC provided four drug trace detector devices to the Customs Organization and Anti-Narcotics Police of Iran under the Japanese government’s funding on February 5. Through the generous donation of the Government of Japan, the UNODC Iran in 2023 and 2024, procured key devices including drug identification devices, drug-detecting dogs, Canine Trailers and other accessories for drug-detecting dog centers.”⁵⁶

In line with the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP, 2015)⁵⁷ and the UN Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty (ECOSOC resolution 1984/50),⁵⁸ the UN must ensure that its support to national law enforcement, prosecutorial, judicial or correctional authorities in Iran’s drug-control sector does not contribute to or facilitate executions carried out in breach of international human rights standards. Consistent with the purposes of the UN Charter, which include the promotion of respect for human rights, UNODC is required to carry out thorough risk assessments before providing assistance, focusing on the possibility that such support may be used in prosecutions or convictions leading to death sentences imposed without full observance of the required procedural safeguards. Where such risks exist, the UN should condition its engagement on the strict application of those safeguards, including fair trial guarantees, protection against coerced confessions, access to counsel, the right to appeal and the requirement of proportionality, and should prioritise assistance aimed at prevention, treatment, judicial reform and non-capital alternatives. Under the HRDDP, the UNODC must also monitor the conduct of supported partners and be prepared to suspend or withdraw assistance where grave violations persist despite mitigation efforts. These measures are essential to uphold the Organisation’s Charter-based duty to respect and promote human rights, including the right to life and fair trial guarantees under the ICCPR, and to ensure that UN activities do not directly or indirectly contribute to the application of the death penalty contrary to international law.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For the UNODC to uphold their Charter-based duty by conducting a human-rights risk assessment specific to drug-offence prosecutions and executions
- For the countries that fund UNODC projects to make their funding contingent on a moratorium on drug-related executions

We further call on the international community and all countries that adhere to universal human rights principles to:

- Publicly condemn executions for drug-related offences in Iran
- Call for an immediate moratorium on drug-related executions
- Raise the issue of the death penalty and in particular, drug executions, in all diplomatic and political engagements with the Islamic Republic
- Condition international cooperation on compliance with human rights standards
- Support international scrutiny and accountability for large-scale drug executions

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