



Contemporary Realities of Iranian Prisons

Master's Dissertation

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May 2024

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Introduction

In many parts of the world, achieving justice, freedom and the defense of fundamental human rights is still a difficult task. Iran is one such area of concern, where scholarly attention is needed because of a critical crossroads that has emerged from the complex interplay of political processes, social developments, and international relations. With a focus on the appalling conditions in Iranian prisons, this dissertation undertakes a thorough investigation of the human rights situation in the country's prisons. Specifically, the research question guiding this investigation is: What are the prevalent human rights violations in Iranian prisons, and what are the underlying enabling conditions that perpetuate these violations? The case study of Iran is crucial to understanding the global challenges to justice and human rights, particularly with regard to the rights of prisoners. Iran is a significant case study as has faced persistent criticism from international human rights organizations over its treatment of prisoners. Reports of human rights violations such as the right to life, freedom from arbitrary arrest, fair trial and protection from physical and psychological torture are rampant (Amnesty International, 2023). Iran consistently ranks among the worst countries in the world for violations of political rights and civil liberties, scoring only 11/100 in Freedom House's Global Freedom Score (2024), underscoring the urgency of examining its practices. Iran serves as an example of broader struggles in the field of human rights and justice. Its situation illuminates the complexities and challenges inherent in dealing with such issues within authoritarian regimes and in contexts of geopolitical tension. The strained relations between Iran and countries such as the United States leading to sanctions and political tensions are exacerbating abuses, with the Islamic republic using national security excuses in response to justify human rights abuses (Shaban, 2021). Iranian geopolitics also have an impact on human rights abuses in other countries, with Iran's geopolitical actions, alliances, and policies

influencing regional dynamics and international relations, which in turn affect human rights situations in neighboring countries or regions. For example, Iran's support for certain groups or governments in the Middle East, such as the Houthis in Yemen, contribute to instability that result in human rights violations in those areas (Moinipour, 2022). In addition, Iran's importance extends to international debates on state sovereignty, the responsibilities of the international community, and effective strategies to promote prisoners' rights, as the regime's assertion of sovereignty a lot of the time conflict with the internationally recognized human rights of its citizens, and as a result is characterized with internal and external tensions. Investigating the human rights situation in Iran, with a particular focus on the rights of prisoners, not only sheds light on its domestic dynamics, but also enriches broader discussions of global human rights challenges and possible solutions. It underscores the imperative for concerted international efforts to hold states accountable for the treatment of prisoners and to uphold universal respect for human rights principles. By researching the intricacies of Iran's prison system through interviews with ten of its former political prisoners from diverse regions of the country, this research seeks to contribute to the advancement of justice and human rights on a global scale.

1. Historical Context

Before 1979, Iran was ruled by the monarchy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, characterized by authoritarianism and political repression. The Shah's regime maintained control through a powerful security apparatus, leading to widespread human rights violations in prisons, including torture and arbitrary arrests. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran became an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, marking the beginning of a clerical regime that continues to this day under a different supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The new regime intensified political repression, resulting in a surge of political prisoners,

executions, and torture in prisons. The state of prisons worsened as the new regime used them as tools to suppress dissent and maintain control over the population (Matin-Asgari, 2006).

2. Iran's Human Rights Violations: The Urgent Need for Examination

There is an urgent need for a thorough examination of the human rights situation in Iranian prisons. After the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, her passing marked a significant turning point in Iranian politics. Iran's theocratic regime has lost a lot of its legitimacy, and human rights, particularly those of women and prisoners are currently critical political issues. Mahsa Amini was an Iranian woman who was arrested in Tehran for disobeying the mandatory hijab. Amini died three days after being arrested by Iran's morality police, on September 16, 2022. While authorities said she suffered a heart attack, Amini's supporters said she was beaten by police and died as a result of her injuries. Her arrest and death in police custody sparked a wave of protests in Iran and received widespread international support (Monshipouri & Zamiri, 2023). The internationally recognized "Women, Life, Freedom" movement was born in the wake of her death and aims to eliminate discrimination against women in Iran as well as revise laws requiring the headscarf.

The urgency of this research is further enhanced by Iran's evolving socio-political landscape. The massive protests that followed for months after the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 and 2023 with the main slogan "Death to the Dictator" was considered by many in the world as the biggest sign of the loss of social legitimacy in Iran in recent years. According to Amnesty International (2023), over 20,000 protesters were arrested, many of whom were imprisoned and became victims of human rights violations. Due to the criticality of the situation, today the rights of prisoners are an important part of politics both internally in Iran and internationally. Accordingly, this dissertation aims to unravel the layers of complexity surrounding human rights abuses in Iranian prisons, offering a timely and comprehensive

examination of a nation at the crossroads of social transformation and political legitimacy. Through interviewing former prisoners, this study adopts a victim-centred approach, capturing their experiences, insights, and perspectives.

The Islamic Republic has a notorious reputation for its treatment of political prisoners. An estimated 5,000 to 30,000 prisoners were executed in prisons, including Evin¹, the country's largest detention center, in the summer of 1988. From 1987 to 1990 many prisoners were victims of rape, torture, and cruel and inhumane treatment. Many of the victims were members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) organization (Khoshnood, 2020), one of the longest-standing Iranian opposition movements founded in 1965 by three former younger supporters of Freedom Movement of Iran, another very popular political party of the time. emerged as a response to the oppressive regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the subsequent fundamentalist regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. ("History of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran," 2022). Another example is the case of Navid Afkari, an Iranian wrestler who gained international attention after he was arrested and sentenced to death for his alleged involvement in a murder during the 2018 protests in Iran. Afkari maintained his innocence and claimed that he was tortured into making a false confession. Despite the pleas for clemency, Navid Afkari was executed by hanging on September 12, 2020. Avoiding such tragedies again in Iran is an important humanitarian issue. By examining the treatment of inmates and the circumstances they live in, this dissertation aims to close the current vacuum in the literature about human rights breaches in Iranian prisons.

3. Enabling Conditions of Human Rights Violations in Iranian Prisons

¹ Evin Prison, located in Tehran, Iran, is notorious for its harsh conditions and human rights abuses. Established in 1972 under the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, it has since been used to detain political prisoners, intellectuals, and dissidents. Over the years, Evin has gained a reputation for its severe interrogation tactics, overcrowding, and poor living conditions. The prison remains a symbol of the Iranian government's suppression of opposition and freedom of expression. (Anaraki, 2020)

Examining the enabling factors that support human rights violations in Iranian prisons is an important part of this research. Understanding the underlying reasons and governmental components influencing the continuation of these abuses requires a careful examination of these circumstances. Iran's prison system operates within a complex web of social, legal and political structures. This research will examine institutional processes, such as the supervision and training of prison staff, which will be essential to understanding the ways in which violations are committed.

Social and political contexts also play an important role in shaping the enabling conditions within Iranian prisons. The impact of ideologies, political beliefs and social attitudes on the inhumane treatment of political prisoners will be examined to reveal how these factors contribute to the situation. By systematically analyzing these enabling conditions, this research aims to uncover the interrelated factors that support human rights violations in Iranian prisons. Through a nuanced exploration, the study strives to contribute valuable insights into the complexities that need to be addressed to advance real reform and create a foundation for improved human rights conditions in the Iranian penal system.

4. Structure of the Dissertation:

The dissertation follows a structured framework to comprehensively examine the status of human rights in Iranian prisons. It begins with an introduction, providing an overview of the study's objectives and significance. The 'Historical Background' section traces the historical evolution of human rights in Iran, from Cyrus the Great's era to contemporary times, highlighting critical periods of change. The 'Review of Literature' delves into global perspectives on prisoners' human rights, exploring their historical development, theoretical foundations, and relevance to authoritarian regimes and Islamic principles. The 'Methodology' chapter outlines the research approach, focusing on interviews with ex-

prisoners as the primary data collection method, while also incorporating desk research to synthesize existing studies. The next chapter entitled 'Findings and Discussion' present empirical results and critical analysis based on the interviews, shedding light on the current state of human rights in Iranian prisons. Finally, the dissertation concludes by summarizing key findings, discussing implications, and making recommendations for advancing our understanding of human rights in Iranian prisons and advocating for meaningful reforms.

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Historical Background

Iran, often celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and ancient civilization, holds a significant place in the annals of human rights history. At the heart of this narrative lies Cyrus the Great, the illustrious founder of the Achaemenid Empire. Ananya Tyagi and Paramjeet Singh's analysis (2019) illuminates Iran's key role as the birthplace of human rights, tracing its origins to the enlightened policies of Cyrus. Dating back to 539 BC, the Cyrus Cylinder stands as a testament to his visionary leadership, embodying the world's first declaration of human rights. Notably, Cyrus's ethos extended to the treatment of prisoners, as evidenced by his decree to liberate captives and uphold religious freedoms. This early commitment to individual dignity and liberty laid a cornerstone for the evolution of humanitarian principles, leaving an indelible mark on Iran's historical legacy (Tyagi & Singh, 2019). However, in contemporary Iran, unfortunately, things are different. As we delve into the modern era, the enduring influence of Cyrus's progressive ideals serves as a poignant reminder of the stark contrast between Iran's historical legacy and its current human rights landscape.

Contemporary Iran has been significantly shaped by historical events, starting with the fall of the Qājār Dynasty (1796-1925) amid the chaos of World War I. In the aftermath of the war, Reza Pahlavi, an Iranian military officer, emerged as a formidable figure, leading a successful coup that toppled the existing regime. With strategic precision, he seized control of Tehran and established himself as the leader of a nation in transition. On December 12, 1925, amidst a backdrop of political upheaval, Reza Shah ascended to the throne, inaugurating the era of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran (Halfond, 2023).

During the period of the monarchy in Iran, particularly under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Reza Shah's son), the management of prisoners was characterized by authoritarianism, political repression, and human rights violations (Matin-Asgari, 2006). The

Shah's regime maintained control through a powerful security apparatus, which included the notorious SAVAK (Organization of Intelligence and National Security), known for its brutal tactics in suppressing dissent and opposition. Prisoners in Iran during the monarchy were subjected to harsh conditions, including torture, arbitrary arrests, and lack of due process. Political opponents, activists, intellectuals, and members of opposition groups were often targeted and imprisoned without fair trials. The regime used prisons as tools to silence dissent and maintain its grip on power. One of the most infamous prisons during this period was the Evin Prison in Tehran, known for its harsh treatment of prisoners. Inmates at Evin and other prisons faced overcrowding, limited access to basic necessities, and restricted communication with the outside world. Visits by family members were often restricted, and inmates were isolated from the outside world.

The management of prisoners in Iran during the monarchy was marked by a lack of transparency and accountability and reflected the regime's authoritarian nature and its willingness to use repressive tactics to maintain control. Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners became even more common, with reports of physical and psychological abuse being widespread. Many prisoners were held in solitary confinement for extended periods, leading to deteriorating mental and physical health. The regime's security forces, including SAVAK, were responsible for interrogations, surveillance, and maintaining order in prisons. They operated with impunity, often using brutal methods to extract confessions or information from prisoners. The lack of independent oversight and accountability mechanisms allowed for widespread human rights violations to occur unchecked. Prison conditions varied depending on the perceived threat posed by the prisoner. Those considered to be high-risk or dangerous were often subjected to more severe treatment, including solitary confinement, torture, and prolonged isolation (Abrahamian, 2002). In contrast, some prisoners, particularly those who were older or deemed less of a threat, received relatively better treatment. Overall,

the legacy of this period continues to impact Iran's prison system and human rights situation to this day.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran, erupting in the late 1970s, represented another important shift in the nation's socio-political landscape. Under the Pahlavi Dynasty's rule, discontent among the people developed, exacerbated by economic disparity, political repression, and Western influence. Popular religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who gained support from dissatisfied clerics and diverse marginalised groups, established opposition to the Shah's regime. Mass protests erupted, escalating into widespread unrest and guerrilla warfare. The revolution culminated in the Shah's ousting, marking the dawn of an Islamic republic under Khomeini's leadership (Dunn, 2023). Despite internal strife and external pressures, the revolution reshaped Iran's global identity, ushering in an era of religious governance amidst continued domestic discord.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the management of prisoners in Iran underwent significant changes under the new Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Initially, revolutionary tribunals were set up, and political executions began as the new regime sought to consolidate power and eliminate perceived threats. The early period after the revolution was marked by a wave of arrests, executions, and the establishment of a new prison system based on Islamic principles. Prisons became key instruments of control for the Islamic Republic, used to suppress dissent, eliminate political opposition, and enforce ideological conformity (Westerweele, 2017). The regime targeted a wide range of individuals, including former officials of the Shah's regime, political activists, intellectuals, and members of opposition groups. The new authorities viewed these individuals as enemies of the state and subjected them to harsh treatment in prisons. Evin Prison, continued to play a central role in the Islamic Republic's prison system. The conditions in Evin and other prisons under the new regime were characterized by overcrowding, limited access to basic necessities, and

restrictions on communication with the outside world. Inmates faced physical and psychological abuse, torture, and solitary confinement.

The Islamic Republic established its own security apparatus, including the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Intelligence, to oversee the management of prisoners and maintain order in prisons. These entities operated with a mandate to uphold the regime's ideological principles and suppress any form of dissent or opposition. The guards and wardens were often ideologically motivated and committed to enforcing the regime's policies. As the Islamic Republic solidified its grip on power, the management of prisoners evolved to reflect the regime's priorities and objectives. Political prisoners, dissidents, and individuals perceived as threats to the regime were subjected to harsh treatment, including torture, arbitrary arrests, and unfair trials. The regime used prisons as tools of repression to instill fear and deter dissent. Notably, in 1988, Iranian authorities, executed around 30,000 of political prisoners, particularly MEK members (one of the largest political parties of Iran), in a campaign against opposition (Khoshnood, 2020). Termed "death commissions," these secret trials led to mass executions, burying victims in unmarked graves.

Over time, the Islamic Republic's prison system became more institutionalized and systematic in its approach to managing prisoners. The regime implemented policies and procedures to control the prison population, monitor inmates, and prevent escapes or uprisings. The authorities also sought to indoctrinate prisoners with the regime's ideology and ensure their compliance with its rules and regulations. Despite international condemnation and calls for reform, the management of prisoners in Iran under the Islamic Republic continued to be marked by human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, and lack of due process. The regime's crackdown on dissent and political opposition led to a cycle of repression and resistance, with prisoners often becoming symbols of resistance against the authoritarian rule.

Today, Iran is once again going through a critical period regarding the management of its prisoners. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the death of Mahsa Amini, sparked widespread outrage. Her death led to massive protests starting in Saqqez, Kurdistan, spreading to Tehran and beyond. Over 20,000 of the protesters faced imprisonment, torture or execution, according to Amnesty International (2023). The regime continues to torture and execute many imprisoned protesters in an unpredictable manner, which poses a huge risk to the lives of the prisoners. This underlines the urgent need to address the ongoing human rights violations in Iranian prisons.

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Literature Review

1. Interviews:

This literature review examines human rights violations in prisons, focusing on the nature of these rights and the conditions that give rise to such violations. Focusing on Iran, a theocratic state, this article aims to analyze the unique challenges in its system. Furthermore, due to the theocratic nature of the Iranian regime, the review illuminates the differences in the perception of these violations between Islamic perspectives and Western culture. By synthesizing existing literature, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between cultural, religious, and systemic factors that shape the landscape of human rights within the confines of incarceration. The literature review reveals the limitations of the existing literature and the need for updated research in light of recent events such as the executions of Navid Afkari and the tragic death of Mahsa Amini. Through an examination of diverse methodologies employed in past studies, including historical comparative analyses and document analysis, this review subtly suggests avenues for further investigation through interviews where there is an understanding of the political affiliations of interviewees, thereby paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of this critical issue.

1. What are the human rights of prisoners and why are they important?

The human rights of prisoners are a crucial aspect of ensuring that justice is served in a fair and humane manner. As Sarkin (2008) asserts, imprisonment is one of the harshest penalties imposed by societies, necessitating the protection of prisoners' dignity and rights. This sentiment is echoed by the international human rights framework, enshrined in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984).

Specifically, prisoners' rights can be contextualized within the framework of the three generations of human rights. The first generation, consisting of civil and political liberties, includes rights such as the right to life, freedom from arbitrary arrest, fair trial, and protection from torture (Pocar, 2015). These rights emphasize individual freedoms and legal safeguards against governmental intrusion, forming the cornerstone of legal protections for individuals within judicial systems. In the context of prisoners' rights, these first-generation rights are particularly pertinent, serving as critical safeguards against abuses and ensuring the integrity of the justice system. Unfortunately, abuses of human rights within prisons continue to pose significant challenges, often unnoticed due to limited media scrutiny and weak civil society (Sarkin, 2008). Such abuses can lead to severe physical and psychological harm to prisoners and undermine the legitimacy of the justice system.

The evolution of the concept of human rights for prisoners has seen significant transformations and has taken on diverse forms, notably during the Enlightenment era, marked by a move toward more humane and rehabilitative approaches, as highlighted by Scharff-Smith (2016). In the contemporary context, international human rights law safeguards an array of rights for prisoners, including freedom from torture, access to adequate necessities, religious freedom, and opportunities for education and work (Scharff-Smith, 2016). Despite progress, challenges persist, such as overcrowded prisons, post-9/11 security measures impacting civil liberties, and issues like language barriers and solitary confinement hinder effective human rights implementation (Scharff-Smith, 2016; Naylor, 2014). Naylor's (2014) perspective, derived from prisoner interviews, underscores the significance of human rights from the prisoners' viewpoint. The emphasis on being treated with respect, fairness, access to healthcare, education, legal representation, and the

ability to raise concerns about rights violations illuminates the multifaceted nature of these concerns.

It is also important to understand that beyond the widely accepted and popular perspectives on standards for prisoners' rights, both the perception and the violations of human rights in prisons take different forms depending on the country. In the case of Iran, one must understand the importance of prisoners' rights in Islam since Iran is a theocratic regime and what is the relationship of dictatorial political systems to prisoners' rights. Islamic teachings, as discussed by Shirazi (2002) and Al-Fijawi (2019), provide a unique perspective on prisoners' rights rooted in principles of human dignity and freedom. Historical examples, such as the time of the Prophet Muhammad, illustrate humane treatment in Islamic societies, with Shirazi (2002) emphasizing that authorities must ensure prisoners' rights are respected regardless of the legal framework.

There is a clear difference between the rights of prisoners as they are perceived in Islam and in the Democracies of Western civilization, but there is a difference of opinion as to whether they are conflicting or more complementary. Ann Elizabeth Mayer (1993) explores the clash between Islamic perspectives on human rights and universal values, particularly in the context of the rights of prisoners and human rights in prisons. It outlines challenges in reconciling Islamic views with international human rights norms, highlighting conflicts in criminal justice and treatment of prisoners. Mayer's article (1993) provides insights into the complexities of this reconciliation, emphasizing divergent viewpoints within the Islamic community. Luiza Maria Gontowska's work (2005) delves into the impact of Sharia law on human rights in Saudi Arabia and Iran. According to Gontowska, the application of Sharia has been associated with challenges in ensuring human rights, including treatment of prisoners and limitations on due process rights. However, interpretations and debates within both countries demonstrate a nuanced

relationship between Sharia and human rights, with ongoing efforts to reconcile Islamic legal principles with international standards.

It is also essential to acknowledge that there are human rights violations in a lot of prisons in all parts of the world, regardless of the ideological principles of their regime. According to Susan Marks (2011), the conditions that enable human rights violations in prisons in dictatorial countries are complex. Lack of accountability and oversight, political repression, weak rule of law, culture of impunity, and structural inequalities contribute to these violations. Addressing these root causes requires concerted efforts to promote the rule of law, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and correct systemic inequities within these countries.

In understanding the breadth of these violations, it becomes evident that human rights abuses in prison systems are not confined to specific regions; rather, they manifest differently across the globe, reflecting unique challenges and contexts. For instance, African prisons, as highlighted by Sarkin (2009), face common issues such as resource shortages, governance problems, overcrowding, and substandard conditions. Violations against remand prisoners, the cohabitation of women and children with male prisoners, and the underutilization of sentencing alternatives highlight systemic challenges on the continent (Sarkin, 2009). Similarly, in some Latin American dictatorships described by Michel and Sikkink (2013), human rights violations in prisons function as a tool used by the regime to serve its interests. Dictatorships employ these violations as a means of suppressing dissent and opposition, threatening individuals with torture and imprisonment to prevent criticism of the government. The systematic use of torture and ill-treatment in prisons also instills fear in the population, making it easier for the regime to maintain power, particularly in the face of significant opposition or resistance. Moreover, Michel and Sikkink (2013) argue that human rights violations are used by dictatorships as a form

of punishment against perceived enemies of the state. By imprisoning and mistreating people who are perceived as threats to the regime, dictatorships consolidate their power and send a warning to others who consider opposing the regime. Finally, the systematic violation of human rights in prisons becomes a method of asserting sovereignty, creating a feeling of despair and resignation in the population, thus facilitating the maintenance of power and control in the country (Michel & Sikkink, 2013).

Regarding democracies, academics such as Buntman (2009) argue that being a democratic country does not guarantee the absence of human rights violations in their prisons. While democratic principles such as the rule of law, individual rights, and accountability are fundamental to democratic societies, human rights violations can still occur in various contexts, including within prison systems. While democratic countries often advocate for human rights and the rule of law on the global stage, they may face criticism for inconsistencies in their own practices, including within their prison systems (Buntman, 2009). Even in democratic nations such as the UK, human rights challenges persist, as illustrated by Whitty (2011). Overcrowding leading to violence, sanitation issues, and limited access to basic services are notable concerns. In addition, isolation creates significant anxiety associated with adverse physical and psychological effects. Vulnerable groups, including women, children, and people with disabilities, face additional barriers to their rights in the UK prison system (Whitty, 2011). At a more extreme end of the spectrum, Guantanamo Bay, as scrutinized by Birdsall (2010), exhibits gross human rights violations. Indefinite detention without trial, torture, and inhumane treatment are far from international norms. Politicized use of the law, lack of due process in military commissions, and a culture of secrecy further exacerbate these violations, presenting a unique set of challenges that differ from conventional prison systems.

2. Human Rights violations in Iranian prisons

Regarding human rights in Iranian prisons, as previously mentioned the country is going through a critical period in terms of human rights in its prisons, and it is important to understand the specifics and history of the rights of its prisoners. According to Asgari (2006) Iranian prisons during the 1960s-80s were notorious for their human rights violations, where tens of thousands of individuals faced imprisonment, torture, and execution, serving as tools to suppress political dissent and opposition. As stated by Asgari (2006) this period marked a high level of human rights abuses, documented by international news media but receiving limited attention in academic works and Iranian studies. As Khoshnood (2020) also mentions, in 1988, thousands of political opponents disappeared, with estimates suggesting up to 30,000 executions, particularly targeting members of the People's Mojahedin of Iran (MEK).

Today, after the death of Mahsa Amini and massive protests in 2022 and 2023, according to International Amnesty (2023) over 20,000 people faced imprisonment, torture, or execution, highlighting the urgent need to address the ongoing human rights violations in Iranian prisons. The existing literature on human rights violations in Iranian prisons focuses mainly on historical data, making comparative studies with the monarchical regime or analyzing the evolution of political prisons, torture and confessions in 20th century Iran, as done by Abrahamian (2002). However, the current regime's loss of legitimacy and the escalating human rights violations emphasize the urgency and relevance of contemporary research on this critical issue. While studies such as "Iran and the European Union" (Posch, 2016) and "The Triple Exclusion of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization" (Cohen, 2013) provide insights into historically significant political developments, there is a notable gap in addressing today's challenges. This gap requires updated perspectives to inform current actions and policy recommendations.

Of course, the study of prisoners' rights in Iran requires a thorough understanding of the nature of the present regime. In addressing this issue, some studies, such as Reza Afshari's (2012) work, explore the disparities between universal human rights values and the perceptions within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Afshari's work delves into the challenges of reconciling these values with the cultural and religious context of the nation, particularly examining their impact on women's subjectivity. The author critiques Western perceptions of Islamic culture as "bounded and static," highlighting misperceptions and exoticization by Westerners. Afshari (2012) also addresses the conditions allowing human rights violations in Iran, examining the structural dichotomy between republicanism and Islam within the country. It discusses the state's sovereignty and legitimacy influenced by this balance, along with the official state sanction of prejudicial norms leading to discrimination. Additionally, Afshari scrutinizes the regime's reactions to human rights charges, including officials justifying actions from an "anti-imperialist" perspective.

Another study by Afshari (2003) on human rights violations in Iranian prisons provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors contributing to these abuses. The extensive use of primary sources, including Iranian newspapers and prison memoirs, exposes the regime's actions. Afshari's research reveals insights into Iran's interactions with the U.N. human rights system, adding a valuable facet to the understanding of human rights violations in the country. The problem with Afshari's studies of Iran's regime relationship with regard to the human rights of prisoners is the same as other studies. The regime today is going through a very different and difficult phase and there is a need to do a new study. In this regard, this research will make an empirical contribution by conducting interviews with former political prisoners, adding firsthand insights to the existing body of knowledge.

In conclusion, the urgency of researching human rights violations in Iranian prisons is underscored by the ongoing atrocities faced by political prisoners today. While historical perspectives provide valuable context, there is a pressing need for updated research to inform contemporary actions and policy recommendations, addressing the notable gap in the current academic discourse.

3. Possible Solutions:

Regarding possible solutions and ways to improve the problem of human rights in Iranian prisons, the following have been written. Mehraein (2021) suggests the possibility of political acts even within the confines of repression. Political prisoners, he argues, can engage in acts challenging power dynamics, disrupting the institution of torture, and gradually protecting themselves against interrogators. This nuanced understanding of resistance in extreme conditions calls for further exploration of its efficacy in empowering prisoners and influencing societal change in contemporary Iran.

Cohen's (2013) examination of the efforts of opposition groups, such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, emphasizes the importance of advocacy in raising awareness. The EU's statements and sanctions in response to human rights violations in Iran reflect a commitment to addressing these concerns (European Parliament, 2023). Future research can delve into the effectiveness of these international reactions, assessing their impact on Iran's policies and practices concerning human rights and whether they have induced any positive change. To address the literature gap, this research will center on recent political events in Iran, especially those addressing human rights abuses. Interviews with former prisoners, who have experienced the atrocities of the Islamic Republic, would provide invaluable insights into the current state of affairs and their potential role as representatives in international processes. Such a study should assess the impact of

political acts, opposition advocacy, and international reactions on the human rights situation in present-day Iran. By incorporating the perspectives of those directly affected, the research would shed light on the evolving nature of human rights abuses and potential avenues for improvement.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the literature review not only creates a strong foundation for the analytical investigation of human rights violations in Iranian prisons, but also reveals the historical, political and international dimensions surrounding this complex issue. Most articles on the issue of human rights in Iranian prisons are either more historical or simply outdated, so recent events such as the execution of Navid Afkari or the tragic death of Mahsa Amini and the 2022/2023 protests inject a sense of urgency and relevance into the research topic. These recent developments highlight the critical juncture in which the Iranian regime finds itself, having lost legitimacy and facing enormous challenges. More than 20,000 people imprisoned in the recent protests, many of whom suffered torture and other human rights violations, further underscore the gravity of the situation. International reactions and developments like some resolutions and sanctions serve as a poignant reminder of the pivotal role of the international community in addressing human rights violations, particularly at critical political times. These articles have a diverse bibliography including books, interviews and reports from the United Nations and Amnesty International. The articles reviewed employ diverse methodologies to examine human rights violations in Iranian prisons. The predominant approach involves historical comparative studies, scrutinizing the evolution of prison systems and rights abuses over time. Document analysis is another common method, using primary sources such as newspapers and prison memoirs. Finally, interviews with ex-prisoners play a crucial role, providing firsthand perspectives, but a gap exists in clarifying the political affiliations of the

interviewees, potentially impacting the interpretation of their accounts. A new study could focus more on interviews with people who have themselves been victims of human rights violations in Iranian prisons and are currently politically active.

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Methodology:

1. Defining the Research Question

The central research focus of this study revolves around comprehensively examining the human rights violations occurring within the context of Iranian prisons and understanding the underlying enabling conditions. As it was mentioned earlier in the introduction, the research question guiding this research is: What are the prevalent human rights violations in Iranian prisons, and what are the underlying enabling conditions that perpetuate these violations? To address this qualitative question, the study employs a methodology centered on conducting 10 semi-structured interviews with individuals who have been formerly incarcerated in Iranian prisons in 1980s. Additionally, in the part about enabling factors, another methodology was utilized: desk research. This involves the systematic summary, collation, and synthesis of existing research and literature on the topic. By engaging with ex-prisoners, who have first-hand knowledge and experiences of the conditions within the Iranian prisons, the research aims to expose the various human rights violations that have occurred and continue to occur in Iran's prison system.

The recent tragic death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, which sparked widespread protests and led to numerous arrests, underscores the urgency and relevance of this research endeavor. The subsequent increase in the number of political prisoners highlights the need to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced and defend their rights and dignity. By engaging with former prisoners, this study aims to provide a platform for their experiences to be heard and documented, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by political prisoners and the broader human rights landscape in Iran. This study seeks to shed light on the systemic issues and structural factors that contribute to human rights violations in Iranian prisons. By understanding the enabling conditions

that perpetuate these violations, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the broader human rights landscape in Iran and advocate for meaningful reforms to address systemic injustices and uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals within the Iranian prison system.

2. Methodological Design and Rationale: Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews with MEK supporters and Incorporating Desk Research

As previously mentioned, the methodological approach used in this study involves conducting semi-structured interviews with people who have been formerly incarcerated in Iranian prisons, particularly focusing on supporters of the People's Mojahedin of Iran (MEK) who have experienced human rights violations firsthand. The choice of semi-structured interviews allows for flexibility and depth in exploring participants' experiences, perspectives, and insights regarding human rights violations within Iranian prisons (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Initial contact with potential participants was established through personal connections with a member of the People's Mojahedin of Iran (MEK). This individual served as a key informant, facilitating access to formerly imprisoned MEK supporters who have experienced human rights violations. This approach not only provides a means of accessing a population with relevant experiences but also ensures a level of trust and rapport between the researcher and participants. After initial contact, the study employs a sampling technique known as "snowball sampling" to identify and recruit additional participants from within the MEK community who meet the criteria of having been imprisoned in Iran and having experienced human rights violations. Snowball sampling involves leveraging existing connections to rapidly expand the sample size by reaching out to individuals within the same network who may meet the inclusion criteria (Singleton & Straits, 2009). Once potential participants are identified, they are approached and invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. These

interviews are conducted in a manner that allows for open-ended discussion and exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and insights regarding human rights violations within Iranian prisons. The secondary research method, desk research, is primarily employed to address the sub-question related to the enabling factors of human rights violations in Iran's prisons. Due to space limitations, this research focuses exclusively on domestic factors. The selection and analysis of articles and reports are conducted with careful attention to detail.

The decision to focus on interviewing members of the People's Mojahedin of Iran (MEK) as participants in this study is based in several key factors that highlight the importance and relevance of their views on human rights violations in Iranian prisons. Firstly, the People's Mojahedin of Iran (MEK) represents one of the most prominent opposition groups challenging the theocratic regime in Iran today. With a significant presence both within Iran and abroad, members of the MEK possess valuable insights into the prevailing human rights situation within Iranian prisons. Their involvement in political activism against the regime positions them as key stakeholders with firsthand experiences of the challenges and injustices faced by political prisoners. Moreover, the historical context of the MEK's interactions with the Iranian government underscores the urgency and importance of amplifying their voices in discussions surrounding human rights abuses. Throughout the history of the Islamic Republic, the MEK has been a primary target of state repression, enduring systematic persecution and violence. The 1988 massacre, in which thousands of MEK members were arbitrarily executed, stands as a stark reminder of the brutality inflicted upon political dissidents in Iranian prisons.

Furthermore, interviewing politically active MEK supporters offers a unique opportunity to explore alternative perspectives on addressing human rights violations in Iranian prisons. These individuals are actively engaged in advocacy efforts and possess first-hand

knowledge of the challenges faced by prisoners within the Iranian context. By capturing their perspectives, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play and identify potential avenues for advocacy and reform. Additionally, the rarity of interviews with individuals whose political beliefs and affiliations are clear highlights the importance of capturing the voices of politically active MEK supporters. The difficulty of gaining access to former political prisoners, particularly given their dispersion across various countries, underscores the significant challenges involved in this research. These interviews provide a unique and valuable contribution to the field, offering firsthand insights that are often difficult to obtain due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the precarious circumstances of the interviewees. Their perspectives offer valuable insights into the broader human rights landscape in Iran and provide a platform to amplify the voices of those directly affected by state repression.

3. Evaluating the Choice of Semi-Structured Interviews:

While semi-structured interviews offer a valuable methodological approach for researching human rights violations in Iranian prisons, it's important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in this method. The small sample size of 10 participants limits the generalizability of the findings but generalizability is not the main goal in semi-structured interviews because the focus is on exploring individual perspectives and experiences rather than obtaining results that can be applied to a larger population (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). While efforts will be made to collect a variety of views from people who have been incarcerated in different periods and prisons, the findings do not fully represent the experiences of all individuals who have been subjected to human rights violations in Iranian prisons. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the research means that the findings may not be easily quantifiable or comparable to larger-scale studies. While semi-structured interviews provide rich, detailed insights, they may

not lend themselves well to statistical analysis or the identification of general trends. Despite these limitations, semi-structured interviews offer a unique opportunity to delve deeply into the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals who have been directly affected by human rights violations in Iranian prisons. By engaging directly with participants and allowing them to share their stories in their own words, this research aims to provide a detailed understanding of the challenges faced by prisoners in Iran and contribute to ongoing efforts to promote accountability and reform within the country's prison system.

4. The Interviews and Ethical Approval:

Interviewees	Date of Interviews
Mohammad Bagheri	15/04/2024
Anonymous Interviewee	15/04/2024
Mehri Emrani	16/04/2024
Mohsen Aboutalebi	17/04/2024
Siamak Saidpour	17/04/2024
Ali Mohammad Dolati	18/04/2024
Gholamreza Jodairi Saber	19/04/2024
Batoul Feghahati	19/04/2024
Javad Abdollahi Nik	19/04/2024
Asadollah Panahimehr	20/04/2024

Table 1: List of interviewees with date of the online interview

The sensitive nature of the interviews conducted for this research necessitated obtaining ethical approval from the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee which was successfully granted under No. EEBK EII 2024 01 129. The committee thoroughly reviewed the

research protocol to ensure that ethical guidelines were adhered to, especially concerning the welfare and confidentiality of the former political prisoners involved. Special considerations were made to protect the rights of the interviewees, and all necessary precautions were taken to maintain confidentiality and respect the sensitive nature of the information shared during the interviews.

Through a careful selection process, specific human rights were selected for the interviews, based on their importance in safeguarding individual freedoms and dignity and their direct relevance to the lived experiences shared by the interviewees. It is important to note that the interviewees were given a consent form that offered the option of anonymity. While one in ten chose to remain anonymous due to the potential risks associated with revealing their identity, nine out of ten opted to use their real names to demonstrate their commitment to political activism. These ten interviewees were political prisoners in Evin Tehran, Tabriz, Mashad, Urmia, Mianeh, Khoy, Gohardash, Kermanshah and Zanjan prisons. All questions and responses in the interviews were conducted in Farsi (Persian), the native language of the participants, and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Some quotations from the interviews may be slightly paraphrased, as word-for-word translation would not have conveyed the intended meaning accurately in English.

The initial question posed to the interviewees revolved around their background and the circumstances leading to their arrest and incarceration. This question is based on Article 9 of the UDHR, which emphasizes the right to protection from arbitrary arrest, detention or exile. By eliciting personal accounts of the events leading up to their imprisonment, this question aims to uncover cases of unjust detention, arrest without a proper legal basis or exile motivated by political dissent. The second area of research delves into the legal aspects of respondents' incarceration. This includes a question about the justification

given by the authorities for their detention, access to legal representation and respect for due process rights. This question relates to Articles 10 and 11 of the UDHR, which emphasize the right to fair public hearings and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. The third question explores how freedom of opinion and expression was restricted during the respondents' time as political prisoners. Article 19 of the UDHR guarantees the rights of individuals to freely express their opinions and to seek, receive and impart information. The fourth and fifth questions in this analysis combine to delve into the interrelated experiences of physical abuse and psychological torture that interviewees endured during their incarceration in Iranian prisons. It is often difficult to separate physical and psychological abuse, as these forms of abuse often coexist in oppressive prison environments. These experiences are rooted in Article 5 of the UDHR, which prohibits all forms of physical or mental torture and emphasizes freedom from torture and degrading treatment, which includes both physical and mental integrity. The sixth question explores any discernible patterns or trends in targeting individuals for abuse based on factors such as resistance to the regime, social status, or political influence. This question relates to Article 7 of the UDHR, which underlines the right to equality before the law and emphasizes the equal treatment of all individuals regardless of their background or affiliations. The seventh focus area delves into respondents' experiences of people executed while in prison. This question relates to Article 3 of the UDHR, which recognizes the fundamental right to life and the importance of protecting individuals from arbitrary deprivation of life. The final question seeks respondents' views on other human rights that they consider important but have not yet been discussed. This open-ended inquiry allows for a broader exploration of human rights issues beyond the specific topics covered in previous questions. It includes rights such as the right to education, freedom

from discrimination, the right to participate in government, freedom of belief and religion, and the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being.

Masoud Mohammadi

Findings and Discussion

1. Interviews:

Interviews with former Iranian political prisoners provide a harrowing picture of a period of intense political repression and human rights abuses that characterized the early years of the Islamic Republic, particularly in the early 1980s. Across different backgrounds and circumstances, the experiences these individuals share reflect a systemic pattern of arbitrary arrests, harsh interrogations, prolonged imprisonment and denial of basic rights and dignity. First, the interviews revealed that a significant majority of respondents, specifically seven out of ten, were arrested in the same year, 1981. On June 20, 1981, MEK supporters held a large rally to reform the new regime. From that date onwards the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Khomeini began pursuing an aggressive strategy against the MEK. This observation suggests a deliberate and systematic approach to targeting perceived threats to the ruling establishment, indicative of a broader political strategy repression. Such targeted actions underscore the regime's determination to consolidate power and stifle dissent during a critical phase of its establishment. This aggressive arrest strategy of the Islamic Republic in 1981, in addition to the interviews of this research, can also be confirmed by historical data and articles such as the relevant BBC article (2011). A common thread among the accounts is the brutality and disregard for human rights that accompanied these arrests. Five out of ten respondents described being blindfolded or beaten and subjected to humiliating treatment after their arrest. For example, Mohammad Bageri, a school teacher, described being arrested blindfolded and subjected to physical abuse during his arrest in 1983. This relates to Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which emphasizes the right to protection from arbitrary detention, arrest, or exile, a right that was flagrantly violated in these cases.

The pre-trial detention conditions depicted in the interviews were equally deplorable. Individuals were often held in overcrowded and unsanitary cells, deprived of adequate food,

medical care and communication with their families. The interviewee who chose to remain anonymous shared her ordeal of pre-trial detention in Mashad prison with her one-year-old baby, forced to face the challenges of caring for a child in a hostile and dehumanizing environment. The interviewee mentioned that she was forced to take care of her child blindfolded for days before her trial, and very sadly stated “Until one in the morning I had to put my child to sleep, as soon as my child was asleep I was taken for interrogation that was full of threats and insults”. The experiences of women and young activists were particularly poignant in highlighting the challenges and sexism faced within the prison system. It is important to understand the influence of the patriarchal state of Iran on the treatment of women within the prison system and that gender norms and societal expectations play a significant role in shaping the experiences of women in the criminal justice system in Iran (Maghsoudi, Anaraki & Boostani, 2018). In addition, separation from families and relatives' lack of awareness of their loved ones' whereabouts added another layer of psychological and emotional distress to an already traumatic experience.

Findings from interviews with former political prisoners in Iranian prisons also reveal serious human rights violations in terms of fair trial rights, legal representation and due process. These findings are deeply troubling and highlight significant challenges in Iran's judicial system. First, none of the ten respondents had access to legal representation during their trials. This fundamental right, enshrined in international standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty (Article 11) & Right to a fair public hearing (Article 10)), ensures that individuals have the opportunity to adequately defend themselves. Lack of legal representation undermines the fairness of trials and denies individuals of the opportunity to present their case effectively. Secondly, interviewees described remarkably short trial durations, with most trials lasting only a few minutes. Specifically, nine out of ten interviewees reported that their trials were

under ten minutes, of which four reported that their trial was as short as two minutes. This rushed and abbreviated process contradicts the principles of fair trial and due process, which require courts to carefully consider evidence, allow meaningful defense presentations, and ensure impartiality. Such summary trials raise serious doubts about the completeness and fairness of judicial proceedings. Moreover, the manner in which these trials were conducted reflects a lack of adherence to internationally recognized standards of justice. Gholamreza Jodairi Saber stated that the situation in which you are being tried in these courts, could not be called a 'trial' and neither could the person who was trying them a judge." According to Gholamreza Jodairi Saber, Ali Mohammad Dolati, and other interviewees, judges imposed harsh sentences, including life imprisonment and the death penalty, without properly considering the evidence or allowing the defendants to present a defense. This highlights a systemic issue where judicial decisions seem predetermined or influenced by factors other than legal merit.

In addition, some interviewees reported cases of torture or coercion prior to their trials, indicating a broader pattern of human rights violations in the Iranian justice system. Torture not only violates basic human rights, but also undermines the integrity of legal proceedings by extracting false confessions or compromising the defendants' ability to participate in their own defense. Siamak Saidpour and Mehri Emrani's experiences, where they were tortured to confess to crimes they did not commit, highlight the wider human rights abuses in Iranian prisons and legal processes. Specifically, Mehri Emrani reported that in the pre-trial interrogations you were told "you have to cooperate and confess what we will tell you". This is a case where there is a combination of human rights violations involving the Right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty (Article 11) with the Right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment (Article 5).

Another aspect of human rights violations related to freedom of opinion and expression, as described in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). All 10 interviewees said they lacked freedom of opinion and expression and recounted experiences where their ability to express opposing views or even speak freely about their beliefs was brutally curtailed. A particularly disturbing aspect revealed by the interviews is the strict censorship and control imposed on the language itself. For example, some interviewees reported that they were not allowed to say the word "Mojahedin", even when asked why they were sentenced to imprisonment, they were forced to use the term "Monafeqeen", which has a pejorative connotation and reflects the regime's propaganda efforts to delegitimize dissenting voices. This language control not only stifled free expression, but also eroded individuals' sense of identity and autonomy, further highlighting the extent of human rights violations inside Iranian prisons. The term "Monafeq" or "Monafeqeen" in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran refers to "hypocrites" or those who feign faith while secretly opposing the Islamic government or its principles. It has a strong negative connotation, suggesting betrayal and deceit. This labeling strategy aimed to justify the repression and inhumane management of the Mojahedin Organization, characterizing them as a threat to the stability and legitimacy of the newly established Islamic state (Gustafson, 2023).

Moreover, the forced indoctrination in the ideology of the Islamic Republic, as highlighted by Mehri Emrani and others, represents a flagrant violation of freedom of thought and belief. Political prisoners underwent mandatory "theology" courses where they were expected to conform to the regime's interpretation of Islam and political ideology. Refusal to comply often led to severe punishments, including torture, underscoring the coercive nature of this ideological imposition. According to Mehri Emrani, not only were the prisoners unable to express their views freely, but they were also denied basic interactions such as conversations with fellow inmates. The threat of solitary confinement and torture for seemingly innocuous

acts such as sharing a laughter with another inmate, further demonstrates the extreme measures taken to control and suppress any form of dissent. Emrani 's experience highlights the insidious nature of Human Rights abuses inside Iranian prisons, where individuals are stripped of their autonomy and subjected to systemic pressure to conform to state ideologies. The threat of isolation, torture and dehumanization was really common, creating an environment of constant fear and surveillance. Mehri Emrani called this high degree of violation of freedom of opinion and expression a form of "psychological torture", which also concerns the right to Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment (Article 5 of the UDHR) which will be discussed further below. Overall, these practices not only violate the principles of freedom of opinion and expression, but also contravene broader human rights norms that guarantee individuals autonomy and dignity. The right to hold and express different opinions, as well as the freedom to choose one's beliefs without coercion or punishment, is fundamental to a just society.

Regarding the right to Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment (Article 5 of the UDHR), the accounts of physical torture suffered by political prisoners in Iranian prisons illustrate a pattern of systematic brutality that leaves lasting physical and psychological scars, reducing their quality of life even after they are released from prison. In many interviews, a grim picture emerges, showing the severity and extent of the torture inflicted on the prisoners. Specifically, nine out of ten respondents reported being beaten and whipped using thick cables. Mohammad Bagari, Mehri Emrani, Gholamreza Jodairi Saber, Batoul Feghahati, Asadollah Panahimehr, Ali Mohammad Dolati, Siamak Saidpour and Javad Abdollahi Nik recount experiences of being tied and whipped under their feet with thick cables. These beatings were not isolated incidents but common forms of punishment within the Iranian prison system. For example, Ali Mohammed Dolati was tortured two to three times a day, highlighting the relentless nature of the abuse. Several others detail similar incidents of being

punched or kicked by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)² members in prison. The physical effects of such torture were severe and long-lasting. Mehri Emrani's hearing loss due to beatings on her left ear and Ali Mohammad Dolati's inability to walk for a year after being beaten until he needed a wheelchair stand as stark examples. Javad Abdollahi Nik's experience of having a kidney removed after being severely kicked in the kidney area speaks about the life-threatening injuries caused during torture sessions. Another relevant and important issue concerns the frequency and intensity of torture, Siamak Saidpour endured eight days of continuous torture, including broken fingers, knife cuts and cigarette burns, showing the relentless and sadistic nature of the perpetrators. Specifically, regarding these eight days Siamak Saidpour sadly stated "during these eight days I received all the tortures you can imagine". Many interviewees report being tortured several times a day, with techniques ranging from physical beatings to sexual assault and psychological torture. Asadollah Panahimehr mentions some prisoners who were raped, highlighting the extent to which human dignity is disregarded within these prison walls. The use of physical torture alongside sexual abuse serves to dehumanize and demoralize prisoners, leaving them in a state of deep vulnerability and trauma.

Beyond physical atrocities, psychological torture is a significant aspect of the ordeal faced by political prisoners in Iranian detention facilities. Testimonies from ex-prisoners interviewed in this research highlight a systematic approach of breaking the spirit and mental resilience of individuals, highlighting the grim reality of psychological torture inside these prisons. According to Asadollah Panahimehr the main purpose of psychological torture in Iranian Prisons was to "break the human character of the prisoner" or in other words, to fully dehumanize the Prisoner. A common form of psychological abuse reported by all

² The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established in 1979 by Ruhollah Khomeini as the primary multi-service branch of the Iranian Armed Forces with the primary purpose of safeguarding the integrity of the regime (Vatanka, 2017).

interviewees is constant threats of harm to themselves or loved ones. All ten interviewees recount instances where they were threatened with torture, harm to their families or even execution. These threats created a pervasive atmosphere of fear and anxiety, leaving detainees in a constant state of anxiety and vulnerability. The use of solitary confinement as a tool of psychological torture is another worrying aspect highlighted in the interviews. Mohammad Bageri, Mehri Emrani, Gholamreza Jodairi Saber, Asadollah Panahimehr, and Ali Mohammad Dolati were subjected to confinement in small cells, reminiscent of "little ease," for extended periods. These cells lacked basic amenities, forcing the inmates to live in squalid conditions and suffer mental anguish from prolonged isolation. Gholamreza Jodairi Saber's six-month ordeal in such a cell without proper sanitary facilities is a stark example of the squalid conditions designed to degrade and demoralize prisoners. Asadollah Panahimehr's confinement in a similar cell for simply laughing at something on TV exemplifies the arbitrary and cruel nature of treatment meted out in Iranian prisons. According to Batoul Feghahati, another form of psychological torture was being forced to listen to the torture of other political prisoners, adding a layer of psychological trauma to her experience. Similarly, Ali Mohammad Dolati recounted being forced to listen to the screams and executions of other prisoners, reinforcing the feeling of helplessness and horror. These tactics were intended to break the prisoners' mental resilience and instill a sense of powerlessness. Other psychological torture often included manipulation and deception by prison authorities, the Anonymous Interviewee reported being lied to about her mother's death, a cruel tactic designed to destabilize her emotionally. Asadollah Panahimehr was constantly insulted and threatened, creating a hostile and humiliating environment that eroded his sense of self-worth. The impact of psychological torture on the mental well-being of prisoners cannot be overstated, with many of the interviewees reporting significant psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and lasting emotional

scars. The constant fear, uncertainty and powerlessness they experienced during their detention left lasting marks on their mental health.

Regarding torture overall, it is also important to note that the distinction between physical and psychological torture is often blurred in these narratives. Many prisoners experienced both forms of abuse at the same time, compounding their suffering. Ali Mohammed Dolati's experience of being locked in a "coffin" for hours exemplifies just that. The term "coffin" here refers to a small, confined space where prisoners are deliberately confined in a manner that mimics the claustrophobic and suffocating conditions of a coffin. This experience evokes a deep sense of helplessness, fear and claustrophobia. The lack of space to stretch or move freely, combined with the psychological burden of being in such a confined space, can have a serious mental and emotional impact on the individual. Specifically, Ali Mohammad Dolati reported that with this method of torture, many of the prisoners either "came out dead from these coffins or with major psychological problems". Another example is the tragic death of Mohsen Aboutalebi's father because of the psychological torture suffered by the prison authorities after he was deceived by the prison authorities that his son was executed. This deliberate act of deception led to immense mental anguish, which resulted in a fatal heart attack. This shows the devastating impact of psychological torture not only on individuals but also on their families and loved ones. Finally, Gholamreza Jodairi Saber's narration of a fellow inmate being forced to witness the rape of a woman is a stark example of the extreme and dehumanizing tactics used in Theocratic Regime's prisons. This act not only violates the dignity and rights of the victim but also causes serious psychological trauma to the witness. It highlights the depths of cruelty to which torturers will go to instill fear and control in prisoners, leaving permanent scars on their mental well-being. All these accounts are a violation of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which

categorically prohibits torture and degrading treatment, emphasizing the inherent dignity and integrity of every person.

It is important to mention that in analyzing the treatment of political prisoners in Iranian prisons, remarkable patterns emerge, shedding light on targeted mistreatment based on factors such as resistance to the regime, political beliefs, age and educational background. Mohammad Bagheri emphasized that opposition to the theocratic regime and prison order significantly affected the management of prisoners, reflecting a broader trend where the degree of opposition was correlated with the severity of ill-treatment. This report was also echoed by Asadollah Panachimehr, who noted differential treatment based on political parties, with members of more passive parties receiving comparatively better treatment. Examples from Ali Mohammad Dolati highlighted the harsh treatment faced by members of the Mojahidin, demonstrating a targeted approach based on political beliefs. Mohsen Aboutalebi's narrative further highlighted the plight of individuals involved in political activism, revealing a direct link between activism and harsher treatment within the prison system. Age and educational background also played a decisive role, five out of ten interviewees claimed that youth and students bore the brunt of mistreatment in Iranian prisons. According to Gholamreza Jodairi Saber, students and youth in general belonged to the most educated social group in Iranian society at the time and were usually therefore more politically progressive, thus considered a greater threat to the theocratic regime. Gholamreza Jodairi Saber remembers prisoners who were tortured for wearing "glasses" which meant to the prison authorities that they were people who were doing more "reading", therefore they were more likely to be educated and progressive. And finally, according to Mehri Emrani and Siamak Saidpour, family ties and political activism of relatives enhanced the scrutiny individuals faced, indicating a systemic targeting based on family connections and a perceived threat to regime stability. An example is the case of Monire Rajavi, as described by

Emrani, who was executed only because she was Masoud Rajavi's sister (Leader of the MEK), although she initially faced only two years of imprisonment. Overall, differential treatment based on factors such as level of resistance, political beliefs, age and educational background contradicts international human rights standards, particularly the right to equality before the law as outlined in Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Regarding perhaps the most important Human Right, which is the Right to Life (Article 3 of the UDHR), all ten interviewees shared narratives of knowing many individuals who had been executed, highlighting the pervasive nature of state-sanctioned violence within these institutions. Mohammad Bagheri's narration highlights Morezah Eftekhari and Ahmad Babai's tragic fate, two young men who were executed after only short periods of imprisonment, underscoring the regime's cruelty towards dissenters. The Anonymous Interviewee recalls Simin, a young woman who was tortured before her execution, emblematic of the brutality suffered by political prisoners. Mehri Emrani's narrative reveals the arbitrary nature of the executions, with victims like Shirin Eslamimoghadam and Shamsi Barari to be chosen seemingly at random. Among the accounts shared, the fate of those executed for dissent, such as Abdol Reza Javadi and Naser Badri, is particularly poignant. Their executions, following slogans like "Marg bar Khomeini " (Death to Khomeini), exemplify the regime's uncompromising stance against any form of opposition, often with serious consequences for those who dare to speak out. Gholamreza Jodairi Saber's testimony adds a personal dimension, with his childhood friends like Ebrahim Alizadeh, Mohammad Jedi and Farshid Amini falling victim to the regime's arbitrary execution policies. Gholamreza Jodairi Saber emphasized how heartbreaking his childhood friends' execution was, saying that they "were like brothers to me." The experiences of Siamak Saidpour and Batoul Feghahati, who lost their brothers to execution, offer a glimpse into the personal tragedies

endured by families affected by such state violence. Shahla Abdi, who was just seventeen when she was executed, according to Batoul Feghahati, was lied to by IRGC members in prison, that she would just be moved to another cell, in fact she was raped and executed soon after. All these cases highlight not only the statistical gravity of the situation but also the profound human impact of political repression in Iran's prison system. These executions reported in the accounts of former political prisoners in Iran violate the Right to Life as enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This fundamental right underlines the inherent dignity and worth of every human being and prohibits the arbitrary deprivation of life. The arbitrary executions carried out by the Iranian regime demonstrate a blatant disregard for this fundamental right, denying individuals their right to life based on their political beliefs or expressions of dissent.

Finally, when asked about other human rights, a common response among respondents was the violation of the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, which is particularly emphasized in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular, seven out of ten interviewees stated that they felt that this right was being violated in Iran's prisons. This right includes several key aspects such as access to health care, decent living conditions and protection from inhuman treatment. According to Ali Mohammad Dolati the denial of appropriate medical care and the Right to Health in Iranian prisons was "one of the worst human rights violations". Mohammad Bagheri's narrative highlights the dire consequences of such denial, recounting his struggle to receive timely medical attention, where he was denied an appendicitis surgery until his life was in serious danger. This disregard for urgent medical needs not only puts individual lives at risk, but also reflects a systemic failure to respect basic human rights standards in the prison environment. Likewise, Mohsen Aboutalebi's account highlights the chronic nature of health care violations in Iranian prisons, describing his experiences of days of toothache without proper dental care and the tragic death of another

inmate due to the denial of medication, paints a grim picture of the medical neglect that prevails in these facilities. Such cases not only violate the Right to Health but also demonstrate a callous indifference to human suffering. According to Gholamreza Jodairi Sabre, medical facilities were being used for purposes contrary to their intended function, using medical care as a tool for further torture and interrogation instead of genuine care, which reflects another violation of the principles of medical ethics and human dignity. The issue of overcrowding, as described by Batoul Feghahati and Asadollah Panahimehr, intensifies the challenges faced by prisoners. Overcrowded cells lacking basic amenities such as adequate bedding and living space not only impair physical health, but also contribute to psychological distress among inmates. Furthermore, the forced imposition of religious practices on prisoners, as shared by Mohsen Aboutalebi and Ali Mohammad Dolati among others, directly violates the Freedom of Belief and Religion (Article 18) in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many individuals were forced by members of the IRGC to follow religious rituals against their beliefs, which not only deprived them of their freedom but also created an environment of discriminatory and coercive environment within the prison system. For example, Mohsen Aboutalebi reported how atheists and followers of minority religions, such as Bahais and Zoroastrians, were forced to conform to Shia Muslim practices, regardless of their personal beliefs. Similarly, Ali Mohamed Dolati highlights how prisoners from different religious backgrounds faced pressure to participate in religious activities that were contrary to their beliefs. Finally, the interviews highlight other critical human rights violations, such as the right to education (Article 26 of the UDHR) and the right to marriage and family (Article 16 of the UDHR). Mohammad Bagheri's experience exemplifies the denial of the Right to Marriage and Family when he was arrested just a week after his wedding, denying him the basic right to start a family life without interference. Similarly, the Anonymous Interviewee draws attention to the violation of the Right to Education for young

children in prison, whose access to education was impeded due to the incarceration of their mothers. These cases highlight the wider challenges facing individuals in Iranian prisons, where basic rights integral to personal development and family well-being were routinely ignored.

2. Enabling Factors:

Human rights violations in the prisons of dictatorial regimes, such as those discussed above, are influenced by several enabling factors that contribute to their perpetuation within these regimes. These factors include political, social, institutional, and economic dynamics that support authoritarian rule and suppress dissent. Understanding the enabling factors behind human rights violations, specifically the rights of prisoners, is crucial to comprehensively addressing these violations. These factors allow us to analyze the systemic issues that perpetuate such outrageous acts. By delving into the political, social, and institutional dynamics that enable these violations, we gain insights into the root causes of these injustices. This understanding is essential to formulating effective strategies and interventions to prevent and mitigate violations of the rights of prisoners in dictatorships. Moreover, uncovering these “enabling factors” is integral to enhancing accountability and advocating justice for victims. It also highlights the importance of promoting transparency, the rule of law and respect for human rights in authoritarian regimes, and more generally a deeper understanding of these factors serves as a fundamental step in advocating for a world where human rights are universally protected and upheld.

There are several "enabling factors" of the violations of the rights of prisoners in dictatorships. A fundamental factor, which is perhaps the most important in the case of Iran, is the concentration of power in a single individual or a group of elite. Dictatorships are characterized by authoritarian rule, where leaders exercise unchecked power over state

institutions, including law enforcement and security forces (Gilligan & Nesbitt, 2009). This unchecked power allows dictatorships to suppress opposition and maintain control through fear and intimidation, often resorting to human rights abuses in prisons as a tool of repression. This elite group uses abuses of prisoners' rights such as torture, arbitrary arrests, unfair trials or executions to achieve their goals.

Within the complex socio-political landscape of Iran, the concentration of power in an elite has been and continues to be a key feature of the theocratic regime in Iran. In the 1980s, when the worst human rights abuses took place in Iran's prisons, mainly against members of organizations such as the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) which we have studied extensively in this research, the elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran consisted of influential figures within the government, clerics, military, revolutionary institutions that held significant power and authority in shaping the country's policies and direction, and individuals closely associated with Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran at the time (Vakili-Zad, 1994). Khomeini wielded immense influence on the direction of the Islamic Republic and played a pivotal role in shaping its policies and ideology. In addition, figures such as Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as Supreme Leader, and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a powerful politician and former President of Iran, was also part of the elite class in the 1980s and beyond. These individuals dominated both political and economic matters, exerting control over key institutions and decision-making processes. Economically, some of these elites were involved in business ventures, controlled profitable industries, or had connections to important economic sectors, further enhancing their power and influence in both the political and economic spheres (Vakili - Zad, 1994).

During this period, Iran experienced a period marked by political repression, human rights abuses and violent extremism, particularly in its prisons. The Islamic Republic of Iran's elite played a critical role in shaping and implementing policies that led to widespread human

rights abuses. These actions were often justified under the pretext of maintaining national security, preserving the Islamic revolution, and combating perceived threats to the regime. This elite group used human rights violations and crimes as a means to instill fear and maintain control over the population (Vakili - Zad,1994). Using tactics of intimidation, surveillance and repression, they tried to suppress dissent, trying to silence the voices of opposition and prevent any challenges to their power. The use of torture and execution served as tools of coercion and punishment, sending a chilling message to those who dared to challenge or resist the regime. The culture of fear and surveillance cultivated by the Elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran permeated all aspects of society. Citizens lived under constant scrutiny, with pervasive surveillance by security forces and intelligence agencies. Dissent was met with swift and severe repercussions, leading to a climate of fear and self-censorship among the population. In addition, the regime's control over the media, judiciary and security apparatus further strengthened its power and facilitated the perpetuation of human rights abuses. The Elite used these crimes strategically to suppress dissent, consolidate their power and prevent any challenges to their authority (Vakili-Zad, 1994).

We come to an understanding that most of the "enabling factors" of human rights violations in Iranian prisons in the 1980s and later were directly related to the elite group of the Theocratic regime. As we consider the historical context of human rights violations in Iranian prisons, a related question arises: Who constitutes the elite in the theocratic regime today, and is this elite directly related to human rights violations in Iranian prisons, as in previous decades?

The elite within the theocratic regime in Iran today consists primarily of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and his network of followers directly connected to him. Khamenei, as the Supreme Leader, holds supreme power in the country and exercises control through strategic appointments to key positions within the government, judiciary, military and intelligence

services. This inner circle shares Khamenei 's ideology and vision, playing a critical role in implementing his directives and maintaining his power. Khamenei's direct involvement in critical issues such as foreign policy and security, along with his close relationship with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), further consolidates his control (Vatanka, 2017). The IRGC in the 1980s was the main tool of the elite of the Islamic Republic in the strategy of suppressing any dissenting voice and instrumentalizing the violation of human rights. Many interviewees like Asadollah Panahimer reported that since their arrest, the IRGC was present in all phases of their imprisonment. Today the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) continues to serve as a critical tool for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, to maintain control and enforce his authority. As a powerful military and paramilitary force, the IRGC plays an important role in safeguarding regime interests, suppressing dissent, and countering internal and external threats. Khamenei relies on the IRGC 's loyalty and capabilities to support regime stability and security, making it a key instrument of his governance. The IRGC occupies a prominent position, exerting influence not only in military and security matters but also in politics, economy and society (Forozan & Shahi, 2017). The IRGC 's involvement in various sectors of the state reinforces its status as an important power broker, further enhancing its role as a key pillar of support for Khamenei 's leadership (Vatanka, 2017). In other words, the IRGC, which was the most important tool of elite repression in 1980s, today largely constitutes the elite itself.

Today the relationship of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as part of Iran's ruling elite and human rights violations against protesters and individuals who are members or supporters of opposition organizations to the theocratic regime, such as the Mojahedin (MEK) is complex and deeply intertwined with the historical development and role of the IRGC in maintaining power in Iran. The expansion of the IRGC's power in political and economic matters empowered the IRGC to exercise significant control over dissent and

opposition. Although the IRGC was not directly responsible for the management of Iran's prisons, and the main entity responsible for Iran's prison system is the Islamic Republic of Iran Prisons Organization (IRIPO), which operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has played and continues to play an important role in the management of political prisoners and dissidents, which can be confirmed both by the interviews of this research and by academics such as Alfoneh (2008).

The IRGC 's modus operandi, characterized by informality, direct action and a willingness to use force, has been key in suppressing dissent and maintaining the regime's hold on power. Today, the IRGC 's involvement in suppressing civil unrest, such as the Women, Life, Freedom movement, reflects its role as a key enforcer of ruling elite power. IRGC tactics, including acts of violence and torture against protesters that they arrest, are often carried out with the implicit or explicit approval of the political faction that sponsors them. The IRGC's historical ties to the ruling elite, particularly the clerical establishment, have afforded it a level of political protection and support that allows it to act with relative impunity. Despite some internal disputes and disagreements within the organization and among the wider military and security forces, the IRGC has maintained a strong position in Iran's power structure, allowing it to continue its repressive actions against protesters. The use of torture, violence and other human rights abuses against protesters they arrest is not only a means of maintaining control and suppressing dissent, but also serves as a tool to instill fear and intimidation into the population. The IRGC 's willingness to resort to extreme measures reflects a broader strategy of authoritarian rule aimed at eliminating any challenges to the regime's authority.

According to Monshipouri and Zamiri (2023), one of the most troubling aspects of the IRGC's role in human rights abuses today is its control over prisons and detention centers where political dissidents, activists, journalists and members of minority groups are often

held without due process. Reports from human rights organizations and more recent former detainees describe incidents of torture, arbitrary detention, solitary confinement and lack of access to legal representation in these facilities. Today, the IRGC's influence continues to extend beyond physical abuse to include psychological and emotional torture of prisoners. Reports state that detainees are subjected to psychological pressure, threats against their families and forced confessions under duress (Monshipouri & Zamiri, 2023). The lack of transparency and accountability within the IRGC-controlled prison system also allows these abuses to go unchecked, with little recourse for victims to seek justice or redress.

In conclusion, we realize that despite the passage of time and the emergence of movements such as Woman, Life, Freedom, this research reveals that human rights violations in Iran's prisons have remained largely unchanged from the 1980s to the present day. However, this study, conducted on human rights in Iranian prisons, particularly through interviews with former political prisoners, provides critical insights into the ongoing nature of human rights violations. The voices of those currently incarcerated are often silenced, making such research to serve as a platform to amplify their experiences and advocate for meaningful change. These findings not only deepen our understanding of the ongoing challenges faced by individuals in Iranian prisons, but also highlight the urgent need for efforts to address human rights violations in this context. The IRGC's control of the Islamic Republic's prisons in Iran is a key mechanism through which human rights abuses are committed. Finally, the lack of oversight, accountability and adherence to international human rights standards in these facilities also underscores the urgent need for reforms to ensure the protection of prisoners' rights and dignity.

Conclusions

The Interviews:

The interviews conducted with ten former political prisoners from Iran, who were incarcerated in the 1980s, provided crucial insights into the human rights violations within the country's prison system. These interviews revealed serious violations that go against the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This chapter of the research delves into violations concerning Freedom from arbitrary arrest and exile, Fair trial rights, Right to Life, Freedom of opinion and information, Freedom from torture and degrading treatment, and the Right to equality before the law. From 1981, many opposition members were arrested in large numbers without proper legal procedures. Their trials were quick and lacked legal representation, which weakened the fairness of the justice system. Within the prison system, dissent was ruthlessly quashed through executions, suppression of speech, and relentless ideological indoctrination. Both physical and psychological torture were commonplace, violating the most fundamental rights to life and dignity. Additionally, when asked about other human rights violations besides those mentioned above, the respondents mentioned the Right to an Adequate Standard of Living, the Freedom of Belief and Religion, the Right to Education, and finally the Right to Marriage.

The findings of this study also indicate that the prison system in the Islamic Republic of Iran has seen little change in its approach to human rights since the 1980s. This conclusion is particularly pertinent in light of recent developments. There are striking similarities between the post-revolutionary period and the current era, where the regime has suffered a significant loss of social legitimacy. Then, as now, the regime employs human rights violations as a mechanism to suppress internal social dissent. This strategy includes targeting individuals based on their demographic traits and opposition to the regime. In the 1980s, young people

and students, as well as active regime opponents, were the primary targets of abuse. This deliberate intimidation tactic, aimed at those perceived as threats to the regime's stability, fundamentally undermines the right to equality before the law. Young people and students, characterized by their higher educational attainment and progressive political views, posed a substantial challenge to the regime's ideology. Their propensity to question authority and advocate for change made them prime targets for repression. In the contemporary context, following the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, the regime has once again focused its repressive measures on the youth. Reports from Amnesty International (2023) confirm that many of those subjected to human rights abuses in prisons today are young adults and children. It is also important to note that the primary slogans of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, such as "Death to Khamenei" and "Death to the Dictator," reflect the same sentiments as before with the political prisoners of 1980s. Accounts from this research's interviewees reveal the regime's harsh response to such slogans, with stories of individuals being executed and tortured for chanting "Death to Khomeini." This underscores the persistent danger faced by political prisoners in Iran today. Moreover, the methods of torture have remained largely consistent, as evidenced by the accounts of former prisoners and contemporary reports. This continuity in torture practices highlights the regime's ongoing commitment to using extreme measures to suppress dissent. Another critical conclusion of this study is the profound and lasting impact of the traumatic experiences endured by prisoners in the 1980s. These individuals continue to bear significant physical and psychological scars, which have severely affected their quality of life. The enduring nature of these injuries underscores the long-term consequences of the regime's repressive tactics.

Enabling factors:

A critical analysis of the "enabling factors" for the human rights violations in Iranian prisons shows a clear link between the regime's theocratic elite group's actions and the violations.

Human rights abuses have long been used as a tool of repression by this elite group, most notably by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to establish and maintain power in the nation. During the 1980s, the IRGC emerged as a central tool of repression employed by the regime to quell dissent and assert authority. Its involvement in human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and executions, reflects a deliberate strategy aimed at stifling opposition and instilling fear among the populace. The interviews with former political prisoners underscore the direct link between human rights violations and the actions of the IRGC during this period. Fast forward to the present, the IRGC has not only retained its repressive role but has also expanded its influence to encompass political and economic domains. This evolution transforms the IRGC from being merely a tool of repression to the elite entity wielding significant power and control within Iran. The continuation of similar repression tactics by the IRGC today, as evidenced by the targeting of arrested protesters and dissenters, signifies an ongoing threat to human rights and civil liberties in the country. The detailed data collected in this research, coupled with historical examples such as the 1988 massacre, serves as compelling evidence of the IRGC's culpability in severe human rights violations. The systematic nature of these violations, often planned and executed by IRGC operatives, highlights the urgent need for decisive action on both domestic and international fronts. There is a case to be made for human rights organisations and concerned nations to take action against the IRGC from a foreign policy standpoint. Supporting the IRGC's international designation as a terrorist group is one such action that could be taken. This designation would serve as a means of both denouncing its atrocities and imposing specific sanctions and limitations designed to limit its capacity to commit human rights violations in the future.

Future studies:

Future studies could conduct a comparative case study of human rights violations in Iran's prisons across different periods of the theocratic regime. This research should examine not only the similarities but also the unique aspects of each period. Such a study would be invaluable in predicting the potential risks faced by political prisoners in Iran, given the country's unstable political climate. Another study could explore the relationship between Islamic law and human rights violations in Iran's prisons. This would involve investigating whether specific torture methods or judicial practices are linked to Islamic law. Understanding this relationship could provide deeper insights into the systemic nature of these violations. Another important area for investigation could focus on the enabling conditions that facilitate human rights violations. This research could identify both domestic and international factors that contribute to the perpetuation of these abuses. Due to space constraints, this study only briefly touched on domestic factors, leaving a comprehensive examination of international influences for future research. These suggested areas of study would significantly enhance our understanding of human rights violations in Iran and provide practical insights for improving the conditions of political prisoners. They would also offer valuable guidance for policymakers and human rights organizations working to address these issues.

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Appendix A

List of Interview Questions:

1. Before we begin discussing your experiences in Iranian prisons, could you please share a bit about yourself and your background? Specifically, could you tell us when and under what circumstances you were arrested, as well as any events leading up to your imprisonment? (This concerns the Freedom from arbitrary arrest and exile - Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which emphasizes the right to be protected from unfair detention, arrest, or banishment.)
2. How did the authorities justify your detention, and were you given access to legal representation or due process rights during your imprisonment? (This relates to the Fair trial - Right to be considered innocent until proven guilty (Article 11) & Right to fair public hearing (Article 10) of the UDHR. These rights ensure that everyone is entitled to a fair trial, the presumption of innocence, and access to legal aid, regardless of their circumstances.)
3. Can you describe how your freedom of opinion and expression were restricted during your time as a political prisoner? (This pertains to the Freedom of opinion and information - Article 19 of the UDHR, which safeguards individuals' rights to freely express their opinions and seek, receive, and impart information, regardless of borders or mediums.)
4. During your time in prison, were you subjected to any physical abuse, such as beatings, forced standing or stress positions for extended periods, or sexual abuse or assault? If so, could you please describe those experiences, including any specific incidents or injuries you sustained? (This touches on the Freedom from torture and

degrading treatment - Article 5 of the UDHR, which prohibits any form of physical or mental torture, ensuring the dignity and integrity of every person.)

5. Did you experience any forms of psychological abuse while in prison, such as threats of harm to yourself or your loved ones, isolation from others, including solitary confinement, or sensory deprivation, such as blindfolding or ear-covering? If yes, please share your experiences and how they impacted you during your detention. (This also concerns the Freedom from torture and degrading treatment - Article 5 of the UDHR, recognizing that psychological abuse, alongside physical torture, constitutes a violation of human rights and dignity.)

6. Throughout your experience, did you notice any discernible patterns or trends in the targeting of yourself or other individuals for torture or mistreatment based on factors such as their degree of resistance to the regime, social status, or political influence? Specifically, were there differences in treatment between political prisoners based on their level of opposition to the regime or their perceived importance within political or social circles? (This relates to the Right to equality before the law - Article 7 of the UDHR, which underscores the importance of treating all individuals equally under the law, regardless of their background or affiliations.)

7. During your time in prison, did you personally know individuals who were executed while incarcerated? If so, could you provide details regarding the conditions surrounding their executions, including any information you have about the circumstances leading up to their deaths and how their executions were carried out? (This addresses the Right to Life - Article 3 of the UDHR, acknowledging the fundamental right to life and the importance of protecting individuals from arbitrary deprivation of life.)

8. Lastly, is there a human right that you consider important that we haven't discussed yet? This could include the Right to education, which ensures everyone has access to education without discrimination, the Freedom from discrimination, which safeguards individuals from unfair treatment based on characteristics like race, gender, or religion, the Right to participate in government and free elections, guaranteeing the ability to engage in the political process, the Freedom of belief and religion, protecting individuals' rights to practice their faith or beliefs without persecution, or the Right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being, which ensures that everyone has access to basic necessities such as food, clothing, housing, healthcare, and social services, necessary for their health, well-being, and dignity. If there's a specific human right that you find particularly significant within the scope of our discussion, I would appreciate hearing your thoughts.

Masoud Mohammadi