

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/12/iran-suddenly-executes-wrestler-navid-afkari>

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Update: Iran authorities executed Navid Afkari, who confessed to crimes allegedly under torture. This cruel act, in defiance of an international outcry for a fair retrial, shows an utter disregard for the most fundamental human rights norms.

(Beirut) The case of an [Iranian](#) wrestler on death row is part of a systematic pattern in which Iranian authorities disregard torture allegations and use coerced confessions in trial proceedings, Human Rights Watch said today. Iran's judiciary should immediately open a transparent and independent investigation into allegations that the authorities tortured Navid Afkari and his brothers and grant Afkari a fair retrial in accordance with human rights standards.

Iranian authorities brought three cases against the wrestler Navid Afkari and his brother Vahid. Both were arrested in September 2018 on dozens of charges that include participation in illegal demonstrations, insulting Iran's supreme leader, robbery, enmity against God, and murder. Iran's Supreme Court has upheld a death sentence by a criminal court in Shiraz against Navid and a 25-year prison sentence for Vahid for assisting in the alleged murder, while summarily dismissing the brothers' serious allegations that they were tortured into confessing.

Iranian authorities' utter disregard of serious allegations that they tortured Navid Afkari into confessing to alleged murder fits with a broader pattern of systematic impunity for torture and coerced confessions, said [Tara Sepehri Far](#), Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch. The authorities should drop charges that violate the Afkari brothers' legitimate freedoms, investigate their allegations of torture, and ensure that they get a fair trial.

International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach has said he is [extremely concerned](#) about the case, and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has requested that [the life of sportsman Navid Afkari will be spared](#), with a similar call by some of the world's [top wrestlers](#).

Based on court documents that Human Rights Watch reviewed, on October 15, 2019, Branch 1 of the Shiraz Criminal Court sentenced Afkari, 27, a professional wrestler who was a runner-up in the national wrestling competition, to retribution in kind in this case, the death penalty for the alleged murder of Hasan Turkeman, who appears to have been a law enforcement agent during protests in August 2018 in Shiraz. The court sentenced Vahid to 25 years for allegedly assisting in the murder.

On April 25, 2020, Branch 32 of the supreme court upheld the sentence. The court dismissed the torture allegation, quoting a statement apparently from Navid in which he said in the presence of a lawyer that he had not been tortured and he did not need to see a medical examiner. The court stated that it appears that under the influence of prison training [referring to being coached to claim torture by other prisoners] and with the assumption that with the denial [of their confessions] they might avoid punishment, the suspects have put forward errors that don't change the nature of the case.

However, on September 13, 2019, in a handwritten letter, Navid detailed the torture he says that he experienced in two Shiraz detention centers. It includes beatings on his legs, hands, and abdomen with a baton or a stick, pouring alcohol in his nose, and pulling a plastic bag over his head to the point of suffocation.

Human Rights Watch has repeatedly documented the use of torture to coerce confessions and the state TV's broadcast of them. In one recent [example](#), the BBC [Persian TV channel](#) broadcast a video in January 2019 of a labor activist and journalist, Sepideh Gholian, saying that she was beaten with a cable to force her to confess.

In another case against the three Afkari brothers that Human Rights Watch reviewed, on July 24, 2019, Branch 116 of Shiraz's Second Criminal Court sentenced Navid and Vahid Afkari to 1 year in prison and 74 lashes for participation in illegal demonstration and

disrupting public order, and to 3-and-a-half years for disobeying a law enforcement officers order and insulting him.

The verdict sentenced Habib Afkari, another brother, to 1 year in prison and 74 lashes for participation in illegal demonstration and disrupting public order, 4-and-a-half years for disobeying a law enforcement officers order and insulting him, 2-and-a-half years and financial compensation for intentional assault with a sharp tool, and 7-and-a-half years for assembly and collusion to commit crimes against the population.

The Human Rights Activists News Agency(HRANA) has [reported](#) that Branch 1 of Shirazs Revolutionary Court also sentenced Navid Afkari to death on the charge of enmity against God and two years in prison for insulting the supreme leader, and Vahid to 25 years for assisting, under the same charge.

The indictment for the revolutionary court trial appears to have been issued by Branch 10 of the Shiraz Criminal Court and the national security prosecutors office, which accused the three Afkari brothers of sowing corruption on earth (*Ifsad fil Arz*) through establishing a four-person group opposing the regime with the intention to disrupt national security, propaganda against the state, and assembly and collusion to commit crimes against the population. Both court cases are under appeal.

On September 5, the Islamic Republic State TV (IRIB) program *20:30 broadcast* footage of Navid supposedly re-enacting the murder scene in the presence of the police. On the same day, the human rights group HRANA [reported](#) that authorities had transferred the brothers to a different part of the prison with no phone access. On September 6, Mehdi Mahmoudian, an activist who follows the cases of those arrested during the protests, [tweeted](#) that after two days of the family waiting outside prison, Navid called his family and said that he and his brothers were being kept together. He also reportedly said that they had been beaten and that they needed to see the medical examiner, but that authorities refused to process their complaint.

After Turkemans murder, media close to Iranian intelligence agencies [reported](#) about his funeral, saying he was a law enforcement officer, but most recently they [referred](#) to him as an employee of the National Water and Water Waste Management Company.

Under Iranian law, the victims family members can forgo their right to ask for retribution in kind.

At least eight other people have been sentenced to death in relation to the protests in Iran over the past two years. On August 5, the authorities executed Mostafa Salehi, convicted of killing a security officer during protests in December 2017 and January 2018 in Isfahan.

After a popular online campaign using the hashtag #DontExecute, on July 10, lawyers representing three defendants facing the death penalty [announced](#) that the judiciary had halted the executions of Amirhossein Moradi, Saeed Tamjidi, and Mohammad Rajabi. They were arrested after participating in the November 2019 protests on charges of taking part in destruction and burning aimed at countering the Islamic Republic of Iran. The judiciary accepted their pleas for a new trial.

Irans security forces have responded to widespread protests over the past 3 years with excessive use of force and mass arrests of protesters and have not conducted transparent investigations into protesters deaths. In the most recent example, the authorities [used](#) excessive and unlawful lethal force against large-scale protests that began on November 15, 2019. According to [Amnesty International](#), at least 304 people were killed during the protests. On June 1, Mojtaba Zonoor, the head of Irans parliamentary national security committee, [said](#) that 230 people had been killed. The authorities have not published any detailed investigation or held anyone accountable.

Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances because it is inherently cruel and irreversible. Iran [has](#) the worlds second-highest execution rate, executing 251 people in 2019 alone, according to Amnesty International.

Under international human rights law, everyone has the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly as provided under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party. International law guarantees anyone accused of a crime access to a lawyer at all stages of criminal proceedings.

Under the [UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement](#), law enforcement officers may use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required to achieve a legitimate policing objective. When using force, law enforcement officers should minimize damage and injury and respect and preserve human life. The deliberate use of lethal force is permissible only when it is strictly necessary to protect life.

Under both international law and the Iranian constitution, confession under torture should be inadmissible in court.

Instead of prosecuting the Afkari brothers and protesters in unfair trials, the authorities should allow for an independent inquiry into the abuses by security forces cracking down on the protests, Sepehri Far said. The authorities should ensure anyone accused of a real crime gets a fair trial in accordance with international human rights standards.

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