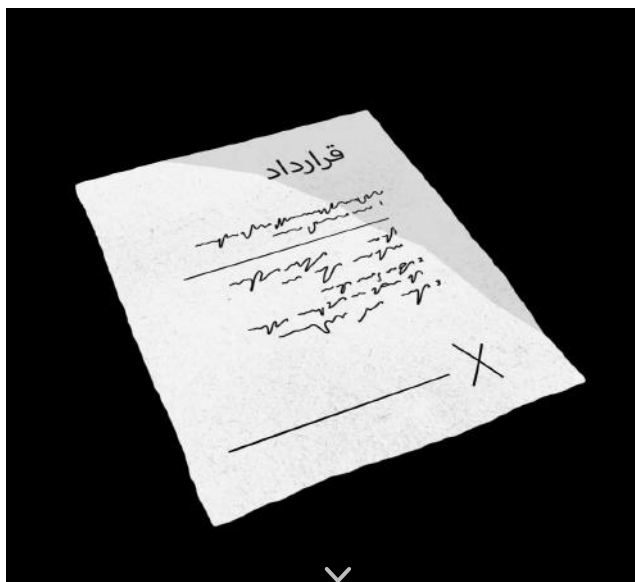
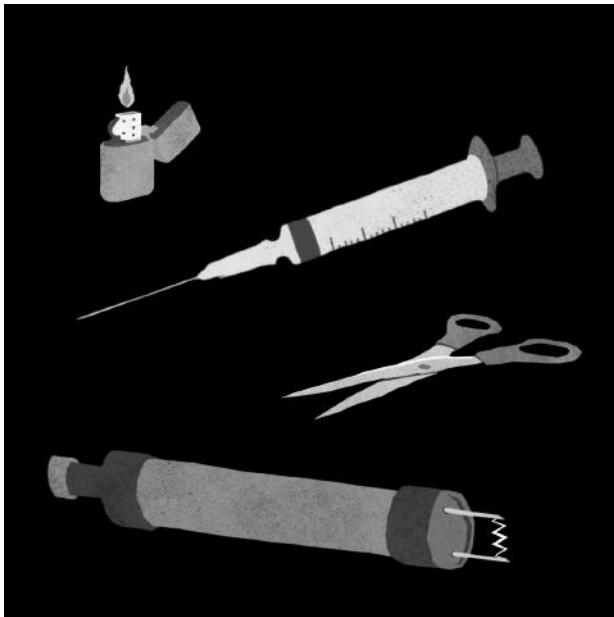


I was arrested for protesting, and thrown into a tiny cell. My captors demanded I sign a confession.

I refused.

That's when the torture started.





They used lighters, cutters and cattle prods on me. They even drugged me.

I vomited blood.

Some days I couldn't even walk back to my
cell.

I was certain I would die. No one even knew
where I was.



**CNN Special Report**

How Iran used a network of secret torture centers to crush an uprising

By CNN's international investigative unit
and visuals team

February 21, 2023



Illustration: CNN

(CNN) — For 40 days, Kayvan Samadi has avoided going to bed during the hours of darkness. Instead, he whiles away the night-time reading books or chatting with the guards manning the entrance of the compound where he's in hiding – anything to ward off the night terrors.

After his afternoon rest, the 23-year-old medical student makes a cup of Turkish coffee and opens a pink notebook on his lap.

In crisp, evocative sentences written in immaculate handwriting, he records his memories of Iran's uprising. Like thousands of others, he was rounded up by security forces, caught up in a brutal crackdown against the protests ignited by the death in custody last September of 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Amini.

His photographic-like memory comes back in snapshots: A narrow alley leads to a courtyard where a cacophony of voices from a nearby girl's school fills the air; Iranian intelligence agents drag him past a row of buttonwood trees, shoving him into an unassuming building. This is a secret detention center, somewhere in the northern Iranian city of Oshnavieh, where he would experience the stuff of nightmares.

Over the course of 21 days, his only human contact was the two interrogators who he says treated him to an increasingly harsh regimen of torture. They assailed him with insults, then they beat him so violently that he vomited blood. He was flogged 42 times and he was molested. On the 16th day of his detention – having failed to extract a confession out of him – Samadi's interrogators raped him with a baton.



Kayvan Samadi, 23, sits in his safehouse outside Iran, weeks after he was detained for 21 days in a secret detention center. (Alex Platt/CNN)

“The prison uniforms were stretchy and mine were loose. They pulled my trousers down. I thought they were going to give me an electric shock again,” Samadi says. “He took the baton and went behind me... I couldn't even scream. I was dumbstruck and just cried in silence.”

Samadi, who is from Iran's Kurdish minority, recounts his story in his safehouse, at a location outside Iran that CNN is not identifying for his own protection. The methods of torture he details tally with dozens of testimonies collected by CNN since the uprising began. CNN has now established that much of this abuse was carried out not just in Iran's official network of repression – prisons and police stations – but also in an extensive network of illegal clandestine jails, or black sites, like the one Samadi was taken to.

The methods of repression and torture carried out in this shadowy network appear to be even more horrific than the regular harsh treatment that arrested protesters can expect in legal detention sites.

CNN has reached out to the Iranian government for comment on the allegations of torture and abuse at these unofficial locations but has not

received a response.

Over the course of four months, CNN spoke to 12 survivors of torture; six local lawyers, most of whom were in Iran during the uprising; and seven Iranian and international rights groups.

“I saw men with their hands tied behind their backs... they were completely naked and they were bleeding from their backs.”

— Fatemeh in Tehran

They paint a picture of a regime meting out torture on an industrial scale, to crush an uprising that has posed the biggest domestic threat to the clerical elite in decades. Unofficial detention centers – mostly run by the powerful Revolutionary Guard and intelligence agents – were key to making the torture systematic. These sites exist outside of Iran’s official system, escaping any modicum of due process that the Islamic Republic affords, and seemingly enabling unfettered cruelty.

Among the most severe forms of torture detailed in testimonies about the unofficial detention centers were electrocutions, removal of nails, lashings and beatings that resulted in scars and broken limbs, and sexual violence.

“People were beaten so badly, they ended up with broken noses, broken arms or broken ribs,” said one activist who was detained in a warehouse that served as a clandestine jail in Mashhad. For security reasons, CNN is identifying him by a pseudonym, Mehran.

“I was previously in prison for six years. It was far worse this time,” he said.

A network of terror

CNN has been able to pinpoint the location of more than three dozen black sites. Many are undeclared jails inside government facilities such as military and Revolutionary Guards bases, known to rights groups and lawyers for years. Others are makeshift, clandestine jails – sometimes warehouses, empty rooms in buildings or even the basements of mosques – that cropped up near protest sites during the Mahsa Amini uprising.

Iran's capital, Tehran, was convulsed with protests during the Mahsa Amini uprising, prompting a proliferation of black sites around the city, according to sources.

Unofficial detention sites

Note: Some locations are approximate

According to dozens of testimonies from survivors of torture as well as legal experts, the torture used on protesters in these off-grid sites was "unprecedented" in its severity.

These clandestine jails exist outside of whatever due process the Islamic

Republic affords, seemingly enabling unfettered cruelty.

Unofficial detention sites

Note: Markers show number of sites identified by CNN per city, not exact locations



“People were beaten so badly, they ended up with broken noses, broken arms or broken ribs.”

— Unnamed activists who was detained in a black site

CNN has identified more than three dozen black sites across Iran. Many are undeclared jails inside government facilities such as military and Revolutionary Guards bases, known to rights groups and lawyers for years.

Others are makeshift, clandestine jails – sometimes warehouses, empty rooms in buildings or even the basements of mosques.

Sources told CNN that the paramilitary Basij ran detention centers at numerous mosques around Mashhad, which is one of two holy Shia cities in Iran, and is considered a powerbase of the clerical elite.

CNN has been able to identify three of these Mashhad black sites where sources said protesters were brutally tortured.



"My cell was 2 x 2 meters. It smelled terrible and the bright white lights were on all night. You only fell asleep when you fainted from exhaustion."

— Dr. Mohsen Sohrabi

The Kurdish-majority western city of Sanandaj was a flashpoint of the crackdown on protesters where thousands were rounded up and protesters were gunned down with live ammunition.

Dr Mohsen Sohrabi, a public hospital physician, was detained at a black site here for refusing to report injured protesters to police, he said.



***“There were three of them.
They ripped my clothes off... I
was bleeding a lot.”***

— Unnamed female protester

Dozens of protesters were killed in the the city of Zahedan on a particularly deadly day in September last year. One female protester told CNN she was detained that day and sent to a black site where she was held for over a month and repeatedly raped.

Sources: CNN interviews with eyewitnesses, legal experts and human rights groups; Google Earth

paramilitary unit – the Basij. She said they slapped, verbally abused and molested her during her four hours of detention, blindfolding her with her hijab.



Basij paramilitary force members march during a rally in Tehran on April 29, 2022. (Vahid Salemi/AP)

On the rooftop of the unofficial site, her hijab momentarily slipped and the window of the adjacent building caught her eye. “Through that window, I saw men with their hands tied behind their backs,” she said. “They were completely naked and they were bleeding from their backs.”

One of her captors noticed her transfixed by the other apparent clandestine site next door, she said, abruptly pulling the veil over her face. The cries and pleas for mercy of the tortured men rang out in the air.

Fatemeh said she was released at midnight. Her captors ordered her to run down the dark alleyway and threatened to shoot her if she looked back.

Unlike Fatemeh, Kayvan Samadi, the medical student, was not blindfolded. He says he remembers the space where he was held in vivid detail: the dirty stitched-up blanket that served as his mattress; the faces of his interrogators who called themselves Rezaei and Ibrahimi; and the

closet that contained the torture tools including screwdrivers and cattle prods.

“Whenever security forces tortured people, they were careful not to harm their faces or hands. They kept their faces unharmed so that they could appear in court without clear signs of abuse.”

— Lawyer Saeid Dehghan from Tehran

“I was given electric shocks at the back of my head, my neck and my back,” he says. “I remember vividly they electrocuted my genitals for several seconds.”

“When I was untied, I was unable to stand on my feet. I was so weak, the soldiers dragged me to the cell.”

Samadi was released on bail three weeks after his arrest. It’s unclear why he was let go, despite not having signed a confession – although this is not unusual in Iran’s arbitrary, unpredictable system. He fled Iran shortly after his release and says he has slept in more than 15 safehouses since then, fearing the long arm of Iran’s security forces.

Not a new phenomenon

Off-the-books detention centers are not a new phenomenon in Iran. Rights groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the Kurdistan Human Rights Center have documented the abuse perpetrated in these places for years. Yet lawyers and activists say the proliferation of the sites during the Mahsa Amini protests was unprecedented.

“Not only has the use of secret detention centers increased significantly, but the torture used in them became more severe and the conditions of detention more restrictive,” said Ghassem Boedi, a lawyer from Tabriz, northwestern Iran.

The regime’s fear of being overthrown led to increasingly brutal tactics, observers say. “The major difference between these protests and the previous ones is the scale of the protests. They have been so widespread,” said Boedi, who sought refuge outside Iran. “The regime felt that it would be overthrown this time. They needed to stop the protests at any cost.”



CNN



Protesters take to the streets of Tehran on September 19, 2022, in one of the first demonstrations after the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman. (AFP/Getty Images)

“During the recent protests, they took protesters to places like the parking lots of mosques and garages in Basij bases and they did whatever they wanted to do with them,” one Iran-based lawyer, who asked not to be named for security reasons, told CNN. “They unleashed a group of mad dogs to brutalize the protesters.”

Four Iranian lawyers and two eyewitnesses told CNN that interrogators sometimes injected protesters with sedatives such as morphine and codeine.

Marzieh Mohebi, a lawyer who was a former judge in Mashhad – one of two holy Shia cities in Iran – told CNN that at least one man was tortured to death in one of many clandestine sites that mushroomed in the city.

Mohebi said that Basij centers in numerous mosques were converted into black sites in the city of Mashhad, a regime power base in northeastern Iran, where protests appeared to blindsides the clerical leadership.

“The regime felt it would be overthrown this time. They needed to stop the protests at any cost.”

— Lawyer Ghassem Boedi from Tabriz

“The Basij were wild with rage. They did things we thought were unimaginable before these protests,” Mohebi told CNN from a location outside Iran, where she fled during the uprising.

Unofficial sites also peppered the vicinity of the main protest site in the southeastern city of Zahedan, home to many members of the Baluch

community, a restive Sunni minority. Dozens were gunned down there on September 30 last year, the single most violent day of the crackdown. It has become known by rights groups as “Bloody Friday.”

One female protester who took to the streets that day said she was whisked to a clandestine site inside a Revolutionary Guards facility, where she said she was detained for more than a month and raped by three different men. She told CNN she suffers from suicidal thoughts and sought the counsel of a cleric to ask if taking her own life would have repercussions on her in the afterlife. The cleric also recounted the conversation to CNN.

The protester and the cleric asked not to be named, for security reasons.

A Baluchestan activist journalist group, Haalvsh News Agency, connected CNN with the protester and the cleric. It also provided CNN with the location of the unofficial site where she was detained and assaulted, as well as other sites that were corroborated by another activist researching accounts of detentions in Zahedan.

Laying the groundwork for death sentences

The sites may have helped lay the groundwork for scores of death sentences against protesters, passed down during hasty sham trials. According to testimony collected by CNN, the protesters were nearly always asked to sign a forced confession professing to being part of a terror group, seeking to topple the state or sowing disorder, charges that carry long-term imprisonment or the death sentence.

Four protesters have been executed since the start of the Mahsa Amini protests. At least 40 have been sentenced to death, and more than 100 have been charged with crimes that carry the death sentence.

“I was given the shock at the back of my head, my neck and my back... I remember vividly they electrocuted my genitals for several seconds.”

— Kayvan Samadi from Oshnavieh

A well-known Iranian lawyer, Saeid Dehghan, said he was able to confirm that at least two condemned protesters were tortured in unofficial detention sites before they signed forced confessions that would then be used to justify their death sentences.

According to two sources familiar with the events, Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini – two protesters who were executed at the ages of 21 and 39 respectively – were both tortured at

unofficial sites before being transferred to Karaj prison, south of Tehran. Mohsen Shekari, the first protester to be executed after the recent uprising, was also taken to a clandestine site before he was taken to prison and then sentenced to death in a hasty trial, according to a third source.

Karami was an Iranian-Kurdish karate champion. Karimi's father told Mizan Online, a news agency affiliated with Iran's judiciary, that his son was so violently beaten during his interrogation that his captors left him in the street thinking he was dead, before detaining him again. Hosseini was a protester who "had his hands and his legs tied... the soles of his feet beaten with an iron rod tased in different parts of his body," according to his lawyer, Ali Sharifzadeh Ardakani.

Shekari was also tortured in a clandestine site, according to a source familiar with the events.

All three were sentenced to death based on their confessions.

Mohammad Hosseini, a protester who was convicted and executed, speaks during his trial in November. (Amir Abbas Ghasemi/Mizan News Agency/AP)

Mohammad Mehdi Karami, a karate champion and protester who was also convicted and executed, speaks during his trial in November. (Amir Abbas Ghasemi/Mizan News Agency/AP)

"Whenever security forces tortured people, they were careful not to harm their faces or hands," Dehghan, the lawyer, told CNN. "They kept their faces unharmed so that they could appear in court without clear signs of abuse."

"And they kept their hands safe so they could sign their forced confessions."

The brutality meted out in this clandestine network of harsh interrogation sites appears to have had its desired effect. The protests, that once appeared to pose an existential threat to the regime, have fizzled. Activists say, however, that the underlying dissent has not gone away, and that the regime's cruelty in the face of the Mahsa Amini uprising has bred resentment that could re-emerge in even greater force.

But they admit that that the spree of death sentences had a particularly

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