

HAS OPERATION EPIC FURY WEAKENED THE IRANIAN REGIME?

A DATA-BASED ANALYSIS USING EXECUTION RATES

Ella Harrison and Joseph Fitsanakis

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Abstract

Present-day Iran is arguably the most prolific state executioner state in the world. It currently holds the unenviable record of executing the largest number of people per capita globally. Historical data show that Iran's rate of political- and dissident-linked executions, as opposed to executions for criminal offenses, historically spirals when the regime's authority is challenged by civil society. This paper assembles all available data about the rate of executions in the lead-up to Operation EPIC FURY, which began in February 28, 2026, and compares them with the rate of executions following the outbreak of war. The purpose of the analysis is to assess whether an increase in the rate and intensity of executions points toward a deepening weakness at the heart of regime—such as internal fragmentation and disarray—which could foreshadow a period of wider sociopolitical instability. The execution data are therefore examined as a measurable projection of the regime's power and absolute control over civil society. Our concluding formulation is that the evidence does not support a distinct choice between intense panic and intense confidence among regime circles. Rather, what it points to is that the regime remains strong enough to kill at a mass scale, yet not secure enough to make killing unnecessary. We argue, therefore, that the Islamic Republic's execution policy during wartime is best understood as a form of deliberate coercion deployed from a position of institutional strength in response to a condition of relative—but not critical—political weakness.

Introduction

Operation EPIC FURY, the joint U.S. and Israeli military campaign in Iran, commenced on February 28, 2026, with a decapitation strike that killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei alongside several of his senior officials¹. Within days, one of Khamenei's four sons, Mojtaba Khamenei, emerged as his father's successor under the patronage of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Characterized by a notable lack in transparency, the transition has raised speculation about the degree of internal cohesion of the Iranian regime and its ability to impose itself on its domestic and external critics². These developments have occurred within a broader context of deepening regional hostilities, a series of fragile ceasefire agreements,

the closure of the Strait of Hormuz—arguably the world's most critical maritime chokepoint—and minimal progress toward resolving Western and Israeli concerns about the Iranian nuclear program³. The continued uncertainty in every one of these areas threatens further worldwide socio-economic disruption and has caused public opinion over American involvement in the war to weaken significantly, as indicated by the latest U.S. polling⁴. Meanwhile, rumors continue to circulate about the possibility of an American-led all-out invasion of Iran involving ground troops if no resolution can be found through diplomatic means or remote-control warfare⁵.

Alongside this interstate conflict, a second and less visible crisis has drawn much less global attention

¹ Jon Gambrell, "Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Who Led Iran with Iron Fist While Confronting the US, Will Be Buried," *Associated Press*, July 3, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-profile-funeral-us-war-israel-a6e0676d0263bb09cfa9e4128cc930ec>.

² Adam Radjy and Sarah El Deeb, "A Bitterly Divided Iran Grapples with Khamenei's Legacy as He Is Laid to Rest," *The Associated Press*, July 9, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-war-khamenei-politics-religion-society-a9e0405878db8266e1965d7c0b396243>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Quinnipiac University Poll, "60% of Voters Think U.S. Military Action Against Iran Was Not Worth It, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Nearly Half Think U.S. Is Too Supportive of Israel, a New High," June 24, 2026, <https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3964>.

⁵ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "US Strikes on Iran Strengthen Trump's Options for New Escalation, Officials Say," *Reuters*, July 16, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-strikes-iran-strengthen-trumps-options-new-escalation-officials-say-2026-07-15/>.

—namely the war of executions of prisoners that is waged by the Iranian regime against its own population. This topic is hardly new. On the contrary, operating in a theocratic ideological context, Iran’s political and legal systems combine statutory codes, religious doctrines, and security mandates, to produce one of the world’s highest execution rates—what one observer has called a “story of law used as theatre and violence used as governance”⁶. Today, Iran is considered by all measurable standards the most prolific state executioner state in the world, holding the highest rate of executions per capita globally⁷. What is more, recent trends show a clear upward spiral in the rate and scope of state executions. Reports by human-rights groups estimate that the Islamic Republic authorized at least 1,639 executions in 2025, a 68 percent increase from 2024 and the highest number recorded since 1989⁸. As an extension of this upward trend, in the first quarter of 2026 alone, at least 656 executions were verified by human-rights monitors⁹. While the overall volume of verified executions in 2026 remains below the exceptional levels of 2025, the composition of state violence appears to have shifted sharply: over half of all confirmed executions occurring by April of 2026 were political- and dissident-linked. This is important because, historically, these types of executions have constituted a marginal share of the total number.

Predictably, the reported scale of Iran’s execution rate prompts timely questions about its underlying political rationale. The first and most widely circulated explanation points toward a critical weakness—possibly even desperation—at the heart of regime, which could signify a deeper instability. A contrarian theory views the relentless use of the death penalty as an illustration of the regime’s strength and increasing authoritarianism. In essence, executions may serve as a measurable projection of the regime’s uncompromising power

and absolute control over civil society. Leadership fragmentation is another critical factor to consider: according to this perspective, the regime’s weakness stems from an inability to build a broad-based and unified ruling party¹⁰. What results is conflicting poles of control operating in parallel within the regime, combined with a genuine breakdown in elite consensus between pragmatists, hardliners, and revolutionary ideologues¹¹. Finally, it can be suggested that Iran’s impetus for the intensification of capital punishment represents nothing more than the *status quo*. This theory, which relies on historical precedent, poses the question: is what we are witnessing inside Iran genuinely exceptional, or is it attention-exceptional? This view raises questions surrounding media-framing, conflation of trends, the improved monitoring of global execution statistics, as well as historical cases of Iranian extrajudicial killings. For instance, the 1988-1989 massacre of political prisoners far outweighs the statistics of 2025-2026. Taken in their totality, these trends can point to the existence of a structurally-embedded—rather than a crisis-driven—system of social control¹².

This article seeks to further-explore the complex question of: what does Iran’s post-February 2026 rate of political executions signify when viewed against historical baselines, as well as the current landscape of protest, war, succession, and factional competition inside the country? Answering this question requires a multidimensional framework, because focusing on a single statistic runs the danger of misrepresenting a complex set of political processes. Thus, what will follow is a discussion of Iran’s legal framework, the question of deliberately blurring criminal and political categories, and a comparative examination of data from 2024-2026. These will be analyzed against the aforementioned four competing theses about what the observed execution surge indicates.

⁶ Cyrus ZarGanj, "Understanding the Role of Drug Offenses and the Death Penalty in Iran," Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2025, 11.

⁷ Amnesty International, *Iran: Further Information: Protestors and dissidents at risk of execution* (May 2026), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/1032/2026/en/>.

⁸ ECPM and Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO), *Iran Annual Report 2025* (2026)

⁹ Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO), *Quarterly Report on Executions in Iran: January–March 2026* (Oslo: IHRNGO, 2026).

¹⁰ Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), especially 79–106.

¹¹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

¹² Amnesty International, *Iran: Violations of Human Rights, 1987–1990* (London: Amnesty International, 1990); Geoffrey Robertson, *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran, 1988* (2010).

1.0 | Iran's Legal and Penal Framework

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a *Shi'a* theocracy that combines elements of republicanism with centralized religious authority¹³. Democratic intuitions exist more in form than function¹⁴. At the top of the country's governing structure is the supreme leader—a serving cleric who exercises lifelong authority over the state and has extensive control across all domains of the Iranian state, including the military and the intelligence services, as well as all state-controlled media. The supreme leader also heads Iran's legislative and judicial branches¹⁵.

Iran's legal system is based on Twelver Shi'a jurisprudence, which is expressed through the country's Islamic Penal Code. The latter defines and outlines all crimes and their corresponding punishments. Judges are trained in Islamic law and often in Twelver *Shi'a* jurisprudence. They hold significant discretion, particularly over cases surrounding the nation's religious doctrine. Prior to the 1979 Revolution, the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) enabled even local judges to exercise final authority on all legal matters. Under the Islamic Republic, that authority was transferred to a hierarchical appeals system, which is centrally managed by the state. This further-consolidated the state's control over the judiciary and its legal powers. The Iranian judicial system is therefore governed by centralized religious authorities, which exert absolute control over the judiciary.¹⁶

Traditional Islamic law is divided into two main categories: offenses against *Allah* (God) and offenses against humans. This does not mean that the latter category is viewed in a secular light; on the contrary, offenses against humans are perceived as a

violation of divine boundaries. Consequently, the Iranian Penal Code divides crimes and punishments into categories derived from *Shari'a*; this categorization dictates the level of judicial discretion allowed in each case. The three main categories of punishment under *Shari'a* are *Hadd*, *qesas*, and *Ta'zir*. *Hadd*—crimes against *Allah*—have fixed punishments that judges cannot alter and are explicitly prescribed in the *Qur'an* or in the *Hadiths*¹⁷. The latter are documented traditions describing the sayings and actions of the

Prophet Muhammad, which serve as a source of Islamic law and religious guidance alongside the *Qur'an*. Crimes under the *Hadd* category include *moharebeh* (enmity against God), *mofsed-e-filarz* (sowing corruption on Earth), as well as rape and consensual same-sex relations. *Qesas* refers to retributive justice ('eye for an eye') for murder or injury. Under Iranian law, punishments for these types of crimes are treated as private affairs, giving the victim's family, rather than

the state, the responsibility of deciding whether to demand execution, grant a pardon, or accept 'blood money' (*diyeh*). Finally, *Ta'zir* refers to discretionary punishment for acts that conflict with state interests or with *Shari'a*, but do not have fixed sentences. Traditionally, this category does not involve the death penalty, with the exception of some standalone legislation—such as the Anti-Narcotics Law of 1988—which has been used to apply the death penalty as punishment for non-violent crimes¹⁸.

1.1 | Islamic Revolutionary Court Practices

To an extent, Iran's high execution rates can be explained with reference to a host of systemic legal peculiarities. Principal among them is the Islamic Revolutionary Court, a network of special courts that has jurisdiction over national-security cases

¹³ Cyrus ZarGanj, "Understanding the Role of Drug Offenses and the Death Penalty in Iran," Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2025, 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Silvia Tellenbach, *Islamic Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Silvia Tellenbach, *Islamic Criminal Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Wael B. Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Ekhtebare Legal News Portal, "چطور حکم اعدام اجرا می‌شود؟" [How Is the Death Penalty Carried Out?], January 9, 2023.

or *jara'em-e alayh-e enqelab* (crimes against the Revolution). The Revolutionary Court system is regularly described in the relevant literature as opaque and lacking due process¹⁹. Another reason for Iran's high execution rates centers on forced confessions. Despite Article 38 of the *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, which prohibits torture, the latter remains an integral element of the Iranian judicial process. There are numerous documented cases of defendants being subjected to prolonged absolute solitary confinement and other forms of torture, including beatings and floggings, in attempts to extract confessions from them. These are used as primary evidence leading to the imposition of the death penalty²⁰. Moreover, defendants are often confronted with the principle of *elm-e qazi* (personal knowledge of the judge). The term refers to the discretionary power of Iranian judges to determine a defendant's guilt in the absence of conclusive evidence, based on their own 'certainty'. This effectively allows a judge to act as both a witness and an adjudicator for the prosecution, and often enables convictions without proof.

Yet another peculiarity of the Iranian judicial system relates to its governance, which is based on *Shi'a*-inspired Islamic laws passed after the 1979 Revolution. These laws enable the appointment of judges based on their ideological loyalty to the regime. Under the leadership of the Islamic Republic's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, law-makers in the Revolutionary Council abolished most of the state's existing laws, including the penal code, declaring them un-Islamic. They then drafted a new constitution that designated the *Ja'fari (Ithna Ashari, or Twelver Shi'a)* school of jurisprudence as the official state doctrine. *Shari'a* thus became the primary source of all applicable law²¹. In the absence of a system of codified criminal laws, the Revolutionary Court was able to administer 'order' and 'justice' through its own interpretation of *Shari'a*.

Predictably, the judiciary swiftly transitioned into an arm of political oppression, as the regime proceeded to quash all threats to its existence as a means of maintaining its authority. Hence, organized political entities that appeared to challenge the authority of the regime were ruthlessly targeted with the permission of the legal system. Whilst the Supreme Court had to nominally approve all death sentences, in practice the Head of the Judiciary was given almost complete control, particularly over *qesas* (retribution) cases. Thus, the politicization of the judiciary turned executions into a tool of governance, as the imposition of the death penalty was no longer a used as a penal response to a specific crime, but instead as a "calculated mechanism" used to instill fear, suppress resistance, and maintain ideological legitimacy by framing executions as "manifestations of 'divine law'". In this sense, Iran's Revolutionary and religious courts have been described as inquisitorial mechanisms because of their emphasis on ideological conformity and belief-policing. Indeed, their primary function is to closely "monitor beliefs and systematically punish ideological deviations"²².

1.2 | The *Velayat-e Faqih* Doctrine

It follows that Iran's judiciary is not an independent institution, but rather an extension of the supreme leader's authority. The latter stems from the foundational political and religious doctrine of the *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), which is a central component of Iran's execution system. This doctrine designates the supreme leader as the ultimate interpreter of *Shari'a* and the guardian of the Islamic state²³. The supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, as well as the prosecutor-general, and oversees the Revolutionary Court through a vast and multilayered legion of appointed loyalists. Hence, with the supreme leader posited as the guardian of divine law, executions, particularly for

¹⁹ Ahmed Shaheed and Faraz Sanei. "Outlier: Iran and its use of the death penalty." (2018).

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cyrus ZarGanj, "Understanding the Role of Drug Offenses and the Death Penalty in Iran," Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2025.

²³ Alireza Nader, David E. Thaler, and S. R. Bohandy, "Factor 2: The Prevailing View of *Velayat-e Faghih*," in *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).

Hadd crimes like *moharabeh* or *efsad-fil-arz* can be framed as religious obligations—divinely mandated punishments and acts of piety, rather than politics.

This reframing explains why political dissent is viewed, not merely as opposition to the Iranian state, but rather as opposition to *Allah*’s representative on Earth. Thus, political executions are treated as forms of punishment for theological crimes. Consequently, the charges of *moharebeh* and *efsad-fil-arz* are not metaphorical—rather, they are treated as legal categories of crimes that oppose the divine authority of *Allah* as much as they oppose the regime. This approach was openly articulated for the first time in the 1988-1989 massacre of Iranian political prisoners (see *Table 1*). In July of 1988, Supreme Leader Khomeini issued a covert formal *fatwa* (order) that decreed the formation of “special commissions” to execute political prisoners. The primary targets of these secret commissions were the members of the leftist People’s Mujahideen of Iran (MEK), who were labeled as *moharebs* (those who wage war against *Allah*). Other key targets were various leftist factions, such as the Organization of Iranian

“Political dissent is viewed, not merely as opposition to the Iranian state, but rather as opposition to Allah’s representative on Earth,,

People’s Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG), whose members were labeled as *mortads* (apostates).

The subsequent executions were administered by four main panels, later known as ‘death committees’, which included officials such as the future Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi. The subsequent trials were not concerned with establishing a defendant’s criminal guilt; instead, they were directed at re-interrogating prisoners who were already serving sentences in order to assess their ideological loyalty to the regime. This extrajudicial structure ultimately established a major precedent for bypassing formal legal authority with the goal of eliminating all political opposition to the Iranian government. What ensued was vague descriptions of alleged criminality, involving charges such as issuing ‘disturbing propaganda against the regime’, ‘insulting the supreme leader’, or *mofsed-e-filarz* (sowing corruption on Earth). These vague descriptions provided the legal basis to conduct mass executions

of dissidents. Thus, the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* enabled the enactment of a single religious decree that overrode all legal norms, with the supreme leader at the forefront of all legal decisions and with the ‘death committees’ acting as extensions of his control.

2.0 | The Blurring of Criminal and Political Executions

A central component of Iran’s systemic use of state-sponsored executions is the lack of transparency regarding the number of executions carried out and the details surrounding their circumstances. In many cases, “provincial branches of the judiciary [...] announce executions only after they have taken place and there is no will or effort to publish comprehensive execution data to the public”²⁴. For instance, approximately 90 percent of all executions conducted in 2024 were unannounced and unspecified

—thus limiting efforts to distinguish between genuine criminal cases and politically motivated executions. This opaque system is not incidental; rather it is a deliberate feature of the system, designed to enable the state to eliminate its political opponents whilst maintaining the facade of legality.

Another element of this deliberately opaque system can be seen in the introduction of the Anti-Narcotics Law, which was adopted by the Expedience Discernment Council in 1988 and amended in

²⁴ Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO), *Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran 2024* (Oslo: IHRNGO, 2025), 10.

1997 and 2010. This law expanded the list of drug-related crimes that carried the death penalty to include non-violent offenses²⁵ and severely restricted the right of appeal against the death penalty²⁶. Moreover, it created a central regulatory agency, the Drug Control Headquarters, which coordinates all anti-drug-related activities in the country, and established mandatory death

sentences for possession of banned substances²⁷. Since its inception, this legal foundation has provided the state with a new criminal category, in which political cases can be infused into²⁸. Rather predictably, the 2010 amendment of the Anti-Narcotics Law led to a sharp rise in the rate of executions, which began during the second term of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad²⁹.

Period	Victim Category	Number or Estimate	Evidentiary Basis	Important Qualification
Calendar year 1988	Persons executed for ordinary criminal offenses	At least 142	Announced in the Iranian press and recorded by Amnesty International	Minimum figure; excludes secret or unreported executions
July 1988–January 1989	Political prisoners—contemporaneous count	More than 2,000 named victims	Amnesty International's 1990 investigation	Amnesty International could not determine the massacre's full extent
Second half of 1988	Political prisoners, revised Amnesty count	2,500 named victims	Amnesty International's 1992 report	Amnesty International believed the actual total was "much higher"
July–December 1988	Political prisoners, contemporaneous UN documentation	More than 1,000 named victims; likely several thousand victims	UN Special Representative Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, January 1989	Preliminary evidence gathered while killings were being investigated
Principally July–September 1988	Political prisoners, mainstream estimate	2,800–5,000	Human Rights Watch's synthesis of available information	Best defensible range for general use
Principally July–September 1988	Political prisoners, Amnesty International retrospective estimate	Around 5,000 minimum	Amnesty International's 2018 investigation	Based partly on several overlapping lists
Calendar year 1989	Persons executed for ordinary criminal offenses	More than 1,500	Announced in the Iranian press and recorded by Amnesty International	Over 1,000 executed for drug offenses; actual total probably higher
January–May 1989	Persons executed for ordinary criminal offenses	More than 900	Contemporaneous Amnesty International report	Subset of the 1,500-plus full-year figure; most accused of drug trafficking
Calendar year 1989	Political prisoners	No reliable separate annual subtotal	Amnesty International reported relatively few political executions	Massacre count crosses the calendar boundary, preventing disaggregation

Table 1. Contemporary and retrospective estimates of executions carried out by the Iranian state during 1988–1989. Sources: Amnesty International (1989, 1990, 1992, and 2018); United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights (1989); Human Rights Watch (2022); and UN Special Rapporteur Javād Rehman (2024). Figures represent reported minimums or estimates and should not be treated as complete official counts.

²⁵ Ahmed Shaheed and Faraz Sanei. "Outlier: Iran and its use of the death penalty." (2018).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cyrus ZarGanj, "Understanding the Role of Drug Offenses and the Death Penalty in Iran," Master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2025.

²⁹ Ahmed Shaheed and Faraz Sanei. "Outlier: Iran and its use of the death penalty." (2018).

In addition to enabling the rapid rise of executions, the Anti-Narcotics Law helped blur the line between criminal and political executions by the regime. After 2010, the regime has increasingly resorted to using vague and religiously framed offenses and manipulated evidence to represent political repression as ordinary criminal activity—often involving drugs. Notably, Iran’s 2013 Islamic Penal Code stipulated the use of the death penalty for a wide range of offences “in violation of international human rights”³⁰. Under this law, political dissidents are frequently reclassified as criminals committing drug offenses, murder (*qesas*), or broadly defined “security violations”, which enables the regime to disguise political punishment as routine crime control.

The blurring of criminal and political categories is most evident in the execution data from the period 2024-2026. For instance, in 2024, only 12 political executions were officially acknowledged, while more than 500 drug-related executions and over 400 *qesas*-related executions took place. Hence, criminal categories could potentially be interpreted as statistical shields: by turning political cases into drug, *qesas*, or security-related charges, the state manufactures the appearance of a criminal justice system, whilst attempting to conceal the political nature of state violence. Therefore, the low number of official political executions is not necessarily evidence of restraint on behalf of the state, but rather points to of a deliberate attempt to erase the existence of political dissent.

2.1 | The Use of Executions

Executions operate as a mechanism of ideological reinforcement under *Velayat-e Faqih*. Charges such as *moharebeh* and *esfad-fil-arz* are not simply metaphorical—they are treated by the regime as

theological categories that help transform acts of political opposition into spiritual crimes. This gives the supreme leader and his judiciary the jurisdiction to reframe political dissent as rebellion or resistance against Allah, rather than simply against the state. In a culture so heavily rooted in religious faith, perceived opposition to the divine allows the state to enact the harshest of punishment against offenders. Executions therefore become religious obligations, representations of a divine form of

justice. The 1988-1989 massacre of political prisoners serves as a defining example of that doctrine, with a singular *fatwa* overriding all other legal codes. This type of ideological framing serves as a powerful anchor that enables the Islamic state to justify executions as acts of piety, rather than acts of repression.

It should come as no surprise that executions are strategically utilized during periods of heightened public distress and

unrest, as demonstrated during the 2022 protests, the 2025 economic crisis, and in early 2026 during the Israel-US conflict. It can be argued that the rate of executions accelerates when the regime feels threatened and seeks to recalibrate its political dominance by abandoning more neutral legal solutions. During periods of instability, executions serve to ‘discipline’ segments of the Iranian society, signal strength, and prevent forms of domestic mobilization that might threaten the regime. Although many of those arrested and charged with the death penalty may not ultimately face execution, the continued presence of an extensive death row serves as a reserve for the regime: it can be drawn upon to intensify the rate of executions as a “form of performative control”³¹. This strategy is used to counteract what the regime

“By turning political cases into drug, qesas, or security-related charges, the state manufactures the appearance of a criminal justice system, whilst attempting to conceal the political nature of state violence,,

³⁰ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Iran: Death Penalty Used as Political Tool – UN Expert,” October 21, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/iran-death-penalty-used-political-tool-un-expert>.

³¹ Cyrus ZarGanj, “Understanding the Role of Drug Offenses and the Death Penalty in Iran,” Master’s thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2025.

perceives as ‘social *anomie*’ and respond to domestic political pressure, such as demands for reform, democracy, or during times of profound economic instability³². This may explain the recent surge of executions of prisoners who had been on death row for several years³³.

Executions also function as a security strategy intended to eliminate perceived threats that could jeopardize the regime’s authority. The Revolutionary Court handles political dissent as a national-security threat that is often punished by execution. Mere membership in an Iranian oppositional group, such as the MEK, alleged espionage and cooperation with ‘hostile states’, or even participating in public protests, can serve as grounds for the imposition of the death penalty. An October 2025 Law titled “Intensifying the Punishment for Espionage and Cooperation with the Zionist Regime and Hostile States” dramatically expanded the definition of espionage. Predictably, it has enabled the state to classify a wider range of political, social and digital/ online activities as national-security crimes³⁴. Hence, the Iranian judiciary now has the ability to impose the death penalty for non-violent political activity, thus further-blurring the line between dissent and national security. The Basij paramilitary force fuels this system through a constant stream of arrests, coerced confessions and ideological policing, which serve to neutralize individuals and groups that the regime perceives as security threats.

2.2 | Consistent Themes in the Literature

When it comes to established practice regarding the use of executions in present-day Iran, a number of consistent themes permeate the literature. First,

it is apparent that executions serve broader socio-political objectives by silencing those who advocate for reform, democracy, and human rights, in a domineering authoritarian system characterized by strict religious governance and surveillance. Second, the state has been repeatedly shown to use executions as barriers against ‘anti-*anomie*’, which it views as threatening the political and ideological stability of Iran³⁵. Based on this approach, the Iranian execution system dispenses

systemic, predictable, and bureaucratically managed state violence. Their use enables the suppression of opposition activists and groups that are seen as posing a threat to the stability of the regime.

The combination of torture-based confessions, opaque Revolutionary Court actions and procedures, the doctrine of *elm-e qazi* (personal knowledge of the judge), and the blanket secrecy surrounding the nature and timing of executions, have

formed a system in which death sentences are carried out routinely, consistently, and without oversight. They are, by design, operations devoid of accountability. In this sense, executions are not anomalies, but rather the predictable outcome of a political-legal machine centered on censoring and maintaining order by any means necessary. It follows that executions are not the exception to the *status quo*, nor are they solely crisis-driven; rather they are routine in nature. They are ingrained in the Iranian judicial system and form part of the security apparatus that holds the Islamic Republic together.

“Executions in Iran are not anomalies, but rather the predictable outcome of a political-legal machine centered on censoring and maintaining order by any means necessary,,

³² Ibid.

³³ France 24, “Iran Executes Two More Members of Exiled Opposition Group,” April 20, 2026, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20260420-iran-executes-two-more-members-of-exiled-opposition-group>.

³⁴ Iran Human Rights, “The ‘Law on Intensifying the Punishment for Espionage’: New Tool for Fast-Tracking Executions in Iran,” June 10, 2026, <https://www.iranhr.net/en/articles/8812/>

³⁵ Cyrus ZarGanj, “Understanding the Role of Drug Offenses and the Death Penalty in Iran,” Master’s thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2025.

3.0 | Comparative Data, 2024-2206

3.1 | 2024: Escalation Under the Cover of Secrecy

In 2024, Iran carried out at least 975 confirmed executions, a 17 percent increase from 2023 and the highest number recorded since systematic monitoring began in 2008. The overwhelming majority of these executions were classified as criminal cases, but the distribution of charges reveals that the state used criminal categories to obscure political repression. Political executions remained officially low, with 12 confirmed political prisoners executed. However, this figure understates the true scale: The Hengaw Organization for Human Rights in Norway separately documented 13 individuals sentenced to death for political or religious activities, including participants in the Women, Life, Freedom movement, of whom 10 were Kurds. The most striking feature of 2024 was the secrecy. Only 95 executions—less than 10 percent of the total number of executions—were announced by the state, compared to 15 percent in 2023, 12 percent in 2022, and an average of 33 percent in 2018-2020. Roughly 90 percent of executions were unacknowledged, making 2024 one of the least transparent years on record. Demographic patterns also reveal the systemic targeting of Baluchis, Kurdish, and Afghans. These patterns show that even in a ‘normal’ year, executions disproportionately affect minorities and rely on secrecy to mask political motives (*Table 2*).

3.2 | 2025: The Sharpest Spike Since 1988-1989

In 2025, executions surged to at least 1,639 confirmed cases, a 68 percent increase over 2024 and the highest number recorded since 1988-1989—the period of the mass political executions following the emergence of the ‘death committees’. Human rights groups reported even higher numbers: the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists in Iran organization estimated 1,922, and National Council of Resistance in Iran (NCRI)/MEK-linked

sources claimed 2,201—though the latter must be treated cautiously due to the organization’s partisan political affiliation. Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO) also stated it received reports of 553 additional cases that could not be independently verified. Notably, a new October 2025 espionage law—“Intensifying the Punishment for Espionage and Cooperation with the Zionist Regime and Hostile States”—created a fresh legal instrument for politically motivated death sentences. Women were executed at unprecedented levels: 48 women—a 55 percent increase from 2024 and the highest in more than two decades. Notably, 21 women were executed for allegedly killing their husbands or fiancés, reflecting gendered patterns of criminalization. The exact number of executions remains a state secret, with hundreds likely unreported.

3.3 | 2026: Pre-War Period (January-February)

The early months of 2026 showed a continuation of the execution surge. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, at least 100 people were executed in January alone. Meanwhile, the political dimension intensified: by February, Amnesty International warned that at least eight people linked to the January protests had been sentenced to death in expedited trials, with 22 more at risk, including two children. A judicial source told the French newspaper *Le Monde* on February 25 that the regime was deliberately throttling political executions due to the threat of U.S. military action: “If the regime stabilizes and this pressure disappears, many prisoners will be hanged”³⁶. This indicates that executions were strategically modulated in response to geopolitical pressure. Overall, the early months of 2026 saw at least 656 executions, though the true number is likely higher due to internet shutdowns and restricted monitoring.

³⁶ Ghazal Golshiri, “Iran’s Regime Sentences Protesters to Death,” *Le Monde*, February 25, 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2026/02/25/iran-s-regime-sentences-protesters-to-death_6750873_4.html.

Dimension	Indicator	Number	Share or comparison	Qualification
Overall scale	Confirmed executions	At least 975	17% increase from 2023	Highest annual total recorded since systematic monitoring began in 2008
Charges	Drug-related offenses	At least 503	51.6%	Only 15 (approximately 3%) were officially announced
	Murder (<i>qesas</i>)	At least 419	43.0%	Includes two protesters prosecuted and executed on murder charges
	Sexual offenses	Approximately 20	Approximately 2%	Number calculated from the reported percentage and rounded
	Security-related charges	Approximately 29	Approximately 3%	Calculated from the reported percentage and rounded
Political repression	Confirmed executions of political prisoners	12	Approximately 1.2% of all executions	May overlap with the security-related category and probably understates political executions
	Political or religious activists sentenced to death	13	Not applicable	Not completed executions; includes Women, Life, Freedom participants
	Kurdish prisoners among those 13 death sentences	10	76.9%	Illustrates disproportionate exposure of Kurdish activists
State transparency	Executions officially announced	95	Less than 10%	State disclosure declined sharply relative to earlier years
	Executions not officially acknowledged	At least 880	Approximately 90%	Calculated by subtracting 95 announced cases from the 975 confirmed total
	Official-announcement rate, 2023	—	15%	Comparative reporting rate
	Official-announcement rate, 2022	—	12%	Comparative reporting rate
	Average announcement rate, 2018–2020	—	33%	Approximately three times the 2024 rate

Table 2. Iran’s use of the death penalty in 2024. Charge classifications, political status, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and age are not mutually exclusive. Political-prisoner executions should not be added to the charge totals because they may already be classified under security, murder, or other offenses. Likewise, the 13 political or religious activists sentenced to death were not executed during the reporting period and are excluded from the total of 975. Percentages may not sum precisely to 100 because several figures are rounded.

Dimension	Indicator	Number	Share or comparison	Qualification
Overall scale	Confirmed executions	At least 1,639	68% increase from 2024	Highest confirmed annual total since 1989
Alternative estimates	HRANA estimate	1,922	283 above the confirmed count	Approximately 17% higher than IHRNGO's confirmed minimum
	NCRI/MEK-linked estimate	2,201	562 above the confirmed count	Approximately 34% higher; should be treated cautiously because of source's political affiliation
	Additional cases reported to IHRNGO but not verified	553	Not included in the confirmed total	May overlap with other organizations' estimates
Charges	Drug-related offenses	At least 795	48.5% of confirmed executions	58% increase from 2024 and approximately 32 times the 2020 total
	Drug-related executions officially announced	3	0.4% of drug executions	Indicates exceptionally limited official disclosure
	Drug-related executions not officially announced	At least 792	99.6% of drug executions	Calculated by subtracting the three announced cases from the documented total
	Murder (Qesas)	Several hundred	Exact share unavailable	No sufficiently precise figure was provided
Judicial institutions	Executions ordered by Revolutionary Courts	852	52% of confirmed executions	Demonstrates the Revolutionary Courts' central role
Political repression	Confirmed political executions	17	Approximately 1.0% of confirmed executions	Likely understates political executions as criminal or national-security-related
	Prisoners sentenced to death for alleged MEK membership	18	Not included in execution total	Death sentences outstanding at the end of 2025, not completed executions

Table 3. Iran's Use of the Death Penalty, 2025: The Sharpest Spike Since 1989. The charge, court, political-status, and demographic categories overlap and must not be added together. Political executions may also appear among Revolutionary Court, espionage, murder, or other national-security cases. Alternative estimates likewise should not be combined with IHRNGO's confirmed figure or its 553 unverified reports.

3.4 | 2026: Post War Period (March 1 Onward)

After the outbreak of war at the end of February, the character of executions changed dramatically. For the first time in the Islamic Republic's history, political executions outnumbered criminal ones.

The Center for Human Rights in Iran reported that in the six weeks following the outbreak of the war, political prisoners were executed at a higher rate than non political prisoners. If true, this trend would represent a complete reversal of Iran's historical pattern.

Period	Victim Category	Number or Estimate	Evidentiary Basis	Important Qualification
May 2026	All executions	At least 109	Hengaw documented at least 109; IHRNGO/ Iran News Update reported at least 80	Variation reflects different documentation standards
May 2026	Political or national-security cases	At least 17	Hengaw documented 17; IHRNGO also reported at least 17	Includes protest-related, political, espionage, rebellion, and similar security cases
May 2026	Ordinary criminal offenses	No reliable monthly subtotal available	Several individual murder and drug-related cases confirmed, but case list is not reliable	Executions cannot automatically be classified as criminal cases
May 2026	Officially announced executions	15	Cases announced by Iranian state media	Approximately 19 percent of the IHRNGO total; this is a reporting-status category
May 2026	Secret executions	At least 19	Cases conducted without prior family notification	May overlap with the political and criminal categories above
June 1–23, 2026	All documented executions	At least 91	Calculated from chronological execution record	Partial-month minimum; no cases after June 23
June 1–23, 2026	<i>Qesas</i>	At least 42	Alleged murder cases	Treated here as executions for ordinary criminal offenses
June 1–23, 2026	Drug-related cases	At least 12	Possession or distribution of narcotics	Treated here as executions for ordinary criminal offenses
June 1–23, 2026	Subtotal: ordinary criminal offenses	At least 54	Total of documented murder/ <i>Qesas</i> and drug-related cases	Represents approximately 59 percent of the 91 documented executions
June 1–23, 2026	Political or national-security cases	At least 4	Confirmed cases of political dissent or alleged espionage	Includes four individuals executed in connection with the January 2026 protests
June 1–23, 2026	Charge unspecified	At least 33	No offense was reported by the source organizations	Should not be assigned to criminal or political category without additional evidence
June 1–23, 2026	Secret executions	At least 2	Two protest-related executions explicitly described as secret	Cases are already included among the political executions above

Table 4. Executions reported in Iran during May and June 2026, distinguishing executions for ordinary criminal offenses from those imposed in political or national-security cases. Sources: Compiled from Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, Mahmoud Hamidi, Iran News Update. Supporting information concerning individual and political executions obtained from Iran Human Rights, Amnesty International, and Hasht-e Subh. Figures represent minimum documented totals and may differ because the monitoring organizations employ different verification standards.

3.5 | Interpreting the 2026 Data

As can be seen in *Table 5*, May and June 2026 marked a significant change in the nature and strategic purpose of Iranian executions, which was already visible as early as late February 2026. The principal development is not simply an increase in the aggregate number of executions. Confirmed execution totals initially fell below the exceptionally high levels of 2025, but the proportion involving political prisoners, protesters, dissidents, and alleged spies rose dramatically. By June, the state appeared to be restoring its broader machinery of executions for murder and drug offenses while retaining an expanded capacity for politically motivated executions.

Hengaw documented 160 executions during the first quarter of 2026—31 percent fewer than during the first quarter of 2025. April produced only 26 executions, compared with 122 in April 2025; May's 80 executions represented a 51 percent decline from May 2025. June then rose to 109, approximately 10 percent above June 2025. Hengaw's first-quarter report, April report, May report, and June report, provide an internally consistent series. The first-half total was therefore at least 375, compared with 617 during the corresponding months of 2025—a decline of approximately 39 percent. On confirmed figures alone, 2026 was not continuing the extraordinary overall execution rate of late 2025.

That conclusion requires caution. The war, internet shutdown, restrictions on families, and state secrecy

severely impeded documentation. By March 2, Iran Human Rights had confirmed 141 executions during January and February but had received reports of another 531 cases it could not independently verify. The apparent decline may consequently reflect both a genuine interruption of ordinary executions and a deterioration in monitoring.

Eight of the 12 political and ideological executions recorded during the first quarter occurred during

the final weeks of March, after the outbreak of war. This was followed by 14 political executions in April and 17 in May. Thus, at least 44 political or ideological prisoners were executed between March and June. That four-month total exceeds the 29 confirmed political executions recorded during 2024 and 2025 combined. Even allowing for differences among monitoring organizations' definitions, the increase is unmistakable.

“After the outbreak of war at the end of February 2026, the character of executions changed dramatically. For the first time in Iran’s history, political executions outnumbered criminal executions,,

The political proportion is equally striking. Political-based cases constituted approximately 1 percent of executions in both 2024 and 2025. They accounted for 54 percent in April 2026 and 21 percent in May. Across the first half of 2026, the political share was approximately 13 percent. This suggests that the state temporarily shifted from a predominantly criminal death-penalty system toward a more openly political campaign of execution.

Period	Confirmed executions	Political executions	Political share	Principal pattern
2024	975	12	1.2%	Drug and murder cases dominated; extensive secrecy
2025	1,639	17	1.0%	Sharp overall escalation, driven particularly by drug-related executions
January–March 2026	160	12	7.5%	Overall decline, but political executions concentrated after the war began
April 2026	26	14	53.8%	Political and espionage cases temporarily became the majority
May 2026	80	17	21.3%	Political wave continued as ordinary executions began recovering
June 2026	109	5	4.6%	Return to predominantly murder and drug-related executions

Table 5. Comparative trajectory of executions highlighting the share of expressly political/ideological executions during the period January 2024–June 2026.

3.5 | War Provided Both Cover and Justification

The timing indicates that the authorities used wartime conditions to accelerate an already developing crackdown following the January protests. Amnesty International documented at least 39 political executions between February 28 and the end of May, comprising 16 protesters, 9 dissidents, 10 individuals accused of espionage, and 4 accused of armed rebellion. The categories also show that political repression is likely being reframed as national-security enforcement. Protest participation, MEK affiliation, dissident activity, and alleged espionage are increasingly grouped together as foreign collaboration, or treason. The October 2025 espionage law strengthened this mechanism by providing a broader legal basis for capital punishment involving alleged cooperation with Israel or other hostile states. This permits the authorities to present executions of political opponents as punishment for espionage, terrorism, violence, or ordinary crime rather than acknowledging their political character.

The 2026 cases reveal accelerated proceedings, brief intervals between arrest and execution, alleged torture, coerced confessions, restricted legal representation, secret transfers, and little or no warning to the families of the accused. In one documented case, only 55 days separated arrest and execution. By April 30, Iran Human Rights had documented at least 44 protesters already sentenced to death, including alleged juvenile offenders, while hundreds more faced potential capital charges. Judicial authorities were simultaneously calling for swift implementation of sentences. Iran Human Rights’ assessment indicates that the executions already completed represent only part of a larger pipeline. The fall from 17 political executions in May to five in June should therefore not necessarily be interpreted as durable de-escalation. A substantial population of condemned protesters and political prisoners remains available for future execution.

The political campaign did not replace Iran’s routine use of capital punishment permanently. By

June, ordinary criminal categories—at least nominally—had again become dominant. Thus, 104 of June’s 109 executions—approximately 95 percent—were formally classified as ordinary criminal cases. The progression from 26 total executions in April, to 80 in May, and 109 in June suggests that the state initially concentrated on selected political cases and then progressively resumed the larger criminal-execution apparatus. This highlights the existence of a dual-track system: mass execution for murder and drug offenses continues to supply the overwhelming volume, while political executions can be rapidly intensified in response to protests, war, or perceived threats to regime survival. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the possibility that the state camouflages cases of political dissent as drug-related should not be ruled out. In fact, such a practice would allow state authorities to speed up the execution of selected political prisoners.

“Political repression is likely being reframed as national-security enforcement. Protest participation, dissident activity, and alleged espionage, are routinely classified as foreign collaboration, or treason,,

Only 12 of the 160 first-quarter executions were officially announced. In May, 15 of 80 were announced; in June, only seven of 109 were acknowledged. These disclosure rates broadly continue the secrecy visible in 2024 and 2025. April was an exception: 15 of 26 executions were officially reported. This may reflect the political function of that month’s executions. The state sometimes concealed executions from families while subsequently publicizing selected cases to associate domestic opponents with Israel, terrorism, or armed rebellion. Secrecy protects the authorities from scrutiny; selective publicity serves intimidation and political messaging. The pardon of 139 death-row prisoners in June does not alter this conclusion. Clemency and execution operated simultaneously, as Iran still executed at least 109 people that month. Pardons demonstrate the discretionary nature of the system rather than movement toward a moratorium.

3.6 | Overall Judgment

The post-February 2026 trend is best understood as a change in composition followed by a restoration of volume. The confirmed overall execution rate initially declined, but political executions increased severalfold and became concentrated in a markedly short period. By June, the wave of political killings appeared to have moderated while executions for murder and drug offenses accelerated again.

This does not appear to be numerically comparable to the 1988-1989 massacre, when an estimated 2,800–5,000 political prisoners were killed in a coordinated nationwide purge. Nevertheless, several structural similarities are apparent: emergency conditions, secret proceedings, accelerated judicial decisions, broad ideological or security accusations, concealment of victims’ fate, and the treatment of political opposition as an existential threat.

The important difference is that, compared to the late 1980s, present-day Iran has embedded political execution within a much larger, routinized death-penalty system. Rather than choosing between political repression and conventional capital punishment, the state is employing both—using ordinary criminal executions to sustain a high baseline of coercion while activating political executions whenever protests, war, or regime insecurity make exemplary punishment strategically useful.

4.0 | Execution Data During Op. EPIC FURY

Operation EPIC FURY, the U.S.-led military campaign in conjunction with Israeli operations against Iran, focused some international attention on Iran’s escalating use of capital punishment. It also created what Amnesty International calls a “wartime” frame for mass arbitrary arrests,

accelerated prosecution proceedings, and politically motivated executions³⁷. The international conflict, therefore, altered the language through which domestic dissent could be recoded as espionage, treason, armed rebellion, or collaboration with a hostile power.

The annual trajectory appears stark. Iran Human Rights and *Ensemble contre la peine de mort* (Together Against the Death Penalty, ECPM) recorded at least 975 executions in 2024, a 17 percent increase from 2023 and the highest total in their systematic series at that point. Their confirmed count rose to at least 1,639 in 2025, an increase of 68 percent and the highest recorded since 1989. Other organizations reported still higher figures: HRANA estimated 1,922, while NCRI/MEK-linked sources claimed 2,201. Those higher estimates cannot simply be added to the confirmed series. Indicatively, IHRNGO separately received reports of 553 additional 2025 cases that did not meet its two-source verification threshold. The divergence is itself evidence of secrecy and methodological strain, rather than a license to treat every estimate as equally established.

The 2026 data complicate any simple claim that the annual surge continued on a straight line. Hengaw recorded at least 160 executions in the first quarter, 26 in April, 80 in May, and 109 in June, for a first-half minimum of 375. The sequence moves from a 31 percent year-on-year decline in the first quarter to an unusually low April, a partial recovery in May, and a June total 10 percent above June 2025. At the same time, the nature of the executions changed. Murder, or *qesas*, cases accounted for 192 of the first-half total, drug offences for 118, political or ideological cases for 48, and other charges for 17. Political cases

therefore constituted 12.8 percent of the first-half total, compared with approximately 1-2 percent in the recent annual reporting. Cross-source definitions are not perfectly identical, but the order-of-magnitude change is too large to dismiss as a rounding problem.

The central research question is consequently narrower and more demanding than asking whether executions increased: what does the post-February concentration of political executions signify when viewed against the criminal-execution baseline, the exceptional annual total in 2025, the mass political killings of 1988-1989, the enormous ordinary-criminal execution wave of 1989, and the current landscape of protest, war, succession, and factional competition? A multidimensional framework of analysis is required here, because a single count can represent several different political processes.

“By 2026, an entire generation of Iranians had repeatedly witnessed protest and violent crackdown without the state obtaining the durable submission it anticipated,,

4.1 | Thesis One: A Sign of Weakness of a Regime Clinging to Power?

It can be argued that executions are not a projection of confidence, but an act of desperation—a regime resorting to the gallows because its other tools of control are failing. A regime secure in its legitimacy does not need to execute at this rate. The correlation between protest waves and execution surges reveals the mechanism: each time the regime faces a legitimacy crisis it cannot resolve politically, it escalates violence as a substitute for consent.

The protest continuum—2009, 2017-2018, 2019, 2022, and 2025-2026—can be read as recurring eruptions of the same unresolved discontent, rather than as a series of unrelated events. Abbasi places a crisis of legitimacy at the core of Iran’s predicament: the state attempts to sustain authority through

³⁷ Amnesty International, "Iran: Mass Arbitrary Arrests and Political Executions Mark Intensifying Repression," May 28, 2026, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/05/>

[iran-mass-arbitrary-arrests-and-political-executions-mark-intensifying-repression/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2026/05/iran-mass-arbitrary-arrests-and-political-executions-mark-intensifying-repression/).

theocratic legislation and periodic elections, but chronically fails to address persisting economic and social needs³⁸. The 2022 Mahsa Amini protests marked a critical ideological fracture because many demands moved beyond reform, toward structural transformation, and explicitly rejected the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic. By 2026, an entire generation of Iranians had repeatedly witnessed protest and violent crackdown without the state obtaining the durable submission it anticipated.

The strongest evidence for this thesis is not the first-half total of 375; that number was lower than in the corresponding period of 2025. Rather, it is the targeted political acceleration: eight of the 12 first-quarter political executions occurred after 28 February. Political prisoners constituted a majority of all people executed in April. Forty-four political executions were recorded from March through June, compared with roughly 30 political and protest-related cases in the two preceding full years combined. Meanwhile, Amnesty International reported that at least 41 people arrested during the January protests were already under sentence of death by 21 May. This temporal alignment connects protest, war, and execution far more directly than the annual aggregate does.

The contextual legal and procedural pattern reinforces the inference. Protest activity and dissent were increasingly framed as espionage, or *mofsed-e-filarz* (sowing corruption on Earth). Human rights organizations documented accelerated proceedings, alleged torture and coerced confessions, limited access to counsel, secret transfers, and executions without final family visits. The state's inability or unwillingness to answer political grievance through representation, economic relief, or negotiated accommodation increases the appeal of rapid exemplary punishment. Under this interpretation, wartime

conditions supplied cover and a national-security vocabulary for treating domestic opposition as an existential enemy.

Opp and Roehl's micro-mobilization theory supplies the mechanism: they argue that repression can impede mobilization, but its effect may be nullified or reversed when repression is perceived as illegitimate³⁹. Rasler's study of Iran likewise finds both a short-term deterrent effect and a longer-term delegitimizing effect, while Davenport's "punishment puzzle" warns that repression has no empirically guaranteed relationship with dissent⁴⁰. The regime can generate fear today while deepening the grievance, solidarity, and moral outrage that sustain tomorrow's protest cycle. If each escalation suppresses an immediate mobilization, but fails to resolve the legitimacy deficit, the need for repeated escalation is itself evidence of political weakness.

However, executions alone do not demonstrate imminent regime collapse. The Islamic Republic has survived every major protest cycle since the 2009 Green Movement, and the machinery required to arrest, try, transfer, execute, conceal, and sometimes publicize, prisoners has continued to function across the country during the war. A desperation thesis can also become circular: every use of force is called weakness even when force produces the short-term outcome the state seeks. The data support the claim that executions respond to acute insecurity and unresolved legitimacy problems; they do not by themselves prove that the coercive apparatus is failing or that elite loyalty is about to fracture.

4.2 | Thesis Two: Executions as Elements of Calculated Statecraft?

The execution rate may be not reactive, but deliberate—a calculated display of authoritarian strength by a regime that retains durable structural

³⁸ E. Abbasi, "Political Challenges and Crisis Management in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Comprehensive Analysis," *Discover Global Society* 3 (2025): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00247-9>.

³⁹ Karl-Dieter Opp and Wolfgang Roehl, "Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest," *Social Forces* 69, no. 2 (1990): 521–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/69.2.521>.

⁴⁰ Karen Rasler, "Concessions, Repression, and Political Protest in the Iranian Revolution," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 1 (1996): 132–52; Christian Davenport, "State Repression and Political Order," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.101405.143216>.

control through elite co-optation, patronage dependency, and a monopoly on coercive force. The regime does not necessarily need mass consent; it needs elite loyalty, which it arguably continues to retain. Executions are one instrument in a deliberately balanced toolkit, deployed to create fear among the populace, discipline non-elite and elite constituencies, and demonstrate that the state controls the timing and terms of punishment.

Parsa describes an economy and society transformed by inequality, corruption, and cronyism, with the government, the IRGC, and institutions controlled by a supreme leader who commands enormous resources. By 2014, the state provided income to roughly half of Iranian households. Parsa estimates that the IRGC controlled around a quarter of the country's gross domestic product and possessed its own intelligence and detention infrastructure. The people whose defection would be necessary for regime collapse are therefore among those most insulated by patronage⁴¹. Svoblik's work on authoritarian rule and Zweiri and Nassar's study of regime survival likewise direct attention away from mass popularity and toward elite management, militarization, and institutional control⁴².

The month-by-month record can therefore be read as calibration, rather than panic. Overall executions fell sharply during the first quarter and reached a nadir in April, but political cases were concentrated at precisely the point of maximum perceived threat. Ordinary murder and drug executions then reappeared in May and June, with June reaching 109. In this reading, the state did not lose the ability

to execute; it changed priorities during the acute crisis and then restored the high baseline. The April announcement rate of 58 percent, followed by only 6.5 percent in June, also looks less like undifferentiated terror than a capacity to alternate exemplary publicity with routine secrecy.

The simultaneous use of execution and clemency supports the same inference. In June, Iranian authorities announced commutation or pardon for

139 people under sentence of death, while at least 109 executions were carried out. Clemency did not represent a moratorium. It demonstrated selection: the leadership could spare some prisoners, execute others, and present both choices as sovereign authority. The extensive geographical spread of executions, combined with the prominence of Revolutionary Courts further show that the state's legal-coercive institutions remained largely capable of implementing decisions under the pressures war and even

abrupt leadership succession.

Operation EPIC FURY also provides an imperfect empirical test of the fragility thesis. The external attack did not, at least through July, generate the rapid regime collapse anticipated by calls for Iranians to "take over" their government. Instead, the state intensified domestic repression, imposed severe communications restrictions, conducted mass arrests, and produced a succession outcome that consolidated the hardline camp around Mojtaba Khamenei and the IRGC. RezaeeDaryakenari, Ghafouri, and Kasap's work on sanctions suggests that external pressure can consolidate support among an authoritarian regime's existing base even when it does not create uniform public approval⁴³. Stated

“The data support the claim that executions respond to acute insecurity and unresolved legitimacy problems; they do not by themselves prove that the coercive apparatus is failing or that elite loyalty is fracturing,,

⁴¹ Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed*. Cambridge (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁴² Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Mahjoob Zweiri and Yara Nassar, "How the Iranian Regime Survived: Examining Internal and External Strategies," *Insight Turkey* 23, no. 3 (2021): 93–116, <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2021233.6>.

⁴³ Babak RezaeeDaryakenari, Vahid Ghafouri, and Nihat Kasap, "Who Rallies Round the Flag? The Impact of the US Sanctions on Iranians' Attitude toward the Government," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 21, no. 1 (2025): orae033, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orae033>.

differently, the oppressive state needs enough loyalists in the right institutions, not a national plebiscite of affection.

Religious legitimization strengthens this capacity. Within the *Velayat-e Faqih* framework, executions are presented not only as political instruments, but as divine justice and defense of the Islamic order. The doctrine of preserving the system can convert regime survival into a theological obligation. This does not mean the religious narrative persuades most citizens; it does, however, mean that the narrative can bind and justify the institutions whose obedience matters most.

Yet institutional capacity should not be misinterpreted as confidence or legitimacy, or as having a guaranteed deterrent effect. A state can execute with administrative precision because it is insecure. The return of protest after repeated crackdowns suggests that coercion has not resolved the underlying problem, and the destruction of household incomes by inflation can erode the very patronage dependency on which elite and popular quiescence rest. The 2026 political concentration in executions is difficult to explain as mere ‘business as usual’; it was triggered by identifiable crises. This thesis is strongest when it claims deliberate implementation and durable coercive capacity, and weakest when it treats the policy’s political effects as assured.

4.3 | Thesis Three: Executions as Signs of Elite Fragmentation or Competitive Coercion?

The regime cannot be characterized as a unified actor—especially after EPIC FURY. The IRGC, the judiciary, and the pragmatist camp around President Masoud Pezeshkian hold divergent threat perceptions and respond to different pressures. The execution rate may therefore reflect competitive coercion,

rather than a single coherent strategy: hardliners accelerate executions precisely because reformists or pragmatists are negotiating. This scenario partly supports the view that the regime is weakening, because fragmentation is the mechanism by which real structural weakness can be translated into mass execution as a specific policy response by the faction best positioned to act.

Iran’s constitutional architecture tends to produce managed fragmentation. The Bertelsmann Transformation

Index (BTI) 2026 country report on Iran acutely observes that President Pezeshkian wields limited influence because his authority is constrained by unelected institutions and by the absence of an independent political base⁴⁴. The supreme leader can coordinate the branches of government, but the IRGC maintains substantial economic, intelligence, military, and detention capabilities of its own; the judiciary controls the capital pipeline; and elected officials may seek diplomatic or economic accommodation

that security institutions consider dangerous. The system can thus be legally unified while operationally divided, with different centers of power using the same crisis to advance divergent strategic ends.

The execution series identifies where coercive initiative is concentrated, even if it cannot reveal the content of closed meetings. Revolutionary Courts were responsible for 852 executions in 2025. The 2026 political wave has relied on judiciary-administered charges such as *mofsed-e-filarz* (sowing corruption on Earth), and espionage, while security agencies supplied arrests, interrogations, and confessions. Judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei publicly stressed urgency after the January unrest, arguing that punishment loses its effect if delayed by two or three months⁴⁵. That language can be interpreted

“The 2026 political concentration in executions is difficult to explain as mere ‘business as usual’; it was triggered by identifiable crises,,

⁴⁴ Bertelsmann Stiftung, “Iran Country Report 2026”, *Bertelsmann Transformation Index*, 2026, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/IRN>.

⁴⁵ Tarek Chouiref, “Iran Judiciary Vows Fast Trials for Arrested Protesters,” *Anadolu Agency*, January 14, 2026.

as reflecting the institutional doctrine of the body able to convert arrest into execution.

At the same time, the pragmatist camp had reasons to resist unlimited coercion. President Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, and other officials associated with negotiation required some prospect of economic relief, diplomatic engagement, and administrative normalization. Even limited discussion of amnesty or accommodation could be interpreted by hardliners as dangerous softness. The political-execution majority observed in April can thus be interpreted as compatible with a hypothesis centering on a competitive coercion: namely, as diplomats and elected officials searched for room to negotiate, the judiciary and security establishment may have chosen to establish facts through irreversible punishment.

The succession following the death of Ali Khamenei may have temporarily resolved part of this competition in the hardline direction. Mojtaba Khamenei's elevation under strong IRGC patronage produced wartime cohesion, but not necessarily a settled elite bargain. Ali Vaez's observation remains apt: shared duress can give the system cohesion while leaving governance challenges just as stark. The patronage crisis, the nuclear and war files, public anger, and the question of how much diplomatic compromise is tolerable, continue to generate different incentives across institutions.

Still, aggregate execution figures cannot by themselves distinguish competitive coercion from the coordinated division of labor. The same monthly sequence could arise from a central plan: political cases are accelerated during the emergency, ordinary cases are temporarily deferred, and the backlog resumes once capacity returns. Nor does factional disagreement necessarily imply disagreement over regime preservation. Pragmatists may object to the timing, scale, or diplomatic cost of executions without opposing coercion as such.

Thesis Three is therefore plausible and consistent with the institutional evidence, but direct causal attribution would require internal orders, reliable elite testimony, budgetary or personnel shifts, or observable disputes over particular cases.

4.4 | Thesis Four: Exceptional Violence or Exceptional Visibility?

The current figures are significant, but framing them as historically unprecedented could be partly a product of improved monitoring infrastructure—namely curated media treatment that tends to conflate political and criminal executions. Such a framing could also produce a mostly inadequate comparison with 1988-1989, which dwarfs current political executions in speed, targeting, and intent. The surfacing question is whether what we are observing is genuinely exceptional or whether our attention to it is exceptional.

The source divergence is substantial. The 2025 confirmed total of 1,639 executions sits below HRANA's 1,922 and the 2,201 claimed by NCRI/MEK-linked sources. IHRNGO excluded 553 additional reports because it could not verify them through at least two independent sources. In early 2026, the same organization verified 141 executions in January and February, while holding 531 additional reports outside its confirmed count. Such gaps may reflect genuine undercounting, duplicated rumors, politically motivated disinformation, disruption of source networks, or different classification dates. The prudent response is neither to accept the highest figure nor to assume the lowest figure is complete.

Systematic cross-verified monitoring by IHRNGO began only in 2008. Earlier figures are often drawn from official announcements, fragmented prison reporting, survivor testimony, and retrospective name lists. Davenport's critique of repression datasets is directly relevant: newspaper and NGO sources undercount events that fall below a

“Political execution cases are accelerated during emergencies, ordinary cases are temporarily deferred, and the backlog resumes once capacity returns,,

significance threshold, while changes in access, technology, and advocacy can change what becomes visible⁴⁶. Digital monitoring may make a contemporary provincial execution more likely to be documented than an equivalent execution in the early 1990s. Conversely, internet shutdowns and wartime fear can make 2026 less visible at precisely the moment international attention is greatest.

Media framing also tends to collapse different kinds of execution into one political narrative. In 2024, 922 of the 975 recorded executions were in the drug and *qesas* (murder) categories. In 2025, 795 were drug-related and 747 were *qesas* cases, while IHRNGO/ECPM explicitly identified 18 political prisoners among the security-related executions. The 1988-1989 massacre, by contrast, targeted political prisoners as a class. Calling every person executed in 2025 a ‘political activist’ would be factually wrong and would obscure the distinct legal and social pathways that place drug defendants, people convicted of murder, women in abusive marriages, ethnic minorities, and dissidents on death row.

Yet a clean political-criminal separation can also mislead. As we have discussed, drug executions may serve a political function regardless of the charge on the paperwork by maintaining a generalized state of fear, demonstrating the state’s reach in marginalized communities, and normalizing hidden killing. *Qesas* can be selectively instrumentalized in politically sensitive cases, as shown when protesters are prosecuted on murder charges. Revolutionary Court jurisdiction, security charges, prisoner identity, and the broader intended audience are overlapping dimensions rather than mutually exclusive boxes. The most defensible table or narrative must therefore

distinguish legal charge from political status and from the state’s likely political use of the execution.

The comparison with 1988-1989 is where this thesis is strongest. The 1988-1989 prison massacre killed an estimated 2,800 to 5,000 political prisoners in a compressed period, in secret, through a process designed to eliminate a defined opposition population. Nothing in the March-June 2026 data

approaches that speed or political concentration. The current wave is sustained across years, combines political punishment with a much larger criminal-execution baseline, and sometimes uses official publicity rather than total concealment. Describing 2025 as the highest annual total since 1989 is technically informative, but it is not evidence that 2025 repeated 1988-1989.

The data on the 1988-1989 criminal-execution wave further-complicate the historical claim.

More than 1,500 ordinary-criminal executions were officially announced that year, with over 1,000 of them for drug offences. This is a closer structural analogue to the drug-heavy 2024–2025 totals than the 1988-1989 political massacre is. Current reporting is exceptional in its detail, speed, and capacity to connect names, prisons, charges, ethnicity, gender, and secrecy. The attention is therefore partly exceptional. But attention alone cannot explain why the political share rose so dramatically after February 2026, why April’s executions were majority political, or why dozens of January protesters entered the death-sentence pipeline.

4.5 | Comparative Evaluation

The evidence does not support a choice between pure panic and pure confidence. The best explanation is calibrated coercion under conditions of structural

“Drug-related executions may serve a political function by maintaining a state of fear, demonstrating the state’s reach in various marginalized communities, and normalizing hidden killing by the state,,

⁴⁶ Christian Davenport, “State Repression and Political Order”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 1-23

insecurity. The first thesis correctly identifies the trigger: the political-execution wave followed the January uprising, intensified after 28 February, and relied on a widening national-security frame. Violence appears to substitute for consent where the regime cannot resolve grievance politically. Thesis Two correctly identifies the capacity: executions were not administered randomly. The state shifted the composition of killing, varied publicity, resumed ordinary cases, and paired execution with selective forms of clemency dispensation. Those may be interpreted as acts of a functioning coercive state apparatus.

The distinction between capacity and condition is crucial. Capacity asks whether the state can execute deliberately, select targets, and command the institutions that carry out punishment. The answer is plainly, yes. Condition asks why that capacity is being used so heavily against political prisoners and protesters at this moment. Here the temporal evidence points toward insecurity, deterrence, and a legitimacy crisis rather than the effortless routine of a confident government. The regime can be operationally strong and politically weak at the same time.

Thesis Three makes the synthesis more realistic, but it should remain conditional. The Iranian regime is not a unitary actor, and hardline institutions have the authority and incentive to accelerate coercion while pragmatists carry the diplomatic cost. The concentration of execution authority in the judiciary and Revolutionary Courts, public demands for speed, and the hardline succession, all make competitive coercion plausible. Still, the monthly data are compatible with both factional competition and central coordination. It is safer to say that fragmentation may shape the intensity and timing of the response, than to present it as proven cause.

Thesis Four should govern the language of every conclusion. Confirmed counts are minimums; higher reports are not automatically reliable; categories such as ‘political’, ‘security’, ‘criminal’, and

‘Revolutionary Court’ are not interchangeable; and 1988-1989 is a different type of event. The phrase “historically unprecedented” should therefore be replaced by more exact claims: 2025 was the highest confirmed annual total in IHRNGO’s series since 1989; the first half of 2026 was lower in aggregate than the first half of 2025; and the political share after February 2026 was exceptional within the recent monitoring period. This precision strengthens rather than weakens the argument.

On balance, Theses One and Two make the most sense together. Thesis One explains the regime’s demand for repression; thesis Two explains the supply. The execution policy is deliberate in implementation but reactive in political origin. Thesis Three is the most plausible account of how a divided elite may intensify the policy, especially when the judiciary and IRGC

can act faster than pragmatists can negotiate, but the available data cannot yet prove factional causation. Thesis Four is correct in that the contemporary narrative is amplified by improved monitoring and that comparisons with 1988-1989 are often careless; it is incorrect if used to reduce the post-February political surge to a media artefact.

The trajectory is therefore neither a straightforward march toward collapse nor evidence of effortless authoritarian command. The state retains durable structural control, but the uses to which it puts that control reveal the pressure it is under. Political executions reached an extraordinary share just as protest, war, and succession converged; ordinary criminal executions then returned at scale. This dual-track system—political killing during acute crises atop a routinised murder-and-drug execution baseline—is the most noticeable trend in the data.

Our concluding formulation, therefore, is that the regime is strong enough to kill at this scale. Yet it is not secure enough to make killing unnecessary. Its execution policy is best understood as deliberate coercion deployed from a position of institutional strength in response to a condition of political weakness.

“The Iranian regime can be operationally strong and politically weak at the same time,,

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