

7-2025

## An Exhibition and Protest of Executions in Iran

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### Recommended Citation

Hughes, Donna M. (2025) "An Exhibition and Protest of Executions in Iran," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 10: Iss. 3, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2025.10.03.05>

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## An Exhibition and Protest of Executions in Iran

### Abstract

An exhibition and protest of executions in Iran was held in Washington, D.C. in June 2025. Portraits of 2000 men and women who were killed or executed in Iran since the 1980s were displayed on the National Mall in front of the Capitol. The Iranian Resistance estimates that 30,000 activists were massacred in one period in 1988. Executions of prisoners have continued steadily, making Iran the world's leading executioner of men and women. In recent years, there has been a sharp escalation in the number of executions of prisoners. A United Nations Special Rapporteur reported that over 800 persons were executed in 2024. The Iranian regime uses public executions to terrorize the Iranian population and maintain control. The exhibition and protest represented activists from the 1988 massacre and the protests of 2019 and 2022 (the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement). The Iranian American Community that sponsored the exhibition supports the pro-democracy, human rights agenda of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

### Keywords

Iran, Resistance, activists, executions, theocracy, U.S., exhibition, protest, human rights

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### Acknowledgements

The author thanks Lynn Dykstra, professional photographer and founder of Our Global Cry for Freedom, for sharing her photograph and thoughts on the exhibition in San Francisco.

## AN EXHIBITION AND PROTEST OF EXECUTIONS IN IRAN



National Mall, Washington, D.C.

Photo: Donna M Hughes

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### ABSTRACT

An exhibition and protest of executions in Iran was held in Washington, D.C. in June 2025. Portraits of 2000 men and women who were killed or executed in Iran since the 1980s were displayed on the National Mall in front of the Capitol. The Iranian Resistance estimates that 30,000 activists were massacred in one period in 1988. Executions of prisoners have continued steadily, making Iran the world's leading executioner of men and women. In recent years, there has been a sharp escalation in the number of executions of prisoners. A United Nations Special Rapporteur reported that over 800 persons were executed in 2024. The Iranian regime uses public executions to terrorize the Iranian population and maintain control. The exhibition and protest represented activists from the 1988 massacre and the protests of 2019 and 2022 (the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement). The Iranian American Community that sponsored the exhibition supports the pro-democracy, human rights agenda of the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

### KEYWORDS

Iran, Iranian Resistance, executions, theocracy, U.S., exhibition, protest

[Oath Anthem](#) (Sorude Sogand). An Iranian protest song was created during the protests against election fraud in 2009. The 2022 version reflects a more revolutionary atmosphere. It is performed by a group of students from the Department of Art and Culture, University of Tehran. The songwriter and composer are unknown.

**T**HE FIRST TIME I encountered a member of the Iranian Resistance was in 1995, on a street in London. A man approached me and showed me a large three-ring binder filled with photographs of women. He told me that the Iranian regime had executed them, and one of them was his wife. They were women who had dared to oppose the mullahs' dictatorship. They paid for their defiance with their lives.

At the time, I was a member of *Women Against Fundamentalism* in the UK. I was concerned about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism around the world and its brutal suppression of women's rights. However, I hadn't known the full extent of the atrocities--especially the executions.

In the spring of 1996, I traveled to Paris for a conference and met more members of the Iranian Resistance. I was impressed by their strength, intelligence, and commitment to a free Iran. These women and men were united in a vision of democracy, civil rights, and equality between men and women—ideals that were denied by the ruling theocracy in Iran, which was established after the 1979 revolution.

As I learned more about the Iranian Resistance, I also learned about the Iranian regime's obsession with eradicating it.

No international agencies or organizations have been permitted to enter Iran to gather data on political executions and disappearances. At great risk to themselves, members of the Iranian Resistance have diligently collected information about the killings, disappearances, and executions. They have tried to identify all the people, including children, who were executed in 1988. Many of the people executed were not identified at the time of execution. According to Human Rights Watch (2022), thousands of political prisoners were hanged in one wave of executions in 1988. The Iranian Resistance estimates that 30,000 people were killed in that massacre.



National Mall, Washington, D.C.

Photo: Donna M Hughes

Iran is the world's leading executioner of women. In 2022, 16 women were executed, and in 2023, 22 women were executed. In recent years, the number of people executed annually has risen sharply. In 2023, 834 people were executed, which was a 43 percent increase compared to 2022, when at least 582 people were executed.

The majority of those executed are accused of drug-related offenses. However, there are over 80 offenses for which a person can be sentenced to death, many of which are vaguely defined and can be applied arbitrarily. According to the law, girls as young as 9 years old and boys as young as 15 years old can be sentenced to death (Rehman, 2024).

Citizens of Iran have been protesting the religious dictatorship since the realization that the 1979 revolution was not going to bring them a better life. They learned the theocracy was going to make their lives worse. There have been major anti-regime uprisings, accompanied by street protests, in 2009, 2019, and 2022. In each protest, thousands were arrested and hundreds killed.



National Mall, Washington, D.C.

Photo: Donna M Hughes

In 2024, Javid Rehman, the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran (from 2018-2024), reported on political executions and forced disappearances. He interviewed 80 persons who survived or witnessed the 1988 mass executions. They described their mental and psychological trauma caused by their experiences. In many cases, families continue to search for loved ones who were forcibly disappeared.

To this day, the regime continues to use public executions to terrorize the Iranian population and maintain control. The regime uses the same practices established after the 1979 revolution. Rehman reported that over 800 persons were executed in 2024. The orders for the execution of political opponents come from the Islamic Revolutionary Court that was set up in 1979 following the revolution. The purpose was to try the political opponents of the new theocracy. It continues to this day. It has a reputation for secret proceedings, reliance on torture for confessions, and harsh sentences (Rehman, 2024).



Execution in Neyzir, Iran, (Sep 22, 2016)

The revolutionary courts issue the vast majority of death penalty sentences. The available statistics indicate that from 2010 to 2020, 3619 cases, or 59 percent of the executions, were based on death sentences issued by these courts (Rehman, 2024).

Earlier this year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Iran reported Iran was the leading state executioner in the world and the leading executioner of women (Sato, 2025). A number of those killed or executed were women's rights activists involved in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, which was ignited in 2022 by the death of Masha Amini, a woman who died in custody after being arrested for allegedly showing her hair (Felix, 2025).<sup>1</sup>

## EXHIBITION AND PROTEST

On Jun 21, 2025, I attended an exhibition and protest of the killings and executions of thousands of people by the Iranian regime.

The Iranian American Community of Virginia set up a moving and powerful display on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. The display included portraits of 2000 members of the Iranian Resistance who were killed or executed in Iran for working for freedom and human rights. Each photo included the year the person was killed, either in the 1988 massacre or in protests in 2019 or 2022.

As I walked through the hundreds of photos, the mostly young men and women came alive and I saw them as individuals, not just one of the numbers. I was reminded

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<sup>1</sup> Antonia Felix (2025) has written in more detail about women's protests and punishments in Iran in her article: "I saw death with my own eyes': Recent women's protests and punishments in Iran." <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol10/iss2/6/>

that each one of them was a vibrant idealist and an activist for freedom and democracy.

At the front of the exhibition was a special section for prisoners who were executed in the previous week. (See the photos of the men and women in the circle at the front of the exhibit.) The photographs of the young people recently executed brought an immediacy to the brutality of the Iranian regime's suppression of pro-democracy activists.

Many of the attendees at the protest were former political prisoners themselves. There were older men and women present who had demonstrated against the Shah of Iran and later against the rising mullahs. Others had friends and family members still inside Iran, who are risking their lives to bring about change.



National Mall, Washington, D.C.

Photo: Donna M Hughes

I spoke with an Iranian woman who had received a request from inside Iran to take a picture of a relative who had been killed and was memorialized in one of the photographs.

A similar exhibition and protest were held at Union Square in San Francisco, USA. It also included photographs of many young Iranian activists for freedom whose lives were cut short by the Iranian regime.



Union Square, San Francisco

Photo: Lynn Dykstra

### **INCREASED EXECUTIONS AND THREAT OF ANOTHER MASSACRE**

On 21 June 2025, Israel and the United States took action to disrupt Iran's nuclear program by bombing several identified nuclear development sites. They also targeted leaders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the powerful branch of the military that was established to defend the Islamic Revolution in 1979. One of its roles is the suppression of all opposition to the Iranian regime. The 12-day war may have destroyed nuclear facilities and killed nuclear scientists and top leaders of the suppressive IRGC, but that was only a temporary solution to Iran's nuclear threat. It is not a solution for the Iranian people.

At the exhibition in D.C., as the bombing was occurring, one of the senior members of the Resistance told me: "If the regime survives, it will retaliate with mass arrests, executions, and a renewed wave of repression."

Through mid-July 2025, his warning is coming true. There has been a surge in executions. There were 14 people hanged in one three-day period. More ominously, on July 8, 2025, the Revolutionary Guards' news agency reported that another round of executions like those of 1988 may be needed to suppress the resistance. Each month, more political prisoners are sentenced to death (Habibi, 2025, Jul 19).

## EXHIBITION AND PROTEST SUPPORT FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

The people of Iran have realized that the mullahs deceived them after the 1979 revolution. The theocracy imposed much greater restrictions than the former Shah (king). An illustration of the cruel attitude of the Iranian regime can be seen in its comment about the exhibition. The Iranian regime said the Iranian Resistance and their exhibition was a “hostile network’s propaganda portraying the 1988 executions as anti-human rights” (National Council of Resistance of Iran, 2025, 17 July). So, the regime considers their brutal execution of 30,000 prisoners as acts that support human rights, and protests of this atrocity are “anti-human rights.”

The people of Iran want to be rid of the religious dictators. The Iranian American Community that sponsored the exhibition and protest supports the National Council of Resistance of Iran’s plan for a free Iran. The *Ten Point Plan* calls for the separation of religion and state, equality between men and women, universal suffrage, freedom of speech and assembly, and a nuclear-free Iran (National Council of Resistance).

For years, the Resistance has been assembling an international coalition of support among democratic world leaders. Over 100 world leaders, 4,000 parliamentarians, and 80 Nobel Prize winners have signed a statement of support (Jafarzaheh, 2024; Women’s Committee, 2023). Currently, there is a U.S. House Resolution 166 “Expressing support for the Iranian people’s desires for a democratic, secular, and nonnuclear Republic or Iran, and condemning the Iranian regime’s terrorism, regional proxy war, internal suppression, and for other purposes,” co-sponsored by 227 bipartisan members of U.S. Congress (119<sup>th</sup> Congress, H. Res. 166).

The leader of the Resistance, Maryam Rajavi, has called upon international leaders to condemn the political executions and to support their work for democracy. She said:

Our message is clear: What we seek is a firm policy toward the ruling regime in Iran. Such a policy must include recognizing the Iranian people’s right to self-determination, rejecting both religious and monarchical dictatorship, and acknowledging the legitimacy of the Resistance Units’ struggle against the IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps] as a means to bring down this regime (Klein, 2025, July 14).

Back in 1995 on that street in London, I heard what the Iranian man said about the executions of women, and I saw the notebook full of photographs. I remembered, but at that time, I didn’t have the background and knowledge to comprehend who he was or what he was telling me. Over the years, I learned more about the brutality of the Islamic theocracy in Iran and the executions, but more importantly, I’ve met numerous members of the Iranian Resistance. They are an exceptional group of activists and leaders committed to the overthrow of a tyrannical, cruel government, and replacing it with a country that respects the human rights of women, ethnic minorities, and all religions.

With their leadership, a major shift could occur in the Middle East....and beyond. To begin with, Iran’s funding of terrorism will end. Without money to fuel violence, ethnic and religious conflicts will slow. The advocacy for women’s rights throughout the region will be enlightening for women.

Immediately, we need to pressure the Iranian regime to stop the executions of prisoners. All serious human rights organization have criticized the Iranian government. Their out-of-control killing is speeding their way to history.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Lynn Dykstra, professional photographer and founder of Our Global Cry for Freedom, for sharing her photograph and thoughts on the exhibition in San Francisco.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Donna M. Hughes. (2025). An Exhibition and Protest of Executions in Iran. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 10, Issue 3, Article 5.  
<https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2025.10.03.05>

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