IRAN
Violence Against Health Care in Conflict
2022

SAFEGUARDING HEALTH IN CONFLICT

Insecurity Insight
Data on People in Danger
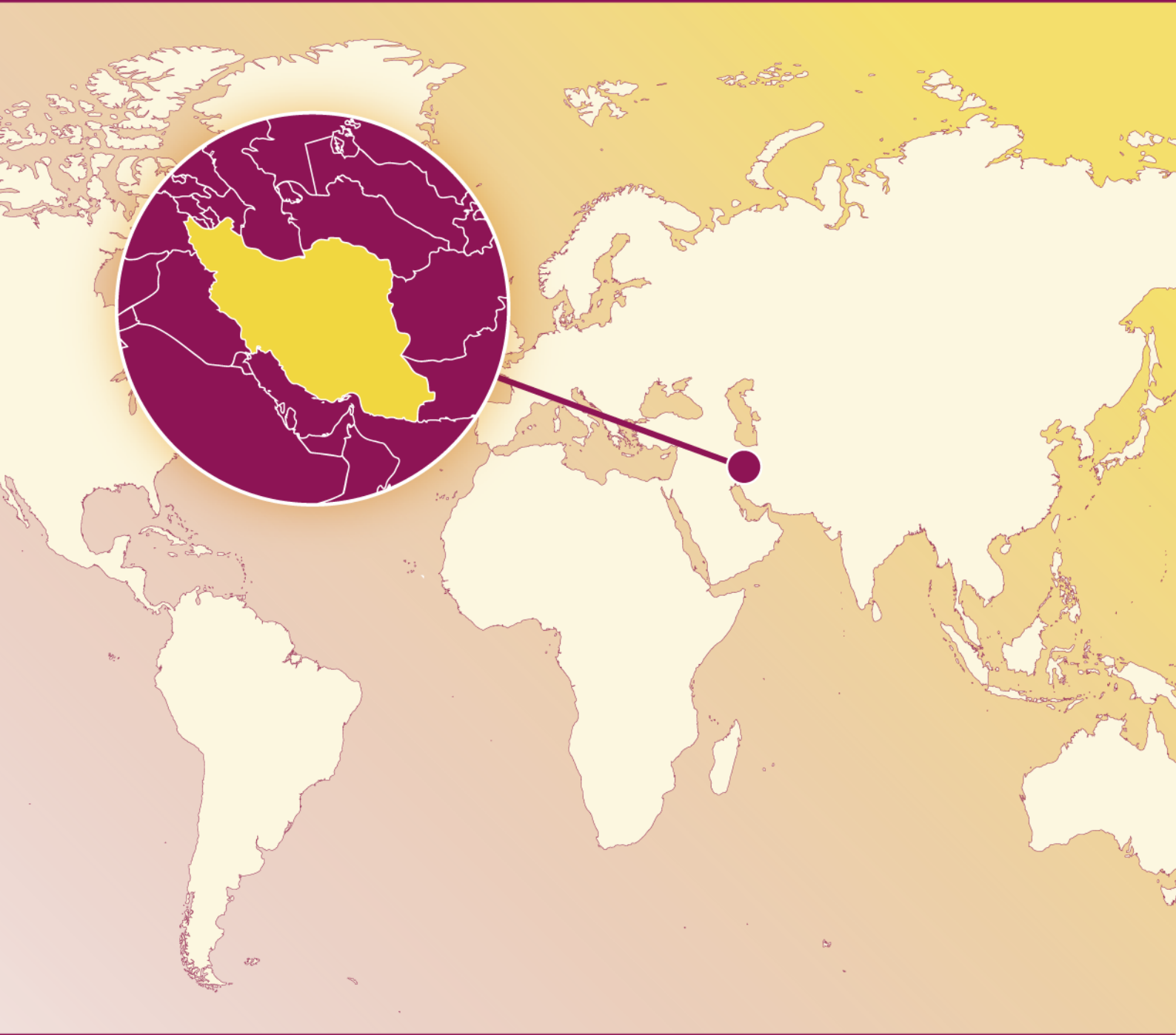
Letter from the Chair

The more than 1,900 incidents of violence against health care in war and situations of political unrest described in this report are by far the highest number documented by the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition since it began reporting a decade ago. The more than 700 assaults by Russia on health care in Ukraine are the most committed in a single year in one country.

Russia's atrocities in Ukraine have brought global attention to assaults on health care in war, highlighting pervasive violations of long-standing humanitarian norms. But in less visible conflicts and civil strife, the numbers of acts of violence and the stories behind them are equally grim: doctors imprisoned – and sometimes killed – in Myanmar and Iran for treating people in need of care; female health workers in Afghanistan harassed and sometimes beaten as they seek to provide health care for women and children; community health workers murdered in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere as they go door to door to immunize children against polio and other infectious diseases.

In the face of the profound harms communities and health workers endure from this violence, the international community has long been passive, even ignoring commitments it has made to prevent attacks and hold perpetrators to account. Impunity for the violence has continued, and even the tracking of attacks has faltered. The World Health Organization's (WHO) system for collecting and disseminating data on attacks on health care in emergencies is plagued by inadequate reporting, lack of transparency, and resistance to reform. After being criticized for reporting zero attacks in Ethiopia despite evidence of looting or damage to hospitals and health centers during the conflict in Tigray, the WHO removed Ethiopia from its public dashboard on attacks on health care.

If we mobilize, however, the war in Ukraine could prove an inflection point. Never have calls for accountability for attacks on health care been as loud and sustained as now. We have an opportunity to press for justice for the people of Ukraine in the face of these atrocities and to extend that demand to people everywhere. The time for accountability for these devastating assaults on health care throughout the world is *now*.

Len Rubenstein
Chair, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

Iran

REPORTED INCIDENTS AND MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CONCERNS

85
REPORTED INCIDENTS

71
HEALTH WORKERS ARRESTED

21
AMBULANCES USED FOR NON-MEDICAL PURPOSES

4
HEALTH WORKERS KILLED

Source: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data

OVERVIEW

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 85 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Iran in 2022 related to the political protests following the death of Mahsa Amini. During these incidents, at least 71 health workers were arrested and four killed, with security forces commandeering ambulances for non-medical purposes on at least 21 occasions, undermining health care providers' ability to access people in need. This factsheet is based on the dataset 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data, which is available for download on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX).

THE CONTEXT

In Iran, violence against civilians rose significantly in 2022 during crackdowns on protests that erupted in September following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who died after being detained by the Iranian Guidance Patrol. Security officials used violent methods to suppress protesters and limited access to treatments for both health workers on standby and injured protesters. Doctors and other health professionals were at the forefront of protests. Statements were issued by various medical professionals and medical groups condemning all violence and calling for security forces to refrain from intervening in the treatment of patients.

This factsheet is not a complete picture of all violence against or obstruction of health care in Iran during this period. Many incidents were unrecorded, because the Iranian government blocked Internet access and imposed violent crackdowns on all forms of dissent throughout the country.

VIOLENCE AGAINST OR OBSTRUCTION OF HEALTH CARE IN 2022

In October 2022, doctors gathered outside the Tehran Medical Council offices joined a protest against security forces' use of violence and obstruction of health care. Security forces responded violently, resulting in a female surgeon being shot and killed; at least 15 doctors being arrested and numerous others were injured by tear gas, batons, and guns firing metal pellets.[1] The president and vice-president of the Tehran Medical Council stepped down from their posts in protest, stating that they were unable to carry out their duties in such circumstances.

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All recorded incidents affected staff working for the national health structure in 19 of Iran's 31 provinces. Iranian security forces, including police officers, members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and plain-clothes security personnel, attacked health care workers and infrastructure almost immediately after protests initially began on September 16, 2022. Iranian security forces frequently indiscriminately fired tear gas, lead pellets, and live bullets near health workers responding to injured protesters, sometimes injuring medical staff. On other occasions, police beat health workers with batons. Access to health care for injured protesters was frequently obstructed and many health staff were arrested for providing health care to protesters. Ambulances were regularly used for non-medical purposes and security forces raided hospitals and prevented families from collecting bodies from hospital morgues.

Health workers arrested in Iran, 2022

Detained health workers were often beaten with batons and other objects, and in some cases were tortured. Those who were released were placed under surveillance, threatened with losing their jobs, and/or banned from leaving the country, having mobile phones, and/or joining political parties. Others were given prison sentences ranging from five to 25 years, in many cases after five-minute court hearings.

Health worker arrested (71)

200km

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HEALTH WORKERS ARRESTED

At least 71 health workers were arrested for protesting, giving medical treatment to injured protesters, reporting the causes of injuries and deaths of protesters, attending memorial services for killed protesters, speaking out against the misuse of health infrastructure by security forces, and using social media to raise awareness of the protests. One dentist was arrested for carrying lidocaine spray, which many health workers used to help treat injured protesters on the streets.[2]

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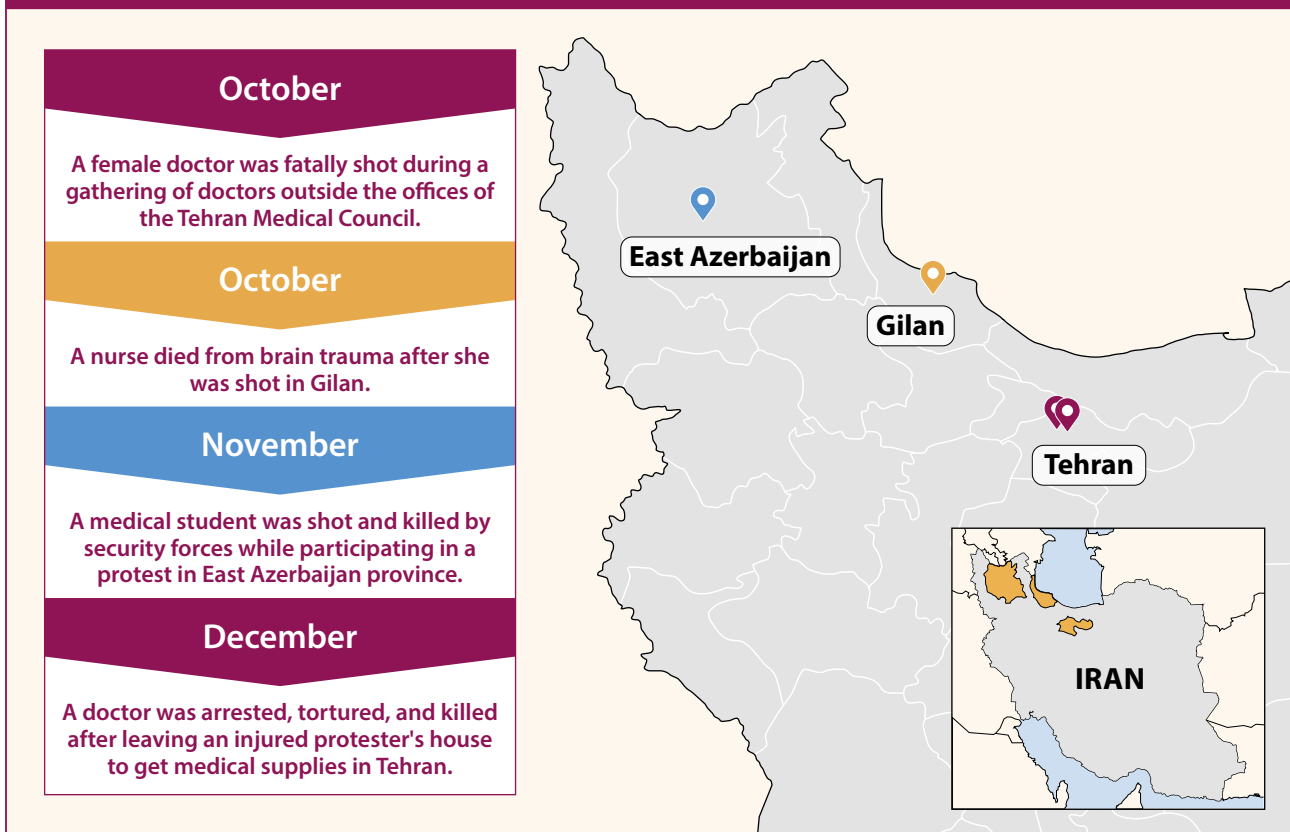
HEALTH WORKERS KILLED

At least four female health workers, including two doctors, a medical student, and a nurse, were killed by security forces in 2022.[5] Two were killed in October: a female doctor was fatally shot during a gathering of doctors outside the Tehran Medical Council offices, while a nurse was shot and killed by security forces during a peaceful protest in Gilan. Security forces alleged that she died in a traffic accident, and she was buried the next day in the presence of security forces. In November, a medical student was shot and killed by security forces while participating in a protest in East Azerbaijan province. Her family were pressured by security forces to sign a statement saying that their daughter died from an accident; otherwise, the security forces refused to release her body. In December, a doctor was arrested, tortured, and killed after leaving an injured protester's house to get medical supplies in Tehran. The morning after she went missing, police informed her family that she had been killed in a road traffic accident and that they could pick up her body from the morgue. Her injuries were inconsistent with a traffic accident and were more likely a result of torture. A medical examiner reported that they were ordered by security officials not to reveal the true cause of the doctor's death.

In other incidents affecting health workers, doctors were banned from treating injured protesters, ordered to record personal details of injured protesters, and forced to issue falsified documents on how protesters were killed and injured. Female doctors not wearing hijabs were harassed and hospital security guards were replaced by members of the IRGC or Basij (a volunteer paramilitary militia linked to the IRGC).[6]

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Locations where health workers were killed in Iran, 2022

October
A female doctor was fatally shot during a gathering of doctors outside the offices of the Tehran Medical Council.

October
A nurse died from brain trauma after she was shot in Gilan.

November
A medical student was shot and killed by security forces while participating in a protest in East Azerbaijan province.

December
A doctor was arrested, tortured, and killed after leaving an injured protester's house to get medical supplies in Tehran.

East Azerbaijan

Gilan

Tehran

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OBSTRUCTIONS OF HEALTH CARE

As protests progressed, security officials cracked down violently. Health workers treating protesters in secret reported treating several life-threatening injuries that were likely exacerbated by the lack of access to proper health facilities. Health workers reported treating pellet wounds from bird-shot often fired at close range. These injuries are difficult to treat due to the dozens of tiny bullets that are lodged in the victim's body. Health workers alleged that security officials aimed at civilians' eyes in an attempt to blind them, while doctors in Isfahan and Tehran reported that female protesters were shot in the genitals. These injuries were reportedly treated in secret, either in their or other protesters' homes in make-shift operating rooms or in the dark.

There were also reports of widespread sexual violence against both men and women detained at police stations or in prisons. Health workers were reportedly prevented from treating injuries resulting from sexual violence. For example, in October 2022, a 20-year-old woman was taken to a hospital by members of the IRGC with internal bleeding and signs of rape after being arrested eight days earlier for participating in the protests.[7] Hospital staff called the woman's family, but before they arrived security officials kidnapped the woman and took her to an unknown location. In Mazandaran province, a 19-year-old man was tortured and sexually assaulted after he was arrested at the beginning of October and held in prison. He was taken to a hospital outside the prison for emergency treatment, but was returned to the detention center the following day before he had recovered. He reportedly still suffers from health complications due to the rape and lack of proper treatment.

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AMBULANCES USED BY SECURITY FORCES FOR NON-MEDICAL PURPOSES

At least 21 ambulances were commandeered by security forces to transport protesters between police stations and detention facilities in Gilan, Golestan, Isfahan, Kermanshah, and Tehran. In response, protesters attacked ambulances in attempts to rescue civilians who were detained inside the vehicles. Iran's Ministry of Health alleged that over 60 ambulances – which were likely being used by security forces to arrest and transport protesters and regime political rivals to detention centers – were attacked by protesters. On one occasion, an ambulance was set on fire by protesters trying to free other protesters held inside. At least one police officer was seen leaving the ambulance and fleeing the scene.[8] In other cases, ambulances were moved across cities without license plates or using military placards as identification. In Alborz and Qom, long convoys of ambulances were seen traveling without sirens, suggesting that these vehicles were being used for non-medical purposes.

PATIENTS DENIED ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Injured protesters were sometimes taken to police stations instead of hospitals or risked arrest if they sought medical care at hospitals that were under police surveillance. As a result, injured protesters were afraid to seek care at hospitals, with some instead turning to online advice from doctors in and outside Iran on how to self-treat their injuries. An Iranian doctor outside Iran received over 500 Instagram messages from wounded protesters asking for medical advice because they were too afraid to go to a hospital. One nurse warned wounded protesters against calling the country's emergency line and told them to go to trusted private clinics instead.

RAIDS ON HOSPITALS

On at least seven occasions, hospitals in Alborz, Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan, and Tehran provinces were raided by security forces looking for and arresting protesters seeking medical treatment. Tear gas was often deployed inside hospitals and bodies were stolen from morgues. Victims' relatives were often extorted for money for the return of their family members' bodies, and in one case in Kermanshah in November, security forces prevented staff from operating on a protester with gunshot injuries, leading to his death.[9] Also in Kermanshah province, health workers and civilians formed a human circle around a hospital to prevent security officials from entering to arrest injured protesters or remove the bodies of killed protesters. Plain-clothes security personnel were reported to be monitoring medicine sales and emergency treatments at pharmacies. One doctor reported that security officers followed people buying sterile gauze pads and then arrested anyone receiving medical first aid using these pads.[10]

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1   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 37974.
2   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Health Data. Incident number 37900
3   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 36267.
4   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 37997.
5   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident numbers 37974; 37975; 36423; 37988.
6   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 38057.
7   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 35858.
8   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 35619.
9   Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 38041.
10 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2022 SHCC Health Care Iran Data. Incident number 38205.

SAFEGUARDING
HEALTH
IN CONFLICT

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition is a group of more than 40 organizations working to protect health workers and services threatened by war or civil unrest. We have raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. We monitor attacks, strengthen universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demand accountability for perpetrators.
www.safeguardinghealth.org