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Who is funding Iran's pursuit of the death penalty?

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"The death penalty has no place in the 21st century." These words [were spoken](#) last year by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Many would agree. In fact, more than 140 countries worldwide have abolished capital punishment, including every country in the European Union. Yet the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and EU member states [have financed](#) Iran's drug war, a program that has allowed Iran to be [a global leader](#) in per capita executions.

The regime in Iran is one of the most repressive governments in the world. In 2015, Iran received close to the lowest possible rating for political rights and civil liberties in a [Freedom House report](#), and was ranked 173 out of 180 countries in the [World Press Freedom Index](#). Dissidents are routinely arrested and tortured; freedom of speech is limited; and the judiciary provides little if any due process to prisoners. Yet the UNODC has given Iran [more than US\\$15 million](#) since 1998 to support operations by the country's Anti-Narcotics Police. This is despite [significant evidence](#) that Iran's governmental drug policies violate international law, and fall short of UNODC's own standards.



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A [2014 report](#) by Ahmad Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, quoted an experienced Iranian lawyer who said that drug trials "never last more than a few minutes." Prisoners are often denied access to counsel, and claim that confessions are forced under torture. By [Iran's own admission](#) 93 per cent of the 852 reported executions between July 2013 and June 2014 were drug related. Iran has already executed [more than 750 individuals](#) this year, and is on pace to reach 1,000 executions by the end of the year.

Human Rights Watch [has accused](#) Iran of using drug charges against political prisoners and dissidents, raising further concerns about the implications of the UNODC's support for the country's anti-drugs program. In 2011, Zahra Bahrami, a citizen of both the EU and Iran [was arrested](#) and accused of drug trafficking – a charge she denied. She claimed her confession was extracted under duress, and [activists contend](#) that her arrest was based on her political views.

Despite the limited scope of the UNODC, Iran's policy of executions is about more than combating drug problems. Instead of focusing primarily on endemic problems such as poverty and a lack of opportunities for youth that foster drug abuse, Iran continues to enact draconian punishments on individuals, including publicly executing them. It appears these [ritualistic killings](#) are a strategy by the regime to maintain political authority through intimidation. These killings are part of Iran's policy of death, which seeks to terrorise and subdue a population, the majority of which is under the age of 30.

Violations of International Human Rights Law

From a legal perspective there is ample evidence that Iran's executions are a [violation of international human rights law](#), as enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The ICCPR, to which Iran and every EU member state is a party, explicitly reserves capital punishment for only "the most serious crimes." Article 6 of the ICCPR explicitly states that the death penalty cannot be imposed if a fair trial has not been granted. This statute has strong resonance given the lack of due process in Iran.

The UNODC has also released a [position paper](#) that appears to critique its own involvement in Iran. The paper notes that cooperation with countries which use capital punishment "can be perceived as legitimising government actions." It concludes that in such circumstances the organisation, "may have no choice but to employ a temporary freeze or withdrawal of support." Yet the UNODC has never publicly expressed a desire to withdraw support from its Iran program.

Political Hypocrisy and Human Rights

The hypocrisy aiding Iran is not lost on all EU member states. The UK, Denmark and Ireland have [withdrawn funding](#) for UNODC's Iran program, citing human rights concerns. However other countries [including Norway and France](#) continue to provide funding. Earlier this year, the UNODC was rumoured to be finalising [a five year deal](#) with Iran, however no official announcement about the deal has been made.

Unfortunately, these policies appear to be part of a larger failure by many Western countries to consider human rights as one of their negotiating points with Iran. It appears that they are willing to champion human rights as a reason for intervening in certain states, while relegating it to a footnote when it may negatively impact foreign policy interests. The attitude suggests that the executions of thousands of Iranians is part of the necessary collateral damage to keep the EU free of increased drug trafficking. This stance not only estranges those who reside outside of Europe's borders, as if their human rights are beyond the interests of international organisations, but it places Western states at the height of hypocrisy.

One need look no further than the current discourse surrounding the [nuclear deal](#) with Iran to see a clear example of this. Recently, the EU's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini visited Iran to endorse the agreement and did not express concerns over Iran's human rights record. This meeting took place while the regime made preparations to [execute Salar Shadizadi](#) for crimes he committed when he was 15 years old.

If international standards and human rights are to have universal application, the UNODC should suspend support for Iran's drug program and demand judicial reform and a moratorium on executions. EU member states should demand accountability in how their contributions are spent. Lastly, any nuclear deal should have also included recognition of the legitimate demands of Iranian society for civil and political rights, and underscored the egregious human rights conditions in Iran.

This is not about interfering with the domestic affairs of a sovereign state, but holding true to the human rights values upon which the UN was founded. It is also about giving real force to international human rights law, which in this case should carry more weight. The death penalty can come to an end, but only if we have the political will to practice the ideals we have long preached.

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