


THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S USE OF BLINDING AS A WEAPON OF WAR AGAINST PROTESTERS



AN IRANWIRE SPECIAL REPORT

BY AIDA GHAJAR
WITH KATHERINE HIGNETT
AND OMID SHAMS



WARNING: the following report contains graphic photography showing severe injuries.

A WHITE FLASH AND THEN DARKNESS

BY AIDA GHAJAR

It has been more than a year since Iran's nationwide protests began, triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini, who died while in the custody of the country's morality policy. IranWire has in that time identified more than 50 protesters who have suffered serious injuries to their eyes – and in many cases, blinded – because of the violent tactics used by Iranian security forces in their attempts to suppress popular demonstrations in favor of women's rights and against the Iranian government.

Our investigations will carry on after this report is published, of course, and IranWire will continue to gather evidence and to document this crime.

The effort to find the victims, or to put it more accurately, the survivors of this violent and widespread crackdown on the 2022 and 2023 protests, started months ago. Beyond those survivors who have shared the stories

of their injuries on social media, there is a larger group, in more remote parts of Iran, who remain unknown either because of threats to their safety or for personal or family reasons.

Many others among the injured are unwilling to disclose their identities because they are afraid of retaliation by the security forces. Several are from underprivileged groups in Iran and live under various forms of political and social deprivation and discrimination – they cannot afford modern means of communication. IranWire nevertheless works to reach Iranians who do not have smartphones although this does take more time.

Several victims provided their medical records to IranWire and the doctors and lawyers consulting with us. The records must, of course, be kept confidential.

One of the goals of Iranian security services, when they indiscriminately and deliberately shoot at the eyes of protesters, must be to teach a lesson to others; to intimidate and terrorize, so that they might not take to the street or demand liberty and human rights. But dozens of protesters who were shot because they were at the forefront of demonstrations have not hesitated: they have come forward to tell the public their stories and to show photographs of the injuries to their eyes and other parts of their bodies. At the time of writing, at least 500 protesters have been killed and at least 580 have lost one or both eyes.

According to doctors and psychologists, losing an eye is one of the most traumatic experiences a person can have, like learning that one has cancer. Knowing this can help us feel a stronger sense of empathy with this group of fighters in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising. They experience this trauma again and again, each morning, when they open their eyes or whenever they look in a mirror.

The following is our first report on this horrifying tragedy that, either alone or with subsequent reports, can be presented as evidence at international criminal tribunals. But even as we work to document these facts, so that they will not be forgotten, we are also thinking about how to prevent such outrages from happening again in the future. Who are the real culprits in this tragedy? And what role do the manufacturers of the weapons used to blind protesters play in the overall effort to suppress protests?

In preparing this report, we worked with contributions from with Katherine Hignett, Omid Shams, a group of doctors including Dr. Rouzbeh Esfandiari, Dr. David Khorram and others who shall remain anonymous, the international lawyer Dr. Payam Akhavan and a group of Iranian, British and French lawyers, and also several Iranian and French sociologists. We give each of them our special thanks and we remain committed to working together.

Niloofar Aghaee, Instagram



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THE ILLEGALITY OF USING BLINDING TO SUPPRESS DISSENT

THE INJURED EYE

1

1.1

MEDICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BLINDING TO SUPPRESS DISSENT

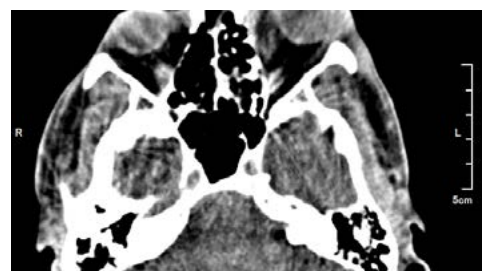
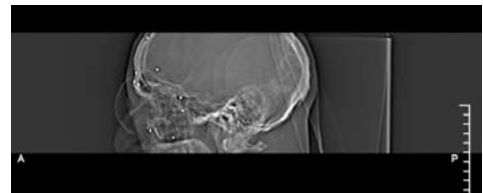
IranWire has recorded around 50 cases of serious eye injuries sustained during the recent protests. This group represents a small proportion of what is likely a much larger number of cases. But many injuries are likely to go unchecked, with survivors reluctant and sometimes unable to access care.

Twelve individuals in IranWire's subset have provided medical records following their injuries. They are generally young, with nine of them male. The oldest patient appears

to be in his forties, while the youngest was five years old at the time of her injury. Benita Kiani Flavarjani was simply a [bystander](#) when her head was struck by 20 metal pellets. She will never use her right eye again.

According to independent ophthalmologists, most of the injuries are so severe that they will significantly impair sight in the affected eyes. Only one patient has been given a good visual prognosis by multiple experts, and even this is guarded given the possibility of future complications.

X-ray images of two survivors showing pellets penetrating their eyes



1.2

TYPES OF EYE INJURY

Kosar Khoshnoudi Kia, Instagram



Blunt injury to the eye may be caused by impact from a kick or a baton, for example. One patient in the IranWire cohort has this kind of injury.

In mild cases these usually have a good prognosis for sight. But in more severe cases this kind of trauma can have a devastating impact on the eye, tearing open the eyeball (the “globe”) and damaging components in the back of the eye.

A second type of injury observed in the IranWire cohort is a sharp object injury, where the eye is cut by something sharp like glass or a blade. If this happens at the front of the eye it may be reparable. But it can still require multiple surgeries, including the replacement of certain components of the eye. For example, patients may need cataract surgery, a cornea transplant or an artificial lens.



The most common type of injuries found in the IranWire group are high-velocity penetrating injuries, where projectiles such as pellets pierce the eye or the surrounding tissue. In milder cases these may lodge in the orbit: the round parts of the skull that house the eyes. If this happens, a patient's sight may be preserved even if it is too risky to surgically remove the debris. These less severe wounds are still vulnerable to pain, inflammation and infection.

More severe cases are much more damaging to the eye and, among the IranWire cohort, much more common. There is only one case in which a pellet appears to have missed the eye itself.

Patients we studied also experienced injuries such as detachment of the choroid, which is a vascular layer under the retina that feeds it with blood. If detached, this can cause secondary damage to this important part of the eye.

Several patients experienced vitreous haemorrhage, or bleeding in the eye. Although this can clear up on its own, when it accompanies penetrating injuries, retinal damage is likely.

Surgeons may treat this by removing the gel-like vitreous inside the eye and replacing it with saline in a procedure called a vitrectomy. If there is also retinal detachment, surgeons may then fix the retina back in place with a laser.

Many patients experiencing such severe trauma are likely to have damage to the front of the eye as well as the back. This can include the development of traumatic cataracts that cloud the lens of the eye, leading to impaired vision and, in some cases where there are tears to the lens or iris, severe light sensitivity.

Iris injury, which is relatively common in severe trauma cases, can be extremely difficult to repair.

1.3

LONGER-TERM RISKS FOR THE SURVIVORS

Most of the IranWire cohort experienced penetrating injuries to the eye. In such cases a surgeon's first goal is to close any open wounds, to prevent the loss of organic content from the eye, ophthalmologist Dr David Khorram explained. Every minute a patient waits for this surgery is a risk, in part because of how easily matter can protrude from an open eye wound. "Every time the patient coughs or bends over, there's a risk of the contents of the eye coming out, which is obviously not a good thing," he said. "So we want to close those wounds."

When a patient does not receive primary surgery immediately, opportunities to preserve sight, and in some cases the eye itself, are soon lost.

For example, a detached retina may be deprived of the oxygen and sustenance it receives from other parts of the eye. The effect on vision can vary, depending on the nature of the detachment, but the longer

a retina is detached the more serious and permanent these effects are likely to be. If a retina detaches entirely, it is likely that the affected eye will become blind.

The body's immune response is another concern for ophthalmologists, as this can cause an injury to worsen. The immune response may cause inflammation in and around the wound, damaging components inside the eye, which then develops into scar tissue that can prevent proper healing and lead to chronic pain.

Another dangerous and painful consequence of inflammation comes from changes to pressure inside the eye, Dr Khorram explained. "The eye being like a hollow ball – like a basketball or a tire – it has a certain pressure inside of it. So if that pressure gets too high or too low, then that can result in damage to the structures inside the eye and that damage can be permanent."



Helia Babayi, Instagram



Mohsen Kafshgar, Instagram

A male survivor of blinding
in Kurdistan province of Iran, private source



Infection – which is a particular risk for wounds that do not receive immediate medical attention – is still a possibility in the weeks and even months following surgical intervention.

Even if an eye wound receives immediate, high-quality care, and certainly for those injuries that do not receive quick attention, eye injuries remain vulnerable to several complications such as the danger of infection. Severe infection within the eye is possible weeks or months after an incident and can cause complete vision loss and chronic pain.

If a foreign body, such as the metal pellets that have been fired at protesters in Iran, remains in the eye area, this puts a patient at further risk of infection and inflammation. The material of the debris may itself also

damage surrounding tissue. The exact composition of the metal pellets used in Iran is unclear, but any metal is risky.

Some metals – such as lead – are toxic and can release poison into the body over time. Others may be biologically inert but still cause harm if they are not removed. Iron, for example, must be extracted from wounds because of the way it reacts with oxygen. But in cases where metal has been fired into the eye area, the damage and bleeding can make it difficult to find and remove every piece of debris.

Rapid intervention is particularly important in younger patients both because of the way a younger eye is formed, and because of the strong immune response seen in healthy young people.

1.4

PAIN AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

Pain – both chronic and acute – is always a concern for ophthalmologists because of the eye’s sensitivity. Pain is common after eye surgery, and even in optimal conditions can last for several months. In cases of severe trauma patients may experience pain for a year or more.

The cornea – the transparent surface that covers the iris and the pupil – is particularly sensitive to pain. Even small injuries to this part of the eye can hurt.

In more severe cases, where stitches are needed to hold the cornea together, patients will feel these foreign bodies in their eyes constantly until they can be removed.

In some cases damage to the cornea may be so severe that it needs to be replaced with

a cornea donated from a cadaver. In such cases patients will require eye drops for months, and potentially their entire lives, to prevent rejection.

Many patients with severe eye injuries will experience potentially stigmatizing disfigurement. “With any disability there are two sides of it. There’s the way you interact with the world and what challenges that disfigurement or disability has for you,” Dr Khorram said. “But there’s also the equally difficult side in how the world interacts with you and how people react to you.”


Losing vision – even in only one eye – not only changes the way a patient looks but also the way they see and experience the world. The loss of an eye can have a greater psychological impact than losing a limb



Kosar Eftekhari, Instagram



Zoha Mousavi detailing the surgical operation and the pain she suffered on her Instagram page

A woman with dark, curly hair and a white eye patch over her right eye. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

CASE STUDIES 2 OF SURVIVORS

Niloofer Aghaee, Instagram

2.1

ELAHEH TAVAKOLIAN, YOUNG KURDISH WOMAN WHO INSPIRED THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

Elaheh Tavakolian, before and after her injury, Instagram



Elaheh Tavakolian is a young Kurdish woman who was shot in the eye on September 20 last year, at the very beginning of the nationwide protests.

Tavakolian wrote on her Instagram page, “You shot my eye, but my heart is still beating.” She also said that the sound of her crying in hospital “undoubtedly reaches further than the sound of your gun.”

Tavakolian, from North Khorasan province in northeastern Iran, holds a master’s degree in international commerce and now works as an accountant. She was one of the first women who was shot in the eye and used her Instagram page to reveal that the Islamic Republic’s security forces were deliberately targeting protesters’ eyes.

Pictures of her with a white heart on her lost eye now appear on placards carried by Iranian protesters across the world.

For the forces of suppression, it makes no difference whether the protesters are religious or atheists: they want to put down the protests at any cost.

Tavakolian’s posts show that she is a believer. She has never posted any picture of herself without a hijab. She has pictures and stories of herself in Shia holy places in Iran and Iraq. In one of her stories [she wrote](#) that just two days before she was shot she was in Karbala, Iraq. Afterwards, however, she removed religious pictures from her page and did not visit the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad for four months.

“Why am I not the Elaheh I was?” she asked.

Read more about Elaheh Tavakolian [here](#).

2.2

BENITA KIANI FLAVARJANI, BLINDED IN ONE EYE AT AGE FIVE

Benita Kiani Flavarjani was playing with her cousin in their grandfather's home in the central Iranian city of Isfahan last November when they heard the sound of gunfire.

Curious to know what was happening outside, the two children went to the balcony, where Benita's head was hit by some 20 metal pellets fired by police.

After the incident Benita was taken to hospital, where her eye was bandaged to stop the intense bleeding. She was brought back a few days later with a fever, and subsequently underwent surgery.

Now the 5 ½-year-old girl "has to see the world with only one eye for the rest of her life," a close relative going by the pseudonym Afsaneh told IranWire.

"My heart is broken for this family, for her parents, for her grandparents, for the whole family. Their life has been ruined," Afsaneh said, in tears.

"Maybe someone will hear our voice and can help her to get her sight back."

Read more about Benita Kiani Flavarjani [here](#).



Benita Kiani Flavarjani, before and after her injury, private source

2.3

ZOHA MOUSAVI, BEAUTICIAN FROM ISFAHAN

Zoha Mousavi, 25, lives in the central city of Isfahan. She was shot in the temple while protesting there and lost her left eye as a result.

Treatment has failed to restore Mousavi's eyesight. She has returned to her everyday life, but it is no longer a normal life.

Recently an Instagram follower asked Mousavi, "Your eye or freedom?" and she replied, "Difficult question... but the best feeling in life is to feel free... We pay a price to gain freedom. So, it is worth it."

In a story she posted on Instagram on February 21, Mousavi recalled the night when she had to go from hospital to hospital for tests and find one that had the required equipment. She wrote that, besides the pellet in her eye, another had lodged inside her head.

Mousavi was sent to the operating room without any anesthetics: "They tied me to the bed, the doctor took a scalpel and

started cutting deep into my eye. I screamed so loudly from the excruciating pain that the whole hospital came to the door of the operating room. Because of the pain I lifted myself from the bed and then slapped myself down again... Suddenly a doctor who spoke with an Isfahani accent turned and said, 'This scalpel is blunt. It cannot cut easily.' I cried, 'For God's sake, give him a sharp one.' It lasted 20 minutes."

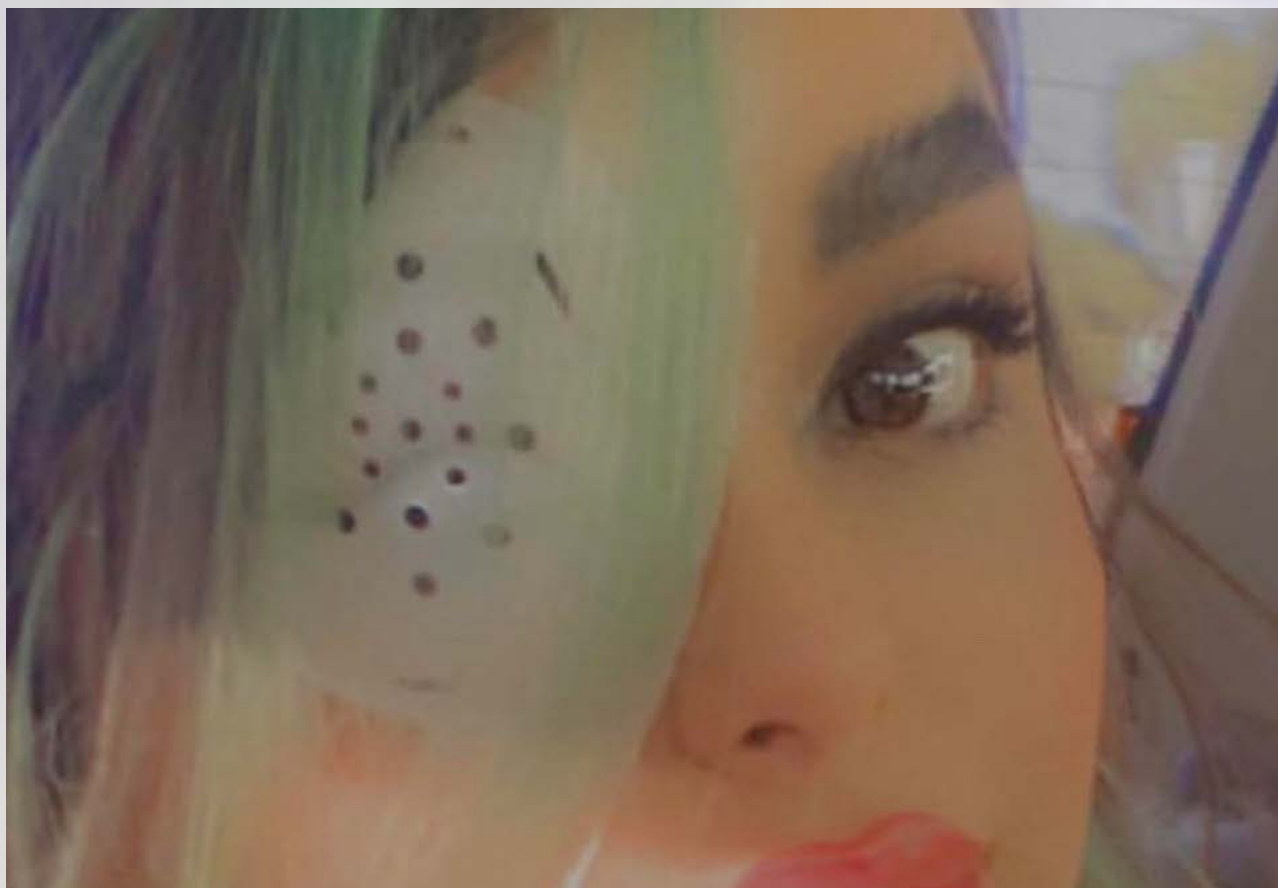
By looking at Mousavi's posts we come to know a young woman who, before the night she was shot, was a tattoo artist and a beautician. She was joyful, loved driving cars and listened to music popular with Gen Z.

Like many other victims who lost their eyes during protests, Mousavi lost her job. But she writes more about hope than the pain she is suffering. "I am from the tribe of light. I shall not remain dark," [she wrote](#) on Instagram. "One day, history will say what our eyes did."

Read more about Zoha Mousavi [here](#).



Zoha Mousavi, before and after her injury, Instagram



2.4

GHAZAL RANJKESH, LAW STUDENT WHOSE WORDS BECAME A SLOGAN

21-year-old law student Ghazal Ranjkesh from Bandar Abbas in southern Iran is one of the highest-profile victims of the security forces' targeted shootings. "Why did you shoot me? Why did you have that smile on your lips?" she asked on social media.

Ranjesh [wrote](#) in a different post, "The shooter didn't know I'm bulletproof, he didn't know that my spirit and body are too strong for me to retreat out of fear when I see the rifle in his hand and let my mother get shot... No, I'm Ghazal, someone who couldn't breathe, not because of the pain in her eye. The only thing that she said was, 'Mother, were you shot? Are you all right?'" "Understand my eyes/ You must understand/ the language of the eyes."

Ranjesh said she put these words together two years ago and added, "The voice of the eyes is stronger than any outcry." Now she is

astonished that eyes were always a central theme of what she was writing before the incident.

"The voice of the eyes is stronger than any outcry" has become a slogan for supporting protesters who have lost an eye.

Ranjesh's right eye has been replaced by an artificial ocular globe she calls a "stranger." This eye was always important to her because she had an accident when she was a child in which her left eye was badly damaged.

Ranjesh has used the image of a dragon on Twitter and Instagram. "Thank you for being my voice. Thank you for becoming a dragon after losing my eye," she wrote on Instagram.

Read more about Ghazal Ranjkesh [here](#).



Ghazal Ranjkesh, before and after her injury, Instagram



Ghazal Ranjkesh, Instagram

2.5

NILOUFAR AGHAEI, MIDWIFE FROM TEHRAN

Midwife Niloufar Aghaei, before and after her injury with newborn babies, Instagram



Niloufar Aghaei, a 32-year-old midwife, was already well known on social media before the nationwide protests began last September.

On November 4 Aghaei joined doctors and other medics in front of the forensic medicine building in Tehran. They marked the 40th day after Mahsa Amini's death by chanting slogans such as "Freedom, freedom, freedom!" and "Cannons, tanks, firecrackers and mullahs get lost!"

Security forces fired shotguns to disperse the gathering, injuring Aghaei, a woman dentist and several other medics.

On January 24 Aghaei shared a heart-breaking story about her missing eye, saying, "My beautiful eyes, today marks three months without you."



"For me, in the midst of all the emotions I experience every day, there's no room for regret," Aghaei wrote in a recent Instagram post.

"...I have adapted to estimate heights, and I'm careful not to rub my left eye when I wake up. For five months I have only worn makeup on one side of my face."

In the same post she published photos. One showed her lying in a hospital bed with a wounded face on October 26, and in another she is holding a newborn baby on February 23.

Read more about Niloufar Aghaei [here](#).



2.6

SAMAN, THE REFUGEE WHO SPOKE TO INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

Saman is a 30-year-old protester who talked to international media about the regime's blinding tactics after he fled the country.

"I wasn't thinking I had gone blind, that I couldn't see, that I had become ugly. No! I was happy. They gave me a powerful tool. They gave me a bigger platform. I had 21,000 followers on Instagram. When I was in the street, I invited people. Today I have 45,000 followers," Saman told IranWire.

As he was sitting on his motorcycle in Tehran's Vali-e Asr Square a few hours after the protests started, Saman turned his head and came face to face with a member of the security forces: "The moment he fired, I pushed the gas on my motorcycle and escaped. I knew what had happened. After crossing a few streets, I laughed loudly. It was the laughter of anger."

The pellet entered the middle of his left eye: "My left-side teeth and my skull were damaged. The veins in my brain were inflamed. I was one step away from brain death. Blood could not flow higher than my neck.

"I went to Farabi Hospital. They said they had no surgeon and that I must wait until the morning. I slept one night in the hospital without any bandages. The next day at 2 p.m. I underwent surgery for my eye so that they didn't have to take it out.

"They said there was probably no way to restore my eyesight and that I won't be able to even see light in the future. This is what happened, and I lost my eyesight forever.

"I made my choice," Saman says. "I have no other choice but to defend my country.

Read more about Saman [here](#).



Saman, before and after his injury, Instagram



Saman with Woman, Life, Freedom tattoo, Instagram

2.7

NAZANIN, TEENAGER WHO COULDN'T STAND POVERTY

Nazanin is a fearless 16-year-old protester who was hit by 11 pellets shot by a riot police officer. She must now live for the rest of her life with a left eye that has lost most of its sight.

"I feel sad when I look at myself in the mirror or at my pictures from before. My eye was very pretty; it was catlike. I loved my eyes. Now, when I'm in front of the mirror or want to take a selfie, my eye looks weird. It's not like it always was. It has changed my face and I feel really bad," Nazanin told IranWire.

This is the only time Nazanin expressed her pain during the interview. For the rest of the conversation she laughed and uttered words of hope for a better future for her country.

"I'm glad that it hit me and not the people behind me. Perhaps the one behind me was younger than me. Perhaps she was sick. Perhaps the pellet would have killed her."

It happened in the southern port city of Bandar Abbas on November 16 last year, when a small crowd of young people was chanting slogans against the Islamic Republic. "That night I begged and cried until my mom allowed me to go to the protests. She came with me. Mom always comes with me." The agent who shot Nazanin was lying in wait behind a cargo container.

"I was hit by 11 pellets, one directly in my eye," she says, adding, "I prayed to God not to be disfigured. I didn't want to become ugly."

The pellet remains lodged in the deepest layer of Nazanin's eye. The other projectiles were removed from the other parts of her body, except for two in her legs.

The teenager underwent her first surgery at a local clinic the day after she was shot. She also had retina surgery in another city, and she now remains under medical supervision in Bandar Abbas.

The doctors told her they would decide in a year whether surgery is possible. In the best-case scenario, the eye's vision might improve by 10 to 20 percent.

Nazanin says she has participated in the protests "because there is poverty, everything is expensive, and people have many problems.

"I am not afraid of anything," she says with passion. "I am not afraid of dying either. The only thing I want is to stand with others until the last moment that I can."

When asked how she feels about her assailant, Nazanin answers, "I am full of rage, but I don't want to do anything to him. However, if I see him in court, I will ask him, 'Why did you blind me? Why did you do this to me, a child?'"

Read more about Nazanin [here](#).



Nazanin, private source

Nazanin before and after her injury, private source



2.8

MOHSEN KAFSHGAR, CHILDREN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST FROM AMOL

Civil rights and children's rights activist Mohsen Kafshgar, 31, was shot in the head with a pellet shotgun during the protests and permanently lost sight in his left eye.

"Pull my eyes out/ but I still see you/ Remove my ears/ but I still hear you/ I have no feet but I run toward you/ I have no tongue but I still talk about you/ Remove my hands/ but I shall embrace you/ My heart embraces you just like my hands/ Take away my heart and my brain shall beat for you/ Immolate my brain/ and I shall have you flow in my veins/ My country!"

This was the first thing Kafshgar posted on Instagram after he lost his left eye. Then he described the night of protests last October in Amol, in the northern province of Mazandaran, when a pellet shot by a member of the security forces hit his left eye.

Kafshgar's retina was destroyed, and there is no chance he will get his eyesight back. He visited doctors many times and his eye got infected. They wanted to hospitalize him, but he refused.

On social media Kafshgar has many pictures of his activities with the Imam Ali Relief Society, an NGO that fought poverty and helped children until the regime shut it down in 2021. He helped the victims of devastating floods, distributed food and basic necessities to poor families during Ramadan and participated with children in Persian League football competitions in Amol. The Imam Ali Society organised these events in marginalize areas of the country.

Read more about Mohsen Kafshgar [here](#).



Mohsen Kafshgar, before and after his injury, Instagram

2.9

BEHZAD HAMRAHI, VETERAN PROTESTER FROM TEHRAN

Behzad Hamrahi is a 43-year-old Tehran resident who had already spent more than six months behind bars after being arrested at protests in 2003 and 2009.

He took to the streets again last year to join the nationwide protests. This time he lost sight in his left eye after being shot by police in November.

"You shot me in the eye, but my heart is still beating," Hamrahi wrote on his Instagram page. "Not a minute goes by without me thinking about what happened that night.

Every moment I hear the sound of my eyeball exploding."

Hamrahi and a few other protesters had taken shelter from riot police in a building's parking lot.

"They attacked us and started beating us. They grabbed the hair of a young woman from behind and pulled her to take her with them," he said. "I couldn't take it and I released the woman from their grasp, but somebody suddenly grabbed my hands from behind and held them tightly. When I looked



Behzad Hamrahi, Instagram

up the barrel of a gun was in front of my face. I was shot in the eye with a paintball at close range.”

The paintball broke Hamrahi’s glasses and penetrated his eye. “Ouch, I am blind,” he said before falling to the ground.

Armed riot police pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and dragged him across the parking lot while kicking and beating him with batons.

“I don’t know why they let me go,” he says. “Perhaps because my eye was hemorrhaging badly.”

When the policemen left, a young couple lifted Behzad by his armpits and took him to their home. He was able to call his family and a doctor removed the broken pieces of glass from his eye.

The next day hospital doctors told Hamrahi his eye could not be saved and that the eyeball should be removed. In January he agreed to have it removed, and he was implanted with a hydroxyapatite artificial eyeball.

“This is a path that I have chosen, and I am not afraid,” Hamrahi says. “I cannot stay silent when my country is on the line. I really love this land.

“Every time I think about it I want to cry, but I’m happy that I succeeded in saving the life of a young woman. I lost an eye, but I’m so happy to have saved one person.”

Read more about Behzad Hamrahi [here](#).



Behzad Hamrahi, before and after his injury, Instagram

2.10

SHAHIN,

KURDISH MAN HIT BY AT LEAST 90 LEAD PELLETS

A Kurdish man who wants to be called Shahin to protect his identity has at least 90 lead pellets lodged in his body after being shot on September 22 last year. There are at least 20 pellets in his face alone, including two in his eyes. He was shot from a distance of 10 meters. The doctors say the pellets are carcinogens and must be removed from his body, at a cost of a million tomans (about \$24) per pellet. But the two pellets that went through his eye and destroyed his retina cannot be taken out as they have penetrated too deeply.

Pictures of Shahin at the hospital tell a horrifying story. His eyeball was protruding from its socket. Doctors were forced to stitch his eyelids together so that, perhaps, the eyeball globe would return to its proper position.

Six days after Mahsa Amini's death, Shahin's life changed forever.

He and several other protesters were followed by police into a side street in Sanandaj, the capital of Kurdistan province. "The street had been blocked a hundred meters from me," he says. "I was stuck between the policemen and those who had blocked the street. I ran into an alley... I saw a flash and fell to the ground. I put my hand over my eye and it was filled with blood."

Like many other injured protesters, Shahin avoided going to a government hospital. His friends took him to a private clinic. The nurses and the doctors locked the doors to the clinic and the operating room. They washed his injuries and his eyes. In the end, however, on the advice of the doctors, Shahin left for Tehran because of the

Shahin's right eye was shot
by the security forces, private source



inadequate medical facilities in Sanandaj and the security umbrella over the city.

"You cannot cross a river without getting wet."

Shahin repeats this sentence to himself and says: "When something has to be done, it has to be done one way or another, and we did it this way. When I feel the pellets with my fingers, I cannot say that I love them. but I must live with them and accept that, like my eye injury, some of them will remain with me for the rest of my life. I have accepted what happened with all my heart and I am proud of it."

Read more about Shahin [here](#).

2.11

SOHEIL, CAFE OWNER FROM SHIRAZ

29-year-old café owner Soheil's body and face were hit by pellets in the southern city of Shiraz on November 16. Soheil says he does not regret participating in protests. The pellet still lodged in his eye is a symbol of the fight against injustice and his hope for freedom: "We are on the right side of history and did what had to be done."

"I saw all white and my eye was watering," he said of the moment when he was shot. "I thought it was the teargas until everything turned blank."

A few hours later his friends used their fingernails to remove the pellets that had not penetrated too deeply into his body. That night was the last time Soheil participated in demonstrations.

Soheil's friends took him to the emergency department of a government hospital. They told the medics that his eye had been injured by a tree branch. The doctors immediately examined him without asking any questions. But a plainclothes policeman approached Soheil and started questioning him, insisting that he had participated in protests.

An hour later hospital staff told Soheil, "Go, don't stay here."

Soheil's CT scan shows a 4-millimeter metal object, a pellet, lodged between the internal and medial layers of the eye, but not harming the nerves. He and his friends went to a private hospital: "The doctor at the private hospital said it was a miracle. 'Had it been one hundredth of a millimicron lower you would have gone blind.' But I must avoid doing heavy work because it could dislocate the pellet."

After that night Soheil never returned home. He moved from house to house and stayed with friends. In some of these places he met other people who had been shot in various parts of their body.

Sometimes Soheil's vision is blurry, and sometimes a white light sparks in his eye.

Read more about Soheil [here](#).



Soheil's right eye was shot by the security forces, private source

2.12

KOWSAR KHOSHNOODI KIA, **ARCHERY CHAMPION** AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Kowsar Khoshnoodi Kia is a member of Iran's women's national archery team and has won medals in national and international competitions.

On the night of December 9, residents of the western city of Kermanshah took to the streets to protest. Amid teargas smoke and sounds of shooting, Kia and her father were both shot at by security forces. Two pellets lodged in her left hand and left eye. As she puts it, she now sees the world with one eye. And the pellet that damaged the hand that pulls the arrow has made her life even more difficult.

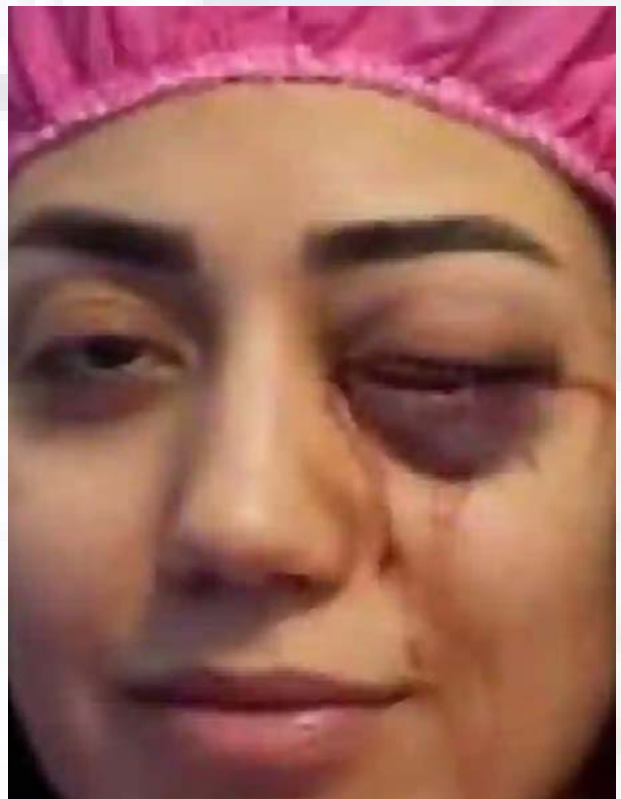
Kia was already an activist who had spoken out many times about the discrimination that Iranian women athletes face, the shortcomings in Iranian sports and officials' interference. She has lost her sight in one eye and her left hand is damaged, but she said, "I have many goals and I will try harder than before to reach them."



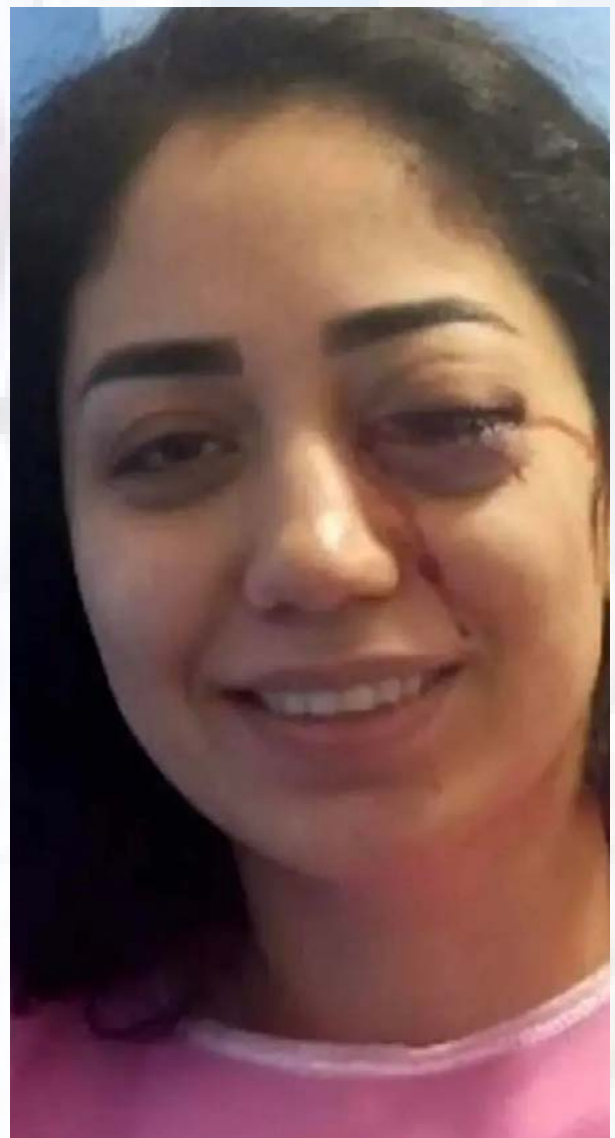
She dedicated her silver medal at the Asian Archery Championships to "all the daughters of my country who endeavor with everything that they have to realize their dreams and who withstand the adversities of life."

Kia ended the story of her ordeal by saying, "In all the competitions I participated in, in those moments when I was very anxious and felt that I might not be able to do something, I had one sentence that I always repeated to myself: 'A fearful heart is a dead heart.'"

Read more about Kowsar Khoshnoodi Kia [here](#).



Kowsar Khoshnoodi Kia, before and after her injury, Instagram



Kowsar Khoshnoodi Kia, Instagram

2.13

THE JOKER OF TEHRAN, A CLOWN WHO SHARES OTHERS' PAIN

Mohammad Farzi calls himself the Joker of Tehran. The 32-year-old artist started out by performing in street theater shows. After losing 80 percent of his sight in one eye when security forces fired at him during protests, he took the fight for freedom to social media, with his face painted white with red eyebrows, a red nose, and a large red smile. In his Instagram posts he speaks about hope and laughter.

On the night of September 22 last year Farzi was hit by pellets fired by government forces in Tehran. According to the online institute Tavana, he was trying to help a woman who was being arrested when security forces opened fire on him.

In his first Instagram message after being shot Farzi posted a picture of himself and wrote: "Friends! A rumor says my eye has been emptied but, thank God, the treatment of my eye is going well, and I can see. This week they're going to put a scleral lens in my eye and after two months I will undergo surgery to have the silicone oil taken out as

well as the cataract caused by the blow to my eye. Then they will put in a permanent lens. Thank you for being so concerned about me but don't worry. The danger is gone, and I have not lost my eye. Thank you and let us hope that better days are on their way."

"I'm not a hero. I just did my duty as a human being, I'm not sorry about what I did and I'm proud that this happened to my eye for the sake of the Iranian people," Farzi wrote next to a picture of himself.

The Joker of Tehran has now become an important source of information about those who have been shot in the eyes and he regularly posts new pictures and names of victims.

Farzi visits the victims as well. When one of them, Kowsar Eftekhari, underwent surgery, he and others visited her in the hospital. It appears that by sharing their pain the victims find new strength.

Read more about the Joker of Tehran [here](#).



Mohammad Farzi, before and after his injury, Instagram



Mohammad Farzi, Instagram

2.14

MOSTAFA, RETURNING TO PROTEST AFTER BEING SHOT

31-year-old Mostafa was hit by dozens of pellets during a protest last September in the province of Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiari in southwestern Iran. One of the pellets perforated one of his eyes, which lost 60 percent of its sight, but he continued to participate in protests, saying that fighting for justice is his duty.

"Agents on motorcycles and on foot came toward us from both ends of the boulevard. There were many of them and they started shooting," Mostafa told IranWire. Many of us were hit with pellets. They were also throwing teargas at us... They were targeting us directly. It was like they were playing a computer game."

At least 50 pellets lodged in Mostafa's body, including three in his head. One of them went through one of his eyeballs and lodged behind it: "I could feel the pellets hitting my body and suddenly I couldn't see any more. A pellet hit my left eye."

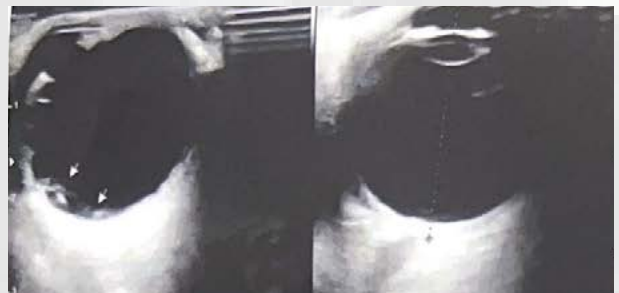
A local resident opened the door of his home to shelter Mostafa and other protesters. Around 10 of them were shot as well and sustained eye injuries: "Most of the protesters were young girls. They really didn't need to shoot directly at protesters, but when the forces of suppression arrived, they started shooting from both sides. It was so horrible, the kids were so terrified!"

Mostafa did not seek treatment in his hometown's hospital over concerns about being identified and detained by security agents. He used anesthetic drops during the first night and traveled the next morning to another town, where he was examined by a doctor.

Mostafa had previously been hit by pellets shot by security forces. That incident occurred in May 2022, when live ammunition and birdshot were fired to crush protests over soaring food prices.

"In our city many protesters were injured," Mostafa said. "Many of them still have pellets in their bodies. I was hit with pellets as well during those protests. I was full of pellets from my back to the lower parts of my legs. I removed the pellets from sensitive spots, but I live with the rest."

Read more about Mostafa [here](#).



Mostafa's left eye was shot by the security forces, private source

2.15

ALI MOHAMMADI, DEFIANT AFTER LOSING HIS LEFT EYE

Ali Mohammadi, before and after his injury, Instagram



22-year-old Ali Mohammadi was shot during protests in the western city of Hamedan on September 21 last year. The pellet that destroyed his left eye has penetrated so deeply that doctors say it cannot be taken out.

“What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is the motto Mohammadi has at the top of [his Instagram](#) page.

The [last video](#) showing his left eye was posted on September 20. The young man is looking at the camera while riding his motorcycle and wearing his sunglasses on his forehead.

A friend of Mohammadi says that he cannot remember exactly when he was shot. He

felt like a sonic bomb had exploded next to his head. His face was filled with pellets and blood flowed from his left eye-socket.

Mohammadi first thought that his eye was only inflamed. Now his left eye is distorted, and its pupil always remains open.

Mohammadi has posted a picture of himself dating back a year and half before he lost his eye, along with this quote by Mahatma Gandhi: “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Read more about Ali Mohammadi [here](#).

2.16

FARID RASHIDI, HAIRDRESSER WHO CAN NO LONGER WORK

Farid Rashidi, 30, lost an eye during the protests in November last year in the Persian Gulf port city of Bandar Abbas. A pellet tore through his left eye and lodged in the bone behind it. The eye's vision has been reduced to nothing more than a blur, and doctors are unable to remove the pellet without causing further irreparable damage.

A doctor examined Rashidi at a private home on the night he was shot and used a scalpel to extract three pellets that had not penetrated deeply into his head. A CAT scan later revealed he had been hit by 12 pellets in his head, four in one eye, three in his torso and two in his legs.

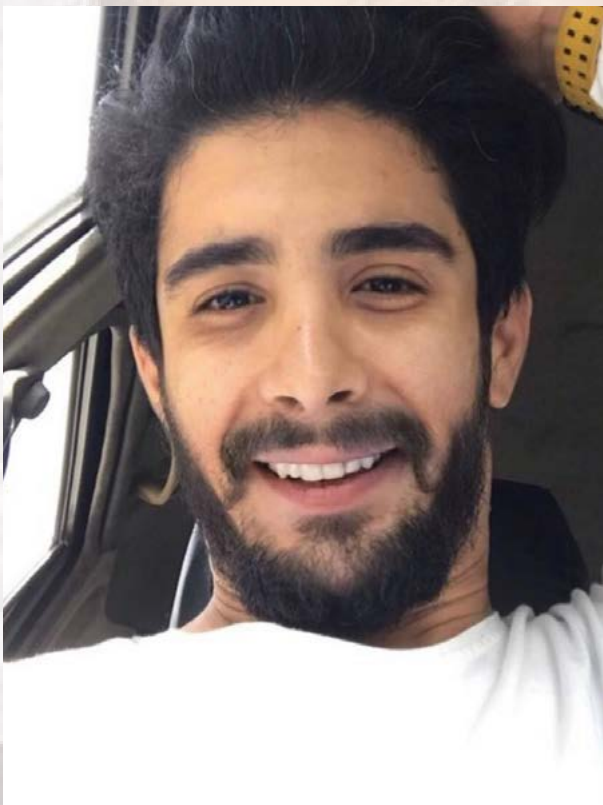
Rashidi's friend says that perhaps the most difficult moment in his life since the incident

was when he picked up a pair of scissors to cut a friend's hair.

"He closed and opened his eyes repeatedly. He was stressed out. Farid's work was always very good, and he was famous for his faded haircuts. But now he couldn't do it and hesitated all the time. Suddenly, he dropped the trimmer and said that he couldn't do it."

Rashidi's left eyelids are now drooping, and they remind him of that November night each time he looks in a mirror. Perhaps that is why he often cries and asks his friends, "How could he be so cruel that he shot at me or anybody else from such a close range?"

Read more about Farid Rashidi [here](#).



Farid Rashidi, before and after his injury, private source

2.17

YASER ALVANDIANI, AN ACCOMPLISHED ARTIST AND ATHLETE

Yaser Alvandiani, 34, is an artist and athlete who was trapped and shot in a blind alley by three riot policemen on September 20 last year in Hamedan, west of Tehran. He has now put his wood carvings and engravings on sale to pay for his surgeries and treatment.

Since he was shot Alvandiani has lost his motivation to do anything other than going from town to town looking for work. He enjoyed many sports from childhood and in 2003 won a national gold medal at 60 kg wrestling. Alvandiani's father was a plasterer and he himself is also a professional in plasterwork and building decorations.

The doctors at the hospital in Tehran where he was taken for a second surgery told Yaser's companions that they could not keep him in the hospital for any longer than a day because they had too many cases of eye injury. Only in the room where Yaser was hospitalized, there were four others who had been shot in the eye. Many people from

other cities had come to Tehran to treat their eyes.

With a surgery that lasted seven hours, the pellets were removed from Yaser's eye but the sight in that eye could not be restored. The surgeons injected silicone oil into his eye.

Friends say Yaser has one consolation: Whatever happened to him happened in the fight for freedom. And when they ask him about the agent who shot him, he says: "A learned person can understand an ignorant one but the reverse is not possible. A learned person was once ignorant, but after learning he becomes aware of brainwashing and false knowledge. The person who shot at our eyes must have expected a reward in exchange for shooting a compatriot or any other living being. My hope for him is that one day he will understand and open his eyes."

Read more about Yaser Alvandiani [here](#).



Yaser Alvandiani, before his injury, Instagram

Yaser Alvandiani, before and after his injury, Instagram



2.18

HELIA BABAYI, THE BIRDWATCHER WHO SACRIFICED AN EYE

Hello. I am Heli. Birdwatcher. Wildlife lover, Environmental semi-activist. Instrumentalist. Narrator. Salsa dancer."

A few days before the stitches were due to be removed from her cornea, Helia Babayi, who doesn't know if her injured eye will ever return to its normal shape, wrote on her [Instagram page](#) about the day, December 22, 2022, when she was shot by Iranian security forces.

"They had put up the fences in the mall," Helia says. "People were escaping from bloodthirsty space aliens wearing military uniforms. I was listening to a gentleman who was saying that pellets had missed his leg, and I was imagining what it would be like to be hit with pellets. Is it like in action movies when the guy is hit and sprawls on the ground? Everything was quiet. I turned toward the fence ... he was holding his shotgun in front of his face and its barrel was protruding from the green fences in the mall. It was right in front of my face. The same guy whose god was merciful and compassionate, and bang!"



Helia Babayi, Private source

Helia saw a yellow-white flash. The impact was so strong, she says, that she could not feel her eye or "felt it more strongly than ever." She fell to the ground and remembers touching her necklace before anything else – on which were inscribed the words "Be brave."

The first voice Helia heard was her own: "Dad, I've been blinded!" She was afraid that she could never again see nature and birds.

Helia's father lifted her from the ground, helped her wash her face, and took her to the hospital. By chance, Helia had covid too, and each cough made the broken glass in her eye move, causing excruciating pain and worsening her injury. But she held her father's hand and said: "If one drop of the people's blood must be shed, then it must include my blood, too."

Read more about Helia Babayi [here](#).



2.19

AMIR VELAYATI, THE MAN WHO TURNED HIS SHOOTER INTO A POEM

Amir Velayati's father died many years ago, leaving him, his mother and sister behind. The family lived on the father's pension and on Amir's income.

He spent four years as a child laborer, working in carpentry, package delivery and the garment business. Later he became a barber.

On September 24, 2022, 24-year-old Amir was shot with metal pellets during protests in Tehran. Security forces had rushed the crowds both on foot and on motorcycles.

Amir was shot in the torso and the legs by an agent on the back of a motorcycle. He saw a white flash, fell and lost consciousness.

"When we were going out to protest, we thought we might get arrested or killed, but we didn't know they would shoot us with pellets," says one of Amir's friends, who also participated in the demonstration.

A local resident gave Amir shelter, and he was later admitted to a hospital after first being rejected by several others. A pellet was lodged just a millimeter from his brain.

He spent 20 days resting in a dark room because light caused him intense pain. He could not even walk. Silicone oil was injected into Amir's eye and now he needs laser surgery to prevent retina detachment.

Amir can no longer exercise, and he lost his job, though he still [continues to post](#) on his Instagram page.

One poem shared there sums up Amir's experience and his attitude now.

"You shot at my eyes/ You knew not that shooting does not end the turmoil/ But do not worry/ I will draw another world/ on the dark of my pupil/ This time though/ I will create you/ as a poem."

Read more about Amir Velayati [here](#).



Amir Velayati, before and after her injury, private source

Amir Velayati, before and after her injury, private source



Scan of Amir’s injured eye, private source



2.20

SHAHRIAR, ROBBED OF HIS EYE BUT NOT HIS VOICE

Like other young men and women of his generation, Shahriar (not his real name) was unhappy with corruption, poverty and inequality, and on September 20, 2022, four days after Mahsa Amini's death, he joined his fellow Iranians to protest.

"Women were at the forefront," Shahriar says as he describes the demonstrations on Tehran's Keshavarz Boulevard: "I felt that I belonged there, and I joined them."

The protesters was chanting slogans when masked motorcyclists rushed at them to terrorize and disperse the crowds.

"We were not frightened, because we were now protesters," Shahriar says. The difference between protesting and being a protester, according to him, is the difference between someone who just complains and someone who takes to the streets and uses their voice; someone who is prepared to pay a price. "I shouted 'Death to the dictator!' even louder."

Then the shooting began.

Security forces fired teargas, paintballs and pellets, and five pellets went into the Shahriar's eye.

He was denied emergency care. Back at home, he spent a night in intense pain with pellets still lodged in his eye, before receiving eye surgery on November 1, 2022, 40 days after being shot.

"Nothing remains of my eye. The pupil and the retina were shredded. Right now, I have an artificial cornea in my eye," he says, adding that he will protect his other eye so that he can see the downfall of the Islamic Republic. Shahriar had a government job before the protests began, which he has resigned to keep his "honour", forfeiting his benefits. His grandfather was killed in Iran's 1980s war with Iraq – meaning that Shahriar could demand use the Martyrs Foundation to sue the security agencies and demand reparations. But he was warned that, if he tried, "We'll stuff your body in a bag and we won't turn it over to your family."

Read more about Shahriar [here](#).



Shahriar's injured eye, private source

2.21

ALI TAHONEH, THE VICTORY OF LIGHT OVER DARKNESS

"I asked, 'Is sadness visible in the eyes?' And you said that sometimes it can be seen, and sometimes it cannot."

Ali Tahoneh, 34, posted this excerpt from a radio broadcast on his Instagram page, four months after sustaining eye injuries during the Mahsa Amini protests. Ali lives in Karan, near Tehran, though he is originally from Ahwaz in Iran's south. His father died when he was young. Ali left secondary school and worked as a porter moving 70kg sacks of pistachios or 18kg oil drums.

Later he started a car-repair service and was popular with his customers.

On September 22, Ali says, he and his friends were participating in a protest in Tehran when dozens of armed security forces opened fire on the chanting crowds.

Riot police fired shots in his direction as he tried to help an old man who had fallen to the ground and was covered in blood.

Pellets struck Ali in the head and hands. He sought shelter in a dead-end alley as the

area filled with tear gas. One agent pointed a gun at him, shining a green laser scope in his eyes, and fired. Ali fell to the ground – blinded.

A local resident helped Ali to a hospital. He underwent three surgeries in 10 days.

Ali's friends also saw others at the hospital, including children, who had been shot in the eyes during the protests. "They were forced to endure excruciating pain, waiting for treatment," a friend says. "It was heart-wrenching to see their eyes drained."

Ali's surgery was successful and he regained some vision after a difficult recovery. For five months he slept on his stomach, stayed in a dark room, avoiding stress and losing weight to prevent further damage to his eyes.

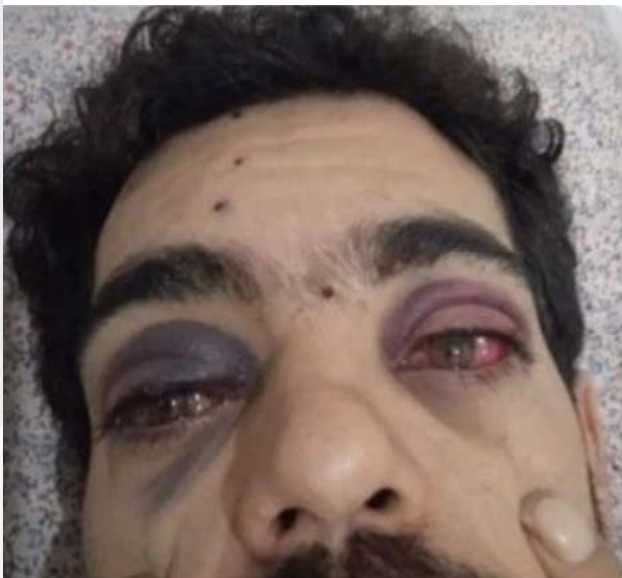
But his eyes are still blurry and the sounds of the hospital stay with him – such as the screams of the children whose eyes were removed after being destroyed.

Read more about Ali Tahoneh [here](#).



Ali Tahoneh, before and after his injury, private source





Ali Tahoneh, private source

2.22

KIMIA ZAND, THE SHINING LIGHT OF HOPE

I raised my hands to my eyes,” Kimia writes. “I was panting. My heart was about to break through my chest. I started running, but I didn’t know where I was running to. My brain was paralyzed... Dizzy. Nauseated. My eye. My eye... Then I found myself in the embrace of a woman who was undoubtedly my savior angel that night.”

These are the words of Kimia Zand, 26, who was shot by metal pellets fired by a compressed air gun during protests in western Tehran on October 26, a month after Mahsa Amini’s death in police custody. Rallies in the area ended in violence when security forces opened fire with metal pellets, paintballs and teargas. Kimia’s eye was hit in the confusion of fire and smoke. Now her Instagram profile features her face with one covered eye.

On November 7, two weeks after her injury, Kimia received a vitrectomy and lensectomy, surgical procedures to remove the eye’s gel-like vitreous and a damaged lens, and to insert a replacement artificial lens. Only some of her eyesight has returned. Kimia also needs a retinal implant – which will require a replacement retina taken from a cadaver.



Kimia Zand, before and after her injury, instagram

On her birthday, Kimia posted [a picture of herself](#) on Instagram, wearing an eye shield and sitting before a birthday cake with a single lit candle. “Even with closed eyes we can see the flame of hope that is shining in our hearts, a flame that will not go dark,” she writes. “More horrifying than blindness is to see with both eyes what they are doing to our country.”

And on the hundredth day after the start of the nationwide protests, Kimia writes: “We felt emotions and we went through experiences that we can neither believe nor forget. And they cannot become commonplace, but all along we had each other.”

Kimia’s Instagram from before her injury shows a woman looking for “[love](#)”, as she writes, and who was fond of her long hair. Now she says she has “turned into a woman who [fights for her ideals](#).”

Read more about Kimia Zand [here](#).



2.23

IMAN, LOOKING FOR A MIRACLE

Iman, a 34-year-old man in Iran's western Lorestan province, was hit by at least 60 pellets fired by security forces during a protest in late October 2022. He had joined thousands of other Iranians to demonstrate against the government after Mahsa Amini's murder in police custody. Security forces wearing masks charged at the protesters, on motorcycles and on foot, and opened fire with teargas and metal pellets.

Some pellets did not penetrate Iman too deeply – these he removed himself one at a time by squeezing them out of his body.

But one pellet cut through his right eyeball and lodged next to the sixth cranial nerve – which controls the rotation of the eye. The pellet cannot be removed and the eye has lost its vision. Iman could not move his other eye for several months. He still cannot tolerate light.

The nerve may heal in time. But for now the eyelid of the injured eye droops and, if Iman tries to look up, both eyes are soon exhausted and fall back down.

Doctors have tried to treat Iman's injuries by injecting silicone into his injured eye, to repair the detached retina, and for weeks he had to sleep on his stomach and take tranquillisers and eye drops to control the pressure in his eyes.

Iman was working as a driver for a ride-hailing app but, after his injury, he could no longer drive and had to sell his car to pay for his treatment. Today he has no income. Iman, his wife and their nine-year-old son have all been devastated by his injury.

Every day, trying to help, Iman's son holds up an eye exam chart, stands before his father and asks him if he can identify the symbols and letters on the chart.

"The child is looking for a miracle," says Shahrzad Pourabdollah, a psychologist who works with IranWire. He is in "disbelief," she added, "like other people who go through disbelief when they lose somebody, and that is why he's constantly testing his father's vision."

Read more about Iman [here](#).



Iman, private source



2.24

KOWSAR EFTEKHARI, THE PHOENIX WHO ROSE FROM HER ASHES

The face of Kowsar's attacker is still in her mind. She was shot on October 12, 2022, as she participated in anti-government rallies in Tehran.

In several of her Instagram stories, Kowsar, from Tabriz in Iran's northwest, who is just 22 years old, asks questions about the man who shot metal pellets at her eyes.

What was going through her shooter's mind? How could he aim at her eye and shoot without hesitation? Many times, in her posts, Kowsar appears without her eye shield and writing that she was still looking for answers to these questions.

Surgeons have operated twice on Kowsar, injecting stem cells into her injured eye and extracting fluid from her spinal cord. Today she waits to see if her eye will heal – hanging between hope and suffering.

Kowsar has become a champion of the victims of blindings by Iran's security forces. Other victims speak of her sympathy and solidarity; she goes to their birthdays, accompanies them on medical appointments, and shares in their suffering.

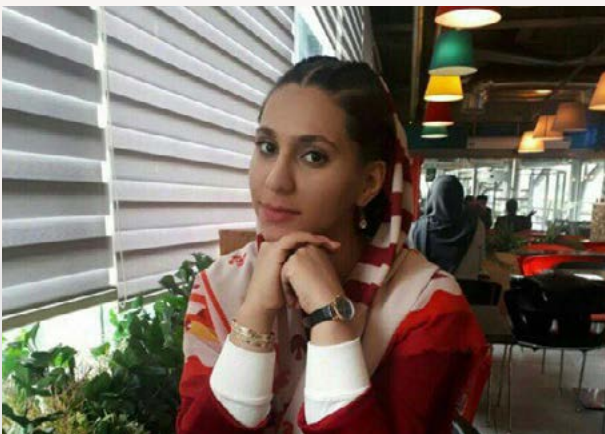
She has also commented about the situation on Manoto, a London-based Persian channel, and she staged a play called "Judges" by Sajjad Hosseinpour about violence against women.

"You are not what happens to you; you are what you choose to be," Kowsar has written on her Instagram. "A girl who is knocked down and rises is stronger than a girl who has never been knocked down."

Kowsar also calls for justice for herself and for other victims like her, for executed protesters, for poisoned schoolgirls and for grieving mothers: "Now we fight more strongly and more resolutely than before, to annihilate you for the blood you have unjustly shed, for the nooses you have tied, for the innocents you have hanged, for the lives you have destroyed, for the grieving families and for all the eyes you have blinded."

Few can know what it is like to be the victim of a targeted shooting. But Kowsar has not lost her courage; she is like a phoenix, risen from the ashes to resist the crackdown on the "Woman, Life, Freedom" protest movement.

Read more about Kowsar Eftekhari [here](#).



Kowsar Eftekhari, before & after her injury, private source

2.25

RAHELEH AMINI, MY INJURED EYE IS A BADGE OF HONOR

I swear to the hope that grows from within despair that all will be set right,” says Raheleh Amini, writing on her Instagram page. The 29-year-old psychologist from Kerman, in Iran’s southeast, says also: “I know that life has become hard, but don’t set fire to the roots of hope in your heart. Let it stay green.”

Raheleh was shot with metal pellets fired by a Basij paramilitary agent on November 15, 2022, during protests sparked by Mahsa Amini’s death. Her right eye was injured and still has not recovered its vision: it will need a retinal implant. Raheleh shared several Instagram posts about the incident and her injury before later deleting her account – no doubt out of fear of official reprisals for talking about her case.

In some of her posts, before they were deleted, Raheleh shows the location where she received her eye injury. She sat with another injured protester, Elaheh Tavakolian, and in her posts she writes that she and Elaheh chatted and laughed. “I was thinking that God must love me to let me

meet the best people from the very first night,” she says. And in another post she thanked her Instagram followers and others for acknowledging the victims of targeted shootings.

“With one eye or two eyes, we must see the beautiful days of Lady Iran,” she says in that post, looking forward to a different future for her country.

Raheleh also posted a picture of herself standing before a mirror, in which she writes: “These days, when I look in the mirror, my right eye is much smaller than the left one but, to tell the truth, I am in love with my right eye because it glows with honor.”

In one of Raheleh’s most recent posts, before she deleted her account, she says: “I have decided to return to my work, and I need your help. Please write to me in what areas you need the help of a psychologist most.”

Read more about Raheleh Amini [here](#).



Raheleh Amini, before & after her injury, instagram

2.26

PARSA GHOBADI, DUMPED IN AN ALLEYWAY AFTER BEING SHOT AND TORTURED

On November 25, 2022, members of Iran's security forces took to the streets, not to protest, but to celebrate the Iranian football team's victory over Wales at the World Cup in Qatar. The same security forces had, four days earlier, executed a brutal crackdown on protesters after the football team lost to England.

The football demonstrations had become political: some anti-government protesters celebrated the England defeat because they saw the national team as belonging to the Islamic Republic rather than to the whole of Iran.

Parsa Ghobadi, aged just 18, was protesting alongside friends in the western city of Kermanshah on that November night. A plainclothes officer fired metal pellets at him and blinded both his eyes.

He tried to flee, even as blood ran down his face, but the security forces fired again and riddled his back with pellets.

Agents beat Parsa as he lay on the ground, handcuffed him, before taking him to an unknown location. He was interrogated and beaten more – including with rifle butts.

Parsa refused to speak so his captors used a taser and scorched the right arm that was already filled with pellets. The torturers pried open his mouth, pouring water down it, to force Parsa to give his name and address. He was threatened with prison and executed. He was later dumped into an alleyway near his home.

Seven pellets had torn through one of Parsa's eyes and lodged themselves near the bone. The other eye was hardly better. Doctors told Parsa the pellets could never be removed. The eyeballs were likely to be removed though, he was first told, and replaced with glass prosthetics, but doctors were managed to drain the eyes before treating Parsa with tranquilizers and antibiotics. For three months he travelled regularly to Tehran for more treatment.

Parsa's left eye cannot see at all and the vision in his right eye is so blurry that he cannot distinguish between colors or between light and dark. His friends describe him as kind and brave – and before his injury he worked as a painter of cars. Doctors cannot give him a clear prognosis.

Read more about Parsa Ghobadi [here](#).



Parsa Ghobadi, private source



2.27

SEYED JAVAD MOUSAVI, A FATHER OF TWO SHOT IN BOTH EYES AND KILLED

A lifeless body on the ground with outstretched arms and closed eyes: this is the only image of Seyed Javad Mousavi after he was shot. A video filmed at the same time recorded the laughter of security forces, nearby, before they rode away on motorcycles.

On November 17, 2022, Javad, a father of two children aged nine and five, was shot in the eyes and killed during mourning ceremonies for a slain protester in Isfahan.

Javad, a manager at a steelworks factory, had used his Instagram to urge Iranians to attend the mourning ceremonies where protesters also chanted anti-government slogans.

Security forces lobbed teargas into the crowd, dispersing the protesters, before agents on motorcycles chased them into the streets and alleyways.

Javad and his friends took shelter in the home of an elderly woman who had opened her yard to fleeing protesters. One agent clambered over the walls of the yard; according to a witness, Javad knew him, and

told his companions to not be afraid. But the agent opened fire without hesitation.

The other protesters escaped while agents took away Javad's body.

Javad began protesting against the Islamic Republic in the 2000s and, during the protests that followed the disputed 2009 presidential election, he was detained for two days.

In Isfahan, he often engaged in conversations with members of the Basij paramilitary brigades and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, to convince them to turn against the regime. But in the end they shot him to death.

For three days the authorities lied to Javad's family and friends about what had happened to him. First they said he had been shot in the leg, then they said he'd been hospitalized. He was finally buried on November 20, under heavy security, and not even his mother was allowed to see his face before he was buried.

Read more about Seyed Javad Mousavi [here](#).



Right, the body of Seyed Javad Moussavi after he was shot in both eyes by security forces, social media

2.28

SADEGH SUFI, THE WOULD-BE COACH WHO LOST HIS EYE

Sadegh Sufi, aged 27, a resident of Iran's West Azerbaijan province, wanted to be a football and futsal coach before he lost his left eye. He was at an evening mourning ceremony 40 days after the death of Mahsa Amini, chanting slogans against the Islamic Republic, when security forces cut electricity to the neighborhood and plunged the protesters into darkness. Agents then opened fire with metal pellets. Sadegh was struck on his legs, abdomen and face.

A bystander took Sadegh home and washed his eye. He was later taken to a hospital, where doctors performed a CAT scan and surgery, but were unable to remove the pellet lodged behind his eye. A second procedure some weeks later then used lasers to burn the blood clots that had formed inside his injured eyeball.

A friend says that Sadegh is proud of his injury.

"Every day, Sadegh looks in the mirror at his eye that was hit by the pellet. He likes it. ...

To him, his wound is a memento of surviving a battle. It reminds him of those scenes of unity and solidarity among the people. He is proud of himself and of the wound that he carries," the friend says.

But the 27-year-old was once a lively and social person. Now he is almost a recluse. Sadegh also lost several friends to killings by the security forces during the recent protests – including one friend who had been married for just two weeks.

Sadegh lives with his mother. His father died in 2015 and his two brothers had become the family's breadwinners. He was studying physical education, while working as an interior decorator and dry-waller, and he wanted to coach futsal and football. Now Sadegh has lost his job, his dreams and his eye.

Read more about Sadegh Sufi [here](#).



Sadegh Sufi, before & after his injury, private source

2.29

MATIN HASSANI, THE “TROUBLEMAKER” ARRESTED DURING TREATMENT

In November 2019, Iran saw huge demonstrations sparked by fuel price hikes, and reports suggest that about 1,500 protesters lost their lives in one of the Islamic Republic’s most violent crackdowns.

Matin Hassani, now a 23-year-old Kurdish Iranian who lived with his mother in Bukan, West Azerbaijan, was studying architecture in the provincial capital of Tabriz.

He joined protests in Bukan that November and was shot by security forces. Several pellets grazed his legs and stomach. One penetrated an eye and split the eyeball before lodging behind the retina. He later wrote on his Instagram page that it felt as though his “eyeball had been pushed out of its socket.”

Matin was taken to hospital and operated on three times in a week, causing more damage to his cornea and retina, before visiting Tehran for more treatment. Doctors said the eye should be drained. Matin and his mother refused the procedure.

Oil was then injected behind his retina, to encourage it to reattach, requiring Matin to lie still for days. But security agents stormed the hospital during his recovery, detained Matin, and took him in a wheelchair to be interrogated in prison.

He was accused of being a “troublemaker”, beaten and insulted for being a Kurd and a Sunni, before his mother paid a \$5,000 bail for his release.

Today Matin has been forced to abandon his architecture studies because of his injuries – which doctors say may have healed better if he had not been arrested.

Read more about Matin Hassani [here](#).



Matin Hassani, private source



2.30

MAJID KHADEMI, THE PHD STUDENT WHO CONTINUES RESEARCH WITHOUT AN EYE

On November 3, 2022, a crowd of protesters were mourning the 40th day since the death of a 20-year-old woman who had been killed in the Mahsa Amini uprising. Majid Khademi was near the crowd at the Behesht-e Sakineh cemetery, in Karaj, near Tehran.

Security forces sealed the cemetery to prevent the crowd from growing. Mourners and armed agents began to clash and a Basiji paramilitary officer was killed. Five people were later sentenced to execution over that death – two were hanged.

Majid was shot by pellets in the eyes that day. He is a PhD student at Isfahan University of technology, conducting research in biotechnology, and he works at a company developing cancer medicines and treatments.

He was with his mother and sister when they were approaching the cemetery but, seeing it closed, they decided to turn back. The atmosphere was already tense and they saw a group of protesters attack a police vehicle.

Security forces on motorcycles opened fire – not only on protesters but on those leaving the scene and others not involved in the violence. A security agent aimed at Majid, fired and struck him with pellets, one of which tore through his left eyeball and lodged behind the retina. He was operated on that night. But he lost sight in that eye forever.

Majid, who has filed a complaint with the judiciary despite knowing it may go nowhere, can no longer drive, shave, and he cannot tolerate bright lights or watch television for more than 15 minutes. He suffers intense pain if exposed to sunlight – even with sunglasses. The particulates of polluted air also cause pain.

But Majid has refused to quit his studies or his research.

Read more about Majid Khademi [here](#).



Majid Khademi, private source



2.31

DANIAL, THE DRIVER WHOSE WINDSCREEN WAS SHATTERED BY A STUN GRENADE

Danial, The Driver Whose Windscreen was Shattered by a Stun Grenade

Danial, a 48-year old husband and father of two, who has withheld his real name to avoid repercussions by the authorities, lost vision in his left eye after security forces fired a stun grenade at his car and shattered the windscreen. His eye was filled with broken glass.

In December, 2022, Danial and a friend were in a car surrounded by crowds shouting slogans against the Islamic Republic. Agents opened fire on the crowd with metal pellets. Drivers in other cars sounded their horns in protest. The security forces, in the bedlam, sometimes turned their guns against the cars. Danial was just beginning to find space – to drive away – when the grenade was launched at him.

He tried to keep driving to escape the chaos. But the pain was excruciating, blood was pouring from his left eye, and he had to stop.

Danial left the car and stumbled to the curb. Basiji paramilitary forces surrounded him

but were soon repulsed by other protesters. And then Danial lost consciousness.

When he awoke, in hospital, someone came to his side and asked questions about the incident. Danial assumed it was a hospital worker and told his story. But then the person handcuffed him and it was only the intervention of a doctor that saved him from arrest.

He was operated on the next day. Doctors tried to repair his ruptured cornea, sclera, and upper and lower eyelids, and was in recovery at home for almost two months. Stitches still hold the tissues of his eye and eyelid together.

Danial and his family at first kept the truth of his injuries from his mother. Now she cries every day. And Danial, a former bus driver who had to retire early because of his union activism, can no longer work as a private driver to supplement his meagre pension.

Read more about Danial [here](#).



Danial, private source



2.32

MATIN, A PART-TIME STUDENT WHO TOOK HIS BLINDING TO COURT

Seyed Matin Manani, aged 25, must have been shot with metal pellets fired from both sides during a September 20, 2022 protest at a park in Sari, Mazandaran province. Doctors have spent six months pulling pellets from his face, arms, chest and elsewhere in his body, but many remain. Two are near blood vessels in his brain but doctors have said it is safer to leave them alone.

He also lost vision in both eyes.

The young Matin – whose father is a veteran of Iran's 1980s war with Iraq, who later painted houses until an accident forced him to retire – was along with his brother one of the household's breadwinners and a part-time university student.

He is one of a handful of Iranians who have lodged complaints with the judiciary in response to his blinding by security agents. Many of those who have taken action – which in some cases has resulted in compensation of up to 900 million tomans, or US \$20,000, although variables such as gender can affect this – say they are not in it for the money.

"I don't need the money," one such victim says. "I am even aware that I might not get anywhere in court, but challenging the judiciary is important to me. For me, it's like continuing the fight [of the protests] ... I want to show that I am not retreating."

Read more about Seyed Matin Manani [here](#).



Matin, before and after his injury, private source

2.33

ELHAM, A WOMAN WHO SAW THE SMIRK IN HER ATTACKER'S EYES

On November 11, 2022, a city in Hormozgan province was in the midst of protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody. Elham, a 35-year-old resident who has chosen to stay anonymous, for fear of reprisals by the authorities and judgement by her community, heard loud noises from the street and stepped outside to see what was happening. Women were hiding among the trees as security agents on motorcycles scoured the area, shining their torches everywhere, and kicking at any woman they saw.

Neighbors leaned out of their windows and shouted at the agents to leave the women alone. One agent jumped off his motorbike and brandished his weapon at the locals.

"My husband and I were so terrified that we were unable to move," Elham says.

The women in the trees asked Elham and others to leave doors to their homes open – so that they could take shelter. Elham did so. "I never believed they would start shooting," Elham says, her voice catching in her throat. "[A motorcyclist] raised his gun and pointed it at me. ... I saw the smirk in his eyes. I heard a noise like they were throwing sand and

pebbles at a car and suddenly the colors mixed together in my eye. Everything went black and my eye started burning."

Elham ran home, covering her injured eye, and burst into tears.

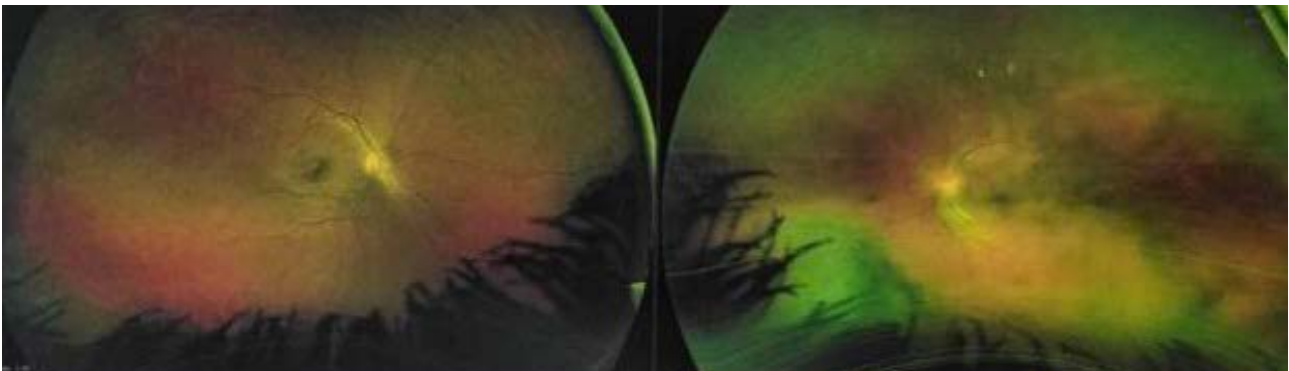
Her relatives could not believe that her attacker had smirked before shooting her – they thought she was hallucinating – until they saw other blinding victims report the same experience.

A series of botched diagnoses and treatments left Elham's eye shrunken, her retina detached, developing cataracts and bleeding. Two surgeries later, Elham's eye looks normal, but her eyesight is gone.

"I look at my eye in the mirror, but my eye does not look at me," Elham says. Medical staff, friends and relatives have treated Elham in different ways; some ridicule and admonish her, thankfully others try to comfort her.

Elham's father keeps repeating that, surely, his daughter's eyesight will return, because she has a kind heart. But at least her husband is clear. "You are my hero," he says.

Read more about Elham [here](#).



Elham's medical report

2.34

HOSSEIN NADERBEIGI, THE BYSTANDER WHO LOST BOTH EYES AND THE JOYS OF LIFE

On November 3, 2022, as a group of mourners gathered at a cemetery in Karaj, near Tehran, Hossein Naderbeigi was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Hossein was not trying to attend the mourning ceremonies. Iran's internet had been disrupted by security forces and, as Hossein drove on the expressway by the cemetery, he had no idea about the turmoil that was to engulf him and claim his sight.

He was near the clashes when a motorcycle carrying two paramilitary Basij forces approached. The motorcycle stopped and the agent on the back pulled a gun from his parka, smiled, and shot Hossein at close range. Hossein lost consciousness and was taken away from the scene. Two pellets had torn through his right eye and three were lodged in his left. Several others had struck him in the neck, arms and abdomen, and for a week he could not even speak.

Doctors have told Hossein they have no hope he will recover his eyesight.

The pellets were removed from Hossein's eyes during a six-hour surgery. Others remain

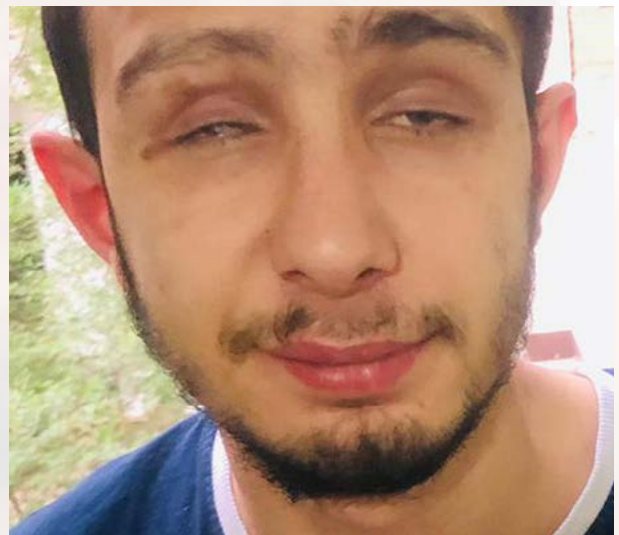
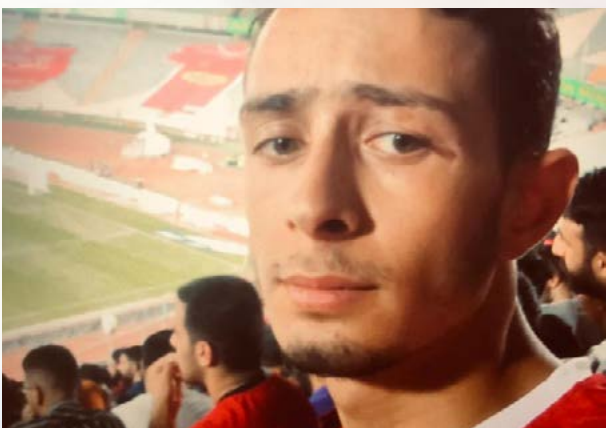
in his body and have caused infections. Hossein still does not know how many pellets are inside him.

Hossein, whose father died five years ago and whose mother works as a seamstress, left high school two years ago and worked as a laborer. He had to spend his life savings on his eye surgery.

Now Hossein has lost his vision, his independence, his job and even the simple jobs of everyday life. He was a football fan, had started bodybuilding, and was studying guitar. None of which he can continue.

A friend says that Hossein spends his days asking himself impossible questions. Who is responsible for the calamity that befell him and his family? Is there a court that can give justice to match the torture he suffers every day? Does his attacker feel \ guilt? And could he ever forgive that man on the back of the bike?

Learn more about Hossein Naderbeigi [here](#).



Hossein, before and after his injury, private source

2.35

MERCEDEH SHAHINKAR, A YOUNG MOTHER'S “BADGE OF HONOR”

“They hanged some people by the neck. They hanged us by the eye,” Mercedeh Shahinkar, a fitness instructor and mother of a 10-year-old girl, wrote on her Instagram page, referring to the hundreds of people executed every year in Iran as she shared pictures of her blinded eye.

On October 15, 2022, Mercedeh and her mother joined protesters in Tehran’s Sattar Khan Street and chanted slogans against the Islamic Republic. It was 730pm when security forces, on foot and riding motorcycles, attacked the crowd.

“I could not believe it: I put my hand over my eye and blood was spilling through my fingers,” Mercedeh later wrote on Instagram. “I still can feel the heat and smell my blood. My mother was beating herself over the head and shouting ‘My daughter has been blinded! Help!’”

A clinic doctor washed Mercedeh’s eye and injected her with painkillers, after which she was transferred to a hospital. She spent 14 hours in a bed as her eye continued to bleed. Her first surgery was performed the

following day. Doctors stitched together the cornea and iris and, during a second surgery, injected silicone oil behind the retina. The injection was repeated during a third procedure. Mercedeh’s iris was losing its color so an artificial iris was inserted.

Eight months later, Mercedeh’s eye has lost almost all of its vision, and appears shrunken. The pressure within the eye fluctuates and causes pain. If Mercedeh brings an object to her nose she may be able to discern its color. But that is all.

Mercedeh shared news of her injury on Instagram – calling it a “badge of honor” – but in January 2023 she cut off communication after agents raided her home and confiscated her phone and diary. She lived in hiding for a month before fleeing Iran in March.

Mercedeh’s daughter, perhaps as traumatized as her mother, has moved from feeling denial to anger to, finally, taking pride in a mother who gave her eye for freedom.

Read more about Mercedeh Shahinkar [here](#).



Mercedeh, before and after her injury, private source

2.36

SHAHIN MILAN, THE MAN WHO LOST AN EYE AND RETURNED TO WORK

The fourth of five siblings, young worker Shahin Milan lives in Khoy, West Azerbaijan province. His father drives a taxi. The family had little money and none of the social connections needed to advance – though as a child he wished he could live like some of the more prosperous children in Iran’s capital of Tehran.

Shahin had to drop out of school in the seventh grade to start working, first by making furniture, then farming, and now as a dry-waller. And even when he was shot in the eye in November of last year, caught on the sidelines of nationwide protests, he has gone back to work with only some of his vision intact.

Shahin works from 8am to 6pm and his only leisure time is on Friday evenings, if he and his friends can arrange a car, to drive around the city and enjoy a meal.

On November 19, 2022, Shahin was returning home from work when protests broke out around him. The protests were motivated both by the nationwide unrest sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini and the two-year anniversary of a violent crackdown against demonstrations.

Agents in black uniforms pulled out their weapons and opened fire. Shahin heard a sound like two iron beams colliding. He fell to the ground in agony – but more terrifying than his pain was the knowledge that if he stayed where he was, he could be arrested. Shahin’s shoulders and head were filled with

dozens of metal pellets and his right eye was sealed shut. His mouth was torn open. A woman helped Shahin into a taxi although the driver was worried that Shahin was bleeding so badly he would ruin the seat. Doctors were able to remove 20 pellets, but many remain.

Shahin has had three operations on his right eye, first to stop the bleeding, then to remove a pellet, and then to remove a membrane that was growing inside the eye.

He has recovered only some of his eyesight. But he has gone back to work as normal – in a country where he has no means and no choice.

Read more about Shahin Milan [here](#).



Shahin Milan, private source

2.37

ALI DELPASAND, THE BLINDED FATHER WHOSE CHILD ESCAPED UNHARMED

The streets of Rasht were full of protesters when Ali Delpasand and his wife, Bahareh, drove to collect their nine-year-old daughter Respina on November 15, 2022.

The family wanted to join the protesters and did so a few times – though when the security forces appeared they returned to their car. Ali was sounding his horn to continue showing support and Bahareh was flashing a V for victory sign, with her hand outside the car window, when something like a sledgehammer crashed into her face.

Respina screamed as the windshield and windows shattered. Ali was bent forward and there was blood everywhere in the car. Protesters surrounded them, a man opened the driver-side door, pushed Ali to the side, sat behind the wheel and drove the family to their home. A Kia Pride car with several bearded passengers followed them and told Bahareh they were willing to take Ali to the hospital. But Bahareh did not trust them and rejected their offer.

The family left Iran for Turkey seven months later.

“We were stuck in traffic,” Bahareh later told IranWire. “Everybody was honking. I was telling Ali that people believe those who were killing the protesters are not Iranians. Two motorcycles of security agents were on the side of that street, next to our car. They spoke in Gilaki [a language spoken in Iran’s northern province of Gilan]. I told Ali that they were our kinsmen. I turned my head towards the car next to us. A girl had extended her hand out of the car’s window

with a victory sign, and I did the same. Then everything was torn apart ... I thought Ali had been killed.”

Bahareh had taken five pellets to her face, but they missed her eyes. Ali’s right eye was injured, though, and he underwent four surgeries in 45 days. Two pellets had torn through the eyeball and reached the nerve. He has lost sight in his right eye.

How would Ali and Bahareh treat their attackers if they could be brought to justice? “We don’t want to be like them, so we leave it to God,” Ali said. “They say that heaven and hell are both in this world, so he will pay for it in this life. I would tell him: ‘We cannot even trample an ant. How could you shoot at a family and then stay there and just look?’” Bahareh is less forgiving. “I am more angry than sad,” she said. “Ali said that he would let it go but I would not. I want the same thing done to him that he did to us. I still cry when I talk about this incident. You have no idea what we have been through.”

Read more about Ali Delpasand [here](#).



Ali Delpasand, after his injury, private source

2.38

HOSSEIN ASHTARI, THE TATTOO ARTIST WHO KEPT JOINING PROTESTS

Hossein has loved painting since childhood. Hossein has loved painting since childhood – a passion he was able to turn into work as a tattoo artist. He also plays the dulcimer, a stringed musical instrument, and used to wrestle before an injury moved him into mountain climbing.

The 22-year-old resident of Karaj, near Tehran, was inspired to join the protests that broke out across Iran in September 2022, after the murder in police custody of Mahsa Amini. He injured a finger when security forces opened fire on one of these demonstrations – then a few weeks later he was struck in the left eye by a paintball.

But Hossein kept protesting. He participated in a November 3 demonstration, even with his damaged eye, and on that occasion he escaped without more physical harm.

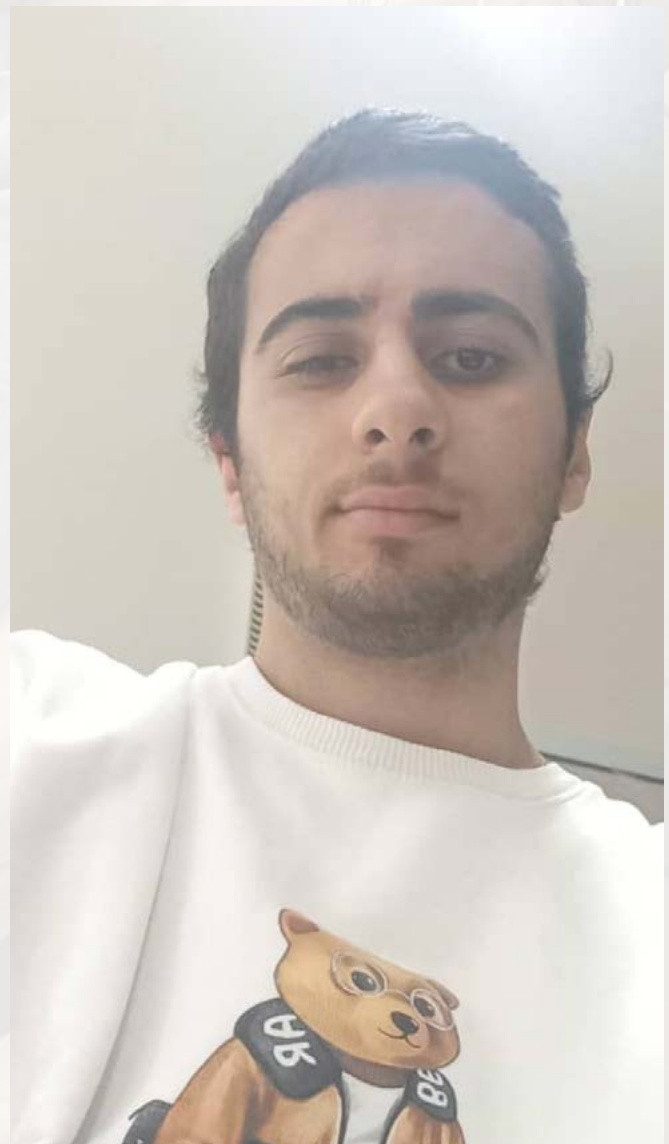
During the October 9 protest, when he was struck in the eye, Hossein was outside Karaj Azad University in the Gohardasht neighborhood. Students had staged a sit-in and were chanting slogans. Security forces on motorcycles drove into the crowd and opened fire. One agent, on the back of a motorbike and wearing an all-black uniform with a black helmet, shot three paintballs at Hossein and hit him in the shoulder, neck, triggering a severe hemorrhage, and his left eye. A friend who then tried to pull Hossein aside was then also hit.

The two injured men struggled down the road when an old man opened his front door and took them in.

He was operated on the next day and pieces of glass were removed from the eye and the eyeball stitched closed.

For his long months of recuperation, surrounded by friends and family, Hossein played songs such as the Woman's Anthem, released 18 days after Mahsa Amini's death, or the early 20th century Iranian Constitutional Revolution classic, Youth of the Motherland, which begins with the phrase "From the blood of the youth of the motherland a tulip had grown."

Read more about Hossein Ashtari [here](#).



Hossein Ashtari, after his injury, private source

FIROOZ MIRANI, THE SINGER WHOSE SUFFERING OFFERED PEACE

Firooz Mirani, a 29-year-old singer and laborer in Iran's Kermanshah province, had joined street protests on November 29, 2022, the same night that Iran's national football team was facing off against the United States in the World Cup.

Security forces attacked the protests and Firooz began to escape down an alley. But as he ran down a flight of stairs, Firooz asked himself why he was escaping, as he had done nothing wrong. He turned around – and was struck in both eyes by metal pellets as well as in the face and neck and chest. Firooz had been shot by an agent disguised in Kurdish traditional dress. He still has several pellets embedded in his body. One of his eyes has been blinded and the other has recovered only a minimal level of sight.

Writing on Instagram, Firooz said, "Pain is not a stranger to me. I have spent all my life in poverty, deprivation and discrimination. Since childhood, I have loved to sing in my mother tongue [Kurdish] in harmony with Kurdistan's nature, but school was a place which alienated me from this love, so I escaped school. This escape dragged me into becoming a laborer in Tehran and a kolbar [a porter who carries goods across the border] in Kurdistan ... My body might have been tired and exhausted, but I had this hope in my heart that someday my melodies would flow. This was until these agents of tyranny targeted my eyes."

A video published online showed Firooz sitting in a car with his eyes bandaged, the night he was shot, singing his heart out for his country.

Firooz was born into a large family although his parents lost five of his siblings.

In another Instagram post, he said: "I am Firooz, the son of Iran, the son of a suffering and grieving mother, a mother who has grieved after the death of several of her children and, little by little, has fallen apart. I say this because if I, too, had lost my life for my motherland, perhaps she would have shed more tears and her eyes would have lost more vision."

On the night he was shot, Firooz's friends looked for shelter for him for hours, before his family arrived to take him to hospital. Over several months, he has received five operations, costing close to \$6,000.

But writing on Instagram, Firooz said: "I feel serene, and my conscience is at peace ... Were it not because of my respect for the blood of our martyrs ... were it not because of the grieving mothers and this grieving land, I would definitely be singing the merriest tunes right now."

Read more about Firooz Mirani [here](#).



Firooz Mirani, after his injury, private source

2.40

VAHED ROZNAVARD, TRAPPED IN THE LIMBO OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Vahed Roznavard, a 22-year-old Iranian-Kurdish man, lost his left eye during the first weeks of Iran's 2022 nationwide protests. Today he has left Iran, half-blinded, and is living in Turkey before seeking asylum in a European country.

On October 12, Vahed and some friends joined other protesters on the streets of Mahabad in West Azerbaijan province. The chanting of political slogans filled the air. Anti-riot police attacked the crowds, moving on foot, motorcycles and other vehicles, using tear gas and firearms. Vahed and his friends sought shelter in nearby alleys. Ten meters away, a masked agent raised his weapon at Vahed and pulled the trigger, drenching his face and upper body with blood. Vahed's friends pulled him away.

A pellet had perforated Vahed's left eyeball and another struck his right eyelid. Several pellets remain lodged in his face, neck, and upper body.

Vahed is the youngest of seven children, and by the age of 11 he was juggling school with working as a street seller and a stone miner. His family's precarious financial situation forced Vahed – who had dreamed of being a footballer – to drop out of school in the 10th grade.

He worked as a hairdresser for several years, a job he loved, but after losing vision in one eye and experiencing weakening sight in the other, he has been unable to continue.

Threats from the paramilitary Basij forces have also worsened his situation. Vahed fled to Turkey on a visa and wants to seek asylum in Europe. He tried to travel illegally to Greece, but he was intercepted at the border. His

belongings were confiscated, including his medical file and eye medications, and he was subjected to physical violence before being sent back to Turkey.

Vahed has struggled with suicidal thoughts since his injury, and mourns another friend, Mohammed Ahmadi-Gagash, who was killed in the protest. But he said: "I may have lost one eye, but the bereaved mothers should have the final say about the attacker and his fellow aggressors."

Read more about Vahed Roznavard [here](#).



Vahed Rosnavard, after his injury, private source

2.41

SEPEHR KHALEGHI, THE BLINDED PROTESTER WHO TELLS HIS ATTACKER “I FORGIVE YOU”

Across from Sepehr Khaleghi, when he was lying in the hospital room, was a young woman who had lost one eye and who was vomiting the blood-soaked contents of her stomach because of her pain and distress. Sepehr’s young wife sat beside him, and she wept and murmured: “I wish I was in your place.”

Hospital emergency rooms in Iran during the nationwide protests of 2022 and 2023 were not always safe places. Injured protesters – blinded by metal pellets fired from shotguns, or wounded with pellets, paintballs, teargas canisters – might be arrested within hospitals by security forces looking for people who had taken part in the demonstrations.

The treatment of the doctors could be minimal. In an examination room, eye injury patients would sit down, and the doctor would ask “Do you see light?” No, the injured protesters would say. “You’re blind. Get up and go. Next!”

Sepehr had joined a street protest in Tehran on November 15, 2022, accompanied by some friends. He joined a small group outside a shopping center and was chanting slogans. Security forces arrived on motorcycles less than 15 minutes after the small rally began and started firing paintball guns and tear gas canisters at the protesters.

Sepehr was hit by a canister. He could neither hear nor see, but one of his friends shouted his name and urged him to get up and run because the agents were approaching. He ran with his friends – someone opened the door to their house to offer shelter. Blood was streaming down Sepehr’s face. A woman inside the house fainted when she saw him.

His eye was protruding from its socket. Sepehr’s friends took him to hospital but the first doctor they saw told them to take him elsewhere. Security guards then tried to prevent him from leaving. The mother of a friend was able to free him from the facility. He received his first operation the next day later and two more operations later. His skull had developed a deformity because of the blow from the gas canister.

Writing on Sepehr’s Instagram, his mother had said that, when she wakes up in the morning, she opens only one eye to symbolize the first image her son sees each morning.

Sepehr’s friends say that he forgives his assailants. He would say, “Blood takes root. If I seek revenge, the assailant and their family will suffer as well. If I were to encounter the assailant, I would embrace him and say: ‘I forgive you.’ We must not allow animosity to take root in our country.”

“Revenge, execution, and murder only breed hatred and malice. We need to eradicate these sentiments from our society to truly understand the essence of humanity. Perhaps if the assailants witness love, they will realize the gravity of their mistake,” Sepehr has said.

Read more about Sepehr Khaleghi [here](#).



Sepehr Khaleghi, after his injury, private source

MILAD SAFARI, THE IRANIAN KURD WHO TAKES PRIDE IN HIS INJURIES

Milad Safari, a father of two, lost an eye after being wounded during the protests sparked by Mahsa Amini's death. Today, as an asylum seeker in Germany, he wears sunglasses rather than an eyepatch to protect his eyes. "My children disliked seeing me wear patches," he says. "I don't use them. Instead, I wear a pair of sunglasses whenever there's too much light and wind."

Milad follows his children's wellbeing day and night through the virtual window of his phone. But when he lived in Iran it was almost the same: he managed to spend a mere day and a half with his children each week.

Similar to many Iranian Kurds, Milad's employment prospects in his hometown of Kermanshah were bleak, so he commuted 500 km to Tehran, each week, to work as a laborer.

Milad was in a Tehran suburb on September 22, 2022, the sixth night of the nationwide protests, and had joined a demonstration. He urged his fellow protesters to not relent. The police fired tear gas at the demonstrators. Security agents in plainclothes came up from the rear, on motorbikes, to suppress the crowd.

Milad moved to the sidewalk, seeking shelter, when a green laser pointed at his face. He had been singled out. He shielded his eyes from the laser just as the agent fired. The sounds of the pellets striking the closed shutters of the shop behind him still linger in his memory.

Two pellets pierced his eye and several others entered his body. One remains lodged in his fingertip.

"I take pride in it," Milad says. "I took to the streets for my convictions, and regardless of the consequences, it no longer matters."

Milad underwent three surgeries on his eye. He withheld the truth about his injuries from his family until after the second surgery. When Milad's father saw his son's bandaged head and eyes, his legs gave way, and he collapsed on to a park bench. Father and son embraced. Tears mingled in their shared sorrow and their grief intertwined as they held each other.

He had yet to break the news to his mother. When Milad's mother saw her son, her strength faltered, and she fainted and crumpled to the ground.

Milad later decided to leave Iran because he faced constant pressure from the security services – who use eye injuries to track and harass protesters. He crossed borders illegally until he reached Germany. Speaking with his children became a source of strength that propelled him on.

"The Iranian people have reached an impasse," Milad says. "Place yourself in Mahsa's family's shoes. You'd have taken to the streets. What if this had happened to my own sister?"

"Hatred defines the Islamic Republic for me."

Read more about Milad Khaleghi [here](#).



Milad Safari, after his injury, private source

ERFAN RAMIZIPOUR, THREE BULLETS FLASHING, COMPLETE DARKNESS

Erfan Ramizipour was a 19-year-old student when Iran's nationwide protests erupted last year. On November 16, at a protest, a laser targeted Erfan, someone fired, and he collapsed to the ground.

He points to an image on a screen, showing a scene from the protests, and says, "This is me." The laser beam dances through the smoke before homing in on him. More videos document Erfan's initial injury and the treatments he received. His agonized moans echo through the audio as a testament to the excruciating pain. Someone removes a pellet from his hand. His head, neck and upper chest had been struck.

Erfan remembers the moment he heard the devastating news of Mahsa Amini's death. He was in the Persian Gulf city of Bandar Abbas.

"After receiving the news of Mahsa Amini's death, we banded together with our neighbors and fellow students. We divided responsibilities among ourselves and planned to distribute leaflets, craft slogans, and organize street protests," he says.

Student organizations kept protesting for months. Local committees were established and scattered gatherings continued in many neighborhoods. But the Islamic Republic was determined to suppress dissent, resorting to killing, arresting, and blinding protesters in the streets and intensifying repression in prisons through torture, punishments, executions.

When Erfan was shot, he told himself he was done, that he would either die or be captured. But his friends became his strength. He sensed that he was not alone, that none of them were alone; they stood

together, supporting one another.

Erfan's eyes were bleeding. People found him a nurse, who slipped into the house where he was hiding after being shot and removed the dozen pellets lodged in his head despite not having the right medical equipment or anesthesia.

The following day, Erfan was admitted to hospital. In the most nightmarish moment of his life, he saw 20 to 30 beds, each with someone injured in one or both eyes.

To prevent further complications and the potential loss of his eye, Erfan was transferred to Shiraz, though hopes of regaining his vision were bleak. His optic nerve was not irreparably damaged, though, leaving him with a faint perception of light.

"When someone loses the most vital part of their body, a pervasive sense of sorrow overwhelms them. But I shouldn't lament my fate. My eyes were meant to be this way," Erfan says, adding, "I took to the streets for a cause I'm deeply proud of."

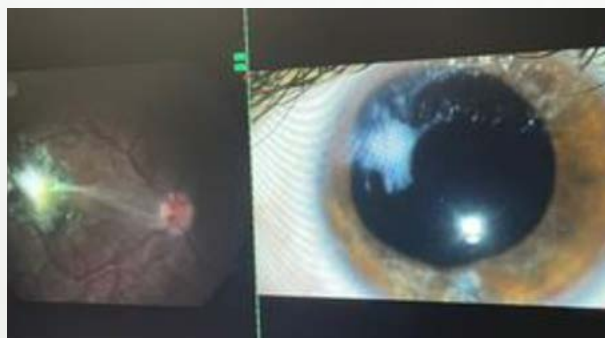
Erfan returned to Bandar Abbas with his eyes shielded and visited a friend who had also been shot. But when he was on the way, plainclothes agents approached him, forced him to the ground, trying to restrain him by binding his hands behind his back.

The intervention of a few courageous passers-by allowed Erfan to flee and take refuge under a hedge. His eyes were in agony. He eventually made his way back to Shiraz, aware that he risked being identified as a protester because of his eye injuries, which convinced him to leave the country. But he has sworn to remain committed to the memory of those who lost their lives or

their eyes in the protests – and to those detainees still being tortured in jail.

“As long as the Islamic Republic exists, not only my life but the lives of all Iranians are in danger,” he says.

Learn more about Erfan Ramizipour [here](#).



Erfan Ramizipour, private source



THE ILLEGALITY OF USING BLINDING TO SUPPRESS DISSENT

3

ARTICLE 7

[of the Rome Statute](#), which established the International Criminal Court (ICC), defines crimes against humanity as criminal acts “when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack.”

Article 7 (1) also determines the actions which amount to crimes against humanity in 11 subparagraphs, including murder, torture, extermination, enslavement, rape, persecution, and the intentional imposition of great physical or mental suffering.

The formulation of crimes against humanity in Article 7 of the Rome Statute includes four basic elements:



Islamic Republic's special forces in training, Mehr Agency, 2019

A) ATTACK

B) CIVILIANS AS THE TARGET OF THE ATTACK

C) WIDESPREAD AND SYSTEMATIC CHARACTER OF THE ATTACK

D) KNOWLEDGE OF THE ATTACK

3.1

ATTACK

Professor Payam Akhavan, a prominent international human rights lawyer and special advisor to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, told IranWire:

“Blinding people would simply be one of the means of committing crimes against humanity and it is not necessary to see it as isolated from the other prohibited acts. For example, there is an act of murder, whether it is targeted killings of people on the streets or arbitrary execution where there is not even a semblance of due process.

There is torture; there is imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law; there is rape; there is persecution on political or religious grounds [...] all of those acts cumulatively are parts of a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population.”



A Basij member shoots directly at protesters.
Social media, October 2022

3.2

CIVILIANS AS THE TARGET

The Islamic Republic has repeatedly attempted to portray protesters as violent and armed rioters, to justify the excessive use of force against them. They are trying to frame protesters as combatants so that confronting them becomes comparable to armed conflict. This is echoed in the authorities' statements about the protesters and reflected in the criminal prosecution of protesters as *Mohareb*, which means combatants and "enemies of God," and is punishable by death.

Professor Akhavan finds the Iranian regime's arguments portraying protesters as combatants "absolutely absurd, as there is no comparison between the youth throwing stones and combatants at war" and

elaborates on the distinction between an armed conflict and a violent riot:

"The difference between armed conflict and a riot is that, in armed conflict, the armed forces can use lethal forces against combatants, whereas in the context of law enforcement the police can only use necessary and proportionate force. So, you cannot kill rioters, even if they are violent. You cannot kill them in the same way that you kill soldiers in a war. For example, in war you don't have to give a warning to soldiers. But in the context of law enforcement, there is always a principle, especially when lethal weapons are being used"



A group of high school students protest against the compulsory hijab.
Social media, November 2022

3.3

WIDESPREAD AND SYSTEMATIC CHARACTER

Cases of Iranian protesters being injured in the eyes at the hands of security forces were reported in many cities and provinces across the country, including in Tehran, Alborz, Isfahan, West Azerbaijan and Kurdistan provinces. This shows the extent of cases beyond a single city or locality.

Iranian officials and doctors who have examined and treated wounded protesters have repeatedly testified to the extent of these cases. Hossein Kermanpour, the head of the emergency room at the Sina Hospital in Tehran, confirmed in an interview with [Ham Mihan](#) newspaper that the most common injuries sustained by protesters were caused by shooting “firstly at the eyes”. On November 20, 2022, the New York Times [reported](#) that doctors in just three hospitals in Tehran had admitted at least 500 protesters with severe eye injuries. In another instance, doctors in Kurdistan province reported 80 cases of protesters with severe eye damage. The number of victims in just two provinces indicates that shooting in the eyes of protesters meets the criteria for a widespread attack.

The frequency of similar injuries sustained by protesters, and the repeated appearance of eye injuries at the top of the list of common injuries sustained in recent protests, indicates that firing at the eyes of protesters happened regularly and that these incidents were not accidents or random.

Therefore, shooting at protesters’ eyes was deliberate and indicates the existence of a pattern of action among security forces. The attackers have therefore been executing a deliberate and systematic plan to blind protesters by shooting at their eyes.



Security forces shoot directly at protesters.
1500 Tasvir, October 2022

3.4

KNOWLEDGE OF THE ATTACK

Iranian authorities and security forces were aware of the existence of such a pattern of action but did not take any preventive measures to limit or end such attacks – nor did they conduct any investigations into the allegations. Instead, Hossein Kermanpour, the head of the Sina Hospital emergency room who first warned about these attacks, was reportedly dismissed from duty.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei with IRGC commanders. Fars News, 2021

PROSECUTION OF THE CRIMES

"Iran is not a party to the [International Criminal] Court," Professor Akhavan told IranWire. "So none of the so-called triggering mechanisms, that is, neither the referral of a state party nor the initiation of an investigation by the ICC Prosecutor would apply. The only possibility would be a referral of the situation by the [United Nations] Security Council. But that would be subject to an affirmative vote or at least an abstention on the part of the permanent members of the Security Council."

But it is unlikely, at least soon, that the Security Council will agree to refer the case of Iran to the International Criminal Court.

"Even if they did," Akhavan added, "the ICC moves very slowly and has serious resource

constraints. But why shouldn't we begin to think in terms of a prosecution before the independent and impartial courts of a [future] democratic state in Iran, rather than putting all our hopes on the ICC?"

A different option could use the principle of universal jurisdiction, which gives any state jurisdiction over serious crimes under international law, such as crimes against humanity, regardless of where the alleged crimes occurred or whether the victim or perpetrator is a national of the prosecuting state. The principle allows national courts in third countries to address international crimes outside their territorial jurisdiction – based on the principle that such serious crimes harm the international community as a whole.

X-ray image of a survivor
of blinding, showing pellets
penetrating the eye



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