

Iran Conservationists Face Charges Punishable by Death as Crackdown Continues

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“The situation for science in Iran is getting worse and worse,” according to one scientist.

New Delhi: Four conservation scientists in Iran – believed to be Taher Ghadirian, Houman Jowkar, Morad Tahbaz and Niloufar Bayani – have been charged with ‘sowing corruption on Earth’, an act punishable by death, [Science reported](#).

The environmentalists work with the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation in Tehran and have been in prison since January this year, when they were arrested on charges of espionage. According to Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, the scientists were using camera traps meant for monitoring Asiatic cheetahs and other wildlife to listen in on the country’s ballistic missile programme, [Sciencereported](#).

Ghadirian and Jowkar, according to the report, are on committees of the International Union for Conservation of Nature that recommend whether to add or remove species from the [Red List of Threatened Species](#). “IUCN is deeply alarmed by the charges,” *Science* quoted Jon Paul Rodríguez, the IUCN species survival commission chair, a conservation biologist, as saying. “As far as I am aware, practically the only information we have on the Asiatic cheetah comes from camera traps.”

Before the charges against Ghadirian, Jowkar, Tahbaz and Bayani were made public, at least eight environmentalists in Iran had been languishing in jail for months without being indicted. [Radio Farda reported](#) that judiciary spokesperson Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei had admitted on October 14 that the delay had been precipitated by “some flaws” in the indictment against the detainees. “Nine months of pre-trial detention with no clear charges and no access to a lawyer is an unusually long time even by Iran’s dismal due process standards. It’s hard not to conclude that the authorities are struggling to gather enough evidence to charge them with any recognisable crime,” Tara Sepehri Far, Iran researcher with the Human Rights Watch, [had written](#).

These detentions, [observers have said](#), reflect the power struggle between the hardline Revolutionary Guards and President Hasan Rouhani’s more moderate government. Though the administration had earlier said that the spying charges were baseless, *Science* reported, it has not been able to ensure the environmentalists’ release.

The crackdown

Why environmentalists, particularly? According to Far,

As a result of [climate change affecting](#) the Middle East and the Iranian government’s mismanagement, [Iran is facing a potential environmental crisis, particularly a water shortage](#). At a time when the country is also confronting major economic hardship after the United States re-imposed economic sanctions, government officials should be

welcoming volunteer efforts to tackle these. Instead, the security apparatus' long-held wariness of international cooperation and fear of independent activism have led it to crack down on the people who were trying to help address these problems.

The espionage charges are only the most recent hurdle that the Iranian state has thrown environmentalists' way. In April this year, Kaveh Madani, a top environmental scientist who had been convinced by the Rouhani administration to return to Iran from the UK and become deputy head of the environmental department, [left the country again](#) because of pressure from hardliners. "Yes, the accused fled from a country where virtual bullies push against science, knowledge and expertise and resort to conspiracy theories to find a scapegoat for all the problems because they know well that finding an enemy, spy or someone to blame is much easier than accepting responsibility and complicity in a problem," he wrote on Twitter at the time of his departure. Madani had been critical of some of Iran's environmental policies, including aggressive dam building and cloud seeding, [according to the Guardian](#).

A few months before Madan's departure, the crackdown on environmentalists had resulted in the arrest of several scientists. Madani himself had been detained for 72 hours. Kavous Seyed-Emami, cofounder of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation, was also detained at this time and died under mysterious circumstances in prison. While authorities have said he committed suicide, his family and friends have [questioned this narrative](#).

In February, [Sweden granted citizenship](#) to a Stockholm-based scientist who was facing the death sentence in Iran. Ahmadreza Djalali had been arrested in April 2016 and was later charged with espionage, with the authorities reportedly claiming that he had given Israel information that led to the [assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists](#). Amnesty International has said that Djalali was tortured in prison, and claimed that he was being held because he refused to spy for Iran.

Impact on research

The Revolutionary-Guard-versus-government power struggle and ensuing crackdown isn't the only thing getting in the way of scientists trying to go about their jobs in Iran. The reimposition of American sanctions after the Donald Trump administration pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal has reportedly made conducting research in the country much harder.

Even before the nuclear deal drama, though, Iran's relations with other countries were a hurdle for its scientists. The [collaborative SESAME physics experiment](#), for instance, had to look for extra funding because while scientists from Turkey and Iran were working together, moving funds from a bank in one of these countries to a bank in the other was not possible.

[According to a Science report](#), the sanctions have worsened the funds scarcity and lack of international support already plaguing the Iranian science community. The journal quoted University of Tehran biologist Hossein Akhani talking about how a company in Seoul was now refusing to test DNA samples for his lab citing the sanctions. "The situation for science is getting worse and worse," Akhani said.

Hamid Gourabi, a geneticist at the Royan Institute in Tehran, told *Science* that US withdrawal from the nuclear deal had damaged both research programmes and morale. "We're facing a devastating condition for our research centres and universities." Several foreign-funded research projects and clinical trials have closed and others too may face the same fate, *Science* reported. Restrictions to transferring grant money to Iran from the West has been another obstacle. A big collaborative initiative between American and Iranian scientists that organises workshops and exchanges has also

been on hold for a year now, the magazine reported.

Devaluation of the Iranian rial has also affected scientists, as they are often forced to buy equipment in the black market at high prices because of the sanctions (Re 1 = 576.21 rial). In addition, fewer Iranians can afford expensive treatments offered thanks to inflation.

Iranian students are also reportedly suffering due to the worsening ties between Iran and the US. In August, students from Iran petitioned the Trump administration to speed up the visa process for them. US government data show that the rate at which visas were granted to Iranian students were approved declined dramatically under Trump.

“We decided to come to the U.S. to do science with hopes of having equal rights to access information and education, regardless of race, colour, and gender, even if that is just for a little while,” [Nature quoted](#) the students’ petition as saying. “We have been feeling discriminated for a long time now.”

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