

A photograph of a protest in Iran. In the foreground, the back of a person's head with long, wavy brown hair is visible. The person is wearing a black backpack. In the middle ground, a man in a black t-shirt is standing on a paved road, looking towards a large plume of white tear gas on the left. He has his right arm raised. A silver metal barrel lies on the ground near him. In the background, there are several white cars, a motorcycle, and a crowd of people. The scene is set on a tree-lined street with a traffic light visible in the distance. The lighting suggests it might be late afternoon or early morning.

The Blinding of Protesters and Bystanders in Iran

An Open Source Investigation for the Iran Digital Archive Coalition

September 2024

Human Rights Center

UC Berkeley School of Law

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Cover image: [Iranian protestors on the Keshavarez Boulevard on 20 September 2022](#). Image by Darafsh via Wikimedia Commons.

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I. Introduction

This report, “The Blinding of Protesters and Bystanders in Iran: An Open Source Investigation for the Iran Digital Archive Coalition,” forms part of a series of open source investigations analyzing various human rights violations and international crimes committed by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI or Islamic Republic) in its brutal crackdown on Woman, Life, Freedom protesters that began in September 2022. The research conducted in each investigation is based on open source content¹ preserved as part of the Iranian Archive housed at Mnemonic — a repository of digital content that has been forensically preserved for use in future accountability efforts. Each report in this series focuses on a specific set of violations, and together they make visible some of the harms suffered by Iranian protesters in their demands for freedom and respect for their human rights. This introduction provides a brief overview of the movement and the IRI’s response, current investigations at the international level, calls for accountability, and a synopsis of the Iranian Archive created by Mnemonic as well as how the Iran Digital Archive Coalition contributed to it.

In early fall 2023, the Investigations Lab at UC Berkeley’s Human Rights Center was invited to join a coalition of organizations that had recently begun investigating alleged crimes and human rights violations perpetrated by the Islamic Republic of Iran against protesters. Our team was tasked with using data from the Iranian Archive to identify, evaluate, and verify the alleged blinding of

people² who participated in or were bystanders to protests that had been triggered by the killing of a young woman from Iran’s persecuted ethnic Kurdish minority, Mahsa Jina Amini, for her alleged “improper” wearing of hijab in September 2022.³ This report summarizes our findings from that investigation.

Our introduction, Part I, includes a summary of the context upon which we relied when conducting our research. Part II summarizes the methodology we used to investigate alleged blindings from within the Coalition’s dataset, including our research questions, and outlines various challenges and limitations. Part III offers a brief summary of our findings, including the types of impacts experienced by victims, how those impacts differed by age and gender, and the types of weapons used to perpetrate the blindings. Part IV includes a series of visual resources, including a timeline and map, that illustrate the temporal and geographic pattern of these attacks. To humanize our summary statistics, Part V features a series of case studies that illustrate the patterns we identified. In Part VI, we discuss those patterns, including an unexpected prevalence of blinding of bystanders (those who were nearby but not actively participating in protests); possible intentionality of blindings; and lasting ramifications for protesters that extended beyond their physical injuries, such as impacts to education and livelihood.

In order to better understand the human rights violations committed by the Islamic Republic of

¹ Digital open source information is online information that is publicly accessible through observation, request, or minimal purchase. Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations (UN Human Rights Office and UC Berkeley Human Rights Center 2022).

² For purposes of this research, we define blinding as injuries that led to a partial or total loss of vision, affecting one or both eyes, consistent with the definition used in UNFFM, “Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Office of the High Commissioner (19 Mar. 2024). The team has applied this definition to describe injuries inflicted as a form of alleged punishment or as a result of violent actions undertaken by Iranian police and security forces.

³ Much of that information was collected by other organizations within the Coalition, although we later added to that dataset.

Iran in the context of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, we first familiarized our team with the historical and political context of Iran, including how the state's recognition of a woman's freedom to veil (or not) has fluctuated over the past century.⁴ What stands out from this research is that women's rights in Iran have been used as a political weapon for decades, with a woman's right to veil used as a tool by each successive regime to symbolize their agendas, as summarized below.

A. Woman, Life, Freedom Movement⁵

Following the 2021 election of now-deceased President Ebrahim Raisi — a loyal supporter of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — the Islamic Republic started rolling out measures to tighten its grip on all aspects of life in Iran.⁶ These included harassment and the arrest of dissenters. This period has been described as a new "reign of terror" by human rights groups,⁷ one punctuated by a crackdown on women's rights.⁸ In 2022, top officials — including President Raisi and numerous Friday Prayer Imams (powerful clerics handpicked by the Supreme Leader) — ordered, promoted, and justified the violent enforcement of "hijab and chastity" laws for women,⁹ which led to a brutal crackdown on women with allegedly improper

hijab.¹⁰ As the violence intensified, people in Iran called for acts of civil disobedience on 12 July 2022. July 12th is the official "Day of Hijab and Chastity" in Iran, during which government officials are expected to promote chastity and wearing of the hijab for a week. On that day in 2022, women posted videos of themselves removing their hijab in public using the Persian hashtag "no to hijab" (حجاب_بی_حجاب), with male allies sharing additional photos displaying similar hashtags and slogans.¹¹ At the same time, supporters of the Islamic Republic used social media to threaten women with acid attacks designed to cause disfigurement,¹² a tactic used in the past by fundamentalists in Iran to sow fear among women they consider "unchaste."¹³ This wave of persecution culminated with the arrest of Sepideh Rashnu, a young Iranian writer who was jailed and tortured for not wearing a headscarf and then made to give a forced confession of her "crimes" before state broadcasters to sow fear among the public and discourage dissent.¹⁴ However, the violent crackdown on civil liberties — coupled with a tanking economy —¹⁵ had stoked public anger.

On 16 September 2022, less than two months after Rashnu's violent arrest, Mahsa "Jina" Amini, a 22-year-old woman from Iran's historically marginalized Kurdish ethnic minority, died in police custody in Tehran after being in a coma for three days. She had been detained for allegedly donning an "improper hijab" while on a family trip to Tehran from her Kurdish hometown of Saqqez,

4 This research was led by advisors to our team, who drafted most of the following section detailing the historical and political context of veiling in Iran.

5 Woman, Life, Freedom ("Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" in Persian) was the key slogan of the protest movement that erupted in Iran in 2022. The first recorded instance of the slogan being used in the country was in Kurdish. Women mourners at Mahsa Jina Amini's burial removed their headscarves in protest and chanted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi" The slogan dates back to 1987 and the Kurdish women's struggle for liberation in Turkey. Its use has been observed by international media as early as 2003. However, it gained more prominence after 2011 and during the Syrian Civil War, when it became the battle cry of Kurdish woman fighters against Islamic State forces. See, e.g., لحظه‌نگاری‌های یک زن, "از زن، ژیان، آزاد" Radio Zamaneh (23 Sept. 2023), <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/781853/>; شعار «زن، زندگی، آزادی» از کجا آمد؟, AASOO (27 Sept. 2022), <https://www.aasoo.org/fa/multimedia/videos/4048>; Joshua Askew, Words have power: What are the origins of Iran's protest chant 'woman, life, freedom'?, EuroNews (11 Jan. 2023), <https://www.euronews.com/2023/01/11/words-have-power-what-are-the-origins-of-woman-life-freedom-iran-protest-chants>.

6 Khosro Kalbasi Isfahani, The 'Butcher of Tehran' is dead. It won't change a thing, Atlantic Council (23 May 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/raisi-death-butcher-of-tehran-iran-policy/>.

7 Heightened Reign of Terror in Iran Under New Intelligence Chief, Center for Human Rights in Iran, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (11 Jul. 2022), <https://iranhumanrights.org/2022/07/heightened-reign-of-terror-in-iran-under-new-intelligence-chief/>.

8 حجاب در ایران: وضع مقررات تازه و واکنش‌ها به آن, BBC Persian (6 Jul. 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-62068950>

9 Iranian President Orders Enforcement of Hijab and Chastity Law for Women, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (7 Jul. 2022), <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-president-orders-enforcement-hijab-chastity-law/31933583.html>.

10 اتاق خبر منوتو (@ManotoNews), X, (10 Jul. 2022, 3:19 AM), <https://x.com/ManotoNews/status/1546076707894857729>.

11 تصویر ۱۵۰ (@1500tasvir), X, (12 Jul. 2022, 7:04 AM), <https://x.com/1500tasvir/status/1546858037457162246>.

12 Khosro K Isfahani (@KhosroIsfahani), X, (11 Jul. 2022), <https://x.com/KhosroIsfahani/status/1546445179053395969>.

13 In 2014, people took to the streets of the city of Isfahan after a wave of acid attacks, which appeared to be aimed at terrorizing women who violated the country's strict Islamic dress code. See Thomas Erdbrink, Thousands in Iran Protest Acid Attacks on Women, N.Y. Times (22 Oct. 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/world/middleeast/thousands-in-iran-protest-acid-attacks-on-women.html#:~:text=TEHRAN%20%E2%80%94%20Thousands%20of%20Iranians%20took,%E2%80%9Cun%2DIslamic%E2%80%9D%20way>.

14 Sepideh Rashnu Receives Summons to Serve Almost Four Years in Prison, Front Line Defenders <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/sepideh-rashnu-receives-summons-serve-almost-four-years-prison> (last visited 18 Jul. 2024).

15 Sayeh Isfahani, The Ebrahim Raisi government just jacked up food prices. Iranians are understandably angry, Atlantic Council (12 May 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-ebrahim-raisi-government-just-jacked-up-food-prices-iranians-are-understandably-angry/>.

and taken to the notorious Vozara Detention Center to be “educated” about hijab restrictions.¹⁶ This “education” is believed to have included vicious beatings. Islamic Republic officials have denied any wrongdoing and claim that she died of a sudden heart attack, but United Nations (UN) experts have found evidence of physical violence inflicted while in custody that led to her death.¹⁷

Amini’s death sparked nationwide protests. Young women took to the streets — burning their headscarves, dancing, and calling for an end to the regime.¹⁸ Wide swaths of Iranian society joined the movement, including parents, grandparents, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQ+ persons, and people representing all genders and socioeconomic backgrounds, supporting the demands for “Woman, Life, Freedom” and calling for an end to the four-decade rule of Iran by the Islamic Republic.¹⁹

Since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, its reign has been marred by human rights violations that likely amount to crimes against humanity — from mass executions of political prisoners in the early 1980s and 1988;²⁰ to the murders of Iranian intellectuals and political dissidents in the 1980s and 1990s;²¹ to persecution of marginalized

groups including women, ethnic,²² and religious²³ minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community.²⁴ These human rights abuses have been coupled with political mismanagement and corruption, a tanking economy,²⁵ and environmental crises²⁶ caused by ideology-driven state policies.

People in Iran have responded to the oppression with resilience, including solitary and collective acts of defiance. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement is part of a long history of people’s protests in Iran: the six-day uprising of women in March 1979 protesting the introduction of mandatory hijab;²⁷ the student uprising of July 1999 over a crackdown on freedom of press;²⁸ the 2009 Green Movement protests in response to a fraudulent election;²⁹ the Bloody Aban protests in November 2019, where hundreds of civilians were killed by security forces during a total internet shutdown;³⁰ protests over a water crisis in 2021,³¹ food price hikes in 2022,³² and more. The Islamic Republic responded to each wave of protests with

22 Press Release, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Iran: UN expert says ethnic, religious minorities face discrimination, UN Fact-Finding Mission says, UN Press Release (22 Oct. 2019).

23 “The Boot on My Neck” Iranian Authorities’ Crime of Persecution Against the Baha’is in Iran, Human Rights Watch, (1 Apr. 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/04/01/boot-my-neck/iranian-authorities-crime-persecution-against-bahais-iran#:~:text=Baha'is%20are%20the%20largest,is%2C%20including%20their%20community%20leaders>.

24 U.S. Report: LGBTQI+ Persecution in Iran, The Iran Primer (25 Apr. 2024), <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/apr/25/us-report-lgbtqi-persecution-iran#:~:text=Iran's%20laws%2C%20based%20on%20a,consensual%20and%20nonconsensual%2C%20was%20criminalized>.

25 Sayeh Isfahani, The Ebrahim Raisi government just jacked up food prices. Iranians are understandably angry, Atlantic Council (12 May 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-ebrahim-raisi-government-just-jacked-up-food-prices-iranians-are-understandably-angry/>.

26 Golnaz Esfandiari and Mohammad Zrghami, Iran’s Climate Migration Crisis Could Turn into a Disaster, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty (Dec. 18, 2023), <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-climate-migrants-crisis/32729538.html>.

27 In 1979, Iranian women protested mandatory veiling - setting the stage for today, CBC Radio (5 Oct. 2022), <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/iran-women-protests-1979-revolution-1.6605982>.

28 Behrouz Turani, Remembering The July 1999 Iran Student Movement; A Forgotten Protest?, RadioFarda (9 Jul. 2020), <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/remembering-the-july-1999-iran-student-movement-a-forgotten-protest-/30716685.html>.

29 Iran: Election contested, repression compounded, Amnesty International (10 Dec. 2009), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/123/2009/en/>.

30 A Web of Impunity: The killings Iran’s internet shut down hid, Amnesty International (16 Nov. 2020), <https://iran-shutdown.amnesty.org/>.

31 Sahab Bahar, Iran’s water is running dry. Now its water woes are worsening., Atlantic Council (13 Dec. 2021), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-water-is-running-dry-now-its-water-woes-are-worsening/>.

32 Sayeh Isfahani, The Ebrahim Raisi government just jacked up food prices. Iranians are understandably angry., Atlantic Council (12 May 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-ebrahim-raisi-government-just-jacked-up-food-prices-iranians-are-understandably-angry/>.

16 David Gritten, Mahsa Amini: Protests over woman’s death claim more lives in Iran, BBC (21 Sept. 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62986057>; UN experts strongly condemn death of Mahsa Amini, ‘victim of Iran’s sustained repression’, UN News (22 Sept. 2022), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127471>.

17 Lipika Pelham, Mahsa Amini: Iran responsible for ‘physical violence’ leading to death, UN says, BBC (8 Mar. 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68511112>; Gabriella Tétrault-Farber, Mahsa Amini’s death in Iran custody was ‘unlawful’, says UN mission, Reuters (18 Mar. 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/mahsa-aminis-death-iran-custody-was-unlawful-says-un-mission-2024-03-18/>.

18 How the women and girls of Iran have fueled their ‘unprecedented’ protests: Bravery, solidarity, and innovation, Atlantic Council (11 May 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/transcripts/how-the-women-and-girls-of-iran-have-fueled-their-unprecedented-protests-bravery-solidarity-and-innovation/>; Somayeh Malekian, Iranian women drive protests targeting regime after suspicious death of Mahsa Amini, ABC News (22 Sept. 2022), <https://abcnews.go.com/International/iranian-women-drive-protests-targeting-regime-suspicious-death/story?id=90313020>.

19 Suzanne Kianpour, The Women of Iran Are Not Backing Down, Politico (22 Jan. 2023), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/01/22/women-rights-iran-protests-00069245>; Tara Sepehri Far, Unveiling Resistance: The Struggle for Women’s Rights in Iran, Human Rights Watch (26 June 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/26/unveiling-resistance-struggle-womens-rights-iran>.

20 Iran: Blood-soaked secrets: Why Iran’s 1988 prison massacres are ongoing crimes against humanity, Amnesty International, (4 Dec. 2018), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/9421/2018/en/>.

21 The ‘Chain Murders’: Iran’s Long, Bloody Reach, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-chain-murders-abroad/31596154.html> (last visited 18 Jul. 2024).

violence.

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement — the most widespread protest in the Islamic Republic's history — has fared similarly, with the regime unleashing brutal force against protesters. As of March 2024, rights groups estimate that more than 500 people have been killed, including as many as 68 children.³³ Persecuted Sunni Kurdish and Baluch communities absorbed the brunt of the violence.³⁴ On "Bloody Friday of Zahedan," 30 September 2022, at least 94 civilians were killed and 350 were wounded by security forces in Zahedan, Sistan, and Baluchestan Province.³⁵ Credible estimates put the number of people detained at over 20,000.³⁶ As of July 2024, at least nine young men, many of whom were subjected to torture in detention, had been executed after trials based on charges relating to the 2022 protests that were marred by forced confessions and other ill-treatment.³⁷ Recent reporting shows the lengths to which the IRI not only violently repressed those they deemed to be involved with the protests, but tried to cover

up that violence.³⁸

Despite repeated denials from officials that they were targeting protesters, leaked government documents show that the Islamic Republic's highest military authorities gave explicit instructions to armed forces in every province to "severely confront" protesters in the weeks following Amini's killing.³⁹ The levels of violence employed by security forces and other officials leave no doubt of the IRI policy. Since protests began in September 2022, hundreds of people have been blinded or suffered other injuries in or around their eyes from metal pellets or rubber bullets.⁴⁰ Some protesters report that security forces explicitly threatened to shoot them in the eyes, even smiling before pulling the trigger.⁴¹ Sexual violence and torture has been rampant, including against children.⁴² Those who dissent online have been targeted with criminalization for speech critical of the regime, while artists have

33 Iran committed crimes against humanity during protest crackdown, UN says, AlJazeera (8 Mar. 2024), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/8/iran-committed-crimes-against-humanity-during-protest-crackdown-un-says>; Parham Ghobadi, Iran protests: 'No going back' as unrest hits 100 days, BBC (26 Dec. 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64062900>.

34 BBC 100 Women, Disinformation, Monitoring, BBC Persian and Visual Journalism teams, Iran protests: BCC identifies many more people killed in demonstrations after Mahsa Amini's death, BBC (5 Dec. 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63836921>.

35 Bloody Friday in Zahedan, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (19 Oct. 2022), <https://iranhrdc.org/bloody-friday-in-zahedan/>.

36 David Gritten, Aida Shakarami: Iran morality police arrests dead protester's sister, mother says, BBC (18 Apr. 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68849736>.

37 David Gritten, Mohammad Ghobadlou: Iran executes protester with mental health condition, BBC (23 Jan. 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68068233>; Iran executives 853 people in eight-year high amid relentless repression and renewed 'war on drugs', Amnesty International (4 Apr. 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/iran-executes-853-people-in-eight-year-high-amid-relentless-repression-and-renewed-war-on-drugs/>; Iran: Executions of tortured protesters must trigger a robust reaction from the international community, Amnesty International (19 May 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/iran-executions-of-tortured-protesters-must-trigger-a-robust-reaction-from-the-international-community/>; Parham Ghobadi, Who are the protesters facing execution in Iran?, BBC (15 Dec. 2022), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63949566?at_medium=RSS&at_campaign=KARANGA; David Gritten, Iran executes three over anti-government protests, BBC (19 May 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65640263>.

38 Parham Ghobadi, Nika Shakarami: Videos show Iran teenager protesting before death, BBC (10 Oct. 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63200652>; Gianluca Mezzofiore, Katie Polglase, Adam Pourahmadi, What really happened to Nika Shahkarami? Witnesses to her final hours cast doubts on Iran's story, CNN (27 Oct. 2022), <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/27/middleeast/iran-nika-shahkarami-investigation-intl-cmd/index.html>; Betram Hill, Aida Miller, Michael Simkin, Secret document says Iran security forces molested and killed teen protester, BBC (29 Apr. 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68840881>; Jon Gambrell, Iran files charges over BBC report on teen girl allegedly killed by security forces in 2022 protests, AP News (1 May 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/iran-protests-mahsa-amini-nika-shakarami-85332f1f3fe730fc42cbad3d7518f4c4>.

39 Iran: Leaked documents reveal top-level orders to armed forces to 'mercilessly confront' protesters, Amnesty International (30 Sept. 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/iran-leaked-documents-reveal-top-level-orders-to-armed-forces-to-mercilessly-confront-protesters/>.

40 Cora Engelbrecht, Hundreds of Protesters in Iran Blinded by Metal Pellets and Rubber Bullets, N.Y. Times (23 Nov. 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/19/world/asia/iran-protesters-eye-injuries.html>.

41 Edward Lempinen, More than 120 protesters blinded by Iranian agents, probe confirms, Berkeley News (21 March 2024), <https://news.berkeley.edu/2024/03/21/more-than-120-protesters-blinded-by-iranian-agents-probe-confirms/>.

42 Iran: Security forces used rape and other sexual violence to crush "Woman Life Freedom" uprising with impunity, Amnesty International (6 Dec. 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/iran-security-forces-used-rape-and-other-sexual-violence-to-crush-woman-life-freedom-uprising-with-impunity/>; Iran: Security Forces Rape, Torture, Detainees, Human Rights Watch (22 Apr. 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/22/iran-security-forces-rape-torture-detainees>; Tamara Qiblawi, et al., How Iran's security forces use rape to quell protests, CNN (21 Nov. 2022), <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/11/middleeast/iran-protests-sexual-assault/index.html>; Iran: Child detainees subjected to flogging, electric shocks and sexual violence in brutal protest crackdown, Amnesty International (16 Mar. 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/iran-child-detainees-subjected-to-flogging-electric-shocks-and-sexual-violence-in-brutal-protest-crackdown/>; Iran: Security Forces Kill, Torture, Abuse Children, Human Rights Watch (25 Apr. 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/25/iran-security-forces-kill-torture-abuse-children>.

been arrested, often tortured, and even sentenced to death.⁴³ Journalists have likewise been targeted, with at least 80 being arrested,⁴⁴ including the two woman journalists who first broke the story on Amini's killing.⁴⁵

As the protests have continued, international attention has shifted to other conflicts, even as the Islamic Republic has doubled down on enforcement of the mandatory dress code and broad repression of people in Iran. The latest crackdown has included a resurgence of morality police patrols, with videos surfacing online of women being forced into vans by police.⁴⁶ The most recent surge of violence has come under the "Nour" ("light" in Persian) campaign, announced on 13 April 2024 on state television by the chief of police in Tehran, the same day the IRI launched its drone and missile attack against Israel.⁴⁷ Later in April, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps announced that a new body had been created to enforce the mandatory dress code "in a more

serious manner."⁴⁸ Reports indicate that businesses found not to enforce the mandatory hijab on their premises have been forcibly closed and that cameras are being used to surveil women while in their cars to identify and punish those seen as not complying with the rules.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the draft Hijab and Chastity Bill continues to advance in the legislative process — a bill that would impose even harsher punishments for violations of the mandatory dress code and criminalize actions like posting unveiled photos on social media.⁵⁰

B. Ongoing International Investigations

In November 2022, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to establish the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFMI or Mission) for a period of one year.⁵¹ In April 2024, the Mission's mandate was renewed for an additional year. The FFMI's mandate is to "thoroughly and independently investigate alleged human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran related to the protests that began on 16 September 2022, especially with respect to women and children," to establish facts relating to alleged violations; to collect, analyze and preserve evidence with a view to cooperating with future legal proceedings; and to engage with relevant stakeholders as it conducts its investigation.⁵²

43 Khosro Kalbasi Isfahani and Andrea Alice Richardson, Everything you need to know about Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi and his death sentence, Atlantic Council (26 Apr. 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/toomaj-salehi-iran-rapper-execution/>; Associated Press, Iranian singer who won Grammy for Mahsa Amini protest anthem is sentenced to prison in Iran, NBC News (2 Mar. 2024), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iranian-singer-won-grammy-mahsa-amini-protest-anthem-sentenced-prison-rcna141499>; Jon Gambrell, Award-winning director Mohammad Rasoulof sentenced to prison in Iran ahead of Cannes, AP (9 May 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/iran-protests-director-mohammad-rasoulof-prison-415e70cbe740191d130747907ca8e25e>.

44 Names of journalists arrested in Iran's anti-state protests, Committee to Protect Journalists (30 Sept. 2022), <https://cpj.org/2022/09/names-of-journalists-arrested-in-irans-anti-state-protests/>.

45 Maryam Afshang, The journalists imprisoned for reporting the death that shook Iran, BBC (4 May 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65466887>; Iran has arrested 79 journalists in a staggering crackdown since Mahsa Amini's death a year ago, Reporters Without Borders (15 Sept. 2023), <https://rsf.org/en/iran-has-arrested-79-journalists-staggering-crackdown-mahsa-amini-s-death-year-ago>; Annie Kelly, Female journalists under attack as press freedom falters, The Guardian (6 May 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/article/2024/may/06/female-journalists-under-attack-as-press-freedom-falters>.

46 'War against women': Iran ramps up crackdown as regional tensions rage, France24 (21 Apr. 2024), <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240421-war-against-women-iran-ramps-up-crackdown-as-regional-tensions-rage>; Deepa Parent, Iranian women violently dragged from streets by police amid hijab crackdown, The Guardian (24 Apr. 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/apr/24/iranian-women-violently-dragged-from-streets-by-police-amid-hijab-crackdown>.

47 Dan De Luce, Iran has launched a new crackdown on women defying its strict dress code, NBC News (9 May 2024), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-launches-crackdown-women-defying-hijab-dress-code-rcna151406>; USCIRF Calls for Additional Sanctions Amidst New Harsh Enforcement of Iran's Mandatory Hijab Law, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (6 May 2024), <https://www.uscifr.gov/newsroom/releases-statements/uscifr-calls-additional-sanctions-amidst-new-harsh-enforcement-irans>.

48 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Iran: Crackdown on hijab law (26 Apr. 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2024/04/iran-crackdown-hijab-law#:~:text=UN%20High%20Commissioner%20for%20Human%20Rights%20Volker%20T%C3%BCrk%20calls%20on,human%20rights%20norms%20and%20standards>.

49 Dan De Luce, Iran has launched a new crackdown on women defying its strict dress code, NBC News (9 May 2024), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-launches-crackdown-women-defying-hijab-dress-code-rcna151406>; Iran: Draconian campaign to enforce compulsory veiling laws through surveillance and mass car confiscations, Amnesty International (6 Mar. 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/iran-draconian-campaign-to-enforce-compulsory-veiling-laws-through-surveillance-and-mass-car-confiscations/>.

50 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Iran: Crackdown on hijab law (26 Apr. 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2024/04/iran-crackdown-hijab-law#:~:text=UN%20High%20Commissioner%20for%20Human%20Rights%20Volker%20T%C3%BCrk%20calls%20on,human%20rights%20norms%20and%20standards>; Shadi Sadr, Iran's Hijab and Chastity Bill Underscores the Need to Codify Gender Apartheid, Just Security (11 Apr. 2024), <https://www.justsecurity.org/94504/iran-hijab-bill-gender-apartheid/>.

51 Human Rights Council Res. 35/1, UN Doc. A/HRC/RES/S-35/1 (29 Nov. 2022), <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/RES/S-35/1>; UN Human Rights Council, Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-iran/index>.

52 UN Human Rights Council, Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffm-iran/index>.

In March 2024, the FFMI released its first report.⁵³ The FFMI had conducted an extensive investigation relying on laws, official regulations and policies, documents issued by the Iranian judiciary, interviews with victims and witnesses, independent reports, medical documents, verified photographs and videos, and satellite imagery.⁵⁴ It analyzed the use of force by security forces; detentions; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; sexual and gender-based violence; sham trials and the use of the death penalty; the targeting of ethnic and religious minorities; and other protest-related issues.

The FFMI ultimately found that Iranian authorities had committed “serious human rights violations” such as “violations of the rights to life, not to be subjected to torture and ill-treatment, to security and liberty of the person, to a fair trial and due process, to an effective remedy, to freedom of religion or belief, of expression, of peaceful assembly and of association, and the rights to privacy, health, education, livelihood and work.”⁵⁵ Additionally, the FFMI found violations of “the right to equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of sex, gender, age, religion or belief, political or other opinions,” which were especially severe as applied to women, children, and ethnic and religious minorities.⁵⁶ The Mission noted that “in implementing State policy, the security forces have used persecutory conduct, including rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, with the intention of discriminating against women and girls and men and boys supporting demands for gender equality and LGBTQI+ persons, in order to silence, deter and punish the protesters and their supporters.”⁵⁷

The Mission further found that many of the serious human rights violations committed by the IRI amount to crimes against humanity. Specifically, the FFMI found that the crimes against humanity

of “murder, imprisonment, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, persecution, enforced disappearance and other inhumane acts” were “committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against a civilian population, namely women, girls and others expressing support for human rights.”⁵⁸ Given the context of discriminatory deprivation of fundamental rights, the FFMI concluded that the crime against humanity of persecution on the grounds of gender had also been committed, intersecting with discrimination on religious and ethnic grounds.⁵⁹ It observed that the crimes committed by IRI agents were not random or spontaneous acts, but rather “part of a pattern of organized conduct, following instructions, encouragement and endorsement by high-level State authorities and senior members of State institutions, and implemented by a large number of physical perpetrators.”⁶⁰ Given the continuing impunity and failure of the Islamic Republic to take action, the Mission concluded that these crimes were committed as part of a state policy.⁶¹

The FFMI highlighted the absence of viable domestic remedies for victims of human rights violations and international crimes inside Iran.⁶² It found that the investigations IRI authorities had announced did not meet applicable international human rights standards and the Mission could not identify any criminal investigations or prosecutions of perpetrators responsible for the human rights violations covered in its report.⁶³ Further, the FFMI noted the role judges, prosecutors, some defense lawyers, and other members of the judiciary played to “deny and conceal violations, shield the perpetrators and punish and silence those seeking accountability.”⁶⁴

Against this situation of continuing impunity, the FFMI observed that international and domestic avenues outside Iran are the only viable options for accountability.⁶⁵ It stressed the important role

53 Press Release, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Iran: Institutional discrimination against women and girls enabled human rights violations and crimes against humanity in the context of recent protests, UN Fact-Finding Mission says, UN Press Release (8 Mar. 2024).

54 Detailed findings of the independent international fact-finding mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN HRC, 55th Sess., UN Doc. A/HRC/55/CRP.1, ¶ 6 (19 Mar. 2024).

55 Id. ¶ 105.

56 Id. ¶ 106.

57 Id. ¶ 107.

58 Id. ¶ 108.

59 Id.

60 Id. ¶ 109.

61 Id. ¶ 110.

62 Id. ¶ 116-118.

63 Id. ¶ 117.

64 Id. ¶ 118.

65 Id. ¶ 119.

of third states that can initiate proceedings at the International Court of Justice, for example, or exercise universal jurisdiction domestically.

The FFMI also noted the potential of third states to open structural investigations, establish and participate in a joint investigation team, track perpetrators, and submit requests for information and judicial assistance,⁶⁶ including from the FFMI itself.⁶⁷ In addition to the information contained in its main report and conference room paper, the FFMI has collected information on the identity and responsibility of individual perpetrators, which it has kept confidential. That information is only available to national authorities that make the appropriate legal assistance requests.⁶⁸

C. Iranian Archive & Iran Digital Archive Coalition

The calls for accountability from Iranian civil society are clear.⁶⁹ Despite great personal risk, people in Iran have documented the abuses committed by the IRI and actively shared them online for the world to see.⁷⁰ The material they have shared will be invaluable to future accountability proceedings, but only if it remains available. User-generated content documenting atrocities is vulnerable to removal from social media platforms either by the users who uploaded it due to pressure from government authorities, or increased danger to their safety or that of loved ones, or by companies that own the platforms on which the material is shared. Media reporting may be removed or links broken, making content inaccessible.⁷¹

As a result, a coalition of organizations came together to contribute to the creation of the Iranian Archive led by Mnemonic to preserve the open source content people in Iran risked so

66 Id. ¶ 119-120.

67 Id. ¶ 119.

68 Id. ¶ 115.

69 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Woman, Life, Freedom” survivors want to end State impunity in Iran, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2024/03/woman-life-freedom-survivors-want-end-state-impunity-iran>.

70 Cameran Ashraf, Iranians sacrificed their lives to share videos of regime violence. Now there’s an online archive for the world to see., Atlantic Council (12 Apr. 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/mahsa-amini-access-now-iranian-archive-human-rights/>.

71 See, e.g., “Video Unavailable”, Human Rights Watch (10 Sept. 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/09/10/video-unavailable/social-media-platforms-remove-evidence-war-crimes>.

much to share online and ensure that preservation complies with legal standards in order to maximize the value of that content for court. The Iranian Archive was created by Mnemonic, in partnership with other members of the Iran Digital Archive Coalition including the Atlantic Council’s Strategic Litigation Project, the Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA School of Law, UC Berkeley’s Human Rights Center, Amnesty International’s Digital Verification Corps, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, and the Azadi Archive, as well as Civil Rights Defenders, which has an independent collaboration with Mnemonic.⁷² Approximately two million digital records have been preserved thus far that document human rights violations and atrocity crimes committed in the context of the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. In addition to preserving and analyzing this open source material, the Iranian Archive will offer support to future investigations and accountability proceedings.

The Coalition is releasing a series of publications analyzing some of the material that has been preserved in the Iranian Archive. The initial reports in the series document and analyze the targeted blinding of protesters and bystanders, the enforced disappearance of children and subsequent harassment of their families by IRI officials, and the crime against humanity of gender persecution. While each report utilizes a unique methodology, they nonetheless share a foundational approach.

The teams behind each report relied on open source material preserved in the Iranian Archive. The specific open source material analyzed varies by report, but mainly consists of photos, videos, and text uploaded to various social media platforms. This is supplemented by news items from inside and outside Iran, and credible reporting from human rights organizations. The material preserved in the Archive can emanate from anywhere, but must relate to events that took place inside Iran and have a demonstrable link to the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, from September 2022 onwards.

72 Human rights coalition unveils digital catalog of evidence pointing towards crimes against humanity committed against Iranian protesters, Atlantic Council (18 Mar. 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/news/press-releases/human-rights-coalition-unveils-digital-catalog-of-evidence-pointing-towards-crimes-against-humanity-committed-against-iranian-protesters/>.

In designing the investigations and verifying the open source material, authors followed the methodologies outlined in the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations.⁷³

At the time of research, all the material included in these reports was open source and publicly accessible. Some content may have been removed since the publication of these reports, but a copy of all artifacts are preserved in the Iranian Archive. None of the authors of this report have interviewed witnesses or otherwise contacted any victims, survivors, or their families. This decision was made to avoid doing additional harm to victims and survivors or to their families and friends. As one of the reports makes clear, families of victims and survivors have been subjected to threats, harassment, and intimidation to prevent them from speaking out. In addition, case studies were selected in conjunction with a multi-stage security review of the potential risk to the victim of including their story, and survivor locations were kept general so as to minimize contributing to any risk of retaliation.

In addition to this report series, the Iran Digital Archive Coalition has supported smaller-scale investigations. For example, researchers from the Atlantic Council's Strategic Litigation Project and UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center published a summary of their open source investigation into the experiences of Toomaj Salehi, an Iranian rapper and dissident sentenced to death.⁷⁴ As they report, Salehi is best known for releasing protest songs denouncing the IRI. He was subsequently arrested and tortured while in detention, practices he publicly denounced after his release. In addition, the Iranian Archive and partners in the Iran Digital Archive Coalition have submitted information and analysis of serious violations to the FFMI to assist the investigation that resulted in the FFMI's March

2024 report.⁷⁵

73 The Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations (UN Human Rights Office and UC Berkeley Human Rights Center 2022) is a set of guidelines for conducting investigations using publicly-accessible online content. The Berkeley Protocol is available in all six official languages of the United Nations at the United Nations Human Rights Office Website at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/publications/policy-and-methodological-publications/berkeley-protocol-digital-open-source>.

74 Khosro Kalbasi Isfahani and Andrea Alice Richardson, Everything you need to know about Iranian rapper Toomaj Salehi and his death sentence, Atlantic Council (26 Apr. 2024), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/toomaj-salehi-iran-rapper-execution/>.

75 Press Release, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Iran: Institutional discrimination against women and girls enabled human rights violations and crimes against humanity in the context of recent protests, UN Fact-Finding Mission says, UN Press Release (8 Mar. 2024)

II. Report Methodology

In September 2023, the Iran Digital Archive Coalition asked the Investigations Lab at the Human Rights Center to use open source investigation techniques to research incidents in Iran relating to the blinding of protesters and victims.

Specifically, the Coalition was interested in the following questions:

- According to digital open source information compiled by the Iran Digital Archive Coalition, was the blinding of Woman, Life, Freedom protesters a repeat phenomenon at protest sites?
- Who was harmed during these incidents and how did these incidents impact their lives?
- Do these documented incidents suggest that blinding was arbitrary, or is there information that suggests that the blinding of protesters may have been a deliberate strategy used by Iranian officials?

To answer these questions, we were provided with two datasets composed of digital open source information: One from the Promise Institute at UCLA in September 2023 (SET 1) and another from Mnemonic in October 2023 (SET 2). The UCLA dataset contained 74 artifacts⁷⁶ related to the alleged blinding of protesters and protest bystanders that had been collected from Instagram, Twitter, and Telegram, and from Western and Iranian news sites. The Mnemonic dataset contained 250 artifacts related to alleged blindings that had been identified on Youtube, Telegram, Instagram, and multiple news sites. Our team identified 85 additional relevant artifacts during the verification process, creating a final dataset of 409 artifacts.

⁷⁶ For purposes of this report, an artifact is an individual item posted to online public spaces. Examples include a video, photograph or text uploaded to a social media site, or an article posted online.

After we received the datasets from UCLA and Mnemonic, we took the following preparatory steps with SET 1:⁷⁷

1. Tagged graphic artifacts and identified broken links:

After the team leads received the data set in early September and reviewed the artifacts, we noticed that some were especially graphic. Thus, with resilience in mind, we retagged those artifacts to provide a warning to limit exposure. We also marked all broken or faulty links.

2. Identified victims:

Next, the team leads identified all known victims listed in each artifact. We also identified the type of media, and included notes about each artifact. After this review, we had a more holistic understanding of the dataset we had been given.

3. Clustered artifacts by victim:

The team leads then sorted all of the artifacts by victim so that team members could more easily create victim profiles based on the data.

Once the full team was in place, we began our analysis. Our team — which consisted of two student team leads, seven student researchers, one investigations advisor, and one faculty advisor — then analyzed the data.

4. Created profiles for each victim:

Each member of the team was assigned five to ten victims to profile using the existing datasets, as well as additional data discovered through open source investigation (scraping, geolocation, etc). Each victim profile included the following:⁷⁸

- Victim ID
- Victim Name (Persian and English Translations)

⁷⁷ During the first month of this investigation, steps two to three were completed by the investigation team leads. By 10 Oct., all team members had completed their open source investigation training and began contributing to the research.

⁷⁸ Not all data points could be established for each victim.

- Victim Gender
- Victim Age
- Hospital Treated
- Protest Date
- Protest Location
- Victim's Social Media Accounts
- Weapons and Ammunition Used for Blinding
- Additional Notes

5. Identified patterns and tabulated data in SET

Number 1: After identifying basic demographic information for each victim, we tabulated the data for the following characteristics: victim gender, victim age, and weapon and ammunition used in the blinding. Using this demographic information and resulting incident reports, we identified potential patterns that emerged from the cases.

After we completed the analysis of SET 1, we received SET 2 from Mnemonic. We then repeated steps one through five for SET 2. We identified duplicate victims and added all additional information that could be gleaned from SET 2 to the SET 1 profiles.

Upon completing our review of SET 2, we created a series of visualizations that allowed us to spot geographic and temporal patterns in our datasets, and that could be used to help communicate our findings. These included:

6. An interactive map detailing the location of all incidents identified in SET Numbers 1 and 2.

7. An interactive timeline documenting the blinding of each victim identified in SET Numbers 1 and 2.

In November 2023, our team drafted a preliminary report that we presented to representatives from the United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran and to our partners at the Atlantic Council.

Following our presentation and the delivery of our preliminary report, we expanded our investigation, deploying additional verification processes specified in the Berkeley Protocol. Specifically, with any new information, we:

1. Standardized and compiled our data: We added the new data to our master database and assigned an identification number to any new victim we identified.

2. Re-verified all victim-related artifacts: We re-assigned victims randomly among team members to verify the information in the spreadsheet and added any missing information and corrected any inaccurate information. We then identified incidents for which we had at least one primary source and two secondary sources to ensure we focused on particularly well-substantiated cases.

3. Created victim memos for those cases that were especially well-substantiated: We drafted detailed memos on the incidents that resulted in the blinding of the previously-identified victims.

4. Identified victim impact: Our team then evaluated the apparent effects that speaking out about these incidents had on the victims. This included assessing how victims' right to freedom of expression was impacted, for example by having to shut down or censor their social media communications, and how their livelihoods were affected, for example through loss of a job, loss of educational opportunities, forced relocation, etc.

During this process, the team faced several challenges and limitations. These mostly relate to the open source nature of the content analyzed and the identities of the researchers.

First, as an open source investigation, our analysis was limited to publicly available sources, such as news articles and information posted on social media sites, the veracity of which could not always be determined with certainty. There were sometimes inconsistencies when multiple sources

reported on an incident, which we addressed with additional verification. Furthermore, as the preservation of the content began in the summer of 2023, almost a year after the Woman, Life, Freedom movement began, relevant content may have already been deleted or removed from platforms.

Second, the information available to us was limited due to prevailing media and social media censorship in Iran. Because of a relative absence of reporting by independent national media, the majority of information the Coalition used was shared on social media, which could introduce an age-bias in the analysis if younger populations are the predominant social media users in Iran. This could also introduce an accessibility-bias due to uneven internet and social media access. Moreover, due to the risks associated with speaking out about human rights violations, information often came from survivors who had already left the country, further skewing the representativeness of our sample.

Finally, much of the information we analyzed was in Persian, which none of the core team members fluently speak or read. This presented challenges with regard to the accuracy of written and audio translations of names, places, weapon types, and dates generated by online translation tools. To mediate this limitation, the team was supported by language experts who clarified or verified translations as needed. Notably, the language gaps may have also resulted in an under-inclusive dataset prior to analysis.

Due to the limitations discussed above, this report does not represent the total population or a representative sample of victims of protest-related blindings in Iran. Nevertheless, this report highlights emblematic and representative incidents that have been verified, illustrating the nature of the blindings and a range of ways in which victims have been impacted. We also spotlight potential patterns that could be verified or expanded upon in future investigations.

III. Findings

During our analysis, we identified several potential patterns related to the blinding of protesters and bystanders, including with regards to victim demographics and the weapons used to perpetrate the blindings. A majority of blinding victims represented in our dataset were youth under the age of thirty, with pellet guns being the primary weapon reported. Our analysis also identified a concentration of reported incidents in Tehran and in the Kurdish regions of Western Iran, though it is unclear whether this indicates a pattern of targeted violence or is an artifact of limitations in reporting and data collection. These patterns can be explored with a timeline and map that we created to visualize our findings.

A. Incident Details - Weapons

Our merged dataset contained information related to 124 blinding incidents. In more than 50% of these incidents it was reported that the victim was blinded by a pellet gun. Paintball guns were associated with 12 incidents; unspecified guns were affiliated with another 16 incidents. Other weapons mentioned include tear gas canisters and shotguns with ammunition including bullets, rubber bullets, projectiles, and pellets, among others. Weapons used in 19 incidents could not be identified in written and visual materials. Please note the team did not conduct independent verification of the types of weapons reported to have been used to blind victims, but relied on what was reported in the dataset. For a comprehensive breakdown of the weapon distribution, please refer to Figure 1 on the right.⁷⁹

B. Incident Details - Victim Demographics (Age and Gender)

⁷⁹ Multiple sources reported on each incident identified in our dataset. In cases where the primary weapon identified differed among sources, the weapon identified by the significant majority of sources was used for analysis. Mention of other weapons were noted in the compiled dataset.

An analysis of the victim demographics suggests a disproportionate prevalence of blinding of individuals aged 30 or younger (69 out of 124 victims). 31 victims represented in our dataset were over the age of 30, while the ages of 24 victims are unknown. Notably, more than 41% of all victims (52 out of 124) were men aged 30 or under. For a visual representation of these findings, please refer to Figure 2 on the following page.

C. Incident Details - Victim Impact

The impact on victims has been profound and multifaceted, often extending beyond the immediate trauma of the blinding. In the aftermath of their injuries, many victims have had to grapple with debilitating pain, prolonged detention, forced relocation, loss of educational opportunities, and loss of livelihood.

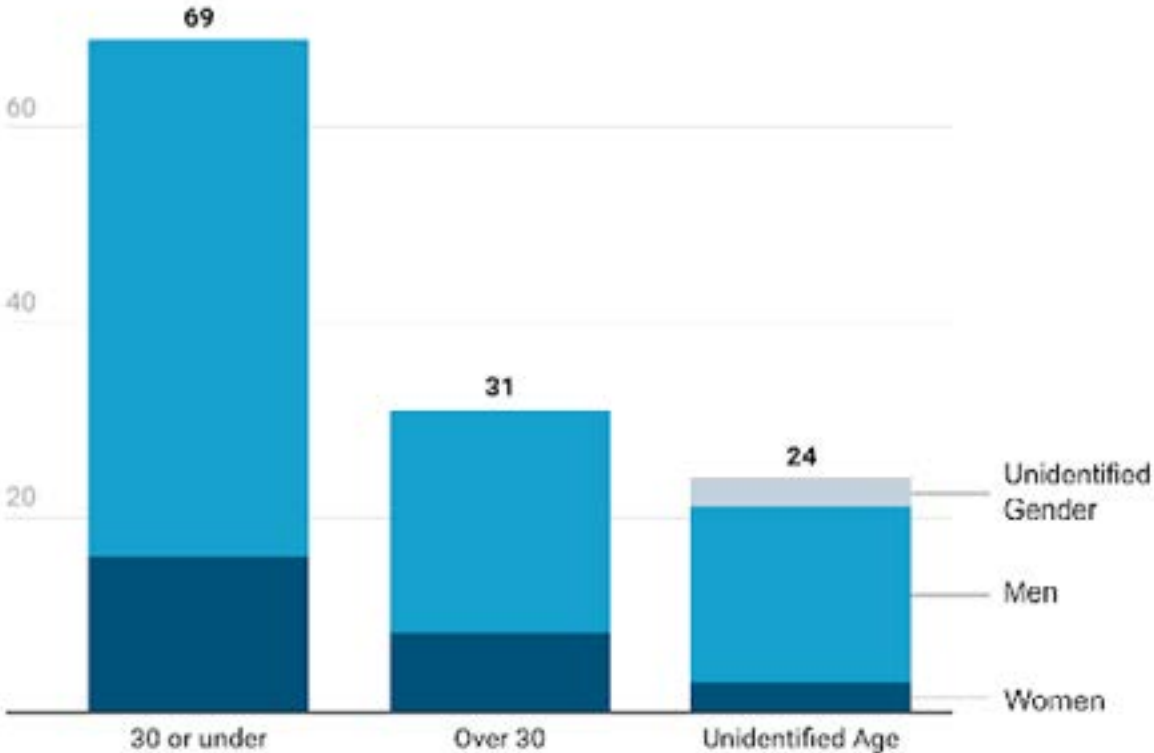
For instance, Elahe Tavakolian, who was shot during a protest, was subject to threats from authorities

<i>Primary Weapon</i>	<i>Incident Count</i>
Pellet gun	65
Unidentified weapon	19
Unspecified gun	16
Paintball gun	12
Tear gas canister	4
Shotgun	2
Tear gas	1
Projectile	1
Pellet gun, Shotgun	1
Sledgehammer	1
Baton	1
Brass knuckles	1
Total	124

Figure 1: Weapons distribution

for sharing her experience on social media; she later lost her job and her position in her PhD program, and relocated to Europe out of concern for her safety. Similarly, individuals like Saman Pouryaghma, Vahed Rouznavard, and Zaniyar Tondro were compelled to flee the country due to pressure from security forces, leaving behind their means of income. There were a total of 19 victims in our dataset whose social media accounts⁸⁰ were taken down by themselves or organizations in the months after being blinded, in many cases in response to explicit threats from authorities. Despite these challenges, numerous victims persist in sharing their experiences, underscoring their determination to bring broader attention to what has been happening in Iran.

Figure 2: Victim age distribution by gender



80 Most of the social media accounts were originally on Instagram.

IV. Visualizations

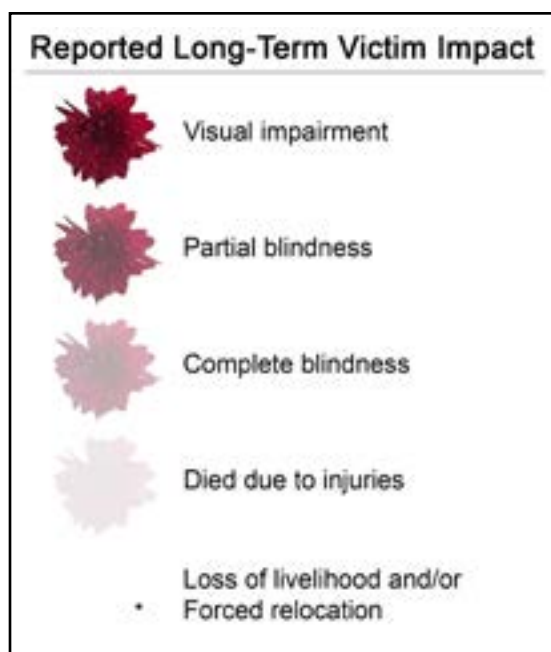
- To facilitate the identification of geographical and chronological patterns, our team created several visualizations of the locations and dates of blinding incidents verified during our investigation. These visualizations were designed to enhance our understanding of the scale, scope, and impact of the incidents on victims and their communities. These visualizations consist of an interactive timeline and map. Some victims are named and others are pseudonymized; the decision of who to name was based on several variables, including the individual’s apparent desire to bring attention to their case (for example, through repeat and continuous postings about their experiences), whether they remain inside the country, and other security-related considerations. Please note: These visualizations incorporate the incidents identified in the datasets provided by UCLA and Mnemonic and do not include all protest-related blinding incidents in Iran.

A. Incident Timeline

The timeline provides a chronological overview of documented blinding incidents that occurred in relation to the Woman, Life, Freedom protests in Iran. It additionally serves as a platform to share the stories of the majority of victims identified during our investigation.

Data was collected covering the period between September 2022 and June 2023, with most incidents reported in the last quarter of 2022. The earliest recorded blinding in our dataset occurred on 17 September 2022, and the latest on 1 June 2023. The team identified the dates of most incidents (110 of 124), which are represented in the timeline. The remaining incidents, for which dates could not be determined, are displayed in a separate section. In this visualization, [red chrysanthemums](#) represent victims of protest-related blinding, with each flower symbolizing one documented victim. Visual elements like opacity and outline are used to depict the reported impact on each victim. These incidents are grouped visually by date and other demographic characteristics like gender and region.

Figure 3: Legend for the timeline (next page)



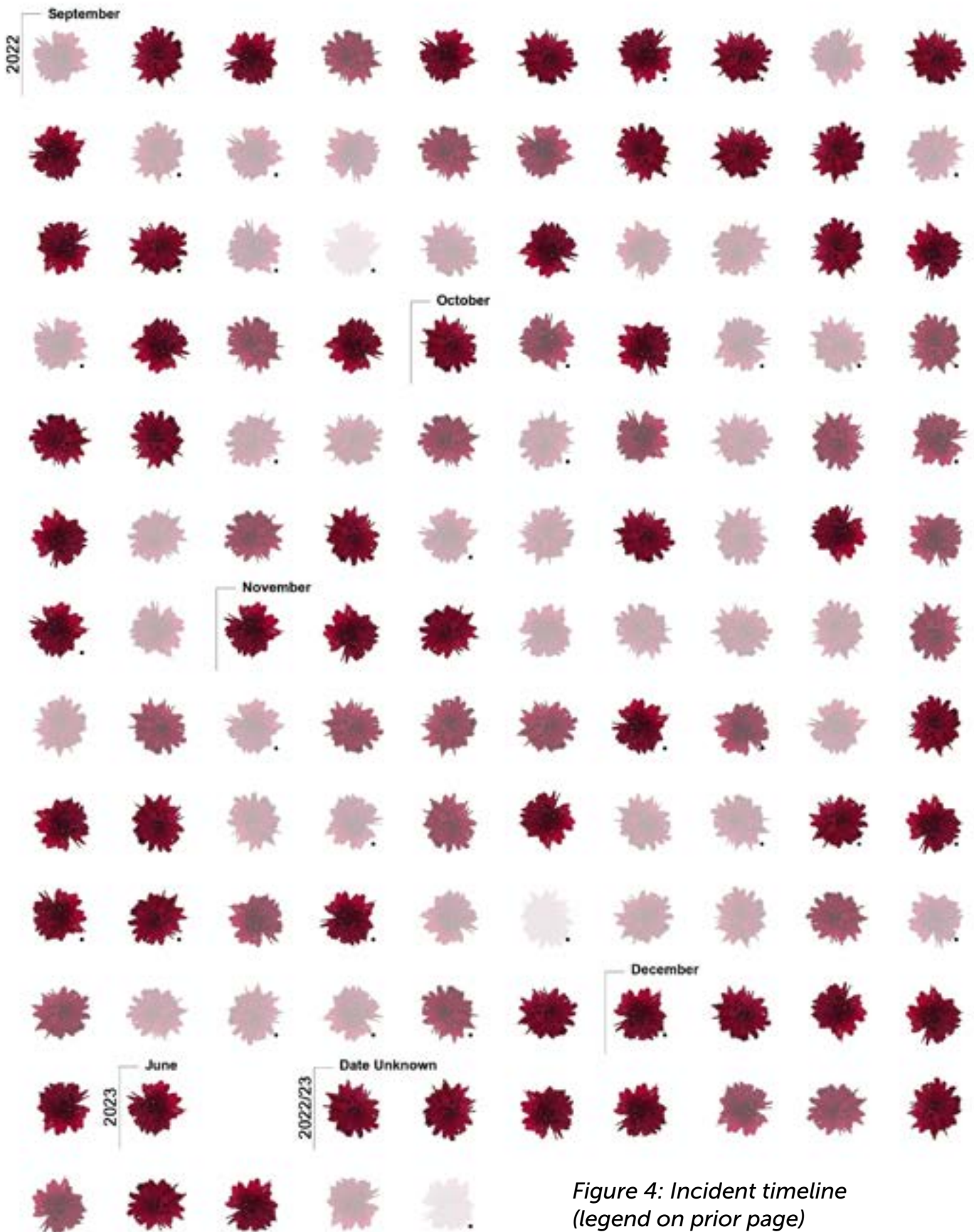


Figure 4: Incident timeline (legend on prior page)

B. Incident Map

The map below illustrates where blinding incidents in our dataset occurred in Iran. The depicted locations include purported incidents and individuals harmed between September and December 2022. Our team compiled geographical incident data across 44 locations for 124 victims. However, this figure likely grossly underestimates the true number of victims who have been blinded in conjunction with protests in Iran.

The map presents two possible patterns:

- A large number of blinding incidents (29) centered in Tehran.
- A large number of blinding incidents in the Western part of the country, including Kurdish regions.

An interactive version of this map [is available online at this link](https://humanrights.berkeley.edu/publications/the-blinding-of-protesters-and-bystanders-in-iran/) [https://humanrights.berkeley.edu/publications/the-blinding-of-protesters-and-bystanders-in-iran/]. It provides additional details, such as names (pseudonymized where necessary) and ages of victims in each city, accessible by hovering over the map.

Figure 5: Incident map

Mapping Incidents of Protest-related Blinding



The locations presented are based on data encountered in our research, detailing the purported incidents and individuals harmed between September and December 2022. Our team gathered geographical incident data for 124 victims; however, this figure likely underestimates the true scope of victims impacted by these incidents.

Created with Datawrapper

V. Case Studies

This section details six cases that represent various patterns we identified during our investigation. This includes a case that represents the likely intentionality of some blindings (Ali Delpasand), the blinding of bystanders (Ali Delpasand), and the breadth of ramifications to victims after the incident (Ali Delpasand, Parsa Ghobadi, Elahe Tavakolian, Kian Derakhshan).

A. Ali Delpasand

On 15 November 2022, Ali Delpasand and his family were shot through their car windshield by security forces on motorcycles with pellet guns. The attack left Ali blinded in his left eye, while his wife Bahareh sustained injuries across her face. The family has since fled to Europe⁸¹ and spoken about their experience, hoping to shed light on the blindings happening in Iran.

Recounting the events of the day through a phone interview with a reporter, Bahareh and Ali describe how they were not participating in a protest when they were injured. As they drove their car through the Gelayol Junction in the Golsar Suburb of Rasht, Gilan, Ali and Bahareh were navigating through protests after picking up their daughter from a class.⁸² According to reporting, security forces drove past their car speaking in Gilaki (an Iranian language spoken in the province of Gilan). Soon after the security forces drove past, a girl in the car next to the family stuck her hand out and made a hand signal that meant “victory,” which Bahareh mirrored. As she made the hand signal, pellets were fired into their car, hitting Bahareh in the face and blinding Ali. Fortunately, their daughter was not hit.

81 Instagram Post, Ali Delpasand, 22 Feb. 2024, at <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3pKY9ZtXVC/>

82 Ghajar, Aida. “Blinding As A Weapon (43): The Blinded Father Whose Child Miraculously Survived,” 13 Jun. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/117496-blinding-as-a-weapon-43-the-blinded-father-whose-child-miraculously-survived/>.

The family, grateful for the protester who jumped into their car to drive them home (since Ali was blinded and could no longer drive) and protesters who surrounded their car to make sure the security forces did not further harm them, have described how difficult it was to get medical treatment. In the hospital, Bahareh was told by hospital staff to leave since the pellets in her face would have caused issues with the security forces there. She was especially worried about Ali, who underwent 45 hours of surgery and two months of hospitalization. The family had to sell furniture in order to afford his medical treatment, and Ali lost his job. The family has since relocated to Europe, where they’re able to more safely share their stories and seek additional medical treatment.

This is not the only instance in which someone has been harmed through the firing of pellet guns through a car windshield. Bahareh and Ali repeated “just like Kian” during their phone interview, in reference to Kian Pirfalak, a nine-year-old boy who was shot in similar circumstances but did not survive.⁸³ Additionally, during their interview, Ali emphasized the apparent intentionality behind the acts. In describing the incident, he stated: “And they only shot at our car. They did not shoot at any car [for example] with a single passenger. Why did they target us, a family?”

Mirroring the accounts of several other victims who highlight an apparent intentionality to the shootings, and in some cases the blindings — like Parsa Ghobadi, who was shot in both eyes,⁸⁴ and Behzad Hamrahi, who stated that his shooter smiled at him before shooting him at close

83 Ibid.

84 Youtube Video, Deutsche Welle, 13 Jun. 2023, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUw4mF-xEwI>

range⁸⁵ — the Delpasand family’s story is just one of many. They were bystanders who, after making a hand signal in support of protesters, were shot and forced to flee.

B. Parsa Ghobadi

On 30 November 2022, security forces were celebrating the Islamic Republic of Iran’s win during the world cup over Wales. In response, people who did not feel the win was a win for Iran but for a regime that they did not support, protested in the streets.⁸⁶ Eighteen-year-old Parsa Ghobadi was one of these protesters in the western city of Kermanshah.⁸⁷

On that night, security forces had begun private attacks against protesters. Ghobadi reports having hid behind a trash can in an attempt to avoid being attacked.⁸⁸ Once he turned, however, Ghobadi remembers a Basij force pointing a gun in his face, and being shot in both eyes.⁸⁹ He tried to run away, blood dripping down his face, but was also shot in the back multiple times.⁹⁰ Then, several agents beat and handcuffed Ghobadi and took him to an unknown location to interrogate him, during which he reports he was kicked, hit with rifle butts, tased, and his right arm was burned.⁹¹ In an interview, Ghobadi stated that “I was awake and answered their questions... there were too many of them, I think they all were Basiji.”⁹² The agents then forcibly poured water down his throat in an attempt to get him to reveal his name and address. He was threatened with prison and execution, but his interrogator told him “It’s better that

you’re blinded than executed,”⁹³ which Ghobadi interpreted as implying that he would suffer more by living as a blind person than being executed.

After 40 minutes of ill-treatment that may amount to torture, Ghobadi claims that the security forces put him into a car and threw him out two blocks away from his fathers house.⁹⁴ Once in the care of his family, he was taken to Khomeini hospital,⁹⁵ where he was informed his eyes needed to be cleaned. He was then hospitalized for a week before being transferred to Tehran for treatment.⁹⁶ His right eye had seven pellets torn through it and lodged near the bone in the back of his eye.⁹⁷ He has since had surgery on his right eye, but is still unable to see clearly. His left eye is completely blind.⁹⁸

Since his blinding, Ghobadi has continued to use his social media platform to share his story, posting multiple images of his eyes right after the shooting. His bio even states “آسیب دیده دو چشم جنبش ملی 1401” which roughly translates to “[person whose] two eyes were damaged during the national movement of 1401 (2022).”

Unfortunately, there are many other victims with a similar story to Ghobadi, like Abd Al-Rahman Aliwisi who was chased and shot in an alley, and Behzad Hamrahi, who was dragged and beaten after being shot. Other accounts that reflect a level of intentionality include that of Ali Delpasand, already mentioned, who recounted that perpetrators shot at his car and only his car, as well as that of Behzad Hamrahi, who stated that his shooter smiled at him before shooting him at close range.⁹⁹

85 11:20:57, قاضی، فرشته. “روایت بهزاد همراهی؛ معترضی که «عامدانه» چشمش را نشانه رفتند.” رادیو فردا، سیاسی. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-protests-behzadhamrahi/32440089.html>.

86 Ghajar, Aida. “Blinding As A Weapon (26): Dumped In An Alleyway After Being Shot, Tortured,” 16 Mar. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/114835-blinding-as-a-weapon-26-dumped-in-an-alleyway-after-being-shot-tortured/>.

87 Ibid.

88 Twitter Post, Dadban4, 27 Mar. 2023, at <https://twitter.com/dadban4/status/1640279395716800512>

89 Ibid.

90 Ghajar, Aida. “Blinding As A Weapon (26): Dumped In An Alleyway After Being Shot, Tortured,” 16 Mar. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/114835-blinding-as-a-weapon-26-dumped-in-an-alleyway-after-being-shot-tortured/>.

91 Ibid.

92 Youtube Video, Deutsche Welle, 13 Jun. 2023, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUw4mF-xEwI>

93 Twitter Post, Dadban4, 27 Mar. 2023, at <https://twitter.com/dadban4/status/1640279395716800512>

94 Youtube Video, Deutsche Welle, 13 Jun. 2023, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUw4mF-xEwI>

95 Ibid.

96 11:20:57, قاضی، فرشته. “روایت بهزاد همراهی؛ معترضی که «عامدانه» چشمش را نشانه رفتند.” رادیو فردا، سیاسی. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-protests-behzadhamrahi/32440089.html>.

97 Ghajar, Aida. “Blinding As A Weapon (26): Dumped In An Alleyway After Being Shot, Tortured,” 16 Mar. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/114835-blinding-as-a-weapon-26-dumped-in-an-alleyway-after-being-shot-tortured/>.

98 Ibid.

99 11:20:57, قاضی، فرشته. “روایت بهزاد همراهی؛ معترضی که «عامدانه» چشمش را نشانه رفتند.” رادیو فردا، سیاسی. <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-protests-behzadhamrahi/32440089.html>.

C. Kian Derakhshan

On 17 September 2022, activist Kian Derakhshan was struck by over 100 pellets during a protest in Saqqez, Iran. He sustained severe injuries across his body, including near his spinal cord, in his right arm, and in his face, resulting in lasting pain and vision loss in his right eye.¹⁰⁰ Kian was 22 years old at the time of the protest.¹⁰¹

The incident left Kian in critical condition. After his initial treatment at Shafa Hospital, he relocated to a hospital in Tabriz, where he had multiple surgeries and ultimately spent 18 days in intensive care.¹⁰² The severity of Kian's injuries is underscored by graphic images and X-ray scans¹⁰³ depicting the extent of the damage inflicted upon him, alongside geolocated video footage¹⁰⁴ capturing moments after the harrowing incident itself.

While hospitalized, Kian made a televised "confession" to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, which was likely coerced.¹⁰⁵ Since his discharge from the hospital, he has faced ongoing threats and intimidation from authorities.¹⁰⁶ His persecution ultimately drove him to leave Iran.¹⁰⁷

D. Elahe Tavakolian

Elahe Tavakolian, a former PhD student applicant

and mother who lost sight in her right eye,¹⁰⁸ fled Iran following the refusal of medical providers to treat her, threats from the regime, and the loss of her job. On 20 September 2022, after returning to Mashhad (Capital of Khorasan Razavi province), Elahe had gone to protest in Imam Khomeini Square in Esfarrayen with her sister and twins.¹⁰⁹ According to her, security forces started to shoot into the crowd about ten minutes into the protest. She saw people hit in the legs and shoulders fall to the ground before she herself was shot.¹¹⁰

Elahe said, "I suddenly felt pain and a burning sensation throughout my body and head, and fell... A few minutes later, I realized a bullet had hit my eye."¹¹¹ She states that she recognized the alleged shooter as a man named Amir Gholizadeh, a wrestler who denies being in the streets shooting people on September 20, but has admitted to targeting unarmed people with a "shotgun on subsequent days."¹¹²

Elahe was rushed to the hospital where nurses placed a temporary dressing on her eye, but the attending doctor left saying "gunshot wounds were not their responsibility" and they did not have an eye department.¹¹³ She then was advised by a medical professional to seek treatment abroad because there was nothing they could do for her in Iran.¹¹⁴

Three months later, Elahe began to post on social media about her experience. In response to her posts, she began getting threats from security

100 Service, VOA Persian. "Injured Iranian Protester Believes Freedom, Democracy Will Prevail." Voice of America, 8 Sept. 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/injured-iranian-protester-believes-freedom-democracy-will-prevail/7260934.html>.

101 Iran Human Rights. "Iran Protests 2022: Women Protester Eyes Intentionally and Systematically Targeted," 22 Sept. 2023. <http://iranhr.net/en/articles/6205/>.

102 Service, VOA Persian. "Injured Iranian Protester Believes Freedom, Democracy Will Prevail." Voice of America, 8 Sept. 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/injured-iranian-protester-believes-freedom-democracy-will-prevail/7260934.html>.

103 Instagram Post, chashm.baraye.azadi, 9 Apr. 2023, at https://www.instagram.com/p/Cq1_rGFsDCK/

104 Human Rights Activist News Agency. "Mahsa Amini's Death Sparks Nationwide Protests." Hrana (blog), 19 Sept. 2022. <https://www.en-hrana.org/mahsa-amini-death-sparks-nationwide-protests/>.

105 "صدای آمریکا: «اختصاصی: کیان درخشان: یقین دارم پیروز می‌شویم و آزادی و دموکراسی را برقرار می‌کنیم» 8 Sept. 2023. <https://ir.voanews.com/a/kian-derakhshan-certain-freedom-democracy-prevail-in-iran/7258636.html>.

106 Service, VOA Persian. "Injured Iranian Protester Believes Freedom, Democracy Will Prevail." Voice of America, 8 Sept. 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/injured-iranian-protester-believes-freedom-democracy-will-prevail/7260934.html>.

107 Saifkaran, Farzad. "The Story of Kian Derakhshan, One of the First Eye Injury Victims on Zhina's Funeral Day." Radio Zamaneh, 25 Sept. 2023. <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/782370/>.

108 Ghorbani, Pouya. "Iran Protests: Victims Shot in Eyes Hold on to Hopes." BBC, 4 Apr. 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64503873>.

109 Rafat, Ahmad. "Elahe Tavakolian, Who Lost Eyesight in Iran Protests, Bears Witness." KAYHAN LIFE (blog), 21 Apr. 2023 at <https://kayhanlife.com/authors/elahe-tavakolian-who-lost-eyesight-in-iran-protests-bears-witness/>.

110 Ghorbani, Pouya. "Iran Protests: Victims Shot in Eyes Hold on to Hopes." BBC, 4 Apr. 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64503873>.

111 Ibid.

112 Rafat, Ahmad. "Elahe Tavakolian, Who Lost Eyesight in Iran Protests, Bears Witness." KAYHAN LIFE (blog), 21 Apr. 2023. <https://kayhanlife.com/authors/elahe-tavakolian-who-lost-eyesight-in-iran-protests-bears-witness/>.

113 Ibid.

114 Ghorbani, Pouya. "Iran Protests: Victims Shot in Eyes Hold on to Hopes." BBC, 4 Apr. 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64503873>.

forces who urged her to remove her posts and not contact the media, which Elahe refused.¹¹⁵ They eventually issued a summons against her that claimed she was “undermining national security.”¹¹⁶

The security forces continued to file summonses, and when Elahe went to court to file a complaint and demand an investigation into her shooting, nothing was done.¹¹⁷

Elahe continued to endure various threats from security forces, and eventually was fired from her job because her managing director — who allegedly had ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — said they do not employ anyone “involved in political activities.”¹¹⁸ She faced similar responses when she tried to apply to jobs and to continue her studies. As her hospitalization had coincided with her interviews for admissions, Elahe lost her spot in the PhD program.¹¹⁹ She fled to Europe and sought medical treatment. She continues to live in Europe, as she believes she will be rearrested if she returns to Iran.¹²⁰

In an interview with Kayhan Life, Elahe reflected on her shooting, stating that “losing an eye, being fired from my job, and being unable to pursue my education disrupted my life.”¹²¹ Elahe’s experience mirrors that of many other victims, such as Parsa Ghobadi, who was shot in both eyes, and Saman Pouryaghma, who had to flee Iran due to fear of arrest if he sought treatment. All three have been shot, threatened, and had their lives disrupted.

115 Life, Kayhan. “Elahe Tavakolian, Who Lost Eyesight in Iran Protests, Bears Witness.” KAYHAN LIFE (blog), 21 Apr. 2023. <https://kayhanlife.com/authors/elahe-tavakolian-who-lost-eyesight-in-iran-protests-bears-witness/>.

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

VI. Discussion

A. Bystanders

Multiple verified victims in our dataset were bystanders who were blinded near protests. A bystander, as defined for purposes of this investigation, is someone who was not actively participating in the protest. This could include someone passing by, watching from their home, or participating in other activities near a protest site.

Many of the bystander blinding victims appear to have been intentionally blinded. Besides the aforementioned victim Ali Delpasand (see Case Studies section above),¹²² there have been four other notable instances in our dataset where bystanders were shot: two walking on the streets and two on balconies.

On 3 November 2024, Majid Khademi Tahir was leaving the Behesht-e Sakineh Cemetery when protesters congregated nearby to mark the 40th day of the death of Hadis Najafi, a 20-year-old woman who had been shot.¹²³ The 40th day is significant in Iranian culture as a traditional day of commemoration. Security forces passing by on motorcycles shot at protesters as they were leaving the cemetery. Majid Khademi Tahir, a civilian visiting the cemetery who was not involved in the protest, was hit and blinded.

Similarly, on the 40th day after Mahsa Jina Amini's death, Hosein Shahi had left work to purchase something in Enghelab Square. Although there was no protest, there were extra police stationed on the street. Approximately 15 motorcyclists moved

into the square and began to attack people.¹²⁴ Hosein Shahi was beaten and later shot in the face with an alleged paintball gun, while defending a young girl from special forces on motorcycles. A reporter later posted on Instagram that more than 30 people were at the hospital seeking treatment for eye injuries when he arrived that day.¹²⁵

These stories represent another pattern that we observed: a spike in the blinding of not just protesters but bystanders on the 40th day after the killing of community members. Civilians' homes have also proven unsafe. Editor Seyed Mohammad Hosseini Payiz was standing on a fourth floor balcony of a building in Mashhad when he was shot and blinded. In an Instagram post, he shared a video and photo of his location.¹²⁶ Mohammad was nowhere near the street when he was blinded — thus raising the question of whether his blinding occurred due to intentionality or carelessness.

This was, however, also not an isolated incident. Unfortunately, a young girl was also partially blinded. Benita Kiani was only five and a half years old when she was shot on her grandfather's balcony. She had rushed outside with her nine-year-old cousin to look at the commotion happening below when she was shot and blinded. She was hit with more than 20 metal pellets, one of which tore through her eye.¹²⁷

122 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding As A Weapon (43): The Blinded Father Whose Child Miraculously Survived," 13 Jun. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/117496-blinding-as-a-weapon-43-the-blinded-father-whose-child-miraculously-survived/>.

123 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding as a Weapon (32): PhD Student Continues Research after Losing Eye." Accessed 2 Apr. 2024, <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/115461-blinding-as-a-weapon-32-phd-student-continues-research-after-losing-eye/>.

124 Instagram Post, chashm.baraye.azadi, 13 Aug. 2023, at https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv4K_OvNhAa/

125 Ibid.

126 Instagram Post, seyed.mohammad.hosseini.payiz, 25 Feb. 2023, at https://www.instagram.com/p/CpGKQqyvthP/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFZA==

127 SAMANEH, and GHADARKHAN. "Iran Protest Crackdown: 5 ½-Year-Old Pellet Victim Loses Sight In One Eye." Accessed 2 Apr. 2024, at <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/110716-iran-protest-crackdown-5-%C2%BD-year-old-pellet-victim-loses-sight-in-one-eye/>.

Whether walking through a street, mourning a loved one, driving to pick up one's daughter, or viewing protests in the streets from the balcony of their own home, multiple Iranians who were not participating in protests have been partially or fully blinded.

B. Intentionality

In the aftermath of the murder of Mahsa Jina Amini, many victims reported having been intentionally shot. Elaheh Tavakolian, as described above, was shot in the eye from close range during a protest in Mashhad. The fact that she was shot from a close distance suggests possible intentionality. Ali Delpasand was blinded when he was in a car with his family. Though it is unclear whether or not Delpasand was intentionally shot in the face, perpetrators intentionally shot at his car, blinding him and injuring his wife in the face. The family was forced to flee to Turkey. Delpasand describes, "My view of life has changed. Now I have to start all over again from zero. I left Iran for the sake of my family."¹²⁸

Behzad Hamrahi is another example of someone who may have been intentionally blinded. Hamrahi was participating in a protest in Tehran when security forces began to use force to repress the protests. Hamrahi and others fled to a nearby parking garage. According to Hamrahi, "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. I couldn't take it and I released the woman from their grasp when somebody suddenly grasped my hands from behind and held them tightly. When I looked up, the barrel of a gun was in front of my face. I was shot in the eye with a paintball from a close distance."¹²⁹ Hamrahi was blinded by the paintball gun and forced to have his eyeball removed. Nevertheless, Hamrahi remains steadfast in his commitment to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. He

128 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding As A Weapon (43): The Blinded Father Whose Child Miraculously Survived," 13 Jun. 2023. <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/117496-blinding-as-a-weapon-43-the-blinded-father-whose-child-miraculously-survived/>.

129 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding As A Weapon (7): 'My Heart Is Still Beating,' Says Protester Shot In Eye," 9 Feb. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/113606-blinding-as-a-weapon-7-my-heart-is-still-beating-says-protester-shot-in-eye/>

says, "This is a path that I have chosen, and I am not afraid." He has further stated, "I cannot stay silent when my country is on the line. I really love this land,"¹³⁰ demonstrating his determination.

Firouz Mirani is a singer from the western Kurdish province of Kermanshah, who was protesting in late November 2022.¹³¹ On 29 November 2022, security forces allegedly chased him into a dark alley and shot at his face and upper torso. He was blinded in one eye. His other eye was so damaged from the attack that he remains under treatment, while his face, neck, and chest are still "filled with pellets."¹³² Mirani was isolated by security forces and then shot at close range in the eyes, face, and upper torso.¹³³ The close proximity during the attack suggests the blinding was intentional.

Similar to Mirani, Parsa Ghobadi was hurt in both his eyes. Ghobadi, an 18-year-old, was blinded after shouting anti-regime slogans with his friends.¹³⁴ The individual who shot Ghobadi was in plain clothes. Agents later told Ghobadi, "It's better that you're blinded than executed."¹³⁵ This quote indicates that security forces may have been deliberate when blinding Ghobadi, utilizing blinding as an alternative punishment to death.

On 3 November 2022, Hossein Naderbeigi, a bystander, was blinded in both of his eyes by security forces. Naderbeigi was observing the protesters and police clashing with each other at Behesht-e Sakineh Cemetery in Karaj. Since the internet had been cut off in the area, Naderbeigi was unaware of protests taking place in the cemetery. He had no prior knowledge of the protest and thus no plans to participate. As Naderbeigi was observing the protest, a motorcycle with two people who are believed to be from the paramilitary Basij force approached

130 Ibid.

131 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding as a Weapon (45): Suffering Can Lead to Peace of Conscience," 6 Jul. 2023, <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/118234-blinding-as-a-weapon-45-suffering-can-lead-to-peace-of-conscience/> (last visited 2 Apr. 2024).

132 Ibid.

133 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding as a Weapon (45): Suffering Can Lead to Peace of Conscience" (Farsi), 5 Jul. 2023, <https://iranwire.com/fa/special-features/118188> (last visited 10 Jul. 2024).

134 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding As A Weapon (26): Dumped In An Alleyway After Being Shot, Tortured," 16 Mar. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/114835-blinding-as-a-weapon-26-dumped-in-an-alleyway-after-being-shot-tortured/>.

135 Ibid.

him. The motorcycle stopped and one of the men allegedly smiled and shot at Naderbeigi at close range.¹³⁶ The paramilitary member's smile suggests the shooting may have been sinister. Also, the fact that this shooting was at such a close range reveals the strong possibility that the blinding was intentional. Naderbeigi's case further underscores that not only protesters are impacted by the regime, but bystanders as well.

C. Victim Impact

We have noted and verified multiple incidents in which protesters have faced persecution for seeking treatment for their injuries and/or speaking out about their blindings. This has included arrest and detention, a denial of medical attention or fear of seeking medical attention, being forced to flee the country, and online censorship by themselves and others.

Many victims have reported being afraid to go to the hospital to seek medical attention at the risk of being arrested by the Security Forces. There are also indications that hospitals have denied victims treatment or assisted in the arrest of victims following treatment.¹³⁷ Amir Velayati was blinded in a protest in the Narmack district of Tehran on 24 September 2022. After being shot by security forces, he was rejected by multiple hospitals¹³⁸ and did not begin treatment until two days after being shot.¹³⁹

As detailed above, Elahe Tavakolian was also denied medical treatment, threatened by security forces, lost her job, and fled to Europe to seek medical attention and safety.

Additionally, victims like Saman Pouryaghma started treatment at a hospital (Farabi Eye Hospital) but ended up fleeing Iran because security

officers were arresting wounded protesters at the hospital.¹⁴⁰ Zaniyar Tondro, who was 18 when shot, fled Iran due to fear and pressure from security forces¹⁴¹ and boarded a small boat to Europe in the hope of seeking medical treatment and safety with his family.¹⁴² He was then tracked down by authorities and sent to a European country where he was detained for 48 hours, and then sent to a refugee camp.¹⁴³ In an interview with German news outlet Deutsche Welle, the Tondro family spoke about their experience. They are now in a European country on a two year humanitarian visa, where they hope to get the pellets in Zaniyar's eyes removed.¹⁴⁴

Hasin Abedini was shot on 21 September 2022, with three pellets hitting his left eye. When his parents took him to Treata Hospital, the doctors refused to give him care. He and his family eventually reached Farabi Hospital, where he underwent surgery.¹⁴⁵ In a video that seems to have originated from WhatsApp, published by Iran International and then posted again by @IranHumanRights.org on Twitter, Abedini states that on 11 June 2023 he was summoned by the Intelligence Ministry, who were threatening victims to be silent.¹⁴⁶ After his surgery, he was followed, taken to and beaten in the Greater Tehran penitentiary (Fashafuyeh Prison). He was eventually charged with "acting against national security," "propaganda against the regime," and "leading riots" because he had posted to social media about his experiences and that of

140 Engelbrecht, Cora. "Hundreds of Protesters in Iran Blinded by Metal Pellets and Rubber Bullets." *The New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2022, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/19/world/asia/iran-protesters-eye-injuries.html>.

141 Kurdpa (kurdpa.net). "Piranshahr; Zaniyar Tondro, a Protester Who Lost the Sight of His Right Eye," 26 Mar. 2023. <https://kurdpa.net/en/news/2023/03/24>.

142 Spasiano, Francesca. "L'appello per curare Zaniyar Tondro, colpito alla testa dal regime iraniano," 31 Mar. 2023, at <https://www.ildubbio.news/cronache/lappello-per-curare-zaniyar-tondro-colpito-alla-testa-dal-regime-iraniano-grka0itt>.

143 Ibid.

144 Youtube Video, Deutsche Welle, 13 Jul. 2023, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6dzRtU4CQc>

145 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding as a Weapon (41): Tormented Victim Wants 'Retribution and Only Retribution,'" 31 May 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/117074-blinding-as-a-weapon-41-tormented-victim-wants-retribution-and-only-retribution/>.

146 Twitter Post, IranHumanRights.org, 12 Jun. 2023, at <https://twitter.com/ICHRI/status/1668423209073496064>

136 Ibid.

137 Human Rights, Center in Iran. "Iran: Scores Blinded as Security Forces Aim Guns at Protesters' Eyes." Center for Human Rights in Iran (blog), 22 Feb. 2023, at <https://iranhumanrights.org/2023/02/iran-scores-blinded-as-security-forces-aim-guns-at-protesters-eyes/>.

138 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding As A Weapon (19): The Man Who Turned His Shooter Into A Poem," 6 Mar. 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/114462-blinding-as-a-weapon-19-the-man-who-turned-his-shooter-into-a-poem/>.

139 Human Rights, Center in Iran. "Iran: Scores Blinded as Security Forces Aim Guns at Protesters' Eyes." Center for Human Rights in Iran (blog), 22 Feb. 2023. <https://iranhumanrights.org/2023/02/iran-scores-blinded-as-security-forces-aim-guns-at-protesters-eyes/>.

other blinding victims like Hossein Naderbeigi.¹⁴⁷ His parents had to pay a bail of two billion rials (approximately \$4,500) and pledge to remain silent in order to get Hasin out of prison.¹⁴⁸ He still resides in Iran and continues to post on social media, though no longer about blindings, the movement, or the regime.¹⁴⁹

147 Ghajar, Aida. "Blinding as a Weapon (41): Tormented Victim Wants 'Retribution and Only Retribution,'" 31 May 2023, at <https://iranwire.com/en/blinding-as-a-weapon/117074-blinding-as-a-weapon-41-tormented-victim-wants-retribution-and-only-retribution/>.

148 Ibid.

149 Instagram Post, Hossein Abedini, at https://www.instagram.com/i_hwst/

VII. Conclusion

The emergence of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement exhibits the hope and resistance of the Iranian people. Even in the face of terrifying violence, Iranians have relentlessly fought for their human rights in bold, innovative ways. Powerfully, Iranians have challenged the status quo and have started to pave the way for a more equitable Iran.

Most notable is the resilience and determination of the victims of blinding. Many of the victims continue to engage in activism, denouncing the Iranian regime and bravely sharing their story. They are individuals with self-determination, who are paving the way for a more human rights-respecting future. The examples above highlight the fact that it is often ordinary people, such as a father with his family or a mother and student, who have become the victims of Iranian security forces. Their strength and self-determination are notable. As Tavakolian asserts on her Instagram page, "You shot my eye, but my heart is still beating."

Ultimately, the violence that protesters and bystanders have endured is unacceptable. It is imperative to act, and to act fast, supporting survivors and creating diverse paths to legal accountability.

VIII. Acknowledgements

A. About the Iran Digital Archive Coalition

This report was drafted in support of and with input from an international research coalition that was formed to document, forensically preserve, and bring additional attention to evidence of potential human rights violations committed by the Islamic Republic of Iran against Woman, Life, Freedom movement protestors following the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022. The Coalition is led by the [Atlantic Council's Strategic Litigation Project](#) and [Mnemonic](#), in partnership with [The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA Law](#), [UC Berkeley's Human Rights Center](#), [Amnesty International's](#) Digital Verification Corps, the [Iran Human Rights Documentation Center](#) and the [Azadi Archive](#). The Iranian Archive was launched by the Coalition in March 2024 to support future investigations and accountability proceedings. Housed by Mnemonic, the Iranian Archive joins other [standalone archives](#) created to support international investigations into alleged atrocities in Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Ukraine. Evidence collected by the Coalition includes information related to the blinding of protesters; forced disappearances and deaths of children; and targeted abuse based on gender, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation; among other violations. This report is the first in a series that will be published by Coalition partners.

B. About the Human Rights Center & Investigations Lab

Using evidence-based methods and multidisciplinary frameworks, the [Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley](#) builds blueprintable solutions to address significant human rights challenges, and supports community-driven efforts to hold perpetrators accountable. In doing so, the center functions as a bridge between the

worlds of academia, policy and practice. With a mission of pursuing justice through science, technology, and law, the Human Rights Center:

- Researches and investigates war crimes and human rights violations;
- Develops standards for policymakers and practitioners; and
- Trains investigators, students, and human rights advocates.

The Investigations Lab at the Human Rights Center empowers the next generation of lawyers, journalists, and researchers to use digital investigation methods to tackle a wide array of human rights challenges. Hundreds of students have been trained in the Lab to investigate alleged human rights violations around the world.

The students — both graduate and undergraduate — have come from more than two dozen majors and minors, and have collectively spoken more than 70 languages since the Lab's founding in 2016. Lab participants are trained with holistic security at the core of their investigative approach, and recognize the mental and emotional impact of this work, as well as the heightened digital and physical security risks that can come with online research both for themselves and those they hope to support.

Our student and professional teams partner with credible, respected organizations around the world, taking on up to a half dozen investigations each academic year. The Lab is creating a pipeline of researchers who are prepared with the technical skills, collaborative mindset, and resilience needed to responsibly conduct human rights investigations in the 21st century.

C. About the Authors

Madeleine (Maddi) Wong is a fourth-year undergraduate student at UC Berkeley and one of the two student team leaders of this investigation. A researcher at the Human Rights Center for three years, she has worked on a variety of projects and investigations. These have included multiple investigations with Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps, and a project highlighting attacks on Indigenous environmental defenders in Brazil that was conducted in partnership with the nongovernmental organization Cultural Survival and the University of California Digital Investigations Network. She is currently double majoring in political science and Asian American & Asian diaspora studies, specializing in American politics. Maddi was the 2021–22 winner of the UC Berkeley Leslie Lipson Research Prize for her paper analyzing the fall of America through the Economist Democracy Index.

Melinda Zou is a graduate of UC Berkeley, where she studied political economy and business administration, and one of the two student team leaders of this investigation. Melinda was involved with the Human Rights Center for three years as a co-team leader with the Iran Digital Archive Coalition investigation, and as a team member with Amnesty International's Digital Verification Corps. Outside of the Human Rights Center, she was a social impact research assistant at the Berkeley School of Public Health, where she conducts research and helps develop strategies for social impact initiatives at the school.

Bianca Torres Murray is a graduate of UC Berkeley with a major in ethnic studies. While at UC Berkeley, she was a student researcher at the Human Rights Center, focusing on topics related to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran. Bianca previously conducted research at centers at UCLA Law School and Loyola Law School. Bianca was one of twenty elected senators with UC Berkeley's Associated Students of the University of California and was endorsed by UC Berkeley's Latino community and LGBTQ+ community.

Lene Guercke is a senior researcher for the Investigations Program at the Human Rights Center, where she supports several digital investigations. Prior to joining the Human Rights Center, Lene worked as an independent human rights researcher and consultant on a variety of subjects, including enforced disappearances and attacks on land and environmental defenders. She holds a PhD in law from the University of Leuven, an MA in human rights from University College London, and a BA in international law, international politics, and peace and conflict studies from London Metropolitan University. Before embarking on her PhD research, she spent several years working in civil society organizations in Mexico.

Stephanie Andrews is a graduate student in the Information and Data Science Master's program at UC Berkeley. She has a multidisciplinary background in public policy, community organizing, software engineering, and creative technology. Before joining the Lab, she worked as an advocate for survivors of gender-based violence, a public policy analyst focusing on anti-trafficking initiatives, and a software engineer for progressive and social impact organizations.

Sabreen Tuku is a graduate of UC Berkeley who majored in political science with a focus on international relations and a minor in human rights. She was an undergraduate fellow at UC Berkeley's Institute of International Studies and a 2023–2024 Florence Mason Palmer award winner for excellent writing in international relations for her paper analyzing the limits of Morocco's equity and reconciliation commission.

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Cole Haddock is a fourth-year undergraduate student at UC Berkeley studying data science and geography. This was their first semester involved with the Human Rights Center's Investigations Lab. During that first semester, they utilized their technical skills in Python to help create visualizations for this project. Outside of the Lab, Cole is involved with journalism and filmmaking at San Quentin News.

Portions of this report were also drafted by the team's faculty supervisor Alexa Koenig; contributed to by investigations advisor Andrea Richardson and by law student Dallin Johnson; verified by research manager Brian Nguyen; edited and designed by the Human Rights Center's lead writer/editor, Maggie Andresen; and supported in critical ways by several experts who must, unfortunately, remain anonymous for security reasons. The authors are deeply grateful for their contributions.

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