

Iran Accountability Conference

‘Ongoing Crimes Against Humanity: Political Executions in Iran and the Duty to Act’

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Dr Mark Ellis



Hanifeh Khayeri: I'm honoured to welcome our first speaker, Dr Mark Ellis, Executive Director of the International Bar Association and a leading international criminal law expert. Dr Ellis has led major IBA initiatives on documenting atrocities and, we are incredibly honoured to have him here today. Please, Dr Ellis.

Dr Mark Ellis: I'm very honoured again to be with all of you on this important event. I think the introductory remarks is a reminder, and I think it kind of bears repeating a bit that what we're looking at right now, even in the most recent months, is the continued use of extreme measures to silence dissent in Iran. And there's a pattern here.

The regime officials continue to use the death penalty as a tool of political repression to really instil fear and pre-empt any kind of revival of popular protest. And indeed, we're in the midst of another execution spree. The latest figures show that even here now, in 2026 and most recently, well over 1000 people have been executed this year.

And I think that number is probably likely significantly higher. And this is, again, actions that reflect a pattern of atrocity crimes committed, of course, in flagrant violation of international law. And they are not isolated. These are not isolated abuses, but they form a part of a sustained campaign that disregards fundamental human rights and humanitarian standards. And this is, as was mentioned at the start.

This is really for me, this the repeat. It's the start of a repeat of the 1988 massacres. That's the level that we're beginning to see right now, openly invoking that kind of dark chapter as a model to eliminate current opponents as well. But I think all of us here today, we have to be clear that these recent actions aimed at entrenching impunity by executing dissidents today and by obliterating, really any evidence of yesterday's massacres.

This is an attempt by the Iran rulers to terrorise the population and shield themselves from accountability. And their message is that no dissent will be tolerated. And the truth about the past and current atrocities will literally be buried. This is why, and this is for the Iranian people. This is why we stand in solidarity with you. You who have courageously demanded your rights in the very fact that even from behind bars, political prisoners are reaching out and they are demanding justice.

They are reaching out. And the testimony tells us that they have not given up on the idea of justice, and nor should we as legal practitioners, scholars, human rights advocates. We have a duty to amplify those silenced voices through the instrument of international law and the adjudication of international crimes is not confined to the realm of international tribunals.

Jurisdiction over atrocity crimes can be exercised by national courts, too. And I just want to say a few words about this, because one of the potentially more robust principles of accountability that relates to Iran is on the national level of universal jurisdiction. This kind of concept, defined as a legal principle that allows and sometimes requires a state to bring criminal proceedings in respect to certain crimes, atrocity crimes, irrespective of the location of the crime or the nationality of the perpetrator or the victim. It's based on the nature of the crime, the types of crimes we have seen over the decades in Iran. So these crimes that are so grave, so heinous and so destructive that they harm the international community as a whole and states are obligated to pursue justice against those perpetrators regardless of the location of the crime or the nationality of the perpetrators or the victims.

And the trial we have to remember of Hamid Nouri in Sweden in 2019 marked a really historic moment as the first legal proceeding related to the 1988 massacres, and it was a case facilitated by the principle of universal jurisdiction. He was found guilty of all the charges, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, murder, and the sentence was life imprisonment, the maximum penalty under Swedish law.

So the case serves as a precedent in international law, illustrating the application of universal jurisdiction and holding individuals accountable for these most heinous crimes. Yes, Nouri was apprehended in Sweden, suggesting kind of a conditional variant of universal jurisdiction, but it's important to note that Sweden followed a very absolute form of judicial process, where the criminal jurisdiction was based solely on the nature of Nouri's crimes, and although he was released as part of a prisoner exchange, a transaction that should never have happened, the case represents an important advancement of the use of universal jurisdiction.

So let me conclude by saying this. And this is again to the Iranian people, the architects and executioners of Iran's atrocities should harbour no illusions that time is on their side. In honouring the memory of those who perished from the mass graves of 1988 to the gallows of 2026, we affirm that their lives mattered and that the law stands with them.

We should not allow their stories to be bulldozed into oblivion. This is the message we must carry on from today that the world is indeed watching, the evidence is being preserved, and the perpetrators of these crimes will be held accountable. Thank you again for allowing me to be here with you.