

Worldwide Reading for Narges Mohammadi and Political Prisoners and in memory of those were killed in Iran - on March 20th 2026, Nowruz, Persian New Year

Introduction - Jo

On January 8 and 9, 2026, Iranian security forces carried out a nationwide massacre of citizens who had taken to the streets to demand democracy and social justice.

According to recent research by Time magazine, more than 30,000 people were killed. These figures are considered realistic not only by human rights organizations, but also by the German federal government and other Western governments. And it is to be feared that the actual number of victims is even higher, as there is virtually no news coming out of remote areas. This means that the suppression of the uprising is likely to be the world's bloodiest massacre of demonstrators in such a short period of time.

Repression has also intensified through the judicial system. Iran remains among the countries with the highest number of executions worldwide; more than 1,000 executions were documented in 2025, and reports from early 2026 indicate that executions continue at a high rate, including cases linked to the recent protests. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, human rights organizations estimate that tens of thousands of people have been executed, including mass executions of political prisoners, most notably in 1988. Systematic repression since 1979 has included widespread imprisonment of political opponents, censorship, persecution of writers, journalists and artists, severe restrictions on women's rights, and repeated violent crackdowns on protests.

Among those imprisoned is Nobel Peace Prize laureate **Narges Mohammadi**, journalist and human rights defender, who has been repeatedly arrested and sentenced over many years. In February 2026, she was sentenced to an additional seven and a half years in prison on charges of conspiracy. According to her lawyer, six years of this sentence relate to the accusation of "assembly and collusion to commit crimes." The sentence further extends her imprisonment despite serious health concerns.

This worldwide reading aims to draw international public attention to the situation of political prisoners in Iran, to the systematic use of the death penalty, and to the victims of the violence of January 2026.

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Reading 1

An extract from Narges Mohammadi's Nobel Peace Prize Laureate lecture 2023 which was delivered by her children Kiana and Ali Rahmani on 10 December, 2023, in Oslo.

I am one of the millions of proud and resilient Iranian women who have risen up against oppression, repression, discrimination, and tyranny. I remember the unnamed and courageous women who have lived a life of resistance in various areas of relentless oppression.

I write this message from behind the high, cold walls of a prison. I am a Middle Eastern woman, and come from a region which, despite its rich civilization, is now trapped amid war, the fire of terrorism, and extremism. I am an Iranian woman, a proud and honorable contributor to civilization, who is currently under the oppression of a despotic religious government. I am a woman prisoner who, in enduring deep and soul-crushing suffering resulting from the lack of freedom, equality, and democracy, has recognized the necessity of her existence and has found faith.

In the midst of the flames of violence and the perpetuation of tyranny, our cause has for years been more about survival than the improvement of our quality of life.

Essentially, it has become about the possibility to stay alive, survive, and live in a world where human life is exposed, without protection or shield, to the power of arrogant authoritarian governments, and remains helpless against everything.

In the current world, there is a significant and alienating gap between these two situations. We are in the struggle to stay alive. This is our reality. We live that struggle consciously and voluntarily, taking action that may not guarantee a safe life.

Tyranny is an endless, boundless malevolence which for a long time has cast its grim shadow over millions of displaced human beings. Tyranny turns life into death, blessing into lament, and comfort into torment. Tyranny oppresses humanity, free will, and human dignity. Tyranny is the other side of the coin of war. The intensity of both is devastating; one directly, with its destructive flames of visible devastation, the other insidiously and deceitfully, tearing apart humanity.

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Giving up one's life in the valley of terror and the insecurity of tyranny is like living the frantic life of an unarmed, defenseless human under fire from missiles and bullets.

Tyranny and war create a multitude of victims, and not only those who lose their lives; tyranny and war challenge the humanity and dignity of the survivors, the observers, and those who remain silent. Who can claim that, in this struggle, humanity remains?

The people, the determining factor in the democracy equation in Iran.

Reading 2

'Reborn' By Forugh Farrokhzad, Translated By Sholeh Wolpé

from her collection *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*.¹

Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967) was an influential Iranian poet and film director. She was born in 1935 into a large family in Tehran. She married her much older cousin at age 16 and soon after had a son. Her first published poem, *Sin*, placed her at the center of controversy. Translator of her work, Sholeh Wolpé writes, "Forugh wrote with a sensuality and burgeoning political consciousness that pressed against the boundaries of what could be expressed by a woman in 1950s and 1960s Iran. She paid a high price for her art, shouldering the disapproval of society and her family, having her only child taken away, and spending time in mental institutions. She died in a car accident in 1967 at the age of thirty-two."

'Reborn'

All my being is a dark verse

that repeats you to the dawn
of unfading flowering and growth.
I conjured you in my poem with a sigh
and grafted you to water, fire, and trees.

Perhaps life is a long avenue
a woman with a basket crosses every day;
perhaps life is a rope
with which a man hangs himself from a tree,

¹ Copyright Credit: Forugh Farrokhzad, "Reborn" from *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*.

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Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/1590785/reborn>

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or is a child returning home from school.

Maybe life is the act of lighting a cigarette
in the listless pause between lovemaking,
or the vacant glance of a passerby who tips
his hat and says, *Good morning!*

with a meaningless smile.

Perhaps life is a choked moment where my gaze
annihilates itself inside in the pupils of your eyes—

I will mingle that sensation with my grasp
of the moon and comprehension of darkness.

In a room the size of loneliness,
my heart's the size of love.

It contemplates its simple pretexts for happiness:
the beauty of the flowers' wilting in a vase,

the sapling you planted in our garden,
and the canaries' song—the size of a window.

Alas, this is my lot.

This is my lot.

My lot is a sky that can be shut out
by the mere hanging of a curtain.

My lot is descending a lonely staircase
to something rotting and falling apart in its exile.

My lot is a gloomy stroll in a grove of memories,
and dying from longing for a voice
that says: *I love your hands.*

I plant my hands in the garden soil—

I will sprout,

I know, I know, I know.

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And in the hollow of my ink-stained palms
swallows will make their nest.

I will adorn my ears with twin-cherry sprigs,
wear dahlia petals on my nails.
There is an alley where boys who once loved me still stand
with the same tousled hair, thin necks, and scrawny legs,
contemplating the innocent smiles of a young girl
swept away one night by the wind.

There is an alley my heart has stolen
from my childhood turf.
A body traveling along the line of time
impregnates time's barren cord,
and returns from the mirror's feast
intimate with its own image.
This is how one dies, and another remains.

No seeker will ever find pearls from a stream
that pours into a ditch.

I know a sad little fairy who lives in the sea
and plays the wooden flute of her heart tenderly,
tenderly. . .

A sad small fairy who dies at night with a kiss
and is reborn with a kiss at dawn.

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Reading 3

By Narges Mohammadi, an extract from a letter sent from Evin Prison, published in 2023, in which the Iranian human rights lawyer describes how the regime's brutality has increased against women.

...These days we are witnessing open physical attacks and murderous blows against the head, face and body of the imprisoned women. What message does the regime want to send us with this openly barbaric behavior and with the display of the consequences of the beatings, the wounds and traumas? I have heard reports of sexual assaults against women in the Women's Department over and over again in recent years. But in this form and in this severity, such beatings, wounds and injuries on women's bodies and such narratives of sexual violence against them and sexual abuse, I have not yet experienced.

The regime pursues the goal of spreading terror and strives to stifle any stirrings in society by creating an atmosphere of fear and terror. Violence, physical and sexual torture of women and display of unlimited violence by the agents, who are not bound by any moral principles and know no limits, continues. The Iranian people are on their way out of a religious dictatorship, and the regime is trying to prevent this. Women have become, on the one hand, a central axis of popular resistance and, on the other hand, precisely because of this, the central target of the regime's oppression.

It is the humanitarian and moral duty of every individual and every person who learns of what is happening, to protest against it and demand it to be stopped. The detainees and their families are not able to openly revolt against this horrific phenomenon of sexual violence and murderous beatings by the regime's agents in the prisons – the relatives are paralyzed by their worry and fear and some of the detainees by the threats, humiliation, insecurity and helplessness. They cannot file a complaint and they cannot make the events public to the media because the files are secret. It is the duty of each and every one of us not to remain silent in the face of this tyranny. Quite a few women have died as a result of this violence, as a result of the terrible events, as a result of mental breakdowns, the administration of tranquilizers and psychotropic drugs, and as a result of suicides after being released from prison because they could not bear the consequences of the violence.

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The violence against women, the sexual and physical torture by the agents of the regime goes on and on. In the last two months we have heard reports of unimaginable atrocities that will undoubtedly leave irreparable psychological damage to the women involved and to society.

I call on the United Nations Truth Commission, the international media, international feminist associations, Nobel laureates, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights to take a swift and strong stand against the sexual violence and violent actions of the regime's agents against the protesting and detained women. The inhumane and barbaric treatment of women in Iran must end.²

Reading 4

By Mammad Aidani 2026, PEN Melbourne Committee member.

Mammad is a human rights advocate, acclaimed poet, playwright, theatre director, and distinguished psychosocial researcher investigating the violence, torture and trauma experienced by Iranians and Middle Eastern immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers who have resettled in Australia and the West.

I want to see a change of regime in Iran, but not through war.

For the entire lifespan of this regime, I have said no to it, and I have paid the price for more than forty-seven years of, unable to return home, cut off from my roots, carrying the weight of exile. My family and I have endured profound tragedy under the absolute rule of the Islamic Republic. The deepest wound of all was losing my birthplace during the Iran–Iraq war. In that war, I lost not only my city but the entire landscape of my early life, including my closest friends. That loss has never left me.

² The letter was published in German on Sept. 15 in "Die Welt", read it here.

<https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article247454146/Iran-Bericht-aus-dem-Evin-Gefaengnis-Ich-hoerte-wie-sie-sich-uebergab-und-klagte.html>

Source: <https://freedom.axelspringer.com/en/2023/a-letter-from-narges-mohammadi/>

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What is happening now is not an effort to free the Iranian people. It is an invasion of my country and an assault on its population. Such a war will not liberate anyone. It will destroy cities and towns, homes and schools, and shatter the infrastructure that belongs to ordinary Iranians. It will inflict catastrophic humanitarian suffering on people who have already endured decades of trauma.

History has shown again and again that peace does not emerge from war and invasion. The beneficiaries of such conflicts are never the people who have been waiting for freedom. The winners are those who thrive on violence—those who kill without hesitation, destroy without consequence, and profit from the endless cycle of manufacturing and selling weapons.

The real and innocent people of Iran—especially the poor, the marginalised, and the forgotten across this wounded land—are already suffering deeply. They do not want war. They do not want more destruction. They want peace, safety, and the chance to reclaim their future without becoming collateral damage in someone else's geopolitical game.

They want this regime to go, but not at the cost of their lives, their homes, or their country. They want change without annihilation—freedom without their homeland becoming a battlefield for this regime and the invaders' racial, religious and ideological ambitions.

Reading 5

Ali Asadollahi, Iranian writer, poet, and translator was born in 1987 in Tehran. One of his books, *The Coco's Tale*, was nominated for the prestigious Iranian poetry book prize, the Ahmad Shamlou award, in 2019, but he withdrew in protest of the severe censorship of books in Iran.³ “In January this year he was violently [arrested](#) from his home by security forces. His detention on undisclosed charges signals a worsening campaign of intimidation and violence against writers amid the state's brutal crackdown on protestors.”⁴

‘Six Poems by Ali Asadollahi’⁵

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³ <https://www.roanokereview.org/poetry2020/ali-asadollahi>

⁴ <https://pen.org/press-release/arrest-iranian-writer-ali-asadollahi/>

⁵ <https://pen.org/press-release/arrest-iranian-writer-ali-asadollahi/>

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In honor of peace

Solely binge drinking

Solely stagger dancing

The bullet passing through the vineyards

Never hits the target

2

Nor that sturdy tree

Nor that frisky little boy

No longer know how to stand

The old man's staring at the cane

The cane's staring at the old man

3

Yellow in green

Black in white

:

Fall stabbed the spring in back

Night cast a shadow over the day's corpse

Leave "red in blue" for later

One day

I'll throw the history books into the sea

4

Smile...

May this smile hold me up

I'm a broken wall

Pick up that picture frame

See me collapse

5

God created your feet

Man invented the wheel

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Who knows between the two lines above

How many mines are concealed?!

6

A lady's silk gown

Day of mourning on the butterflies' calendar.

Reading 6 -

Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh was murdered in the so-called "chain murders" of 1998. He was a critic of the government; he lived in Tehran. To help his family, he began taking jobs as a 10-year-old, while working harder at his studies. A sociologist and a translator, he translated human rights texts to make them accessible to Iranians. The release of his last translation, on Human Rights Day, coincided with his murder.

He played a vital part in the writing and publication of a letter, dated October 15, 1994, consisting of objections of 134 writers to censorship and restraints on freedom of expression. This is his letter⁶:

"...We are writers; that is, we write about and publish our feelings, thoughts, and research in various forms. It is our natural, social, and civil right to see our work – be it poetry or fiction, plays or screenplays, criticism or research work, and even translation[s] of other writers' work... – reach our readers freely and without restriction. No person or institution, under any pretext, should be allowed to hamper the publication of these works. Needless to say, any published work is open to free criticism and judgment by all. While obstacles which face us in our thinking and writing far exceed our individual means and power, we have no alternative but to confront them through collective professional channels, i.e. to unite in order to achieve freedom of thought and expression and to fight against censorship... We reiterate that we are writers and expect to be seen as such, and that our collective presence [is] to be understood as the professional representation of Iranian writers."

⁶. <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/28412/mohammad-jafar-puyandeh>

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Reading 7

By Mohammad Mokhtari, 'The House of Illumination'⁷

Mohammad Mokhtari- a writer and poet who was murdered in the so-called "chain murders" of 1998. He was a critic of the government; he lived in Tehran. Translated to English by Manavaz Alexadrian.

'The House of Illumination'

Cast your most beautiful glance

At the world,

For the sun also

Is crying.

Heave your freshest breath.

Death is so intermingled with your shadow

That the light of hundred suns

Cannot distinguish it.

The most dazzling song of wave,

In the wide ocean's breast

Unites

With the silent sleeps of tranquility.

Sing

The most beautiful and fanciful melody of liberty,

For little has remained

To the ocean shore.

⁷ <https://www.caroun.com/Resume.php?dir=Research/Literature-Poems/MohammadMokhtari/>

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Reading 8

An extract from *White Torture: Interviews with Iranian Women Prisoners* by Narges Mohammadi published in 2022.⁸

...Days passed and I had not heard a word of Ali and Kiana and not seeing them bothered me so much that sometimes I thought of dying. How much I needed to be and breathe in a healthy and safe environment, and how much I needed mundane things such as seeing the sun, staring at the sky, seeing a stray cat, a leaf falling from a tree, smelling good, a sound even if disruptive and unpleasant, talking to a friend, and anything that was a sign of being alive. It's impossible to imagine how not seeing the sun, not feeling the breeze on your skin and the unbroken silence around you shatters the human will to fight and keep living. An idealistic fighter can never even imagine that being deprived of the things they take for granted outside might at one point cause doubt or indifference in a passionate and productive person.

The conditions of the cell and the interrogations are mechanisms designed to overwhelm everything key to your identity and exert psychological pressure. It leaves a crack in a part of the human mind...

Reading 9

Simin Behbahani 'My country I will build you again'⁹

Simin Behbahani was one of Iran's most celebrated contemporary poets and activists, born to a literary family. She was known for her reinvention of the ghazal, a classical Persian poetic form, to explore contemporary themes. Called "the lioness of Iran," Behbahani wrote outspoken poems about women's issues, war, peace, revolution, poverty and justice under the shadow of Iranian censorship. She published the first of her hundreds of poems at fourteen and wrote prolifically for her whole life. *Setar-e shekasteh* (*The Broken Sitar*), her first verse collection, was published in 1951. Behbahani's work, collected in 19 volumes, was nominated twice for the Nobel Prize in literature, and she was awarded the Simone de Beauvoir Prize for Women's Freedom in 2009, and the Janus Pannonius Poetry Prize in 2013.

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<https://oneworld-publications.com/2023/10/09/read-an-extract-of-white-torture-by-nobel-peace-prize-winner-narges-mohammadi/>

⁹ <https://poetryinvoice.ca/read/poems/my-country-i-will-build-you-again>

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'My country I will build you again'

(To the lady of Persian storytelling, Simin Daneshvar)

My country, I will build you again,

if need be, with bricks made from my life.

I will build columns to support your roof,

if need be, with my bones.

I will inhale again the perfume of flowers

avored by your youth.

I will wash again the blood off your body

with torrents of my tears.

Once more, the darkness will leave this house.

I will paint my poems blue with the color of our sky.

The resurrector of "old bones" will grant me in his bounty

a mountain's splendor in his testing grounds.

Old I may be, but given the chance, I will learn.

I will begin a second youth alongside my progeny.

I will recite the Hadith of "love and country"

with such fervor as to make each word bear life.

There still burns a fire in my breast

to keep undiminished the warmth of kinship

I feel for my people.

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Once more you will grant me strength,
though my poems have settled in blood.
Once more I will build you with my life,
though it be beyond my means.