

The Judge of Death: Abolqasem Salavati

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Introduction

Abolqasem Salavati is an Iranian judge infamous for violating the human rights of defendants and sentencing them to death or long prison terms on trumped-up charges. He is nicknamed [“The Hanging Judge”](#) and [“The Judge of Death.”](#)

Salavati is the chief judge of [Branch 15](#) of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran. The Islamic Republic’s first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, created the Islamic Revolutionary Court system by decree during Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 to eliminate real or imagined opponents of the new regime. The courts reportedly [condemned over 16,000 Iranians to death](#) in the first ten years after the revolution. The tribunals operate as kangaroo courts, denying defendants due process and [holding closed, sham trials](#) where a [conviction is de facto predetermined](#).

The Iranian regime has used the Revolutionary Courts to persecute political dissidents, activists, and journalists, as well as to punish real or purported smugglers and drug traffickers. The courts—and Salavati in particular—have also tried, convicted, and imposed harsh sentences on Americans and other Westerners held hostage by the Iranian regime. Branch 15 of the court in Tehran handles cases involving political prisoners, journalists, internet users, and members of ethnic- and religious-minority communities.

Salavati’s Background

Few details about Salavati’s background have been published. It is unknown whether he has a law degree or even if Abolqasem Salavati is his real name ([according](#) to Iran expert and academic Faraz Sanei, some Revolutionary Court judges use aliases). Rod Sanjabi, former executive director of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, [commented](#), “Even within that context [the Revolutionary Court], he has a reputation of being a hanging judge with no apparent legal knowledge.”

The NGO United for Iran [claims](#) that Salavati served in the Basij, a paramilitary force of Iran’s [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#), during the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War and was wounded. In 1987, he [joined](#) Iran’s judicial police in Kurdistan province. He then [became a prosecutor and judge](#) in 1991 in Kurdistan’s provincial capital, Sanandaj.

Initial Prominent Cases

As a judge, Salavati first attained notoriety in 2006, when he [presided](#) over the trial of two Iranians accused of assassinating fellow judge Hassan Ahmadi Moghadas, a serial oppressor of political dissidents. Salavati sentenced the two, Majid Kavousifar and his nephew, Hossein Kavousifar, to death, and they were [hanged](#) the following year.

In 2002, Salavati [was appointed](#) as head of Branch 15 of the Tehran Islamic Revolutionary Court by Saeed Mortazavi, a notorious judge in the Islamic Revolutionary Courts.

In 2009, Salavati [oversaw](#) the trial of Dr. Arash Alaei; his brother, Dr. Kamiar Alaei; NGO official Silva Harotonian; and documentary filmmaker Mohammad Ehsani. The four were [accused and convicted](#) of colluding with an enemy government (in this case, the United States) to overthrow the Iranian regime—even though such purported collusion [consisted](#) of publicly partnering with an American NGO and participating in a medical conference run by the Aspen Institute think-tank and funded in part by the U.S. State Department.

Salavati, as he often does, [cited as evidence](#) a report from the intelligence ministry and “confessions” repudiated by the defendants. He [sentenced](#) Arash Alaei to six years in prison and the others to three years each.

2009 Election-Protests Trials

Salavati became famous by presiding over the public show trials of demonstrators who took to the streets after Iran’s 2009 presidential election to protest incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s dubious victory. The defendants [included](#) not only grassroots-level protesters but also former government officials like former vice president Mohammad Ali Abtahi, former deputy speaker of the Majlis Behzad Nabavi, and former government spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh. Salavati [handed out lengthy prison sentences](#) to over a hundred demonstrators and [condemned at least six to death](#).

2022–24 Repression

In early January 2023, Salavati became the center of a false death rumor spread across social media. The claim, [originating](#) from an anonymous Twitter account, alleged that Salavati had been assassinated, triggering widespread speculation and misinformation online. A [swift response](#) from Mahdi Keshtdar, CEO of Mizan News Agency, disputed the rumor, affirming Salavati’s health after a direct phone conversation.

In March 2023, Salavati [sentenced](#) Iranian women and children’s rights activist Samaneh Asghari to 18 years and three months in prison. Asghari, a student at Kharazmi University in Tehran, was initially arrested during nationwide protests in October 2022 and [accused](#) of various charges, including disrupting public order, spreading propaganda against the Islamic Republic system, and violating religious dress codes. Although she was initially released under a judicial amnesty, she was [rearrested](#) in September 2023 and subjected to periods of solitary confinement in Evin Prison. According to her husband, Asghari is serving a [one-year prison sentence](#) in Evin as of April 2024.

In the fall of 2023, Salavati [sentenced](#) Iranian journalists Niloufar Hamedi and Elahe Mohammadi to lengthy prison terms—13 years for Hamedi and 12 years for Mohammadi—alongside bans on their journalistic activities. The court had convicted the journalists of [charges](#) including “collaboration with the hostile government of the United States,” “propaganda against the regime,” and “assembly and collusion to act against national security.” Such charges are frequently used to stifle dissent and independent reporting.

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Niloufar Hamed, a former correspondent for Iran's reformist newspaper Shargh, and Elahe Mohammadi, a reporter for Ham-Mihan, were arrested in September 2022 [while covering](#) the death of Mahsa Amini in Morality Police custody, which sparked [nationwide protests](#). Both journalists consistently [denied](#) the charges, stating that their reporting aimed to illuminate public issues rather than threaten national security. Despite legal challenges, including appeals against their sentences and accusations of judicial misconduct against Salavati, Hamed and Mohammadi remained imprisoned until their release on bail in January 2024. Bail was [reportedly](#) set at \$200,000 for each journalist. Following their release, Hamed and Mohammadi faced travel bans preventing them from leaving the country.

In late January 2024, [Mohammad Ghobadlou](#), a young protester in Iran, was executed despite his sentence being overturned by the Supreme Court. Ghobadlou had been [accused](#) of killing a policeman during the 2022 protests, a charge he and his defense consistently denied, presenting evidence of his innocence. His defense attorney, Amir Raisian, highlighted the irregularities in the judicial process, emphasizing Ghobadlou's right to appeal. Despite hopes that a vigil outside the prison could delay his execution, the judiciary [announced](#) his death shortly after sunrise.

Salavati [presided over](#) Ghobadlou's trial. The court [announced](#) that a trial session would be held on Monday, October 31, 2022, but it never occurred. Instead, the families of the defendants were summoned to court, where Salavati abruptly [announced death sentences](#). He threatened the families with punishment if they informed anyone of the verdicts, adding to the atmosphere of fear and intimidation surrounding the trial proceedings.

In early February 2024, Salavati sentenced Baha'i citizen Kayvan Rahimian to [nine years](#) in prison. Rahimian received five years for "deviant education or propagandist activities that contradict or disrupt the sacred law of Islam" and four years for "assembling and conspiring to commit a crime against national security." Additionally, he was fined 500 million rials (\$1,000) and deprived of his "social rights"—his ability to participate fully in social, political, and economic activities—for six years. [Rahimian](#), a translator, psychologist, and professor at the Baha'i Virtual University, has been in Evin Prison since his arrest on July 18, 2023.

Methods

Salavati has trampled on defendants' rights in myriad ways. In many of his cases, the accused are jailed in hellholes like [Evin Prison](#) for months or years without being charged. While in detention, defendants are often subjected to physical and psychological torture, including [beatings and tasings](#); [threats of being killed or of family members being arrested or killed](#); [threats of being injected with hallucinogenic drugs](#); and [extended solitary confinement](#). They may be denied medical treatment for serious illnesses, including [cancer](#), [severe heart conditions](#), and [cataracts](#). Family visits or phone calls are frequently not permitted. Salavati [reportedly](#) even threatened to execute journalist Jason Rezaian, an Iranian-American hostage, before Rezaian's trial.

Not only has Salavati not intervened to prevent or end such abuses, but he has also guaranteed that they will happen by routinely denying bail to defendants or deliberately setting it too high for them to pay. Iranian-American hostages [Karan Vafadari and Afarin Niasari](#), for example, sought to be

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released pending their appeal, but Salavati imposed bail equivalent to \$13.5 million for each of them. When Vafadari's family tried to post bail for Niasari, the judge reportedly [refused](#), saying, "If I wanted her free, I wouldn't have set [the bail] so high."

Salavati also deprives defendants of due process before their trials. He frequently denies the accused access [to their chosen attorneys](#) or [to any legal counsel](#), and has even [sat in](#) on meetings between defendants and their lawyers. Often, defendants are not told of the charges against them and the purported evidence of their crimes until trial or shortly beforehand. For example, Salavati [refused](#) to provide any evidence of wrongdoing to attorneys for imprisoned Iranian-British-American environmentalist [Morad Tahbaz](#) and his colleagues before trial and [did not allow](#) the accused to see the full indictments and evidence before they were convicted and sentenced. Some defendants also [have not been provided with translators](#).

At trials Salavati presides over, the fix is in against defendants and he doesn't try to hide it. On the first day of the trial of Iranian-Swedish doctor [Ahmadreza Djalali](#), according to Djalali, Salavati read him the indictment and [said](#), "Your sentence is death and it won't change at the end of the trial."

The trials frequently take place [behind closed doors](#) and [run as short as a few hours](#). Salavati acts as [judge, prosecutor, and jury](#). Sometimes [few or no witnesses or pieces of evidence](#) are produced against the defendants. Salavati [unquestioningly relies on reports](#) from Iran's [intelligence ministry](#). He also [accepts coerced "confessions"](#) later repudiated by the accused.

Finally, after such trials, and despite the absence of substantiating witnesses or evidence, Salavati frequently sentences defendants to [death or long prison terms](#). Adding insult to injury, some defendants, such as Iranian-British hostage [Aras Amiri](#), have only learned of their convictions and sentences, and of new charges against them, [while watching television in prison](#).

In short, Salavati is not a judge, regardless of his job title. As U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [said](#), "He's a tool of the regime's oppression, not an impartial friend of justice."

Sanctions Incurred

The European Union and the United States have sanctioned Salavati for human rights abuses.

The European Council [designated](#) Salavati on April 12, 2011, under [Council Decision 2011/235/CFSP](#), which enacted sanctions against "persons responsible for serious human rights violations in Iran." Pursuant to that designation, any assets of Salavati's in EU member states' jurisdictions must be frozen, and "no funds or economic resources" may be provided to him.

The U.S. only imposed sanctions on Salavati on December 19, 2019, more than eight-and-a-half years after the EU acted. The Treasury Department [designated](#) him under [Executive Order 13846](#), freezing any property or property interests of his under U.S. jurisdiction, prohibiting U.S. persons from conducting any transactions with him. The designation also threatens foreign financial institutions that "knowingly facilitate significant transactions for" or foreign persons that "provide

material or certain other support to” Salavati with their assets being frozen and with being cut off from the U.S. financial system.

Human Rights Abuses by the Numbers

According to the [Iran Prison Atlas](#) of the NGO [United for Iran](#), as of September 15, 2020, Salavati has issued 25 death sentences and sentenced 250 defendants to a combined 1,277 years in prison and 540 lashes. [Among other human rights abuses](#), at least 229 defendants in his cases have been denied access to legal counsel, no fewer than 166 have been put in extended solitary confinement, at least 104 have not been allowed family visits or telephone calls, and no fewer than 46 have been subject to psychological and physical torture.

Hostages

Salavati has been assigned to judge numerous cases of [Americans and other Westerners held hostage](#) and used as bargaining chips by the Iranian regime. Salavati has sentenced hostages to death or long prison terms in cases with few or no witnesses or pieces of evidence and where the justice system has denied the defendants’ rights at every turn. These hostages include:

Last Name	First Name	Nationality	Profession	Sentence	Year sentenced	Status
Amiri	Aras	Iranian-British	U.K. government employee	10 years in prison	2019	Imprisoned
Bauer	Shane	American	Journalist	Eight years in prison	2011	Released in 2011 after payment of \$500,000 by Sultan of Oman
Djalali	Ahmadreza	Iranian-Swede	Scientist and academic	Death	2017	Imprisoned pending execution
Fattal	Josh	American	Student / nonprofit manager	Eight years in prison	2011	Released in 2011 after payment of \$500,000 by Sultan of Oman
Foroughi	Kamal	Iranian-British	Energy consultant	Eight years in prison	2013	Released in 2018, but only allowed to leave Iran in 2020

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Hassanpour	Sabri	Iranian-Dutch	Anti-Iranian regime activist	N/A	N/A	Released in 2018
Hekmati	Amir	Iranian-American	Translator and culture/language expert	Death, but later resentenced to ten years in prison	Initially sentenced in 2012 and resentenced in 2013	Released in 2016 through prisoner swap
Namazi	Baquer	Iranian-American	Former Iranian and United Nations official	Ten years in prison	2016	Released in 2022.
Namazi	Siamak	Iranian-American	Businessman and consultant	Ten years in prison	2016	Released in 2023 through prisoner swap.
Niasari	Afrin	Iranian-American	Co-owner of art gallery with wife and fellow hostage Karan Vafadari	16 years in prison	2018	Released
Rezaian	Jason	Iranian-American	Journalist	Undisclosed prison term	2016	Released in 2016 through prisoner swap
Shourd	Sarah	American	Educator	N/A (released before trial)	2010	Released in 2010 after payment of \$500,000 by Sultan of Oman
Tahbaz	Morad	Iranian-American-British	Environmentalist	10 years in prison	2019	Imprisoned
Vafadari	Karan	Iranian-American	Co-owner of art gallery with wife and fellow hostage Afarin Niasari	For one set of charges: 27 years in prison, 124 lashes, a \$243,000 fine, and confiscation of his assets; for another	2018	Released

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				charge set: 18 months in prison, 64 lashes, and a \$38,000 fine; for a third set: three years in prison, and \$162,000 fine; and for a fourth set, 15 years in prison		
Wang	Xiyue	Chinese-American	Graduate student	Ten years in prison	2017	Released in 2019 through prisoner swap
Zaghari-Ratcliffe	Nazanin	Iranian-British	Nonprofit manager	Five years in prison	2016	Released in 2022 in exchange for a British payment of \$530 million to Iran
Zakka	Nizar	Lebanese-American	Information and communications technology expert	Ten years in prison and a \$4.2 million	2016	Released in 2019
Zam	Ruhollah	Iranian citizen and French asylee	Media anti-Iranian regime activist	Death, as well as life in prison for undisclosed charges	2020	Executed