



Spotlight on Iran



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Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt

The economic crisis, the extent of crime, and the problem of official data in Iran

Esma'il Ahmadi Moqaddam, chief of Iran's internal security forces, said this week that there is no direct link between the economic sanctions and the increase in the extent of crime in Iran. He did admit, however, that the recent months' economic upheavals and rising prices have led to an increase in crime, particularly incidents of theft.

Ahmadi Moqaddam's lenient position on crime, which has drawn criticism from website readers and social network users, reignites the debate on the link between the economic sanctions, the economic crisis, and the increase in the extent of crime, reopening the issue of accessibility to official data on social and economic topics. In recent months, Iranian media—particularly those affiliated with the reformist opposition—have reported on a considerable increase in the extent of crime in Iran, motivated by the economic crisis.

Crime figures in Iran are not clear-cut and remain a subject of controversy. A 2002 article by Dr. Parviz Ejlali published in the Iranian Sociological Association periodical discussed the problems pertaining to the official crime figures published in Iran. These problems, Ejlali said, undermine the ability to seriously study the issue and formulate an effective strategy to combat crime.

The problem of accessibility to official and reliable data can be seen in various areas of society and economy. On several past occasions the issue has been criticized by the Iranian media, which accused the authorities of trying to deny public access to information on sensitive economic and social subjects.

Esma'il Ahmadi Moqaddam, chief of the internal security forces, said this week that there is no direct link between the economic sanctions and the increase in the extent of crime in Iran. He did admit, however, that the rising prices contribute to the increase of crime. Speaking at a press conference held last Thursday, December 6, Ahmadi

Moqaddam said that while the sanctions may put more pressure on the public, they should not be considered particularly significant, and that it is business as usual for the citizens of Iran (Mehr, December 6). Several days earlier, Ahmadi Moqaddam pointed out the link between the economic crisis and the extent of crime, saying that the recent months' economic upheavals and rising prices have led to an increase in crime, particularly incidents of theft. The internal security forces chief discussed the crime figures, saying that police data reflect the actual state of affairs concerning those types of criminal incidents that are usually reported to the police, such as murder, armed robbery, and car theft. On the other hand, thefts of cell phones or cases of pickpocketing are not always reported to the police, and its data on these criminal incidents therefore do not necessarily reflect the phenomenon's true extent (Fars, December 3).

Commenting on a video uploaded on websites and social networks this week documenting a resident of Tehran being mugged by a group of motorcyclists, Ahmadi Moqaddam said that the Tehran police chief is the one responsible for dealing with the phenomenon of robbery in Iran's capital (Mehr, December 8). His remarks drew criticism from website readers, who took issue with the fact that the internal security forces spend most of their efforts rounding up satellite dishes, arresting bloggers, and enforcing the Islamic dress code instead of dealing with crime in the streets (Baztab, December 6).



Still image from the video documenting an armed robbery in Tehran

The remarks made by the internal security forces chief reignite the debate on the link between the economic sanctions, the economic crisis, and the increase in the extent of

crime in Iran, reopening the issue of accessibility to official data on social and economic topics. In October the reformist website Jaras published an article written by journalist and sociologist Hamid-Reza Jalaeipour, which analyzes the social situation in Iran this past year while examining the link between the escalation of social pathologies and the escalation of the economic situation. In his article, the author argues that the Iranian society is experiencing an escalation of social pathologies and that in recent years there has been a considerable increase in the extent of crime in Iran. The judiciary opened 16 million criminal cases last year, compared to 12 million cases in 2005. The researcher notes that it is difficult to assess the extent of the negative social phenomena in Iran because the authorities try to sweep them under the rug (Jaras, October 24).

This week the reformist website Rooz On-line reported on an increase in incidents of violence in the streets these past several months (Rooz On-line, December 9). On the other hand, the conservative website Alef reported that in recent years there has been a decrease in the number of people killed with cold weapons, except for in Tehran. The website's report cited figures provided by the Forensic Medicine Organization of Iran, indicating that, in the first seven months of the current Iranian year (which began in March 2012), 500 people (397 men and 103 women) died after being assaulted with a cold weapon. This represents a decrease of nearly 11 percent compared to the same period last year. Sixty-five people died in Tehran in the first seven months of the year, 32.7 percent higher compared to the same period last year. In the past 11 years a total of 11,995 people have died from injuries inflicted with cold weapons. The highest number of deaths was recorded in 2006, and the lowest in 2011, indicating that the number of deaths has been steadily declining since 2006 (Alef, December 9).

Crime figures in Iran are not clear-cut and remain a subject of controversy, as is the case with official data in other areas. A 2002 article by Dr. Parviz Ejlali published in the Iranian Sociological Association periodical discussed the problems pertaining to the official crime figures in Iran.¹ The sociologist discusses various kinds of data published in the world on the extent of crime: "real" crime data, which does not actually exist since some of the crimes are not exposed and/or go without being reported; police data, which differs from the real data for various reasons: some of the crimes are not reported, some crimes are reported but not documented, and in some cases the police

¹ [اجلالی، پرویز. "نگاهی به مشکلات آمار جرایم در ایران"، *جامعه شناسی و علوم اجتماعی* «جامعه شناسی ایران»، تابستان 1381 - شماره 14.](#)

misrepresents the data to conceal the extent of crime; court data, which concerns only criminals who have been brought to trial; data obtained from crime victims, which is problematic as well since not all crimes have victims while some crimes have several; data based on reports obtained from the criminals themselves during questioning; and data on the number of prisoners held in jails, which is problematic because not all prisoners actually committed the crime for which they are incarcerated. Deriving any useful insight from data of this last kind is difficult, since it does not always mention the date of the criminal incident in question.

The researcher indicates three main official sources that collect data on crime in Iran: the Office of Statistics at the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Statistics at the Planning Section of the internal security forces, and the Prisons Organization. These three institutions collect and document data on crime that is not published on their own initiative but can be accessed by the public and by researchers. This data is the basis for the criminal database that is documented in the yearbook published by the Statistical Center of Iran starting in 1967. In addition to the data compiled by the national organization for statistics, crime data is also compiled in reports released on behalf of Iran's various provinces.



In his article, Dr. Ejlali lists a series of problems involved in the use of official crime data for research purposes:

- 1) The data obtained from the Ministry of Justice, the main source of information on crime in Iran, concerns the number of criminal cases opened rather than the number of criminal incidents. In many cases, more than one

criminal case is opened for a criminal incident, or one case is opened for several crimes.

- 2) Some of the cases concern events that are not defined as criminal incidents, such as vehicular homicide or negative social phenomena related to morality.
- 3) The crimes discussed in the yearbook published by the Statistical Center of Iran appear under various categories according to the type of the crime. These categories have changed over the years and it is difficult to use them for an analysis of crime data. For example, such crimes as pickpocketing, selling stolen property, fraud, and so forth are not included in any of the categories in the yearbook. Even drug trafficking is not included in the data that comes from the Ministry of Justice, since criminal cases involving drug trafficking are heard in revolutionary courts, not in regular public courts.
- 4) In many cases there is no specific mention of the crime type, and even when there is, there are no details on the number of crimes committed or the number of criminals involved in the incident.
- 5) In some cases, the Ministry of Justice data makes no distinction between suspects and convicted felons.
- 6) All crime data collected by the official institutions across Iran is pooled together. At best, it is classified by province. It is therefore impossible to compare crime data for specific cities and villages in the country.
- 7) The crime data published in provincial reports provides an incomplete picture, since not all provinces publish such data. In addition, the data is difficult to analyze because each province divides criminal incidents into different categories: by the legal venue in which the case was heard, by city, or by the penalty imposed in each particular case.

In light of these problems, it is extremely difficult to rely on this data to conduct research into social pathologies, and generally speaking, none of the official types of data can be relied on to compile a report that would reflect the real state of crime in Iran, Dr. Ejlali said. He further added that the data problem is detrimental to social research and to the ability to formulate an effective strategy to combat crime.

The problem of accessibility to official and reliable data is evident in various areas of Iran's society and economy. On several past occasions the issue has been criticized by the Iranian media. In June 2012, for instance, the reformist daily Shargh took issue with the fact that the Health Ministry refrains from publishing official and up-to-date figures

on the number of mental disorder sufferers, saying that the most recent official figures date back to 2005 even though the ministry is required to publish up-to-date figures every five years. An expert interviewed by the daily said that the official figures released by the Ministry of Health in 2005 on the number of mental disorder sufferers is considerably lower than their number really is (Shargh, June 19).

In addition, the authorities are often criticized for not publishing official, reliable data on major economic indicators, such as the inflation rate, unemployment rate, and economic growth rate. In the past, 'Adel Azar, head of the Statistical Center of Iran, admitted before the Majles Planning and Budget Committee that the center he leads had been instructed by the authorities to avoid publishing official data on the inflation rate. Government critics have claimed in recent years that the government conceals economic data from the public and the Majles and presents distorted data to mask the true severity of the economic crisis.