Iran to execute mentally ill man for allegedly burning Qur’an during protest

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/19/iran-to-execute-mentally-ill-man-for-allegedly-burning-quran-during-protest>

A 35-year-old man from a small village in northern Iran has been sentenced to death on charges including apostasy for allegedly burning a Qur’an and “insulting holy things” during the early phase of the protests triggered by the [death in custody of Mahsa Amini](https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2022/oct/31/mapping-irans-unrest-how-mahsa-aminis-death-led-to-nationwide-protests).

Javad Rouhi has not been entitled to a lawyer of his choice in court and suffers from a severe mental illness. [Human rights](https://www.theguardian.com/law/human-rights) groups say he was tortured so terribly in a detention centre run by the feared Revolutionary Guards that he lost his ability to speak and walk, and became incontinent.

Rouhi was sentenced to death on 3 January on three generic charges – waging war against God, corruption on Earth, and apostasy – and the specific charge of inciting people to fight and kill each other in relation to an alleged incident in Nowshahr, Mazandaran province, on 21 September.

He was accused with two others of entering the headquarters of the traffic police in Nowshahr, setting it on fire, throwing items from inside on to the street and burning items, including a Qur’an. According to the Mizan news agency, run by Iran’s judiciary,the chief justice of the province said Rouhi had “confessed to the fact that he destroyed the headquarters and set it on fire”.

Habibullah Qazvini, Rouhi’s state-selected defender, said his client did not know a Qur’an had been burnt, and that in any event according to the transcript of the verdict, “the review of the CCTV footage and the statements of Javad Rouhi only show his presence at the gathering place, and there is no evidence that he participated in burning and destroying public property”.

A copy of the verdict was obtained by Dadban, a Turkey-based counselling and legal education centre.

Rouhi was tortured in the first days of his detention and forced to confess, and no other evidence exists of his involvement, a rights group has said.

Rouhi’s family were allowed to visit him just once before his court hearing. “They didn’t allow any more visits or phone calls after that,” his father said in a video message published on social media on 26 December. Rouhi has a mental health illness, his father said. A source said he regularly took the strong painkiller Tramadol.

Rouhi’s family lives in Kelikan village in Amol, Mazandaran province. In common with many others facing the death penalty, Rouhi, who has a bachelor’s degree in law but comes from a working-class family, was unemployed. Before that he worked as a labourer in a brick store and at a pottery manufacturing company.

His lawyer said in court: “Javad had separated from his wife due to mental illness and unemployment; in September, he had gone to Nowshahr to meet his ex-wife and try to bring her back. He didn’t have any money, so he had slept on the street during those few days in Nowshahr before his arrest.”

The court said the guilty verdict on incitement charges was in relation to the deaths of five people, whom it named as Hanane Kia, Hossein Ali Kiajori, Mehrzad Awadpour, Mohsen Malmir and Amir Hossein Shams – all protesters apparently killed by security agents. No members of the security forces were killed on that day in the town.

The two other men sentenced to death are 19-year-old Mahdi Mohammadifad and 18-year-old Arshia Takdastan.

The Oslo based Iran Human Rights, said: “At least 109 protesters are currently at risk of execution, death penalty charges or sentences. This is a minimum, as most families are under pressure to stay quiet; the real number is believed to be much higher.”

Rights groups say the Rouhi case highlights the many in-built flaws in the legal system, including the fact that more than 40 human rights lawyers have been arrested since December.