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Iran: Imprisoned human rights defender **Baktash Abtin** admitted to prison clinic

On 4 April 2021, human rights defender **Baktash Abtin** was transferred to the clinic in Evin prison. The human rights defender initially tested negative for COVID-19 on 2 April 2021, however a CT scan two days later showed that he was suffering from pneumonia possibly linked to COVID-19. The human rights defender is reportedly in a critical condition, with requests from his lawyer and family for medical parole so far unanswered. From 17-23 March 2021, together with human rights defender and lawyer **Amirsalar Davoudi**, also detained in Evin prison, Baktash Abtin began a hunger strike to protest the recent trend of transferring detained human rights defenders and political prisoners from Evin prison to prisons in other provinces, over the course of the past three months.

[Baktash Abtin](#) is a human rights defender, film director and a member of the [Iranian Writers' Association \(IWA\)](#), which aims to promote freedom of speech and denounce censorship in Iran, and has published numerous books on history, sociology and literary criticism. On 15 May 2019, Branch 28 of Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced Baktash Abtin to five years' imprisonment on charges of "illegal assembly and collusion against national security" and one year for "spreading propaganda against the state", in relation to his joint authorship of a book on the history of the IWA, which has been critical of successive Iranian governments for decades, and visiting the graves of dissident poets and writers. He began serving his six-year sentence on 26 September 2020.

[Amirsalar Davoudi](#) is a human rights defender and a member of the Human Rights Commission of the Iranian Bar Association. In his work as a human rights lawyer, Amirsalar Davoudi has represented many detained human rights defenders and political prisoners. The human rights defender is also the founder and director of a Telegram Channel, "Without Retouching," featuring a variety of critical content about the authorities' treatment of lawyers in particular and more generally, the human rights situation in Iran.

Amirsalar Davoudi was arrested on 20 November 2018 by security agents in his law office and on 28 May 2019, he learned that Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran had sentenced him to a total of 30 years' imprisonment and 111 lashes, on account of six charges including "insulting the Supreme Leader", "spreading propaganda against the system" and "forming a group with the purpose of disrupting national security" in relation to his human rights work. The charges are in connection to media interviews he had given and posts he had uploaded to his Telegram channel. According to Art. 134 of the Islamic Penal Code, Amirsalar Davoudi must serve the most severe single sentence, which in his case is 15 years for "forming a group with the purpose of disrupting national security".

On 17 March 2021, Baktash Abtin and Amirsalar Davoudi began a hunger strike to protest the increasing trend of transferring detained human rights defenders and political prisoners to predominantly remote prisons, where their rights to family visitation tend to be limited. In particular, Baktash Abtin and Amirsalar Davoudi were protesting the [multiple transfers](#) of fellow human rights defender [Esmail Abdi](#), before he was ultimately transferred from Evin prison to the Central Prison of Alborz. The transfers have occurred despite the recommendations not to travel to some provinces, and have reportedly exposed those being transferred to increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, there have been reports of a vast number of COVID-19 cases in prisons throughout Iran, with severe overcrowding heightening the risk of contracting the virus. Additionally, the failure by prison authorities to implement sufficient

prevention and protection measures in addition to discriminatory access to medical furloughs, have exposed [human rights defenders](#) to higher risk of contraction of COVID-19 in prison.

Despite having tested negative for COVID-19 on 2 April 2021, Baktash Abtin's pulmonary CT scan on 4 April displayed signs that he was suffering from COVID-19 related pneumonia and so he was transferred to the prison clinic. It is reported that the Evin prison authorities have so far refused to test Baktash Abtin's two inmates, prior to his transfer to the clinic, for COVID-19. In a telephone call on 5 April, the human rights defender could hardly speak due to his difficulty breathing and his condition was reported as critical. Baktash Abtin's pre-existing pulmonary conditions make his current condition particularly concerning.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned by the failure of prison authorities in Evin prison to respond efficiently and effectively to the display of COVID-19 symptoms by human rights defender Baktash Abtin and other prisoners. The organisation is particularly concerned, given the vulnerable health condition of the defender, his pre-existing pulmonary problems and the living conditions for detainees in the prison. Front Line Defenders believes that the treatment of Baktash Abtin in Evin prison, and the denial of access to medical furlough and necessary medication, is solely due to his peaceful and legitimate work in defense of human rights in Iran.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Iran to:

1. Urgently provide the necessary medical treatment for Baktash Abtin as well as for the other prisoners who are at risk of being infected by COVID-19;
2. Immediately and unconditionally release Baktash Abtin and Amirsalar Davoudi, and quash their convictions as Front Line Defenders believes that they been targeted solely as a result of his legitimate human rights work;
3. Ensure that the treatment of Baktash Abtin, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
4. Ensure protection and hygienic provisions for all detained human rights defenders, and grant non-discriminatory access to temporary release and furlough during the pandemic;
5. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Iran and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.