



Association for  
**Iranian  
Studies**

January 14, 2022

We write on behalf the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) to express our deep sorrow and outrage regarding the tragic death of Mr. Baktash Abtin, the Iranian poet and board member of the Iranian Writers' Association. Mr. Abtin, who was serving a six-year sentence for "anti-government propaganda," died on 8 January 2022, at the age of 47, in Sassan Hospital in Tehran due to delays in receiving medical treatment after contracting COVID-19 in Evin prison. While Mr. Abtin's family had announced in a statement that the body of the poet was to be buried on Monday, 10 January 2022, Iran's security forces reportedly ordered the body to be buried a day earlier to avoid an outpouring of public mourning and foreclose even a hint of organized protest.

Mr. Abtin's arrest and detention constituted clear violations of his freedom of speech as an Iranian writer and reflects the ongoing persecution of Iranian writers, scholars, and researchers in the country as well as the mistreatment of political prisoners. His death is a direct result of the inadequate care Iranian authorities provide the prison population, which are held in deplorable conditions in which COVID-19 and its numerous variants run rampant.

AIS is a private, non-profit academic society founded in 1967 to support and promote scholarship and research on Iran and the Persianate world at the international level. An independent, non-partisan, non-political, and multidisciplinary international community, the association publishes *Iranian Studies*, the principal journal in the field. AIS membership includes over 500 scholars, students, and academic and professional researchers. We are committed to encouraging the free exchange of ideas and freedom of speech, both within and beyond the geographical boundaries of Iran. AIS's CAF has been closely following the concerning news of Mr. Abtin's unlawful detention and the deterioration of his health after contracting COVID-19 in Evin prison, which led to his premature and devastating death.

On 15 May 2019, Mr. Abtin was sentenced to six years of imprisonment on charges of "illegal assembly and collusion against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the state," and for his activities as the Secretary of the Iranian Writers' Association which is a legal entity in Iran. Along with two other Iranian writers and members of the association, Reza Khandan Mahabadi and Keyvan Bajan, who still remain in captivity, Mr. Abtin was imprisoned in Evin on September 2020, where hundreds of inmates were believed to have contracted the coronavirus.

On Thursday, 2 December 2021, Mr. Abtin informed his family that he had developed severe symptoms of COVID-19 in Evin prison. On the evening of Sunday, 5 December 2021, security forces transferred Mr. Abtin to the Taleghani Hospital in Tehran without informing his family

members. On Tuesday, 7 December, Mr. Abtin's cellmates informed his family that he was no longer in the prison and had been hospitalized. For six days, Mr. Abtin's closest family members remained uninformed about his situation. During this period, despite his poor health, the prison authorities did not take necessary immediate actions by providing him with vital medical care in prison. Their negligence resulted in the rapid worsening of his symptoms before his admission to the hospital. According to his lawyer, Mr. Naser Zarafshan, Mr. Abtin was handcuffed and shackled at the time of his admission to Taleghani Hospital. On Monday, 13 December, judicial authorities finally issued his furlough, at which point his family was able to transfer him to the private Sassan hospital. Unfortunately, due to delays in the treatment process, Mr. Abtin died on 8 January 2022, after having been placed in a six-day medically induced coma to help him recover from the severe case of the coronavirus he was experiencing.

A week prior to Mr. Abtin's death, a group of political prisoners in Evin prison warned prison officials about his deteriorating health. PEN International, along with forty-two other human rights groups, issued multiple statements that called on Iranian officials to immediately release Mr. Abtin and other members of Iranian Writers' Association. We are dismayed that the Iranian government did not take any subsequent action to release Mr. Abtin or to provide him the medical care he required in a timely manner.

Baktash Abtin is not the first writer—but we certainly hope he will be the last—who lost his life in the fight for freedom of speech in Iran. The arbitrary censorship, interrogation, imprisonment, and murder of writers, scholars and researchers which continue in Iran are violations of the Iranian Constitution, Article 23, concerning the freedom of opinion, thought and conscience. The Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) and its Committee for Academic Freedom remain deeply concerned about the condition of the two writers and members of Iranian Writers' Association, Mr. Reza Khandan Mahabadi and Mr. Keyvan Bajan, who remain in prison. We call, once again, upon Iranian authorities to release these writers and all those who have been imprisoned merely for holding a dissenting opinion and to put an end to the targeting of writers, students, academics, and researchers through all forms of surveillance and persecution. This call is ever more urgent since the coronavirus outbreak remains a serious threat to the lives of all prisoners in Iran.

For Baktash Abtin, poetry was a tongue, a language, in which the poet would write songs of freedom and peace and dream of ending the wars and restoring humanity. His poems and his legacy will live on and inspire his friends and his readers for the years to come.

مرمت انسان  
جهنم است بی تو زندگی  
ای شعر! رویای مرمت انسان  
تو را می نویسم و  
در آستین دنیا  
دنبال دستی می گردم  
که گلوه را  
به پرچی سفید تبدیل کند.  
شعبده ای چنین را دوست دارم.

## **Restoring the Human**

Without you life is hell  
Poetry! the dream of restoring the Human  
I write you and  
In the world's sleeve  
I look for a hand  
That could turn a bullet  
Into a white flag.  
Such sorcery I love.