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OPINION | COMMENTARY

Navid Afkari's Murder Was a Message

To silence dissent, Iran's regime executes a wrestling star.

By Reza Pahlavi

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A demonstrator holds up a picture of Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari while protesting his execution outside the Iranian embassy in Berlin, Sept. 12.

PHOTO: ALEXANDER BECHER/SHUTTERSTOCK

In August 2018, thousands of Iranians joined antigovernment protests across Iran in another wave of widespread rejection of the Islamist regime. Navid Afkari, a wrestling champion, marched with two of his brothers and was detained by security forces. After torturing Afkari for months and forcing him to confess to murdering a security guard, the regime sentenced him to death. A domestic and international outcry followed, but on Saturday Afkari, 27, was executed.

As is common under the Islamic Republic, Afkari's case lacked any semblance of justice. There is a consensus that Afkari wasn't merely the victim of an unjust judicial process but the target of deliberate assassination intended to silence public protest through sheer terror. By killing a star athlete in defiance of international condemnation, the regime communicated an unmistakable message to Iranians: Protest and we will kill you, no matter who you are. To the international community, the regime recalls a famous saying of its founder, Ruhollah Khomeini, during the 1979-81 hostage crisis: "You can't do a damn thing."

Though shocking, Afkari's killing is nothing new in Iran, where the past 41 years tell a story replete with state murder. There have been countless Navids. A recently released Amnesty International report describes in distressing detail how the Islamic Republic killed and tortured so many of those who took part in the November 2019 protests, including children. The regime doesn't limit its repression to Iran's dissidents and protesters. It systematically targets their families—requiring relatives to pay for their lifeless bodies, often with a special charge for used bullets.

Many in the West continue to insist on engagement with, and normalization of, the Islamic Republic. Calls to "trust" or "reform" Nazi Germany, or to "moderate" the apartheid regime in South Africa, would never have been taken so seriously for so long. To believe still, in the face of overwhelming countervailing evidence, that this regime can come to behave like a normal government is absurd. It damages the credibility of Western democracies and international organizations.

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Officials of the Islamic Republic aren't legitimate representatives of the people they oppress and murder. It's time for leaders in the free world to recognize this and look instead to the Iranian people for dialogue and partnership. The mullahs believe that monstrous violence will quash dissent and stave off resistance, but they are wrong. The Iranian people are more committed than ever to turning the page on this dark

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chapter in Iran's history.

For every Navid Afkari the regime takes, dozens more Iranians join the struggle for liberty and democracy. When the people of Iran take to the streets again to call for an end to the Islamic Republic—and inevitably they will—the free world must stand with them.

Mr. Pahlavi is the eldest son of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and an advocate of secular democracy for Iran.

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