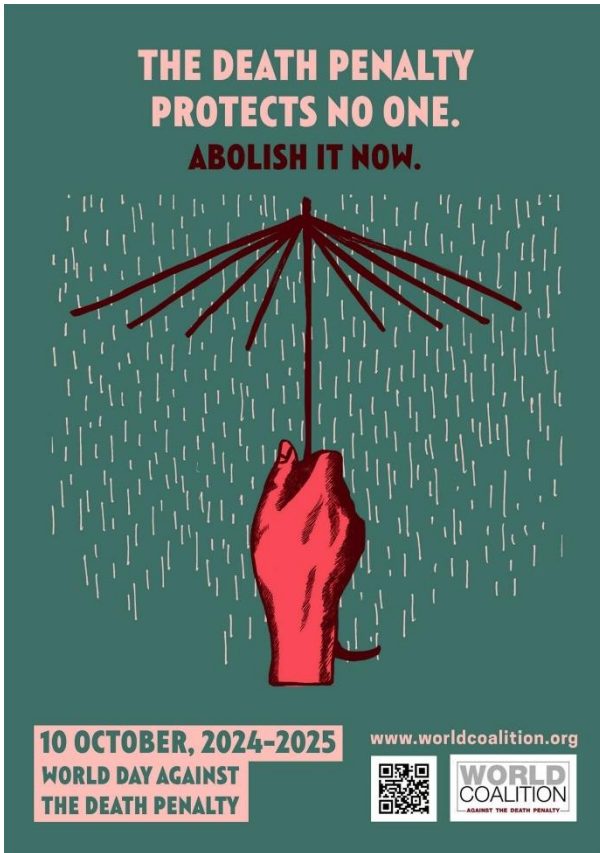


DETAILED FACTSHEET

World Day Against the Death Penalty

10 October 2024 - 2025

Security and the Death Penalty



CONTENTS

- INTRODUCTION..... 1
- OVERVIEW 2
- SOURCES..... 3
- BACKGROUND 3
 - Human security3
 - Deterrence4
- DISMANTLING A MYTH: DETERRENCE, SECURITY, AND THE DEATH PENALTY 4
 - Singapore.....5
 - Nigeria.....6
- INTERCONNECTED INSECURITY AND MISGUIDED RELIANCE ON THE DEATH PENALTY 7
 - Iran8
 - Egypt.....9
- CONCLUSION 10

INTRODUCTION

Every year, on the 10th of October, the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty and advocates globally mark World Day Against the Death Penalty. This occasion serves as an opportunity to celebrate the strides made in the global campaign to abolish capital punishment. In the years 2024 and 2025, the World Day will serve as an opportunity to challenge the misconception that the death penalty can make people and communities safer.

Security can mean different things in different contexts.¹ Politicians and others in authority often use the concept of security to shape public opinion and garner support for certain policies.² But the ways lawmakers and political leaders identify threats to security and respond to them are often influenced by complex power dynamics, discrimination, and inequality.³ Authorities may broadly define security offenses, rendering them easy tools to

¹ Laura Neack, *Elusive Security: States First, People Last* (2007).
² John T. Hamilton, *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (2013).
³ Thierry Balzacq, *Théories de la sécurité* (2011).

exploit. Appeals to the need for security can politicize criminal cases and, worse, the need to protect the state may become a pretext for human rights violations.⁴

Public calls for the death penalty often come from places of fear and despair, for example, in response to a government's struggle to control rising violence and crime.⁵ Despite such reactions, studies show that the death penalty does not have a deterrent effect on crime.⁶ Some research even show that countries without the death penalty often have lower crime rates.⁷ In conflict zones, capital punishment does not resolve disputes; it can even further violence when authorities use the death penalty to consolidate military control or to settle political scores.⁸

Effective solutions to crime and violence must address their root causes.⁹ The human security approach recognizes "the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair."¹⁰ It shows that by addressing issues like poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, societies can foster security without resorting to the death penalty.

OVERVIEW

Problems like climate change, violent conflict, poverty, and social inequality are interconnected and contribute to feelings of insecurity on a global scale.¹¹ In this complex world, authorities often justify the death penalty as a way to maintain security. Yet growing evidence shows that the death penalty not only fails to address the root causes of insecurity and crime, but can even worsen these interconnected problems by perpetuating cycles of violence.¹² This factsheet, prepared by The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty in partnership with The Advocates for Human Rights, and with the assistance of the law firm Fredrikson & Byron, P.A., highlights the interplay between insecurity and the death penalty.

First, it examines the concept of human security by tracing its evolution and recognition as an integral aspect of global security policies. Introduced in 1994, the human security approach highlights the interconnection between social and economic inequalities, human rights violations, and global instability. Human security includes three main components: freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live in dignity. This framework underscores the importance of addressing basic human needs and rights in order to ensure overall security.

Next, this factsheet analyzes the notion of deterrence in the context of the death penalty, to demonstrate that the death penalty does not deter crime more effectively than other forms of punishment. Evidence from various jurisdictions shows that crime rates are often lower in states without the death penalty. Deterrence theory is fraught with logical and empirical flaws; there is no credible connection between capital punishment and reduced crime rates. Rather than improving public safety, use of the death penalty exacerbates social inequality by failing to address the underlying issues that lead to crime.

Finally, this factsheet investigates specific case studies from jurisdictions that continue to use the death penalty. Case studies of **Singapore** and **Nigeria** highlight unsuccessful attempts to use the death penalty to deter specific crimes, such as drug trafficking and kidnapping. Case studies of **Iran** and **Egypt** demonstrate how

⁴ Neack, *supra* note 1.

⁵ Richard C. Dieter, *Smart on Crime: Reconsidering the Death Penalty in a Time of Economic Crisis* (2009).

⁶ National Research Council, *Deterrence and the Death Penalty* (2012), <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/13363/deterrence-and-the-death-penalty>.

⁷ Brennan Center for Justice, *What Caused the Crime Decline?* (2015), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/what-caused-crime-decline>.

⁸ Amnesty International, *The Death Penalty in Wartime: Arguments for Abolition* (1994), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/001/1994/en/>.

⁹ Dieter, *supra* note 5.

¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security* (1994), <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-1994>.

¹¹ John T. Hamilton, *Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care* (2013).

¹² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk* (2022), <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2022/policy-reports/environment-peace-security-new-era-risk>.

authorities often employ the death penalty to target marginalized groups and political dissidents, rather than to promote public safety and security. These case studies illustrate how the death penalty fails to address the underlying causes of insecurity and can even perpetuate cycles of violence.

SOURCES

This research draws on a comprehensive review of international human rights treaties, regional agreements, and state-specific legislation and jurisprudence. Key sources include the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Federation of Associations of Christians Against Torture (FIACAT), as well as reports and databases from research organizations and human rights advocacy groups such as the U.S.-based National Research Council, Reprieve, and the Death Penalty Information Center.

BACKGROUND

HUMAN SECURITY

Human security encompasses various aspects of personal and community safety and wellbeing. Human security is not just about protecting people from war or violence—it is also about making sure people have food, water, shelter, good health, and an opportunity for a decent life.¹³

The United Nations Development Programme, in its 1994 *Human Development Report*, first articulated a human security approach to human rights. Formulated as part of an agenda for the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, the human security approach recognizes that political, social, and economic inequalities work in tandem with human rights violations to create conditions of instability and violence.¹⁴ To feel protected and secure, people need to have their basic human rights upheld.

Human security has three main prongs:

1. Freedom from want. This prong recognizes economic, social, and environmental threats to people's basic needs.
2. Freedom from fear. This prong recognizes all forms of violence that threaten people's safety and contribute to community insecurity.
3. Freedom to live in dignity. This prong recognizes various threats to human rights, and promotes people's access to life-improving services and opportunities.

Through this approach, states can implement security measures that effectively address the root causes of crime and insecurity, such as education, social services, and economic support.¹⁵ The United Nations has been instrumental in promoting this broader understanding of security by highlighting the interconnectedness of socio-political development, human rights, and peace.¹⁶ To this end, in 2012 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/290, stating that "human security is an approach to help countries identify and address widespread challenges to the survival, livelihood, and dignity of their people."¹⁷

¹³ UNDP, *supra* note 10.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Dieter, *supra* note 5.

¹⁶ United Nations, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security, and Human Rights for All. Report of the Secretary-General* (2005), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/543857>.

¹⁷ G.A. Res. 66/290, U.N. Doc. A/RES/66/290 (Oct. 25, 2012), available at <https://undocs.org/A/RES/66/290>.

DETERRENCE

In an effort to foster human security, states often attempt not only to affirmatively provide resources—such as clean water and healthcare—to their people, but also to discourage negative acts and outcomes that contribute to overall insecurity. Deterrence is the idea that, if a person faces a threat of punishment for committing an act, that person will refrain from committing the act.¹⁸ Supporters of the death penalty often argue that the threat of capital punishment stops people from committing serious crimes. But research consistently shows that there is no evidence that the death penalty has a deterrent effect on crime.¹⁹

Studies show that jurisdictions that have eliminated the death penalty often have lower crime rates than jurisdictions that retain it.²⁰ These empirical examples suggest that the death penalty is not an effective crime prevention tool.²¹ It instead perpetuates cycles of violence. Authorities can and do use the death penalty as a tool for repressing political opponents and consolidating military control.²² Prosecutors and courts often apply the death penalty arbitrarily, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups.²³

DISMANTLING A MYTH: DETERRENCE, SECURITY, AND THE DEATH PENALTY

The perception of the deterrent effect on the death penalty has been a stubborn and persistent myth that has fueled the continued resort to death sentences and executions. In 2023, sixteen countries were known to have carried out executions.²⁴ Even though the number of countries carrying out executions was low, collectively those countries carried out the highest number of executions recorded in nearly a decade.²⁵ Authorities often assert that they must retain the death penalty to create a safer and more secure society.²⁶ Proponents of the death penalty believe that the threat of execution deters people from committing crimes. Yet studies show that the death penalty, when compared to a lengthy term of incarceration, offers no additional deterrent effect.²⁷

According to the U.S.-based National Research Council, studies that claim that the death penalty has a deterrent effect are often fundamentally flawed, either because they do not consider the existing deterrent effect of a prison sentence or because they use incomplete models.²⁸ Studies often work with such small sample sizes of executions that it is difficult to measure exactly what effect, if any, an execution has on the mind of a person considering a crime.

Fear of the death penalty is unlikely to prevent a person from committing a crime.²⁹ Logically, for the death penalty to have a deterrent benefit, a person contemplating committing a crime would have to decide that, while a

¹⁸ National Research Council, *supra* note 6.

¹⁹ National Research Council, *supra* note 6. Brennan Center for Justice, *supra* note 7.

²⁰ Death Penalty Information Center, *States With No Death Penalty Share Lower Homicide Rates* (2020), <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/murder-rates/murder-rate-of-death-penalty-states-compared-to-non-death-penalty-states>.

²¹ David Weisburd, David P. Farrington & Charlotte Gill, *What Works in Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation: An Assessment of Systematic Reviews*, 16 *Criminology & Pub. Pol'y* 2 (2017).

²² Rachel M. Stein, *War and Revenge: Explaining Conflict Initiation by Democracies*, 109 *Am. Pol. Sci. Rev.* 3 (2015).

²³ Amnesty International, *The Death Penalty in Wartime*, *supra* note 8.

²⁴ Amnesty International, *Death Sentences and Executions 2023* (May 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/7952/2024/en>.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Death Penalty Information Center, *Deterrence* (last accessed June 11, 2024), <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/deterrence>.

²⁷ Amnesty International, *Not making us safer: Crime, public safety and the death penalty* (Oct. 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act51/002/2013/en/>. Amnesty International, *Does the death penalty deter crime? Getting the Facts Straight* (juin 2021), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/act500062008en.pdf>.

²⁸ National Research Council, *Deterrence and the Death Penalty* (2012), <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/13363/deterrence-and-the-death-penalty>.

²⁹ *Id.*

long prison sentence is an acceptable risk, the death penalty is an unacceptable risk.³⁰ Those thinking of engaging in crime are unlikely to engage in this calculus. Even when people plan and contemplate a crime, many people assume they will not be caught, and therefore they do not include criminal penalties as part of their decision-making calculus. Additionally, the circumstances surrounding the crime or the offender's mental state often demonstrate that the offender is unlikely to be conducting a risk calculus. For example, threat of execution is unlikely to enter the mind of either a person who is under the influence of mind-altering substances like drugs or alcohol, or a person who commits a crime in a moment of rage or panic. The death penalty also cannot deter individuals who cannot understand the gravity of their actions or the consequences that flow from them.³¹

Empirical data from multiple countries confirm this logical analysis. For example, homicide rates in the United States illustrate the lack of deterrent effect. From 1990 to 2020, the murder rate has been consistently higher on average in states that use the death penalty compared to states that do not.³² This trend suggests that the death penalty does not provide additional deterrence compared to life in prison and does not create safer societies. The National Academy of Sciences found that the available research was not informative on whether the penalty affected the homicide rate in the **United States**, concluding that lawmakers should not rely on deterrence to guide policy judgments about capital punishment.³³

The United States is not unique in this regard. Several countries have studied the deterrent effect of the death penalty and found that it did not make societies safer or more secure. **Canada** stopped carrying out executions in 1962 and formally abolished the death penalty in 1976.³⁴ If the death penalty had had an additional deterrent effect when compared to life in prison, one would logically expect crime rates to rise in the years following abolition. In Canada, however, the homicide rate after 1977 decreased steadily.³⁵ Canada's homicide rates indicate that it became a safer society after abolition. This empirical example undercuts the idea that the death penalty deters crime and contributes to a safer society.

Several countries have attempted to deter specific crimes by imposing the death penalty. For example, lawmakers in both **Singapore** and **Nigeria** have grappled with drug trafficking and have either resorted to the death penalty, or are considering resorting to the death penalty, with the aim of deterring drug-related offenses. But findings show that just as the death penalty does not deter violent crime like homicide, it does not deter other criminal acts.

SINGAPORE

Singapore continues to impose the death penalty for various crimes, including murder and drug-related offenses, although the data show that the number of executions has dropped over the last decade. In 2023, Singapore was known to have carried out five executions, all for drug trafficking offenses.³⁶ A woman was among the five people authorities executed—she was the first woman Singapore had executed in twenty years.³⁷

³⁰ Amnesty International, *Does the death penalty deter crime*, supra note 32.

³¹ *Id.*

³² Death Penalty Information Center, *Murder Rate of Death Penalty States Compared to Non-Death Penalty States* (last accessed Jun. 11, 2024), <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/murder-rates/murder-rate-of-death-penalty-states-compared-to-non-death-penalty-states>.

³³ National Institute of Justice, *Five Things About Deterrence* (May 2016), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/247350.pdf>.

³⁴ E. A. Fattah, *Canada's Successful Experience With the Abolition of the Death Penalty* (1983), <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/canadas-successful-experience-abolition-death-penalty>.

³⁵ Amnesty International, *Singapore: Cooperate or die: Singapore's flawed reforms to the mandatory death penalty* (Oct. 11, 2017), at 10, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/7158/2017/en/>.

³⁶ Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions in 2023* (May 29, 2024), at 24, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/7952/2024/en/#:~:text=Amnesty%20International%27s%20monitoring%20of%20the%202022%20to%2016%20in%202023>.

³⁷ Amnesty International, *Singapore: Unlawful and shameful drug executions continue, including of first known woman in 20 years* (July 28, 2023), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/singapore-unlawful-and-shameful-drug-executions-continue-including-of-first-known-woman-in-20-years/>.

Singaporean authorities had cited capital punishment as a “key element” in keeping Singapore safe from drugs and murder.³⁸ At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016, the Minister of Foreign Affairs asserted that “the death penalty has deterred major drug syndicates from establishing themselves in Singapore, and we have successfully kept the drug situation under control.”³⁹ Public opinion in Singapore overwhelmingly endorses these assertions.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, a study comparing murder rates in Hong Kong and Singapore—the former of which does not impose the death penalty—found “a lack of clear connection between executions and homicide rates.”⁴¹ The study also observed that Singapore’s murder rate was lower in 2007, after a period of declining execution rates, when compared to Singapore’s peak execution years of 1994 to 1996.⁴² Further, evidence shows the death penalty has a negligible effect on drug use. Data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime show similar levels of controlled drugs in regions where the death penalty is and is not used.⁴³

A Central Narcotics Bureau report shows that, rather than dismantling major drug syndicates, the Singapore Police Force largely targets “middle-level traffickers, street-level pushers and drug abusers,” leaving the leadership of drug trafficking syndicates largely unscathed.⁴⁴ Many individuals involved in these drug-related offenses report that they agreed to carry drugs to overcome financial struggles.⁴⁵ Many of these people were “unemployed or unskilled workers.”⁴⁶ Singapore’s use of the death penalty in drug trafficking cases has therefore victimized individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds and further exacerbated inequalities, while failing to effectively deter drug crime.

NIGERIA

In Nigeria, over 3,300 people are presently under sentence of death—one of the largest death row populations in the world.⁴⁷ The Nigerian Constitution allows the death penalty to be imposed for a wide variety of offenses, including statutory offenses such as homicide, armed robbery, kidnapping, treason, and conspiracy for treason, as well as offenses under Shari’a law such as blasphemy, adultery, rape, sodomy, and homosexuality.⁴⁸ Twenty-six of Nigeria’s thirty-six states have a mandatory death penalty, stripping from judges the discretion to impose lesser sentences.⁴⁹ Jurisdictions commonly impose a mandatory death penalty for offenses such as kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, banditry, and cultism.⁵⁰

Nigeria has more capital crimes than any other country, and authorities have not demonstrated interest in restricting the scope of the death penalty.⁵¹ In fact, some officials have recently indicated support for further

³⁸ Amnesty International, *Singapore: Cooperate or die*, *supra* note 35, at 13.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Yasmin Begum, *Most residents in regional cities believe Singapore’s death penalty deters drug traffickers: MHA survey*, CNA (Oct. 19, 2022, 3:38 PM), <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/death-penalty-capital-punishment-drug-trafficking-mha-survey-3011026>.

⁴¹ Franklin E. Zimring, Jeffrey Fagan, David T. Johnson, “Executions, deterrence and homicide: a tale of two cities”, 31 August 2009, Columbia Public Law Research Paper No. 09-206; CELS 2009 4th Annual Conference on Empirical Legal Studies Paper.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ Amnesty International, *Singapore: Cooperate or die*, *supra* note 35, at 14.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Amnesty International, *Singapore: Cooperate or die*, *supra* note 35, at 6.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Not a Quick Fix to Insecurity* (Jul. 2023), at 32, <https://www.amnesty.org.ng/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/DEATH-PENALTY-BRIEFING-2023-final-version.pdf>.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 8; Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), <https://nigeriarights.gov.ng/files/constitution.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Paulina Lucio Maymon, *Nigeria’s Debate on Death Penalty: Sign Execution Warrants or Impose a Moratorium?*, Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide (Jun. 26, 2019), <https://deathpenaltyworldwide.org/nigerias-debate-on-capital-punishment-sign-execution-warrants-or-impose-a-moratorium/>.

⁵⁰ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Not a Quick Fix to Insecurity*, *supra* note 47, at 12-15.

⁵¹ Maymon, *supra* note 49.

expanding the scope of the death penalty.⁵² In response to increased drug crime, multiple members of the Nigerian Senate have proposed making the death penalty the maximum sentence for drug trafficking offenses.⁵³ Politicians and others assert that the death penalty will “serve as a stronger deterrent to drug traffickers than life imprisonment.”⁵⁴

Notably, despite its large death row population, Nigeria has reportedly not carried out an execution since 2016.⁵⁵ Still, Nigerian courts have sentenced over 1,150 people to death since 2016,⁵⁶ and hundreds of others have been on death row for many years or even decades.⁵⁷ Some Nigerian politicians are advocating for a return to executions, especially to penalize people convicted of kidnapping and banditry.⁵⁸ Human rights advocates have expressed concern that the Nigerian government is resorting to the death penalty as a “quick fix” to political and economic insecurity and violent crime.⁵⁹

Nigeria’s continued—and, in some ways, growing—reliance on the death penalty has proven unsuccessful at deterring crime. Between 2020 and 2022, despite Nigerian courts’ consistent application of the death penalty to kidnapping and banditry offenses, the number of civilians killed by kidnapping and banditry violence each year increased nearly threefold, from 1,717 to 4,550.⁶⁰ Even as more Nigerian states have retained the death penalty and expanded its scope, crime rates continue to increase.⁶¹ Nigeria’s experience thus exemplifies the death penalty’s ineffectiveness at deterring future crime.

INTERCONNECTED INSECURITY AND MISGUIDED RELIANCE ON THE DEATH PENALTY

Today, the world faces several interconnected crises that threaten human security. Some of the most pressing issues are the climate crisis, growing political instability and violence, deepening socioeconomic divides, and the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The climate crisis has led to more extreme weather patterns, rising sea levels, and constraints on water availability.⁶² Between 2010 and 2020, the number of state-based armed conflicts nearly doubled, and so did the number of conflict-related deaths.⁶³ These violent conflicts have forcibly displaced and killed hundreds of thousands of people.⁶⁴ Additionally, many regions face political turmoil and growing instability. While these crises may seem unique or disjointed, they are intimately connected. Environmental degradation increases the risk of instability and conflict.⁶⁵ Resource sharing under pressure can exacerbate existing tensions when world leaders choose conflict over cooperative solutions.

Because threats to human security are intertwined, proposed solutions that ignore the underlying root causes will inevitably fall short. When states are in crisis, they sometimes turn to the death penalty to maintain or reestablish political order and to promote security. These measures are misguided, because the death penalty not

⁵² Maymon, *supra* note 49; Camillus Eboh, *Nigeria’s Senate proposes death penalty for drug trafficking*, Reuters (May 9, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-senate-proposes-death-penalty-drug-trafficking-2024-05-09/>.

⁵³ Camillus Eboh, *Nigeria’s Senate proposes death penalty for drug trafficking*, Reuters (May 9, 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-senate-proposes-death-penalty-drug-trafficking-2024-05-09/>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Not a Quick Fix to Insecurity*, *supra* note 47, at 4.

⁵⁶ Death Penalty Information Center, *Executions Around the World* (last accessed Jun. 7, 2024), <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/international/executions-around-the-world>.

⁵⁷ Amnesty International, *Nigeria: Not a Quick Fix to Insecurity*, *supra* note 47, at 4.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 4-5.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 5.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 4.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 16.

⁶² Margot Wallstrom, *Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk* (May 2022), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/environment_of_peace_security_in_a_new_era_of_risk_0.pdf.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Our World In Data, *Deaths in armed conflict, World* (last accessed Jun. 11, 2024), <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/deaths-in-armed-conflicts>.

⁶⁵ Wallstrom, *supra* note 62.

only fails to deter crime, it also targets only the symptoms of insecurity, overlooking the underlying interconnected conditions that foster insecurity.

Iran and Egypt have turned to executions in a misguided attempt to resolve security issues. Both countries rely on the death penalty to quash threats to people in authority and to maintain political control. Yet instability and political opposition do not form in a vacuum. Rather than dealing with underlying security concerns like socioeconomic disparities, discrimination, and resource scarcity, politicians in these countries have resorted to the death penalty. Nevertheless, both cases show that nor security or stability were improved with the death penalty.

IRAN

In 2023, Iran accounted for approximately 74% of the world's recorded executions.⁶⁶ The number of recorded executions jumped by 48% between 2022 and 2023, with a total of 853 recorded executions in 2023.⁶⁷ Although the executions occurred in nearly all regions, authorities disproportionately carried them out against the Baluchi ethnic minority and other marginalized groups. The Baluchi people, who are just 5% of the overall population, made up 20% of the country's executions in 2023.⁶⁸

Iran's escalating use of the death penalty for drug-related offenses accounts for most of this surge in executions.⁶⁹ Iran has authorized the death penalty for drug crimes since 1979.⁷⁰ Executions for drug-related offenses saw a decrease between 2018 and 2020.⁷¹ After the presidency of Ebrahim Rais and the appointment of Gholamhossein Eje'i as the Head of the Judiciary in 2021, however, Iran embarked on a "renewed 'war on drugs.'"⁷² Authorities called for a crackdown on drug trafficking, prompting a spike in executions.⁷³ In 2023, the Baluchi people made up 29% of the country's drug-related executions.⁷⁴

After drug-related offenses (481 executions), the next-most cited underlying offense in 2023 was murder (292 executions).⁷⁵ Iranian authorities identified other capital crimes such as "enmity against God," "corruption on earth," and rape, as forming the basis for other executions in 2023.⁷⁶

Iranian authorities use the death penalty "to punish people who had challenged or were perceived as having challenged the Islamic Republic establishment and its ideologies."⁷⁷ Human rights groups accuse Iranian authorities of "weapon[z]ing the death penalty to instill societal fear."⁷⁸

After Mahsa Amini's death in police custody in 2022, large-scale nationwide protests sparked the Woman Life Freedom movement.⁷⁹ In 2022, at least eight individuals faced the death penalty for their involvement in these

⁶⁶ Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions in 2023* (May 29, 2024), at 9, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/7952/2024/en/#:~:text=Amnesty%20International%27s%20monitoring%20of%20the,2022%20to%2016%20in%202023>.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 47.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 32.

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 5.

⁷⁰ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *Ways to Restrict the Use of the Death Penalty in Iran* (Apr. 8, 2019), <https://worldcoalition.org/2019/04/08/ways-to-restrict-the-use-of-the-death-penalty-in-iran/>.

⁷¹ Amnesty International, *Iran executes 853 people in eight-year high amid relentless repression and renewed 'war on drugs'* (Apr. 4, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/iran-executes-853-people-in-eight-year-high-amid-relentless-repression-and-renewed-war-on-drugs/>.

⁷² Amnesty International, *Iran executes 853 people in eight-year high amid relentless repression and renewed 'war on drugs'* (Apr. 4, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/iran-executes-853-people-in-eight-year-high-amid-relentless-repression-and-renewed-war-on-drugs/>.

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ Amnesty International, *Death sentences and executions in 2023*, *supra* note 66, at 32.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 34.

⁷⁸ Sophie Abdulla, *Iran executions rise sharply to 834 last year to 'instil societal fear', report says*, BBC News (Mar. 5, 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68480284>.

⁷⁹ *Id.*

protests.⁸⁰ Iranian authorities thereby use of the death penalty as “a tool of political repression.”⁸¹ Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, the Director of the international human rights non-governmental organization Iran Human Rights, observes that “instilling societal fear is the regime’s only way to hold on to power.”⁸²

Iranian authorities continue to leverage executions in an attempt to stifle dissent and consolidate political control in 2024. Iran Human Rights reports at least 171 executions in Iran from January 1 through May 1, 2024.⁸³ Amnesty International has called on other nations to intervene, indicating that “without a robust global response, the Iranian authorities will feel emboldened to execute thousands more people in the coming years with total impunity.”⁸⁴

EGYPT

Egypt’s use of the death penalty has skyrocketed in recent years, making the country one of the world’s top executioners.⁸⁵ The nation’s increased reliance on the death penalty began in 2014 when President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became president, ousting Mohamed Morsi amidst nationwide political protests and violent crackdowns on those protests.⁸⁶ Since 2014, the Sisi regime has prosecuted and executed hundreds of political dissidents in an effort to “send a message to the Egyptian public not to revolt against the regime.”⁸⁷

After the overthrow of Morsi in 2013, authorities created special “Terrorism Circuit Courts” to oversee cases of alleged political violence.⁸⁸ In the early years, the Court of Cassation, Egypt’s highest appellate court, frequently overruled these special terrorism courts’ orders of execution.⁸⁹ In 2017, however, Sisi approved a series of amendments to the Egyptian Criminal Procedure Code that undermined the independence of the Court of Cassation and made it easier for government officials to circumvent appeals.⁹⁰ Since 2017, the number of death sentences upheld on appeal has increased eight-fold.⁹¹

In the first year of Sisi’s presidency, the number of recorded death sentences in Egypt rose by nearly 500%.⁹² Since Sisi consolidated effective control over the judiciary in 2017, authorities have, on average, executed

⁸⁰ Amnesty International, *Iran: Risk of unjust protest-related executions* (May 24, 2024, 6:14 PM), <https://amnesty.ca/urgent-actions/iran-risk-of-unjust-protest-related-executions/>.

⁸¹ Abdulla, *supra* note 78.

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ Death Penalty Information Center, *Worldwide Wednesday International Roundup: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Uganda, United States, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe* (May 1, 2024), <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/news/worldwide-wednesday-international-roundup-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-iran-japan-russia-saudi-arabia-taiwan-uganda-united-states-vietnam-and-zimbabwe>.

⁸⁴ Amnesty International, *Iran executes 853 people*, *supra* note 72.

⁸⁵ Reprieve, *The Death Penalty in Egypt – Ten Years After the Uprising* (May 2, 2021), https://reprieve.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/ResearchReport_DeathPenaltyInEgypt2021.pdf.

⁸⁶ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Egypt uses terrorism trials to target human rights activists, say UN experts* (Oct. 8, 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/10/egypt-uses-terrorism-trials-target-human-rights-activists-say-un-experts>.

⁸⁷ International Bar Association, *Egypt: public resentment increases and authorities respond with a surge in executions* (Jan. 26, 2021), <https://www.ibanet.org/article/C3B1A009-1D3C-4184-BF7A-6AE221196226>.

⁸⁸ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *supra* note 86.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Why Executions in Egypt are Skyrocketing and Why They Should End* (Mar. 25, 2019), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/25/why-executions-egypt-are-skyrocketing-and-why-they-should-end#:~:text=Since%202011%2C%20Egypt%20has%20been%20undergoing%20an%20intense.any%20vision%20nor%20any%20promise%20for%20transitional%20justice>.

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ Reprieve, *supra* note 85.

⁹² Amnesty International, *Governments increasingly resorting to the death penalty to combat crime and terrorism* (Apr. 1, 2015), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/04/governments-increasingly-resorting-to-the-death-penalty-to-combat-crime-and-terrorism/>.

50 people and sentenced over 483 more to death every year.⁹³ Very few of these individuals received a fair trial.⁹⁴ People sentenced to death in Egypt frequently experience human rights violations throughout their interactions with the criminal legal system, including arbitrary detention,⁹⁵ confessions extracted through torture and subsequently introduced as evidence,⁹⁶ and mass trials.⁹⁷ Further, military courts try and convict many civilians charged with political crimes.⁹⁸ These practices suggest that Egyptian authorities engage in the “systematic misuse of counter-terrorism and national security laws” to silence political opposition and quell internal instability.⁹⁹

In 2023 alone, Egyptian authorities made politically motivated arrests of over 2,400 individuals,¹⁰⁰ including many opposition leaders and their relatives, trade unionists, lawyers, journalists, and civil society members who have been critical of the Sisi regime and its human rights record.¹⁰¹ While President Sisi has expressed his view that the detention and sentencing of political dissidents is “saving Egypt,”¹⁰² empirical evidence suggests that Egypt’s reliance on the death penalty has not deterred political violence or terrorism. As the International Bar Association has acknowledged, the risk of a death sentence does not deter terrorists from committing serious crimes.¹⁰³ To confirm this point, since Sisi’s election in 2014, terrorist attacks in the North Sinai region alone have killed over 1,500 civilians and have displaced over 10,000 more.¹⁰⁴ Human rights advocates also express growing concern that Egypt’s unprecedented and unchecked use of intimidatory state violence against the population, coupled with systematic violations of fair trial rights, will, if anything, foment increased political violence and terrorism.

CONCLUSION

A general understanding of human security and deterrence helps to illustrate how the death penalty can’t protect people and its communities. Case studies from countries such as Singapore, Nigeria, Iran and Egypt show that the death penalty fails to address the underlying issues that lead to crime and violence and instead exacerbates social inequalities, injustices and political repression.

Despite repeated assertions of effectiveness from politicians and lawmakers, Singapore’s continued use of the death penalty for drug-related offenses has not deterred drug crimes. Instead, it has disproportionately affected disadvantaged and marginalized individuals without dismantling the drug syndicates that control the

⁹³ Death Penalty Information Center, *Executions Around the World* (last accessed Jun. 7, 2024), <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/international/executions-around-the-world>

⁹⁴ https://reprieve.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/05/ResearchReport_DeathPenaltyInEgypt2021.pdf.

⁹⁵ Amnesty International, *Egypt 2023* (last accessed Jun. 7, 2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/report-egypt/>.

⁹⁶ Amnesty International, *Egypt: Chilling rise in executions reveals depth of human rights crisis* (Dec. 2, 2020), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/egypt-chilling-rise-in-executions-reveals-depth-of-human-rights-crisis-2/>.

⁹⁷ Amnesty International, *Egypt: Quash death sentences in torture-tainted grossly unfair mass trial* (Jun. 28, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/egypt-quash-death-sentences-in-torture-tainted-grossly-unfair-mass-trial/>.

⁹⁸ Reprieve, *supra* note 85.

⁹⁹ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *supra* note 86; Amnesty International, *Governments increasingly resorting to the death penalty to combat crime and terrorism*, *supra* note 92.

¹⁰⁰ Amnesty International, *Egypt 2023*, *supra* note 95.

¹⁰¹ *Id.*; International Bar Association, *supra* note 87.

¹⁰² Amnesty International, *Egypt 2023*, *supra* note 95.

¹⁰³ International Bar Association, *supra* note 87.

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Egypt* (last accessed Jun. 7, 2024), <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/egypt/>; U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2021: Egypt* (last accessed Jun. 7, 2024), <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/egypt/>; U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Egypt* (last accessed Jun. 7, 2024) <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/egypt/>.

trade. Similarly, Nigeria's expansive use of the death penalty for a broad array of offenses, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, and banditry, has failed to curb these crimes. The country's large number of people on death row, coupled with rising rates of violent crime, underscore that the death penalty is an ineffective deterrent.

Iran's recent surge in executions, particularly of ethnic minorities and political dissidents, highlights that authorities often rely on the death penalty not to ensure public safety, but to maintain and consolidate state control. Iran's disproportionate use of executions against the Baluchi ethnic minority and its use of the death penalty to suppress political opposition illustrate how authorities can weaponize the death penalty to instill fear rather than promote justice. Egypt's increasing reliance on the death penalty under President Sisi similarly demonstrates how authorities use the death penalty to silence dissent and maintain political power, while sidestepping the root causes of insecurity and violence.

The interconnected nature of today's security challenges, including climate change, political instability, and socioeconomic divides, demands comprehensive and humane solutions. The death penalty, with its inherent flaws and injustices, is an inadequate and counterproductive response to these complex issues. Instead, politicians and policymakers should focus on human security, by addressing poverty, inequality, and lack of opportunities and promoting a world that upholds human dignity and that achieves security through justice and equality, not fear and retribution.

The global campaign against the death penalty is therefore a vital component of a broader campaign of advocacy for a more humane and effective justice system that truly protects and serves all members of society. By rejecting the death penalty and embracing a holistic approach to security that addresses the root causes of crime and violence, advocates, politicians, and lawmakers can together build a world where justice is restorative rather than retributive, and where the justice system promotes the safety and dignity of all. The abolition of the death penalty is not only a moral imperative but a necessary step toward creating a safer, more just, and more equitable world.