

IRAN'S WAR ON JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS

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The Iranian regime is one of the world's worst persecutors of journalists and suppressors of journalism. Tehran imprisons, harasses, and surveils journalists and their families; censors reporting—both directly and by intimidating journalists into self-censoring; and prevents the dissemination of journalism by blocking access to social media and jamming satellite-television signals. Iran's war on journalists and journalism reflects the Islamic Republic's fear of public knowledge of—and resistance to—its systemic malfeasance, mismanagement, and repression.

Rankings

Iran is the seventh most censored country in the world, according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ). Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2020 [World Press Freedom Index](#) ranks Iran [173rd](#) out of 180 countries, down from 170th in 2019.

Jailing Journalists

More than 40 journalists remained imprisoned as of May 13, 2020, according to the human rights website [JournalismIsNotACrime.com](#). Members of the press were frequently arrested after reporting on topics considered touchy by the regime, including: [widespread protests](#); the status of the [novel coronavirus in Iran](#) and the regime's response; the IRGC's [missile strike on a Ukrainian airline jet](#) over Tehran; [government entities](#) such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Guardian Council, and courts; [corruption](#); [women's rights](#); [mistreatment of minorities and detainees](#); [labor issues](#); [earthquake-relief activities](#); and other [social and cultural tensions](#). In some cases, the authorities [detained journalists without warning](#) and would not admit to holding them in custody.

Journalists in jail are [subjected to torture and other human rights violations](#), including extended solitary confinement and denial of family visits and access to health care and legal counsel. Journalists and others charged with crimes against national security [may only select an attorney from a government-approved list](#). The CPJ reported in 2013 that 65 percent of imprisoned journalists were housed in Evin Prison, which is [notorious](#) for subjecting inmates to torture, beatings, harsh interrogations, and mock executions.

Charges brought against journalists include:

- [“waging war against God”](#);
- [“struggling against the precepts of Islam”](#);
- [“assembly and collusion against national security”](#);
- [“gathering classified information with the intent to harm national security”](#);
- [“forming groups with the intention to disturb national security”](#);
- [“insulting government officials”](#);
- [“propaganda against the state”](#);
- [“defamation and threats against a government contractor”](#);
- [“contacts with anti-state organizations”](#);
- [“disrupting public order”](#);
- [“rebellious against officers on duty”](#);
- [“disobeying law enforcement agents”](#);
- [“creating the \[T\]elegram channel ‘No to urban death in support of dervishes’”](#);
- [“participating in drafting a joint statement of student activists”](#); and
- [“insulting the divinity of Imam Hussein and other members of the \[Prophet Muhammad’s\] blessed](#)

[household.”](#)

Journalists convicted of such crimes have been sentenced to prison terms (often lengthy), lashes, and/or internal exile, and have been prohibited from continuing to work in their chosen profession.

One of the Iranian regime’s most famous hostages was U.S. journalist [Jason Rezaian](#), a former Tehran bureau chief for the Washington Post. Rezaian and his wife, fellow journalist Yeganeh Salehi, were arrested in 2014. Salehi was [released on bail](#) three months later, but Rezaian was held captive for 544 days at Evin Prison. He was [sentenced](#) to an undisclosed prison term in 2015. Tehran [released](#) Rezaian and three other American hostages in 2016 in exchange for U.S. clemency to or dismissal of charges against 21 Iranian nationals.

Current hostage [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#), a British-Iranian dual citizen, arrested in 2016, was a project manager for the Reuters news agency’s charitable branch, the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Tehran’s prosecutor general [stated](#) that Zaghari-Ratcliffe was arrested for directing “a BBC Persian online journalism course which was aimed at recruiting and training people to spread propaganda against Iran.” However, the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s CEO [said](#) that Zaghari-Ratcliffe “is not a journalist and has never trained journalists at the Thomson Reuters Foundation.”

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was [sentenced to five years in prison](#) in 2016 on [undisclosed charges](#) and presently [languishes in Evin Prison](#). The authorities have repeatedly [thrown](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe into [solitary confinement](#) and denied her [medical care](#) and [access to her family and legal counsel](#). As the [novel coronavirus ravaged Iran](#) and particularly endangered inmates living in the appalling conditions of the Iranian prison system, the regime [temporarily released](#) her and tens of thousands of other prisoners in the spring of 2020. On May 20, Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s family [tweeted](#) that her medical furlough had essentially been extended indefinitely—until the regime decides whether to grant her clemency.

Harassment

The Iranian regime routinely [harasses](#) domestic and foreign journalists and their Iran-based families in order to coerce members of the press to self-censor. Intelligence and judiciary officials have [summoned the family members of Iranian journalists working abroad](#) and conveyed that the journalists must immediately “stop collaborating with enemy media.” The regime also commonly [imprisons, freezes and seizes the assets](#) of, [demotes](#) (if government employees), or [confiscates the passports](#) of journalists’ relatives to pressure members of the press to self-censor. Additionally, the authorities have forced family members to go on state television and slander journalists to whom they are related. RSF [reported](#) in October 2019 that it had documented at least 25 cases of Iranian regime pressure on journalists based abroad, or their families, in the past year. Tehran also seeks to impede journalism by [harassing Iran-based sources](#) for international outlets to impede journalism.

Additionally, Iranian journalists based abroad [receive death threats](#). The director of Radio Farda, a U.S. government-funded outlet broadcasting to Iranians in Farsi, [said](#) that “sometimes [a death threat] includes information that only members of the [Iranian] intelligence services could know.”

In 2017, the Iranian regime intensified its harassment of BBC Persian Television—the BBC’s Farsi-language service, which is banned by Tehran—by opening a criminal investigation into over 150 current or former BBC staff or their relatives and [freezing their Iran-based assets](#). In an internal survey of BBC Persian

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Television staff, 86 of the 96 survey takers [said](#) they had been harassed and 45 claimed their parents were interrogated. In 2019, the regime [threatened](#) Iranian journalists working for the BBC in Britain, telling their relatives living in Iran that unless the journalists quit, they would be “snatched off the streets” of London and brought back to Iran.

Tehran [similarly threatened](#) journalists at Iran International, a London-based, Farsi-language news network. Iran’s intelligence ministry [stated](#) that employment with Iran International is “proof of collaboration in terrorist actions with the enemies of Iran,” and acknowledged that it has “monitored and identified all movements and actions” of the channel’s employees and will punish those who “serve foreigners” and “betray the country.”

These are no idle threats coming from the Iranian regime. In 2019, IRGC agents reportedly kidnapped exiled Iranian refugee, activist, and journalist [Ruhollah Zam](#) and brought him back to Iran. The *Times of London* [reported](#) that a female Iranian intelligence agent persuaded him to go to Iraq, where he was abducted and taken to Iran. Zam openly sought the overthrow of the Islamic Republic and ran Telegram channels spreading information to Iranians protesting the regime and encouraging viewers to join demonstrations. He also published controversial materials undermining the regime, including documents revealing government corruption and malfeasance. The IRGC [posted](#) news of Zam’s arrest on his Telegram channel, as well as a photo of Zam in captivity, with the caption “This is just the beginning.” The regime [forced](#) Zam to confess on Iranian television to engaging in “counter-revolutionary” actions at the direction of France.

Surveillance

The Iranian government surveils domestic and foreign journalists, including via hacking and phishing attacks [reportedly](#) often carried out by IRGC-affiliated groups. Radio Farda’s Hannah Kaviani [said](#) that reporters based in Iran “are under surveillance 24/7 and so is [their] work.”

Nariman Gharib, who works for Manoto, a Farsi-language, London-headquartered satellite news channel based in London, [stated](#) that he and many of his colleagues, or their family members, have received anonymous threats or phishing attempts. Gharib said hackers focus their attacks against journalists’ family members because the journalists will often refrain from disclosing the attacks out of fear of retaliation against their loved ones.

Direct Censorship

The Islamic Republic directly censors journalism that crosses red lines. The regime has [prohibited](#) domestic- and foreign-based journalists from covering anti-government protests; [required](#) that journalists only use official government data and sources about the spread of the novel coronavirus in Iran and refrain from investigative reporting or seeking information from other sources; and forced news outlets to parrot Tehran’s initial attempt to cover up its downing of a Ukrainian jetliner in January of 2020 by [claiming the plane crashed due to mechanical failure](#).

Domestic media outlets receive harsh scrutiny from the regime, and Tehran has repeatedly [suspended or shuttered](#) critical news media. For example, in May of 2019, the government [suspended](#) the operations of weekly magazine Seda after the latter called for “high-level engagement” between the U.S. and Iran.

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Journalists also cannot operate legally in Iran without getting government accreditation, which is [frequently frozen or rescinded](#). The regime has outright prohibited some foreign agencies, from reporting in Iran, and has [denied entry](#) to certain foreign journalists and expelled others. The regime [conditioned](#) allowing a BBC correspondent to operate in Iran on the BBC's agreement not to share its reporting materials with BBC Persian Television. Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance [obliges](#) international journalists seeking Iranian visas to first present details of their planned travel and subjects of their proposed reporting, and to work with local "minders." Former Washington Post Iran bureau chief and hostage Jason Rezaian [wrote](#) in August of 2019 that the ministry had ceased issuing permits to foreign members of the press.

Beginning in February of 2019, the regime [barred](#) *New York Times* Tehran bureau chief Thomas Erdbrink from reporting in Iran. His wife, photojournalist Newsha Tavakolian, was also prohibited from working. Erdbrink [did not tweet for over a year](#), and his work [was not published again until April of 2020](#) when [tweeting](#) that he was "Back in Europe for a while," he wrote a [Times article](#) about his native Netherlands. As of May of 2020, Erdbrink [has not been published on Iran](#) since February of 2019, though [the biography on his Twitter account](#) still lists him as "Tehran bureau chief."

Bans on Satellite Television and Social Media

Iranian law [prohibits private broadcasters](#), and the regime also [bans the use of satellite dishes](#) and [jams foreign satellite television channels](#), including news outlets like BBC Persian Television and the Voice of America's Farsi-language networks. The government, via its National Cyberspace Council, tries to obstruct online journalism further by [blocking access to multiple social media platforms](#), including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and WhatsApp, and [banning circumvention software](#).

The regime also is continuing to operate and grow its "National Information Network" (SHOMA), essentially a national intranet that acts as an internet service provider while monitoring and controlling content on Iranian websites and keeps out foreign sources of information. Using SHOMA, Tehran outright [shut down internet networks](#) during the nationwide anti-regime demonstrations in late 2017 and early 2018 and in November 2019 demonstrations. Iranian Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi [stated](#) on November 18, 2019, that the shutdown was ordered by Iran's national security council. Periodic internet outages in Iran also were [reported](#) during the January 2020 demonstrations. The exceptions to these internet shutdowns included regime officials like Iran's supreme leader, who continued to tweet while the internet was effectively shut down for the rest of the country.

Iran has a [Basij "Cyber Council," Cyber Police, and a Cyber Army](#)—all presumed to be controlled by the IRGC—tasked with monitoring, identifying, and countering citizens' activities on officially banned social networking sites such as Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.