

IRAN'S WAR ON JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS

UNITED
AGAINST
NUCLEAR
IRAN

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 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 systematic malfeasance, mismanagement, and repression.

Rankings

Iran is the 7th most censored country in the world according to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) (CPJ). Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2019 [World Press Freedom Index](#) ranks Iran [170th](#) out of 180 countries.

Jailing Journalists

Over 20 journalists remained imprisoned as of October 2019, according to multiple sources. Members of the press were frequently arrested after reporting on topics considered touchy by the regime, including: [popular protests](#); [government entities](#) such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Guardian Council, and courts; [corruption](#); [labor issues](#); [earthquake-relief activities](#); and even [social and cultural tensions](#).

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. The CPJ reported in 2013 that 65 percent of imprisoned journalists were housed in Evin Prison, which is [notorious](#) for torture and beating of inmates and their subjection to mock executions and harsh interrogations.

The regime also commonly [imprisons journalists' family members](#) in order to pressure members of the press to self-censor.

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 telegram 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](#).

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.” RSF [reported](#) in October 2019 that it had documented at least 25 cases of regime pressure on foreign-based journalists 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 media 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 Television staff, 86 of the 96 survey takers [said](#) they had been harassed and 45 claimed their parents were interrogated.

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. For example, the regime has also [prohibited](#) domestic- and foreign-based journalists from covering anti-government protests.

Domestic media outlets receive the harshest 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. Significantly, for months, the regime has [barred](#) New York Times correspondent Thomas Erdbrink from reporting in Iran. His wife, also a journalist, has been prohibited from working as well.

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, like BBC Persian Television, from reporting in Iran, and has [denied entry](#) to certain foreign journalists and expelled others.

Bans on Satellite Television and Social Media

The regime [prohibits 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, also tries to obstruct online journalism by [blocking access to multiple social-media platforms](#), including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and WhatsApp, and [banning circumvention software](#). Tehran also outright [shut down internet networks](#) during the nationwide anti-regime demonstrations in late 2017 and early 2018.