



Women  
Journalists  
Without  
Chains



Media Landscape in Iran:

**The Walls of Shame**



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## Introduction

Iran is considered to be one of the earliest nations to have integrated into the world of print journalism. The monthly newspaper "Akhbar-e Rooz" (News Papers) was established by Mirza Saleh Shirazi in 1837. During the constitutional era, which commenced in 1903, the proliferation of newspapers and magazines in Iran was observed to have occurred at a comparatively accelerated pace compared to other nations in the region. Nevertheless, during this era, there was a progressive decline in rights and freedoms in the country, which was reflected in the gradual reduction of press freedom.

Following the 1979 revolution, the press in Iran underwent a period of rapid development and growth. However, this period was relatively short-lived as the government began to impose restrictions on the press during the 1980s through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which implemented a licensing system for publishing agencies. This system enabled the regime to exert control over the press, as [licenses were granted to journalists](#) and publishers on the condition that they refrained from publishing material that could be perceived as harmful to the Supreme Leader's sentiments or national interests.<sup>1</sup> This effectively resulted in a suppression of criticisms against the government. Despite these restrictions, the media in Iran has grown extensively and become a massive community today.

Journalists in Iran have encountered significant challenges to their work since the constitutional era, with many facing threats, arrests, imprisonment, torture, and even death. The period following the Green Revolution in 2009 saw a marked increase in repression and intimidation against journalists, particularly female journalists, leading Iran to be ranked among the top ten countries globally for imprisoning and suppressing journalists. Despite some recent indications of a lessening of repression, the situation has worsened since the

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<sup>1</sup> Mudbidri, Ishan, Freedom of press in Iran : the International Law perspective  
<https://blog.iplayers.in/freedom-of-press-in-iran-the-international-law-perspective/>



latter half of **2022**. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of press freedom in Iran and the challenges facing journalists, particularly female journalists, who work within a revolutionary, religious, and authoritarian governance system.

## Firstly, the Wall of Shame

The Iranian regime's continued suppression of the protests that began on September 16, 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini, has led to an unrelenting campaign against journalists, with over **100** journalists, including two facing the death penalty, and nearly half of all newly detained journalists being women. Activists have reported that over **520** people were killed during the ensuing protests, with more than **20,000** people being unlawfully detained, including dozens of journalists. The biased trials have resulted in harsh sentences being handed down to protesters. This situation has been referred to as the "Wall of Shame" by some<sup>2</sup>.

The majority of journalists, both male and female, who have been incarcerated in Iran are being held in the notorious Evin prison, which has been specifically designated for the detention of journalists, activists, and political prisoners. The prison is widely regarded as a black box, making it difficult to ascertain the conditions and treatment of those detained inside. Former inmates have reported instances of humiliation, physical abuse, torture, and mock executions.<sup>3</sup> Journalists are frequently charged with national security offenses, which authoritarian regimes often use to avoid local scrutiny of cases, despite the serious implications for press freedom.

Despite the challenges posed by limited access to information on press freedom violations in Iran, our data indicates that over **100** journalists, including women, have been detained between September **2022** and May **2023**. Out of these, at least **33** remain incarcerated, while nine others were

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<sup>2</sup> Journalist Hamidi Contests Charges As Trial Opens <https://iranwire.com/en/journalism-is-not-a-crime/117046-journalist-hamidi-contests-charges-as-trial-opens/>

<sup>3</sup> Iran: A Prison for Free Expression <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-a-prison-for-free-expression/6291461.html>



arrested before the start of the protests. Some have been handed lengthy prison sentences, with one journalist receiving up to **18** years behind bars. Others have been released on bail, but with the possibility of being re-arrested and retried looming over them. In June **2023**, several journalists who had been granted amnesty or released on large bail amounts were summoned [for](#) political judgments, illustrating the precarious situation that journalists continue to face in Iran.<sup>4</sup>

A number of female journalists and media workers, including Niloofar Hamidi and Elahe Mohammadi, were among those detained in Iran following the protests in September **2022** sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini. Our data indicates that more than **35** female journalists and media workers were arrested during the nine-month period between September **2022** and May **2023**, which is an unusually high number given that women in Iran are already a minority in the field of journalism. While the arrests were ostensibly related to the journalists' reporting and journalistic work, there are indications that gender played a role as well.

### Journalists currently imprisoned in Iran:5

1. Niloofar Hamedi, reporter for the Tehran-based semi-reformist Shargh Daily, was among the first journalists to report on Amini's hospitalization, according to a report by the exile-run news website IranWire. Her lawyer, Mohammad-Ali Kamfirouzi, tweeted that Hamedi was able to make a phone call to her husband and say that she is in solitary confinement and being interrogated in Tehran's Evin Prison. She had not been told of any charges against her.
2. Iman Behpasand, political commentator, columnist, and women's issues reporter.
3. Marzieh Talaei, a Kurdish reporter for Mukrian News Agency arrested in the city of Saqqez in Kurdistan province, arrested on September **22**.

<sup>4</sup> بازی با اصطلاح عفو رهبری؛ روزنامه‌نگارانی که خامنه‌ای «بخشیده بود» در احضارند

[https://radiftarin.com/link\\_page.php?id=218064](https://radiftarin.com/link_page.php?id=218064)

<sup>5</sup> Sources: Relatives of affiliated journalists, official and unofficial Persian-English media outlets, the Tehran Journalists' Association, the International Federation of Journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders.



4. Elahe Mohammadi, a reporter with the state-run Hammihan Daily. According to a tweet by her lawyer Mohammad-Ali Kamfirouzi, she was arrested on September 22. According to the lawyer, security forces broke the entrance door to her house and confiscated her personal devices such as laptop, books, phone, and her press card.
5. Vida Rabbani, political commentator recently sentenced to ten years and four months in prison and banned from practicing journalism.
6. Alireza Jabbari-Darestani, a culture and arts reporter for the state-run Mehr news agency, was arrested on September 25 at his Tehran home and taken to an undisclosed location.
7. Ali Khatibzadeh, a reporter for the Kurdish Mukrian News Agency, was arrested on September 20 in the city of Saqqez.
8. Mohammad Zare-Foumani, publisher of Sedaye Eslahat daily newspaper, was summoned to the Intelligence Ministry October 9 where he was arrested and taken to ward 209 of Evin prison. He was allowed to make a brief phone call to his family and was taken to solitary confinement, according to the journalist's post on Instagram.
9. Freelance reporter Farzaneh Yahya-Abadi was arrested on October 19 from her office in the southern city of Abadan in Khuzestan province.
10. Freelance reporter Farkhondeh Ashori, a former reporter with the state-run Fars news agency, was arrested on October 17 from her home in the central city of Shiraz in Shiraz province and was taken into an undisclosed location, HRANA reported.
11. Malihe Darki, a freelance photojournalist was arrested in the central city of Shiraz in Shiraz province on October 28, IranWire reported.
12. Afshin Gholami, an Iranian Kurdish journalist and the editor-in-chief of the Kurdish online bi-weekly magazine Tafakor Enteghadi ("Critical Thinking") was arrested October 12 in the city of Bukan in West Azerbaijan province, IranWire reported.
13. Hashem Moazenzadeh, editor-in-chief of medical news website Pezshkanoghanoon, was arrested September 21 in Tehran, according to Journalism Is Not A Crime.



14. Shahriar Ghanbari, editor-in-chief of quarterly cultural and art magazine Badban, was arrested on October 10 in Khoramabad, Lorestan province.
15. Maral Darafarin, a freelance journalist, was arrested in her hometown of Lahijan in Gilan province on November 1st, HRANA reported.
16. Morteza Hajebian, an independent journalist, was arrested on May 19, 2023, and sentenced to one year and six months in prison.
17. Zhina Modares Gorgie, an independent journalist, was arrested on April 11, 2023, in the city of Sanandaj.
18. Keyvan Samimi, a 73-year-old veteran journalist and editor-in-chief of Iran-e Farda magazine, was arrested on April 20th, 2023, on the eve of an online conference discussing government corruption and the crackdown on opposition. He was accused of having links to a "deviant sect" abroad and held incommunicado for three weeks before being transferred to Evin Prison on May 10th.
19. On May 7th, Maryam Vahidian, a journalist who writes about labor issues for the ILNA news agency, [was sentenced](#) to four years in prison.<sup>6</sup> She was arrested in Tehran on November 27th.
20. On January 28th, journalist Nazila Maroofian was sentenced to two years in prison by Iranian judicial authorities without a court hearing. Maroofian was sentenced for interviewing the father of Mahsa Amini, and the ruling was handed down in absentia.
21. Sajjad Shahrabi, a journalist who works for the state-owned "Iran Republic Radio," was arrested on May 3, 2023, and taken to Evin Prison after his father's house was raided, where he lives. The authorities seized his phone and laptop. It is not yet known what charges are being brought against him. He was held in solitary confinement and interrogated for several days before being transferred to the public ward of Evin Prison in Tehran on May 24, 2023. Officials announced his

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<sup>6</sup> Maryam Vahidian, journalist, condemned to 4 years in jail <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2023/05/07/maryam-vahidian-journalist-jail/>



release on bail of 10 billion rials (\$20,000), but he has not been released.<sup>7</sup>

22. Ehsan Pirbornash, former editor of Varzish magazine and satirical columnist for Ghanoon newspaper, was arrested on October 28, 2022, and sentenced to 18 years in prison. He was charged with insulting Islam, inciting aggression against the government, and propaganda against the Islamic Republic system. This is the harshest sentence given to a journalist since the protests over Mahsa Amini's death began. In February 2023, he was released, but the reasons and terms of his release remain unknown.
23. Alia Motalebzadeh, an independent photojournalist and women's rights activist, was mistreated when seven police officers raided her home and searched it on May 10, 2023. She was targeted for her participation in an online conference titled "Dialogue to Save Iran" on April 21, 2023, in which journalists and academics discussed the challenges posed by government corruption and the current crackdown on opposition. As a result, she was ordered to present herself for interrogation at the prosecutor's office in Evin Prison in Tehran on May 16th.
24. Mohammad Zare-Foumani, publisher of Sedaye Eslahat daily newspaper, was summoned to the Intelligence Ministry October 9 where he was arrested and taken to ward 209 of Evin prison. He was allowed to make a brief phone call to his family and was taken to solitary confinement, according to the journalist's post on Instagram.
25. Ayat Arefinia, the director of Abdanan's private Telegram channel and a reporter, was likely arrested in Ilam on November 2, 2022, after receiving a threat from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. He was later arrested by Iranian security forces in Abdanan as part of a broader crackdown on media workers.
26. Investigative reporter Nazila Maroofian, who works for the state-run Rouydad24.ir news site, was arrested at a friend's house in Tehran on

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<sup>7</sup> Languishing in Prison for Being the Brother of a Journalist <https://iranwire.com/en/journalism-is-not-a-crime/117221-languishing-in-prison-for-being-the-brother-of-a-journalist/>



November 3 and taken to Evin Prison's ward 209. Maroofian, from Saqqez, was able to make a brief call to her family to inform them of her arrest, according to HRANA.

27. Dr. Hashem Moazenzadeh, editor-in-chief of medical news website Pezshkanoghanoon, was arrested September 21 in Tehran, according to Journalism Is Not A Crime.

28. Iman Behpasand, political commentator, columnist, and women's issues reporter, was arrested on September 22 from his home in Tehran.

29. Arya Jafari, a photographer for the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA) and responsible for photography service at this news agency in Isfahan, was arrested by security forces at his home on Sunday, September 25.

30. Saba Sherdoost, an independent journalist, was arrested in Tehran on October 10.

31. Massoud Kordpour, a human rights activist and editor-in-chief of Mokrian News Agency, was arrested on September 20 in Bukan, Urmia.

32. Mohsin Ravari, a journalist at Jiroft, was arrested on September 23.

There is no further information available.

Journalists and reporters incarcerated in the prisons of the Islamic Republic of Iran are subjected to both physical and psychological torture, which raises serious concerns for their well-being. Furthermore, the political trials that they are being subjected to lack the fundamental principles of a fair trial, thereby rendering them unjust.



# IRAN'S JUDICIARY

USED TO SUPPRESS PRESS FREEDOM



**Iran's judiciary is not independent and is often used to silence journalists.**

**Basic standards of fair trial procedures are routinely violated in cases related to press freedom.**

- Journalists are arrested without a warrant or formal charges, denied legal counsel, and restricted from contacting family members.
- National security offenses are used to bring vague charges against journalists.
- Political trials can last only minutes.
- Journalists reporting on sensitive issues face serious risks, including arbitrary detention and mistreatment.





## Secondly, the legal and judicial landscape... Silencing the truth.

The lack of explicit constitutional support for full press freedom in Iran creates a complex legal and judicial issue. While acknowledging press freedom, the Iranian Constitution qualifies it by stating that expression must not violate Islamic rules and public rights. Article 175, section 12, obligates the country to ensure media freedom in accordance with Islamic criteria and the country's interests. However, the Constitution does not explicitly protect "freedom of opinion and expression," and the press law does not provide clear guidance on the definition of the country's interests and Islamic criteria.

Despite being a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirms universal freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information freely, Iran's regime routinely restricts or blocks access to websites and satellite signals for its citizens, both inside and outside the country, through the Ministry of Guidance and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Cyber Division.<sup>8</sup>

## No Independent Judiciary

The Iranian judiciary lacks complete independence, and it is frequently exploited as a means to suppress journalists, opposition members, and critics of the regime. The Chief Justice is appointed by the Supreme Leader for a five-year term, which can be renewed. In July 2021, Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i gaming, a former intelligence minister and public prosecutor<sup>9</sup>, was appointed as the head of the judiciary to succeed Ibrahim Raisi, who won the presidential elections.

The regime's frequent violations of fundamental rules of due process are particularly pronounced in cases involving the press and freedom of speech. Detainees are often held for extended periods without access to legal representation, counsel, or communication with their families. Journalists, both

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<sup>8</sup> What does a 'free press' in Iran really mean? <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/2012-09-13/research/what-does-%E2%80%98free-press%E2%80%99-iran-really-mean>

<sup>9</sup> FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023, Iran <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2023>



male and female, are routinely apprehended without just cause and detained indefinitely without formal charges. Notably, recent years, including 2022-2023, have witnessed the conviction of numerous journalists on tenuous security-related charges following perfunctory trials.

In 2023, the Iranian government conducted a series of covert trials for journalists, denying them access to a fair trial and a defense team. Among the individuals impacted by this action were Nilufer Hamidi and Elha Mohammadi. [According to a statement](#), their trials were conducted in May without any warning, and in private, without any media presence. This approach prevents the public from being informed of the details of the hearing and the truth of the matter.<sup>10</sup> Such behavior is in violation of Article 168 of the Iranian Constitution, [which guarantees](#) journalists the right to a public trial with a jury.

## Press Law

The Iranian Press Law, which was originally passed in 1985 and updated in 2000 and 2009 to accommodate for online media<sup>11</sup>, paints a clear picture of how the Iranian dictatorship wants the press to function. It includes all of the judicial processes and press infractions to which we make reference in various materials. The duties and scope of the press are set forth in Article 2 of the law:

### The Iranian Press Law places a strong emphasis on:

- a) Increasing public awareness and understanding in one or more of the areas stated in Article 1
- b) Adhering to the aims and objectives established in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution - Removing artificial borders and discrimination based on race, language, customs, and other aspects
- c) Endorsing the "neither East nor West" doctrine.

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<sup>10</sup> کمیته پیگیری وضعیت روزنامه‌نگاران بازداشتی خواستار برگزاری علنی دادگاه نیلوفر حامدی و الهه محمدی شد  
<https://ifj-farsi.org/?p=10147>

<sup>11</sup> Press Law in Iran (Ratified on March 19, 1986)  
<https://wipolex-res.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/ir/ir027en.pdf>



**Several limits on the press are outlined in Article 6 of the law, including:**

- a) Not allowing the publication of content that belittles Islamic principles, public decency, or public rights;
- b) Prohibiting the publication of articles or photos that stir up racial or ethnic tensions or cause social unrest;
- c) Restricting the dissemination of sensitive information about the Council of Experts, the Iranian government, or the armed forces;
- d) Prohibiting the leveling of defamatory charges against prominent Iranians or reputable judges who uphold Islamic law;
- e) Banning the insulting of Islam as a religion.

Under the Iranian Press Law, the [Press Censorship Authority in Iran](#) is granted the power to suspend or entirely shut down newspapers and articles in certain circumstances. Specifically, this authority is exercised when the content in question is deemed to offend the Supreme Leader or undermine public morals and values.<sup>12</sup>

During the latter months of 2022, the Censorship Authority took steps to ban certain newspapers and to issue warnings against the publication of reports, information, and journalistic coverage deemed to be of interest to the Iranian public. [For example:](#)<sup>13</sup>

- a) In August, the Jahan Sanat newspaper was suspended due to a report that was deemed to have "violated the approvals of the Supreme National Security Council of the limits of the press," and the case was referred to the judicial authority without the newspaper's knowledge. The newspaper was later reopened in December.
- b) In November, the authority issued a directive requiring local Iranian media to refrain from displaying images and content that

<sup>12</sup> Press Supervisory Board <https://www.ifmat.org/03/06/press-supervisory-board/>

<sup>13</sup> The Annual Report of Women Journalists Without Chains (2023)



were described as "contrary to social norms and in the field of hijab."

- c) In December, the authority warned three newspapers and one news agency against covering the rise in currency prices. Additionally, in the same month, the license of the bi-monthly legal magazine "Maf" was suspended, confiscated, and revoked by the Kurdistan Region Guidance Department.

## New Laws, Plans, and Incitement Campaigns:

The existing press law and censorship agency in Iran have proven inadequate for the authorities to control the press environment and media production effectively. A case in point is the adoption of three provisions by the Supreme Council for Cyberspace, which had been under debate in parliament at the same time as the protests over the execution of Amini. These provisions established an organizing committee comprising members from the security forces, which was granted extensive authority over internet content and services.

A "legal and judicial follow-up plan for false news in cyberspace" and a government draft bill [called](#) "The Comprehensive Press Law" have been in development since December 2022.<sup>14</sup> Neither the plan's nor the bill's text has been made public. Concerns about new laws that limits the independence of the already weakened press, particularly citizen journalism, are raised when they are kept a secret from journalists and media professionals.

With the exception of situations specified by law, such as those described in Article 131 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, any depiction of crime scenes that result in loss of life, life imprisonment, crimes that result in amputation of limbs, intentional crimes against physical integrity, accidents that result in death or bodily injury, or terrorist acts is considered a crime and the perpetrator is sentenced to imprisonment of the fifth degree.

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<sup>14</sup> The Annual Report of Women Journalists Without Chains (2023).



In June 2023, the Iranian Supreme Leader [blasted](#) journalists and activists on social media, complimented the court for increasing its intervention, and praised some public prosecutors for prosecuting journalists. He also praised the judiciary for growing its use of discretion. Using digital or non-digital spaces, he said, "Some people sit and agitate the general public's nerves, weakening their psychological security and frightening citizens, which opposes the resurrection of public rights. The legal authorities must get involved."<sup>15</sup>



**48** News agencies

**3.360** News websites

**5.000** Print media outlets

**15 such outlets being affected**

**Iranian authorities see in independent press as follows:**

- Enemy bases.
- A source of confusion for public opinion.
- Practicing lying.
- Mobilizing against the Islamic Republic.
- Being spies working for foreign governments.
- Serving as puppets for foreigners to spread misinformation.



<sup>15</sup>بیانات در دیدار رئیس و مسئولان قوه قضائیه <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=53222>



### Thirdly, the Weak Radiation of Independent Journalism

Due to its monopoly on the radio and television industries, the Iranian government only permits the establishment of newspapers and electronic media that are governed by the laws of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. 48 news agencies,<sup>16</sup> 3,360 news websites,<sup>17</sup> and over 5,000 print media outlets are connected to the regime, according to the most recent figures released by the ministry. The number of Iranian media outlets that function independently of the regime is still less than the number of fingers on the hands and feet, and those that do are subject to government control.

In May 2000, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, expressed his hostility towards independent media by referring to them as "enemy bases" that threaten the interests of the country. He accused some journalists of spreading confusion, discord, and pessimism among the people, which he deemed a form of journalistic charlatanism. Khamenei demanded that the press respect the country's interests and promote religion, rather than mobilize against the Islamic Republic. His statement reflects a broader vision of treating independent media as an adversary that poses a threat to the regime<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the recent wave of protests in 2022 and the grievances expressed by the protesters, the authorities did not attempt to address these issues. Instead, they resorted to blaming the media and suppressing freedom of expression. The authorities employed their extensive media machinery to distort the protests, portray male and female protesters as spies or serving foreign purposes, and attribute the spread of misleading information to foreign interference utilizing journalists from independent and semi-independent Persian-speaking media inside and outside the country.

The authorities exerted careful control over the local media to disseminate their own narrative and influence public opinion. The Supreme Leader, Ali

<sup>16</sup> [isna.ir/xdNk8H](https://isna.ir/xdNk8H) تعداد خبرگزاری های ایران کم می شود؟

<sup>17</sup> <https://irna.ir/xjvLkt> آسیب‌شناسی تعدد رسانه‌ها در ایران

<sup>18</sup> <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/amp-content?id=3003> بیانات در دیدار با جوانان در مصلای بزرگ تهران



Khamenei, emphasized the importance of communicating the ruling body's perspective, warning that failure to do so would allow the enemy to spread lies.<sup>19</sup> Khamenei [accused](#) both male and female journalists of spreading rumors and claimed that hundreds of thousands of media outlets were employed in the service of lies, rumors, and deviations.<sup>20</sup>

The government has intensified its pressure on journalists and media organizations, resulting in security and judicial institutions suppressing dissenting voices and imposing censorship on critical reporting of the protests.

The press situation in Iran is a matter of concern, particularly regarding the following issues:

- **Public Media:** The press situation in Iran is a cause for concern, as the freedom of public media, both online and offline, is severely restricted, leading to limitations on the free flow of information. The heavy censorship of news and analysis, coupled with limited representation of independent voices, pundits, and opposition members on mainstream media further restricts press freedom. Despite these limitations, the mainstream media remains a primary source of information for many Iranians. However, the authorities [ban satellite dishes](#), and channels and radios broadcasting in Persian from outside the country are frequently jammed, although Iranians have resorted to smuggling dishes into the country. The police often conduct raids on private homes and confiscate satellite dishes, further limiting access to information.<sup>21</sup>
- **Restrictions and Control:** the press situation in Iran is characterized by censorship and warnings issued by authorities to semi-official and independent newspapers and magazines, resulting in limitations on free expression and press freedom. The Islamic Republic of Iran imposes strict internet censorship policies, including the blocking of thousands of websites and widespread internet shutdowns, which restrict access to information and

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<sup>19</sup> Khamenei's Speech 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Full text of Imam Khamenei's speech at a meeting with poets and Persian literature professors is available at: <https://arabic.khamenei.ir/news/7031> ↗

<sup>21</sup> FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2022, Iran, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2022>



communication for most Iranians. During the months following September 2022, a complete internet blackout occurred throughout Iran, with restrictions on online searches and interference in social media activity since 2009. Tens of thousands of foreign websites, including news sites and major social networks, are also filtered, further constraining access to information. These policies and practices have significant implications for the free flow of information and communication in Iran, with potential consequences for human rights and political freedom.

- **Direct Censorship:** In countries with severe repression, working for a free press and human rights is often challenging. This is also true in Iran, where censorship has expanded beyond the arrest and imprisonment of journalists, leading to self-monitoring by journalists to ensure their safety. Such an approach is extremely dangerous. Editors and supervisors also [prevent journalists from](#) carrying out their duties out of fear of retaliation from authorities.<sup>22</sup> Even journalists in government-funded media are punished if they show solidarity with their colleagues. For instance, in November 2022, Naderah Ebrahimi, an environmental reporter for IRNA News Agency, was fired for [signing](#) a statement in support of imprisoned journalists and faced direct personal threats from security agencies.<sup>23</sup>

The authorities' strategy has led to the silencing of independent reporting and suffocation of opposition, eroding public trust in domestic media and increasing reliance on foreign media outlets. Nonetheless, there is still hope for information to flow from inside Iran despite the repression. These restrictions on press freedom have significant implications for human rights and political freedom in Iran.

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<sup>22</sup> Iranian Sports Journalist Sofali "Released" From Prison <https://iranwire.com/en/journalism-is-not-a-crime/113654-iranian-sports-journalist-sofali-released-from-prison/>

<sup>23</sup> Women Journalists Without Chains Annual Report (2023).



## Iran's government use the following tactics to silence independent reporting:

Strict controls and censorship of public media.

The use of satellite dishes is prohibited.

Regularly blocking Persian language networks and radio stations broadcasting from outside the country.

Police frequently invade individuals' houses and seize satellite dishes.

Censorship and warnings regarding the themes covered by semi-official and independent media and periodicals.

The closure of thousands of independent news websites.

Prohibiting the use of Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram.

Requiring journalists to self-monitor.



## Fourthly, the Continued Flow of Information

Despite the widespread fear, helplessness, and despair among Iranian journalists due to the government's campaign of arrests and imprisonment, a group of them has chosen to resist the imposed reality and continue reporting news and facts. This determination has enabled the flow of information both within the country and beyond its borders to persist, despite the obstacles faced. The enduring spirit of these individuals is reminiscent of a well-known Persian proverb that speaks of a tree's resilience: "Regardless of how many times it is attacked and wounded, it will not wither, but will bloom once again."

- Iran's Schoolgirl Poisoning Scandal: following the publication of his report on a mysterious wave of poisonings affecting Iranian schoolgirls in the city of Qom in November 2022, Ali Pourtabatabaei anticipated that he would face targeted retaliation.<sup>24</sup> As expected, [he was arrested](#) on March 5th, 2023. Despite his detention, the report's findings [quickly spread](#), and similar cases emerged in other Iranian cities, fueling anger and concern among Iranians worried about the safety of their daughters.<sup>25</sup> In response to the growing anger from parents and the need to manage the narrative around the wave of poisonings affecting schoolgirls, the Iranian authorities implemented [measures to control](#) the flow of information. This included censorship of media outlets and legal action taken against several newspapers, editors-in-chief of "Hamshahri," "Hadath 24," and "Sharq," as well as other journalists and activists, on charges of "protecting the mental health of individuals and families" and "dealing with the dissemination of lies and rumors about the recent poisoning incidents."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, authorities [instructed](#) schools across the country to withhold information about the poisonings from the media.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/persian/world-64858616> بازداشت خبرنگار پیگیر مسمومیت دختران در قم، تشنج در مجلس

<sup>25</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/27ljl23> مسمومیت در مدارس دخترانه؛ جریانی در قم و اصفهان "مرکز نقل"

<sup>26</sup> اعلام جرم دادستانی تهران علیه مدیر مسئولان هممیهن و شرق و آذر منصوری، صادق زیباکلام و رضا کیانیان <https://tinyurl.com/28q6x6o4>

<sup>27</sup> دستورالعمل جدید به مدارس در مواجهه با مسمومیت: پخش شیرینی، صحبت با رسانه‌ها و خروج از مدرسه ممنوع!



- Reports on Organ Trade and Acid Attacks: In May, the prosecutor general in Tehran [summoned](#)<sup>28</sup> the editors-in-chief of "Jahan-e San'at" and "Etemad" newspapers following their reports on the sale of Iranians' body parts abroad and the increasing acid attacks against women. The prosecutor [accused](#) them of "propagating false information,"<sup>29</sup> which is a common tactic used to silence journalists and restrict their work.

Jahan Sanat newspaper released a field report disclosing a significant rise in the number of [Iranians selling](#) their organs in neighboring countries due to poverty,<sup>30</sup> subsequently prompting authorities to [impose a ban](#) on the sale of organs abroad,<sup>31</sup> while Etemad newspaper raised alarm over the increasing incidence of acid attacks against Iranian women.

- Meat Riot: In February, the Iranian authorities temporarily closed the "reformist" Sazandegi newspaper because it refused to stop publishing field reports on corruption and problems within Iran, which were denounced despite threats. She produced [a report](#) titled "The Meat Riot... How Did Meat Disappear from the Tables of the Middle Class and Working Class?"<sup>32</sup> It discusses the government's mismanagement of rising meat prices. This tale had a significant influence throughout Iran. The Sazandegi newspaper was closed down by the Press Supervisory Board, a branch of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, [under articles](#) 5 and 6 of the Press Law, which prohibit media outlets from publishing false or rumor-based content<sup>33</sup> that disturbs public opinion, and according to Akbar Montajebi, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, the closure was primarily driven by a [previous report](#) that mocked a government-organized conference featuring "influential women" from

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<https://www.etemadonline.com/tiny/news-600795>

<sup>28</sup> Iranian journalists summoned over reports on organ trafficking and acid attacks

<https://www.iranintl.com/ar/202305051758>

اعلام جرم علیه روزنامه «جهان صنعت» برای گزارش افزایش فروش اعضای بدن در ایران

<https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-selling-kidney/32404294.html>

<sup>30</sup> افزایش فروش اعضای بدن در ایران <https://tinyurl.com/2433z7ng>

<sup>31</sup> فروش کلیه به اتباع خارجی ممنوع شد <https://tinyurl.com/2aamfp8g>

<sup>32</sup> طغیان گوشت، گوشت چگونه از سفره طبقه متوسط و طبقه کارگر حذف شد؟ <https://sazandegi.ir/post-1518>

<sup>33</sup> «سازندگی» توقیف شد، <https://tinyurl.com/2yyslpcy>



around the world,<sup>34</sup> widely seen as a blatant hypocrisy after the violent crackdown on women's protests following the death of Mahsa Amini.

- Resistance to uncover corruption: Authorities are afraid of reports of official corruption and utilize the judiciary as a key weapon to combat the truth. Four journalists from state-run news outlets were convicted of defamation and propagating fake news in July 2021 after reporting on potential corruption in the Ministry of Oil, though they were not imprisoned. Wahid Astari, a journalist and activist, [was sentenced to two years in prison and barred from all media operations in July 2022](#) after releasing information about a contentious shopping trip done earlier that year by the family of Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> RSF denounces reformist daily's closure by Iran, <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-denounces-reformist-daily-s-closure-iran>

<sup>35</sup> FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023, Iran <https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2023>



# IRAN'S TACTICS TO SILENCE JOURNALISTS ABROAD

- 1** **Assassination:** An Iranian assassination team targeting employees of the "Iran International" news channel was discovered in 2022.
- 2** **Threats of physical harm** to Iranians working for Persian-language TV networks.
- 3** **Pursuing and punishing family members** of journalists abroad.
- 4** **Legal actions, travel bans, and imprisonment in absentia** against journalists.
- 5** **Economic pressure, including freezing assets and confiscating passports.**
- 6** **These tactics demonstrate Iran's disregard for press freedom and human rights, and the risks faced by journalists reporting on sensitive issues.**





## Fifthly, Targeting Beyond Borders:

Despite the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is the largest authority managed by the government, owning about 60 Persian-language television channels in addition to foreign language channels such as Arabic and English, as well as approximately 30 radio stations that focus on spreading the principles of the Iranian Revolution and the policies of the authorities politically, socially, culturally and artistically, with the weakness of official public media, Iranians resort to media outlets broadcasting from outside the country. Many Iranians believe that the official IRIB programs represent the authority's media and do not represent their issues, concerns, and requirements, and do not represent them politically or socially. Therefore, despite the ban on satellite dishes, 60 to 70% of Iranians own them and spend most of their time watching Persian-language channels broadcasted from abroad, including BBC Persian, Deutsche Welle, Iran International, Gem TV, and others, all of which are not allowed to operate within Iran, and the authorities punish anyone who works with or appears on their screens from within the country.

- Elimination Threats: Due to ongoing murder threats against its journalists, Iran International TV stated in February 2023 that it will close its offices in London and relocate its operations to Washington, D.C. At least 15 attempts to attack the television were reported by UK counter-terrorism authorities. [The level of threat](#) has risen to the point where police officers can no longer guarantee the safety of journalists.<sup>36</sup> In November of 2022, reports emerged regarding an "Iranian assassination team" allegedly targeting individuals, including two journalists working for "Iran International" in London.<sup>37</sup> The team was

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<sup>36</sup> Iran International: Channel leaves UK after regime threats <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64690387.amp>

<sup>37</sup> Statement On Formal Threats To The Life Of Journalists On UK Soil, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211076450>



[reported](#) to have issued threats to their lives. A suspect has since [been apprehended](#) in connection with the case.<sup>38</sup>

In December 2019, Sadegh Saba, the news editor and former director of the Persian-language news service at BBC, stated that the Iranian regime was "strongly trying to silence" [the channel](#), targeting at least 12 of its journalists. "They are afraid. But we will not give up. We have a job to do," he said.<sup>39</sup> Aside from actual threats, internet threats of kidnapping, rape, and hanging are [part of](#) the authorities' filthy language, which primarily targets female journalists.<sup>40</sup>

- Relatives of journalists inside Iran: To silence and frighten these journalists, Iran pursues their relatives who work overseas. Security agents typically question family and ask them to put pressure on their journalist relatives to cease their journalistic activity and criticism of the authorities. If the distant journalist does not comply with the directives, they threaten them with consequences inside Iran ranging from incarceration to job loss to asset freeze.

Reporters Without Borders has previously [reported](#) that the Iranian regime is threatening and pressuring the families of 101 Iranian journalists working abroad, and also preventing them from transferring their money and property in the country.<sup>41</sup>

In 2020, a court in Iran [sentenced](#) Ali Nejad, the brother of a broadcaster on Voice of America Radio (Persian), to eight years in prison.<sup>42</sup> In May 2023, Sajjad Shahrabi, a journalist working for the state-owned Radio Republic of Iran, was arrested. He is the brother of Shima Shahrabi, the editor-in-chief of Iran Wire, who works from outside the country. In addition to the arrest of her brother, her family members were

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<sup>38</sup> Terror Suspect Arrested Near Iran International HQ Pleads Not Guilty

<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302144174>

<sup>39</sup> Iran threatens mass kidnappings of journalists in Britain <https://tinyurl.com/29yr62hc>

<sup>40</sup> Iran: Iran International TV Relocated Due To Serious Death Threats — CFWIJ Holds Iranian Regime Responsible <https://tinyurl.com/24hmnkqg>

<sup>41</sup> What are we talking about when we talk about freedom of the press in Iran?

<https://tinyurl.com/26m4mkww>

<sup>42</sup> Tweet by his lawyer on July 25, 2020 <https://twitter.com/vakilroaya/status/1283431616946339843>



interrogated about her journalistic work as a means of intimidating the exiled journalist.

According to [reports](#), the money of numerous BBC Persian journalists have been frozen in Iran, and authorities have confiscated their families' passports. Furthermore, family inside Iran have received over 300 abusive phone calls in less than 10 days, often at night.<sup>43</sup>



## ON VAGUE CHARGES

Iran's authorities control the Press Supervisory Authority, which can suspend and ban newspapers under the Press Law. The Iranian government frequently uses this authority to violate press freedom, with journalists facing harsh prison sentences and newspaper bans on unfounded allegations, including:

- Disrespect towards the Supreme Leader.
- Harming public morality and ideals.
- False accusations against prominent Iranians and legal professionals.
- Threats to national security.
- Impact on public opinion and Iranian citizens.

<sup>43</sup> Iran threatens mass kidnappings of journalists in Britain <https://tinyurl.com/29yr62hc>



## Conclusion

The Iranian regime has abused its power against the press to the point where, on May 12, 2023, an Iranian journalist in Tehran told us that he and most independent journalists are "terrified"; "I look at my door waiting for when they come to arrest me, my bag and clothes including my toothbrush and toothpaste are also ready."

We believe that the Iranian court is not autonomous in matters of the press and is subject to the executive branch's and the Supreme Leader's power and judgment. "Justice" is also noticeably lacking in the punishments handed down or trials scheduled for journalists. Recent occurrences have also demonstrated that the Press Supervisory Board is a tool for regulating and prosecuting journalists.

Iran is regarded as the most severe country in the Middle East and North Africa with regards to restrictions imposed on independent journalists, including the targeting of female journalists based on their gender and the content of their reports. This targeting is part of an organized process influenced by the authorities' perception of women in this oppressive country. The current state of press freedom in Iran is considered to be the worst since the country's inception of journalism over 180 years ago, with a significant decline observed since 2009 and a further deterioration since mid-2022. Despite these challenges, independent journalists within Iran remain committed to providing the public with accurate news and information amidst the extensive and systematic misinformation campaigns orchestrated by the government.

## Recommendations

In order to address the ongoing violations against journalists in Iran, we offer the following recommendations for Iranian authorities and the international community.

### **For Iranian authorities, we recommend:**



1. The immediate release of all imprisoned journalists and media personnel, as well as cessation of unjust trials that lack fair trial standards and end the harsh arbitrary sentences. The authorities should allow a team of human rights activists and international organizations to visit imprisoned journalists and female journalists released on bail and awaiting their lawyers until their release.
2. Ensuring the free flow of information in the country and stopping the continuous persecution faced by journalists, both male and female, within Iran.
3. Upholding the international covenant on civil and political rights that they have signed, which emphasizes that freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information, is a universal freedom.
4. Acknowledging that the imposition and siege of true news and information will not end the crises in the country. A free press is necessary to establish a free society and impartial authorities.
5. Repealing the arbitrary laws that restrict free journalism and persecute journalists, including amending the constitution and press laws and related laws to ensure that journalism remains free without any restrictions. The Press Supervisory Board should be dissolved, and independent journalists and female journalists should participate in developing a charter that outlines their goals and tasks.
6. Stopping the "elimination" teams, defamation campaigns, and threats against journalists, both male and female, who work outside the country. The authorities should refrain from pursuing their families inside Iran and stop all violations that target them because of their relatives' work.

For the international community, we recommend:

1. Calling on the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, to prioritize violations against journalists, both male and female, in Iran and continuously inform UN circles about what is happening in this file.



2. Urging countries where Iranian journalists and female journalists are present to protect them and protect free journalism by securing the headquarters of Persian-speaking channels, radios, and media outlets and not evading these commitments.
3. Calling on special rapporteurs on arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, and independent judiciary to visit Iran.
4. Urging international organizations concerned with press freedom and human rights to exert more pressure on Iran to ensure an end to the tragedy of imprisoned journalists, both male and female, in the country, and to ensure the free flow of news and information.