

IRAN'S WAR ON JOURNALISM AND JOURNALISTS

August 2024

UNITED
AGAINST
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IRAN

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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; plots and executes operations against journalists abroad; 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 ranked [176th](#) out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2024 [World Press Freedom Index](#).

Jailing Journalists

Iran [imprisons 27 journalists](#) as of August 2024, according to the human rights website JournalismsIsNotACrime.com. Members of the press were frequently arrested after reporting on topics considered sensitive by the regime, including: [widespread protests](#); the status of [COVID-19 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, 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 Committee to Protect Journalists 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.

Iran’s journalism law [authorizes](#) the government to take care that members of the press don’t “endanger the Islamic Republic,” “do not offend the clergy and the Supreme Leader,” and don’t “spread false information.”

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’”](#);

Field Code Changed

Field Code Changed

- [“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.

Former 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 [incarcerated in Evin Prison](#). The authorities repeatedly [threw](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe into [solitary confinement](#) and denied her [medical care](#) and [access to her family and legal counsel](#). As COVID-19 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 September 8, 2020, while Zaghari-Ratcliffe was furloughed at her parents’ home in Tehran, and [reportedly](#) about six months before her original prison sentence would end, she appeared before Tehran’s Revolutionary Court. The court told her she would be [tried on new charges](#) on September 13, five days later. However, on September 13, at the last minute, the court [postponed Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s trial](#) without providing a reason. The government [put her on trial again](#) on March 14 for the new charge of “spreading propaganda against the regime.” Specifically, the regime [accused](#) her of participating in a demonstration outside Iran’s embassy in the U.K. in 2009 and speaking with the BBC’s Persian service.

The [second trial](#) lasted one day. In April 2021, Nazanin was [sentenced](#) to a year in prison and prohibited from leaving Iran for a year thereafter, but was not directed to return to prison by the authorities.

On March 16, 2022, the Iranian regime [released](#) Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her fellow hostage Anousheh Ashoori (also a British-Iranian) into the custody of the British government, and the two left Iran. The two were freed after the U.K. paid Iran \$530 million to erase a debt dating back to the 1970s.

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.

Surveillance

The Iranian government surveils domestic and foreign journalists in Iran, 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."

Direct Censorship

The Islamic Republic directly censors journalism that crosses red lines and Iranian law [bans](#) the spreading of information that the regime thinks is "damaging"—under which category the government has included, according to the State Department, "discussions of women's rights, the situation of minorities, criticism of government corruption, and references to mistreatment of detainees." Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance examines all potential publications before they are released and ban or edits them at will. The state-run Islamic Republic News Agency decided which main issues Iranian media should report on and instructed outlets accordingly.

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 the weekly magazine *Seda* after the latter called for "high-level engagement" between the U.S. and Iran.

Prior to Iran's 2021 presidential election, the judiciary or intelligence ministry brought in at least 42 members of the press because of their election coverage. The regime put in place a number of restrictions on media coverage, including a ban on making "negative or critical comments about the election" or criticizing candidate Ebrahim Raisi, the eventual winner.

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, 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 2019 that the ministry had ceased issuing permits to foreign members of the press. Beginning in February 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 2020](#), when, [tweeting](#) that he was “Back in Europe for a while,” he wrote a [Times article](#) about his native Netherlands.

Bans on Satellite Television and Social Media

Iranian law [prohibits private broadcasters](#), and the regime also [bans the use of satellite dishes](#) and, since 2003, [jams foreign satellite television channels](#), including news outlets like BBC Persian 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 July 2021 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 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, X, and YouTube.

Legislation has been pending before Iran’s parliament entitled the “Regulatory System for Cyberspace Services Bill.” This internet protection bill, according to a [letter](#) from human rights groups, will “result in even further reductions in the availability of international internet bandwidth in Iran and violate the right to privacy and access to a secure and open internet.” The draft law also establishes a Secure Gateway Task Force which will include representatives from the armed forces and security agencies and will operate under the auspices of the National Center of Cyberspace. All technology companies will also be required to register representatives in Iran, and work with the Islamic Republic’s authorities in surveillance efforts. U.N. special rapporteurs have registered [concerns](#).

Operations and Threats against Journalists Abroad

The Islamic Republic’s war on journalists extends beyond Iran’s borders. The most prominent examples of this include the cases of Ruhollah Zam, Voice of America’s Masih Alinejad, Iran International, and BBC Persian.

Ruhollah Zam

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.

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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.

Zam was [tried](#) in February 2020 in Tehran’s Revolutionary Court. Zam was reportedly charged with either [15](#) or [17](#) counts, [including](#) “sowing corruption on earth,” insulting “the sanctity of Islam,” and “conspiring with the US Government against the Islamic Republic of Iran”—all of which carry the death penalty—as well as having “committed offences against the country’s internal and external security,” “complicity in provoking and luring people into war and slaughter,” “espionage for the French intelligence service,” “spying for Israeli intelligence services via the intelligence services of one of the countries in the region,” “establishment and administration of the Amad News channel and the Voice of People,” and “insulting Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei.”

An Iranian judiciary spokesman [announced](#) on June 30, 2020, that Zam had been convicted and sentenced to death for 13 counts, which were grouped together and treated as cases of “sowing corruption on earth.” He was also sentenced to life in prison for “[several other charges](#),” which were unnamed. The regime [executed](#) Zam on December 12, 2020.

Masih Alinejad

Masih Alinejad is a journalist and human rights activist who [works as a presenter](#) for the Voice of America Persian News Network. She [founded](#) the “[My Stealthy Freedom](#)” campaign, which protests mandatory hijab in Iran by posting photos of Iranian women with their hair uncovered.

In September 2019, the regime [arrested](#) three relatives of Alinejad. Some of them were put in solitary confinement, according to reports. The authorities reportedly later released one of the three relatives after interrogating him and warned him that contact with Alinejad or “her team” was a crime. In March 2019, the regime interrogated Alinejad’s elderly mother for two hours and videotaped the session.

In 2021, a U.S. federal court [unsealed an indictment](#) of an Iranian intelligence official—Alireza Shavaroghi Farahani—and three Iranian intelligence assets for “kidnapping, sanctions violations, bank and wire fraud, and money laundering.” The indictment also charged an Iranian national residing in California, Niloufar Bahadorifar, as a coconspirator. “[T]he government of Iran directed a number of state actors to plot to kidnap a U.S.-based journalist and American citizen, and to conduct surveillance on U.S. soil—all with the intention to lure our citizen back to Iran as retaliation for their freedom of expression,” said the assistant director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Counterintelligence Division. The U.S. Department of Justice stated:

Victim-1 is an author and journalist who has publicized the government of Iran’s human rights abuses. . . . Farahani and his network procured the services of private investigators to surveil, photograph and video record Victim-1 and Victim-1’s household members in Brooklyn. Farahani’s network procured days’ worth of surveillance at Victim-1’s home and the surrounding area, videos and photographs of the victim’s family and associates, surveillance of the victim’s residence, and the installation of and access to a live high-definition video feed of Victim-1’s home. The network repeatedly insisted on high-quality photographs and video recordings of Victim-1 and Victim-1’s household members; a large volume of content; pictures of visitors and objects around the house; and depictions of Victim-1’s body language. . . . The network that Farahani directs has also targeted victims in other countries, including victims in Canada, the United Kingdom and the

United Arab Emirates, and has worked to procure similar surveillance of those victims.

Alinejad [told](#) the *Guardian* after the indictment's unsealing that she was the intended victim of the kidnapping plot. "About eight months or so ago, the FBI warned me that there was a plot against me," she said. "I said that's not exactly news, I get death threats daily. The next thing is that the FBI tell me that I'm being targeted, that I am under photo and video surveillance in an operation by the intelligence ministry ... My family stayed in three safe houses for three months."

Bahadorifar, the indicted California resident, pleaded guilty in 2021 to "conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act" and was [sentenced](#) to four years' imprisonment.

In July 2022, police [arrested](#) a New York man, Khalid Mehdiyev, whom they observed "behav[ing] suspiciously" outside Alinejad's Brooklyn home. Alinejad posted a video on Twitter of a man walking back and forth on her front porch. She [said](#) that he had knocked on her door but she did not answer because she was in a Zoom meeting. Investigators discovered a "loaded AK-47-style assault weapon" in Mehdiyev's car. Mehdiyev was charged with "possession of a firearm with a destroyed serial number."

In January 2023, a federal court [unsealed](#) an indictment of three members of an Eastern European organized-crime organization, including Mehdiyev, "for plotting the murder of a U.S. citizen who has been targeted by the Government of Iran for speaking out against the regime's human rights abuses." One of Mehdiyev's codefendants, Rafat Amirov, is a resident of Iran but is also in U.S. custody. The third defendant, Polad Omarov, was [extradited](#) to the U.S. by the Czech Republic in February 2024. The three are set to [go on trial](#) in 2025.

Commenting on the indictment at the time of its unsealing, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland [said](#):

The Victim in this case was targeted for exercising the rights to which every American citizen is entitled. The Victim publicized the Iranian Government's human rights abuses; discriminatory treatment of women; suppression of democratic participation and expression; and use of arbitrary imprisonment, torture, and execution. The Department of Justice will not tolerate attempts by an authoritarian regime to undermine those protections and the rule of law upon which our democracy is based. We will not tolerate attempts by a foreign power to threaten, silence, or harm Americans.

The three defendants were charged with murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire, and conspiracy to commit money laundering. Mehdiyev was also charged with possessing a firearm with an obliterated serial number.

The U.S. government continues to provide protection to Alinejad, who [told](#) the press in 2024 that she has moved to almost 20 FBI safe-houses in the past four years.

Iran International and BBC Persian

Tehran has [repeatedly threatened](#) journalists at Iran International and BBC Persian, two London-based, Farsi-language news networks that Iran bans.

Iran's intelligence ministry [stated](#) in 2019 that employment with Iran International is "proof of collaboration in terrorist actions with the enemies of Iran," said it had arrested several persons for sending information to the network, and [claimed](#) that it had "monitored and identified all movements and actions"

of Iran International staff and would punish those among them who “serve foreigners” and “betray the country.” The Iranian judiciary also [prohibited](#) financial transactions with over 150 Iran International personnel and the intelligence ministry said network staff would be “prosecuted at an international level.” Later in 2019, Iran’s ambassador to the UK, Hamid Baedinejad, [tweeted](#) that Iranian journalists employed by Farsi-language TV channels headquartered in London, such as Iran International and BBC Persian, were “agents and mercenaries of foreign services, paid by the country’s enemies and acting against the national interest.”

In 2020, Iran International [claimed](#) that Iranian intelligence had threatened to kidnap journalists working for the network and bring them back to Iran. The network also stated that Iranian intelligence had pressured such journalists’ relatives living in Iran to convince the journalists to stop working for Iran International.

Iranian Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib [stated](#) in November 2022 that the regime considered Iran International a “terrorist” group, would treat cooperation and ties to the network as a threat to Iran’s national security, and would go after the network’s “agents.” The same month, a source in British law enforcement confirmed that two British-Iranian journalists working for Iran International had been informed of their lives were in danger, citing an increase “credible” threats from Iran’s security forces.

In December 2022, the Iranian regime [rolled out sanctions](#) on Iran International and BBC Persian, claiming both networks were engaged in “incitement of riots” and “support of terrorism” due to their coverage of the demonstrations that swept Iran following the September 2022 death of Mahsa “Jina” Amini in Morality Police custody.

In February 2023, UK police [charged](#) an Austrian citizen, Magomed-Husejn Dovtaev, with “collecting information likely to be useful for committing or preparing an act of terrorism” two days after arresting him near Iran International’s headquarters. Prosecutors later [alleged](#) that Dovtaev traveled to London to collect “hostile reconnaissance” on the building out of which the network operated. A London jury [found Dovtaev guilty](#) in December 2023 and he was sentenced to three-and-a-half years’ imprisonment.

Later in February 2023, Iran international [suspended operating](#) in Britain due to what it called a “significant escalation in state-backed threats from Iran,” adding, “Threats had grown to the point that it was felt it was no longer possible to protect the channel’s staff.” The network continued to operate in Washington, DC. The commander in chief of the IRGC, Gen. Hossein Salami, [crowed](#) following the closure of Iran International’s London studios, saying the threats to the network’s personnel “show how far the Islamic Revolution’s realm of power, field of infiltration and radius of influence has extended.”

Iran International [relaunched](#) in London in September 2023 from a new location. About a week prior, Intelligence Minister Khatib [issued](#) new threats against the network. “Support from various countries will not deter us from taking invasive security measures,” including against foreign-based media channels that promoted “terrorism,” Khatib said. “We believe that Iran International is a terrorist network, and naturally we deem it our duty and mission to act against them wherever and whenever we deem appropriate. . . . no terrorist media will be safe.”

Also in September 2023, Iranian officials [threatened and accosted](#) an Iran International journalist in New York. The incidents occurred when the officials were visiting New York as part of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi’s delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. One of the officials attempted to seize the mobile phone of Iran International’s Kian Amani. Another official, Reza Naghipour, after being asked by Amani about the regime’s killing of protesters the previous year, [replied](#), “I really like your hand that is

trembling. You'll all be trembling like this for the rest of your lives. All the enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran must tremble."

In December 2023, Britain's ITV [published](#) a story revealing that the IRGC had planned to kill two Iran International anchors in London the previous year, before the network closed its studios in that city. The operation was conceived of and overseen by Mohammad Reza Ansari, an IRGC commander [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. in 2023 for his "participat[ion] in a series of terrorist plots including assassination plots targeting former United States government officials [reportedly Mike Pompeo and John Bolton], dual U.S. and Iranian nationals, and Iranian dissidents." Ansari's initial plan was for a car bombing aimed at Iran International's "director and his deputy, and five to six people." The plan was later changed to a stabbing targeting network presenters Fardad Farahzad and Sima Sabet. Ansari and other organizers of the plot enjoy a close relationship with the Syrian regime. They planned to use a human smuggler to carry out the assassination, but he turned out to be a double agent.

March 2024 marked the first violent attack actually carried out against an Iran International journalist. Presenter Pouria Zeraati was [stabbed](#) in the leg outside his home in London. Zeraati survived. Three men from Eastern Europe suspected of carrying out the attack speedily [fled](#) the country. Fearing for their safety, Zeraati and his family [moved abroad](#) several months later. The suspects [remain at large](#) abroad.

In June 2024, Iran International journalist Mehran Abbasian, based in Sweden, [went into hiding](#) in a safe house following threats against his life. "Recently, a criminal group in Sweden has been tasked by the Islamic Republic with killing me and one of my colleagues," Abbasian said.

That same month, Kazem Gharibabadi, the head of the Iranian Judiciary's Human Rights Headquarters, [posted on X](#) that Iran International "has appealed to human rights mechanisms in hopes of reducing Iran's pressure, unaware that we will not appease terrorists!"

The BBC has [said](#) that the Iranian regime has harassed and threatened personnel at BBC Persian [since 2009](#), when the network covered protests that broke out throughout Iran after the regime rigged that year's presidential election.

In 2017, the Iranian regime [intensified its harassment](#) of BBC Persian personnel by opening a criminal investigation into over 150 current or former such staffers 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.

In 2018, the BBC [told](#) the United Nations Human Rights Council that Iran was engaging in a campaign of harassment and threats against the network's personnel and their Iran-based relatives. As of March of that year, over 20 BBC Persian journalists or their relatives had received death threats, some resulting in UK police protection.

A female BBC Persian journalist [said](#) that Iranian security forces had raided her father's house in Tehran and held her sister in the city's infamously brutal Evin Prison. The journalist then received pressure from Iranian intelligence agents via Skype to end her employment with BBC Persian or commit espionage against her fellow journalists in exchange for her sister being released. When the journalist refused, the regime held her sister in solitary confinement for over two weeks. The journalists recorded her conversations with the Iranian intelligence actors. Another woman working for BBC Persian received an e-mail from an anonymous sender pressuring her to cease employment at the network and saying they knew the school her young son went to. And Iranian intelligence called in the mother of a BBC Persian senior

producer for questioning and said to her that her son might be involved in a car accident in London if he continued being employed by the network.

Iranian persecution of BBC Persian personnel again [intensified](#) after the network's coverage of widespread demonstrations in Iran against the regime in November 2019. The regime [threatened](#) journalists working for the network, 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.

The BBC has submitted [multiple](#) complaints to the United Nations over the years regarding the Iranian regime's threatening behavior against BBC Persian personnel. In 2022, for example, the BBC [filed a complaint](#) alleging online threats against women working for BBC News Persian.

UN human rights experts have repeatedly expressed concern over the Iranian regime's threatening behavior against BBC Persian personnel.

In 2020, for example, such experts [said](#):

[j]ournalists working for the BBC Persian Service and other Farsi-language news outlets outside Iran have faced threats, criminal investigations, unlawful surveillance, freezing of assets, defamation and harassment by Iranian authorities. Several journalists have also been targeted for going public about the harassment and seeking protection from the UN. Their families residing in Iran have faced harassment and intimidation by Iranian authorities. In some cases, family members were deprived of their liberty and held in degrading conditions, and ordered to tell their relatives to stop working for the BBC. . . . Reports also indicate a pattern of gender-based harassment, targeting women journalists since 2009, and including the dissemination of false stories, spreading of rumours and slander, usually with highly misogynistic contents and threats of sexual violence. . . . These allegations are extremely concerning and if confirmed, would indicate that the Iranian authorities are prepared to use force extra-territorially, in violation of international law.

In 2022, UN human rights experts professed "grave concern over the continuation of reported harassment and intimidation of the BBC News Persian staff and their family members, which appears to be aimed at preventing them from continuing their journalistic activities with BBC News Persian." The experts cited years of "systematic attacks, including harassment, asset freezing, serious threats, and defamation campaigns implemented by the authorities against BBC News Persian journalists." The experts stated that they were "particularly concerned at the gendered physical and psychological threats and attacks against women journalists of BBC News Persian including death and rape threats online."

It bears noting that Iranian regime threats to Farsi-language media operating abroad have come not only from the intelligence apparatuses and other 'hardline' sources but from purported 'reformists.' For example, in January 2020, after the IRGC shot down a Ukrainian civilian airliner over Iran, Hesameddin Ashena, the media adviser to then-President Hassan Rouhani, a supposed moderate, [tweeted a warning](#) to "the Iranian agents of Persian-language media [abroad] not to participate in the psychological warfare regarding the Ukrainian airliner [crash] and stop cooperating with those who are at war with Iran."