Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Iran: Journalists and internet based media

Version 2.0

October 2016

Preface

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and policy guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling particular types of protection and human rights claims. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the policy guidance contained with this note; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

Country Information

The COI within this note has been compiled from a wide range of external information sources (usually) published in English. Consideration has been given to the relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability of the information and wherever possible attempts have been made to corroborate the information used across independent sources, to ensure accuracy. All sources cited have been referenced in footnotes. It has been researched and presented with reference to the Common EU [European Union] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information (COI), dated April 2008, and the European Asylum Support Office's research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology, dated July 2012.

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve the guidance and information we provide. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email the Country Policy and Information Team.

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office's COI material. The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. IAGCI may be contacted at:

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration,

5th Floor, Globe House, 89 Eccleston Square, London, SW1V 1PN.

Email: Chiefinspector@icinspector.gsi.gov.uk

Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's website at http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/

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Policy Guidance

Updated: 24 October 2016

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

1.1.1 Fear of persecution or serious harm by the Iranian authorities due to actual or perceived criticism of the government in their role as a journalist (including internet-based media), a blogger or as an online activist.

1.2 Points to Note

1.2.1 Internet activity could also include any activity undertaken outside of Iran.

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2. Consideration of Issues

2.1 Credibility

2.1.1 For further information and guidance on assessing credibility, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview. See the Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants.

2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing. See the Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis.

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2.2 Assessment of risk

i. to the journalist, blogger or online activist

2.2.1 The Iranian authorities severely restrict freedom of speech and press freedom. It reviews all potential publications – including foreign printed materials – prior to their domestic release and may deem potential publications unpublishable, remove text or require word substitution for terms deemed inappropriate (see Legal position). However, simply being subject to such censorship does not of itself give rise to a protection need.

2.2.2 The Iranian authorities reportedly harass, detain, abuse, torture, and use vaguely worded criminal provisions to prosecute, flog and otherwise severely punish publishers, editors and journalists. This also includes those involved in internet-based media, such as bloggers and users of social media, where their reporting is, or is perceived to be, critical of the government or offensive to public morality. Perceived government critics including journalists and bloggers are at risk of torture and are likely to be held in poor detention conditions, some of which are capable of breaching the Article 3 ECHR threshold (see Treatment by the authorities and the country policy and information note on Iran: prison conditions).

2.2.3 The authorities monitor the press, internet cafes, cyberspace and private communications including social networking sites and messaging apps, and charge persons with crimes against national security and insulting the regime based on letters, e-mails, and other public and private communications (see Internet access).

2.2.4 Since the Iranian Government is not able to monitor the activities of every individual, decision makers must consider the level of involvement of the person, in addition to any political activity that the person may have previously been involved with in Iran.

2.2.5 Decision makers must be satisfied that persons claiming to be journalists or bloggers are able to demonstrate that their activities have brought, or will bring them, to the adverse attention of the Iranian authorities. Decision makers should give consideration to all relevant factors, including in particular:

- the subject matter of the material in question;
- the language and tone used;
- the method of communication;
- the reach of the publication (i.e. how many people are they communicating with);
- the publicity attracted;
- the frequency of such publications;
- any past adverse interest by the authorities.

2.2.6 With regard to sur place activities, decision makers must assess risk taking account of factors similar to those set out in the country guidance case of BA (Demonstrators in Britain – risk on return) Iran CG [2011] UKUT 36 (IAC).

ii. Treatment of family members

2.2.7 Family members of journalists and online activists have been targeted on occasions for harassment and detention (see Journalists).

2.2.8 When considering claims from such persons, decision makers should give consideration to all relevant factors, including in particular:

- the relationship to the person;
- actual or perceived support for, or facilitation of, the activities of the person;
- any previous adverse interest in the family member from the authorities, e.g. arrests, detention, harassment;
- the specific profile, history and activities of the person.

2.2.9 For further information and guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status

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2.3 Protection

2.3.1 As the person's fear is of ill treatment/persecution at the hands of the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.

2.3.2 For further information and guidance on assessing the availability or not of state protection, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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2.4 Internal relocation

2.4.1 As the person's fear is of ill treatment/persecution at the hands of the state, they will not be able to relocate to escape that risk.

2.4.2 For further information on considering internal relocation and the factors to be taken into account, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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2.5 Certification

2.5.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

2.5.2 For further information and guidance on certification, see the Asylum Instruction on Non-Suspensive Appeals: Certification Under Section 94 of the NIA Act 2002.

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3. Policy summary

3.1.1 Perceived government critics or those offending public morality, including journalists, social media users and bloggers, may be subjected by the Iranian authorities to harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrest, flogging, severe custodial sentences, incommunicado detention, unfair trial and torture.

3.1.2 Victims of such treatment would not be able to access effective state protection or internally relocate to mitigate any risk.

3.1.3 In some cases, family members may also be at risk of ill-treatment.

3.1.4 Each case should be considered on its individual merits, but persons who can show that they have come to the adverse attention of the authorities or are reasonably likely to do so, will normally qualify for asylum on the grounds of their actual or perceived political opinion.

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Country Information

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4. Overview

4.1.1 The US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015 noted that:

'The law limits freedom of speech, including by members of the press. Authorities did not permit individuals to criticize publicly the country's system of government, supreme leader, or official religion. Security forces and the country's judiciary punished those who violated these restrictions. They also often punished persons who publicly criticized the president, the cabinet, and the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament). The government monitored meetings, movements, and communications of opposition members, reformists, activists, and human rights defenders. It often charged persons with crimes against national security and insulting the regime based on letters, e-mails, and other public and private communications. Citizens also faced restrictions on social interaction and expression because authorities threatened arrest or punishment for the expression of ideas or images they viewed as violations of the legal moral code.'[1]

4.1.2 An March 2016 report from the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre entitled 'Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran' noted that:

'The legal provisions that criminalize certain types of speech are vague, and the charges brought against Iranian citizens based on these provisions are often politically motivated.

'The Iranian government tightly controls speech through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MOCAIG), the security apparatus, and the judiciary. The MOCAIG reviews books before they could be published, grants and revokes newspaper and magazine permits, and oversees musical and theatre performances. The security apparatus and the judiciary also monitor the press and the cyberspace, and they arrest and prosecute individuals who write or post content deemed illegal or inappropriate.'[2]

4.1.3 Freedom House noted in their Freedom in the World report for 2016 that:

'Freedom of expression and access to information remain severely limited both online and offline. However, some journalists and citizens say the situation improved slightly after Rouhani took office. The state broadcasting company is tightly controlled by hard-liners and influenced by the security

[1] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

[2] Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, March 2016, Conclusion http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/1000000635-restrictions-on-freedom-of-expression-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html Date accessed: 7 September 2016.

apparatus. News and analysis are heavily censored, while critics and opposition members are rarely, if ever, given a platform on state-controlled television, which remains a major source of information for many Iranians. State television has a record of airing confessions extracted from political prisoners under duress, and it routinely carries reports aimed at discrediting dissidents and opposition activists.'

'Various forms of art face restrictions in Iran. All books must be approved by the Ministry of Culture in order to receive a publishing license. Scores of books have been banned, while authors have been accused of subversion, though there were reports in 2015 that book censorship had slightly eased and that some previously banned books were allowed to be published. Filmmakers also face censorship and official pressure. In June, artist and activist Atena Farghadani was sentenced to 12 years and nine months in prison for a cartoon that criticized members of parliament. It emerged in October that two poets, Fatemeh Ekhtesari and Mehdi Mousavi, had been sentenced to 11.5 and nine years in prison, respectively, as well as 99 lashes each, on charges that included "insulting sanctities." Filmmaker Keywan Karimi was sentenced that month to six years in prison and 223 lashes on similar charges.'[3]

4.1.4 Freedom House note in their Freedom on the net report 2015 published on 28 October 2015 that:

'The 2009 Computer Crime Law (CCL) outlines punishments for spying, hacking, piracy, phishing, libel, and publishing materials deemed to damage "public morality" or to be a "dissemination of lies." Punishments are severe and include the death penalty for offenses against public morality and chastity, as well as long prison sentences, draconian fines, and penalties for service providers who fail to enforce government content restrictions.'[4]

4.1.5 Amnesty International's annual report for 2016 stated that:

'The authorities continued to severely restrict freedoms of expression, association and assembly. They blocked Facebook, Twitter and other social media websites, closed or suspended media outlets including the Zanan monthly women's magazine, jammed foreign satellite television stations, arrested and imprisoned journalists and online and other critics, and suppressed peaceful protests.'[5]

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[3] Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2016- Iran, 7 March 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/iran Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[4] Freedom House, Freedom on the net 2015, 28 October 2015 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/iran Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[5] Amnesty International, Annual report- Iran 2015/2016, 24 February 2016, https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/ Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

5. Legal position

5.1 Press Law

5.1.1 A March 2016 report from the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre entitled 'Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran' noted that:

'Article 24 of the Iranian Constitution declares:

- Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified by law.'

'Over the years what can be considered "detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam" has been defined very broadly, and it has even included various expressions of Islamic belief.'

'The Press Law, last amended in 2009, expands the constitution's constraint on freedom of expression. Publishing atheistic articles or content that is prejudicial to Islamic codes, propagating luxury and extravagance, insulting Islam and its sanctities, offending senior Islamic jurists, quoting articles from the "deviant press, parties and groups which oppose Islam," and publishing statements against the Constitution are among actions expressly prohibited by Article 6 of this law.'

'The press law also restricts the individuals who may own or operate a media outlet. To be able to obtain a permit, a person must be a citizen of Iran and at least 25 years of age. Furthermore, he or she should not be in bankruptcy due to his or her own mistake. He or she should also not be publicly known for "deviance," and nor should he or she have been convicted of a crime that is punishable by loss of social rights. Other conditions are having a bachelor's degree or its equivalent from a religious seminary and acceptance of the constitution of the Islamic Republic. In order to make a decision regarding these qualifications, the Press Oversight Board should request a background check from the MOI, the police, and the Ministry of Justice.'[6]

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5.2 Propaganda

5.2.1 The US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015 noted that:

'The law states that anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state may be imprisoned for as long as one year; the law does not define "propaganda." The law also provides for prosecution of persons accused of instigating crimes against the state or national security or "insulting" Islam; the latter offense is punishable by death. The government severely restricted

[6] Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, March 2016, 4.2. Restrictions Imposed on Freedom of Expression by the Press Law http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/1000000635-restrictions-on-freedom-of-expression-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html Date accessed: 7 September 2016.

freedom of speech and of the press and used the law to intimidate or prosecute persons who directly criticized the government or raised human rights problems, as well as to bring ordinary citizens into adherence with the government's moral code.'[7]

5.2.2 Freedom House's report 'Freedom in the Press 2016' published in September 2016 noted that:

'Article 500 of the penal code states that anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state will be sentenced to between three months and a year in prison, but the code leaves "propaganda" undefined. Under Article 513, certain offenses deemed to be an "insult" to religion are punishable by death, or prison terms of one to five years for lesser offenses, with "insult" similarly undefined. In 2010, the government broadened the definition of the crime of moharebeh, or "enmity against God," in order to convict activists and journalists. Iranian law also provides for sentences of up to two years in prison, up to 74 lashes, or fines for those convicted of intentionally creating "anxiety and unease in the public's mind," spreading "false rumors," writing about "acts that are not true," and criticizing state officials; however, many prison sentences have been arbitrarily harsh, ranging from 6 to 10 years or more.'[8]

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5.3 Libel/slander laws

5.3.1 The USSD report for human rights in 2015 noted:

'The government commonly used libel laws or cited national security to suppress criticism. According to the law, if any publication contains personal insults, libel, false statements, or criticism, the insulted individual has the right to respond in the publication within one month. If the libel, insult, or criticism involves Islam or national security, the responsible person may be charged with apostasy and crimes against national security, respectively. The government applied the law throughout the year, often citing statements made in various media outlets or internet platforms that criticized the government, to arrest, prosecute, and sentence individuals for crimes against national security.'[9]

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[7] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[8] Freedom House, Freedom of the press 2016, 28 September 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/iran Date accessed: 5 October 2016.
[9] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

5.4 Censorship

5.4.1 The same source stated

'The law forbids government censorship but also prohibits dissemination of information the government considers "damaging." During the year the government censored publications--both reformist and conservative--that criticized official actions or contradicted official views or versions of events. "Damaging" information included discussions of women's rights and the situation of minorities, as well as criticism of the government. Officials routinely intimidated journalists into practicing self-censorship. Public officials often filed criminal complaints against newspapers, and the Press Supervisory Board referred such complaints to the Media Court for further action, including closure, suspension, and fines.'[10]

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5.5 Broadcasting

5.5.1 The USSD also noted:

'Under the constitution private broadcasting is illegal. The government maintained a monopoly over all television and radio broadcasting facilities through the government agency, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. Radio and television programming, the principal source of news for many citizens (especially in rural areas with limited internet access), reflected the government's political and socio-religious ideology. There were widespread reports of government "downlink" jamming of satellite broadcasts as signals entered the country. Satellite dishes remained illegal but ubiquitous, although police launched campaigns to confiscate privately owned satellite dishes throughout the country under warrants provided by the judiciary.'[11]

'Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, the main governmental agency in charge of audiovisual policy, directed all government-owned media. Under the constitution the supreme leader appoints the head of the audiovisual policy agency; a council composed of representatives of the president, the judiciary, and parliament oversees the agency's activities. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance reviews all potential publications, including foreign printed materials, prior to their domestic release, and may deem books unpublishable, remove text, or require word substitutions for terms deemed inappropriate. Independent print media companies existed, but the government severely limited their operations.'[12]

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[10] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[11] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[12] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

6. Treatment by the authorities

6.1 Internet access

6.1.1 The US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015 noted that:

'The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance must approve all internet service providers. The government also requires all owners of websites and blogs in the country to register with the ministry, which, along with the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and the Tehran Public Prosecutor's Office, compose the Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorized Websites, the governmental organization that determines censoring criteria. The same law that applies to traditional press applies to electronic media, and the Press Supervisory Board and judiciary invoked the law to close websites during the year.'

'According to Internet World Stats, the internet penetration rate was 57 percent, with 41 percent of the population regularly using the internet. Reflecting the internet's importance as a source for news and forum for political expression, the government adopted technology and shaped restrictive laws enabling it to ban access to particular sites and to filter traffic based on its content.'

'Ministry of Information and Communications Technology regulations prohibit households and cybercafes from having high-speed internet access, and the government requires cybercafes to install security cameras and to collect users' personal information. The government periodically reduced internet speed to discourage downloading material; however, in general there were slight improvements to speed as the government expanded access to 3G services for mobile devices.'

'NGOs reported the government continued to filter content on the internet. On May 5, Information and Communications Technology Minister Mahmoud Vaezi announced that the government had launched the second phase of "Smart Filtering," to "protect society from immoral harm" from certain websites and social networks. In September the supreme leader renewed the mandate of the Supreme Council for Cyberspace, which formulates the country's internet policies and regulations. The renewal transferred the Supreme Council from the authority of the president to the authority of the supreme leader.'[13]

6.1.2 The UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran dated 10 March 2016 noted:

'Security forces have reportedly increased efforts to monitor internet cafes across Iran, especially in the capital Tehran. Tehran's chief of security

[13] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

forces, Hossein Sajedu, stated: “The scheme that has been in force since the beginning of the year has meant that the FATA [cyber] police, along with security force agents, have carried out 5,280 inspections on internet cafes in the Greater Tehran region. The operation is meant to maintain calm and security in Tehran neighbourhoods and the security forces will crack down on any immoral and illegal act by internet café owners.” Over 272 internet cafe businesses have been repeatedly shuttered in 2015 for their alleged “threat to societal norms and values.”[14]

6.1.3 Freedom House’s report Freedom on the Net 2015 published on 28 October 2015 noted that:

‘The Iranian authorities continued to restrict access to tens of thousands of websites in 2014-2015, particularly those of international news sources, the opposition, ethnic and religious minorities, and human rights groups. Websites are also filtered if they differ from the official doctrine of the state’s Islam.

‘The online sphere is heavily monitored by the state in Iran. Both Iranian Cyber Police (FATA) and the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Ministry have announced that they are capable of monitoring all messages sent on messaging apps Viber, Tango, and WhatsApp. However, it remains unclear how the authorities can technically monitor the content of messages, given that some of these apps encrypt their messages. All platforms and content hosted in Iran are subject to arbitrary requests by various authorities to provide more information on their users. Local equivalents of international platforms do not guarantee an adequate level of protection for users. For instance, a replica of Facebook, Facenama, was hacked, resulting in the leaking of the personal information of all of its users in December 2014.

‘The expansion of Iran’s “national information network” (SHOMA) further threatens to infringe on users’ privacy in Iran, such as a proposal to require all internet users to log-in with a unique ID to browse the internet. The government claims the IDs are needed to fight corruption; however, such functionality will also enable the authorities to find out the real identities of online users and target them for their online activities.[15]

6.1.4 Freedom House’s world report for 2016 noted that: ‘Tens of thousands of websites remain filtered, including news sites and social media, which have otherwise become a relatively free platform of expression for many Iranians. The government has said it is pursuing "smart filtering" for social-networking sites such as Instagram, allowing it to block certain content without obstructing the entire service.’[16]

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[14] UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 10 March 2016, para 41 http://www.refworld.org/docid/56f1802b4.html Date accessed: 12 September 2016.
[15] Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2015, 28 October 2015, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/iran Date accessed: 13 September 2016.
[16] Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2016- Iran, 7 March 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/iran Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

6.1.5 Amnesty Internationals annual report for 2015/2016 noted:'In August, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology announced the second phase of "intelligent filtering" of websites deemed to have socially harmful consequences, with the support of a foreign company. The authorities continued efforts to create a "national internet" that could be used to further impede access to information via the internet, and arrested and prosecuted those who used social media to express dissent. In June, a spokesperson for the judiciary said that the authorities had arrested five people for "anti-revolutionary" activities using social media, and five others for "acts against decency in cyber-space".[17]

6.1.6 Reuters reported in May 2016 that:

'Iran has given foreign messaging apps a year to move data they hold about Iranian users onto servers inside the country, prompting privacy and security concerns on social media. […] "Foreign messaging companies active in the country are required to transfer all data and activity linked to Iranian citizens into the country in order to ensure their continued activity," Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace said in new regulations carried by state news agency IRNA on Sunday. The council, whose members are selected by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, gave social media companies a year to comply, IRNA said, adding that the measures were based on the "guidelines and concerns of the supreme leader". The new requirements could affect messaging app Telegram in particular. The cloud-based instant messaging service has gained popularity because of its high level of security and is estimated to have about 20 million users in Iran, which has a total population of about 80 million. In November authorities said they had arrested administrators of more than 20 groups on Telegram for spreading "immoral content" as part of a clampdown on freedom of expression.'[18]

6.1.7 Freedom House's report 'Freedom in the Press 2016' published in September 2016 noted that:

'The authorities' systematic internet controls and pervasive censorship have continued despite Rouhani's promises to ease restrictions on media and information. The government has relaxed curbs on media coverage of topics that were previously deemed sensitive, including the state of U.S.-Iran relations and some very limited discussion of the house arrest of opposition leaders. However, the wholesale blocking of social media websites including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, and surveillance of the activities of Iranians who manage to reach such platforms, remained in effect in 2015. In January, the IRCG's cybercrime unit confirmed the existence of an extensive internet surveillance program believed to have been initiated the previous year. The unit said that more than 130 Facebook pages had been taken down as part of the operation, and that more than 30 individuals had been

[17] Amnesty International, Annual report- Iran 2015/2016, 24 February 2016, https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/ Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[18] Reuters, Iran orders social media sites to store data inside country 29 May 2016 http://www.reuters.com/article/internet-iran-idUSL8N18Q0IN Date accessed: 5 October 2016.

arrested or detained. In April [2015], Iran's communications minister announced that the government had begun implementing a so-called "intelligent filtering" program, which allowed it to surveil online activity and caused disruptions to a number of popular mobile messaging applications, including WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram. Disruptions to Telegram's service persisted into October. The government denied that it was deliberately enforcing a ban, though it did admit that authorities had previously asked Telegram to block "immoral content."

'Although access to the websites of international Persian-language media outlets and other organizations is similarly blocked by Iranian authorities, many Iranians use circumvention tools to reach censored information on the internet and discuss taboo subjects on banned social-media sites. The regime's increased monitoring of such activity in recent years is a tacit acknowledgment of its inability to completely silence online dissent through blocking. The internet in general is subject to extremely slow speeds and other practical obstacles in Iran, but it continues to expand as an important source of diverse news coverage and analysis. The penetration rate reached about 44 percent in 2015.'[19]

6.1.8 Reporters Sans Frontières reported in September 2016 that:

'Two news agencies and several information websites have been blocked since 4 September, a week after the official unveiling of the "National Information Network," also known as "Halal Internet".

'The first phase of the National Information Network was formally celebrated on 27 August by several government officials including the first vice-president, the minister of communication and information technology and the secretary-general of the Cyberspace Supreme Council.'[20]

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6.2 Bloggers

6.2.1 Freedom House's report Freedom on the Net 2015 published on 28 October 2015 noted that:

'Iran continues to be an extremely dangerous environment for internet users. Iranian laws heavily restrict what is acceptable speech online and specify harsh punishments for those who deliberately flout restrictions, as well as those who have inadvertently drawn the ire of authorities. The constitution provides for limited freedom of opinion and expression, but numerous, haphazardly enforced laws restrict these rights in practice. The 2000 Press Law, for example, forbids the publication of ideas that are contrary to Islamic principles or detrimental to public rights, none of which are clearly defined.

[19] Freedom House, Freedom of the press 2016, 28 September 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/iran Date accessed: 5 October 2016.
[20] Reporters Sans Frontières, Iran creates "Halal Internet" to control online information, 06 September 2016 https://rsf.org/en/news/iran-creates-halal-internet-control-online-information Date accessed: 12 October 2016.

The government and judiciary regularly invoke this and other vaguely worded legislation to criminalize critical opinions.

'Despite President Hassan Rouhani's progressive views on accessing social networking sites, his voice has remained silent as Iranian internet users faced increasing arrests and severe punishments. During the coverage period, a number of users were arrested and imprisoned for their online activities, particularly for posts on social media sites that are officially blocked within the country. As of mid-2015, Reporters Without Borders reports that 26 netizens remain imprisoned for online activities.'[21]

6.2.2 The US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015 noted that:

'The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet, monitored private online communications, and censored online content. Individuals and groups practiced self-censorship. The government collected personally identifiable information in connection with citizens' peaceful expression of political, religious, or ideological opinion or beliefs.

'Organizations, including the Basij "Cyber Council," the Cyber Police, and the Cyber Army, which was presumed to be controlled by the IRGC, monitored, identified, and countered alleged cyber threats to national security. These organizations especially targeted citizens' activities on social networking websites officially banned by the Committee in Charge of Determining Offensive Content, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr and reportedly harassed persons who criticized the government, including by raising sensitive social problems. NGOs reported that the government attempted to block internet users' access to technology that would allow them to circumvent government content filters.

'In October the government banned actress Sadaf Taherian from returning to the country after she posted photos on her social media account that showed her not wearing the "hejab" (headscarf), which is mandatory in the country for all women appearing in public. Authorities briefly arrested an unnamed man for posting photos with members of the opposite sex who were not wearing the hejab on his social media account in November, according to multiple press reports. Authorities also banned television show host and chef, Maedeh Hajari, from working after she commented disparagingly on social media sites about the death of an IRGC commander killed in Syria.

'The ICHRI reported that the Center for Investigation of Organized Cyber Crimes, a branch of the IRGC Cyber Defense Command, issued a press release January 31 [2015] claiming that several Facebook users had been arrested in a surveillance project called "Operation Spider," designed to stop the spread of corruption.'[22]

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[21] Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2015, 28 October 2015, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2015/iran Date accessed: 13 September 2016.
[22] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date

6.2.3 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran noted in an article titled 'Iran's IRGC Intensifies Crackdown on Facebook Users with 12 Arrests and 24 Summonses' dated 5 February 2015 that:

'An IRGC cyberspace specialist, Mostafa Alizadeh, announced in a statement on Iranian state television on February 1, that 12 Iranian Facebook users have been arrested on charges of "spreading corruption, and [carrying out a] mission to change family lifestyles." He added that 24 other citizens were summoned to answer questions about their Facebook activities.

'On January 31, a press release by the Center for Investigation of Organized Cyber Crimes, a subsidiary of the IRGC Cyber Defense Command, was published that stated several Facebook users had been arrested in a surveillance project by the IRGC named "Operation Spider" that is aimed at identifying and rooting out Facebook pages and activities that spread "corruption" and western-inspired lifestyles.'

6.2.4 The same report also noted:

'Alizadeh said that since September 2014, the IRGC has intensified its review of Facebook pages, and that 350 Facebook pages managed by 36 individuals had been identified and 130 of them deleted from Facebook.

'Last year, the IRGC arrested and prosecuted eight Facebook users on charges of "assembly and collusion against national security," "propaganda against the stage," "insulting the sacred," "insulting Heads of Branches," and "insulting individuals." Soheil Arabi, another Facebook user, has been sentenced to death for insulting the Prophet on Facebook.[23]

6.2.5 Human Rights Watch in their world report for 2016 stated that:

'In April [2015], an appeals court in Tehran sentenced six social media users to five to seven years in prison for their Facebook posts on charges of "assembly and collusion against the national security" and "insulting the sanctities." On July 13, 2014, a Tehran revolutionary court had previously sentenced eight Facebook users to a total of 127 years in prison for allegedly posting messages deemed to insult government officials and "religious sanctities," among other crimes.

'On June 8 [2015], authorities announced a wave of arrests of social media users and activists who "published illegal invitations on social networks ... [and] had anti-security tendencies."[24]

6.2.6 Freedom House's Freedom in the World report 2016 stated that:

'Authorities continue to target online activists. In September 2016, reports emerged that well-known internet activist and founder of the popular

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accessed: 31 August 2016.

[23] International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Iran's IRGC Intensifies Crackdown on Facebook Users with 12 Arrests and 24 Summonses, 5 February 2015, https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2015/02/facebook-arrests/ Date accessed: 7 September 2016.

[24] Human Rights Watch, World report 2016- Iran, 27 January 2016, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/iran#e81181 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

Weblogina portal Arash Zad had been detained since the previous month on unknown charges. Facebook activist Soheil Arabi, who had been arrested in 2013 and sentenced to death in 2014 for "insulting" the prophet Muhammad, had his death sentence commuted by the Supreme Court in June, though he still faced seven and a half years in prison, with two years of supervised theological study. Reporters Without Borders said in September that more than 100 online activists and bloggers had been arrested since Rouhani took office, in most cases by the intelligence branch of the IRGC.'[25]

6.2.7 In May 2016, the New York Post reported on a crackdown on models for their instagram selfies. The reported noted that:

'Eight Iranian Instagram models have been arrested and interrogated by Islamic police because their glamorous pictures were too "Western." Iran's feared morality police — the Basij — have targeted nearly 200 women whose snaps they deemed to be too revealing. And eight of those have been hauled before interrogators to answer questions after they posted snaps without the hijab headscarf. […] The operation named Spider-2 has pinpointed 58 models, 59 photographers and 51 salon owners. […] Each of the models, who include men, post numerous selfies and boast thousands of followers.'[26]

6.2.8 Middle East Eye's report 'Iran rounds up 450 social media users for 'immoral activities' dated 23 August 2016 noted that:

'Iran has "arrested or summoned" around 450 social media users over their online activities, a website linked to the powerful Revolutionary Guards said on Tuesday. Gherdab, the cyber arm of the Guards, said the people targeted administered pages on social networks including smartphone applications such as Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp. "These people were carrying out immoral activities, insulted religious beliefs or had illegal activities in the field of fashion," said Gherdab. It said the suspects would be put on trial without specifying how many exactly have been placed under arrest.'[27]

6.2.9 Reporters Sans Frontières reported in September 2016 that:

'For the past year, different sections of the Revolutionary Guards have been announcing the dismantling and systematic arrest of networks of people who act "against society's moral security," "modelling criminals" (those who have photos and videos of models) and those who "insult religious beliefs."

RSF has registered more than 800 cases of this kind since the start of 2016. The Centre for Monitoring Organized Crime, a Revolutionary Guard unit that

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[25] Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2016- Iran, 7 March 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/iran Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[26] New York Post, Iran's morality police are shaming models for their Instagram selfies, 17 May 2016 http://nypost.com/2016/05/17/islamic-police-arrests-iranian-models-for-instagram-selfies/ [date accessed 13 June 2016]
[27] Middle East Eye, Iran rounds up 450 social media users for 'immoral activities' 23 August 2016 http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-rounds-450-social-media-users-immoral-activities-52599347 Date accessed: 5 October 2016.

polices the Internet, announced on 23 August that "450 individuals responsible for pages on social networks such as Telegram, Whatsapp and Instagram" had been summoned and arrested.'[28]

6.2.10 Freedom House's report 'Freedom in the Press 2016' published in September 2016 noted that:

'Bloggers and online activists face many of the same legal repercussions for their work as do professional journalists. The judiciary frequently denies accused journalists and bloggers due process by referring their cases to the Revolutionary Courts, which generally feature closed-door hearings and denial of access to an attorney. Among other arrests during 2015, reports emerged in September that well-known technology blogger and internet entrepreneur Arash Zad had been arrested at a Tehran airport while attempting to exit the country the previous month. He was believed to have been arrested by the intelligence unit of the IRGC. Authorities did not provide a reason for his arrest or information about where he was being detained.'[29]

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6.3 Journalists

6.3.1 The UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran dated 10 March 2016 noted:

'As of January 2016 at least 47 journalists and Internet users were reportedly imprisoned in the country. At least six prominent artists, writers and musicians have been arbitrarily detained or prosecuted since October 2015. Iran ranks among the seventh most censored country in the world. Iran also ranked 173rd out of 180 countries on the World Press freedom index.

'The Special Rapporteur regrets what appears to be a widening crackdown on freedom of expression and opinion during the reporting period, punctuated by a series of arrests carried out by the intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guards and harsh sentences against journalists, cyberactivists and artists. President Rouhani has reportedly criticised the string of arrests against individuals likened to an "infiltration network," and noted the apparent connection between allegations made in ultra-conservative news outlets, and arrests that follow.'[30]

6.3.2 A March 2016 report from the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre entitled 'Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran' noted that:

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[28] Reporters Sans Frontières, Iran creates "Halal Internet" to control online information, 06 September 2016 https://rsf.org/en/news/iran-creates-halal-internet-control-online-information Date accessed: 12 October 2016.

[29] Freedom House, Freedom of the press 2016, 28 September 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/iran Date accessed: 5 October 2016.

[30] UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 10 March 2016, paras 39-40 http://www.refworld.org/docid/56f1802b4.html Date accessed: 12 September 2016.

'Iranian law imposes serious yet arbitrary and ill-defined restrictions on the press and what they can publish. As a result, the press is constantly under the threat of closure and judicial action. One of the recent instances of restrictions on the press involved the discussion of the nuclear deal between Iran and the 5+1 group. In July 2015 Iranian media reports emerged that a secret directive by the MOCAIG had instructed Iranian media to refrain from criticizing the nuclear deal. The directive further urged the media to praise the Iranian negotiating team. According to this directive, the instructions regarding the manner in which the nuclear deal was to be covered were issued by the Supreme National Security Council.'[31]

6.3.3 The May 2016 Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran considered that:

'The persistence of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment in various places of detention and prisons also remains of serious concern. Beatings, stress positions, denial of medical attention and prolonged solitary confinement are among commonly applied methods of ill-treatment. Such treatment appears to affect mainly human rights defenders, journalists, social activists, political activists, members of some religious groups and individuals associated with some minority groups.'

'At least 45 journalists and social media activists are being held in detention for peaceful activities in the Islamic Republic of Iran, one of the highest totals in the world. The laws pertaining to freedom of expression remain overly restrictive and allow vague and broad exceptions to journalistic freedom that make it possible for the authorities to violate the spirit of the law and to harass, arbitrarily arrest and detain, or prosecute journalists.' [32]

6.3.4 Human Rights Watch's World report for 2016 noted that 'Security authorities continued to clamp down on free speech and dissent, and revolutionary courts handed down harsh sentences against social media users, including death sentences in some cases.'[33]

6.3.5 Freedom house reported in their world report published in March 2016 that:

'Newspapers and magazines face censorship and warnings from authorities about which topics to cover and how. Journalists state that they are often forced to practice self-censorship when working on sensitive issues. In late July 2015, the government allegedly instructed newspaper editors to praise the nuclear agreement and avoid publishing content that would suggest a rift among officials. In August, a hard-line daily was suspended over its

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[31] Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in the Islamic Republic of Iran, March 2016, 3. Restrictions on Freedom of Expression in Practice http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/1000000635-restrictions-on-freedom-of-expression-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html Date accessed: 7 September 2016.

[32] UN Report of the Secretary-General, Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 17 May 2016, paragraphs 19 and 25 http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1472039835_g1609767.pdf Date accessed: 12 October 2016.

[33] Human Rights Watch, World report 2016- Iran, 27 January 2016, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/iran#e81181 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

coverage of the nuclear talks, while two other hard-line media outlets received warnings.

'Since Rouhani became president, several new dailies and magazines have been granted publishing licenses, but a number of publications and websites have been closed or suspended. In January 2015, the daily Mardom-e Emrouz was shut down after it published a cover photo of American actor George Clooney expressing solidarity with the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, the target of a terrorist attack the previous week. In April, a magazine dedicated to women's issues and run by prominent editor Shahla Sherkat was temporarily banned over coverage of cohabitation outside of marriage.'[34]

6.3.6 The US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015 noted that:

'The government and its agents harassed, detained, abused, and prosecuted publishers, editors, and journalists, including those involved in internet-based media, for their reporting. The government also harassed many journalists' families, and authorities often subjected journalists in prison to solitary confinement. […] International NGOs reported that authorities forced several citizen journalists into internal exile during the year, and authorities continued to close publications for political reasons.

'The government's Press Supervisory Board issues press licenses, which it sometimes revoked in response to articles critical of the government or the regime, or did not renew for individuals facing criminal charges or incarcerated for political reasons. During the year [2015] the government banned, blocked, closed, or censored publications deemed critical of officials. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) severely limited and controlled foreign media organizations' ability to work in the country by requiring foreign correspondents to provide detailed travel plans and topics of proposed stories before granting visas, limiting their ability to travel within the country, and forcing them to work with a local "minder."

'The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's censorship practice is to bar inappropriate content, including references pertaining to alcohol, describing physical contact between an unmarried woman and man, or mentions of the mass protests that occurred after the disputed 2009 presidential elections. Judiciary spokesman Golamhossein Mohseni Ejei warned journalists at a February 16 press conference that media would be banned or fined if they published information about individuals designated as "heads of sedition," alluding to former president Khatami; former presidential candidates held under house arrest, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi; and Mousavi's wife Zahra Rahnavard.'[35]

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[34] Freedom House, Freedom in the world 2016- Iran, 7 March 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/iran Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[35] US State Department, Country report on Human Rights Practices for 2015- Iran, 13 April 2016, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm?year=2015&dlid=252923 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.

6.3.7 The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, reported in an article titled 'Revolutionary Guards Going after Family Members of Iranian Journalists Living Abroad' dated 29 April 2016 that:

'In a long-established practice of targeting the family members of Iranian journalists who live outside Iran, the Revolutionary Guards have sentenced the brother of a journalist to five years in prison, on trumped up national security charges. The Guards have long harassed the relatives of Iranian journalists living abroad, in an effort to intimidate foreign-based reporters and silence critical media coverage of the Islamic Republic. In the most recent case, Davoud Assadi, the brother of the well-known Iranian journalist Houshang Assadi who lives in Paris, was sentenced to the five-year prison term for "assembly and collusion against national security."[36]

6.3.8 The New York Times reported in April 2016 that:

'An Iranian revolutionary court handed down long prison terms on Tuesday to four journalists supportive of the government of President Hassan Rouhani, Iranian news media reported. All were convicted on charges of having acted against national security.

Noting that Mr. Rouhani has called for more press freedom in several speeches, analysts said the prison sentences were a warning by Iran's conservative-dominated judiciary that it would not accept any relaxation of the rules for journalists.

'Over the last decade, dozens of reformist newspapers have been closed by the Iranian judiciary and hundreds of reporters have been imprisoned, a campaign of intimidation that has forced many to tone down criticism or to seek other jobs. The Iranian news media remains divided along factional lines, however, with hard-liners controlling state television and some important newspapers and the reformists shifting their attention to social media where they can talk more freely. The arrests partly reflected the rivalries between these political factions, insiders said.'[37]

6.3.9 Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty reported in July 2016 that:

'Hundreds of journalists in Iran have been warned against contact with "hostile elements" outside the country via anonymous text messages. "All contact and collaboration with hostile elements based abroad, by e-mail, safe [online] portals, and other methods of communication is a crime and will be brought to justice," the message said, according to a screen grab posted online. "This SMS is the last warning," the message added. Iranian media and journalists say some 700 journalists received the message last week.

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[36] International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Revolutionary Guards Going after Family Members of Iranian Journalists Living Abroad, 29 April 2016, https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2016/04/davoud-assadi/ Date accessed: 19 September 2016.

[37] New York Time, Iranian Court Sentences 4 Journalists to Long Prison Terms, 26 April 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/world/middleeast/iranian-court-sentences-4-journalists-to-long-prison-terms.html Date accessed: 19 September 2016.

'A number of activists and journalists have in the past faced security charges for giving interviews to Persian-language media based outside the country.'[38]

6.3.10 The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) website reported in their article 'Why proposed bill could mean the end of independent journalism in Iran' dated 12 September 2016 that:

'The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is proposing a bill that calls for the creation of the Iranian Media System, a state-regulated organization to oversee the press.[…] If parliament approves the bill, the Iranian Media System would be given powers including:

- Issuing of licenses, which will be available only to journalists with a minimum of two years' experience and who have had several pieces of work published.
- Ensuring that those applying for licenses agree to the rules on how a journalist should operate, including a clause to protect national interests.
- Authority to punish journalists, including through issuing bans on practicing journalism.
- Power to punish journalists for issues including failure to observe religious or legal regulations in mass media products, non-compliance with trade and professional unions, and negligence.
- Authority to represent journalists in communication, including with foreign professionals and non-governmental bodies.

Under the proposed media system, authorities would have the power to prevent journalists with anti-state convictions from being a member of the group.

'The press will also be vulnerable from vaguely worded language in the draft bill around what protection will be afforded to those covering events that have not been determined legal gatherings by authorities.'[39]

6.3.11 CPJ reported in January 2016 that:

'[Jason] Rezaian was freed along with three other Iranian-American dual nationals, according to the Fars News Agency, which quoted Tehran's prosecutor, and other reports today. Rezaian was arrested in July 2014. On October 12, 2015, Iranian media reported that he had been convicted, according to the Post. The following month, Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, a spokesman for Tehran's Revolutionary Court, confirmed to Iranian media that Rezaian had been sentenced to prison but did not specify the length of

[38] Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, Iranian Journalists Warned Over Foreign Contacts Via SMS, 2 July 2016 http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-journalists-warned-sms-foreign-contacts/27834501.html Date accessed: 19 September 2016.
[39] Committee to Protect Journalists, Why proposed bill could mean the end of independent journalism in Iran, 12 September 2016 https://cpj.org/blog/2016/09/why-proposed-bill-could-mean-the-end-of-independen.php Date accessed: 19 September 2016.

the sentence. Charges against Rezaian included espionage, which he denied, according to reports.'[40]

6.3.12 Human Rights watch noted in their world report for 2016 that:

'On June 1[2015], another revolutionary court sentenced Atena Farghadani to a total of 12 years and 9 months' imprisonment in connection with a critical cartoon she drew and posted on her Facebook page in August 2014 that depicted members of Iran's parliament as animals. The charges against Farghadani included "assembly and collusion against the state," "propaganda against the state," and insulting public officials. Although by law she should serve no more than seven-and-a-half years, the heaviest single sentence she received, the judiciary compounded her sentence.'[41]

6.3.13 In April 2016 the New York Times reported that:

'An Iranian revolutionary court handed down long prison terms on Tuesday [26 April 2016] to four journalists supportive of the government of President Hassan Rouhani, Iranian news media reported. All were convicted on charges of having acted against national security.[…] All of the journalists worked for reformist newspapers. They included the editor in chief of Farhikhtegan, Eshan Manzandarani, who received a seven-year sentence. The other two were Davood Asadi, who received five years, and Eshan Safarzaiee, who received seven years. The four were arrested in November [2015] by the intelligence unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps on suspicion of assisting the United States in ''infiltrating" the country.'[42]

6.3.14 CPJ reported in August 2016 that:

'A revolutionary court in Tehran sentenced the prominent Iranian journalist Issa Saharkhiz to three years in jail on August 8 for "insulting the Supreme Leader" and "propagating against the state," according to his lawyer, Mahmoud Alizadeh Tabatabaei, and news reports.[…] Authorities have not publicly stated what activity led to the journalist's arrest. His son Mehdi Saharkhiz told CPJ earlier this year that he believes his father was arrested because of his pre-election reporting and analysis.[…] Iranian authorities arrested Saharkhiz in an apparent pre-election crackdown on November 2, 2015, the same day that three reformist journalists--Saman Sarfarzaee, Afarin Chitsaz, and Ehsan Mazandarani--were arrested. At the time Tasnim, a news agency closely associated with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and the conservative Rah-e Dana news website reported that the journalists were members of an "infiltration network" with links to "hostile Western countries." Saharkhiz, who previously served as deputy minister of culture, was

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[40] Committee to Protect Journalists, Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian is free, Iran news outlet says, 16 January 2016, https://cpj.org/2016/01/washington-post-reporter-jason-rezaian-is-free-ira.php Date accessed: 19 September 2016.
[41] Human Rights Watch, World report 2016- Iran, 27 January 2016, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/iran#e81181 Date accessed: 31 August 2016.
[42] New York Times, Iranian Court Sentences 4 Journalists to Long Prison Terms, 26 April 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/world/middleeast/iranian-court-sentences-4-journalists-to-long-prison-terms.html Date accessed: 19 September 2016.

imprisoned from 2009 to 2013 on charges of "insulting the supreme leader" and "propagating against the state," according to CPJ research.'[43]

6.3.15 In September 2016 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemned a Tehran court's decision to uphold journalist and human rights activist Narges Mohammadi's ten-year jail sentence on appeal.[44]

6.3.16 Freedom House's report 'Freedom in the Press 2016' published in September 2016 noted that:

'Courts also frequently set exorbitant bail for detained journalists. The high bail amounts and suspended jail sentences often discourage journalists from engaging in media activities and criticism of the establishment even when they are not behind bars.

'Political cartoonists and satirists are also frequently targeted by authorities.

'As of December 2015, Iran had the third-largest number of incarcerated journalists in the world, after China and Egypt, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). While the number of imprisoned journalists declined from 30 in 2014 to 19 in 2015, CPJ's December census did not account for the dozens of journalists who were arbitrarily arrested and released throughout the year, some of whom were freed on bail and continued to face charges or restrictions on their ability to work. Authorities have sometimes extended the intimidation and harassment to journalists' family members. Prison conditions remain harsh, and detained journalists are often held in solitary confinement in the first weeks or months of their imprisonment.'[45]

6.3.17 For further information on individual journalists arrests and detention please see the Reporters without Borders website which lists 2016 press freedom violations.

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[43] Committee to protect Journalists, Iranian journalist Issa Saharkhiz sentenced to three years in jail, 10 August 2016 https://cpj.org/2016/08/iranian-journalist-issa-saharkhiz-sentenced-to-thr.php#more [date accessed 14 September 2016]

[44] Reporters Sans Frontières: Appeal court confirms 10-year term for Narges Mohammadi, 28 September 2016 https://rsf.org/en/news/appeal-court-confirms-10-year-term-narges-mohammadi Date accessed: 12 October 2016.

[45] Freedom House, Freedom of the press 2016, 28 September 2016 https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/iran Date accessed: 5 October 2016.

Version Control and Contacts

Contacts

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Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **2.0**
- valid from **25 October 2016**

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Updated country information

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