



On the table:

Why now is the time to sway Rouhani to meet his promises for press freedom in Iran



A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists

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About this report

President Hassan Rouhani sought re-election on the promise of a more open Iran. But little has changed for the press, as hardliners in the judiciary and other powerful institutions jail journalists, block websites, and maintain a climate of fear with harassment and surveillance. The current international focus on Iran and its economic ties with Europe could represent an opening to engage on press freedom and other lapsed human rights.

A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

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COVER PHOTO: President Hassan Rouhani, pictured speaking with reporters in June 2013, has had limited success keeping his pledges to roll back Iran's repressive policies. (AP/Ebrahim Noroozi/File)

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Why now is the time to sway Rouhani to meet his promises for press freedom in Iran

President Hassan Rouhani came to power in 2013 on a platform of pledges to roll back the repressive policies of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who decimated Iran's once vibrant media. Rouhani, seeking to create space for political reform and end the country's international isolation, openly backed greater freedom for the press and the internet.

Rouhani has achieved some notable successes, such as a steep decline in the number of journalists imprisoned—the most visible sign of Iran's repression. But CPJ interviews with exiled journalists, international correspondents, and tech experts—because it was not possible to report from inside the country—found that censorship and repression are intact and may have strengthened in recent years.

The ranks of independent and reform-minded journalists remain depleted, as many left the profession or headed into exile. Rouhani has not met his commitment to allow an independent journalists association to reopen. Families of media personnel are increasingly harassed. Efforts to gather and spread news on social media platforms such as Telegram are met with increasing pressure as hardliners move aggressively to control the online space. Furthermore, digital rights activists warn that popular technology puts journalists and their networks at risk.

Even as journalists have pushed the boundaries by reporting on sensitive social issues, some subjects are completely off limits, such as the Guardian Council, the Revolutionary Guards, and the judiciary. The secretive nature of these powerful institutions is particularly vexing now that President Donald Trump has pulled the U.S. out of an agreement to keep Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and European leaders are debating whether and how to save the deal. At the same time, Tehran is engaged in the political and military conflicts of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Yet the current focus on Iran's intentions may represent an opening to engage with the country over press

freedom and other lapsed human rights. Regardless of the fate of the nuclear deal, Rouhani's political legacy depends on boosting the economy, which in turn rests on increased trade with Europe. European Union leaders can use this leverage to insist on a more open and pluralistic media environment. Receptiveness by Rouhani would strengthen his hand against the more hardline elements in Iran. Meanwhile, technology companies could use their influence with Tehran and with the West to ensure that they retain access to the critical Iranian market.



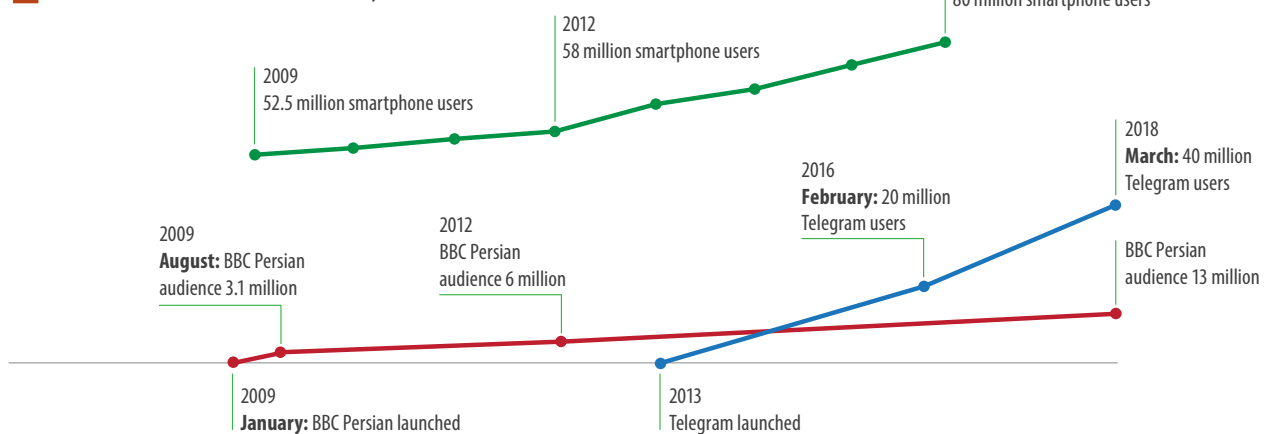
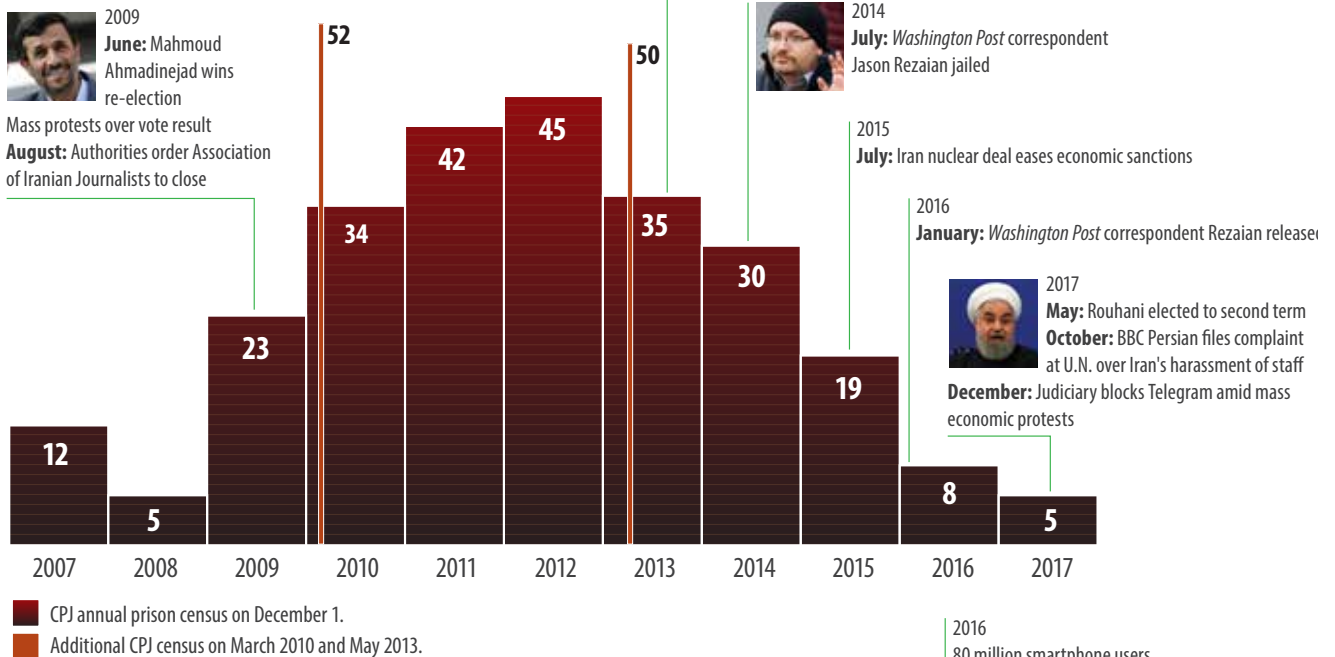
In many ways, Iran's press is still reeling from the crackdowns imposed during the two terms of Rouhani's predecessor, Ahmadinejad. At the worst of his onslaught after the disputed 2009 election, CPJ documented 52 journalists jailed in retaliation for their work—a figure that excluded over 50 journalists imprisoned and released on bail during the same period. Additionally, authorities ordered numerous critical newspapers to close and barred or expelled foreign journalists from the country. This left a greatly diminished press corps.

“An entire fleet of well-seasoned journalists had to flee Iran and go into exile out of fear. This has had a tremendous impact on the industry,” said Hannah Kaviani, who left the country in 2007 to intern in Berlin and has not returned since for fear of retaliation over her reporting. Kaviani, who works for the U.S. funded Persian-language news service Radio Farda—part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty—said that many of her colleagues were once the heads of prominent reformist newspapers in Iran.

Rouhani pledged in his 2013 and 2017 election campaigns to confront conservative political forces that equate access to information with threats to national security, such as by implementing his Citizens' Rights Charter to reinstate rights rolled back under Ahmadinejad. He promised to ease internet censorship restrictions and the jamming of satellites; to provide affordable and accessible high-speed internet; and to allow the

Journalists jailed in Iran

Press crackdown, politics, and progress



Source: CPJ research, BBC, ITU database, news reports. Images: AFP, AP

independent Association of Iranian Journalists, which closed in 2009, to reopen.

“We want freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom of thought,” Rouhani told a stadium of supporters during an election rally in May 2017. At the same rally, however, he acknowledged that his ability to effect change was restricted. “I often had problems keeping my promises. What I promised in 2013, either I did or wasn’t allowed to do,” he said.

Iran’s revolving-door policy of jailing critical journalists while temporarily releasing others on furlough continued into Rouhani’s presidency, even as the overall

number of journalists in prison declined because sentences imposed in the post-2009 crackdown expired. At the time of CPJ’s last prison census, the number behind bars in Iran was the lowest in a decade, but journalists say the figure belies the reality that those reporting critically still face harassment and intimidation.

Kambiz Foroohar, a New York-based Iranian-American journalist who left Bloomberg News in March 2018, told CPJ, “Self-censorship among journalists has also increased in the Rouhani era because journalists are convinced that press freedoms are not a priority for his administration.” He added that, while fewer journalists

have been arrested under Rouhani, the president has done little to free those who do get detained.

As of May 1, CPJ was aware of at least three journalists currently in jail for their work, including Iraj Jamshidi of *Asia News*, and Reza Entessari and Kasra Nouri, reporters with the Sufi news website *Majzooban-e-Noor*, who were arrested on February 19. Nouri is in poor health, according to reports.

Rouhani's bid for progress is countered by powerful forces in Iran's political system that favor a society limited by Western influence: the judiciary, state TV, and the Guardian Council, whose leaders are chosen by the Supreme Leader.

These institutions often accuse journalists they deem a threat of slander or anti-state activities such as spying or collaboration with the West, CPJ has found.

Siamak Ghaderi, a former journalist for the state-run news agency IRNA who was jailed for four years during the Ahmadinejad administration, said the office of the Supreme Leader and the judiciary see journalists "as enemies."

Journalists with whom CPJ spoke identified three main subjects that cannot be criticized: The Supreme Leader or other high-ranking member of one of Iran's unelected councils or organizations; the judiciary; and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an elite security institution.

Kaviani told CPJ that navigating the political landscape in Iran requires around-the-clock diligence, which can be challenging even for seasoned foreign correspondents. "There are informal red lines everywhere on what you can and cannot report on. You are under surveillance 24/7 and so is your work," she said.

But journalists told CPJ that they have increased latitude to report on social issues, largely thanks to the combination of smartphones, increased internet bandwidth, and apps such as Telegram that have made it easier to keep in touch with contacts and sources, and to share news and ongoing developments.

"Telegram is basically the internet for Iranians," said Amir Rashidi, an internet security and digital rights researcher at the New York-based Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Rouhani has largely kept his promise to delay official efforts to permanently block social media platforms such as Telegram and Instagram, and increase Iran's telecommunications infrastructure. Article 33 of his Citizens' Rights Charter—a largely symbolic presidential decree—called for Iranians to "have the right to freely and without



A supporter of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani waves a poster with his image at an election rally in Tehran in May 2017. Rouhani's campaign promises include calls for greater press freedom and access to information. (AP/Ebrahim Noroozi)

discrimination enjoy access to and communicate and obtain information and knowledge from cyberspace."

Apps like Telegram and a sharp rise in the use of smartphones—from 58 million in 2012 to over 80 million in 2016, according to statistics from the U.N.'s International Telecommunication Union—have forced the government to allow more critical coverage and provided journalists with a layer of protection by spreading news wide and fast.

Kaviani told CPJ that news stories, such as a 2016 report on "grave sleepers," and reports on climate change or natural disasters, such as the 2017 Kermanshah earthquake, "made really big waves inside the country—waves that we haven't seen in a long time." She said the report in reformist paper *Ghanoon* about homeless families and drug addicts sleeping in open graves just outside Tehran sparked public outrage and nationwide debate on under-reported topics such as homelessness and addiction.

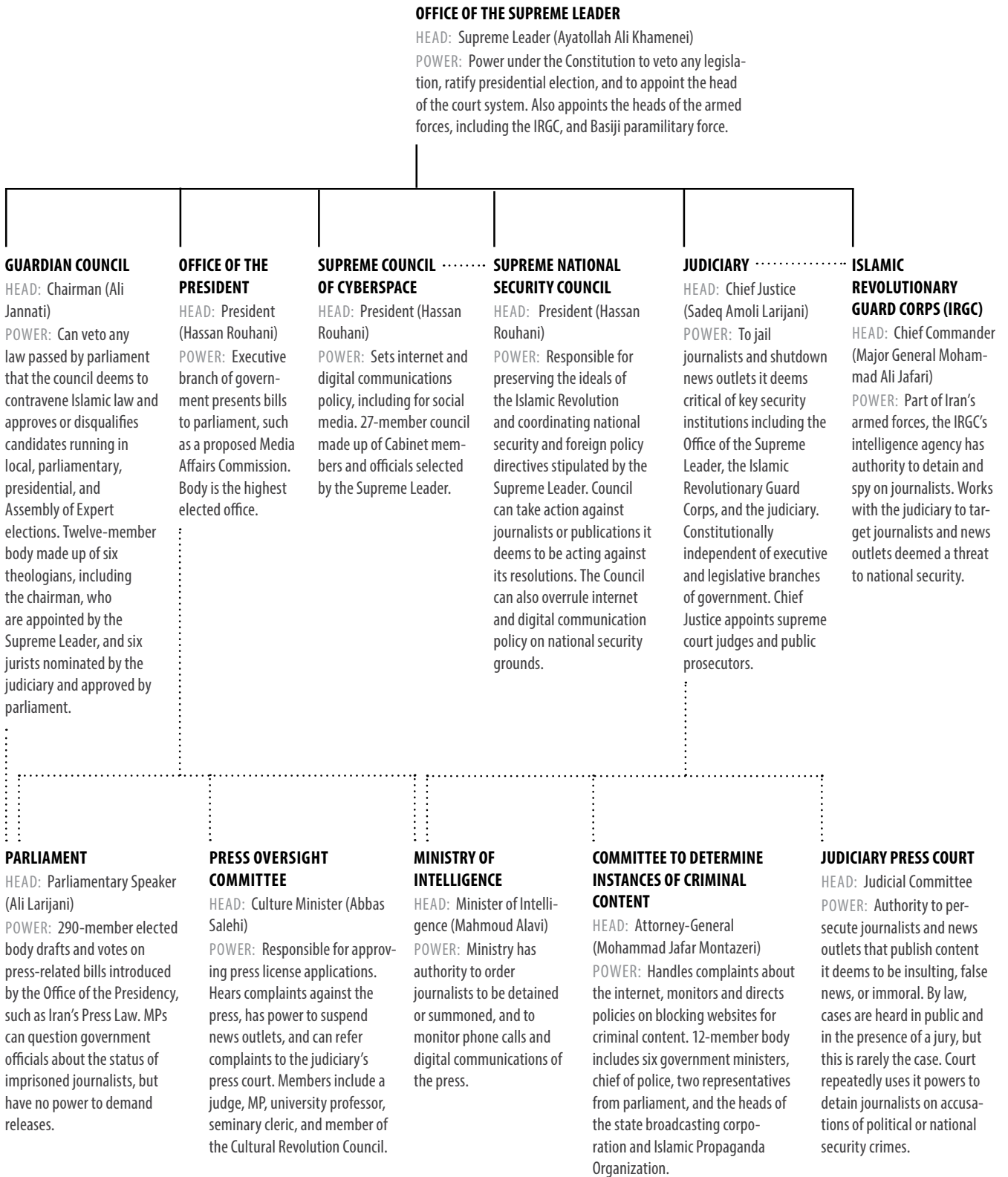
Without the outrage, Kaviani said, *Ghanoon* might have been suspended for printing a story that cast the then conservative-led Tehran Municipality in a poor light. Authorities couldn't censor the paper because the story went viral. Doing so would have appeared "unjust" and as if government wanted to cover up the mess.

"It illustrates how powerful it was and how challenging it became for authorities to control the narrative and address the issue of homelessness," Kaviani told CPJ.

Exiled journalist Ghaderi, a recipient of CPJ's International Press Freedom Award in 2014, also highlighted

Power in Iran

Institutions that govern and regulate Iran's press and internet



Source: Iranian government website, news reports, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.



People check their phones for news after an earthquake in Tehran in December 2017. The use of smartphones to share news helps Iran's press report on issues previously off limit. (AFP/Atta Kenare)

the prevalence of social matters making front-page news. “If a private company hikes fees for medical prescriptions, a journalist covering this topic will go to great lengths in their reporting because there is such loud public outcry,” Ghaderi said.

Previously the government would seek to control coverage of natural disasters. However, social media coverage of events—such as a 7.3 magnitude earthquake that rocked the Kurdish-minority region of Kermanshah in November 2017, killing over 600 people and injuring more than 10,000—has made it harder for the government to downplay local impact or cover up critical coverage about its handling of a situation.

Despite this opening, some journalists said self-censorship is ingrained after decades of repression and retaliation against the press. Journalist and filmmaker Maziar Bahari, who was jailed for over 100 days in 2009 for his work, said, “Journalists increasingly resort to self-censorship and take government restrictions for granted.

These journalists are cautious even where and when they are allowed to get close to red lines [and] report more freely on traditionally taboo subjects.”

Bahari acknowledged that social media has helped tackle some issues that traditional media are unable to cover. He said, “What has changed, however, is the power and the spread of unfiltered social networks. The news that the press does not report finds its way to social networks.”

Rouhani has publicly supported the use of social media despite efforts by conservatives who warn the internet is “un-Islamic,” “immoral,” and a danger to national security. In a state television program in June 2013, he said, “We live in an era in the world in which restricting access to information is no longer possible.”

Rashidi said that these technological advances come at a cost. Higher internet speeds helped the growth of domestic websites such as Aparat, the Iranian version of YouTube, but foreign websites still have slower access

speeds. The blocking of sites and apps has become a new battlefield between Iranian political forces.

“President Rouhani has improved Iran’s ICT [Information and Communication Technology] infrastructure and overall internet bandwidth, but the judiciary’s power and surveillance capacity has also increased,” Rashidi said.

The digital rights researcher added, “In previous elected administrations, the Ministry of Culture would have more of a responsibility in regards to filtering, but now the judiciary is increasingly exerting its influence and power over what should or shouldn’t be filtered. As a result, we’ve been witnessing an unprecedented direct attack on data.”

A September 2017 study by the Open Observatory of Network Interference, which is part of The Tor Project, found that 121 of the 886 sites blocked by Iran between September 2014 and 2017 were news related.

Authorities have also ramped up attempts to control, monitor, and ultimately block Telegram. Iran’s Supreme Cyberspace Council, the body primarily responsible for setting internet policy, ruled in December 2016 that any Iranian-owned channel with over 5,000 followers needed to register and obtain a permit, according to the Center for Human Rights in Iran.

A separate committee under the Cyberspace Council was assigned to monitor the content of these channels, according to former Minister of Culture Reza Salehi Amiri. If the Cyberspace Council disapproved of content in a Telegram channel, it had the power to shut the channel down.

The council’s power was exercised in March 2017, ahead of the elections, when authorities arrested several administrators from 12 reformist news channels, including some voluntarily registered with the committee, according to the Center for Human Rights in Iran. The center reported that in August 2017, a court sentenced six of the administrators to prison terms ranging from two to five years for unspecified charges.

Rouhani’s commitment to a freer internet continues to be tested as hardline branches of government call for greater regulation after anti-government protests in December.

Protests sparked when details of the Rouhani administration’s budget proposal were leaked to the press. The leaked material was widely reported in both traditional press and social media. The story spread quickly via Twitter and Telegram, which in turn were used to document and disseminate the resulting unrest in real time.

In a January report, *New York Times* Tehran bureau chief Thomas Erdbrink pointed out that resentment and anger toward authorities quickly spread among Telegram’s users. Erdbrink wrote, “The leak intended to tap popular resentment, and it worked.”

In response to the protests, the Supreme National Security Council issued a ban on Telegram that stayed in place for two weeks, according to *Slate*.

Before blocking the app, Iranian authorities attempted to make Telegram remove some channels by filing complaints alleging they were “inciting violence,” which is grounds for instant removal under the app’s regulations. On December 30, 2017, Iran’s Minister of Information and Communications Technology Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, tagged Telegram’s founder Pavel Durov in a tweet that claimed a channel was “encouraging hateful conduct.” Durov replied via Twitter to say that Telegram would investigate, and later confirmed that the Telegram channel for pro-opposition news site *Amad News* had broken the app’s rules on incitement and been suspended, according to reports.

The following day, however, Durov claimed in a tweet that authorities blocked access to Telegram after the platform refused other requests to shut down channels.

Telegram did not respond to CPJ’s requests for comment or information about the number of takedown requests it receives from the Iranian government. CPJ attempted to seek comment over a period of weeks, including via the app, Twitter, and third parties who have connections with the company.

At least eight Telegram administrators were arrested or briefly detained between December 28, 2017 and late January for their channels’ coverage of the protests, which authorities claimed “fomented chaos,” according to reports.

After the protests, many senior conservative political figures discussed implementing a ban on Telegram, similar to those in place on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which are only accessible via VPN, according to reports. In April, several senior officials, including the Supreme Leader and a vice-president, announced they were closing their Telegram accounts “to protect the national interests.” Iran’s judiciary on April 30 issued an order for internet service providers to block access to the platform to protect national security, and highlighted how the app had been used to mobilize protests, according to Reuters. As of May 1, some Iranians said they were still able to access the app using measures such as VPNs to get around the block, according to *The New York Times*. A group of



An image from the state-run news agency ISNA shows Iranian soldiers using tanks to destroy satellite dishes in 2013. Iran jams satellite signals to prevent citizens from accessing Western news and entertainment channels. (AFP/ISNA/Mohsen Tavaro)

Iranian lawyers filed a petition to a Tehran court, in early May, saying the ban contravened the constitution, and calling for the ban to be overturned, the Center for Human Rights in Iran reported.



Even as greater access to smartphones and the internet has helped local journalists push back against what have been considered sensitive issues, digital rights researcher Rashidi warned that these tools have also led to an increased risk of surveillance.

Being hacked and surveilled has become so commonplace, “even Rouhani’s own Cabinet members get hacked and no one says a word or makes a fuss,” Rashidi said, referring to a Center for Human Rights report on how the vice president for women and family affairs had her Facebook and Gmail accounts hacked.

Nariman Gharib, a social media analyst for Manoto, a

Persian-language satellite news channel based in London, told CPJ that many of his colleagues have faced phishing and hacking attacks.

Gharib said hackers whom he believes are affiliated with Iranian intelligence or security agencies, have sent anonymous threatening messages to him and his colleagues or made phishing attempts via their social media accounts to intimidate, harass, and gain information on the journalists. Gharib said hackers focus on family members because the journalists are less inclined to reveal or admit that they are being targeted for fear of further retaliation against their family and friends.

Collin Anderson, an internet-security researcher and co-author of a Carnegie Endowment report “Iran’s Cyber Threat” that was released in January, told CPJ that many of the groups behind such attacks are affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards.

Iranian malware was found in the computers of Voice

of America Persian and reformist journalists, and foreign-based non-governmental organizations that focus on Iranian civil liberties, according to the report.

Anderson said the malware campaign targeted journalists from 2010 to 2016. “The folks that were doing attacks against journalists in the 2016 parliamentary elections, were the same groups doing their attacks in 2011 with online media activists. They’ve always been hacking the same types of targets,” he said.

Despite knowing surveillance is a possibility, Rashidi and another security expert told CPJ that many Iranians don’t know how to protect themselves against malware or phishing attacks. Rashidi told CPJ he regularly receives messages from Iranians whose accounts are being hacked repeatedly, but they don’t take the simple and readily available steps to protect themselves.

Gharib said, “People blow off digital security and tend to think that the authorities have better things to do ... It’s a general lack of awareness. They simply don’t understand that digital networks are like a ring, and if one gets snagged, they all do.”

CPJ advises journalists to use two-factor authentication for social media accounts and to use messaging apps such as Signal that have default end-to-end encryption capabilities.

Gharib said he was aware of several cases where journalists were briefly detained by authorities but, whether through fear or embarrassment, didn’t alert anyone in their network. Often by the time they have been released, authorities have accessed the journalist’s cell phone, email, and social media accounts.

Gharib added, “The best advice that I can give a journalist is that if at any moment, your email or social media account has become compromised, it’s imperative that they let everyone in your network know.”



Satellite television is another technology platform that represents an opportunity for information and censorship. Technically, owning satellite equipment is illegal in Iran. But according to April 2018 estimates from local outlet *Tabnak News*, 60 percent of Iranians own a satellite dish.

But authorities regularly jam the signals of Western news outlets such as BBC Persian, U.S.-funded Voice of America Persian, and Manoto. The regime’s tactic is two-fold: to prevent broadcasts of foreign-based television and radio news programs based on political opposition, and to curb the socio-cultural influence of Western

entertainment programs deemed “morally deviant” by Iran’s most conservative ideologues.

Authorities also regularly carry out symbolic “anti-Westernization” displays such as using a tank or other means to destroy hundreds of thousands of satellite receivers.

Rouhani has long criticized the regime’s policy of jamming signals as being regressive and out of date.

Security researcher Gharib told CPJ that although steps were taken early in Rouhani’s administration to ease such policies, “Satellite jamming has not only increased in the bigger cities, but it’s become automated. Instead of blanket jamming of satellite signals, jamming signals are now deployed once certain programs start, and conclude when the programs end.”

Although Rouhani officials have called for revising a law that makes it illegal for Iranians to use, repair, or distribute dishes, their efforts have had little traction. For legislation around satellite blocking to be changed Rouhani would need the Supreme Cyberspace Council, the country’s sole authority over internet and cyberspace policies, to approve amendments.

Still, some Iranians have managed to stay a step ahead of the censors. Gharib told CPJ, “People get around satellite jamming by digitally recording their favorite programs during off-hours when the program is repeated, and then watch it later at their leisure.”

The California-based technology nonprofit Net Freedom Pioneers released a digital tool in 2016 that allows Iranians to use generic satellite dishes to bypass censorship and download news articles, music videos, podcasts, and foreign-based news and entertainment shows.

The ability of foreign-based tech firms like Net Freedom Pioneers to help independent news outlets or Iranians access the internet or evade censorship is hampered by sanctions. European and U.S. policy makers could help Iranians by liberalizing rules that impede access to tools to circumvent censorship and surveillance.

Although the U.S. Treasury Department reaffirmed in a news release in March its commitment to fostering internet freedom and supporting the Iranian people, President Trump’s rhetoric toward Iran has caused “over-compliance of sanctions,” according to the director of a U.S.-based non-governmental organization focused on Iranian affairs. The director asked to remain anonymous for security reasons. Last year for instance, Apple removed several Iranian apps from its store, citing the U.S. sanction regulations, according to *The New York Times*.

Foreign Policy reported in January that a fear of fines



The French delegation briefs journalists during nuclear talks in Vienna in July 2015. The future of the deal is in question after the U.S. pulled out. (Reuters/Joe Klamar/Pool)

or being penalized for breaking U.S. sanctions on business dealings in Iran means many companies block all Iranians from using their products. The report added that, “U.S. tech companies that offer free or low-cost apps have no practical way of reliably identifying individual users to screen out those who are prohibited.”



Even as access to foreign technology and to international broadcasts is limited within Iran, Tehran has taken some steps, led by Rouhani, to project beyond its borders an image of opening to the world.

In addition to officials using social media accounts and giving interviews to, and writing columns for, major U.S. news outlets during the U.N. General Assembly each year, Iran has provided greater access to international journalists.

This change was flagged early, with a former counselor to Iran’s Permanent Mission to the U.N. telling CPJ

in 2015 that Iran had doubled the number of journalist visas issued to U.S. press, and planned to continue approving more visa requests.

A reporter who asked to remain unidentified told CPJ, “Under Rouhani, high-ranking government officials have made themselves increasingly accessible across the board, both in foreign embassies abroad and domestically.” The journalist added, “They realize how important it is to have a relationship with the media. This wasn’t the case while Ahmadinejad was in power.”

Still, foreign journalists wanting to report in Iran must apply for a visa via the Foreign Ministry website, where they are requested to provide details on what story they plan to cover or whom they plan to interview. International reporters are also required to be accompanied by a government minder during their travels.

Foreign journalists said they can freely ask Iranian officials combative questions about sensitive topics such as human rights abuses and strategic military affairs. This

stands in contrast to their domestic counterparts, who would cover such topics at risk of jeopardizing their press credentials or their freedom.

“What doesn’t appear to have changed from Ahmadienejad and Rouhani, is that journalists working for foreign media outlets abroad continue to have more access to Iranian officials than those based inside the country,” a local journalist told CPJ.

The 2015 nuclear negotiations in Vienna illustrated the gap between access granted to international and local journalists. Local press freedom group Journalism Is Not a Crime spoke with Berlin-based exiled Iranian journalist Arash Azizi about how the talks were covered by the roughly 100 members of Iran’s press who traveled to Vienna. Azizi said that an absence of critical reporting, or focus on issues such as human rights and political prisoners, suggested that the Iranian press were self-censoring to avoid arrest or retaliation.

The president’s office did not respond to CPJ’s request for comment for this report, including on claims that journalists are prevented from reporting freely for fear of arrest or retaliation.

Several foreign and local journalists told CPJ that they operate under the premise that authorities monitor their phone calls, email, and social media accounts. One Iranian journalist, who is based abroad and requested to remain unidentified for security reasons, told CPJ, “I would use non-journalist friends to initially reach out and contact politically sensitive Iranian officials to set up discreet interview requests with them. As a dual citizen, I always had a suspicion that my phone calls were being listened to.”

In fact, journalists who have dual citizenship face special risks for working in Iran—as demonstrated most spectacularly in recent years by the imprisonment of U.S.-Iranian journalist Jason Rezaian, a correspondent for *The Washington Post*. Like other dual citizens, Rezaian was used as a political pawn by hardline forces. During his 544 days in prison on charges of espionage, collaborating with hostile environments, and propaganda against the establishment, Rouhani, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and the government-run regulatory body the Press Oversight Committee, repeatedly deferred to the judiciary when questioned by the press.

The judiciary, in turn, appeared to time updates in Rezaian’s case to key political moments, for example announcing charges against Rezaian on the day that Zarif was scheduled to meet then- U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for talks on Iran’s nuclear program, according to



Ali Rezaian, left, delivers a petition to Iran’s United Nations mission in 2015 demanding the release of his brother, Washington Post correspondent Jason Rezaian. The Rezaian family accuses Iran of using Jason’s 544-day detention as political leverage. (AP/Bebeto Matthews)

The New York Times.

Rezaian, now a global opinions writer for the *Post*, told CPJ he sees parallels in his treatment and the current cases of foreign nationals jailed in Iran. (These include Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a project manager with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, who is serving a five-year jail sentence for allegedly plotting to overthrow Iran’s clerical establishment.) “The notion that dual nationals are tried as Iranians is farcical, especially when Iranian authorities make it abundantly clear—as Zarif did again in his latest CFR [Council on Foreign Relations] appearance—that his government won’t release the prisoners until the U.S. engages in a trade on Iran’s terms,” Rezaian said. “Iran arrests dual nationals as Iranians, denies them all of their rights—the same way they would Iranians—and then dangles them as trade bait to the governments of their other nationality. It’s the height of hypocrisy and literally no one is fooled by it.”

In October 2016, Rezaian and his family filed a federal suit against the Iranian government, claiming the journalist was targeted for arrest as a means of political leverage. “For nearly 18 months, Iran held and terrorized Jason for the purpose of gaining negotiating leverage and ultimately exchanging him with the United States for something of value to Iran,” *The Washington Post* cited the suit as saying.

Iran’s treatment of dual citizens undermines attempts by the Rouhani administration to encourage those who fled persecution to come home. In October 2013, the president tweeted that his government wanted to



Demonstrators gather in Tehran to protest the 2009 presidential election result. The disputed vote prompted a crackdown on reformist journalists, forcing many into exile to avoid arrest or retaliation. (AP/Ben Curtis)

“facilitate” the return of expatriates, but a series of arrests followed in early 2014, including that of journalist Sera-jeddin Mirdamadi whom, CPJ reported at the time, had only recently returned from exile. As Iranian-American journalist Negar Mortazavi, who lives in self-imposed exile, tweeted at Rouhani in May 2014 after Mirdamadi was detained, “[Iranians want] The right to return to our homeland without the fear of arrest.”

Iran’s judiciary also harasses journalists at outlets funded by foreign governments, such as BBC Persian. Dozens of its Iranian staff have been unable to return to the country for fear of reprisal by authorities over their critical news coverage, according to press reports. Since August 2017, the judiciary increased the harassment, including seizing their domestic-based assets and blocking financial transactions between the BBC journalists, who mainly live in the U.K. or U.S., and their families in Iran.

These intimidation tactics are meant to both silence the journalists and hurt Rouhani’s image internationally, several journalists told CPJ. Foroohar said, “Members of the press are seen as tools in Iran, and the manner in which Iranian authorities manipulate journalists is cruel

and counterproductive.”

The BBC has appealed to the international community for help in fighting the harassment. In March, the broadcaster filed an appeal to the U.N. in Geneva on behalf of 152 of its employees. In a statement at the time, BBC Director-General Tony Hall said, “In truth, this story is much wider: it is a story about fundamental human rights. We are now asking the community of nations at the U.N. to support the BBC and uphold the right to freedom of expression.”

The judiciary did not respond to CPJ’s request for comment for this report, including on claims that it harasses and arbitrarily detains journalists who report critically on state institutions, or work for foreign-funded outlets.



Several local journalists told CPJ that conditions would improve if Rouhani kept the pledge he made during his first press conference as president-elect in 2013, to reopen the Association of Iranian Journalists, an independent organization that advocated for journalists in

legal or employment disputes.

The association has been closed since August 2009, when security forces arrested several of its members and raided its offices after the disputed presidential election.

Instead of allowing the independent association to re-establish itself, authorities are pushing a parliamentary bill that would create a government-sponsored body called the Iranian Media System.

The proposal has faced resistance from Iran's journalists, not least because it would "give security forces and the hardline conservative judiciary tighter control of the media," said exiled Iranian journalist Ghaderi.

Ghaderi and other critics of the bill warned that if the proposed government body is established, it could spell the end of independent journalism in Iran.

According to the Center for Human Rights in Iran, the body would be made up of journalists from print, radio, television, and web outlets, as well as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, a member of parliament, a judge, a representative from seminary schools in Qom, a media expert chosen by the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council, a web expert selected by the Supreme Cyberspace Council, and the commission's chairperson. The commission could temporarily or permanently suspend journalists deemed in "violation" of religious principles or professional ethical codes.

In contrast, the independent Journalists Association was set up to protect the press and had no power to penalize or suspend a reporter or outlet.

"This new design will actually harm the journalists more than President Rouhani even knows because such a creation will essentially hand the association over to the security apparatus," Ghaderi said.

In late 2017, the bill was up for a vote in parliament but it was pulled by the Rouhani administration after opposition from key figures in the media community as well as reformist forces in parliament, said Ghaderi, who has followed the status of the bill closely since its inception.

Ghaderi told CPJ, "The Rouhani government isn't that strong regarding this matter and I think that at some point it will be forced to reintroduce the bill again, because the judiciary and intelligence establishment are some of the main backers of the state-sponsored association."

Aside from keeping press matters out of the hands of the security forces, several journalists told CPJ that an independent association would provide job security and backing at a time when Iran's economy is still struggling.

A journalist at a local news outlet in Tehran, who

asked to remain unnamed for fear of reprisal, told CPJ that with monthly salaries for journalists around 12 to 28 million Iranian rials (US\$300 to US\$900) a month, it is common for reporters to seek a second job.

Bahari, who leads the Journalism is not a Crime initiative, told CPJ, "The government in Iran has become much more active in public relations and numerous journalists and media outlets depend on government money." Bahari added, "The government has absorbed many journalists and media activists into its circle and this goes against their impartiality and independence."



At a time when the Trump administration is taking a hostile stance toward Iran and Rouhani has to look to European leaders to shore up international support, the country's lack of press freedom and other lapses in human rights could be a lynchpin.

In Iran, Rouhani is under pressure to save the nuclear deal he helped seal in 2015. The deal, struck with China, France, Germany, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S. in 2015, compelled Iran to limit its nuclear program in exchange for removing sanctions under a preliminary framework that allowed major trade deals from European countries to flow into Iran's newly open markets of energy, automobiles, and technology. The deal was a boost for Iran's economy, with Rouhani travelling to Europe the following year to make an estimated €40 billion in trade deals, according to reports.

However, the U.S. and some European officials demanded early this year that the deal incorporate security interests focusing on Iran's missile program and regional policies. On May 8, President Trump announced the U.S. would pull out of the deal and reimpose its sanctions on Iran. As of May 14, European officials and Iranian leaders said they planned to uphold the agreement.

Trump's hostility to the nuclear deal comes as the U.N. and EU member states pressure Iran over its politically motivated trials against dual nationals and its treatment of BBC Persian staff. U.N. Secretary General António Guterres called on Iran in March to cease all legal action against the BBC staff and their families, and against "independent journalism, whether affiliated to the BBC or not." Prior to that, David Kaye, special rapporteur on freedom of expression, and Asma Jahangir, former special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, released a joint statement in October that called on Iran to stop intimidating journalists.

Other EU officials have called for human rights issues



French President Emmanuel Macron and U.S. President Donald Trump at the White House in April 2018. France led unsuccessful efforts to keep the U.S. in the Iran nuclear deal. (Reuters/Joshua Roberts)

to be raised during meetings with Iranian counterparts. Ahead of an official visit from 12 members of European Parliament (MEPs) to Tehran in 2016, MEP Marietje Schaake called for the EU to prioritize human rights issues with the country.

France led attempts to keep the nuclear deal on track, with President Emmanuel Macron in April making a state visit to Washington in an attempt to convince the U.S. to stay in the deal, according to news reports. He has also vowed to work with Iran and said he will consider making a historic visit to the country. Such a visit could be a significant opening for Iranian and European policymakers to bring human rights issues to the table. Macron's office issued a statement in January that said the EU response to unrest in Iran should stress the importance of

human rights in Iran, Bloomberg reported.

After widespread protests in December, Rouhani acknowledged that "people had economic, political, and social demands," but it is unclear what power he has to meet them. Fulfillment of the demands rests on many factors, including the fate of Iran's international commitments; greater internet openness that would boost both press freedom and Iran's economy; and the thinking inside Iran's hardline institutions, which journalists cannot currently write about.

As Bahari told CPJ, "The most important issues [facing Iran's press] are censorship and fear. Journalism in Iran is tightly tied to constant fear of arrest and to finding ways to avoid censorship. This shadow hangs over all areas of journalism." ♦

Recommendations

The Committee to Protect Journalists offers the following recommendations:

TO THE IRANIAN GOVERNMENT

- Commit publicly to an ambitious and rapid legislative agenda to introduce and support legislation in support of press freedom.
- Immediately allow the independent Association of Iranian Journalists to re-open.
- Revise or repeal the laws that enable Iran's revolving-door policy of imprisoning journalists, release all journalists currently in jail, and provide adequate medical care while they remain in custody.
- End the legal harassment of BBC Persian staff and their families in Iran and thoroughly investigate cases of harassment and online surveillance against journalists who are threatened because of their work.
- Expand access for the press to Iranian government officials within and outside the country, and publicly challenge the use of censorship and retaliation against journalists, including dual nationals and their families.
- Stop satellite jamming, ease internet censorship restrictions, and avoid throttling high-speed internet.

TO EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

- Make press freedom an explicit and essential element of conversations with Iranian officials in bilateral and multilateral meetings and apply the EU Human Rights Guidelines on Freedom of Expression Online and Offline in agreements with Iranian officials.
- Advocate within the U.N. for policies and norms that uphold media freedom, including providing support for the U.N. special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.
- Support strong encryption. Liberalize export rules that can impede access to tools to circumvent censorship and surveillance.

TO THE UNITED STATES

- Liberalize sanctions restrictions that impede access to software on online tools and services to circumvent censorship and surveillance and provide greater clarity to tech companies to ensure that limitations are not imposed erroneously.

TO TELEGRAM AND OTHER TECH COMPANIES

- Establish communication channels with journalists and press freedom organizations, including rapid response protocols.
- Ensure compliance with the U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and ensure human rights assessments are conducted on a regular basis.
- Consider joining the Global Network Initiative.



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