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## IRAN: JAILED FOR BEING A JOURNALIST

Journalists and media workers in Iran are yet again targeted for repression as Amnesty International has documented a surge over the last few months in the number of media professionals being arrested and imprisoned for carrying out their journalistic activities. The fresh crackdown appears to be aimed at crushing hopes heralded by promises of change and increased freedoms that followed the election of President Hassan Rouhani.

Amnesty International is urging the Iranian authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all those arrested and imprisoned in recent months if they have been detained solely for their peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

Since the 2009 disputed presidential election, a wide range of dissenting voices have been the target of state repression. In a bid to stifle any public debate and virtually all criticism of their record in various spheres, including human rights, the authorities further tightened their grip on freedom of expression including by closing down publications, jailing media workers, and banning journalists and filmmakers from reporting and making films. In the year that followed the 2009 election, over 100 journalists, many of whom worked for publications perceived by the authorities as “reformist”, were believed to have been arrested.<sup>1</sup>

In January 2010, the Iranian authorities banned contact with over 60 foreign institutions, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America, an official external broadcast institution of the United States federal government, and some other media outlets, as well as some human rights organizations, putting anyone making contacts with these institutions at risk of prosecution. Since then, scores of filmmakers, writers, journalists, bloggers and family members of Iranian journalists abroad have been harassed, intimidated, arrested, and imprisoned following unfair trials. Those arrested have often been accused of having ties with foreign-based media organizations.

On 19 September 2011 and following the broadcast of a documentary on BBC Persian about the life of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, five documentary directors and a producer and distributor were arrested in Iran. Iranian local media alleged that they had “provided BBC Persian with information, films and secret reports to paint a black picture of Iran and Iranians.”<sup>2</sup>

In another wave of arrests aimed at repressing potentially critical voices in advance of the 2012 parliamentary elections, the authorities targeted writers, journalists, bloggers and family members of Iranian journalists abroad. Following this wave of arrests, *Gerdab*, the website of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Institute against Organized Crimes,<sup>3</sup> published an online article detailing what it called the “Fox’s Eye Mission”. The “Mission” according to the article had been carried out by the Institute in order to identify and arrest a network of individuals who “under the pretext of gathering news material for the BBC...had gathered and transmitted classified information.” The article claimed that BBC Persian had recruited employees in Iran and had organized secret trainings in the neighbouring countries. According to the article, 24 individuals had been identified in the course of the “Mission”.

In a renewed crackdown on journalists, the security forces stormed the offices of several Tehran-based publications, arresting 10 journalists in five simultaneous raids on 27 January 2013. The authorities then carried out more arrests bringing the number of journalists arrested in January 2013 to at least 16. In a statement released on 30 January 2013,

the Ministry of Intelligence announced that the Ministry, under its legal obligation to combat any “foreign intervention”, had identified one of the “largest media networks” connected to the BBC which it accused of working for foreign intelligence services. The statement asserted that while some of the detainees could be released upon recognition of their innocence, more arrests would be made in the following days.<sup>4</sup> In two subsequent statements respectively on 5 and 19 February 2013, the Ministry said that some of the detainees had been released on bail and a number of others had been summoned for interrogations.<sup>5</sup>

On some occasions, those arrested are released on hefty bails and remain at liberty pending their trial sessions, which are often delayed, or even upon receiving prison sentences. Amnesty International is alarmed that prosecution and prison sentences have been used by the Iranian authorities as a tactic aimed at creating a climate of fear and coercing journalists and media workers into self-censorship. Such protracted prosecutions and unimplemented prison sentences remain hanging over journalists. Any such media worker or journalist who crosses the lines defined by the authorities risks then receiving heavy sentences or being summoned to serve their prison terms.

Iran’s amended Islamic Penal Code, passed into law in May 2013, continues to maintain vaguely worded ‘crimes’ such as “spreading lies”, “spreading propaganda against the system”, “creating unease in the public mind”, “insulting Islamic sanctities” and “defamation of state officials”. These ill-defined provisions are frequently used to curb peaceful dissent. Such laws and practices violate Iran’s obligations under Articles 18, 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party, guaranteeing freedom of belief, expression, assembly and association respectively.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to repeal all legislation which curtails freedom of expression, in particular, provisions in the Islamic Penal Code regarding national security which are overly broad and allow the authorities to prosecute and imprison journalists for their peaceful journalistic activities.

Journalists and media workers who have been arrested or summoned to begin serving their prison terms in the past months include:

**Jason Rezaian**, the Washington Post’s correspondent in Iran and a dual Iranian-American national, and his wife, **Yeganeh Salehi** a journalist for a United Arab Emirates newspaper, the National, were arrested on the night of 22 July 2014 in Tehran. Gholamhossein Esma’ili, the Head of Tehran’s Judiciary confirmed the arrests on 25 July saying that further information will only be provided upon the completion of the “technical investigations and interrogations”.

As of 30 July 2014, Jason Rezaian and Yeganeh Salehi’s whereabouts remain unknown. It appears that the authorities have not allowed the detainees to access their family members or lawyers. In a video-recorded message, published by the Washington Post on 29 July, Mary Breme Rezaian, Jason Rezaian’s mother pleaded with the Iranian authorities to release her son and daughter-in-law. She said: “it has been more than seven days and they are still being held without charge. I do not know where my son and daughter-in-law are”.

A photojournalist and her husband, both dual Iranian-American nationals, were also reported to have been arrested at the same time as Jason Rezaian and Yeganeh Salehi.

**Saba Azarpeik**, a journalist working for a number of reformist publications in Tehran, was arrested on 28 May 2014 and transferred to an undisclosed location. Amnesty International understands that she was not informed of the reason for her arrest. Following her arrest, her family was denied any information about her situation and whereabouts and only received a call from a Ministry of Intelligence official on 2 June stating that she was “well”. Saba Azarpeik was allowed to phone her family for the first time on 6 July, almost 40 days after her arrest. As of 29 July, she is believed to remain in solitary confinement and is barred from access to her lawyer. The authorities have reportedly pressured her family not to give interviews or else risk compromising her early release. On 17 June 2014, the state-sanctioned news agency *Jahan News*, claimed her arrest was because of her alleged ties with foreign-based

media and journalists. Another state-sanctioned media listed "enmity with the judiciary", and "spreading false news about Section 350 of Evin Prison", among others as reasons for her arrest.<sup>6</sup>

Saba Azarpeik was brought before Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 21 and 22 July apparently to face the charges of "spreading propaganda against the system" and "spreading lies", in relation to her previous arrest in January 2013. Her lawyer was not present during these hearings.

Prior to her recent arrest in May 2014, she had been arrested on several occasions, including in January 2013 when security officials arrested at least another 15 journalists, apparently solely for their journalist activities. She had reportedly also been detained for a couple of hours in May 2009 in advance of the presidential election the following month following an article she wrote in which she detailed her treatment by "the Guidance Patrols", a special police patrol mandated with ensuring that women adhere to the strict state-imposed dress code. In her article, she alleged that she had been physically assaulted in the street by the patrol officers who deemed her clothing inappropriate. Saba Azarpeik had also widely covered the case of Sattar Beheshti, a blogger who died in the custody of the Cyber Police in November 2012 allegedly as a result of torture.

Amnesty International understands that as of 30 July 2014 the authorities have not formally informed Saba Azarpeik's lawyer and family of the new charges against her and her place of detention.

Documentary filmmaker and women's rights activist **Mahnaz Mohammadi** was summoned to Evin Prison on 7 June 2014 to begin serving her five-year prison sentence. Mahnaz Mohammadi, also a member of the One Million Signature Campaign, was arrested on 26 June 2011 by Revolutionary Guards officials at her home and taken to Evin Prison. She was released a month later on 27 July 2011 on a hefty bail. In November 2012 a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced her to five years' imprisonment on the charges of "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system", stemming from her June 2011 arrest. Speaking with the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran on 6 June 2014, Mahnaz Mohammadi said that she was prosecuted for her alleged cooperation with BBC Persian and other foreign-based media organizations, as well as her role in the making of a documentary film called 'We Are Half of the Iranian Population' about women's rights demands in the lead-up to the 2009 presidential election.<sup>7</sup>

In another media interview, she said:

*"...This sentence was imposed under the influence and with the request of my interrogator as he told me in prison that everything is in his hands and if I do not submit and make the false confessions that he wanted, he would give me a heavy sentence and that is what happened."<sup>8</sup>*

Mahnaz Mohammadi had previously been arrested in August 2009 along with a number of other artists and human rights defenders during a memorial ceremony commemorating one of the protestors killed during the 2009 post-election protests. Mahnaz Mohammad reportedly suffers from health conditions which previously resulted in her admission to a hospital for a few days during her detention in 2011.

Journalist and a former writer for *Shargh* and *Bahar* newspapers **Reyhaneh Tabatabaei** started serving her six-month prison term on 21 June 2014 after she responded to a summons by the Office of the Prosecutor in Evin Prison to be informed of new charges stemming from a separate case against her. She was reportedly released on bail after being informed of the new charges, but was then arrested the same day to serve her prison sentence in relation to her December 2010 arrest. Following that arrest by Revolutionary Guards, Reyhaneh Tabatabaei was detained in solitary confinement in Evin Prison for 36 days and released on bail on 16 January 2011. In April 2012, a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced her to one-year imprisonment. An appeal court later suspended six months of her sentence for a period of four years.

According to Kaleme, a Persian-language news website close to opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, she was

sentenced for “campaigning for free elections through [promoting] the elimination of the Council of the Guardians’ vetting powers, [advocating for] reforms in the Council of the Guardians, free press, free political parties” and “publishing the news of political prisoners”.<sup>9</sup> She was arrested again in January 2013 during the wave of arrests of journalists which resulted in the arrest and detention of at least 16 journalists, including Saba Azarpeik, and media workers but was released almost a month later on bail. According to her mother, in a media interview, she is now facing the new charge of “spreading propaganda against the system”. Her new charge is understood to relate to a number of Facebook posts and her participation in the Reformists Youth Conference in the city of Shahr-e Kord, central Iran.

In her interview with Kaleme, her mother said:

*“They have summoned Reyhaneh ten times; was there a time when she did not go? Did she ever delay reporting to them? Reyhaneh’s interrogators were contacting her constantly and she was always responsive, she was never afraid. She went to all those interrogations. She was even once summoned [to serve her sentence] and she prepared to go. It was the Revolutionary Guards themselves who stopped the implementation of the sentence. Why did not they send the summons [for serving] this time? Why like this so sudden so my child could not even see her father?”<sup>10</sup>*

**Marzieh Rasouli**, an editor on art and culture for a number of reformist newspapers, started serving her two-year prison sentence on 8 July 2014. She had been sentenced to two years imprisonment on the charges of “spreading propaganda against the system” and “disturbing the public order through participating in illegal gatherings”. She was also sentenced to 50 lashes. Marzieh Rasouli was arrested on 17 January 2012 at the same time as a number of other journalists, during a period of increased crackdown on freedom of expression in advance of the 2012 parliamentary elections. She was released on 27 February 2012 on a hefty bail. On 25 February 2012, *Gerdab*, the website of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Institute Against Organized Crimes, alleged that Marzieh Rasouli, who it called “Ms M. R”, of having a “complex role in attracting, employing BBC Persian applicants, assisting them to exit the country, and producing material for some of BBC Persian key programmes.”<sup>11</sup>

**Hossein Nourani Nejad**, journalist and a member of the Participation Front political party was arrested on 21 April 2014 and was taken to solitary confinement in Evin Prison. He had returned to Iran two months prior to his arrest from Australia, where he was a postgraduate student, in order to see his new-born child for the first time. In a media interview, Hossein Nourani Nejad’s mother said that he had been charged with “gathering and colluding against national security” while he was abroad. She said that more than two weeks after his arrest they had only received a very brief phone call from him and had not received any information regarding his situation from the authorities other than his place of detention despite their attempts at obtaining further information. According to Hossein Nourani Nejad’s mother, apart from giving some interviews to the media, in which he encouraged people to participate in the 2013 presidential election, Hossein Nourani Nejad had not been politically active when he was in Australia.<sup>12</sup> On 10 June 2014, a Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced him to six years imprisonment for “spreading propaganda against the system” and “gathering and colluding against national security”. On 16 June 2014 he was released after posting bail.

Hossein Nourani Nejad had previously been arrested in September 2009 following the 2009 disputed presidential election. He was subsequently sentenced to three years’ imprisonment by a Revolutionary Court in Tehran on the charges of “spreading propaganda against the system” and “gathering and colluding against national security”. His sentence was later reduced on appeal to one year and he was released in September 2010 after completing his prison term.

Journalist, political activist, and former official in the Ministry of Interior during the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami, **Serajeddin Mirdamadi**, was arrested on 11 May 2014 after he was summoned to the Office of the Prosecutor in Evin Prison and is currently held in Evin Prison. His passport had been previously confiscated at the airport on 3 August 2013 upon his return from France. He was subsequently banned from traveling abroad and was reportedly summoned for interrogations a number of times by the Ministry of Intelligence and the Revolutionary

Guards. His court hearing, apparently on the charge of "spreading propaganda against the system", was held on 8 January 2014 in a Revolutionary Court. However, the court refrained from trying him as it deemed the casefile incomplete and returned it to the Office of the Prosecutor.

Serajeddin Mirdamadi is reported to have said that his attendance in a conference, his work for Radio Zamaneh, a Persian language radio and news website, co-signing letters to international organizations regarding the situation of political prisoners and condemning the house arrest of opposition leaders, and working with Rasa TV, had been documented as evidence against him on the charge of "gathering and colluding against national security".<sup>13</sup> Serajeddin Mirdamadi's court hearing was held before Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 21 July 2014. On 27 July, he was sentenced to six years imprisonment on the charges of "gathering and colluding against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system".

**Sajedeh Arabsorkhi**, journalist and mother of an eight-year-old, started serving her one-year imprisonment sentence on the charge of "spreading propaganda against the system". She had returned to Iran from France, where she was studying, following the 2013 presidential election. It appears that the charge of "spreading propaganda against the system" is related to her open letters for her father, Feyzollah Arabsorkhi, a former deputy trade minister and a senior member of a reformist political party, Islamic Revolution Mujahidin Organisation, during the time he was imprisoned.<sup>14</sup> In a media interview, Sajedeh Arabsorkhi's mother said that her court hearing had been held in absentia and that she had lost the deadline for submitting an appeal request as the verdict had not been communicated to her in time.<sup>15</sup>

Amnesty International understands that Sajedeh Arabsorkhi has a separate case open against her on the charges of "propaganda against the system" and "gathering and colluding against national security". She had been arrested on 24 November 2013 in relation to this case after she was summoned to the Office of the Prosecutor located in Evin Prison but was released the next day on a hefty bail. She was summoned for interrogations for a number of occasions following her release.

On 9 July, Sajedeh Arabsorkhi wrote on her Facebook page:

*"I have been summoned to serve a sentence which has not even been communicated to me. Even more interesting is that I have been summoned by the Revolutionary Guards at the same time. Only God knows what is the status of each case."*

By criminalizing what essentially falls within peaceful and professional journalistic activities, the Iranian authorities are in effect criminalizing journalism and are thus in breach of their international human rights obligations.

Amnesty International urges the Iranian authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all journalists and media workers jailed solely because of the journalistic activities;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights; and drop all charges against anyone who is facing trial solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression or related rights to freedom of association or assembly;
- Ensure that detainees and prisoners, from the moment of arrest, are granted access to relatives, lawyers of their own choosing and all necessary medical care, and are fully protected at all times against torture or other ill-treatment while in custody;
- Urgently review and amend or repeal all Iranian laws that impinge on the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly, with a view to bringing them in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other relevant international treaties to which Iran is a state party.

<sup>1</sup> See Amnesty International, *Iran: From protest to prison: Iran one year after the election*, (Index: MDE 13/06/2010, 9 June 2010) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/062/2010>

<sup>2</sup> In a statement published following the arrests, BBC Persian denied the allegations that those arrested were working for the BBC, emphasising that they were independent documentary makers. See: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110919\\_ll-bbc\\_filmmakers.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/09/110919_ll-bbc_filmmakers.shtml)

<sup>3</sup> The Revolutionary Guards Corps Institute against Organized Crimes is a body affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards Cyber Defence Command (RCDC). According to the Institute's website, *Gerdab*, this body is mandated with "detecting and investigating organized terrorist, espionage, economic and social crimes in cyber space." See: <http://www.gerdab.ir/fa/content/3>. The website of the Institute contains a section wherein internet users can report cyber activities which the Institute deems criminal including "insulting Islam and its principals", "propagating deviant sects such as Baha'ism, and Sufism...", and "trainings on methods to bypass internet filtering". See: <http://www.gerdab.ir/fa/report> A number of detainees who have been arrested by this body have alleged that they have been tortured or otherwise ill-treated and were forced to make "confessions" which were later broadcast on national television.

<sup>4</sup> Mehr News, *The statement of the Ministry of Intelligence about the arrested journalists*, 30 January 2013, available at: <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/1804416>

<sup>5</sup> Shargh Newspaper, *The second statement by the Ministry of Intelligence about the arrest of journalists*, 6 February 2013, available at: <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=2674672>, and Entekhab, *The third statement of the Ministry of Intelligence about the arrest of journalists: three released, four fled*, 19 February 2013, available at:

<http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/97372/%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86-3-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1-4-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF>

<sup>6</sup> Farhang News, *The reasons for Saba Azarpeik's arrest*, 18 June 2014, available at: <http://www.farhangnews.ir/content/77682>

<sup>7</sup> International Campaign for Human rights in Iran, *Filmmaker Mahnaz Mohammadi Begins 5-Year Sentence on baseless charges*, 11 June 2014, available at: <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/06/mahnaz-mohammadi/>

<sup>8</sup> Roozline, *No news about Saba Azarpeik and the arrest of Mahnaz Mohammadi*, 9 June 2014, available at: <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/-05eef727e9.html>

<sup>9</sup> Kaleme, *One year imprisonment for Reyhaneh Tabatabaei, journalists*, 2 April 2012, available at: <http://www.kaleme.com/1391/01/14/klm-96487/>

<sup>10</sup> Kaleme, *The untold aspects of Reyhaneh Tabatabae's case: they want to throw the ball in Rouhani's court/ Instead of Jalili and Ghalibaf the Revolutionary Guards filed a complaint*, 9 July 2014, available at: <http://www.kaleme.com/1393/04/08/klm-189952/>

<sup>11</sup> Gerdab, *The details of Fox's Eye Mission published*, 25 February 2012, available at: <http://www.gerdab.ir/fa/news/9755/%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%DA%86%D8%B4%D9%85-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%AF>

<sup>12</sup> Roozonline, *Hossein Nourani Nejad's mother: tell them not to come back to Iran*, 7 May 2014, available at: <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/-0911803299.html>

<sup>13</sup> Meli Mazhabi, *The Intelligence Unit of the Revolutionary Guards interrogates Seraj Mirdamadi on the charge of overthrowing the system*, 2 March 2014, available at: <http://melimazhabi.com/?p=60698>

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<sup>14</sup> Feyzollah Arabsorkhi was arrested following the 2009 disputed presidential election and was sentenced to six years imprisonment on the charges of “spreading propaganda against the system” and “gathering and colluding against national security”.

<sup>15</sup> Kaleme, *Sajedeh Arabsorkhi’s mother: my daughter’s charge is writing for her imprisoned father*, 17 July 2014, available at: <http://www.kaleme.com/1393/04/26/klm-192237/>