

“WATCH OUT BECAUSE WE’RE COMING FOR YOU”

Transnational Repression
of Iranian Journalists in the UK



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, Iran's brutal repression of independent journalism at home has been accompanied by the systematic targeting of journalists reporting on Iran from abroad, in an effort to silence them. Iranian journalists working in countries as far afield as the United States, France, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom – countries which claim to champion press freedom – are regularly subjected to intimidation or attacks, both online and offline. Just like repression inside Iran, transnational repression, as attacks beyond borders are known, tends to increase at times when the eyes of the world are on Iran: thus, there has been a spike in harassment of exiled Iranians since late 2022, when protests erupted in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini.

Iran has made no secret of its opposition to a number of foreign-based news outlets reporting on Iran, publicly accusing them of harming national security, sanctioning several of them and launching judicial proceedings against the BBC's Persian broadcast service.¹ In October 2022, as the Iranian regime ratcheted up its public attacks on foreign journalists, Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Hossein Salami warned those he said were in charge of spreading news and lies. "You've tried us before," he said. "Watch out because we're coming for you."² When, a few months later in February 2023, broadcaster Iran International was faced with a threat level so high it was forced to stop broadcasting from London, Salami boasted it showed how far the Islamic Revolution's "realm of power, field of infiltration and radius of influence" had spread.³

This new report from Reporters Without Borders (RSF), based on testimony gathered in 2023 from dozens of exiled Iranian journalists living in the United Kingdom, shows that the level of transnational threat to Iranian journalists is unprecedented and comes at enormous professional and personal cost. It also reveals that, though they work in a country which professes to champion press freedom, the impact of transnational repression on Iranian journalists has not been adequately addressed by government, law enforcement, or social media platforms, in part because their plight has tended to be seen as a foreign priority, not a domestic one.

AMONG THE REPORT'S KEY FINDINGS ARE:

- **Online attacks have risen exponentially:** Almost 90% of journalists surveyed said they had experienced online threats or harassment in the last five years, with 50% reporting they received them frequently. These include death and rape threats, phishing attempts, impersonation and cyberattacks.
- **Many attacks are gendered:** Women are particularly likely to be frequently abused online, receiving messages that are sexualised, misogynistic or defamatory. Female survey respondents said they or their family members had been sent explicit images, been the subject of campaigns to besmirch their reputations, and received graphic rape and death threats – sometimes as often as daily.
- **The harassment of family members in Iran continues apace:** Around 60% of RSF survey respondents said their families had experienced threats or intimidation related to their work as journalists. This includes being called in for interrogations, applying economic penalties such as asset freezes or job loss, the removal of passports, travel bans, surveillance, tapping phone calls and detentions.

1 RSF. "RSF slams the Iranian government's attempt to silence foreign media". 28 October 2022. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-slams-iranian-government-s-attempt-silence-foreign-media>.

2 *Ibid*

3 Jones, D. "The UK must proscribe Iran's brutal Revolutionary Guard". *The Telegraph*. 3 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/09/03/the-uk-must-proscribe-irans-brutal-revolutionary-guard/>.

- **The impact on journalists, and on journalism, is devastating:** The sustained exposure to threats and abuse, online and offline, leads to anxiety, suicidal thoughts, hypervigilance, disruption to family life, exhaustion, an inability to sleep, and isolation. Three quarters of survey respondents said they had experienced psychological stress, anxiety or feelings of vulnerability as a result of threats and harassment. Stress has been compounded since the start of protests in Iran in 2022 by the professional demands of covering a story so emotionally and physically challenging, and by feelings of guilt about the impact on loved ones in Iran. Journalists report self-censorship, needing time off work, leaving social media platforms, or leaving work altogether.
- **The threat comes from multiple actors:** The Iranian government and its proxies are the principal source of threats and harassment, but not the only one. The last 10 years have also seen a rise in harassment from opposition groups, political activists and other members of the Iranian diaspora who accuse journalists of being too sympathetic to the regime. For journalists on the receiving end of abuse, it feels like hostility comes from all sides.
- **The response of social media platforms has been inadequate:** Journalists' experiences of reporting online abuse have been overwhelmingly negative. Many respondents said complaints made to social media platforms were either ignored or dealt with in an unsatisfactory manner.
- **The response from UK police has been mixed:** Larger organisations said they were well supported by police, including through the provision of training for their staff. However, on an individual level many journalists reported negative experiences reporting attacks to police, who did not understand the context or gravity of the threats they faced. The lack of follow-up or prosecutions has led to a breakdown in trust: only 13% of respondents said they had reported abuse to police in the last five years, with many feeling it would be a waste of time.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **For the UK government**

- Include transnational repression of journalists in the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists.
- Provide an appropriate rapid response protection mechanism for individual journalists in exile in the UK facing serious threats.
- Hold social media platforms accountable for dealing with online violence against journalists.
- Establish clear pathways for journalists forced to flee their home countries to enter the UK.

- **For police and other law enforcement agencies**

- Establish trained points of contact for journalists.
- Sensitise and train law enforcement officials to better recognise transnational repression.
- Issue up-to-date national-level guidance on how to record transnational and online crimes.
- Ensure systematic investigation and prosecution of transnational crimes against journalists falling under domestic jurisdiction.

- **For social media platforms**

- Establish trained points of contact for journalists.
- Strengthen capacity to deal swiftly and effectively with online attacks on journalists, including those in languages other than English.
- Train teams responsible for dealing with online violence to recognise characteristics of transnational repression, including the gendered nature of much online abuse.
- Report back regularly to the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists on the issue of transnational online harassment of journalists.

For a full list of recommendations, see p.25

INTRODUCTION

Iran is one of the most repressive countries in the world for journalists.⁴ Hundreds of journalists, citizen journalists and media workers inside Iran have been prosecuted, arrested, imprisoned and, in some cases, executed since the end of the revolution in 1979, and hundreds more have been forced into exile.⁵ Many exiled journalists have continued to report on Iran, providing a vital service for Iranian audiences who would otherwise not have access to independent information about what is happening in their country. They do so, though, at great personal cost. Globalisation and the rapid development of technology may have made it easier for journalists to report from a distance, but they have also made it easier than ever for authoritarian governments to target journalists living and working abroad.



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Attacking and intimidating exiled Iranian journalists has become one of the tools used systematically by the Iranian government as it seeks to project its power and control flows of information to its citizens – part of a continuum of repression that begins at home. Known as transnational repression, this targeting of journalists abroad tends to intensify at times of domestic strife and increased international attention: it has risen sharply since the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, in response to the extensive coverage of protests that followed in Iran. As this report, which draws on the testimony of dozens of journalists, documents, alarming numbers of Iranians working in countries that pride themselves on having freedom of the press regularly face intolerable pressure to stop reporting. Those working in Persian for prominent media platforms such as the BBC, Iran International, Deutsche Welle, Radio France Internationale, Voice of America, Radio Zamaneh and others are particularly likely to be targeted, as they are the most likely to reach large audiences at home.

The range of tactics is wide. It includes, among others, physical attacks, detentions, defamation, asset freezes, harassment of family members, threats and harassment, judicial proceedings, and intrusive surveillance. In recent years, to these more traditional methods have been added a slew of digital techniques, most notably threats and intimidation delivered online. Physical and digital threats are often used together, and attacks are often gendered. The Iranian government and its proxies are the primary perpetrators of attacks, but they are not the only source. Journalists surveyed for this report believed that most threats came from the Iranian government, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), or their proxies, but they also reported a rise in the last 10 years in harassment from opposition groups, political activists and other members of the Iranian diaspora. In such cases, the most common accusation is that journalists are too sympathetic to the regime. Hostile messages also often come from unknown sources, with provenance particularly opaque online. For journalists on the receiving end of such abuse, it feels like hostility comes from all sides.

Iranian journalists around the world have reported similar patterns of harassment. Raising the alarm in 2020, RSF counted around 200 Iranian journalists living in countries including the United States, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Czechia and Sweden who had received intimidatory messages online, around 50 of which were death threats.⁶ But London – the focus of this report – has been a particular

4 Iran ranked 177 out of 180 territories in RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/country/iran>.

5 RSF. "Forty years of state lies: RSF unveils leaked Iranian justice file". 7 February 2019.

Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/forty-years-state-lies-rsf-unveils-leaked-iranian-justice-file>.

6 RSF. "Open letter about threats to Iranian Journalists in six EU Countries and US". 22 January 2020.

Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/open-letter-about-threats-iranian-journalists-six-eu-countries-and-us>.

hotspot for attacks, because of the large number of Iranian journalists working there.⁷ Exiled Iranian journalists have shown remarkable courage and resilience in continuing to report in the face of such threats, and, at a time when the independent press in Iran is all but shut down, their work is all the more vital. Yet they have struggled to get the support and protections they need, in part because transnational repression has tended to be seen as an issue of foreign, not domestic, policy. In reality, transnational repression requires a more joined-up approach, for while it may originate abroad, it is fundamental freedoms at home that are at risk. This report, documenting a chilling and rising threat to democratic values, should act as a wake-up call to UK authorities, and to democracies worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

This report aims to get a better understanding of transnational repression against Iranian journalists by documenting the experiences of those living and working in the United Kingdom. London, home to major Persian-language broadcasters, was chosen because of the concentration of Iranian journalists based there.

The research underpinning this report includes:

- > **Extended interviews** with 24 journalists, employers and other stakeholders.
- > **An anonymous online survey** completed by 28 UK-based journalists. The survey asked a wide range of questions about respondents' experiences of online and offline attacks in the last five years. Almost all respondents were aged 35 or over, and more than 80% had been working as journalists in the UK for at least five years.
- > **A literature review** of existing accounts of transnational attacks on journalists.
- > **Freedom of Information requests.**

While the report contains testimony from dozens of Iranian journalists, it is important to note that many others with similar experiences felt unable or unwilling to participate because of fear, fatigue, trauma, resignation, or habituation to the kind of pressures described in this report. The difficulty they have in speaking up, noted also by employers, is symptomatic of the effectiveness of transnational repression, whose primary aim is intimidation. Any further studies would undoubtedly benefit from wider participation; nonetheless, the data below can be viewed as representative and a starting point for further national and international research and action.

Content warning

THIS REPORT CONTAINS GRAPHIC CONTENT THAT VIVIDLY PORTRAYS PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON JOURNALISTS, INCLUDING SOME OF A SEXUALISED NATURE.

⁷ The British capital has been home for years to three major Persian-language broadcasters: BBC Persian, Iran International, and Manoto TV, an independent channel that closed in early 2024. There are also other smaller platforms based in the UK.

WHAT IS TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION?

Broadly defined, “transnational repression” is the practice of governments reaching across national borders to target opponents abroad, with the aim of silencing critics and maintaining their grip on power. While the term has gained currency in recent years, the practice itself is not new: in the 20th century, many non-democratic countries used their secret services to track down political opponents abroad.⁸ Exiled journalists, unsurprisingly given their frontline role in exposing the crimes of authoritarians, have been among those targeted with lethal attacks, including in the UK. In 1978, for example, Bulgarian defector Georgi Markov was on his way home from work at the central London headquarters of the BBC World Service when he claimed he was stabbed by a poisoned umbrella, an event believed to have led to his death a few days later.⁹

Evidence gathered across RSF's global network of bureaus shows that journalists around the world continue to be a target today.¹⁰ Recent high-profile examples include the murder in Turkey of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018; an attack on Turkish journalist Erk Acarer in his Berlin apartment in 2021; the attempted poisoning in Germany of Russian journalist Jelena Kostyuchenko in 2023; and the harassment in 2022 and 2023 of Dutch journalist Marije Vlaskamp and Europe-based Chinese journalist Su Yutong, whose critical reporting on China led to a number of false accusations, fake hotel bookings, and rape and death threats.¹¹ But for every attack that makes the headlines, there are scores that take place behind the scenes.

As the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights recently noted, extraterritorial acts of repression have reached an unprecedented level, and are taking place more openly as autocrats cooperate with one another and avoid international scrutiny.¹² Quantifying the full extent of transnational repression remains difficult, however. Non-governmental organisation Freedom House has recorded 854 direct, physical incidents committed by 38 governments in 91 countries around the world since 2014, including 97 attacks, or 11% of the total, on journalists.¹³ But while direct, physical incidents may be the most visible form of attack, they are only the tip of the iceberg. And as this report shows, indirect strategies such as surveillance, online intimidation, and the harassment of families back home – harder to trace and document, but increasingly widespread – can have equally devastating effects on a journalist's career and well-being.

- 8 A notable example is the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City by a suspected Soviet agent. Furstenberg, S., E. Lemon & J. Heathershaw. “Spatialising state practices through transnational repression”. *European Journal of Security*, 6 (2021), 358-378. doi:10.1017/ejs.2021.10.
- 9 Mackie, L. & J. Andrews. “The poison-tipped umbrella: the death of Georgi Markov in 1978”. *The Guardian*. 12 September 1978. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/from-the-archive-blog/2020/sep/09/georgi-markov-killed-poisoned-umbrella-london-1978>.
- 10 According to Freedom House, the governments of at least 26 countries have targeted journalists abroad with transnational repression. Freedom House. *A Light That Cannot Be Extinguished*. Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2023. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/TNR_Journalism_Report_12.2023_Digital.pdf.
- 11 RSF. “RSF joins statement calling on US government to insist on accountability for Khashoggi murder”. 5 February 2019. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-joins-statement-calling-us-government-insist-accountability-khashoggi-murder>; RSF. “Exiled Turkish journalist attacked in Germany”. 8 July 2021. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/exiled-turkish-journalist-attacked-germany>; RSF. “After poisoning attempt, RSF urges European countries to protect Russian exile journalists”. 16 August 2023. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/after-poisoning-attempt-rsf-urges-european-countries-protect-russian-exile-journalists>; RSF. “RSF concerned by bomb threats made in the name of Europe-based journalists covering China”. 27 April 2023. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-concerned-bomb-threats-made-name-europe-based-journalists-covering-china>.
- 12 Council of Europe, Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights. “Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights”. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2023. Doc. 15787. Available at <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2093307/doc.+15787.pdf>.
- 13 Gorokhovskaia, Y, N. Schenkan & G. Vaughan. *Still Not Safe: Transnational Repression in 2022*. Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2023. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/FH_TransnationalRepression2023_0.pdf.

1

SPAT AT, SHOUTED AT, HURT: THE LOOMING THREAT OF PHYSICAL ATTACKS



I started screaming. I shut the door. I started running down the stairs, but he ran. And he grabbed me in the middle of the stairs and I thought, okay. I saw death.”

Iran is one of the top 10 origin countries of direct, physical transnational repression worldwide.¹⁴ In the United Kingdom alone, it emerged in February 2023 that police and security forces had responded to 15 credible Iranian threats to kill or kidnap British or UK-based individuals since the start of 2022, and similar plots have been uncovered worldwide.¹⁵ Journalists and media workers have often been the targets of such threats, such as France-based Rouhollah Zam, kidnapped while visiting Iraq and subsequently executed, and US-based Masih Alinejad, victim of an alleged kidnapping plot in New York.¹⁶ In 2023, the threat to journalists working for London-based, Persian-language broadcaster Iran International became so severe that the channel had to cease broadcasting from London until it could relocate to a more secure location (see p.11).¹⁷ And as this report went to press, counter-terrorism police in London were investigating whether the stabbing in London of Iran International journalist Pouria Zeraati was linked to Iran.¹⁸

Less serious direct attacks happen all too frequently, too. Half of the journalists covering Iran whom RSF surveyed said they had experienced verbal or physical harassment in the past five years. Unlike online threats (see Section 2), which are more likely to be directed at women, men are more likely to be the recipients of real-world attacks: 57% of men surveyed reported physical or verbal harassment compared to 36% of women. Intimidation is sometimes directed at news organisations as a whole, but it is also directed at individuals: 10 respondents reported experiencing verbal threats – that is, intimidating, offensive or abusive language either in person or in phone calls; two respondents reported being surveilled; and one said they had been followed or stalked.

Those behind physical attacks or plots can be difficult to trace. One journalist, who said that at various times she has been spat at, shouted at, subjected to cyberattacks and sent lewd photos, came home one day in 2005 to find a tall man in her home. Screaming, she tried to run but the man pursued her, grabbed her and threw her down the stairs. As she lay, terrified and shocked, at the bottom, he put

14 According to Freedom House, the top 10 origin states of transnational repression since 2014, responsible for 80% of all incidents of direct, physical attacks, are (in order): China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Russia, Egypt, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Iran and Rwanda. See Gorokhovskaia, Y, N. Schenkan & G. Vaughan. *Still Not Safe: Transnational Repression in 2022*. Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2023.

Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/FH_TransnationalRepression2023_0.pdf.

15 Tugendhat, T. "Security Threat to UK-Based Journalists" [Hansard]. 20 February 2023. Available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-02-20/debates/29A8956F-795C-430F-BBA8-25D93A5A2FCB/SecurityThreatToUK-BasedJournalists>.

16 RSF. "Tehran court sentences Amad News editor Rouhollah Zam to death". 30 June 2020. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/tehran-court-sentences-amadnews-editor-rouhollah-zam-death>; Graziozi, G. "Two men arrested in kidnapping plot targeting Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad living in Brooklyn". *The Independent*. 27 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/masih-alinejad-iran-kidnapping-plot-arrest-b2270750.html>.

17 RSF. "Court case and ITV investigation reveal tactics used by Iran to silence UK-based journalists". 21 December 2023. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/court-case-and-itv-investigation-reveal-tactics-used-iran-silence-uk-based-journalists-rsf-calls>.

18 RSF. "RSF condemns shocking stabbing of Iran International journalist". 3 April 2024 Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/uk-rsf-condemns-shocking-stabbing-iran-international-journalist>.

a hand on her head and warned her not to look up. Then he took her keys, ran down the street and escaped in her car with an accomplice. The journalist was so shaken she could not talk for two days. But though she believed the Iranian authorities were behind the attack, she could not prove it: after months of investigation, police said a prisoner on remand, part of an armed Eastern European gang, had confessed to breaking in. The use of hired criminals to do its bidding is a known Iranian tactic, obfuscating the direct line to Tehran.¹⁹

As well as state-driven threats, several journalists said they had faced in-person harassment from individuals they believed were associated with the Iranian opposition, who accused them of reporting too favourably on the regime in Tehran.

1.1 NEWS ORGANISATIONS SANCTIONED AND BRANDED TERRORISTS

The Iranian government has made no secret of its desire to see foreign-based news outlets shut down. In 2017, it began judicial proceedings against BBC Persian journalists en masse, and also froze the assets of more than 150 staff (see p12). Five years later, in October 2022, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs named BBC Persian on a list of individuals and organisations sanctioned for what it called actions in support of terrorism, inciting violence and hate speech, and human rights abuses.²⁰ The following month, Iran's intelligence minister said Iran International had also been designated a terrorist organisation, and anyone connected to the channel would be viewed as a threat to national security. Ismail Khatib also attacked the UK for hosting three Persian-language channels, telling Iranian state media that Britain would "pay for its actions to harm the security of Iran".²¹ In Germany and France, Deutsche Welle and Radio France Internationale's Persian services have also been subject to sanctions.²²

In-country representatives have also threatened journalists in the past. In 2019, then Iranian ambassador to the UK Hamid Baeidinejad used Twitter to accuse journalists at a number of UK-based outlets of being enemies of Iran.²³

1.2 "ENEMIES OF IRAN": VERBAL ATTACKS, POSTAL THREATS & SURVEILLANCE

Examples of physical and verbal abuse experienced by Iranian journalists based in the UK in the last five years include:

> **Verbal abuse:** Several interviewees and survey respondents reported being approached by strangers on London streets, on public transport, or even right outside their homes. One BBC journalist said a man had accused him of being a "traitor" and an "enemy of Iran". Another respondent said that in 2023, his wife, also a TV journalist, was shouted at on a London bus by a man who told her "We will kill you. You are a very bad person." One journalist said they were too scared to go to Iranian restaurants or shops, for fear of being attacked. Verbal attacks are often prompted by anger at the tone of a journalist's report; journalists from BBC Persian, for example, said they were accused by members of the public of being pro-regime, even as the regime accuses them of the opposite.

19 UK Government. "UK and US step up action to tackle domestic threat from Iran". 29 January 2024. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/yeywep7k>.

20 Ghobadi, P. "Why reporting on Iran comes at a heavy price". *BBC*. 12 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-64222261>.

21 Radio Farda. "Tehran designates London-based Iran International News a 'terrorist' organisation". 9 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-international-terrorist-organization/32122561.html>.

22 RSF. "RSF slams the Iranian government's attempt to silence foreign media". 28 October 2022. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-slams-iranian-government-s-attempt-silence-foreign-media>.

23 RSF. "Iranian ambassador threatens UK-based Iranian journalists and media". 26 November 2019. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/iranian-ambassador-threatens-uk-based-iranian-journalists-and-media>.

- > **Wire-tapping:** In 2022, a London-based BBC journalist's private WhatsApp calls with her family in Iran were wire-tapped and subsequently manipulated to misrepresent her views. They were then disseminated through a news agency in Iran affiliated with the IRGC. The same journalist had her car broken into while it was parked close to her home.
- > **Threatening post:** One journalist received a package through the post that was made to look like anthrax. The package was hand-delivered to a postbox inside her apartment block and had the journalist's full name and address on the front. Finding it suspicious, she contacted the police who took it away for forensic testing. The case turned out to be a hoax and was closed, but the journalist was unsettled by the fact someone had accessed her home.
- > **Confrontation at public events:** Several journalists covering protests involving the Iranian diaspora reported being confronted by demonstrators. In 2022, a TV journalist covering a protest in London was surrounded by protesters who accused her of not doing enough and shouted: "Go to hell! Go to hell!" Journalists for BBC Persian are often accused of siding with the Iranian regime by anti-government protesters who shout "Ayatollah BBC".



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IRAN INTERNATIONAL: FORCED TO STOP LONDON BROADCASTS



اینترنشنال

Iran International, a Persian-language news channel launched in London in May 2017 and widely watched in Iran, has faced some of the most high-profile and serious threats against UK-based journalists. Its journalists have long been subjected to harassment and intimidation both online and offline, but the threat level increased dramatically following its coverage of protests in Iran. In November 2022, two British-Iranian journalists from the channel were notified by London's Metropolitan Police of an "imminent, credible and significant" risk to their lives.²⁴ For the next few months, extensive security measures had to be put in place at the channel's West London home in Chiswick Business Park, including roadblocks, a perimeter fence and a police presence.

In February 2023, a Chechen-born Austrian national, Mohammad-Hussein Dovtaev, was found covertly filming at the site and arrested by counter-terrorism police. He was subsequently found guilty of collecting information "likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism" and sentenced to more than three years in jail.²⁵ Following his arrest, police advised the channel to shut down and move to more secure premises, saying they were no longer able to guarantee the safety of its journalists. Iran International therefore stopped broadcasting from London, resuming seven months later, after having moved.²⁶ Security Minister Tom Tugendhat described the threat as an "outrageous violation" of the UK's sovereignty, while the Foreign Office summoned Iran's most senior diplomat.²⁷

IRGC Commander-in-Chief Major General Hossein Salami – who had, in October 2022, warned media based abroad to "Watch out, because we're coming for you" – said news of the threats showed "how far the Islamic Revolution's realm of power, field of infiltration and radius of influence has extended".²⁸ An investigation by ITV News traced plots against Iran International – including a plan to car bomb their premises – back to the IRGC, a claim Iranian officials dismissed as "baseless".²⁹ On 29 March 2024, just before this report went to press, Iran International journalist Pouria Zeraati was stabbed outside his southwest London home. Counter-terrorism police had yet to determine the motive or who was responsible. Like BBC Persian, Iran International has been sanctioned and labelled an enemy of the Islamic Republic. In November 2022, Iran's intelligence minister said Iran International had been designated a terrorist organisation, and anyone connected to the channel would be viewed as a threat to national security.³⁰

Owned by Volant Media UK, a London-based company owned by a Saudi-British national, the channel has been scrutinised for its links to Saudi Arabia, but it says it has no state backing.³¹ It has a staff of around 200 journalists and is available online, via radio and via satellite broadcasting worldwide. According to the Netherlands-based Gamaan foundation, it is the most-watched media in Iran, with around 54% of the population watching sometimes or often.³²

24 Iran International. "Statement On Formal Threats To The Life Of Journalists On UK Soil". 7 November 2022.

Available at: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211076450>.

25 Iran International. "Suspect In Terror Plot Against Iran International Gets Jail Term". 22 December 2023.

Available at: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312227033>.

26 RSF. "RSF calls on Iran to cease targeting journalists abroad following suspension of Iran International TV's UK operations". 20 February 2023.

Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-calls-iran-cease-targeting-journalists-abroad-following-suspension-iran-international-tv-s-uk>; Iran International. "Iran International Re-Launches UK Studios From New Building". 25 September 2023.

Available at: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202309250985>.

27 Tugendhat, T. "Statement on the security threat to UK-based journalists". 20 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-on-security-threat-to-uk-based-journalists>;

UK Govt. "Foreign Secretary summons Iranian diplomat over continued threat to UK-based journalists". 20 February 2023. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/v92j2w65>.

28 RSF. "RSF slams the Iranian government's attempt to silence foreign media". 28 October 2022. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-slams-iranian-government-s-attempt-silence-foreign-media>;

Iran International. "IRGC Boasts Of Victory For Iran International's Relocation From UK". 22 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202302228943>.

29 ITV. "The Wedding': Iranian spy plot to kill two news presenters in London uncovered by double agent". 21 December 2023.

Available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-12-20/iran-spy-plot-to-kill-two-news-presenters-in-london-uncovered-by-double-agent>.

30 Radio Farda. "Tehran designates London-based Iran International News a 'terrorist' organisation". 9 November 2022.

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32 Gamaan. "Iranian attitudes towards media 2023". 8 September 2023.

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BBC NEWS PERSIAN: SANCTIONED, CRIMINALISED, THREATENED

Harassment of BBC Persian staff and their families has been constant since the TV channel launched but has intensified since 2022, as protests triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini put Iran back in the international spotlight. Journalists have received death threats and threats of horrific violence online, as well as thousands of orchestrated abusive comments. In addition, their family members in Iran have been frequently targeted.³³ While pressure on families, judicial proceedings and attempts to discredit BBC journalists appear to be state-led, BBC journalists also face harassment from members of the opposition who perceive BBC coverage as too pro-government.

Judicial proceedings against BBC Persian journalists en masse began in July 2017, with Iranian authorities alleging their work was a crime against national security. More than six years later, that criminal investigation is ongoing, meaning staff cannot travel to Iran without fear of arrest. Also in 2017, the Iranian authorities froze the assets of 152 named individuals preventing them from buying, selling or inheriting property in Iran. The asset freeze has a serious impact on families in Iran, who have been unable to sell or rent properties if their BBC relative holds any share. In October 2022, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs named BBC News Persian on a list of individuals and organisations sanctioned for “promoting and instigating terrorism, violence and hate-mongering and violation of human rights”.³⁴ Days later, Iran’s state-backed Mizan News Agency reported that Iran’s culture ministry had prepared a legal action against “London-based hostile media” for their alleged support of “terrorism” and “violent activities”.³⁵

The BBC has filed a number of complaints with the United Nations over the treatment of its staff, the most recent of which, filed in 2022, focused on the online harms and threats directed at women journalists. It has also made submissions to a UN international fact-finding mission on Iran due to publish its report in 2024. In its response to the 2022 complaint, Iran denied harassing BBC employees, but doubled down on its accusations that the BBC fomented strife.

BBC News Persian is one of the BBC's oldest non-English language services. It began as a radio service in 1940, launched its website in 1996 (blocked by the Iranian authorities since 2006), and opened its television channel in 2009. Today, BBC News Persian TV is on air 24/7, broadcasting a mix of news and current affairs, debates and features. It employs around 145 journalists. The BBC News Persian TV channel is currently banned in Iran, but audiences watch it via satellite and digital platforms. In addition to its TV channel, website and podcasts, BBC News Persian also connects with its audience on social media platforms, including Instagram where the service has 19.7 million followers. According to the BBC, BBC News Persian reaches 19.2 million viewers a week, including 14.8 million in Iran.³⁶

33 Doughty Street Chambers. “Iran’s targeting of journalists across Europe raised at UN Human Rights Council in Geneva”. 17 March 2023. Available at: <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/news/irans-targeting-journalists-across-europe-raised-un-human-rights-council-geneva>.

34 Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Iranian Foreign Ministry’s statement on sanctions against British institutions and individuals”. 19 October 2022. Available at: <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/NewsView/697020>.

35 Mizan Online. 25 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.mizanonline.ir/fa/news/4488099>.

36 Harris, J. Written evidence submitted by Ms Julia Harris at BBC World Service. (UKIO0019). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/214/the-uk-and-iran/publications/>; Ghobadi, P. “Why reporting on Iran comes at a heavy price”. *BBC*. 12 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-6422261>; BBC Global Audience Measure 2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/documents/ara-2022-23.pdf>.

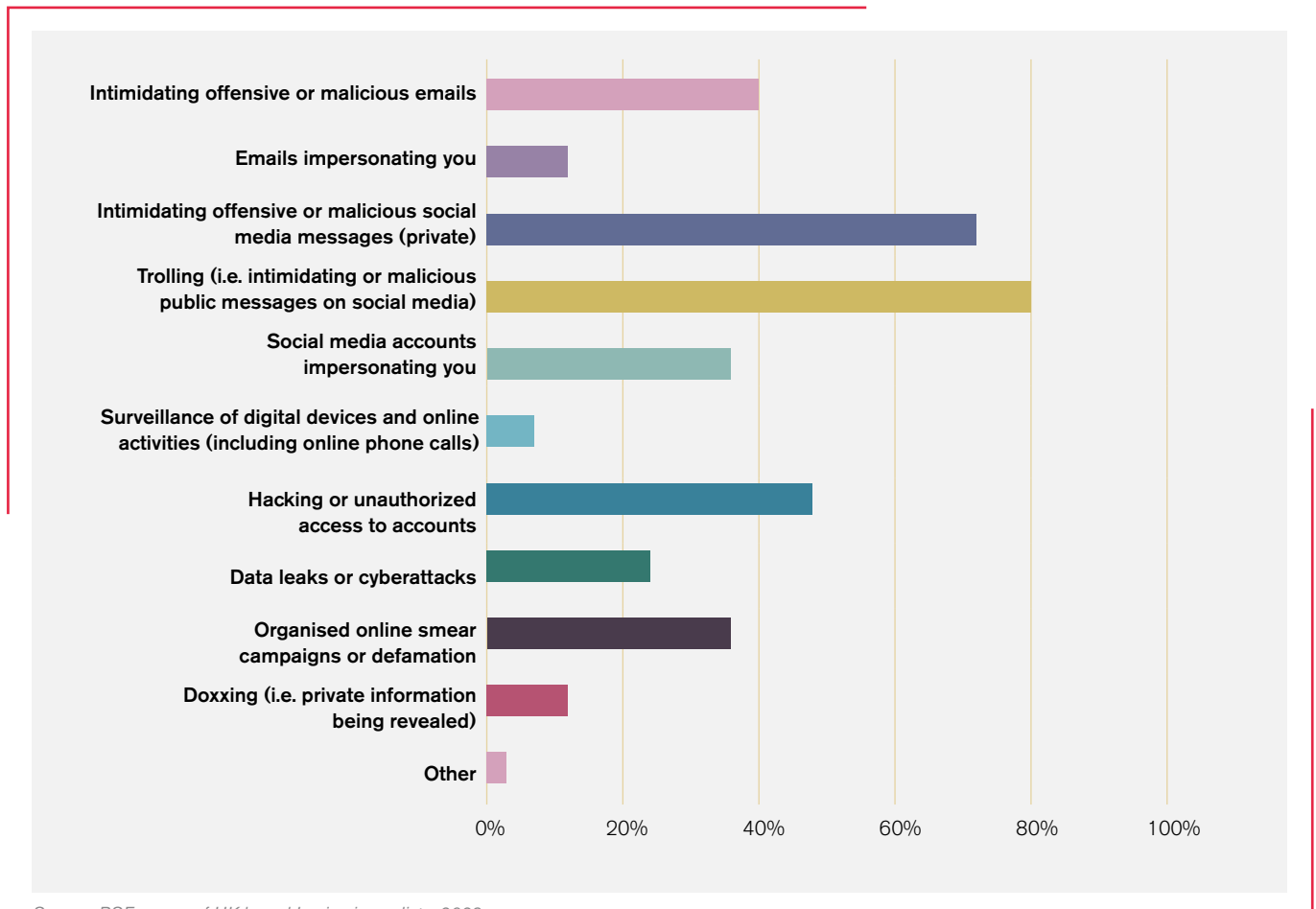
2 |

DEATH THREATS & INTIMIDATION: THE RAPID RISE OF ONLINE ABUSE

“*You’re next. You’re next. We are near you. You should always watch your back. If we were you, we wouldn’t sleep. Sleep with your eyes open.*”

One of the most striking aspects of transnational repression in the past decade has been the rise of online harassment. Almost 90% of survey respondents covering Iran said they had experienced online threats or harassment; 50% said they received them frequently (once a month or more); and some said they received them daily. The most common form of delivery is social media: 80% of respondents reported receiving intimidating or malicious public messages on social media, and 72% had received such messages privately on social media. Half of the respondents felt the number of online threats had increased significantly in the past five years.

FIGURE 1
Types of online threat or harassment experienced in the last five years



Source: RSF survey of UK-based Iranian journalists, 2023.

Messages include death threats, either by text or voice message. In its 2020 submission to a UK parliamentary enquiry into the UK's relationship with Iran, the BBC reported that journalist Rana Rahimpour had received a message threatening she would be assassinated within a month, and that after her it would be the turn of the rest of BBC Persian employees. The sender also warned Rahimpour to think about her children.³⁷ Respondents to RSF's survey said they had been contacted on a variety of platforms, including X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. One journalist was sent an image of an acid attack in London, implying that she would be next. Another was sent a message noting that the water under Westminster Bridge was very deep. Another received a message via WhatsApp just as she was about to go on air which said "I know you're about to go on air. Please, you should not be reporting this. This is wrong." The journalist was deeply troubled by the fact someone within her workplace was surveilling her.

Other examples of messages received include:

- > ***You will be hanged or you will be executed.***
- > ***You remember Mohammad Ali Zam? We lured him to Iran and executed him. You're next.***
- > ***We will kill your mum, we will kill your mum.***
- > ***Find a grave for yourself in London. Don't be surprised if you are shot one day.***

Online intimidation should not be viewed in isolation from real-world attacks. As other studies have shown, online abuse can often be a predictor of physical violence; research by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) into online violence against women found that online abuse and physical attacks against women journalists are not only correlated but causally related in many cases.³⁸ Online abuse can trigger offline attacks, but real-world abuse can also provoke online pile-ons. When people in positions of power or state-endorsed platforms target journalists, they give the green light to a far wider group of detractors. As the ICFJ report concluded, in extreme cases, online violence can escalate to physical attacks or even murder.

2.1 WOMEN FACE ALARMING LEVELS OF EXPLICIT AND GENDERED ABUSE

Women are particularly likely to be frequently abused online: almost 93% of women journalists who completed the RSF survey said they had been subjected to online threats or harassment linked to their journalism in the last five years, compared to almost 86% of men, with 57% of women surveyed saying it happened at least once a month, compared to 43% of men. Several women journalists said they are sent abuse daily. Many of the messages they receive, both publicly and privately, are gendered and sexualised, including rape threats, explicit images and besmirching.

More women were on the receiving end of almost every type of abuse (see Fig. 2), with the biggest gap being the number of women receiving private messages on social media that were intimidating, offensive or malicious. Further research into the gender disparity is required, but the results support what employers say: women journalists face online abuse on an alarming scale.

Women are also more likely to receive abuse that is gendered or personal. More than 60% of women surveyed said they had received online messages targeting their gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity or other facets of their identity, compared to less than 30% of men. Many women journalists described receiving messages that were sexualised, misogynistic or defamatory, including rape and death threats,

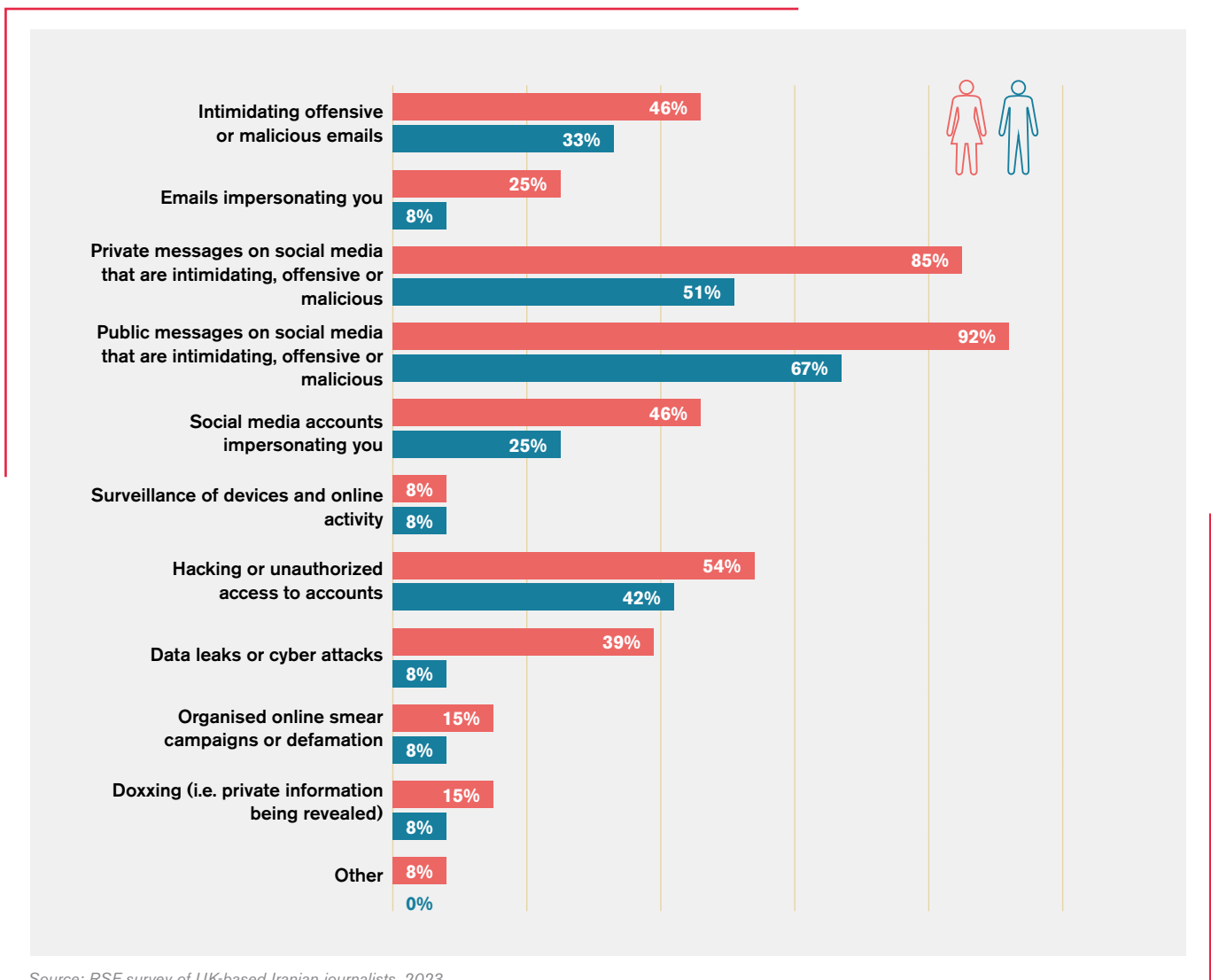
³⁷ Harris, J. Written evidence submitted by Ms Julia Harris at BBC World Service. (UKIO0019). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/214/the-uk-and-iran/publications/>.

³⁸ Posetti, J. and N. Shabbir (eds). *The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists*. ICFJ/Unesco, 2022, p.85. Available at: https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/ICFJ_UNESCO_The%20Chilling_2022_1.pdf.

and threats of sexual violence towards them or their families. Such messages are often delivered on social media, either through direct messaging channels or on open threads.

Other abuse plays out more publicly still: a particularly chilling Iranian tactic is creating fake stories and circulating them on state-controlled media in Iran, or other platforms designed to reach a wide audience. These stories aim to damage female journalists' reputations on a personal level, often suggesting they are promiscuous or debauched. One BBC journalist, for example, was the subject of a weblog which, over the course of a year and using photos of her with someone else's child, claimed she had been raped by a male presenter and given birth to an illegitimate child. Her father in Iran was subsequently brought in for questioning and convinced by his interrogators that she had hidden the birth because she was ashamed.³⁹

FIGURE 2
Types of online abuse of journalists covering Iran, by gender



39 Harris, J. Written evidence submitted by Ms Julia Harris at BBC World Service. (UKIO0019). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/214/the-uk-and-iran/publications/>.

Efforts such as these to besmirch a reputation, as well as those targeting the appearance, marital status and professionalism of women journalists, can have a huge psychological effect. As the ICFJ's study into online violence against women rightly noted, online attacks are intimate and hard to get away from, arriving on mobile screens first thing in the morning or late at night, in private spaces as well as the workplace.⁴⁰ The quantity of abuse is also deeply alarming. "Every. Single. Day." wrote Rahimpour in 2022, describing the horrific rape and death threats that for her had almost become routine, including one that said she would be raped and beheaded in front of her children.⁴¹ Deleting such messages does not take them away. "Disgusting words and images still [run] through your head hours after deleting them," Rahimpour wrote. "All because we are journalists for the BBC. It might not be personal, but it feels like it."⁴²

Other examples of gender-based harassment shared by respondents include:

- > **Photoshopping:** A female interviewee's 14-year-old son was sent a pornographic image with his mother's face photoshopped onto it, causing serious distress for both the teenager and his parent.
- > **Explicit images:** A woman journalist received images of male genitals by email and direct message. Another reported receiving images of genitals on both Instagram and Twitter. Another said she was sent explicit content from several unknown accounts.
- > **Threats to female family members:** A male respondent said he had received threats that his female family members would be raped, including a message saying "we will find your sister's child and rape them".

2.2 HACKING, PHISHING, DOXXING AND MORE

In addition to online verbal abuse, journalists reported hacking incidents, phishing attempts, fake accounts and cyberattacks. Examples include:

In June 2023, Persian-language online news outlet Kayhan London received a sudden surge of 850,000 website access requests within a matter of seconds that appeared to originate from Iran. Kayhan often experiences similar attacks aimed at overwhelming the server, varying from hundreds of thousands to several million simultaneous access requests. There have also been frequent attempts to hack the email accounts of its journalists.

A journalist with Manoto TV said her Instagram account was hacked and subsequently inaccessible for a month. The breach led to the exposure of private conversations between her and significant individuals in Iran, some of whom were subsequently arrested. She reported the incident to British police but was told they could do nothing. The journalist said her personal information and address were repeatedly shared on an Instagram page with over 100,000 followers, forcing her to move twice.

One respondent said that their mother's address in Tehran was published on Twitter (now X). Fearing for their mother's safety, they reported this to the platform but were told that, as there was no violation of rules or obvious offence, nothing could be done.

40 Posetti, J. and N. Shabbir (eds). *The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists*. ICFJ/Unesco, 2022, p.22. Available at: https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/ICFJ_UNESCO_The%20Chilling_2022_1.pdf.

41 Rahimpour, R. "Rana Rahimpour talks about the daily threats she receives as a BBC News Persian journalist". *BBC*. 23 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/articles/2022/rana-rahimpour-bbc-news-persian-journalist>.

42 Rahimpour, R. "Rape, death and arrest threats reality for Rana Rahimpour as BBC submits UN complaint". *The Independent*. 23 March 2022. Available at: <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/rape-death-and-arrest-threats-reality-for-rana-rahimpour-in-iran-as-bbc-prepares-to-submit-complaint-to-un-1532326>.



Demonstrators in Tehran condemn UK support of exiled Iranian media, October 2022. © AFP

2.3 INVISIBLE ENEMIES: ONLINE ABUSE COMES FROM ALL SIDES

As with physical intimidation, online intimidation appears to come from a range of sources, including accounts or individuals affiliated with the regime and members of the opposition. Around 46% of survey respondents said those sending threats identified themselves, but that it was not always clear if they were who they claimed to be.

Journalists may be accused of being anti-government, or of being government mouthpieces. Some attacks appear to be coordinated smear campaigns organised by highly-mobilised activists, while others are more personal. Even journalists who cover non-political subjects such as sports or entertainment said they were targeted.

A number of journalists said they had reported threatening messages or fake accounts to social media platforms, but that the platforms were either slow to respond, or did not respond at all (See Section 5.2). Several noted that platforms were particularly unresponsive when posts were written in Persian.

3 | FEAR & GUILT: THE HARASSMENT OF FAMILY MEMBERS IN IRAN

“

I cannot get rid of that guilt – that feeling of guilt that other people have been punished severely for what you do for your job.”

As well as directly targeting journalists based abroad, the regime in Tehran routinely targets their families back in Iran. Around 60% of respondents said their families had experienced threats or harassment linked to their work, a form of co-option that puts enormous pressure on journalists living abroad. As one BBC journalist noted, while he made the choice to be a journalist, with all of its attendant stress, his family did not; many journalists feel guilt that their family members are dragged in. One journalist said he could not shake the feeling that his work led indirectly to the death of a relative whose assets were frozen by the Iranian regime. Another said he had stopped communicating entirely with his sister, after she was threatened with death if he did not leave his job in journalism.

As with other forms of repression, the harassment of family members tends to escalate at times of upheaval and increased visibility for Iran on the global stage. Journalists said it had become worse in 2017, and then much worse again when they began covering the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022.

3.1 FAMILY MEMBERS HAULED IN FOR INTERROGATION

Many respondents said family members in Iran had been called in for questioning multiple times, some for spells of up to six hours. Such interrogations can be aggressive and frightening; one respondent said her mother was blindfolded, while another said hers was taken for questioning by three men wearing black masks and made to sit in front of a wall in their office for five hours. One journalist, whose family in Iran had their assets frozen and their movement limited, said her mother had been interrogated four or five times. During interrogations, family members have been threatened with economic sanctions, or never seeing their journalist relatives again.

Sometimes, interrogators have attempted to coerce the family member to convince their relative to stop being a journalist, to arrange to meet their relative in a neighbouring country such as Iraq or Turkey, or to put officials directly in touch with their relative abroad. One journalist's mother was interrogated several times, with each session lasting between three and six hours. The interrogators, who said they were from the security forces, offered to pay for a trip to Turkey or Dubai if she arranged to meet her daughter there.

One journalist's dying father was taken from hospital for interrogation, with photographs sent to his son. Another respondent said that even though he does not have a public-facing job, his sisters living in Iran were called in by intelligence officials and asked to put pressure on him to quit. The sisters were told there would be consequences if he did not stop working as a journalist; he cut off communication in response, out of fear for their safety.

3.2 RELATIVES FACE ASSET FREEZES, TRAVEL BANS, JOB LOSS

Several respondents reported family members losing their jobs as a result of their journalism; one said her brother-in-law had been quizzed about her during a job interview. Other economic tactics used include asset freezes and loss of pension.

One journalist whose family in Iran had assets frozen said her mother was taunted with the suggestion that she might not see her again. “You haven't seen her in so long, have you?” the interlocutor said, implying she might never see her again and instructing her to tell her daughter to stop working as a journalist.

Another journalist said their mother, having been questioned several times, found out the authorities were going to revoke her business licence. Fear of being banned from leaving Iran prompted her to close her business and flee into exile, leaving almost everything behind.

Journalists' families have also experienced detentions, the confiscation of passports, intimidating phone calls, surveillance, the tapping of phone calls, the spread of defamatory stories about them and their relatives, and travel bans.

One journalist said that during military service, his brother was deployed to an active zone rather than to a clerical position, a decision he believed was taken as a direct result of his work as a journalist in the UK.

One journalist's ex-wife, who was travelling with their teenage children, was detained when she travelled to Iran, called for questioning three times, and threatened with not being allowed to return to the UK.

4 | FEAR & SELF-CENSORSHIP: THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION



I wake up in the middle of the night. I check my son to see if he's there. I don't let him play in the garden on his own. I have to be there. I'm on alert constantly."

Sustained exposure to threats, abuse and intimidation, both online and offline, has a devastating impact on journalists' lives, as does the seeding of fear. Over half of respondents said they had concerns for their safety. For some, like the journalists of Iran International, the level of threat has been so severe that it disrupted their working life (see p.11); for others, working patterns continue, but only against a backdrop of heightened security and vigilance. For many, the relentlessness of abuse is overwhelming. Several interviewees showed clear distress when recounting their experiences, and many described their inability to lead a normal life.

Three quarters of survey respondents said they had experienced psychological stress, anxiety or feelings of vulnerability as a result of threats and harassment. Many said they relied on therapy or antidepressants; some said they could not sleep; one had become suicidal. More than 60% of respondents said their family life was impacted, and 25% said they had made changes to their daily routines, such as walking different routes or changing modes of transport (See Fig. 3). Many described living in a state of hypervigilance.

Many journalists described a sense of mistrust in the response of authorities. A lack of concrete action on their particular cases, particularly from police or social media platforms, heightened their sense of vulnerability and isolation (See Section 5).

4.1 PROFESSIONAL PRESSURES TAKE THEIR TOLL

Stress is compounded by the nature of journalists' work. As noted above, threats and abuse tend to be most intense at times of turbulence in Iran – also the times when Persian-language journalists are under the most pressure professionally. Covering the protest movement in Iran since the death of Mahsa Amini has been extremely challenging, physically and emotionally: interviewees described the emotional and physical toll of working extremely long hours, of watching hours and hours of distressing footage, and of remaining objective on a story so complex and important and close to home. Journalists are also painfully aware that audiences in Iran rely on them for news, and must constantly weigh the threat to them and their families against the moral imperative they feel to report the truth. The carefully constructed climate of fear, the barrage of online abuse, the pressure on family at home and the daily potential for real-world confrontations all take place against this backdrop of professional strain.

4.2 TOO SCARED TO LIVE A FULL LIFE

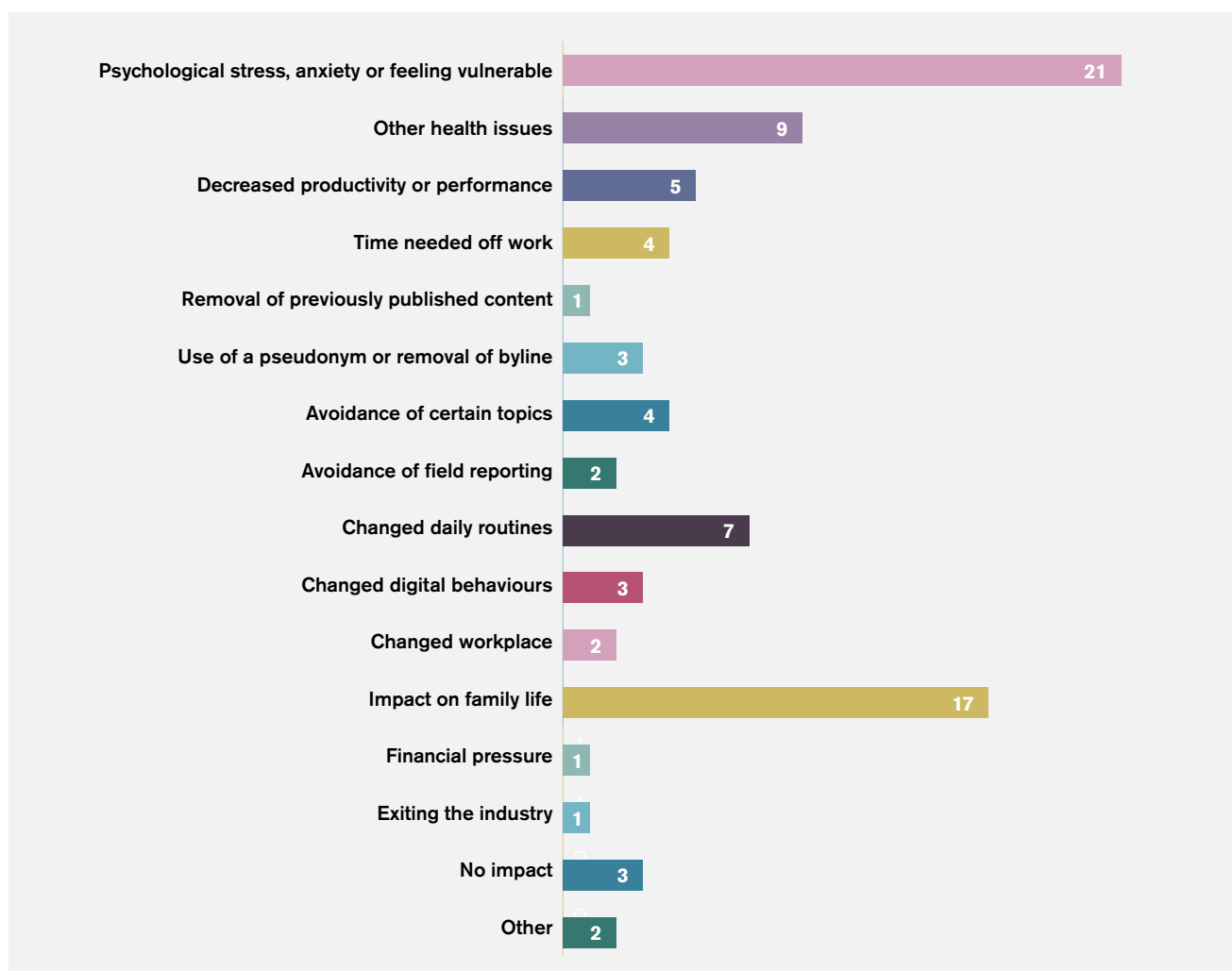
For many, anxiety has made it impossible to live a full life. Some said life was reduced to work and home. "I always said I was like a plant," one interviewee said, describing their experience of direct pressure from the Iranian authorities. "I just came to work and went back home and did nothing." Many respondents said

they avoided attending demonstrations organised by the Iranian diaspora, for fear of being confronted by individuals who do not like their reporting. Some said they had stopped going to Persian restaurants, shops and social gatherings.

One journalist said that, despite security measures including police presence and notification of the Home Office, she chose not to attend a university conference where the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran was to address human rights violations. Instead, she limited herself to covering the event by watching a video recording provided by the university. Another journalist said she no longer had parcels delivered to her home, after an encounter with an Iranian delivery man left her shaken.

Travel to Iran is also impossible for those associated with sanctioned broadcasters or subject to judicial proceedings. Some journalists said even travel to neighbouring countries had become too risky, and that travelling anywhere made them nervous.

FIGURE 3
Impact of transnational repression on journalists covering Iran
 Number of respondents experiencing these of a total 28 surveyed



Source: RSF survey of UK-based Iranian journalists, 2023.

4.4 SERIOUS DAMAGE TO FAMILY LIFE

Being cut off from families is another emotional challenge. The blanket denunciation of journalists working for platforms such as BBC Persian and Iran International, including criminal proceedings still underway, has made it impossible for many respondents to return to Iran without fear of arrest, stopping them from fully participating in family life.

Travel bans prevented one journalist's father from coming to meet his newborn grandchild, while others have missed weddings, or funerals, or a chance to say goodbye. In 2019, an internal survey completed by the BBC showed that at least 48 staff had lost loved ones and been unable to see them before they died, as a result of Iranian injunctions.⁴³

Some journalists try to limit or stop contact with family in Iran as a protective measure, while some families in Iran try to protect their relatives by keeping secret the harassment they face. All of these things disrupt relationships and breach the fundamental right to a private family life. Even future relationships are affected. One journalist said fear about the impact on a spouse prevented him from seeking a life partner. "I am always worried that one day they may get punished for being related to me," he said.

4.3 SELF-CENSORSHIP OR WITHDRAWAL

Fear sometimes leads to withdrawal and self-censorship. One journalist said that every time they wanted to pitch a story, they thought about the attacks that might follow. "There are times that I think I have a good story that I want to work on, but then I think is it really worth it?" they said. "They are going to attack me, and maybe they are going to interrogate my mum again and she can't tolerate it. And then I think, OK, leave it."

Several journalists said they had made a conscious decision to limit their activity online, avoiding posting tweets or comments, or deciding not to engage with individuals on Facebook, X or Instagram. Three journalists said they quit social media entirely to avoid harassment. Several respondents noted that their employer's advice was to "keep a low profile" or avoid social networks altogether. Yet such withdrawal comes at a professional cost: in a digital age, social media is a key locus of work for journalists, without which it is harder to report or maintain a profile.⁴⁴

Several respondents said they had needed time off work. Some journalists leave the profession entirely; one employer reported a significant turnover of staff. More than half of the respondents had accessed counselling or therapy through their employer, and some employers said they offered digital and physical security training to staff.

4.5 THE SLOW BURN OF SURVIVOR'S GUILT

Journalists' sense of duty, along with the solidarity of colleagues, can sometimes be a buttress against abuse and a driver to continue working. As one journalist said, "What I'm suffering now is nothing compared to what people are dealing with in Iran. And the least I can do is be their voice." Another said colleagues helped maintain perspective. "We are in the same boat," they said. "We do our best to diffuse threats. We have decided not to become martyrs for a story." Others, though, described struggling with a kind of survivor's guilt, triggered by the suffering of friends, relatives and audiences in Iran.

43 Mayhew, F. "BBC Persian journalists unable to visit sick relatives as Iran continues 'collective punishment' of news service". *Press Gazette*. 5 March 2019. Available at: <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/bbc-persian-journalists-unable-to-visit-sick-relatives-as-iran-continues-collective-punishment-of-news-service/>.

44 United Nations. AL IRN/2022. 26 May 2022. Available at: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=27277>.

5 | FRUSTRATION & DISMISSAL: THE INADEQUATE RESPONSE OF AUTHORITIES AND PLATFORMS

“*I don't even know if they knew where Iran was.*”

5.1 RESPONSE FROM POLICE INCONSISTENT

Journalists reporting threats to the UK police had a variety of experiences, ranging from very good to very disappointing. In high-profile, major cases, such as the serious threats against Iran International, the police response was largely praised, and the major employers described a good working relationship with law enforcement, especially specialist forces who have provided training for staff on digital security and self-protection. One journalist said that after a particularly serious attack, she had been advised to install panic buttons at home, and another respondent said they had received practical advice, such as installing security cameras and varying daily routines.

But many journalists interviewed said that when they personally reported cases to the police, they found the response inadequate. Some said local police officers were unaware of the context of complaints, leading them to dismiss cases too quickly, or pass them from station to station. One respondent described a journalist receiving an Osman warning – that is notification of a threat to their life – from an officer making small talk. Another, who had received graphic threats to his family by voicemail on Instagram, said that when he went to the police station at the police's request, the officer failed to attend his appointment. Ultimately, he was given an online link to upload the voicemail and asked for a translation because of a lack of equipment at the station, leading him to feel disheartened. The following year, the case was dismissed, on the basis that the voicemail had been sent from an unidentifiable IP address.

Several journalists spoke with frustration of persevering with police, only to come to a dead end. “More than 10 times I called the police, and [then] they came to my workplace,” one interviewee said. “They sat with me for an hour but after that nothing happened.” Another journalist, facing serious threats, found herself tossed between her local station and counter-terrorism police. She said she was left feeling abandoned. “I was under so much pressure,” she said. “Being thrown between one office and another. What's the point of having a case number? I was done.”

Some journalists said that while police did respond, the support they offered was limited. A TV journalist, subjected to rape and death threats, doxing and account hacking, was visited by a Persian-speaking officer who checked her home but never followed up. On another occasion, she was told police could do little to help in her case, and advised to “turn it down a little” on her show, to attract less attention. Another journalist, who in the Netherlands had been viewed as a high-risk person and had daily check-ins with Dutch police, said the response he received in London was contrasting. “Here, they just give me a reference number,” he said.

The perceived lack of response has eroded trust between journalists and law enforcement. While 46% of respondents had experienced offline abuse in the past five years, only 25% reported it to police; for online abuse, just 21% made a report to police, though 89% had experienced it. While some cases did not reach a threshold seen as worth contacting police, in other cases, the decision not to report was driven by a sense it would be a waste of time.

It is clear that the perpetrators of transnational repression can be hard to identify, particularly when threats are online. But more could be done to enhance police skills and training in dealing with threats that are preventing journalists from working freely in the UK, and in better supporting journalists. There is also an urgent need for national guidance on how to record and pursue such crimes, and greater transparency on how they are recorded and dealt with. Freedom of Information requests submitted by RSF to try and find out more about police practice and the frequency of such crimes were either declined or left unanswered.

5.2 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS LET JOURNALISTS DOWN

Respondents were overwhelmingly negative about the response of social media platforms and email providers, whose role in tackling the online elements of transnational repression is central. Multiple respondents said that complaints about abuse made to X (formerly Twitter) were either ignored or dealt with in an unsatisfactory manner. Fake accounts were not removed, and abusive messages and threats were hidden from the victim but left public. The problem is particularly acute when messages are written in languages other than English.

Over 60% of survey respondents said they had reported abusive content to social media platforms, but not one reported an adequate response. Respondents said platforms “didn’t do anything”, sent a “generic answer” or “basically ignored” the complaint. One respondent said that when someone posted the address of her mother in Tehran, X refused to delete it, saying it did not violate any rules; another said that even when they were sent death threats, they were told there was nothing “offensive”. Another journalist said Instagram had failed to respond in a timely way to a hacking event: she was eventually only able to regain access to her account with the help of IT colleagues.

Some respondents mentioned the removal of X’s blue ticks as a problem, as the latter had protected them from fake accounts. Others cited changes in X’s management and policies as an exacerbating factor.

5.3 GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO DO MORE

Senior figures at Iran International said the government’s intervention when threats against them forced them to close down was swift and supportive; the plight of BBC Persian has also often been raised in Parliament. Nonetheless, the fact that a London-based channel was forced to close down, and that hundreds of journalists continue to be subjected to levels of harassment that greatly impact their professional and personal lives, shows that the UK government needs to take far more robust and effective action, as per the recommendations in this report, to stop transnational repression and sanction those responsible.

Only five journalists across the survey said they had contacted their MP about their experience. One said the issue had been raised in parliament, another that they had received sympathy, and a third that they just got a standard reply.

6 | RECOMMENDATIONS

| FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT

- **Support exiled journalists.** Journalists in exile have a vital role to play in pushing back against disinformation spread by authoritarian regimes. The UK government should work with partners, domestically and internationally, to protect journalists exiled to the UK and ensure they are able to work freely and without fear.
- **Include transnational repression of journalists in the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists.** The presence of prominent diaspora media platforms makes the UK a hotspot for transnational repression of journalists. Recognising this, the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists should commit to enhancing protections and to increasing support for UK-based exiled media, under objectives 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists.⁴⁵
- **Provide an appropriate rapid response protection mechanism for individual journalists in exile in the UK facing serious threats to their physical integrity.** As part of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, providing an early warning system (or “panic button”) for journalists at particular risk of physical attack, enabling them to contact the police quickly, and establishing regular patrols in the vicinity of newsrooms of journalists under threat could be considered.
- **Establish clear pathways for journalists forced to flee their home countries because of their work to enter the UK.** There is currently no dedicated pathway for journalists at risk to apply for a visa to come to the UK. Providing immediate safe refuge sends a clear message to countries seeking to repress independent journalism and has long-term benefits for the journalists concerned. Our experience shows that when journalists can travel quickly to safe, supportive environments, they are far more likely to continue working in the profession and eventually return home.
- **Hold social media platforms accountable for dealing with online violence against journalists.** Ensure tech companies put effective measures in place to reduce online abuse and hold those responsible to account.
- **Train law enforcement officials and personnel at key agencies** to recognise forms and effects of transnational repression, and ensure consistent reporting of crimes against journalists.
- **Adopt safeguards to protect journalists and their sources from digital surveillance** and include information about rights violations through digital surveillance in governmental human rights reports.


⁴⁵ The first four objectives of the UK government’s National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists are highly relevant here. They focus on evidence gathering, enhancing the criminal justice system response to crimes against journalists, supporting journalists and their employers to protect themselves, and helping online platforms better tackle online abuse. UK Govt. “National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists”. Updated 30 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists#the-plan>.

FOR POLICE AND OTHER LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

- **Establish trained points of contact for journalists.** Exiled journalists and their employers need direct and effective channels of communications with police, so that attacks can be quickly reported and dealt with, communities reassured where appropriate, and perpetrators held to account.
- **Sensitise and train law enforcement officials to better recognise transnational repression,** including the connections between online and physical violence journalists experience, the gendered nature of abuse, and best practice in dealing with such crimes. Online attacks on journalists should be viewed as a workplace safety issue and as potential indicators of future offline harm.
- **Issue up-to-date national-level guidance on how to record transnational and online crimes** to ensure consistency of data records and ensure that where individuals have been targeted because of their work, their profession is recorded. Clear reporting is essential if police are to understand the scale of the problem and formulate effective responses.
- **Ensure systematic investigation and prosecution** of transnational crimes against journalists falling under domestic jurisdiction.
- **Sensitise and train judicial investigators and prosecutors** to systematise their treatment of transnational crimes against journalists as per the Unesco Guidelines for Prosecutors on Crimes Against Journalists, backed by RSF.
- **Report back to the government.** Police forces should report back their annual figures of crimes against journalists to the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists.

FOR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

- **Establish trained points of contact for journalists.** Exiled journalists and their employers need direct and effective channels of communication with platforms, so that attacks can be quickly reported and dealt with, and perpetrators held to account. Social media functions as part of the 21st century journalism workplace, and platforms therefore have a key role to play in keeping journalists safe.
- **Strengthen capacity to deal swiftly and effectively with online attacks on journalists,** including those in languages other than English.
- **Train teams responsible for dealing with online violence to recognise characteristics of transnational repression,** including the gendered nature of much online abuse.
- **Increase transparency.** Report back regularly to the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists on the issue of transnational online harassment of journalists, and work with government, law enforcement agencies, industry and civil society to strengthen responses.



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