

**Iran Under President Hassan Rouhani:  
Nuclear Negotiations, Regime  
Insecurity and Increased Suppression**

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## Introduction

Almost two years into the presidency of Hassan Rouhani, and nearly two years of nuclear negotiations between Tehran and the P5+1 negotiators, human rights in Iran show no signs of improvement. On the contrary, there is continuity, and in some cases deterioration, in the state of human rights in Iran compared to the pre-Rouhani era.

This deterioration is closely linked to the nuclear negotiations. Compelled by the international sanctions regime, the Islamic Republic has agreed to certain nuclear concessions. As small as those concessions may seem to the P5+1, they make the regime appear weak in the eyes of many Iranians. This perceived weakness leads the regime to resort to increased repression as a means of compensation.

### Appearing weak: The price of “heroic flexibility”

Tehran engaged in nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 from a poor bargaining position. The international sanctions regime – and eight years of mismanagement under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – had taken their toll on the economy, which teetered on bankruptcy. Rouhani ran for president with the promise of improving Iran’s economy, which he explained was only possible through sanctions relief. Rouhani’s statements implicitly meant Iranian concessions in the course of nuclear negotiations.

As Rouhani’s team moved into office, perception of Iran’s weak position became abundantly clear. As presidential adviser Akbar Torkan publicly admitted, Iran’s economy was “in worse shape than expected.”<sup>1</sup> It was under such dire conditions that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on September 17, 2013, officially endorsed Rouhani’s nuclear diplomacy by calling for “heroic flexibility.”<sup>2</sup>

### Suppression: Compensating weakness

“Heroic flexibility,” however, was only needed when facing the United States. In its dealings with the Iranian public, the regime has adopted repression and terror as its preferred method of dealing with domestic opposition.

That terror has been reflected in an increased number of executions – at least 753 in 2014, which is the highest total recorded in twelve years, and includes 53 public executions.<sup>3</sup> By comparison, there were 580 executions in 2012 and 687 in 2013.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Khabar Online, “کبر ترکان: وضع اقتصاد خرابتر از آن است که تصور می کردیم/چالش اول روحانی تامین کالاهای اساسی است” (Iran), July 14, 2013. (<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/303402>)

<sup>2</sup> Khamenei Website (Iran), September 17, 2013. “بیانات در دیدار فرماندهان سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی” (<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=24033>)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” March 13, 2014. (<http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61-updated.pdf>)

Most were either related to narcotics or homicide,<sup>5</sup> but the public executions were designed to demonstrate the central government's strength.

Under the Rouhani presidency, the Islamic Republic has continued the practice of arbitrary detention of political dissidents. Most notably, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, leaders of Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement, are still under house arrest.

Ali Mottahari, a parliamentarian who used the podium to call for their release, was severely beaten last month by vigilante groups close to the Basij paramilitary.<sup>6</sup> Mottahari and his driver sought refuge at a local police station, but officers simply watched as the mob landed its blows.<sup>7</sup>

The regime has been equally repressive when it comes to the Iranian press. According to Mottahari, there exists an atmosphere of fear among journalists, who exercise greater self-censorship than in the past.<sup>8</sup> This is hardly surprising when

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> ماجرای حمله "اوباش" در شیراز به روایت علی مطهری: سنگ و آجر و گاز فلفل/ پیشنهاد عجیب رئیس کلانتری/ استانداری دروغ " گفت", *Asr-e Iran* (Iran), March 10, 2015.

(<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/386652/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B7%D9%87%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%86%DA%AF-%D9%88-%D8%A2%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%88-%DA%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%81%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B4%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%AC%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%BA-%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA>)

<sup>7</sup> ماجرای حمله "اوباش" در شیراز به روایت علی مطهری: سنگ و آجر و گاز فلفل/ پیشنهاد عجیب رئیس کلانتری/ استانداری دروغ " گفت", *Asr-e Iran* (Iran), March 10, 2015.

(<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/386652/%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B7%D9%87%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%B3%D9%86%DA%AF-%D9%88-%D8%A2%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%88-%DA%AF%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%81%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84-%D9%BE%DB%8C%D8%B4%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%AC%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D8%B1%D8%A6%DB%8C%D8%B3-%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%BA-%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA>)

<sup>8</sup> "مطهری: آزادی بیان در دولت یازدهم کمتر شده", *Tabnak* (Iran), January 29, 2015.

(<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/470951>)

one considers that thirteen journalists and bloggers have been detained over the past year, bringing the total to thirty.<sup>9</sup>

The jailed journalists include Seraj al-Din Miramadi (a distant relative of Khamenei),<sup>10</sup> Ali-Asghar Qavari of the reformist newspaper *Bahar*,<sup>11</sup> and Jason Rezaian of *The Washington Post*.<sup>12</sup> Arya Jafari and four other journalists from Iran Student News Agency (ISNA) were arrested in October of last year because they covered public protests against a spate of acid attacks against women. While Jafari was released, the fate of his ISNA colleagues remains unknown.<sup>13</sup> Lesser-known imprisoned journalists and bloggers include Sajedeh Arabsorkhi,<sup>14</sup> Zahra Ka'bi,<sup>15</sup> Hamid Hekmati,<sup>16</sup> and many younger Iranians who use the Persian-language blogosphere to express discontent with the regime.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, Human Rights Council, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," March 13, 2014. (<http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61-updated.pdf>)

<sup>10</sup> "آخرین وضعیت پرونده سراج الدین میردامادی" *Fararu* (Iran), March 8, 2014.

(<http://fararu.com/fa/news/182648/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%B9%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D9%BE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C>)

<sup>11</sup> "محکومیت زندان نویسنده مقاله روزنامه بهار تایید شد" *Asr-e Iran* (Iran), August 20, 2014.

(<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/351436/%D9%85%D8%AD%DA%A9%D9%88%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%B4%D8%AF>)

<sup>12</sup> "ظریف: رضاییان به جرایم خیلی جدی متهم شده است" *Shafaqna* (Iran), April 30, 2015.

(<http://www.shafaqna.com/persian/law/item/115564-%D8%B8%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%AE%DB%8C%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>)

<sup>13</sup> "آریا جعفری عکاس ایسنا آزاد شد" *HRA News* (Iran), November 1, 2014. (<https://hra-news.org/fa/prisoners/ariya>)

<sup>14</sup> "جلوگیری از بستری شدن ساجده عرب سرخی در بیمارستان با وجود تجویز پزشک" *HRA News* (Iran), November 20, 2014. (<https://hra-news.org/fa/prisoners/sajedeh-3>)

<sup>15</sup> "بازداشت هفت فعال سایبری در مشهد" *HRA News* (Iran), July 31, 2014. (<https://hra-news.org/fa/thought-and-expression/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D9%87%D9%81%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF>)

<sup>16</sup> "بازداشت هفت فعال سایبری در مشهد" *HRA News* (Iran), July 31, 2014. (<https://hra-news.org/fa/thought-and-expression/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA-%D9%87%D9%81%D8%AA-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF>)

Newspapers have not fared much better. The reformist daily *Roozan* was closed in December 2014 after commemorating the anniversary of the passing of Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri,<sup>17</sup> an ally-turned-rival of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The weekly *Setareh Sobh* was closed in January of this year after calling for a fair trial of the opposition leaders under house arrest,<sup>18</sup> while another paper was closed the same month for publishing a photo of the actor George Clooney wearing a lapel pin to honor the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.<sup>19</sup>

Suppression of Iranian workers and labor activists is another area of concern. Eight labor union activists are currently imprisoned for attempting to organize strikes in protest against lacking pay and many more are in legal limbo awaiting the ruling of the Islamic Revolutionary Court.<sup>20</sup> Just last week, ahead of the May 1 Labor Day holiday, details emerged of the arrests of two additional labor activists.<sup>21</sup>

Other human rights concerns include attacks against women – and often men – under the guise of enforcing modesty and morals, as well as detaining followers of Islamic mysticism and Muslim converts to Christianity. However, it is the followers of the Baha'i faith, considered a direct theological challenge to the principles of the regime, who are subjected to the most severe repression. More than 100 members of the Baha'i faith are currently imprisoned.<sup>22</sup>

### Agents of repression: MOIS, the IRGC and vigilante groups

As was the case before the Rouhani presidency, the leading agents of regime repression continue to include the Islamic Revolutionary Court, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Intelligence Organization of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and the Basij paramilitary and their allied vigilante groups.

<sup>17</sup> “توقیف روزان به خاطر سالگرد آیت‌الله منتظری؟” *Bahar News* (Iran), December 23, 2014.

(<http://baharnews.ir/vdchvzn-23nkqdf2.html>)

<sup>18</sup> “هفته نامه ستاره صبح توقیف شد” *Tabnak* (Iran), January 27, 2015.

(<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/470442/%D9%87%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D8%B5%D8%A8%D8%AD-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%AF>)

<sup>19</sup> “مردم امروز» توقیف شد»” *Mehr News* (Iran), January 17, 2015.

(<http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2466793/%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%B4%D8%AF>)

<sup>20</sup> United Nations, Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” March 13, 2014. (<http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61-updated.pdf>)

<sup>21</sup> “بازداشت فعالین کارگری در آستانه روز جهانی کارگر” *HRA News* (Iran), April 28, 2015. (<https://hra-news.org/fa/labor/a-532>)

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, Human Rights Council, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” March 13, 2014. (<http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61-updated.pdf>)

The overlapping fields of responsibility between the various intelligence and security organizations and their vigilante allies have created a permanent state of terror in Iran due to the fact that an individual arrested and released by one security agency risks arrest in the hands of a rival agency.

### **Conclusion**

Despite claims that President Rouhani is trying to rein in the security and intelligence services, the evidence suggests that the Iranian regime is resorting to increased suppression to compensate for its perceived weakness after making nuclear concessions with the P5+1. We can expect even harsher suppression should the Islamic Republic and the P5+1 reach a comprehensive nuclear agreement.

Should the two sides fail to reach a comprehensive nuclear agreement, I anticipate a similar outcome, Indeed, the regime would be facing an impoverished public demanding improvements to the economy, which the government cannot deliver due to continued sanctions.

Finally, allow me to thank you for providing me with the opportunity to testify on state of the human rights in Iran. An issue, which unfortunately has been overshadowed by the nuclear negotiations, but is just as important.