

COI QUERY

Country of Origin	<u>IRAN</u>
Main subject	<u>Political opponents, journalists, activists</u>
Question(s)	1. <u>Treatment of political opponents, journalists, activists by state actors between 1 January 2020- 28 February 2022</u>
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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. The answer was finalised on 04 March 2022. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

COI QUERY RESPONSE – Iran

Political opponents, journalists, activists

1. Treatment of political opponents, journalists, activists by state actors between 1 January 2020- 28 February 2022

During 2020, ‘Iranian authorities continued to repress their own people’¹. The United States Department of State (USDOS) 2020 report on ‘Outlaw Regime’ indicated that:

‘The Iranian government targets its citizens for their peaceful civic activities and the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of religion or belief. As of April 2020, there are more than 500 prisoners of conscience detained in Iran.’²

According to Amnesty International (AI), the Iranian Ministry of Interior and Iranian security and intelligence bodies banned ‘independent political parties, and human rights and civil society groups’. Namely, AI stated that:

‘Hundreds of people remained arbitrarily detained for peacefully exercising their human rights. Among them were protesters, journalists, media workers, political dissidents, artists, writers and human rights defenders, including lawyers, women’s rights defenders, labour rights activists, minority rights activists, conservationists, anti-death penalty campaigners and those demanding truth, justice and reparation for the mass extrajudicial executions in the 1980s. Hundreds of prisoners of conscience were excluded from pardons and temporary releases’.³

According to Arab News (a news agency), ‘Iran is running two surveillance operations in cyberspace, using various methods to spy on more than 1,000 dissidents.’⁴

In 2020, death penalty has been applied as a ‘repressive tool against protesters, ethnic minority groups and any opponents or independent thinkers’.⁵

Political opponents

The Iranian system allows political participation but within the ‘strict boundaries of the Islamic Republic’ whereas ‘any candidate who opposes to the Islamic Republic, or wants to change

¹ HRW, World Report 2021, Iran, Events of 2020, 23 January 2021, [url](#)

² USDOS, Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities ,2020, 19 September 2020, [url](#), p. 45

³ AI, Iran 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

⁴ Arab News, Iran’s dissident surveillance operation exposed, 8 February 2021, [url](#)

⁵ Iran Human Rights and ECPM, Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran, 2020, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 122

the existing system is not allowed to run⁶ as ‘only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate’.⁷ Since 1979, the Iranian regime has been using “‘televised confession’” as a means of propaganda’ against its political opponents and activists ‘to induce ‘fear and justifying the heavy sentences’ inflicted on them.’⁸

Furthermore, Iranian regime ‘restricts the travel and speech of high-profile figures, including political candidates.’⁹

In September 2021, the Iranian musician Tomaj Saleji was arrested by security forces because ‘his song lyrics [were] considered critical of the system, because they also [dealt] with protests by the Iranian people, workers’ strikes, executions and imprisonments, as well as corruption in business and politics’.¹⁰ During the same period, the arrest of a photographer has been reported. The photographer, who was released three weeks after his arrest, was accused of ‘propaganda against the system and photographing and documenting sensitive military installations’.¹¹

Journalists

According to the 2020 report of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT):

‘Arrests of journalists are common. Courts have frequently handed down long sentences against journalists deemed to have breached ‘red lines’, including those who publish material online. Rather than using provisions under the Press Law, authorities often invoke legislation related to national security or religious-based offences. This legislation allows for more severe punishments, including prison sentences ranging from six to 10 years or more.’¹²

In April 2020, the editor in chief and the social-media administrator of the Iranian semiofficial news agency ILNA (Iranian Labour News Agency) were taken into custody after the publication of a cartoon which was considered as an insult to the ‘country’s leadership’. The news agency ‘denied any affiliation with the “‘disrespectful” cartoon while accusing its opponents of having faked the news agency’s logo and falsely accused it of publishing the cartoon’.¹³

⁶ BBC, Iran protests: Who are the opposition in the country?, 16 January 2020, [url](#)

⁷ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2021, Iran, 3 March 2021, [url](#)

⁸ Iran Human Rights and ECPM, Annual Report on the Death Penalty in Iran, 2020, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 36

⁹ USDOS, Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities, 2020, 19 September 2020, [url](#), p. 45

¹⁰ Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes, Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, 20 September 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹¹ Germany, BAMF, Briefing Notes, Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration, 20 September 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹² Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2020, [url](#), p. 45

¹³ RFE/RL, Iran Arrests Editor, Journalist Over Cartoon Mocking Khamenei, 28 April 2020, [url](#)

In December 2020, a journalist who was accused of stirring up the 2017 and 2018 protesters in Iran through his private website named Amad-News, was executed by the Iranian authorities.¹⁴

Freedom House characterized Iran as ‘not free’, in relation to freedom on the internet for 2021. Specifically, the aforementioned source reported that:

‘Internet freedom remained highly restricted in Iran during the coverage period. The government ordered localized internet shutdowns amid antigovernment protests and continued to block access to independent news sites as well as a number of social media and communication platforms.’¹⁵

In Iran, ‘halal internet’ (inspired by the Sharia Law) was imposed by Iranian government in order to ‘restrict the flow of news and information, as occurred when large-scale public protests took place in the country’. Additionally, the existence of Islamic Radio and Television Union ‘allows the dissemination of Iranian propaganda and fake news beyond its borders’¹⁶ while ‘the regime regularly targets journalists and restricts the online exercise of freedom of expression, including through the arrests of bloggers and social media users because of their online posts’.¹⁷

In July 2021, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported about the nomination of Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei by the Iranian Supreme Leader as the head of judicial system in Iran. Mohseni-Ejei has been reportedly known as a ‘conservative cleric and notorious hardliner’ who ‘has always dealt severely with media personnel’.¹⁸

During November 2021, the Press Supervisory Board of Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance shut down the daily newspaper ‘Kelid’ after publishing an article titled ‘Millions of Iranians Living Under Poverty Line’.¹⁹

Activists

Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2021 report, covering the year 2020, stated that:

‘The judiciary and intelligence agencies continue to use several overly broad articles of the penal code, such as “propaganda against the state,” “assembly and collusion to act against national security,” “insulting the supreme leader,” and “establishing or

¹⁴ BBC, Ruhollah Zam: Iran executes journalist accused of fanning unrest, 12 December 2020, [url](#)

¹⁵ Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2021- Iran, 21 September 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶ RSF, 2020 RSF Index: The illusion of peace in the Middle East, n.d., [url](#)

¹⁷ USDOS, Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities ,2020, 19 September 2020, [url](#), p. 45

¹⁸ RSF, New head of Iran’s judicial system has journalists’ blood on his hand, 13 July 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹ CPJ, Iran shuts newspaper that implied supreme leader was responsible for poverty, 8 November 2021, [url](#)

membership in a group to disrupt national security” to prosecute activists, dissidents, and human rights defenders’.²⁰

According to the USDOS 2020 report on Human Rights Practices, ‘human rights activists reported trials in which authorities appeared to have determined the verdicts in advance, and defendants did not have the opportunity to confront their accusers or meet with lawyers’²¹ while the Iranian government ‘continues to crack down on activism of all kinds’.²² Furthermore, activists and government critics were often intimidated by government actors by ‘detaining their family members as a form of reprisal’.²³

During the reporting period, members of ethnic minority activists have been reportedly arrested and prosecuted by the Iranian authorities on the base of ‘national security grounds’.²⁴ Iranian authorities have also been monitoring environmental activists and researchers.²⁵ In addition, several journalists, as well as women’s rights activists, human rights defenders, academic and social scientists have been targeted on the basis of national security.²⁶

The 2020 International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Global Rights Index, published in June 2020, reported that ‘in Iran, as of March 2020, 38 labour activists were still arbitrarily imprisoned, often detained in remote secret prisons, subjected to ill-treatment and denied access to a lawyer’.²⁷

According to Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), in July 2021, Iranian intelligence officers allegedly tried to kidnap Masih Alinejad, an activist and journalist living in the United States since 2014. Alinejad has left Iran in 2009 and she has been known for her ‘campaign against the compulsory hijab, and efforts to highlight Tehran’s rights abuses.’ According to the mentioned source, Iranian authorities have rejected the claim.²⁸

²⁰ HRW, World Report 2021, Iran, Events of 2020, 23 January 2021, [url](#)

²¹ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Islamic Republic of Iran, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 19

²² USDOS, Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities ,2020, 19 September 2020, [url](#), p. 46

²³ USDOS, 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Islamic Republic of Iran, 30 March 2021, [url](#), p. 24

²⁴ Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2020, [url](#), p. 24

²⁵ Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2020, [url](#), p. 42

²⁶ Ceasefire and Minority Rights Group International, In the Name of Security, Human Rights Violation under Iran’s national security laws, 26 June 2020, [url](#), p. 18

²⁷ ITUC CSI IGB, 2020 ITUC Global Rights Index, 18 June 2020, [url](#), p. 5

²⁸ RFE/ RL, U.S.- Iran Kidnap Plot: Why Is Iran Attempting To Silence Masih Alinejad?, 15 July 2021, [url](#)

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