



On Press Freedom Day, this special report for Defence Viewpoints by Kasra Najafi, BBC News Persian

It's the looking over one's shoulder to see anyone is following. It's not all the time but more often than I'd like to admit. When leaving the BBC's office in central London, and heading home, I look around for suspicious looking men lurking around. In the underground, I rarely stand close to the edge of the platform. I am paranoid about not sharing my home address. I have asked my child not to put photographs online.

Most people in Britain don't know me, but as a correspondent and presenter for the BBC's Persian Television channel for the past 13 years, I and many of my colleagues have become recognisable faces for Iranians. More than 12 million people watch the channel in Iran every week – about three times the number of people who watch the BBC's ten o'clock news in Britain. It makes BBC Persian journalists vulnerable even in the UK where we should be safe with our families far beyond the reach of the Islamic Republic.

Iran is trying to build a wall of censorship around the country and BBC News Persian journalists are breaking down that wall almost every hour, on the hour, providing Iranians, starved of reliable and truthful information, with the best quality journalism – the BBC's journalism – in Persian.

As a result, the Iranian government has stepped up targeting me and my colleagues. We are seen as a threat and Iran is willing to go to extraordinary lengths to silence us.

Messages have been sent, via anonymous emails, threatening the lives of my colleagues. They were deemed worrying enough that counter terrorism police in London felt it necessary to provide a couple of my colleagues with a degree of police protection.

Iran published a list of 152 staff and contributors to BBC News Persian, complete with their full names and details, accusing them of conspiracy against national security. They imposed an

injunction on all those named and as a result all of our assets in Iran are frozen. This has caused untold problems for many of my colleagues. Apart from depriving them of inheritance, the ban affects families from separating shares of inherited property between siblings, as the name of a BBC colleague on the deed makes it impossible to sell the property. It's an unprecedented assault on such a large group of journalists in one go, all working for one organisation and by an international government.

Our family members back home in Iran are the leverage, useful as hostages. Over Christmas, agents of Iran's Intelligence Ministry in Tehran and other cities summoned family members of several of our colleagues to warn them in no uncertain terms. They ordered terrified parents and siblings to ask their loved ones in London to stop working for the BBC. The intelligence agents casually mentioned the case of the journalist Ruhollah Zam. He was an exiled opposition web journalist in Paris who was lured to Iraq in October 2019 where he was kidnapped and taken to Iran. He was executed in December 2020 just for running an anti-government website.

The Intelligence Ministry agents were brazen enough to provide their mobile numbers to be passed on to us, with orders to call them so that they could persuade us to stop our work, and return to Iran where they promised to find jobs for us at the state broadcaster. They also wanted to know about our travel outside the UK so they could arrange for a meeting with us.

In the worst case so far, a few years ago, the security forces arrested the 25-year old sister of one of our reporters in a night raid on her father's home in Tehran. A few days later she contacted her sister in London on Skype from the notorious Evin prison in Tehran in the presence of her interrogators, who came on audio, but not in vision, to demand that our colleague stop working for the BBC in return for the release of her sister. They said they would be happy if she stayed in the BBC and agreed to spy for them. When our colleague bravely refused their requests, they held her sister for another 17 days.

An anonymous email to one of our presenters, a young mother, mentioned that they know where her young son went to school. Siblings and other relatives of our colleagues have lost their jobs or businesses in Iran because of their links with us. Some have even been evicted from rented flats because of the tenuous BBC link. One elderly mother was called in for questioning late at night and made to sit facing the wall while being questioned by five men in balaclavas.

Meanwhile, on Twitter and Facebook, many of us are regularly lampooned for allegedly being the mouthpiece of the British government or the Saudi government or even the Iranian government! Many of our female colleagues have been targeted in shockingly misogynist attacks, often alleging sexual transgressions.

Iran has taken the collective punishment of BBC journalists, who are mostly dual British-Iranian nationals, to new depths. Recently they have extended this to journalists working for other Persian-language media based abroad whom they describe as also hostile.

Unsurprisingly many of my colleagues have left the BBC in the past couple of years, to help reduce pressure on their loved ones in Iran, or because they couldn't take the impact on their physical and mental health. The rest of us have soldiered on. We remain proud of our reliable and impartial journalism. We know our work is very important to Iranians who desperately need to know the developments that affect their lives. An overwhelming majority of Iranians do not speak English. For them, BBC News Persian journalism, available to them on radio, TV and online, is an important window to the outside world and a vital source of accurate information. To continue our work, we need support. We need colleagues in the BBC, as well our representatives in Parliament and the UK government, and the general public, to bring

pressure on Iran at every opportunity to stop its harassment and persecution of us and our families, and to speak out regularly and publicly, to name and shame the Iranian government. It might just work.