

Fear, Uncertainty Stalk Iranian Journalists in Exile

By María Salazar-Ferro and Sheryl A. Mendez

The days before Iran's June 2009 elections were euphoric, photographer Javad Moghimi Parsa remembers. In Tehran, the atmosphere was festive and the anticipation palpable. But the mood turned quickly as results were announced, giving the presidency back to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Thousands of people claiming fraud and demanding democracy crammed the streets and were met with brutal violence. Parsa covered the demonstrations in his time off from the semi-official Fars News agency. "This was the first time in my life I had seen so many people protesting together. I was in awe," he said. "So I followed them and took their pictures." Two weeks later, one of Parsa's photos appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Parsa, who had secretly sent images abroad, was warned by his boss that journalists filing material to foreign media would be considered spies. Terrified by the prospect of jail, the photographer fled Iran the next day.

Since June 2009, the Journalist Assistance program at the Committee to Protect Journalists has been in contact with 68 Iranian journalists who have fled their country. Many left in the months that immediately followed the 2009 protests. But as Iranian authorities have continued to aggressively silence dissent, maintaining a revolving prison door for critical journalists, the exodus of the Iranian media personnel has not slowed. Today, more than half of the Iranian journalists living in exile are under the age of 35. The bulk crossed over the Turkish or Iraqi borders, facing difficult paths to relocation. Thirty-five permanently resettled in Western countries, most having been granted political asylum. Many have financial worries, and nearly all expressed continuous fear of retaliation from Iran.

Journalists in Iran are required to register with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Those working for official or semi-official outlets are given specific instructions on what angle to give their news, and if they fail, they can be suspended for up to three months, according to CPJ

interviews. The government's most frequently used weapon against the critical press until June 2009 had been the withholding of official subsidies, although journalists covering sensitive issues such as human rights sometimes did short prison stints. But the landscape changed with post-election demonstrations. In a full-scale effort to stifle criticism, authorities closed outlets, expelled foreign media, arrested dozens of journalists and media workers, ransacked homes, and seized property.

"When the arrest wave started, a lot of people who thought that if they kept quiet they would be spared were arrested," exiled political commentator Babak Dad said. "There was a list, and everyone on that list had to be taken in." By CPJ's count, more than 150 journalists have been detained at various times since then. Some have been released, even as authorities have made new arrests. Others have been sentenced in closed courts on vague antistate charges, drawing prison terms of up to 10 years. In jail, journalists are often kept in solitary confinement, denied family visits, and at times physically abused.

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*Intimidation soars with more than 150
journalists detained at various times.*

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Fearing this fate, Dad fled Iran in October 2009. He had worked as a journalist for two decades and had been an important figure in the country's burgeoning blogosphere. Dad also was a political commentator on the Persian service of the U.S. government-funded Voice of America; on the eve of the elections, he had warned listeners about the possibility of fraud. The next day, Dad received a call from a man claiming to have a package for him. Realizing authorities had him in their sights, Dad packed his two children and their dog into his car and sped out of Tehran. "This time next year," Dad told his children as they were leaving, "you could have a father you are proud of or a father who is dead from torture." For the next 120 days, Dad, the kids, and the dog slept at tourist campsites in northern Iran, changing locations every few days while Dad continued reporting. By the end of September, as more journalists were arrested and Dad felt his tail getting closer, the journalist used his last \$20 to pay smugglers to lead them over the mountains into Iraq. The journey on horseback lasted four days.

Around that time, an arrest warrant was issued in Tehran for the young photojournalist Parsa for his collaboration with news media described as "enemy agencies." But Parsa had left Iran for Turkey in August. "Every step of the day I left was emotional because I knew it was the last time I would be in my country," Parsa said. At the airport, an Iranian immigration

official questioned him intensely, asking about his destination, current job, and previous travel. “His questions were intimidating and I was petrified that I would never make it out,” the journalist told CPJ. “Even when I was sitting in the airplane, ready to go, I was afraid that someone was going to come grab me.”

More than half of the Iranian journalists who have left since June 2009 have done so secretly to avoid airports or border posts. Only a handful with long-standing connections to foreign media flew directly to Western countries with help from their employers. By late 2011, CPJ research shows, the 68 exiled journalists were spread among 18 countries worldwide. Their top hosts were France, Turkey, the United States, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. Twenty-eight had been granted asylum, and 14 were awaiting a final decision. The rest were registered refugees in transit countries.

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*Sixty-eight exiled journalists now spread
across 18 countries worldwide.*

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Of the cases documented by CPJ, 35 journalists traveled through Turkey, where Iranians are not required to have entry visas. Turkish immigration laws grant government protection only to refugees from European or ex-Soviet countries, but a 1994 regulation allows non-Europeans to have temporary asylum-seeker status. For practical purposes, then, until non-European refugees are resettled to a third country, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, is their main source of protection. Iraqis and Iranians make up the two largest refugee populations in Turkey, according to the UNHCR.

Resettlement out of Turkey can be a long process. In some cases it can take the UNHCR up to three years to process applications, according to a 2010 report by the California-based organization OMID Advocates for Human Rights. Meanwhile, Turkish law requires refugees to register with local authorities in one of 30 cities where they must remain at all times. They are required to pay \$227 in “stay” fees every six months, and are given minimal social and economic support. Failure to comply with Turkish law can result in prosecution, fines, imprisonment, or deportation.

“The time I was in Turkey was very difficult,” said Parsa, who spent 16 months in the country before being relocated to Norway. “It was the toughest, most restricted, and frightening time of my life.” Job opportunities are few, discrimination is common, and finding suitable housing is almost impossible, Parsa explained. Many of the journalists living in Turkey room together and pool their resources. CPJ has written

letters to the UNHCR and other international bodies in support of 22 journalists, detailing their work and the persecution they endured. CPJ has also supported 16 with small grants to cover basic needs and travel expenses.

Tension among refugees in Turkey is common, often due to medical and psychological problems and uncertainty about the future, the OMID Advocates report states. Tensions are also fueled by widespread rumors about the resettlement process. In 2011, several journalists informed CPJ of schemes to speed resettlement through falsified letters from international organizations testifying to their vulnerability. The letters, the journalists said, are sold for up to \$100 apiece outside the UNHCR offices in Ankara. (CPJ notified the UNHCR, which said it would investigate the claims.) But the most troubling rumors are about the presence of Iranian intelligence agents in Turkey, where they are said to harass, attack, and even snatch asylum-seekers. Two Iranian journalists exiled in Turkey confirmed having been directly approached by threatening, Farsi-speaking individuals.

Dad heard the same rumors in Iraq, where a much lower number of Iranian journalists have traveled. "One guy said people were abducted, put in cars, and taken back to Iran. Others were [said to be] killed in drive-by shootings," Dad recounted. Dad told CPJ that he had been followed on several occasions by individuals later identified by other refugees as Iranian agents. "They would wait outside the [UNHCR] offices, listening to what I was saying," Dad said. "So I tried to leave the country quickly for security reasons." Other refugees in Iraq also cite insecurity as their top concern.



Iraq is one of the countries with the highest numbers of internally displaced people in the world. As such, the relocation process for foreign refugees is often long and exhausting. Dad told CPJ that he visited the UNHCR offices in Arbil multiple times. “Each time, they would make me fill out another form and say they were understaffed and that I needed to come back later,” Dad said. UNHCR did not respond to requests for comment.

So the journalist reached out to the French consulate in Arbil through a friend in Paris. With support from CPJ and other international organizations, Dad and his children were given emergency humanitarian visas and resettled to France within two months. Their dog, Nancy, was adopted by a local government official.

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*For Iranians who fled to Iraq, a long and
exhausting relocation process.*
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CPJ has documented 13 other cases of Iranian journalists who have been granted emergency visas, mostly to France and Germany. According to CPJ research, however, such visas are rare. In fact, most countries deny journalists and human rights defenders visas for fear that they will request political asylum, bringing political and budgetary headaches. “This is the problem with the refugee system generally. Conventions on human rights say people have the right to seek asylum, but international law doesn’t have a lot to say about the practicalities of how to get there,” Anwen Hughes, senior attorney for the refugee protection program at Human Rights First, told CPJ.

Fear among Iranian exiles is not restricted to Turkey and Iraq. Journalists who have been resettled or are living in Western countries also spoke to CPJ of indirect threats by the Iranian security apparatus. One journalist who has been granted asylum in Europe asked not to be identified for fear of retribution against his family in Iran. Another, Mohammad Kheirkhan, a photojournalist who lives in California, said his girlfriend in Iran was routinely harassed after he left the country. “At the beginning, they would ask her to go to court and ask her questions about what I was doing,” Kheirkhan told CPJ. “Now, there are no more problems because I am not covering Iran anymore.” Kheirkhan’s brother also received threatening phone calls, the journalist told CPJ.

Kheirkhan is studying journalism but said that he tries to avoid reading news about Iran. “The thing is that even if you don’t want to, you will see something on Facebook or somewhere, you will hear about your col-

leagues, journalists being detained, tortured.” The photographer left Iran immediately after the elections and was never arrested. Yet he said that he often wakes up in a panic. “I dream about torture, that I am being lashed in public,” he told CPJ.

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*A photographer avoids news of his
homeland but still dreams of torture.*

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The feelings of guilt expressed by Kheirkhan and other Iranian exiles is common among refugees, particularly journalists, according to Jack Saul, a psychologist and director of the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University. “They feel that they are abandoning their colleagues, and have a conflict around their professional responsibility and their personal safety,” Saul told CPJ. The consequences of exile, he said, can at times be more severe than those of torture. Refugees often feel like they are still in a state of change. “Their trauma is not over as they continue to be in exile,” he said.

For many of the journalists who have been resettled to the United States or Western Europe, the transition has not been easy. Only 14 said they have continued working in the profession, either with an international media outlet or with a Farsi-language, exile online publication. Most cannot make ends meet. Dad, who continues to blog and at times does commentary for VOA, does not get paid for his journalism. Instead, he relies on the small funds the French government provides him monthly. Photographer Ehsan Maleki, who is also in France, told CPJ that the government funds are so small that he is unable to pay his phone or Internet bills. “I escaped Iranian prisons,” Maleki said, “but now I risk starving to death.”

It is too early to know, Saul said, how the exiled journalists will fare. Dad, Parsa, and Kheirkhan said that by leaving Iran, they had made a decision to put safety above all else. Yet their decisions have been accompanied by ambivalence. Parsa said that fleeing was the only way to continue working as a journalist. For Kheirkhan, the decision was right only if he is able one day to return home.

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