

Iran's State TV: A Major Human Rights Violator

IRIB Briefing Paper

June 2014

www.iranhumanrights.org

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Executive Summary

In February 2014, the Obama Administration temporarily waived sanctions that the US had placed on the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Iran's state-run radio and television broadcasting service, for Iran's practice of satellite broadcast jamming and IRIB's routine broadcasting of the forced confessions of detainees. The **waiver** was "based on Iran's commitment to ensure that harmful satellite interference does not emanate from its territory." However, Iranian authorities have continued to engage in the rights violations for which IRIB was originally **sanctioned** in February of 2013. The blocking of foreign broadcast signals via direct satellite (or "uplink") jamming has been effectively replaced with an intensification of local ("downlink" or "terrestrial") jamming, achieving the same end result: the Iranian people are effectively denied access to the free flow of information. They are cut off from access to alternative news and information sources and restricted to state-approved broadcasts. Moreover, IRIB continues to broadcast forced confessions by detainees, in clear violation of international provisions on fair trials and the right to due process. This report documents seven recent cases, some of which involve multiple detainees, of forced confessions broadcast on national TV by IRIB. As a result, the Obama Administration should reinstate sanctions on IRIB at the end of the 180-day waiver in August 2014.

Background

IRIB is the sole provider of radio and television broadcast services in Iran and one of the few total state media monopolies in the world. It has become an integral part of the country's security and intelligence apparatus.

US sanctions were placed on IRIB in February 2013, for Iran's jamming of international satellite broadcast signals, as well as for human rights violations that included filming and broadcasting coerced confessions by detainees which were often elicited under torture. In addition, IRIB continues to use state-media transmissions to trample dissent: it broadcasts show trials and false "news" reports to conceal human rights violations, and airs defamatory content to discredit dissidents.

The director of the agency, chosen directly by the Supreme Leader, is currently former Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander Ezzatollah Zarghami. Appointed by Khamenei in 2004 and re-appointed in 2009, Zarghami has consistently maintained IRIB's role as a principal tool of state repression and censorship in Iran. The EU and the US sanctioned him as an individual human rights violator, in addition to the sanctioning of IRIB as an institution.

The Sanctions Waiver and the Continuation of IRIB Violations

The US Administration decided in February 2014 to waive sanctions for a 180-day period, based on Iran's cessation of satellite jamming. However, a review of Iran's actions during the waiver period shows that in all key areas for which it was originally sanctioned—including satellite jamming—the violations have effectively continued unabated.

1. Signal Jamming

Jamming the television and radio signals broadcast into the country via satellite by foreign stations has been a long-standing and routine practice of the Iranian security and intelligence organs. In this way, the authorities are able to control access to information and limit the citizenry to state-approved broadcasts. Persian-language foreign broadcasts such as VOA, BBC Persian, Manoto TV, and Radio Farda are particularly consistent targets for IRIB blocking, given their reach, accessibility, and popularity inside Iran, and their willingness to cover news and information that the government in Tehran prefers to censor.

Iran has engaged in two forms of jamming: satellite (or “uplink”) jamming, in which jamming signals are sent directly to the broadcasting satellites, destructively interfering with the content entering Iran, and local (also known as “downlink” or “terrestrial” jamming), in which jamming is directed at the local receptors of the satellite signals, which are usually rooftop satellite dishes inside Iran.

In 2010, human rights groups launched an international campaign against Iran's satellite jamming. As a result, the UN's International Telecommunications Union (ITU) voted in 2012 to amend their telecommunications regulations, requiring governments to take “necessary action” to stop the jamming of satellite broadcasts from within their jurisdiction. In March 2012, the European Union (EU) imposed sanctions against IRIB Director Zarghami. Starting in October 2012, Eutelsat and other providers of satellite service to IRIB ceased providing service to Iran. In December 2012, the US Congress passed sanctions legislation against IRIB. This was followed in February 2013 by the US Treasury Department's imposition of sanctions against IRIB as an institution and against IRIB Director Zarghami as an individual human rights violator.

Following these actions, Iran agreed to stop satellite jamming, and in February 2014 the US Treasury Department gave IRIB the temporary 6-month waiver of sanctions, based on this commitment by Iran.

However, Iran has merely replaced uplink satellite jamming with intensified terrestrial jamming.

Now, Iran does not send jamming signals directly to the satellites that are broadcasting, but it has compensated for this by intensifying its sending of jamming signals to the local receptors of the satellite signals, which are typically satellite dishes on rooftops in Iran.

In one method utilized, Iranian trucks traverse neighborhoods, sending jamming signals directly toward the rooftops of buildings that have satellite dishes, effectively continuing the blocking of any content with which the state disagrees. Other methods are employed as well to ensure the disruption of reception of the satellite signals.

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran has been monitoring and documenting the reception of satellite signals inside Iran and **our data confirms that satellite broadcasts continue to be blocked inside Iran.**

Our latest data indicates that local or terrestrial jamming is most intense in Tehran, but it is also carried out, with varying degrees of intensity, throughout the provinces:

- In the northern Tehran neighborhood of Bagh Feyz, terrestrial jamming of the satellite broadcasts of BBC Persian, VOA Persian, Manoto TV, and Radio Farda TV is complete and nonstop during prime time; there was an effective black out of these broadcasts from 5:40 pm until 2:00 a.m. (the end of the broadcasting day), every day, from June 8-June 21, 2014.
- In the southeast Tehran neighborhoods, terrestrial jamming of BBC Persian, VOA, and Manoto TV broadcasts was also complete and non-stop during the primetime of 6 pm to 2 am, during the period of June 5- June18, 2014.
- In city of Mashhad, broadcasts of BBC Persian were jammed from 6 pm to 2 am during the period of June 5- June 18, 2014.
- In Ekbatan neighborhood of Tehran, broadcasts of BBC Persian and Manoto TV were jammed from noon to midnight during the period of March 8- March 27, 2014.
- In city of Kermanshah, broadcasts of BBC Persian and VOA were completely jammed during the period of March 8- April 4, 2014.
- In the city of Kashan, however, during the period of June 8- June 21, 2014 broadcasts of VOA, BBC Persian, and Radio Farda TV were jammed selectively and for intermittent periods during the day.

- In the southern port city of Bandar Abbas, Radio Farda's signal was completely blocked all day throughout the period of June 8- June 21, 2014.

Not only is state censorship and restriction of access to information continuing, but the practice of local or terrestrial jamming is also widely believed by medical experts to cause serious health concerns in the inhabitants of the neighborhoods in which it is employed. In June 2014, Rouhani's government **announced** formation of a committee to investigate such health hazards.

2. Forced Confessions

IRIB also severely violates the rights of detainees, particularly political dissidents and activists in custody, in violation of Iranian and international laws that guarantee due process, prohibit coercion, and forbid torture.

Detainees are routinely forced, often under torture or threats to themselves and their families, to "confess" to crimes, and IRIB films and broadcasts these forced confessions as a form of public intimidation and humiliation. These "confessions" are used as part of a conscientious effort to discredit and defame political dissidents, human rights defenders, and activists.

IRIB works hand in hand with interrogators and security, intelligence, and judicial officials to conduct, film, and broadcast these sham confessions, which have been consistently documented by numerous victims and eye-witnesses. These forced confessions are then the principal "evidence" typically presented in courts to convict targeted individuals, usually on various national security-related charges.

In the Appendix to this report, we have documented seven cases, a number of which involve numerous individuals, of forced confessions that were broadcast by IRIB during 2012-2014.

A number of these documented cases of forced confessions broadcast by IRIB occurred during the period in which the US sanctions were waived.

This demonstrates that the waiver had no effect on IRIB's willingness or ability to continue its practice of broadcasting forced confessions.

Recent cases illustrate the continuation of this practice. On May 20, 2014, six youths who had appeared in a **music video** posted on YouTube were **forced to appear on state TV** to apologize and express remorse. According to firsthand testimonies obtained by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, the IRIB interviewer actively engaged in forcing the youths to make such statements.

At one point, when the IRIB “reporter” was not satisfied with the youths’ testimony, he told the security agents to pressure the youths further to make statements to the IRIB interviewer’s liking. **Credible sources reported** that the youths were threatened, including one at gun point, and severely ill-treated during their detainment, and it is clear from the testimony that the IRIB officials actively colluded with intelligence and security officials to obtain these “confessions,” in addition to then airing them on state TV.

In another recent instance, in December 2013, numerous IT professionals, including editors, entrepreneurs, social media users, technical experts, website designers, and others, who had been arrested during the preceding month, were **paraded on IRIB state broadcasts** handcuffed and in prison garb, and were accused of being spies. The men were forced to confess to national security crimes. There have been consistent and credible reports that these detained professionals were subjected to intense physical and psychological abuse and threats to make these confessions and to condemn social networks such as Facebook.

Forced confessions are also used as part of an ongoing strategy to persecute ethnic and religious minorities, and to discredit and punish activist members of minority communities in particular. For example, in June 2013, **Sunni prisoners at Rajae Shahr Prison** were coerced into making “confessions” for an **IRIB “documentary” film called “Scenario,”** aired in February 2014. Eyewitnesses reported that they were forced into admitting that they intended to overthrow the regime on camera, and that a number of the prisoners accepted their charges under torture.

3. Defamation of Dissidents and Activists

IRIB news programs are also routinely used to spread falsehoods and defamatory accusations, presented as facts, against dissidents and activists.

On May 31, 2014, IRIB broadcast a program on its IRINN news network channel during prime time that lashed out at the exiled female journalist Masih Alinejad. Alinejad had launched the “My Stealthy Freedom” **Facebook campaign** in early May 2014, in which she posted photographs of herself without the hijab and invited others to share similar photographs. The campaign has amassed nearly half a million Facebook followers.

The IRIB program stated that Alinejad was “trying to deceive Iranian girls and women” and falsely claimed that she had been found “naked under the influence of heavy drugs on a street in London” and was then “raped by three men in front of her child,” implicitly drawing a connection between the lack of hijab and sexual assault. The “report” was a thinly masked incitement to violence against women.

IRIB programs have also targeted Iranian journalists working for Persian-language media abroad. Intelligence and security agents have contacted these journalists abroad, through online and social networking sites, **threatening harm to them and their families** inside Iran, if they do not cease their journalistic and media activities. Several of these exiled journalists have told the Campaign that such harassments and intimidations usually follow in tandem with **broadcast of IRIB programs** targeting and attacking them. This is another indication of the close working relationship between IRIB and the security and intelligence services in charge of implementing repression and censorship.

4. Disinformation to Cover Up Rights Violations

IRIB also continues to broadcast blatant and intentional disinformation aimed at covering up human rights violations.

For example, after the well-documented beating of political prisoners by security guards at Evin Prison's Ward 350 on April 17, 2014, IRIB ran a **film clip** on state television during prime time on its Channel 2 "20:30" prime-time news program on April 21 which claimed that no violence was used against the inmates, **in direct contradiction** to eyewitness accounts detailing grievous injuries to the prisoners, and broadcast staged footage showing a placid, docile Evin Prison that had actually been filmed many months prior to the assault.

In addition to targeting Iranian civil society members, IRIB has also attacked and spread falsehoods against the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, in order to discredit his reporting on human rights violations in Iran.

In a program aired in March 2014, for example, Ahmed Shaheed was accused of "promoting Western life-style," "issuing racists reports," and instigating unrest amongst Iran's ethnic minorities. IRIB also continues to broadcast programs on religious and ethnic minority communities such as the Baha'is that could only be described as hate speech.

The Need for Reinstating Sanctions on IRIB

The Obama Administration's February 6, 2014 decision to temporarily waive the sanctions on IRIB was based on the Islamic Republic commitment to cease engaging in "harmful satellite interference." Yet harmful interference continues: direct satellite jamming has merely been replaced with an intensification of local jamming. The effect is the same: the blocking of satellite broadcast signals continues, Iranian citizens are cut off from the free flow of information, and all content entering Iran remains subject to state censors.

In short, Tehran has not complied with the core international demand to cease signal jamming; it has only changed its method.

In addition, IRIB continues to work hand-in-hand with Intelligence, Judiciary, and security officials to routinely broadcast the forced confessions of detainees.

The 180-day sanctions waiver, which allows companies to provide IRIB with satellite services without coming under US penalties, sends exactly the wrong signal to Tehran: namely, that it can ignore with total impunity the spirit of the international demand that Iran cease signal jamming by merely switching its method from combined satellite and local jamming to intensified local jamming, and that the international community will turn a blind eye to IRIB's continued broadcasting of forced confessions.

Iran's aggressive use of local jamming should constitute a breach of its obligations and thus a reinstatement of sanctions on IRIB at the end of the waiver period.

David S. Cohen, the US Treasury Undersecretary of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, has **publicly stated** "We will...target those in Iran who are responsible for human rights abuses, especially those who deny the Iranian people their basic freedoms of expression, assembly and speech." This is, in fact, exactly what IRIB continues to do. It is critical at this juncture that the US demonstrate that Iran must honor the international commitments it makes in word and deed. Iran has not earned the continuation of the waiver; upon conclusion of the 180-day temporary waiver in August 2014, the US Treasury should fully reinstate sanctions on IRIB.

APPENDIX

Recent Cases of Forced Confessions Broadcast by Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)

(Aired during the July 2012 - May 2014 period)

1. May 2014: The “Happy” Video Arrests

On May 20, 2014, six youths who had appeared in a **music video** posted on YouTube were **forced to appear on state TV** to apologize and express remorse. According to firsthand testimonies obtained by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, the IRIB interviewer actively engaged in forcing the youths to make such statements. At one point, when the IRIB “reporter” was not satisfied with the youths’ testimony, he told the security agents to pressure the youths further to make statements to the IRIB interviewer’s liking. Credible sources reported that the youths were threatened, including one at gun point, and severely ill-treated during their detainment, and it is clear from the testimony that the IRIB officials actively colluded with intelligence and security officials to obtain these “confessions,” in addition to then airing them on state TV.

2. February 2014: Sunni Prisoners

In February 2014, IRIB on multiple occasions aired the confessions of Sunni prisoners in a program called “**Scenario.**” The program included statements by several Sunnis condemned to death, who issued confessions and made accusations against other death-row prisoners.

Loqman Amini, 28, and Bashir Shahnazari, 22, were among those who made confessions on the program. **Informed sources told** the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran that the confessions were made under intense psychological and physical torture and with threats and harassment against their families.

3. December 2013: “Orange” IT Professionals

Following the arrest of a group of professionals belonging to a technical IT website called “Narenji” (Orange) on December 3, 2013, in Kerman province, IRIB aired a film six days later which showed the arrested individuals handcuffed, wearing prison clothes, standing against a wall, and forced to make false “confessions.” A judiciary official in Kerman was shown accusing the individuals of “ties with espionage networks.” These IT professionals have been sentenced to prison terms ranging one to eleven years.

4. November 2013: Arab Activists

On November 19, 2013, state-controlled Press TV (the English-language channel of IRIB) aired confessions by Arab activists imprisoned in Shoush – Ali Chabishat, Seyed Khaled Mousavi and Salman Chaiani – and accused them of terrorism, namely blowing up a gas pipeline. Chabishat and Mousavi were executed in May 2014 based on these televised “confessions.”

In addition to broadcasting the confessions by the three activists, Press TV also showed images of their families, who have stated they were filmed without prior notice or permission. The families have repeatedly stated that the three prisoners had confessed under prolonged torture and pressure.

“Intelligence agents told all relatives, including the wives of the accused and their children and parents, to come to the station for a visit. During the visit, the families were surprised to see they were being filmed by cameramen. They were told the film was for the Supreme Leader and intended to help the detainees and no one other than the Leader would watch it,” Hakim Chabishat, Ali Chabishat’s nephew, told the BBC on November 21, 2013.

The BBC also quoted another relative of the detainees, who asked to remain anonymous, who stated that the families were “completely unaware that the film had been shown on a satellite channel [Press TV] and up to the very last moment we were told the film was private. The intelligence agents filmed our women and children under threat in order to use them against the prisoners.”

Chabishat, Mousavi and Chaiani, were arrested on November 11, 2012, and charged with blowing up the gas pipeline in Ahvaz, capital of Khuzestan Province. Their trial took place in August 2013 in Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz. Judge Mohammad Baqer Mousavi condemned Chabishat and Mousavi to death and sentenced Chaiani to 25 years and exile in Yazd Prison. News reports at the time, however, said the explosion was an accident, and the head of the Khuzestan gas company ruled out sabotage.

5. May 2013: “Confessions” of Espionage

On May 19, 2013, IRIB's Central News Unit broadcast the confession of two prisoners executed on the previous day on charges of **espionage for the Mossad and the CIA**, the Israeli and U.S. spy agencies. Both prisoners were shown confessing to espionage. No information regarding the prosecution of these individuals or the evidence presented against them was provided. IRIB's broadcast of these confessions, devoid of any legal transparency, is indicative of IRIB's collusion with judicial and security officials, and its routine and central role in justifying repression and the executions of political opponents without due process.

6. February 2013: Mahmoud Zamani's Confession

On February 25, 2013, IRIB's Channel One **aired a confession** by Mahmoud Zamani. In his confession on the “Mosalas” (Triangle) program, Zamani introduced himself as a mediator between U.S. and U.K. spy agencies and Mehdi Karroubi's 2009 presidential election campaign as well as other Green Movement activists. (Karroubi has now been held under extra-judicial house arrest for over three years.)

Zamani confessed to having ties with “Western intelligence services, including those in the U.S. and U.K., opposition and anti-revolutionary elements abroad, as well as domestic agitators in the 2009 insurrection.” He named a number of critics and opponents of the Islamic Republic and described himself as a close associate of Karroubi during his presidential bid. The accusations were aired two years after Karroubi's house arrest.

Esmail Gerami Moghaddam, a former member of Parliament and a spokesman for Mehdi Karroubi's Etemad e Melli Party **issued a statement** denying any close ties between Zamani and Karroubi. Gerami described the Zamani's confessions on IRIB as a “theatrical piece manufactured by the Iranian intelligence apparatus” and asked whether Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei “would remain silent towards state oppression against an oppressed person under house arrest?”

7. July 2012: Arab Activists in Ahvaz

In July 2012, state-controlled Press TV broadcast confessions by Hashem Shabaninejad, Hadi Rashedi, Jaber Alboushoukeh and his brother Mokhtar, Mohammad Ali Amourinejad, and a number of other Arab activists from Ahvaz. They “confessed” to carrying out bombings in Khuzestan Province and political activities against the Islamic Republic.

Mohammad Ali Amourinejad, 34, has a degree in chemical engineering from Isfahan Industrial University. Hadi Rashedi, 39, has a master's degree in chemistry from Omidiyeh Open University and was a chemistry teacher in Khalifeh high school. Hashem Shabaninejad, 32, has a degree in Arab literature and taught literature in Khalifeh high school. Jaber Alboushoukeh, 28, worked at a stone cutting factory. Mokhtar Alboushoukeh, 26, has a diploma in computer science and was a conscript soldier. Rahman Asakareh, 34, is married with five children, and has a master's degree in sociology. He also taught at Khalifeh high school. The prisoners were also founders of a cultural NGO called “Al-Hawar” (Dialogue). The group held Arabic-language poetry nights and organized educational and cultural classes for youth.

The Al-Hawar members were held at the Ahvaz Intelligence Office between February and April 2012 and two months later, along with three other Arab activists, were sentenced to death on charged of sedition by Branch 2 of the Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz. In December 2012, Branch 32 of the Supreme Court approved the sentences.

Kamel Alboushoukeh, a cousin of the Alboushoukeh brothers, said there was no evidence linking the two to acts of sedition. The remaining accusations against them and all others in this case were based on confessions obtained under torture, he added.

On Wednesday January 29, 2014, security agents informed the families of Hadi Rashedi and Hashem Shabani that they two Arab activists had been executed and their place of burial would be announced later.