MEDIA

SUSTAINABILITY INDEX—

MIDDLE EAST AND

NORTH AFRICA

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MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2005

The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in the Middle East and North Africa

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USAID

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is an independent agency that provides economic, development, and humanitarian assistance around the world in support of the foreign-policy goals of the United States. The agency works to support long-term and sustainable economic growth and advances US foreign-policy objectives by supporting economic growth, agriculture, and trade; global health; and democracy, conflict prevention, and humanitarian assistance.

USAID provides assistance in four regions of the world: Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia and the Near East; Latin America and the Caribbean; and Europe and Eurasia.

With headquarters in Washington, DC, USAID's strength is its field offices around the world. They work in close partnership with private voluntary organizations, indigenous organizations, universities, American businesses, international agencies, other governments, and other US government agencies. USAID has working relationships with more than 3,500 American companies and over 300 US-based private voluntary organizations.

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The United States Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative provides tangible support to reformers in the Middle East and North Africa so democracy can spread, education can thrive, economies can grow, and women can be empowered. In four years, this presidential initiative has devoted $293 million to more than 350 programs in 15 countries and the Palestinian territories to support the aspirations of those working to build a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Examples of the initiative's work includes campaign schools, independent media training, civic education, entrepreneurship skill building, youth leadership development, trade transparency promotion, business hubs for women, and judicial and legal reform training.

UNESCO

UNESCO, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, maintains a Communication and Information (CI) sector that is guided by the principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press as basic human rights. Since 2003, the CI sector has supported the Iraqi people in their transition to democracy. Among other projects, UNESCO facilitated initiatives to develop a national media policy and provided practical guidance for journalists and civil society prior to the elections. Training and networking opportunities were made available to more than 550 media workers and professionals.

IREX

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

Founded in 1968, IREX has an annual portfolio of $50 million and a staff of over 500 professionals worldwide. IREX and its partner IREX Europe deliver cross-cutting programs and consulting expertise in more than 50 countries.

ALTHOUGH THE IRANIAN MEDIA SECTOR IS ONCE AGAIN EXPERIENCING ONE OF ITS DARKER PERIODS IN TERMS OF THE LEGAL ENVIRONMENT, THE 2005 MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX (MSI) ASSESSMENT FOUND POSITIVE SIGNS IN THE LARGER PICTURE.

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IRAN

P rofessional journalism has a long tradition in Iran, and it has been a contested arena since its inception in the 1850s. The profession itself, its legal framework, its educational and institutional support, and the government's involvement with the media have been in continuous evolution. The Iranian media landscape has been characterized through the decades by stretches of government repression lightened by occasional "press springs."

Although the Iranian media sector is once again experiencing one of its darker periods in terms of the legal environment, the 2005 Media Sustainability Index (MSI) assessment found positive signs in the larger picture. Educational and institutional support for the trade has been strengthened. Multiplicity of news sources is a reality of the digital world that manifests itself despite government efforts at control. Legal protections for the media are at a low, but the closure of more than 100 newspapers in recent years and the high-profile cases of a Canadian photojournalist's death in detention and an Iranian journalist's prison hunger strike have raised public awareness of the media freedom issue. Serious efforts are being undertaken by individuals and associations to improve the legal conditions of journalism in Iran.

The year 2005 was precarious for the Iranian press. The presidential election saw the victory of a hardliner, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose conservative stance, many feared, would further reduce the already limited liberties of the press. In addition, the election of a majority conservative Majles in 2004 negated hopes that the parliamentary body might provide a more liberal counterbalance to the new president. The previous president, Mohammad Khatami, was considered a proponent of free speech, albeit a powerless one who had failed to prevent the closure of many newspapers during his tenure.

OVERALL SCORE 1.57

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: IRAN

SUSTAINABILITY

- SUSTAINABLE
- NEAR SUSTAINABILITY
- UNSUSTAINABLE MIXED SYSTEM
- UNSUSTAINABLE ANTI-FREE PRESS

FREE SPEECH	PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM	PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES	BUSINESS MANAGEMENT	SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS
1.20	1.33	1.54	1.75	2.04
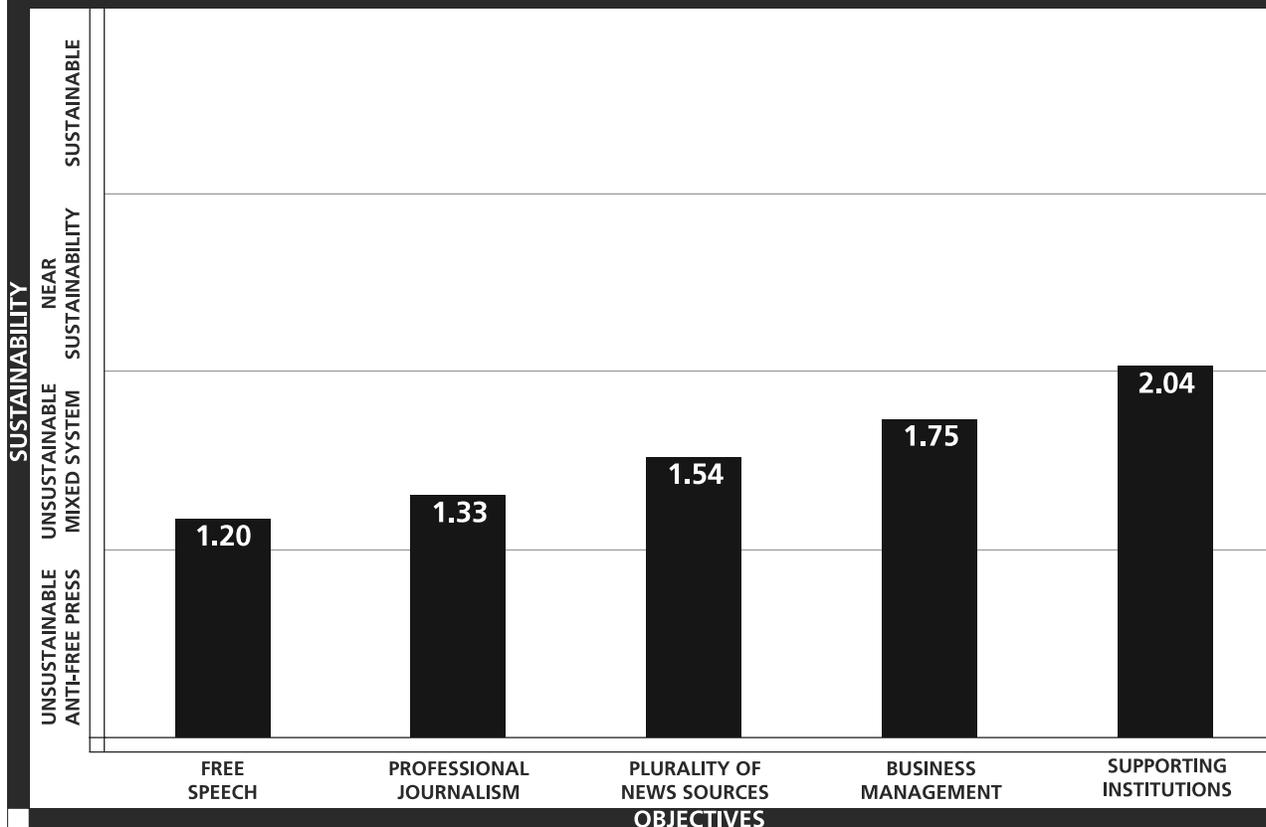
OBJECTIVES

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

State radio and television are closely controlled by the government. While the government also controls the issuance of permits for newspapers and subsidizes them to varying degrees, newspapers remain the only source of more independent news and views along with Internet sites and weblogs, which also are filtered by the government.

To escape the forced closures that have silenced reformist print media in recent years, all newspapers practice some level of self-censorship, the MSI panel said. But although the major "red lines" are known and taken into consideration by journalists, papers nonetheless are often closed on more general charges of insulting Islam, or threatening the interests and security of the Islamic Republic. Most journalists agree that the main legal impediment to freedom of speech is not the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of speech within Islamic principles, but the Iranian Press Law. Passed by the Islamic Revolutionary Council in August 1979, even before the Constitution was adopted later that year, it has been revised twice since.

Of particular concern is the amendment to the Press Law ratified in 2000 during the last weeks of that period's conservative Majles. The amendment was an attempt by Iran's conservative factions to curb what had been the Islamic Republic's first true press spring, following President Mohammad Khatami's election in 1997. Although a reformist Majles followed in 2000, it was not successful in reversing the amendments ratified by the preceding parliament, due to a personal interdiction by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

Following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in June 2005, greater restrictions were imposed on Internet sites and weblogs, and journalists express a general sense that they need to be even more meticulous in their self-censorship. Later in 2005, an initiative by one of the Islamic Republic's old-guard revolutionaries to launch Iran's first independent television station failed due to pressures by the Supreme Council for National Security Council. Around the same time, an aging military plane carrying 68 journalists crashed on its way to the Gulf, where military maneuvers were to be held, and killed all aboard. The year ended with the media community apprehensive about more restrictive times to come, due to an already tighter press environment following the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Akbar Ganji, a former Revolutionary Guard official who became a reformist journalist, was released from prison in June 2005 only to be put back in solitary confinement a week later. Akbar Ganji's investigative reports had alleged a link between senior Islamic Republic officials and the murder of several dissidents and intellectuals in the 1990s. (Akbar Ganji was released again in March 2006, after having served almost six years.) The case of Iranian-Canadian photographer Zahra Kazemi, who died in detention, remained unresolved through 2005, and her lawyers called for a reopening of the investigation. One of the more than 20 webloggers arrested in late 2004 was given a two-year sentence in mid-2005, while most of the others were freed after a few months, some after confessions of guilt allegedly extracted under coercion.

Overall, the MSI panel scored the Iranian media sector at 1.57, with some elements strengthening but the media law environment constituting a significant drag on progress. The strongest component, in the view of the panelists, are the professional organizations and other supporting institutions, particularly the Association of Iranian Journalists.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

Iran Objective Score: 1.20 / 4.00

Iranian Radio and Television are state-owned, and the head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is appointed by the Supreme Leader, as stipulated by the Constitution. This means that there are no independent radio or television stations in Iran, and the debate about freedom of speech within the media is limited to print and online publications.

The MSI panelists concluded that although the Iranian Constitution protects freedom of speech, there are articles that leave room for ambiguities. The panel noted Article 24 of Iran's Constitution, adopted following the revolution in 1979 and amended in 1989, that states: "Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public." While the panelists believed that

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the Constitution itself defended their right to free expression and speech, the conditional clause "except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public" left leeway for the greater restrictions in the Iranian Press Law.

The Iranian Press Law was adopted and ratified by Iran's first Majles following the revolution in 1979, but was altered and amended significantly in 1986. The Islamic Republic's second press law stipulated a Press Supervisory Board consisting of the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance or his representative, a Majles deputy selected by the Majles, a university professor chosen by the Minister of Culture and Higher Education, and a newspaper manager elected by the newspaper managers. This board was given the power to issue licenses, and to "examine the violations of the press" and, "if necessary," arrange for legal prosecution by a court.

While the composition of the Press Supervisory Board outlined in the second press law gave the government decisive powers for revoking press licenses without a court hearing, the panelists unequivocally condemned

the 2000 amendment to the press law for seriously curbing journalists' legal protection and free speech. Among other additions, the 2000 amendment stipulated that any publisher and editor of a newspaper that applied for a license must seek clearance from the Ministry of Intelligence, the Ministry of Justice, and the police. It also placed religious and conservative officials in charge of selecting the seven-member press jury, the court panel responsible for trying cases involving journalists, and added more conservative elements to the Press Supervisory Board. This gave it the right to stop a publication before its case had been heard by a court and prohibited the replacement of a banned publication with a similar one.

The incoming majority reformist 6th Majles declared that reversing the new restrictive amendments would be one of its top priorities and approved an urgent bill three weeks into office for this purpose. However, the panelists said, then–Majles Speaker Mehdi Karroubi removed the bill from the body's agenda upon receipt of a handwritten letter from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei that in effect prohibited the reversal of the 2000 amendments.

Several panelists also pointed to the practices of the judiciary and the hard-line Tehran prosecutor, Said Mortazavi, concerning prosecutions of individual journalists in criminal courts without a jury. These authorities argue that the press law's provision for jury trials applies only to managing editors and that writers are responsible for their own act of writing, rather than publishing. Therefore, the judiciary holds, they can be punished according to the Islamic penal code (Article 697), which provides for the punishment of anyone writing anything criminal.

Panelists held that because there were no clear definitions of the concepts of Islam, insult of top clerical officials, or the national security, journalists are highly vulnerable to ambiguous "red lines." Also, they noted that there are multiple authorities who can close down newspapers, that more often than not motives and charges are not transparent, and that the court cases can be lengthy, even when the outcome is predictable—sentences with heavy bail terms attached.

However, some of these issues are being addressed by a research group connected to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and headed by Kazem Mo'tamedinejad. It has been working on four documents to be presented to the parliament during 2006 for consideration as legislation with the aim of establishing a comprehensive media system in Iran. One element considers the formation of a Media Council "as an independent, public-service institution aimed

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Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

> Legal/social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.

> Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.

> Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.

> Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.

> State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.

> Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and the offended party must prove falsity and malice.

> Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.

> Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.

> Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

at expanding the public right of access to information, supporting and protecting the independence of the press, establishing and promoting scientific and professional standards for journalism, and adherence to its professional ethical principles." Another document is a draft bill for setting up a legal framework "to help secure professional independence and impartiality for journalists and promote their public service in expanding the right of universal access to information for the purpose of enhancing the quality of public life and the country's social, economic, and cultural progress." This is fundamentally different from a similar clause in the Press Law in that it does not require the press to be at the service of or work in the interest of the Islamic Republic. The other two drafts have to do with journalism ethics and a collective employment contract for media workers.

While the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance issues the actual permits for newspapers, licensing is controlled by the conservative Press Supervisory Board and, since 2000, requires clearance from the Ministries of Intelligence and Justice, as well as the police. Panelists maintained that there was a clear bias against reformist publications when it comes to granting permits. One panelist said, "No person without strong political backing can get a publishing permit." Another added that "getting permits is extremely difficult and time-consuming" and that when he tried to get a permit, three years passed without any progress. Panelists also believed that it was much easier for persons connected to conservative circles, or government-affiliated publications, to get permits. "Using connections within powerful circles certainly plays a great role in the attainment of permits," another panelist said.

Market entry for independent publications is not only made more difficult by issues regarding attaining permits, but the general insecurity within the journalism business extends into financial matters. Panelists argued that due to the lack of stability within the media sector, it is difficult to attract investors and those who do usually invest for political and not economic reasons. One panelist noted that during the mass closures of newspapers in 2000, the offices of some publications were closed down for months, with significant financial investments left suspended.

Panelists considered the question of whether crimes against journalists were thoroughly prosecuted as somewhat ironic in the Iranian case because many of those crimes allegedly were supported by the judiciary, if not perpetrated by elements within it. One panelist mentioned the case of Said Hajjarian, a prominent reformist and prolific press personality who was shot in the face in 2000. An alleged perpetrator was charged in the attack but remains free, and has even been sighted at other mass attacks on dissidents in recent years, the panelist said. He is believed by some observers to have links to hard-line elements within Iran's judiciary. Panelists held that crimes against journalists are neither thoroughly investigated nor punished, and the public is poorly informed about such cases, since newspapers often refrain from publishing reports on them for fear of losing their permits.

Generally, government media, especially radio and television, have much better access to domestic news sources, whether it is interviews with officials or information from various government sectors. Management of independent media is not appointed by the government, but panelists agreed that due to the nature of Iranian journalism, wealthy and politically powerful editors-in-chief and managing editors often oversee the general editorial line of a paper and set its boundaries. Hence, one panelist argued, independent of whether a publication is governmental or independent, content that is contrary to the interests of the directors would not be printed.

> *"Certainly," one panelist contributed, "access of information does not always solve the problem, since we work in an environment of self-censorship."*

Although there is no direct control of publications' content, panelists said it is not unusual for top managers to be contacted directly by the Tehran prosecutor with threats of closure if certain subjects were covered, or covered from a certain angle. In addition, sometimes the government issues communiqués warning papers of publishing certain material. Panelists cited issues regarding the Supreme Leader and prominent clerics, press and political prisoners, student demonstrations, Iran's nuclear program, and relations with the United States as subjects raised in this context. In June 2005, papers were warned not to publish an angry letter by old-time revolutionary Mehdi Karroubi to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, accusing hard-line elements of rigging the first round of the presidential election. Three papers that intended to publish the text of the letter were closed overnight, including *Aftabe-Yazd*, a daily connected to Mehdi Karroubi, but all were allowed to resume publication after a one-day suspension.

Libel is punished under articles within Iran's Press Law. Managing editors are tried by a press court with an accompanying jury, the members of which, however, are chosen by a conservative body. The writer, by contrast, can be charged like any other criminal based on the penal code. One panelist who had in the past been imprisoned maintained that "the failure of the plaintiff to prove the charge or claim has practically no effect on the verdict."

Open Majles hearings are broadcast live on national radio, and important press conferences are often shown live on television. At some, journalists, especially those working for foreign agencies, may ask rather probing questions, although none are likely to be so confrontational as to risk having their press permits withdrawn. There is no clause within the Constitution or the Press Law guaranteeing access to information to Iranian citizens or journalists, however. The concept that the work product of government, and hence information about it, belongs to citizens is not part of the public consciousness nor is it outlined in the law.

All the MSI panelists believed that government media had better access to information, and that elements within the conservative segments within Iran's government—such as the judiciary, the Revolutionary Guard, and certain ministries—were adverse to giving information to reformist media. In one case mentioned by the panel, a reporter who had published information on parliament members' paychecks, which she had obtained secretly, was banned by hard-line segments within parliament from gaining access to the building in fall 2005. As a gesture of defiance, however, her employer—ILNA, the semigovernmental news agency—promoted her to the position of parliamentary editor and hired another journalist for the onsite reporting.

Independent journalists, said one panelist, were at a disadvantage in terms of access to officials and influential people. Information could be withheld at any time with the justification that its publication would be detrimental to national security. Government bureaucracy is thick, and so even in cases where information could be provided, access to that information can be so time-consuming that attaining it runs counter to the nature of daily journalism.

"Certainly," one panelist contributed, "access of information does not always solve the problem, since we work in an environment of self-censorship." Another problem that panelists raised was the sensitive nature of public-opinion surveys and the lack of accurate surveys in Iran, especially on subjects that are deemed to be within the "national security" umbrella.

Newspapers use the Internet for research and reporting, and many have satellite television through which they receive international news. The use of satellite dishes by private citizens is prohibited, though there are estimates that about half of Iran's population has access because the ban is not really enforced by the government. Internet sites, especially Persian-language ones, are heavily filtered, and the MSI panelists said a stricter filtering regime could be detected since the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. For the first time, even a conservative news website, www.baztab.com was banned for several days, as was the BBC's Persian-language website, they said.

Entrance into the field of independent journalism is not controlled or restricted by government, nor is entrance to journalism schools. However, journalists do need to obtain press cards from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to be able to work, for which they need a letter from their employer. Usually, press cards for domestic media are issued without much delay. Journalists working for foreign media have a much more difficult time obtaining press cards, and there have been cases where the ministry has taken up to a year to issue press cards for such work.

While work for independent media is not restricted, employment for government media, especially radio and television, is much stricter and follows bureaucratic procedures because employees are categorized as civil servants. In the case of radio and television, applicants for full-time positions must undergo procedures in which their ideology and religiosity is examined. They also must be approved by a specially assigned unit of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) before employment.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Iran Objective Score: 1.33 / 4.00

Panelists agreed that professional journalism is a fairly new phenomenon in Iran that needs significant improvement. Before the revolution, the Shah's regime restricted journalists under its own set of criteria, and independent journalism could not develop well. Through the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the extremely ideological atmosphere as well as the 1980–1988 war with Iraq meant that there was little space for the growth of professional journalism. But panelists agreed that from the mid-1990s onward, there has been a greater awareness among the public as well as media professionals of the need for balanced reporting. Still, some panelists argued, virtually all journalism in Iran is in some way political, and the political leanings of the

reporter as well as the newspaper seep through most reports. In fact, due to the lack of political neutrality in most newspapers, readers often buy and read several newspapers and are aware of each paper's political slant.

The panelists noted that articles may not be so much the work of reporting as summarized transcripts of press conferences or events. It is not uncommon for sources not to be listed, or for only one side of an argument or story to be presented in an article. One panelist ascribed the abundance of clichés, recourse to a limited set of sources, as well as a lack of coverage of both sides of the issue to time constraints imposed by editors, which prevented them from exploring subjects in-depth.

Panelists also argued that the quality of reporting was much higher in the print media than it was in radio and television, adding that the state broadcaster IRIB, due to its allegiance to conservative elements within the regime, tended to be one-sided not only in its reports, but also in the choice of sources and subjects. For example, the reformists are barely given any platform within television, whether in news stories or in debates and roundtables. One participant with considerable experience in Iran's official state television said that within the IRIB there is very little independence for individual producers and directors, as supervisory boards monitor all programs. Every week, reports are handed to supervisory program units, and based on

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

> Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.

> Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.

> Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.

> Journalists cover key events and issues.

> Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.

> Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.

> Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.

> Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

those reports, wrongdoings are identified and warnings given, the panelist said. There may be fines subtracted from salaries, or suspension from work.

Panelists generally agreed that Iranian journalists faced considerable hurdles in access to information, as well as confirmation of information. However, they added that the problem was not solely political but also social, in that within society there was still an awareness of risk attached to the provision of information, though to a much lesser extent than in the first postrevolutionary decade.

Iranian journalists consider the work to be highly insecure, the panelists said. Practicing journalism is like "walking a tightrope," explained one, or "taking a walk in a minefield," as another one put it.

Many professionals within the field of media have had little education and instruction in the craft and have learned through experience. One panelist argued that it was the lack of awareness of ethical standards that was the problem. But panelists also added that attention is increasingly paid to ethical standards within journalism by various media organizations as well as educational institutions. In particular, one of the documents being produced by the research group connected to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and headed by Kazem Mo'tamedinejad was mentioned. The panelists said the draft Convention on the Ethical Principles of Professional Journalism could be a good guide in standardizing ethical and professional principles. Another participant argued that the problem was not one-sided; while many journalists adhered to ethical principles, the government neglected its own responsibility of ethical principles in dealing with journalists.

Selling articles or headlines in political papers is not something that the panelists were aware of occurring. At newspapers specializing in business and the economy, "coordination between the subjects of articles and journalists for pay has been witnessed," a panelist said. One panelist added that younger journalists were wary of bribes, but journalists of older generations are more likely to accept "assistance" for certain coverage. Others added that some of that was to be attributed to low journalist salaries rather than corrupt ethical standards.

Iranian journalists do not have job security due to the frequent closure of newspapers, and they earn low salaries averaging $150 to $225 per month, panelists agreed. At independent media outlets not supported

financially by the government, salaries are often even lower. Online media pay even less and are not seen as primary jobs. Journalists are often forced to work second and third jobs, especially if they are independent and support families.

This is a significant reason for corruption at work, argued one panelist, citing examples of journalists' expectations to benefit from their connections to powerful and wealthy people who tend to be their subjects. Especially at business-focused newspapers, one participant said, journalists may try to become "advisors" to certain projects, losing the ability to cover them objectively if they want to retain their contracts. With media not viewed as financially attractive employment, most journalists work because of their dedication to the profession, a sense of political obligation or duty, or a wish to serve society.

> *In the sphere of publications, "we see modern technology and equipment," another participant said, "but those are in the service of government media."*

Iranian journalists consider the work to be highly insecure, the panelists said. Practicing journalism is like "walking a tightrope," explained one, or "taking a walk in a minefield," as another one put it. The Constitution and the Press Law prohibit journalists from harming Islam, and that "leaves a lot of room for ambiguity, since the state will easily confront journalists with the justification of defending Islam," said one panelist.

Another of the documents being drafted by the media research group as potential legislation would form a collective employment contract in 42 articles and 25 notes to be signed by media owners and managers and journalists' representatives to govern working conditions of media editorial staffs.

Journalists cover important events and issues. However, in addition to the infused self-censorship about sensitive issues, there are multiple authorities who can have influence in preventing the media from covering certain subjects. The panelists included the Tehran state prosecutor as well as the Supreme Council for National Security, which may contact editors by telephone or in writing.

Entertainment does not eclipse news in most newspapers, and there is a good balance between news and political coverage and reporting on other issues, including health, women's issues, philosophy, science, and sports, panelists said. The ideologically heated

postrevolutionary years and restrictions on political reporting drove many journalists toward specializations in niche-subject and entertainment reporting. Also, one panelist argued, due to a dearth of entertainment programming during the 1980s, the years of the Iran-Iraq war, there now is greater interest in entertainment programming, explaining the popularity of television serials and films with Iranian viewers. This participant believed the shows with the highest viewership in Iran tended to be "light-headed stories with pure entertainment value," and that this phenomenon was actually more significant than it might seem because most Iranians derive most of their news and entertainment from state radio and television.

Iranian state television is home to modern technological equipment, but "there is a lack of a skilled workforce to utilize the equipment fully," one participant pointed out. In the sphere of publications, "we see modern technology and equipment," another participant said, "but those are in the service of government media." Although most of the country's newspapers are in color, 80 percent of color-capable publishing houses are in the service of government publications, giving nongovernmental newspapers less access to the technology, the same participant said. Many reporters still write their articles with pens and are forced to be present in the offices of the publication due to a dearth of personal computers in Iranian homes. Although Internet use is widespread, there is a shortage of computer hardware at independent publications, and there are not enough tape recorders for all reporters. Some reporters do not even have mobile phones, which panelists agreed was the single most important piece of equipment for an Iranian journalist. Many news agencies and publications refuse to pay reporters' mobile-phone bills.

There are a good number of publications that offer specialized reporting, governmental as well as independent. Most tend to be weeklies and monthlies, covering subjects such as youth, women, economy, sports, cars, religion, science, and childcare.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Iran Objective Score: 1.54 / 4.00

After President Mohammad Khatami's election in 1997, society witnessed a comparatively high degree of freedom, and the number of newspapers grew dramatically, to about 850 publications during what became known as the "Tehran spring." During the first years of Mohammad Khatami's presidency, newspaper

kiosks often were crowded with people standing around to read the headlines of dozens of papers. However, with the ratification of new amendments to the Press Law by the conservative 5th Majles, state organs, particularly the judiciary, started an offensive on the media that closed some 100 newspapers within a few years. Although there have been fewer papers since, there is still a variety of views available—more than 250 national dailies in 2005, and more than 750 specialist weekly or monthly publications. Most newspapers are subsidized to various degrees, primarily for newsprint and ink, by the government, and privately funded publications tend to be either provincial, or specialized weeklies or monthlies.

However, government subsidies do not greatly affect the content and perspectives of publications, although those linked to the government receive much larger subsidies, the panelists said. They estimated that some 30 percent of urban dwellers read daily newspapers, though a greater percentage could afford to do so because the cost of newspapers is relatively low.

The government-owned *Hamshahri* and *Iran* newspapers have some of the larger readerships, while *Shargh* has the highest readership among the nonstate papers. Panelists also agreed that most

newspapers could be categorized into liberal/reformist or conservative/hard-line, though since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election a greater diversity of views is present within the conservative/hard-line category, providing for a rift between newspapers that during Mohammad Khatami's tenure generally followed a united anti-reformist front.

By the end of 2004, Iran had more than 700 specialist periodicals, amounting to 60 percent of the country's publications. People in large cities have much better access to national print media, as insufficient distribution systems deprive Iranians in smaller towns

> *One panelist argued that since the clampdown on reformist newspapers in 2000, Iranian viewers have turned increasingly toward foreign news sources, particularly Persian-language television programs broadcast mainly from Los Angeles, which has a large Iranian expatriate community.*

and villages. Still, numerous local newspapers reflecting the different spoken languages do exist in most towns, although the lifespan of local publications tends to be rather short due to economic problems. In some areas where minorities live, especially in the Iranian provinces of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, there is greater government repression of the media, according to panelists. During the summer of 2005, two Kurdish newspapers, a daily and a weekly, were closed down, and there were reports of harassment of journalists.

There are six national television stations in Persian, the *Al Alam* station in Arabic, and the *Sahar* network, which broadcasts programs internationally by satellite in Persian and several other languages, including English. All channels are governmental, and the six national television stations offer local programming at certain times. There are nine national radio stations and more than 100 local stations, all state-owned. *Payam Radio* is generally believed to be the most popular radio station, followed by *Javan Radio* (Youth Radio).

Panelists agreed that while there was a plurality of information sources in print, the situation with television and radio is very restricted due to the government monopoly. Hence, news and information offered by television and radio fully reflect the views of the government in Iran and promote regime interests.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

> A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.

> Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.

> State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.

> Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.

> Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.

> Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.

> A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

About half of Iran's households are believed to have access to foreign satellite television programs. One panelist argued that since the clampdown on reformist newspapers in 2000, Iranian viewers have turned increasingly toward foreign news sources, particularly Persian-language television programs broadcast mainly from Los Angeles, which has a large Iranian expatriate community. However, the Iranian state uses technological methods to disrupt programming, and this increased toward the end of 2005, MSI panelists reported.

Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election, panelists said, there has been greater censorship and filtering of sites, including Internet news sites by reformists—one example is www.iran-emrooz.net— as well as those developed by conservatives of differing strands.

Generally, foreign newspapers are not available in Iran, though it is possible now and then to spot *The Herald Tribune* or other major Western newspapers in newspaper stores, which are usually brought privately by travelers. Foreign magazines such as *Time, Newsweek,* and *Fortune* are available and enter the country via an agency, Nashravaran, associated with the Ministry of Culture. However, these magazines are only available with a five-day delay, as each magazine is first subjected to a review during which thick black markers are used to obscure pictures viewed as indecent before being offered to the public. These magazines are generally very expensive and only affordable by the wealthy.

About 8 million Iranians use the Internet regularly, and some 63,000 Persian-language weblogs provide for a large variety of views on all sorts of subjects. The number of Internet users is believed to have grown by 200 percent over the past year. Internet and computers are still considered luxuries for many families, giving rise to a growth in Internet cafés. In recent years, the government has expanded its censorship of electronic media, and filtering is intended to prevent Internet users from viewing sites that carry content considered against the interests of the Islamic Republic. These include those that are considered morally corrupt, such as pornographic sties, as well as those that are politically problematic, including those of Iranian monarchists, communists, and other political groups abroad. Persian-language sites are at greater peril, but even some English-language sites are filtered, primarily sites used by

Iranian opposition groups abroad. Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election, panelists said, there has been greater censorship and filtering of sites, including Internet news sites by reformists—one example is www.iran-emrooz.net—as well as those developed by conservatives of differing strands. Since late 2004, when more than 20 bloggers were arrested and detained for several weeks, the state has pursued an aggressive policy toward the blogosphere. Of the webloggers, Mojtaba Saminejad remains imprisoned and Arash Sigarchi, who was out on bail, had his jail sentence upheld by the Supreme Court in 2006.

Major Western news agencies, such as Reuters, the Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, and Bloomberg, run operations in Iran, and their stories are used by Iranian media, including governmental and independent publications, as well as state radio and television. There are close to a dozen active news agencies, with the governmental Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) as well as the Islamic Students News Agency (ISNA) providing some of the more objective and balanced as well as up-to-the-minute reporting. Iranian news agencies are subjected to similar forms of pressure and censorship as other media, while foreign news agencies experience greater liberties in terms of the content of their reports although their presence and the size of their offices is at government will. In April 2005, the government suspended the operations of the Al Jazeera television network in Tehran, accusing it of inflaming sectarian violence among Iran's Arab minority in the southern province of Khuzestan. The station has not been permitted to take up operations since.

The law requires that the managing director of any publication be identified on each issue, but there is little transparency on the real ownership of publications. There are many rumors on the subject, based on the political line that the outlet follows. For example, *Shargh*, the daily newspaper considered to be of the highest quality, is assumed to be supported financially by the ranking cleric and former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. *Shargh*'s coverage of Rafsanjani's candidacy during the June 2005 presidential elections was viewed as positive in tone, and offered as proof of his backing by some observers. By contrast, in some papers, advertising is an important source of revenue, and advertisers can to some extent affect the way in which papers cover certain subjects.

While a broad spectrum of social interests and minority languages are represented in the media, panelists agreed that minority issues remained sensitive in Iran, and that many journalists preferred to refrain from covering minority issues that could lead to their being

charged with inciting unrest and harming national security interests. They referred to issues such as the use of minority languages as official ones in minority-dominated provinces; succession moves by some minority groups especially in the provinces of Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and Khuzestan; and opposition activity by minority political leaders.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Iran Objective Score: 1.75 / 4.00

Most Iranian publications, governmental and private, benefit from varying degrees of government subsidies of their newsprint and ink. This, the MSI panel agreed, was one of the main factors that hampered the development of publications into independent and profitable media businesses. While the government-owned newspapers *Kayhan, Ettela'at, Hamshahri,* and *Iran* receive the highest subsidies, also including office equipment and funds for higher salaries, private and reformist papers receive subsidies as well, though in much smaller volumes and generally limited to newsprint and ink. The amount of subsidies is decided by the conservative Press Supervisory Board, which allocates much less to reformist papers, making it difficult for them to compete with large state-owned publications.

Figures by the Ministry of Culture showed that

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

> Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.

> Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.

> Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.

> Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.

> Independent media do not receive government subsidies.

> Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.

> Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

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during 1989–2003, it had given the press a total of $368.8 million in aid, 77 percent of which had gone to state-owned papers. While government papers tend to be well-funded bureaucracies with roots that reach decades back, many private newspapers have originated out of political dedication and often are lacking in good business management. A study found that very few of the publishers have ever drawn up business plans or conducted audience research to find out what their potential readers wanted.

Most publishing houses are government-owned, and even private ones buy government-subsidized newsprint and ink. The government has subsidized these materials

> *Panelists believed the insecurity of independent media contributed to the lacking tendency by directors to develop publications into successful business enterprises.*

since 1989 in an effort to keep newspaper prices down. Distribution companies, similarly, are mostly government-run, and private ones have restrictions imposed by the government. These might include limitations on which areas newspapers can be distributed in and how many copies can be sold. Panelists believed the insecurity of independent media contributed to the lacking tendency by directors to develop publications into successful business enterprises.

Most independent publications are able to survive due to a combination of investments, advertising revenues, and government subsidies. Panelists also agreed that the role of advertising in the financial support of newspapers had increased over the past years. They pointed to *Shargh* as an example of a high-quality, successful independent newspaper that appeared to be self-sufficient financially, with ads by major foreign and Iranian companies covering the pages.

There are no available surveys on revenues from advertising for state television and radio, or the print media, but panelists felt that advertising was not taking up too much space in either medium. Some newspapers have difficulties attracting advertisements, especially local ones. The system of subscription is close to nonexistent in Iran, partly due to the underdeveloped distribution system. Those who would like to have papers delivered to their homes or businesses usually pay their local kiosks for the job or, alternatively, motorcyclists who have used this niche to create a profession for themselves.

Market research as such is rare in Iran, due to the political implications of such statistics, some of which might show public interest in dissident viewpoints, social liberalization, or other topics contrary to the priorities of the government. As a result, as one panelist put it, "editors and managers are pretty much tapping in the

> *As one panelist put it, "editors and managers are pretty much tapping in the dark and going with their gut feelings" when it comes to business decisions.*

dark and going with their gut feelings" when it comes to business decisions. Ratings have not been established within the Iranian media business as guides that define content or publications' relationships with their readers. The circulation of papers is sometimes exaggerated by managing directors, added one panelist, because higher circulation rates could justify greater government subsidies.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Iran Objective Score: 2.04 / 4.00

A Press Syndicate has existed in Iran since 1989 and has provided various publications with vans, motorcycles, and other means to support their publishing and distribution needs. However, the first trade organization to defend journalists' rights, the Association of Iranian Journalists (AOIJ), was only founded in 1999. The association is registered with the United Nations as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and is recognized by Iran's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. In early 2005, the association had 2,706 members, from an estimated total of 5,000 journalists in Iran.

> *Panelists agreed that the activities of the professional organizations played an important role in efforts that led to a directive by President Mohammad Khatami to a group of media professionals in 2003 to set up the research committee to prepare a "comprehensive media system" for the country.*

Panelists agreed that the AOIJ has been very active in protesting the closures of newspapers and the detention of journalists. It has also taken steps to improve journalists' pay and work

security, set up loan funds to support the families of jailed journalists, and provide for subsidized housing. It started its own college in 2002, called the Centre for Scientific-Applied Training, which provides a B.A. degree in various areas of journalism.

There are at least another 13 journalist trade organizations, some tailored to specialist circles such as sports writers and photographers, crisis photographers, and graphic artists, but also other more encompassing ones such as the Association for the Defense of Press Freedom, the Association of Iranian Women Journalists, and the Association of Young Journalists. All associations provide membership based on profession, and panelists believed they are democratically run and provide beneficial services as well as courses for professional development.

While some of the organizations are connected to government ministries, such as the Association of Muslim Journalists, most are NGOs and act independently from government. The Association for Iranian Journalists, the Association for the Defense of Press Freedom and the Association of Iranian Women Journalists have been especially active in recent years in raising awareness about journalists' rights and exerting pressure on government in case of violations of journalists' rights. The building of the AOIJ, which also houses Iran's chapter of the Committee to Protect Journalists, hosts regular conferences and other

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

> Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.

> Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.

> NGOs support free speech and independent media.

> Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.

> Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.

> Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

> Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

programs to discuss freedom-of-expression issues and protest repressive measures. Such events were held, for example, following the detention of webloggers in late 2004, on World Press Freedom Day in June 2005, and following the plane crash in December 2005 that killed 68 journalists. In these gatherings, prominent activists speak, and petitions are signed and forwarded to responsible government ministries. However, such NGOs are represented mostly in the larger cities, and their networks are relatively weak in smaller towns and villages.

Panelists agreed that the activities of the professional organizations played an important role in efforts that led to a directive by President Mohammad Khatami to a group of media professionals in 2003 to set up the research committee to prepare a "comprehensive media system" for the country. The resulting four documents, prepared in 2004, include the draft bill for the formation of a Media Council, the ethics convention, the collective labor agreement, and the legal framework. Currently, the drafting group is working with active members of various trade organizations to build widespread approval before the documents are submitted to government for implementation in 2006.

Educational degrees and courses in journalism are available through various universities and institutions, including very competitive ones at Allameh-Tabatabai University and Tehran University. Various other institutions, such as Azad University, the AOIJ, the IRNA news agency, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), and the Centre for Media Studies and Research (CMSR) connected to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance offer degrees and short-term courses.

The CMSR, in particular, received positive feedback for its short-term professional development courses. However, panelists criticized the quality of many of these courses, citing teachers who are not practicing journalists themselves, a shortage of equipment for practical work, and the missing link with media organizations for provision of internships that would allow students to gain hands-on experience.

Short-term courses are occasionally offered within news organizations, but workshops are rare due to insufficient funds. One panelist said there were several instances in which international organizations had expressed interest in running such workshops and courses in Iran, but "due to various reasons, the presence of those organizations has not been approved in Iran."

> *One panelist said there were several instances in which international organizations had expressed interest in running such workshops and courses in Iran, but "due to various reasons, the presence of those organizations has not been approved in Iran."*

There are private as well as governmental publishing houses, and most newspaper kiosks are run privately. Similarly, there are governmental as well as private Internet Service Providers (ISPs), but due to the high profitability of the business as well as its sensitive nature, owners of such ISPs must coordinate critical matters with the government. The government gives directives to ISPs regarding the kinds of sites that they must block, often giving them concrete addresses of sites to filter. Internet cafés are mostly private, although government minders will visit them to ensure that access to "indecent" sites are not permitted by the owners.

MSI Participants

The members of the MSI panel for Iran represented state and private media outlets and included managers, editors, and journalists from print, broadcast, and online media. IREX has withheld their names to ensure there are no repercussions from their participation.

IRAN AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

■ **Population:** 66.9 million (2004 est., World Bank)

■ **Capital city:** Tehran

■ **Ethnic groups:** Persian 51%, Azeri 24%, Gilaki and Mazandarani 8%, Kurd 7%, Arab 3%, Lur 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmen 2%, other 1% (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)

■ **Religions:** Shi'a Muslim 89%, Sunni Muslim 10%, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, Mandean, and Baha'i 1% (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)

■ **Languages:** Persian and Persian dialects 58%, Turkic and Turkic dialects 26%, Kurdish 9%, Luri 2%, Balochi 1%, Arabic 1%, Turkish 1%, other 2% (www.nationsencyclopedia.com, 2006)

■ **GDP (ppp):** $162.7 billion (2004 est., World Bank)

■ **GNI per capita (ppp):** $2,300 (2004 est., World Bank)

■ **Literacy rate:** male 83.5%, female 70.4% (2004 est., UNICEF)

■ **President:** Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

■ **Supreme Leader:** Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei

■ **Next scheduled elections:** Parliamentary 2008

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

■ **Newspaper circulation statistics (total circulation and largest paper):** The largest papers in terms of circulation are the governmental *Hamshahri* and *Iran*; total circulation numbers are not available.

■ **Broadcast ratings (top three ranked stations):** *Payam Radio* is generally believed to be the most popular radio station, followed by *Javan Radio* (Youth Radio); in terms of Iranian television, the station with the most popular television serial is usually the top-ranked station; television serials are usually shown either on channel two or three; overall ratings are not available.

■ **Number of print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** There are over 250 daily newspapers and more than 750 specialist weekly or monthly publications, with the overwhelming majority published in Persian.

There are nine national radio stations and more than 100 local stations, all state-owned.

There are six national television stations in Persian, the *Al Alam* station in Arabic, and the *Sahar* network, which broadcasts programs internationally per satellite, in Persian as well as other languages, including English; all channels are governmental; the six national television stations offer local programming at certain times.

■ **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A

■ **Number of Internet users:** Estimated at 7,500,000–8,000,000

■ **Number of Internet hosts:** 5,246 (2005)

■ **News agencies:** IRNA, ISNA, Fars, Mehr, IRIBNEWS, ITNA, Rasa News, and most major foreign news agencies

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: IRAN

OBJECTIVE	SCORE
FREE SPEECH	1.20
PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM	1.33
PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES	1.54
BUSINESS MANAGEMENT	1.75
SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS	2.04

SUSTAINABILITY scale: UNSUSTAINABLE ANTI-FREE PRESS / UNSUSTAINABLE MIXED SYSTEM / NEAR SUSTAINABILITY / SUSTAINABLE