

U.S. Government Funds Anti-Iranian Regime News Outlet IranWire

Contrary to its claims of independence, the popular dissident Persian news outlet receives the vast majority of its funding from the U.S. State Department

NOIR, Ir)

IAIN CARLOS AND SAM CARLEN

FEB 06, 2024



Share



Illustration: DALL-E 3

IranWire prides itself on being an independent news outlet covering the Islamic Republic. The problem is, *IranWire* isn't independent.

There are several ties between the regime-critical outlet and the United States government and organizations promoting western foreign policy. Moreover, *IranWi*

draws the vast majority of its funding from the U.S. Department of State, per its affiliate company's [audited financial statements](#).

These ties have gone largely undiscussed, despite the meaningful perch *IranWire* has carved out to influence discourse around Iran. The news site garnered over half-a-million visits in October 2023 per [SimilarWeb](#), earned flattering coverage of its work from the [Washington Post](#), and scored a content [partnership](#) with the [Daily Beast](#). *IranWire* articles are routinely used as sources in State Department reports, such as 2022 Iran Country [Report](#) on Human Rights Practices and 2022 [Report](#) on International Religious Freedom. *IranWire* is also frequently cited by prominent media outlets like [The New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), [The Guardian](#), and [The Wall Street Journal](#), with [times](#) characterizing it as an “independent” news organization.

Maziar Bahari, an Iranian-Canadian journalist known for his [documentaries](#), [survival of torture](#) at the hands of the Iranian regime, and writing for [Newsweek](#), founded *IranWire* in 2013 “in response to ongoing and brutal assaults on freedom of expression inside the Islamic Republic of Iran,” per the outlet's [website](#). *IranWire* says it publishes articles from Iranian diaspora journalists and citizen journalists within Iran. Editorially, the publication “has a strong focus on documenting human rights abuses in Iran, fact-checking official claims and analyzing government competence.”

Bahari's outlet publishes articles [in](#) “several languages including Persian, English, Arabic, Kurdish, Azerbaijani, and Spanish,” with the English-language website featuring only a fraction of the content appearing on the Persian-language version. *IranWire* has garnered a substantial global following, with approximately 120,000 unique visitors frequenting its website per month, and the outlet reaching a broad audience of 6.5 million monthly through its website and social media accounts, according to the outlet's [affiliate company](#).

HEADLINES — 2 hours ago



FEATURES / SOCIETY

Devastated Afghan Tells of the Perished Life and Dreams of His Younger Sister



FEATURES / SOCIETY

Jailed Activist Commences Hunger Strike Over her Mother's Treatment

Saba Kord Afshari, a civil activist imprisoned in Qarchak prison in Varamin, launched a hunger strike on Saturday, May 8 ...



FEATURES / PROVINCES

Teachers' Union Condemns Violence Against Protesting Students

In the wake of a violent crackdown by law enforcement officials on Iranian students who protested against in-person final exams, ...



FEATURES / SOCIETY

Gay Iranian Man Murdered by Family on Being 'Outed' by Military Service Card

On Tuesday, May 4, a young ethnic Arab man in Ahvaz was murdered because of his sexual orientation. Shortly afterwards, ...

IranWire's Home Page, May 2021 — Image: Saleem Vaillancourt, reproduced under CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

IranWire is [owned](#) by Off-Centre Productions, a UK-based media and film production company owned by Bahari through [parent company](#) Gelsomina Holdings. Off-Centre Productions was [founded](#) in 2010 and has an affiliate relationship with [non-profit partner](#) Journalism for Change, founded in 2014 (with Bahari at the helm of its Board of Directors). Journalism for Change's [audited financial statements](#) describe how it works together with Off-Centre Productions to “jointly bid for projects, manage projects, and assist one another in carrying out specific grants and projects.” In 2021 and 2022, Journalism for Change paid Off-Centre Productions approximately \$1.96 million and \$1.04 million, respectively, “for consulting and other expenses on grant and projects,” according to the nonprofit's [audited financials](#).

Journalism for Change – and, by extension, *IranWire* (which [describes](#) itself as a “project by” Journalism for Change) – draws the vast majority of its funding from the U.S. State Department: in 2021 and 2022, the Department of State provided 95% and 93% of the organization's funding, respectively. Much of the funding came directly from State Department programs listed in the financial statements as “Public

Diplomacy Programs,” “Regional Democracy Program,” and “International Program to Support Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.” Other funding was routed through pro-western press freedom organizations, including NetFreedom Pioneers, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Media Diversity Institute, and the Siamak Pourzand Foundation.

JOURNALISM FOR CHANGE, INC.
SCHEDULE OF EXPENDITURES OF FEDERAL AWARDS
 Year Ended December 31, 2022

<u>Federal Grantor/Pass-Through Grantor/Program or Cluster Title</u>	<u>Federal Assistance Listing Number</u>	<u>Pass-Through Entity Identifying Number</u>	<u>Provided to Subrecipients</u>	<u>Total Federal Expenditures</u>
Department of State				
Public Diplomacy Programs	19.040		\$ 134,891	\$ 329,453
Regional Democracy Program	19.221		511,648	1,181,020
NetFreedom Pioneers— Regional Democracy Program	19.221	SSIS-JFC22	<u>1,506</u>	<u>29,469</u>
Total 19.221			513,154	1,210,489
International Programs to Support Democracy, Human Rights and Labor	19.345		357,594	1,036,835
National Endowment for Democracy—International Programs to Support Democracy, Human Rights and Labor	19.345	2022-1208	7,206	9,083
Media Diversity Institute— International Programs to Support Democracy, Human Rights and Labor	19.345	N/A	-	600
Siamak Pourzand Foundation— International Programs to Support Democracy, Human Rights and Labor	19.345	STM-001	<u>-</u>	<u>3,761</u>
Total 19.345			<u>364,800</u>	<u>1,050,279</u>
Total expenditures of federal awards			<u><u>\$ 1,012,845</u></u>	<u><u>\$ 2,590,221</u></u>

Schedule of Expenditures of Federal Awards, Journalism for Change’s 2022 Audited
Financial Statements

The Department of State declined to comment on its relationship with *IranWire* and Bahari. Bahari could not be reached for comment after multiple outreach attempts. NetFreedom Pioneers, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Media Diversity Institute, and the Siamak Pourzand Foundation could not be reached for comment.

Multiple members of *IranWire*'s leadership have spent years working for the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). IREX, founded and sustained with the help of funding from the U.S. government (with U.S. government grants accounting for 90% and 81% of the organization's [funding](#) in 2021 and 2022, respectively), [describes](#) itself as "a global development and education organization, working "in more than 100 countries on issues such as education, leadership, information, and youth." Off-Centre Productions' website [characterizes](#) *IranWire* as project supported by IREX."

A significant portion of IREX's work revolves around supporting media organizations that serve western interests. Pro-western outlets, like Georgia's *Mtisambebi.ge* and *Netgazeti.ge*, as well as *Voice of Lebanon*, count IREX among their backers. Moreover, its many [reports](#) on the health of nations' media landscapes, IREX labels various chapters of *Radio Free Europe* independent and reputable. *Radio Free Europe* was born as a propaganda operation of the C.I.A. and is still funded and controlled by the U.S. government.

IREX leaders' professional history also evidences the organization's pro-western agenda. Between the three most recent presidents of IREX, they boast former employers including the U.S. State Department, *Radio Free Europe*, *Voice of America*, Center for a New American Security, United States Institute of Peace, and NATO. The current CEO of IREX, Kristin M. Lord, sits on *Radio Free Europe*'s board of directors per the IREX [website](#).

IREX could not be reached for comment.

Prior to joining Bahari to co-found *IranWire*'s affiliate company Journalism for Change, Mark Whitehouse spent 17 years working for IREX. By his own telling, Whitehouse was an IREX lynchpin. As Director of Media Development, he "led geographic expansion of IREX's media practice into Africa, Asia, Middle East, and Latin America," according to his [LinkedIn](#) profile. Whitehouse remains President of the Board of Directors of ERIM, IREX's European arm.

Whitehouse could not be reached for comment.

Whitehouse isn't the only IREX veteran at the helm of *IranWire*. Michael De Villier board member and treasurer of Journalism for Change, grew "IREX Europe [now known as ERIM] into an innovative development organization with expertise working in support of human rights, freedom of expression, civil society, and education in closed and authoritarian societies and states in conflict," per the Journalism for Change [website](#).

De Villiers [still](#) serves as ERIM's Director. He could not be reached for comment.

IREX isn't the only organization complicating *IranWire*'s claim to independence. Mehrangiz Kar, another Journalism for Change board member, "teaches courses on women's rights in Iran at the Tavaana E-Learning Institute for Iranian Civil Society per the Journalism for Change website.

Tavaana is a formerly State Department-funded organization founded by Mariam Memarsadeghi and Akbar Atri, two well-known advocates of regime change in Iran. *Noir* [revealed](#) that Memarsadeghi and Atri collaborated with the State Department Mahmood Enayat, the general manager of the prominent Persian news outlet *Iran International*, to push Twitter to censor posts containing personal information and hateful speech about Memarsadeghi and Atri. Coincidentally, Enayat also founded the Small Media Foundation, an organization that [describes](#) itself as supporting freedom of expression and information access in "politically closed societies," which designed *IranWire*'s original website.

Kar could not be reached for comment. Atri could not be reached for comment. Memarsadeghi declined to comment.

Another board member, Eric J. Novotny, has more direct ties to the U.S. government having "previously served as a senior advisor for digital media and cyber security to

the US Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs,” per the Journalism for Change website.

A spokesperson for American University, where Novotny is currently a professor emeritus, told *Noir* Novotny was “not available” for interviews.

Daily Beast partnership

From 2014 to 2020, the *Daily Beast* reposted *IranWire* content without making its audience aware of the outlet’s ties to IREX and the United States government, and [described](#) *IranWire* as a “partner publication.”

“*IranWire* seeks to empower Iranian citizen journalists by creating a forum in which young Iranians inside and outside of Iran can discuss national and local news, learn the ethics of reporting, study the craft of writing and Web presentation, and work closely with professionals,” reads the *Daily Beast*’s [description](#) of *IranWire*.

The *Daily Beast* could not be reached for comment.

Bahari

Maziar Bahari, *IranWire*’s founder, comes from dissident stock, assuming he’s accurately relayed his family history. His father and sister were both arrested for their efforts as members of Iran’s Communist Party, per Bahari’s memoir *Rosewater*.

Bahari chose a different kind of dissidence, instead becoming a reporter, who, given available evidence, seems to have been a truly independent journalist before founding *IranWire*.

In his memoir, Bahari paints himself a skeptical realist whose views on Iran lay between the dogmas espoused by the United States and the Islamic Republic. He is critical of the Iranian regime’s suppression of civil rights and self-serving application of Islamic doctrine, but he has no sentimentality for the Iranian monarchic regimes of yesteryear. He reproves the United States’ stalwartly hostile disposition toward Iran

and its former colonial relationship with it, while also criticizing Iran's saber-rattling. He censures Israel for its oppression of the Palestinians, while also condemning Iranian anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

It is within this independent frame, on Bahari's telling, that he covered Iran's 2009 election for *Newsweek* – which Bahari said was rigged in favor of the pro-Khamenei incumbent Ahmadinejad (the legitimacy of the 2009 election is debated). Bahari's reporting for *Newsweek* got him arrested by the Revolutionary Guard and imprisoned for 118 days.

The Iranian government could not be reached for comment.

What ensued, on Bahari's telling, were his interrogator's tenacious efforts to break him, which included physical and psychological torture. Bahari calls his interrogator Rosewater, the namesake of the book, because that's what his captor smelled like.

Rosewater attempts to force Bahari to admit to being a spy for the U.S., U.K. or Israel and name members of Iran's reformist movement as his accomplices. But outside of pushing Bahari to make a nonspecific televised confession-under-duress to being an agent of western intelligence, Rosewater is unsuccessful.

As international pressure to release Bahari mounts and his usefulness to the regime becomes less apparent, Rosewater finally tells Bahari that he doesn't think he's a spy.

But Rosewater says he knows something is wrong with Bahari.

“Even though we know you're not a spy in the classical sense of the word, you're a media spy,” Rosewater tells Bahari.

Bahari points out what he sees as the logical inconsistencies of Rosewater's argument politely enough to his interrogator's face, while letting the reader know how absurd he thinks Rosewater's accusation is.

But *Noir*'s reporting about Bahari's work with *IranWire*, the State Department, and IREX reveals something interesting. Caged and blindfolded, Bahari wasn't who Rosewater thought he was – at least it doesn't seem that way given available evidence. Since acquiring his freedom, however, Bahari has become something resembling what Rosewater suspected.

Type your email...	Subscribe
--------------------	-----------



2 Likes

Discussion about this post

Comments

Restacks



Write a comment...