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## Iran reporters debate nuclear issue

By **Roxana Saberi**  
BBC News, Tehran

**As the international debate over Iran's nuclear programme has intensified, some Iranian journalists say they have come under increasing pressure not to criticise their government on the issue.**



Some Iranian newspapers have criticised government polices

While not all journalists share this

feeling, the government has warned the nation's press to avoid harsh criticism of its nuclear policies.

At a recent press conference, Iran's minister of culture and Islamic guidance, Mohammad Saffar-Harandi, made the government's feelings explicit when he called on journalists not to jeopardise the country's national interests and security.

"In the past few months, especially in regards to Iran's nuclear file, some people in the press have written the same things our enemies would say if they wanted to," he said.

**“ I ask journalists to be careful - I don't want any of the press we now see on the newspaper stands to be shut down**

Culture Minister Mohammad Saffar-Harandi

He suggested this could be interpreted as an abuse of press freedom, adding: "This is very difficult for me, so I ask journalists to be careful. I don't want any of the press we now see on the newspaper stands to be shut down."

### Disagreement

At the same time, some journalists say Iran's Supreme National Security Council has pressed the media not to depict Iran's diplomatic efforts over its nuclear programme as unsuccessful or having reached a dead-end.

They also say the council has instructed the media not to

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create fear and uncertainty among Iranians.

The disagreement between journalists and the government has been more over style than substance.

Iran's newspapers generally support the aim of developing a peaceful nuclear programme, but some have objected to the leadership's policies, calling them confrontational.

Hardline dailies generally agree Tehran should never back down from pursuing its right to nuclear energy, while moderate papers often stress the importance of continuing diplomacy.



Many Iranians see the nuclear programme as a matter of national pride

Etemade Melli, a newspaper founded by Iran's former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi, has called on the country's nuclear negotiators to avoid what it calls "sensational, populist and irrational slogans".

One journalist at the paper, who asked to remain anonymous, said the newspaper disapproves of some of the statements made by the new government of hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

**“ I think the change of language that came with our new government has increased the tensions between Iran and the world ”**

Journalist at Etemade Melli

"We are not opposed to the principle of having peaceful nuclear energy or knowledge," the journalist said.

"But I think the change of language that came with our new government has increased the tensions between Iran and the world."

### **'No obligation'**

In general, the extent to which journalists feel pressured by the government to support its nuclear policies depends on their ideological views.

At a news conference in February, the editor of the conservative Hamshahri newspaper, which belongs to

Tehran City Council, said his newspaper does not feel controlled by the state.

"If I sense something is not the truth, I won't write a single word about it," Mohammed Reza Zaeri said.

"It isn't that I promote the position of the regime. If I don't believe that nuclear energy is the wish of the nation, I am sure I would not write something about that in Hamshahri newspaper," he added.

"I would not be obligated to do so, either, and if one day I am forced to do this, I would leave the newspaper."



**“ If I sense something is not the truth, I won't write a single word about it ”**

Mohammed Reza Zaeri

### **Boundaries**

Some other journalists, however, feel uncertain about how far they can push.

They say they feel limited by certain boundaries, even though they do not always know where those boundaries are.

**“ You don't know how far you can go forward or criticize ”**

Arash, Journalist

"This is one of the problems for Iranian journalists: that we don't know what the red lines are," Arash, a reporter at a Reformist newspaper, who preferred not to give his last name, said.

"You don't know how far you can go forward or criticize," he explained.

"I think it's the right of every political group, newspaper or professional to present the views that he or she has, and society can hear those views and support the ones they prefer."

### **National pride**

In addition to turning to Iran's newspapers, many Iranians also watch state television and radio, which usually report the authorities' views on the nuclear issue.

But some Iranians say they do not believe state broadcasting gives them the whole story - they prefer satellite television

news and the internet.

Still, the government has been largely successful at getting its message across through the national media.

Some Iranian analysts say local coverage has helped many Iranians see the nuclear programme as a matter of national pride - something on which many are willing to support the Islamic regime despite growing international pressure.



Iranians often turn to non-state media for an alternative viewpoint

"There are no public opinion polls by independent institutions or independent radio or TV. It is also hard to find an independent newspaper that can echo the views of Iranians. That area of government policy seems to have worked," said an Iranian analyst who wanted to remain anonymous.

"The Iranian regime has even been able to convince the international community that... all Iranians think the nuclear issue is a national one and an inalienable right and that if the US tries to deprive Iranians of this right, all the people will stand behind the regime, and it will become more popular."

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