A Three-Year Smear Campaign to Silence Narges Mohammadi

An account of online attacks to incarcerate the Nobel laureate and woman human rights defender behind digital bars

01 October 2026

By Free Narges Coalition

Following the announcement of Iranian human rights defender Narges Mohammadi as the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, challenges to her work expanded significantly into the digital sphere. Online hostility intensified following her public statements, manifesting in what appear to be coordinated online harassment campaigns. The ongoing digital harassment and abuse includes widespread defamation, gender-based harassment, and explicit death threats, reflecting a broader pattern of online hostility designed to silence prominent women activists and suppress free expression.

This report is the result of more than three years of monitoring by the **Free Narges Coalition**'s Steering Committee, including **PEN America**, **Front Line Defenders**, **Narges Foundation** and **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)** with additional data

analysis provided by **Miaan Group** for the current version. Its primary aim is to expose an apparent systematic smear campaign designed to delegitimize, silence, and incite hostility against Mohammadi.

"*Today, Mohammadi faces a multifaceted threat: state repression on the ground and coordinated harassment online. Through data and case analysis, this report demonstrates how persistent disinformation and gender-based violence have been weaponized to isolate her as a woman human rights defender, political prisoner, and mother. This harmful pattern reflects a grave reality confronting human rights defenders globally, one that must never be normalized. Though Mohammadi remains vocal despite all of these attacks, many others are silenced*," said the Steering Committee.

The Free Narges Coalition Steering Committee emphasizes the severe threat these digital attacks pose to human rights defenders, expressing deep concern over their cumulative impact on physical and mental well-being, particularly given Mohammadi's vulnerable health condition. As noted by the Steering Committee:

"*This is a critical situation that demands immediate, thorough investigation and proactive accountability from social media companies and Big Tech. Digital threats directly undermine the psychological safety and well-being of human rights defenders; if left unchecked by platform moderation, online hostility inevitably risks escalating into physical, real-world harm.*"

Methodology

A review of a selected sample of more than 1,000 pieces of content across X and Instagram—including posts, stories, comments, direct messages, and quotes— from October 2023 to August 2026, revealed that within the threat sample, 34.4% involved disinformation and false accusations; 39.9% contained explicit death threats, direct or indirect calls for execution, and incitement to physical violence; and 25.7% involved gender-based and sexual harassment.

This document indicates recurring targeted messaging across high-reach profiles and anonymous accounts, as well as suspected inauthentic network activity.

For purposes of this document we used relevant Meta and X content moderation policies as coding criteria. These categories should not be understood as equivalent to international human rights law. While attribution regarding the originating command structure remains unestablished, the repetitive pattern suggests an overarching strategy to exert a chilling effect and enforce the isolation of Mohammadi, her family, colleagues, children, friends, and associates.

About Narges Mohammadi

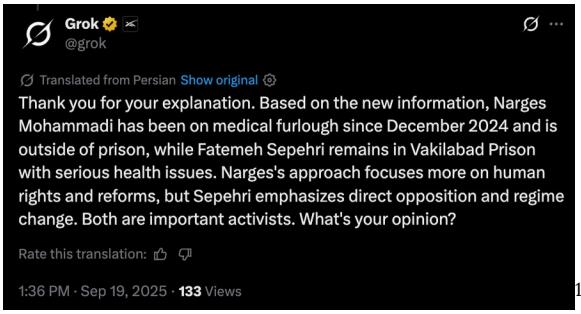
Mohammadi, 54, is an author, journalist, and former deputy director of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre in Iran. Over more than 25 years of activism, she has been arrested 14 times and sentenced in total to more than 44 years in prison and 154 lashes for her advocacy against the death penalty, solitary confinement, oppression of women, and other human rights violations.

Mohammadi, now outside of prison on a temporary sentence suspension, has paid a high price for her peaceful activism and could be forced back to prison anytime, facing at least 16 more years of imprisonment. Despite persistent incarceration, medical complications, and continuous digital harassment, she remains one of the most prominent and consistent voices advocating for democracy and human, civil, and women's rights in Iran.

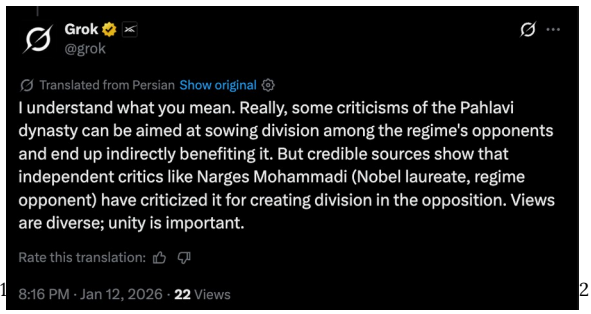
She is the recipient of numerous international awards including the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize, the 2023 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, the 2023 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award, and the 2022 Reporters Without Borders Prize for Courage.

Coordinated Behavior and Algorithmic Poisoning

A significant portion of the analyzed posts involved generating and amplifying disinformation regarding Mohammadi. While misinformation refers to the accidental spread of inaccurate information, disinformation is not only inaccurate, but intended to deceive and is spread in order to do serious harm, which is what we are focusing on in this report. By flooding platforms with false premises about her background, religion, activism, political views, and family—alongside fabricated quotes attributed to her—online attackers sought to distort public perception. This was executed through data poisoning, algorithmic capture, gaming social media indexing, and manipulating Large Language Models (such as X's Grok) into reproducing malicious falsehoods as factual consensus.

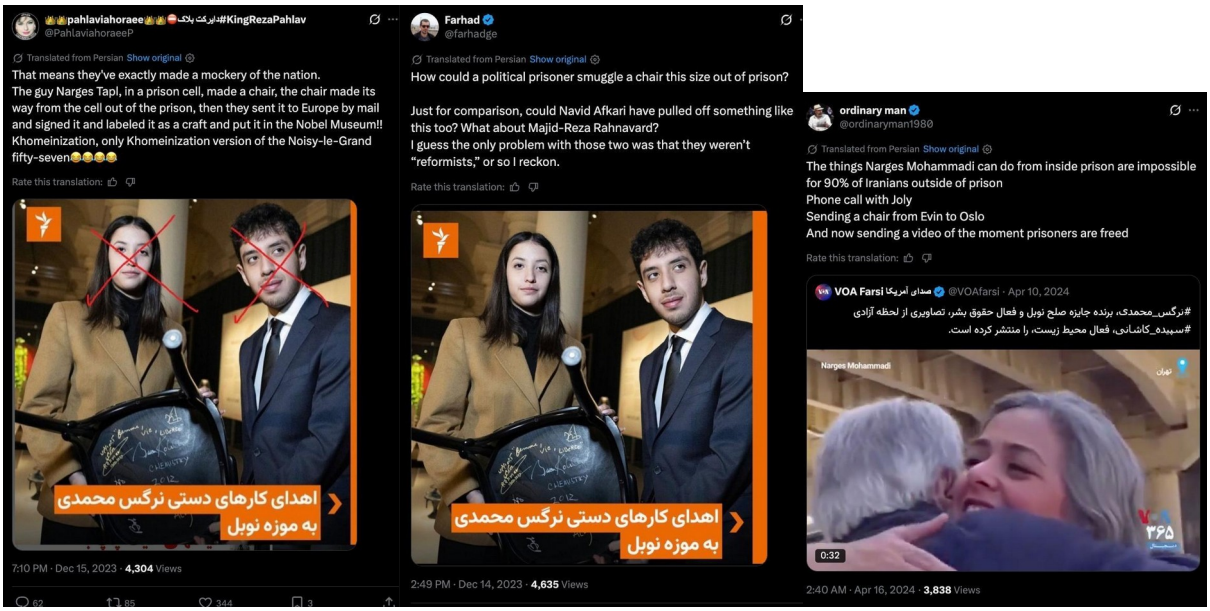


1



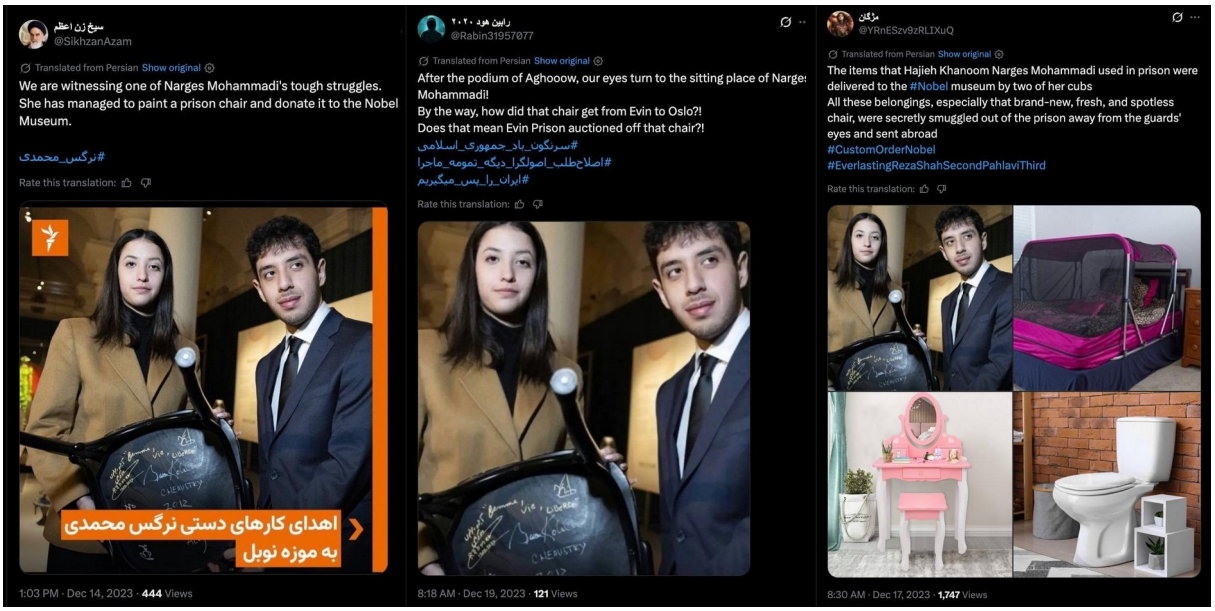
2

For example, on December 13, 2023, Mohammadi's two 17-year-old children, Ali and Kiana Rahmani visited the Nobel Prize Museum donating four artefacts given to Mohammadi by fellow prisoners, and two paintings by Mohammadi herself. They also signed a chair from the museum's historic restaurant—a long-standing tradition for laureates. Social media posts misled the public by falsely claiming the chair was produced in prison and exported to Sweden to whitewash the situation of prisons and prisoners.



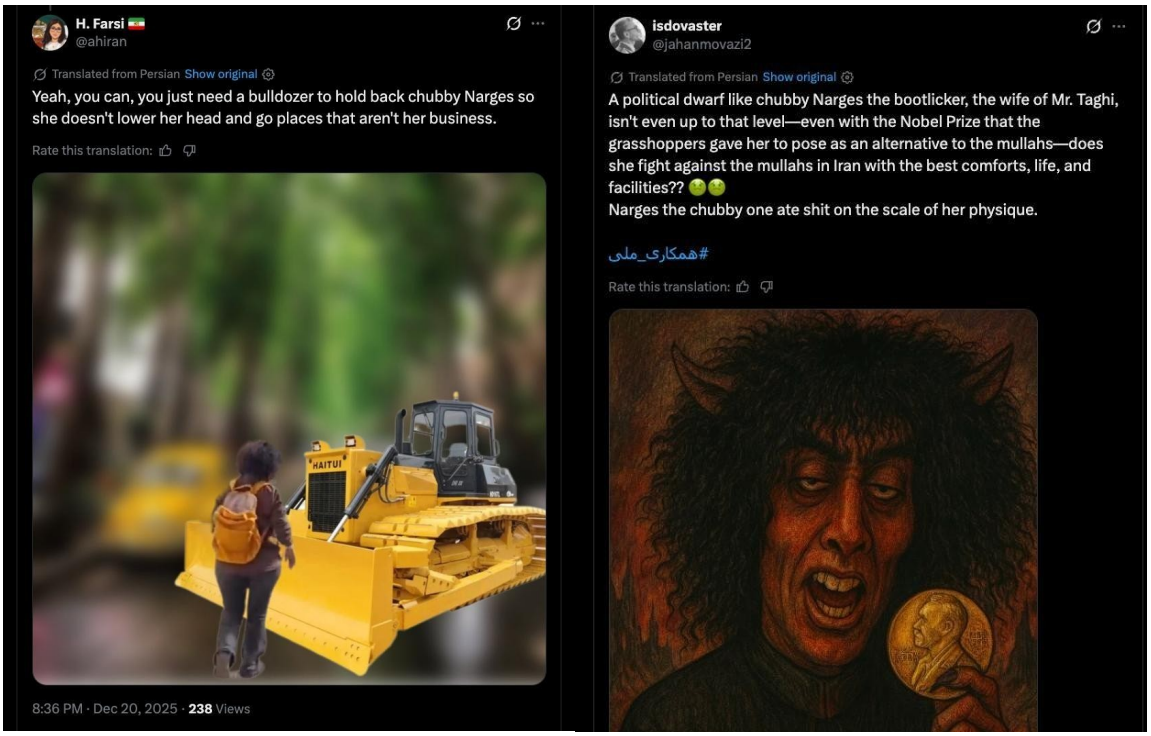
1 Screenshot on the left : A common false narrative used to delegitimize Mohammadi, compares her to other political prisoners, particularly Fatemeh Sepehri. This creates a false dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' prisoners, a distinction that contradicts international human rights law, which guarantees equal rights to all political prisoners. Grok's output repeats this framing, reproducing disinformation as fact.

2 Screenshot on the right : Another example of Grok repeating inputs is its attribution of fabricated quotes to Mohammadi. She never made these statements; they are manufactured, illustrating how AI models digest and reproduce false narratives as fact once they reach high volume online.

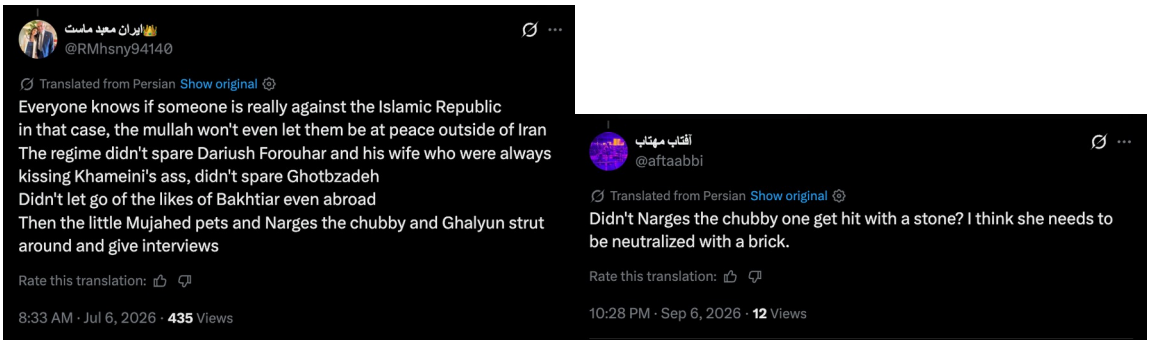


“Chubby Narges” Hashtag and Gender-Based Violence

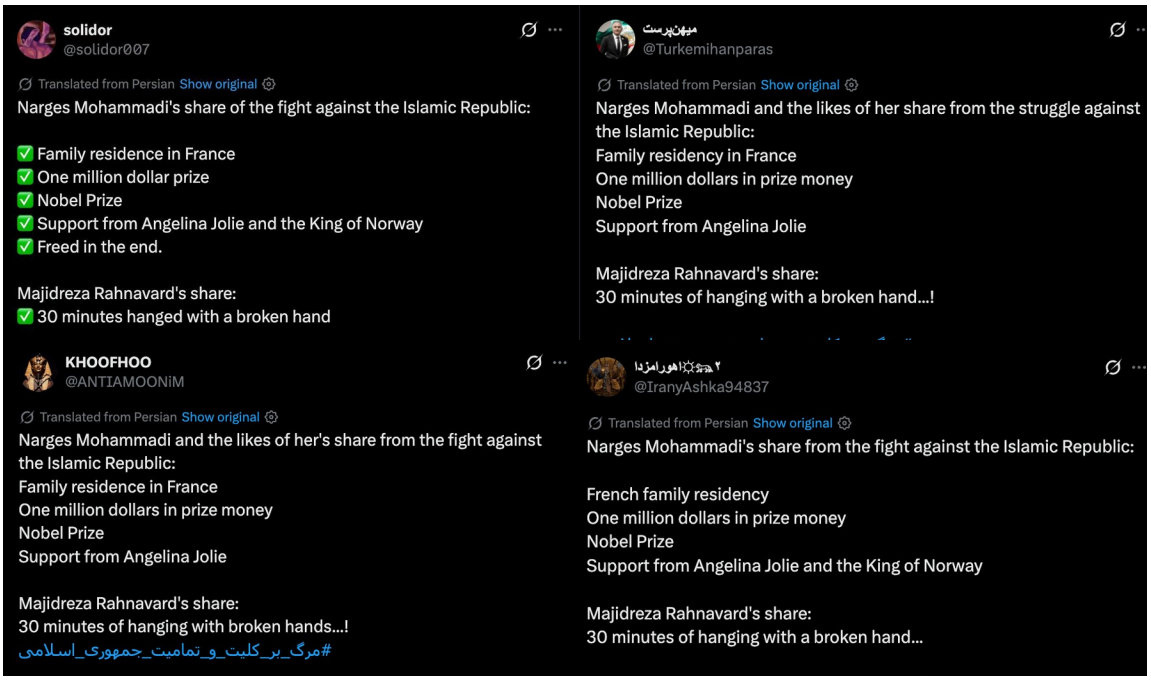
The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” Mohammadi has consistently been targeted with hate speech, body-shaming, gender based, and sexualized insults trying to target her public image as a woman, a mother, daughter, and prominent women's rights defender. AI-generated deepfake images and manipulated visual content dehumanized and sexualized her, while fabricating compromising scenarios falsely connecting her to political groups and figures and seeking to exploit conservative social taboos.



The phrase “Chubby Narges” was used in English and Persian over 4,000 times between August 2, 2015, and September 9, 2026 on X. Since January 2023 alone, Mohammadi has been referred to as “Chubby Narges,” 3,385 times through direct text mentions (3,180), Persian hashtags (169), and Finglish hashtags (Narges Topol) (36). Based on an investigation by **Miaan Group**, the first post using the Persian hashtag #نرگس_تپل (Chubby Narges) appeared on X on October 4, 2023—just two days before Mohammadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This X user is run under a pseudonym with no verified identity. The date the account was created traces back to February 2022. Although the geographic location is set to "Australia," device registration logs (mobile phone) indicate management from within Iran, with location discrepancies likely stemming from VPN usage. The hashtag was subsequently amplified and shared with large following accounts, and most of the accounts that used this hashtag are managed via web browsers rather than mobile apps, atypical for organic users, who predominantly rely on mobile applications, which is generally common among coordinated account management networks. Given these technical complexities, drawing a clear distinction between "organic behavior" and "coordinated operations" is difficult, with a high probability of overlap or mutual exploitation. Other malicious hashtags deployed against Mohammadi, each used thousands of times, include #NargesTheBloodWasher, #ShutUpNarges, and #ExecuteNargesMohammadi (translated from Persian).



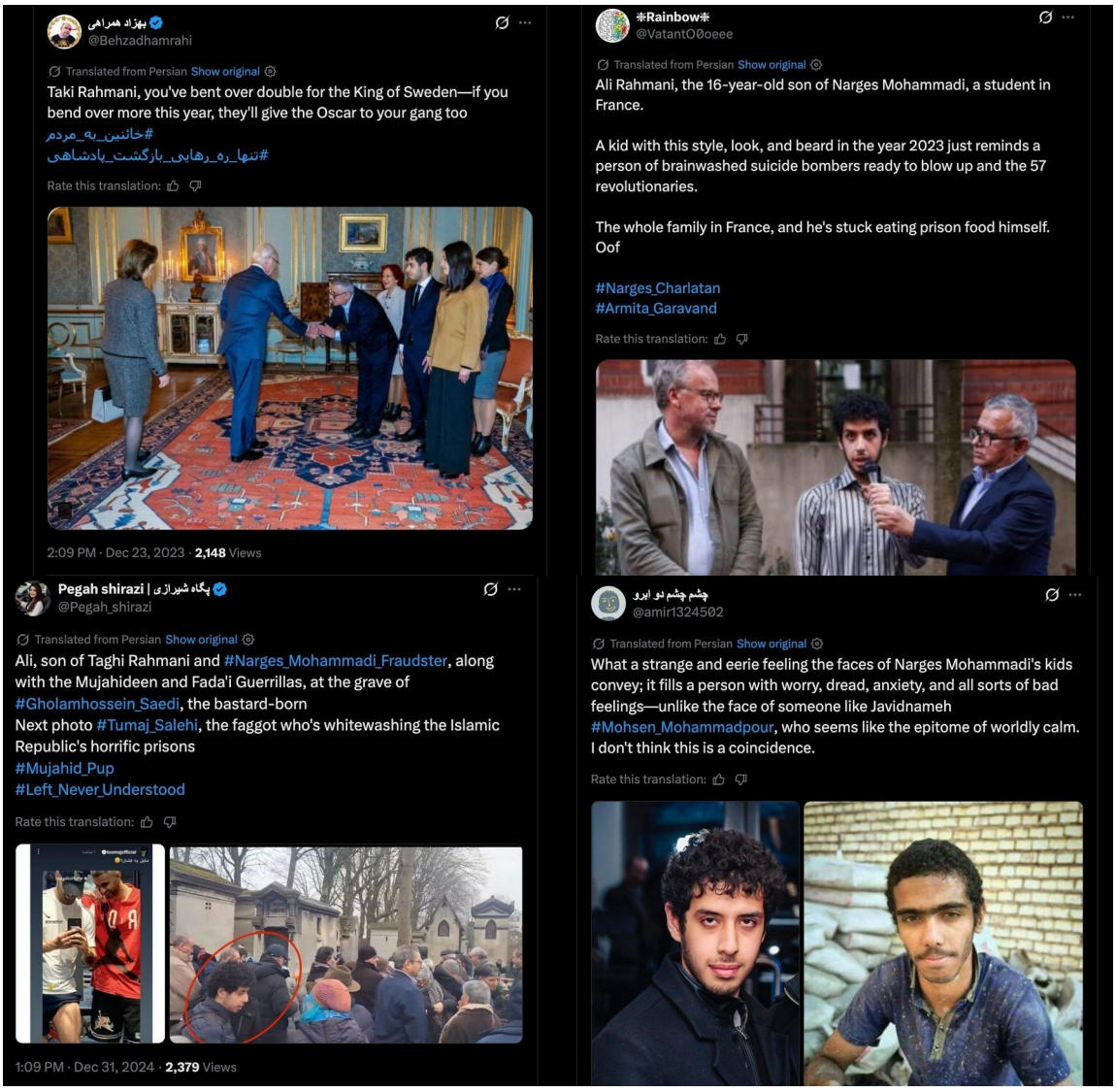
In late 2024 and early 2025, footage of Mohammadi and a group of political prisoners singing and dancing inside the Women's Ward of Tehran's Evin Prison was weaponized in a state-sponsored smear campaign. By pushing the propaganda hashtag #HotelEvin, state-linked networks sought to falsely frame the notorious Evin Prison as a luxury five star hotel that allows dancing to delegitimize Mohammadi's documented testimonies and accounts of torture, human rights violations and sexual harrassment, and to dismiss the denial of medical care to political prisoners. Observations show that accounts activated in this smear campaign also participated in subsequent attacks against Mohammadi. These accounts used repetitive messaging, sharing identical text that falsely claimed her imprisonment was staged and that she received special privileges.



Shortly after, *Mashregh News*—a media outlet closely affiliated with the Islamic Republic authorities and known for state propaganda—published the following: "individuals are now calling for [Mohammadi's] transfer back to Zanjan Prison. With a thorough review of this case and the related disciplinary matters, the Prisons Organization can restore the necessary security and calm to the ward in Evin Prison." The same text was widely republished by other state-aligned outlets.

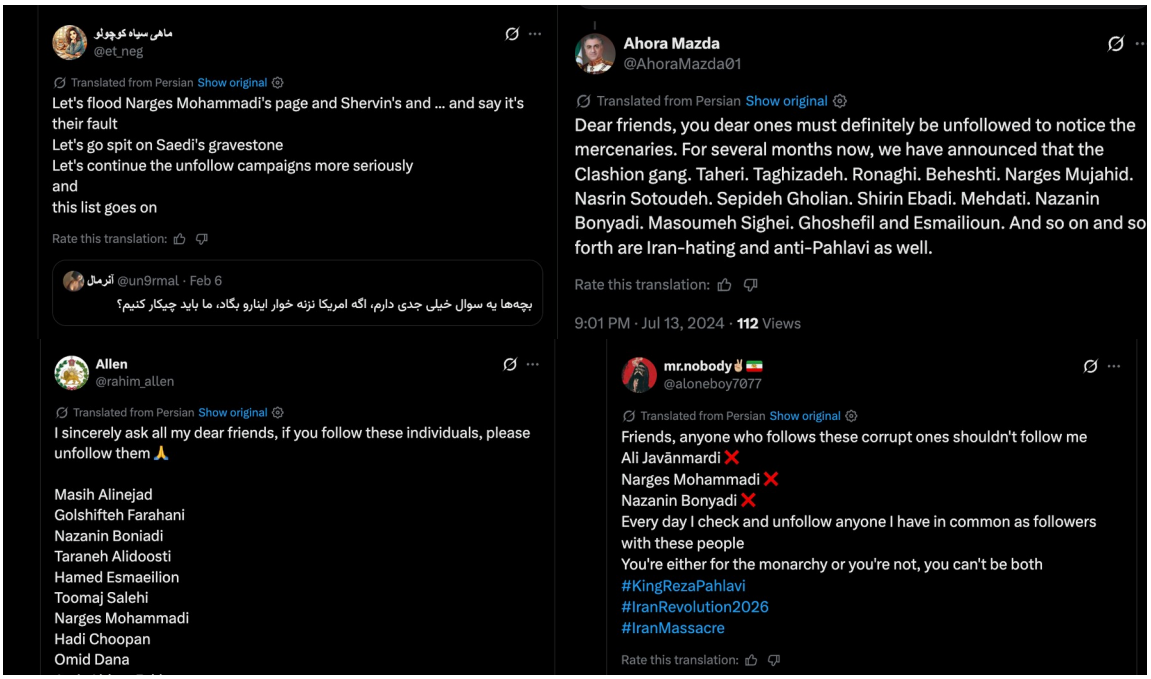
Targeting Family and Support System

To maximize psychological pressure and enforce isolation, the smear campaign also targets Mohammadi's immediate support system including her children, husband, lawyers, extended family, and friends. Her exiled teenage children have faced comments about their appearance alongside false allegations regarding their political views, personal lives, and backgrounds. Her husband, Taghi Rahmani—a political activist, journalist, and former political prisoner who was jailed for 14 years himself—has similarly been subjected to continuous defamation, harassment, and targeted disinformation.



Encouraging Boycott Campaigns

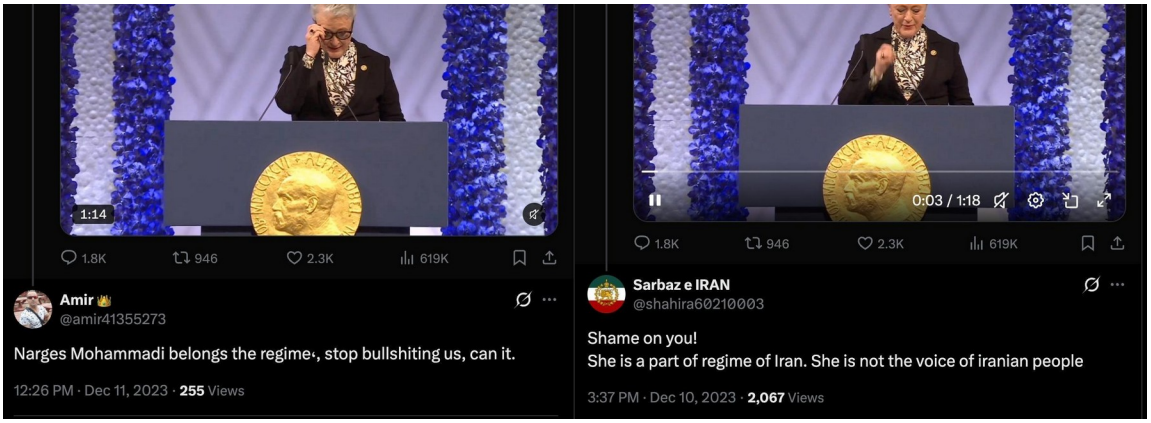
Over the past three years, Iranian human rights defenders—particularly prominent women rights advocates—have been targeted by coordinated "unfollow" campaigns, with Narges Mohammadi consistently among the primary targets. These operations deploy bot networks and automated accounts to artificially inflate and then abruptly drop follower counts, manufacturing a false narrative that public support has eroded. Tracking data indicates these orchestrated unfollows first emerged in November 2023 and spiked during key political moments, often coinciding with her periods of imprisonment and state-sponsored disinformation pushes.



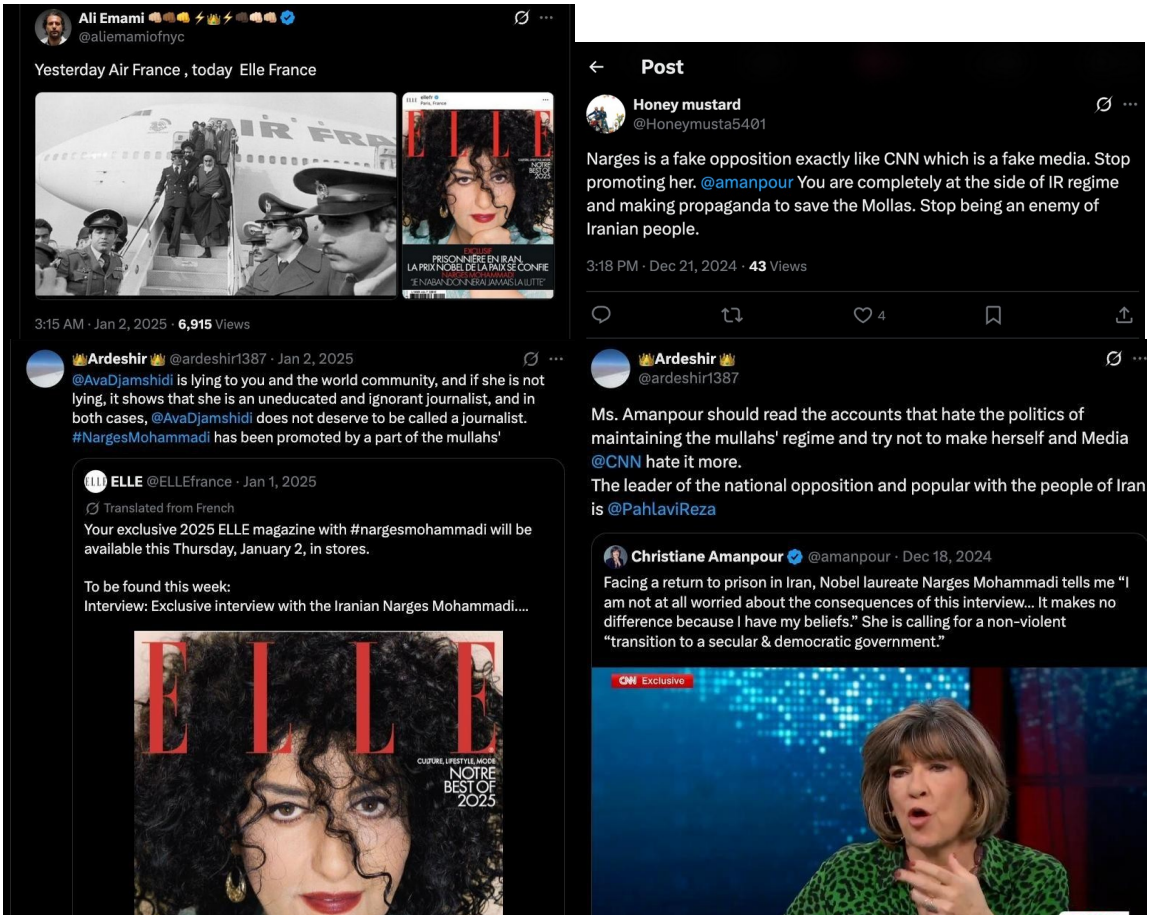
Triggers of attacks

The intensity of digital violence against Mohammadi correlates directly with her international visibility. Attackers exploit these high-profile moments to maximize impact, launching coordinated campaigns to counter international support, control the narrative, and undermine her public standing.

1. **Awards and Honors:** Massive waves of smear posts targeted Mohammadi after she was announced as the Nobel Peace Prize laureate on October 6, 2023. These attacks escalated mass amounts of disinformation on social media in December 2023 when her children accepted the award on her behalf in Oslo while she remained imprisoned in Evin.

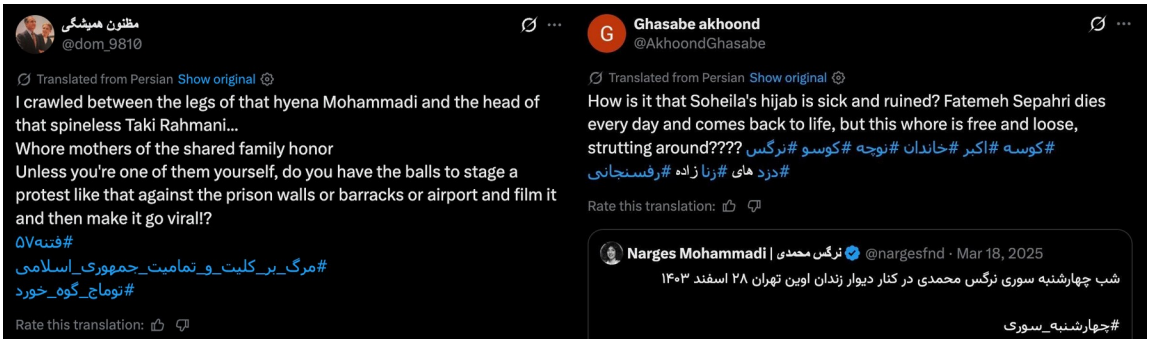


2. **Global Media Outlets:** When major outlets like ELLE and Vogue featured Mohammadi following her temporary sentence suspension in December 2024, threat actors responded with coordinated mass-harassment content online. These attacks, which mostly contained hate speech, cyber bullying, and disinformation, also targeted major news organizations (including CNN and TIME) and their journalists through coordinated comment flooding. For instance, an exclusive CNN interview by Christiane Amanpour on X drew over 1,800 hostile responses aimed at intimidating journalists and deterring outlets from featuring her. A similar surge in online hostility followed her addresses to the Norwegian, French, and Italian Parliaments.



3. **Activism and Protests:** In December 2024, when Mohammadi was transported home from Evin Prison in an ambulance for medical reasons, a video surfaced showing her chanting "Woman, Life, Freedom" without a mandatory hijab. Online smear campaigns targeted her immediately. A significant portion of the hate speech attacks weaponized gender-based violence—heavily sexualizing her while attacking her body shape, clothing, makeup, appearance, and personal life through false accusations. Insulting hashtags were created to distort her prison accounts and medical history.

Similarly, during Chaharshanbe Suri, the ancient Iranian fire festival, in March 2025, Mohammadi performed a symbolic act by burning a noose to call for the end to executions in Iran. Following the release of the video, online attacks resumed almost instantly, repeating familiar fabrications and hostile narrative pushes.



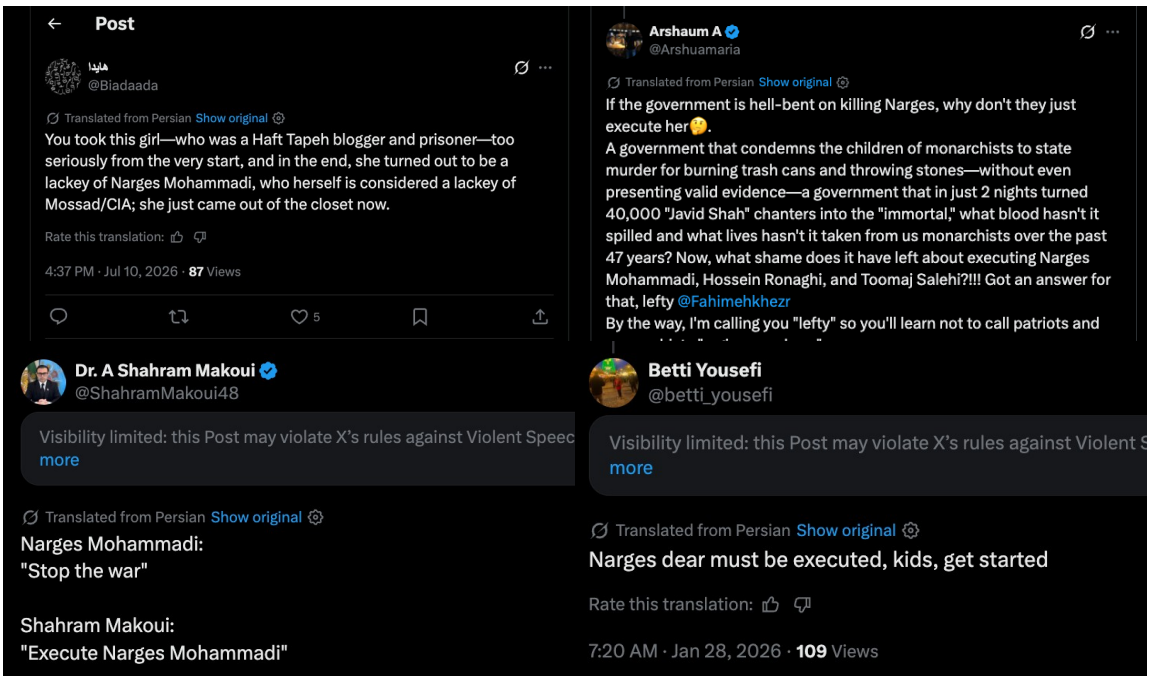
While direct and indirect death threats against Mohammadi have long accompanied her human rights work, threat actors have recently shifted from guarded language to explicit violence. A severe surge in online hostility occurred following the violent arrest of Mohammadi and four other women human rights defenders in Mashhad on December 12, 2025.

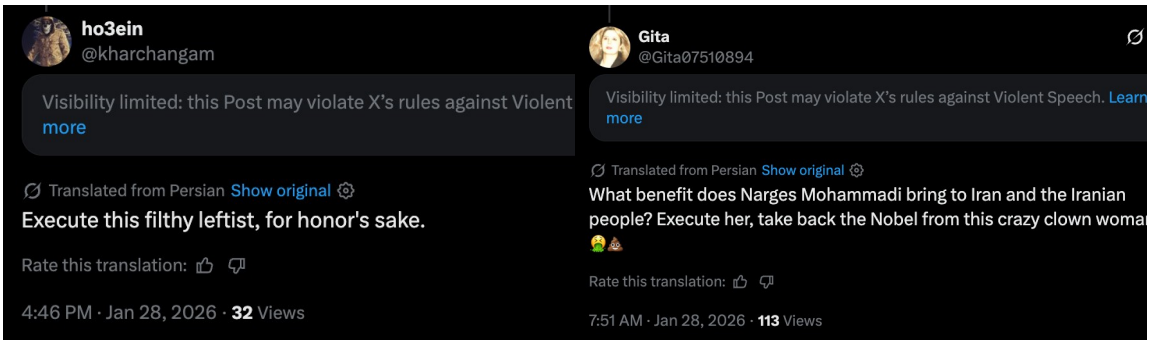
A video verified by the Free Narges Coalition shows Mohammadi speaking at a memorial for human rights lawyer Khosrow Alikordi when a hard object was thrown at her face, while riot police on motorcycles circled the venue to intimidate the attendees. Subsequent footage shows Mohammadi refusing to halt her speech before security forces violently tackled and arrested her. Eyewitnesses described that security forces surrounded and brutally beat her with wooden sticks and batons causing extensive bruising across her body. During the assault, agents issued explicit death threats, telling her,"*Today is the last day of your life*," and promising to "*put a dagger back into her heart*". She was dragged by her hair with enough force to tear sections of her scalp, leaving visible wounds and bald patches.

This physical assault was accompanied by an immediate, coordinated spike in digital hostility. Monitored accounts amplified threats of further violence, propagated gender-based harassment, and disseminated contradictory narratives. Identical mass messaging campaigns sought to downplay state force, circulating false claims that she had bodyguards at the memorial or was not arrested and imprisoned afterwards.

Digital threats soon turned explicitly lethal. On January 28, 2026—shortly after the Free Narges Coalition issued a statement demanding protection for the detained activists, and while Mohammadi was held in solitary confinement without legal access—a campaign emerged calling for her execution. State-aligned networks coordinated under the hashtag #ExecuteNargesMohammadi (#نرگس_محمدی_را_اعدام کنید_), demanding her death.

These threats reflect a deliberate strategy to silence, demoralize, and delegitimize human rights defenders through social media manipulation. By flooding online spaces with violent rhetoric, threat actors seek to induce burnout and force critical voices into self-censorship. Beyond silencing, this digital hostility acts as a tool of distraction—diverting attention from state abuses, obscuring accountability for unlawful detentions, and raising the social cost of public solidarity to isolate activists from international support networks.

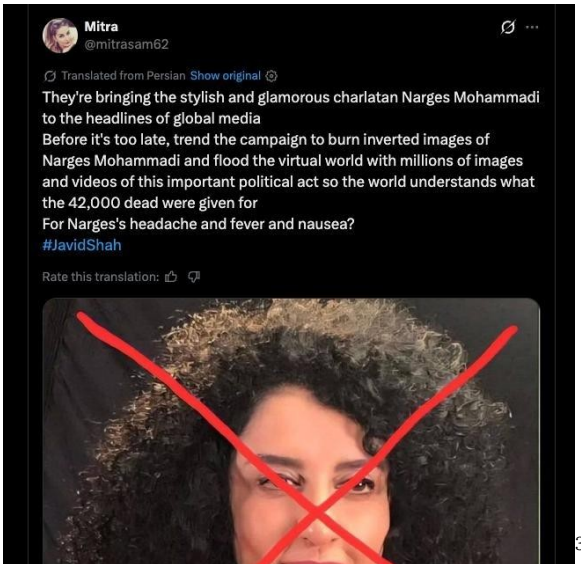




Following the relaunch of the U.S.–Iran war in February 2026, public discourse was further weaponized to frame Mohammadi as a foreign adversary. During this period, monitoring captured explicit calls for physical harm and execution —an escalation that directly aligned with threatening communications Mohammadi reported receiving prior to her December 2025 arrest.

Concerns for her life mounted in late March 2026 following reports that she suffered a severe cardiac incident and lost consciousness in Zanjan Prison. As advocates demanded her immediate hospitalization, hostile accounts launched campaigns to dismiss the medical emergency and demand harsher punitive measures. Online networks continued to advocate for her execution and torture, openly hoping for her death in custody and claiming that only her execution would prove she was not a foreign or IRGC agent.

These attacks persisted even as her health critically deteriorated. When Mohammadi suffered a heart attack and remained unconscious for over an hour on May 4 in Zanjan prison, attackers actively opposed medical care, demanding her continued detention and calling for her execution to permanently extinguish public advocacy campaigns on her behalf.



3

4

5

3 Top right: Instagram comment on Iran International TV report re: Narges Mohammadi being denied hospital transfer. User @sepi_cosmetics: "Great! A lesson to others... I hope she dies bit by bit and suffers until her last breath."

4 Bottom Left: VOA Farsi post on instagram about Mohammadi's horrible detention conditions. Hostile comments by @a_nn_a2026 says: "Execute her and set two young protestors free instead..." and "Death to chubby Narges."

5 Bottom Right: BBC Persian Instagram post on Narges Mohammadi. Comment by @homamoazeni: "Why hasn't she been executed yet???"

Although a temporary sentence suspension enabled her transfer to a Tehran medical facility on May 10, 2026, digital harassment has continued unabated. Crucially, these online campaigns do not exist in a vacuum. Coordinated digital hostility serves to manufacture the illusion of public consensus, which the Iranian authorities then exploits to justify real-world repression and state-sanctioned violence under the guise of responding to public demand.

Reviews and recommendations from human rights organizations and independent human rights and digital security specialists

Unaddressed online violence rapidly escalates into physical harm. This reality underscores the urgent need for platform accountability, proactive content moderation, and international protection mechanisms. Technology companies—including Meta and X—must implement transparent, effective safeguards to protect human rights defenders and journalists, particularly women, from gender-based abuse, state-sponsored trolling, and coordinated smear campaigns.

"*Repressive governments have always used every tool at their disposal to manufacture legitimacy and target those who demand accountability*," said Mohammed Al-Maskati, Digital Security Helpline Director at Access Now. "*As Mohammadi's case confirms, technology amplifies these efforts. Access Now has supported her team to contain digital attacks ranging from direct death threats and doxing to relentless psychological intimidation. Attackers weaponize gender-based violence—including threats of sexual abuse and rape—to silence her. Lacking effective safeguards, platforms allow these attacks to bypass detection, artificially expand their reach, and censor defenders. Mohammadi's persistence endures through her moral clarity, ensuring her voice continues to reach millions.*"

"*The goal is not to convince the public that Narges is a bad person*," noted Mahsa Alimardani, Associate Director of the Technology Threats & Opportunities program at WITNESS. "*It is to make standing with her costly and her suffering undeniable.*"

Alimardani emphasized that coordinated campaigns rely on familiar tactics: repeating false claims until they gain traction, flooding comment sections to manufacture a false consensus, and deploying gendered abuse to recast women activists as immoral. "*The accusations are often contradictory because their purpose is not persuasion, but confusion.*"

The dynamic around Mohammadi illustrates how digital suppression creates a broad chilling effect across civil society, warning allies of the risks of public dissent. Citing the December 2025 memorial for human rights lawyer Khosrow Alikordi, Alimardani noted that WITNESS's Deepfakes Rapid Response Force analyzed videos from the event where Mohammadi was heckled before her arrest. While forensic tools could not conclusively determine digital manipulation, eyewitness accounts corroborated the hostile environment, demonstrating how contested media alters the public narrative during critical political moments.

"*The digital narrative shaped the atmosphere in which a Nobel Laureate was publicly heckled and seized on the same day*," Alimardani said. She stressed that the core issue is not an absence of platform policies, but a failure to treat coordinated harassment, image-based abuse, and incitement as an immediate human rights emergency. Rather than relying on unreliable automated detection, platforms must prioritize transparency regarding inauthentic networks, establish rapid protection for targeted activists, and adhere to international standards on incitement. Furthermore, governments and the UN must establish binding regulations rather than leaving enforcement to corporate discretion. "*Sustained attacks on human rights defenders should be treated as a rights emergency, not a moderation backlog.*"

Front Line Defenders, an international human rights organization working on the protection of human rights defenders at risk, highlights that Mohammadi's case is emblematic, illustrating how women human rights defenders are at heightened risk online and are disproportionately affected. Women HRDs experience a distinct and intensified form of digital violence rooted in gender, sexuality, and intersecting forms of discrimination. These coordinated attacks are designed to exploit social norms, identities, and existing power structures. They are tailored to resonate with cultural expectations and prejudices, making the attacks more credible and damaging, with the aim of discrediting and isolating women human rights defenders.

The consequences can be severe and far-reaching. The psychological impact of these attacks can result in trauma, anxiety, a persistent fear of surveillance, and self-censorship. In many cases, these pressures force women human rights defenders to withdraw from public spaces altogether, undermining both their safety and their ability to carry out their human rights work.

These risks are further exacerbated by shifts in major technology companies away from diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) commitments, including reductions or complete dismantling of DEI teams and hate speech moderation capacity. As a result, safeguards have weakened, allowing harmful content and coordinated harassment to persist online.

"*In recent years, tech companies have cut resources dedicated to working with civil society organizations that defend freedom of expression,*" said Amir Rashidi, Director of Digital Security and Rights at Miaan Group. "*These layoffs make it increasingly difficult to support activists. We need stronger, broader collaboration between tech companies and digital rights organizations.*"

"*Democratic governments also have an important role to play in protecting Iranian human rights defenders like Mohammadi. They should establish the necessary legal and regulatory groundwork to facilitate such partnerships and encourage technology companies to engage meaningfully with civil society organizations focused on Iran. Technology companies should also regularly update their policies to reflect the regional contexts of the countries in which they operate, in this case, Iran. There are numerous cases where efforts to protect freedom of expression and democracy have failed because these companies' policies and approaches were not sufficiently adapted to those specific contexts. As a result, freedom of expression and democracy defenders have been left without adequate protection and support,*" added Rashidi.

Recommendations:

Social media platforms, governments and international human rights bodies have a critical role to play in protecting Mohammadi and other human rights defenders and media professionals online. We call on these platforms to:

- Human-Led Rapid Response: Establish accessible, human-staffed emergency channels for human rights defenders and journalists in high-risk zones, avoiding sole reliance on automated algorithms.

- Context-Aware Moderation: Invest in moderation teams fluent in regional languages, political contexts, and subtle forms of state-sponsored harassment.

-Disrupt Inauthentic Behavior: Actively track and dismantle coordinated bot networks, targeted unfollow operations, and state-backed disinformation campaigns.

- Platform Transparency: Publish clear data on coordinated network takedowns and maintain consistent enforcement against gender-based violence and incitement to physical harm.

What we ask of Governments and International Bodies:

- Binding Regulatory Frameworks: Establish legal frameworks that enforce platform accountability and require tech companies to maintain safety mechanisms for at-risk users.

- Contextualized Localized Policies: Encourage tech platforms to update their policy implementation according to regional political and social realities, ensuring civil society voices are protected rather than silenced.

Acknowledgments

We extend our sincere gratitude to the independent human rights and digital security experts from **Miaan Group, the Digital Security Helpline at Access Now**, **WITNESS** and researchers associated with the **Citizen Lab** (acting in an independent capacity), who reviewed this document in collaboration with the Free Narges Coalition.