Iranian agents blackmailed BBC reporter with 'naked photo' threats
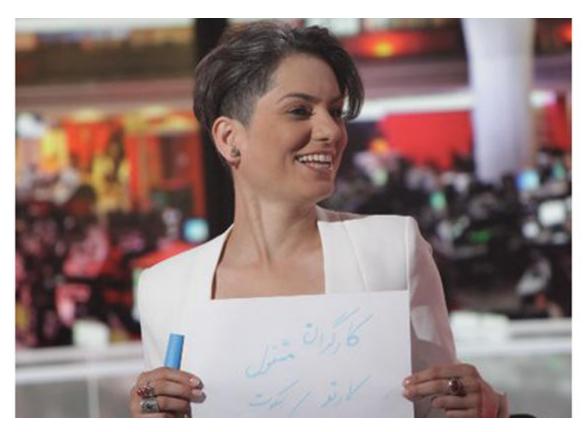
Elise Knutsen   November 18, 2017

LONDON: Iranian agents blackmailed a BBC Persian journalist by threatening to publish revealing photos of her as part of a wider campaign against the British media outlet, staff at the broadcaster told Arab News.

New details emerged on Saturday about alleged harassment of BBC Persian reporters' family members and loved ones at the hands of the Iranian security services.

Negin Shiraghaei, a BBC Persian anchor, told The Times that her elderly father, who has stage-four cancer, had been interrogated by the security services. Rana Rahimpour, a presenter, also said that her parents were brought in for questioning on multiple occasions by Iranian authorities.

Another BBC Persian presenter told Arab News she had been blackmailed by Iranian agents, who threatened to spread rumors about her sex life and compromising pictures. The tawdry tactics had also been used against men, the reporter said, declining to be named due to security concerns. A fake news story about the sexual misconduct of another BBC Persian presenter had been widely disseminated by Iranian agents, she added.

"If they want to make women silenced, they just threaten, (saying) 'OK, we are publishing stories about your sex life'," the reporter said.

The reporter told Arab News that Iranian agents had raided her family's home in Tehran,

confiscating a number of cameras and laptops, and arresting a family member.

That's when the menacing Facebook messages started.

"I got many threatening messages on Facebook and social media from different people saying that (a family member) was arrested and 'we found many photos of you — if you don't cooperate with the Iranian intelligence we are going to (publish them)," she told Arab News.

The journalist said she did not know what, if any, intimate photos the Iranian intelligence services have of her, but decried the ploy as "very dirty."

The smear campaign was intended as leverage to pressure her into resigning from her job as a reporter with BBC Persian, she said. Failing that, she said, the intelligence services wanted her to provide them information about the British news organization.

Blackmail is just part of a string of tactics the Iranian authorities have allegedly used to pressure BBC Persian employees. Family members and friends of BBC Persian staffers, including the elderly and ill, have been arrested and interrogated, according to reports.

According to an internal survey of 96 BBC Persian employees, 44 had been accused of sexual impropriety while the vast majority, 86, reported being harassed. Almost half said their parents had been questioned by authorities in Iran.

Iran has ratcheted up its campaign against BBC Persian reporters and their families since the contested 2009 presidential election.

While BBC Persian is technically banned in Iran, the broadcasts draw listeners eager to hear news updates that have not been filtered through the regime's official channels. According to the BBC, 13 million Iranians tune into the marquee World Service broadcast despite the official injunction.

Last month, the Iranian government initiated a criminal probe into many of the journalists working for BBC Persian in London, accusing them of conspiracy against the country's national security. Over the summer, the Iranian judiciary froze the assets of more than 150 BBC Persian staffers because of their work with the British broadcaster.

The experiences of the BBC Persian staffers and their families — who have been subjected to violence, threats or indignities by the Iranian authorities — have been decried by the BBC. Tony Hall, director general of the BBC, has called the campaign an "unprecedented collective punishment of journalists who are simply doing their jobs."

Officials at the Iranian Embassy in London did not immediately respond to requests for comment.