

Arbitrary Detention



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Iran Alert (UPDATE): No reason provided for arrest of Italian journalist in Tehran, per December 29 reports; points to risk of arbitrary detentions in Iran

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Current Situation:

- The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [stated](#) that the journalist, Cecilia Sala, had traveled to Iran to carry out “journalistic services” and has been in detention since December 19.
- Sala was reportedly detained while doing journalistic work in Tehran.
- Il Foglio, the newspaper Sala is working for, publicly criticized Iran for her detention, stating that “Tehran has chosen to challenge everything the West universally holds sacred: our freedom.”
- Italian officials noted that they were engaged in efforts to secure Sala’s release.
- As of the time of writing, Iran has not released any statements confirming or denying the arrest.

Source: [Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)

Assessments & Forecast:

1. Iran has often been accused of jailing foreigners and dual nationals in what human rights groups have described as “hostage diplomacy,” employed by Tehran to gain leverage against Western countries during times of particularly heightened tensions. This was seen in [September 2023](#), when Washington released frozen Iranian funds to facilitate the release of five US-Iranian citizens detained in Iran. Reported arbitrary arrests also extend to journalists, with some NGOs focusing on journalism suggesting that Iran is the world’s “sixth-worst jailer of journalists,” with at least 17 cases being recorded until the beginning of 2024.
2. Sala’s arrest comes amid heightened tension between Italy and Iran, which may have increased Iran’s motivation to conduct the current arrest. This is based on the arrest of an Iranian national in Italy at the request of the US earlier in the month, which the US Department of Justice revealed on December 16. The individual, Mohammad Abedini, was detained for his suspected association with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and his involvement in the illegal procurement and shipping of US drone navigation technology to Iran. This technology facilitated an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attack that killed US service personnel in Jordan in [January 2024](#). In this context, while the reasons and details for Sala’s arrest remain undisclosed by Iran, it is plausible that the arrest was politically motivated and constitutes an effort to exact a price from Italy for cooperating with the US and subsequently arresting and extraditing Abedini. A similar instance was recorded in [January](#) when a Swedish national was detained following Stockholm’s earlier arrest of a former Iranian prison official charged with war crimes. Such instances of arbitrary arrests are also likely utilized by Tehran to demonstrate to other members of the international community that actively collaborating with the US and/or hindering Iranian interests could result in a backlash that will threaten these countries’ nationals. This threat is likely elevated in cases that involve IRGC associates, as the body constitutes the superior military force in Iran with extensive authorities and capabilities to conduct such extrajudicial arrests.
3. Furthermore, one of Sala’s last social media posts before her arrest noted that she had returned to Iran to chronicle the significant changes experienced by the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” members in the previous year. The journalist mentioned former Foreign Affairs’ spokesman Nasser Kanaani’s involvement in cultivating regional relationships, noting that the “galaxy of militias” allied to Tehran had largely collapsed. While the journalist avoided openly criticizing Iran, the reporting on extensive losses of Iran’s allies may have further prompted her censure. This likely stems from Tehran’s interest in continuing to project itself as a regional power while downplaying the narrative that its regional allies suffered tremendous losses in their involvement in the Israel-Hamas war. This suggests another area of contention that could have motivated Iranian authorities to detain Sala, in addition to her association with an Italian newspaper that is considered right-wing and presumably anti-Iranian. This would further highlight Tehran’s proclivity to closely monitor journalists’ arrivals and work within its territory, compounding the risks foreign journalists face, especially if they engage in journalistic work that is politically loaded and perceived by Tehran to undermine its official narratives and discourse.
4. **FORECAST:** The assessed political motivations for Sala’s arrest will likely strain the diplomatic efforts to bring about her release without Italian or US concessions. This, in turn, will strain bilateral relations between Rome and Tehran. Overall, foreign nationals remain at significant risk of arbitrary detention by Iranian authorities, and similar arrests cannot be ruled out in the coming weeks and months.

Recommendations:

1. Western nationals are advised to avoid nonessential travel to Iran due to the risk of detention. For any essential travel, maintain a low profile due to prevailing negative sentiment toward the West and avoid the vicinity of any protests.
2. Those traveling to Iran should anticipate prolonged questioning by border officials. Cooperate with all security officials and respond to questioning in a respectable and calm manner. Iranian authorities are liable to rigorously question travelers to the country regarding the purpose of their visit and scrutinize their personal items, especially electronic devices that could be used for documenting events or surveillance.

3. Refrain from taking photos in prohibited areas, including government or military installations, as this may lead to detention. If unsure if photography is permitted, look for a sign or ask a local. Err on the side of caution if in doubt.
4. Both in-person and on social media, avoid discussing domestic and geopolitical developments pertaining to Iran, anti-government protests, Iran's nuclear program, tensions between Iran, the US, Gulf countries, and Israel, treatment of minority groups and opposition activists, the activities of the IRGC, and the policies and ideology of the Islamic Republic and the Supreme Leader. This is due to the potential for detention on national security charges.
5. Do not take photographs of sensitive or state-linked infrastructure, including IRGC-linked facilities, Iranian military or government buildings, and installations linked to Iran's nuclear activities.
6. Be advised that authorities may monitor communications from hotels and other facilities frequented by foreigners and that internet access may be limited.
7. In the event that embassy services are required, it is advised to check the operational status of pertinent embassies and consulates. Consular services for US citizens are provided through the auspices of the Swiss Embassy in Tehran.