

# EU concerned over detention of human rights lawyer in Iran

Thursday 16 May 2019, by [KAMALI DEHGHAN Saeed](#) (Date first published: 15 August 2018).

**Nasrin Sotoudeh faces charges such as espionage as Tehran continues to stifle dissent**



Iranian human rights Nasrin Sotoudeh after being released from her first three-year detention in 2013. Photograph: Behrouz Mehri/AFP/Getty Images

The European Union has expressed serious concerns about the continuing detention of [Nasrin Sotoudeh](#), the prominent Iranian human rights lawyer who is serving a five-year jail sentence.

Sotoudeh [was arrested in June](#) amid a crackdown on defence lawyers representing cases deemed sensitive to the country's national security.

Sotoudeh's arrest comes amid an exceptionally tense atmosphere in Iran, where authorities are stifling dissent as they scramble to contain weeks of [street protests over economic grievances](#), environmental issues and a lack of political and social freedoms.

Sotoudeh, 55, is facing a torrent of charges, including espionage, after arguing a string of cases involving [women arrested for defying hijab rules](#) by taking off their headscarves in public and waving them on a stick.

At least 29 women have been arrested over the protests that sparked a nationwide debate about the rules that oblige women to wear head-to-toe coverings in public.

"My client was taken to prison some time ago based on a verdict that was issued in absentia," Sotoudeh's lawyer, Payam Derafshan, told the state news agency on Tuesday. "An [initial] indictment specified the charges against her as spreading propaganda against the ruling establishment and insulting the supreme leader, but the branch 28 of the revolutionary court has issued a verdict based on the charge of espionage."

The Iranian judiciary, which acts with impunity in the absence of any public oversight, has been opaque about Sotoudeh. It is not clear if she has already been found guilty of the newly emerged charges of espionage, whether they are part of her current five-year sentence or if they are merely new accusations.

In 2010, [Sotoudeh was sentenced to 11 years in jail](#) for charges including "acting against the national security" and "spreading propaganda against the state", but her original sentence was later

commuted to six years by an appeals court. She was released in September 2013, a few months after the first election of President Hassan Rouhani, after serving three years.

Sotoudeh's husband, Reza Khandan, said: "Whenever the authorities think that keeping my wife in prison is too costly for them – meaning that the public is becoming sensitive about it – they release her, and whenever they think she's becoming harmful for them outside jail, they take her back in."

According to the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), at least seven human rights lawyers have been detained, charged or summoned. Among the other lawyers targeted is Abdolfattah Soltani, who is serving a 13-year sentence. He is currently on furlough to mourn the death of his young daughter.

"Iran is imprisoning lawyers for doing their job and depriving its citizens of one of the most basic human rights — the right to counsel of choice," said CHRI's executive director, Hadi Ghaemi.

Sotoudeh was publicly critical of new rules that dictated only 20 state-approved lawyers were allowed to represent cases deemed important to national security.

Rouhani, who ran on a pro-reform campaign, has been accused of shifting towards the hardliners as internal turmoil, exacerbated by renewed US economic sanctions, [is putting his government under unprecedented pressure](#). The arrests of lawyers appear to have been spearheaded by Rouhani's ministry of intelligence.

The new political climate has strengthened hardliners, including the conservative-led judiciary, which is behind the arrests of journalists, dervishes, student activists and environmentalists.

A number of environmental activists have been imprisoned on security charges for several months. These include Amirhossein Khaleghi, Houman Jokar, Taher Ghadirian, Sam Rajabi, Niloufar Bayani, Sepideh Kashani, Morad Tahbaz and Abdolreza Kouhpayeh.

Dozens of student activists have also been sentenced to lengthy terms in recent months, according to an MP.

Sotoudeh is being held in Tehran's Evin prison alongside at least 16 other women also held on security charges, including British-Iranian [Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#) and Narges Mohammadi, who has recently been transferred to hospital due to her poor health condition.

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