

Crime against Humanity?

Written by Alison Assiter

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ALISON ASSITER, DEC 11 2016

An event took place in Iran in the 1980s that is receiving some attention at the present time, 2016, because of the reported release of an audio tape. According to the Washington Post – one of several reports – in an article published on August 12, 2016, an audio file was posted on a website by supporters of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, leader-in-waiting in the 1980's after Khomeini. According to this file, he was a critic of a large wave of executions – several thousand, the actual number is disputed – of political prisoners that took place in Evin Prison and other places during this period. Montazeri is reported as saying, in 1988:

In my opinion, the greatest crime committed during the Islamic Republic, for which history will condemn us, has been committed by you (his fellow Ayatollahs). Killing is the wrong way to resist against a thought, an idea. They have one thought, one idea. Responding to a process, a logic — even a faulty logic — with killing will solve nothing. It will make it worse.[1]

It is important to note that Khomeini is said to have issued a *fatwa* at this time that explicitly targeted the opposition movement said to have been the largest at the time, the Mujahadin el Khalk, as enemies of God and as condemned to execution.

Additionally, United Nations Special Representatives to Iran issued regular reports documenting allegations of sexual violence and rape in prisons. In a 1987 report,

the Special Representative noted that six sympathizers of the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran testified about experiencing and witnessing many forms of torture, including sexual abuse, in Iranian prisons. One woman, Mina Vatani, reported that she witnessed seventy persons being executed in Evin prison in early 1982, and that the victims included pregnant women and women who had been raped before being executed.

This reported rape and massacre may have all the hallmarks of a crime against humanity. It involved the mass rape and attempted extermination of a group of people, not on the basis of ethnicity or race, but on the basis of political affiliation.

This event deserves to be widely reported. Why then has it not been widely reported? Why has it taken the publication of an audio tape in recent months to draw some attention to an event that ought to be recognised as a crime against humanity? My initial rhetorical response is this: is it because the leaders at all levels of the organisation, whose members were raped and killed, the Mujahedin -e Khalq, (MEK) are women, that their testimony is often misreported and undermined?

To substantiate this rhetorical point I refer to a brilliant piece of writing by Sara Hassani. In her article *Maniacal slaves: normative misogyny and female resistors of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Iran*, Hassani quotes Cynthia Enloe, 'warfare does not stop the gendered clock'.

Hassani outlines the formation of the MEK and the back -ground ideology that shaped their political thinking.

In 1982, the government in Tehran led an expansive effort to curtail women's rights, attacking their essentialized

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worth and dignity through the Law of Retribution, which set the official juridical “value of a woman’s life [and testimony] [at] only half that of a man’s (Hassani, quoting Tohidi 1991, 254).

In other words, (and these are mine and not Hassani’s) gender apartheid was and is a fundamental principle of the Iranian regime. At the heart of the regime in Iran lies the principle of *Velayat-el faqih*, although there are different interpretations of what this means. In the words of Khomeini,

the role of a vali is like that of a child’s guardian. There is no difference between the guardian of a nation and the guardian of a minor. Their duties are the same. (Khomeini, 1979, quoted in Chitsaz, Sarvnaz, (2000) *Two Decades of Oppression and Resistance, in Mysogyny in Power: Iranian Women challenge two Decades of Mullahs’ Gender Apartheid*, Oise, France: National Council of Resistance of Iran, Committee on Women).

Hassani writes:

Iran’s government had established systemic and institutionalized misogyny; appropriate, then, that its archrivals would espouse radical feminism. MEK’s “reversal” of gendered responsibilities sees women occupying the helm throughout all levels of the organization, including the military. (Hassani, 3)

Hassani then proceeds to deconstruct press coverage of the MEK, coverage from the western world as well as from within Iran. Covering eight distinct news outlets between 2003 and 2013, Hassani argues that the vast majority of press coverage of the MEK undermines the testimony of individual women within the organization. She invokes the tropes of ‘nurturing deviancy’ ‘whores’ ‘monsters’ and ‘maniacal slaves’ to describe ways in which the testimony of individual women from the organization is distorted and undermined.

The following is a quote from Hassani of the coverage of one woman’s testimony:

One of the most disturbing encounters I had in Ashraf (the ‘home’ of the MEK at the time) was with Mahnaz Bazazi, a commander who had been with the Mujahedeen for 25 years. I met her in the Ashraf hospital. Bazazi was probably on drugs, but that didn’t explain the natural intoxication she was radiating, despite – or perhaps because – she had just had her legs amputated after an American missile slammed into the warehouse she was guarding. The doctor told me he never heard her complain. “Even in this way, she’s confronting the Mullahs,” he said. Bazazi interrupted him. “This is not me personally,” she said in a soft voice. “These are the ideas of the Mujahedeen. It’s true I lost my legs, but my struggle will continue because I have a wish – the freedom of my country.” At the foot of her bed, surrounded by candles, stood a large framed photograph of Maryam in a white dress and blue flowered head scarf. (Hassani, quoting Rubin 2003, 5)

Hassani continues:

Likening Bazazi’s image with that of a sedated psychiatric patient, the author blithely suggests that the subject had a loose grip on reality. This draws the autonomy of Bazazi’s testimony into question, implying that she is incapable of rationalizing her own involvement in political resistance. Casting her stated political aspirations in the shadows of an otherwise simple display of iconography, the author sensationalizes her role as a victim of indoctrination. One cannot help but wonder whether this same imagery could have been legitimated if the subject of Rubin’s reporting had been a man hospitalized in a war zone? (Hassani, op.cit).

One reason, I am speculating, then, for the lack of coverage of the reported carnage that took place in Iran in the 1980’s may be the huge disregard, amongst the vast majority of press outlets over a long period of time, of the actual testimony of individual women in the MEK, and the substitution, instead, of constructed tropes of woman-hood that may stem more from the imagination of the journalist, than from the MEK itself. Is it not, to be fair to the journalist, in the above case, hard for many of us, to imagine women enduring the level of pain outlined in Bazazi’s case, and retaining her political commitment?

But there may also be a second reason for the lack of coverage of these events. Meredith Tax, in her book *Double*

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Bind, makes the point that there has been an association, amongst left leaning groups in the west, who might otherwise have been expected to publicize matters such as this, of criticism of the USA, with support for 'enemies' of the USA, like Iran. In the contemporary context, does this perhaps explain Jeremy Corbyn's appearances on the Iranian state news agency, Press TV? He is reported to have been paid on several different occasions by Press TV for speaking to them. One recent account appeared in the following source, and Corbyn has been publicly challenged for his actions.

Speaking about his actions, Corbyn said:

I presented other programmes in which I was able to raise a number of human rights issues, not just in Iran but other countries as well – and the money I was paid, which wasn't an enormous amount actually, went on my constituency office.

But then he goes on to applaud: "the inclusivity, the tolerance and the acceptance of other faiths, other traditions, and other ethnic groupings within Iran".

In 2014, Corbyn was invited to speak at a seminar "to commemorate the auspicious anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran". Corbyn's topic was: "The Case for Iran".

I document this example, not to undermine Corbyn in particular, but to indicate that his views represent a commonplace in certain sections of the left. Might this kind of view then not constitute a further reason for the relative lack of reporting of the events described above?

The events outlined in this article are not merely of historical interest. According to Amnesty International, in a report from 2015, Iran

is believed to have executed' 694 people between the 1st January and the 15th July, 2015. This constitutes the regime carrying out the equivalent of three executions per day. This rate of execution comes at a time when many countries have ceased to use the death penalty altogether. Amongst those executed have been Kurdish political prisoners and Sunni Muslims. Iran is one of three countries (excluding China) and including Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to have carried out 90% of the total number of executions for the year 2015.

Recognising that the events described constitute a crime against humanity, then, it is important not only in order to give an accurate picture of a historical event, but also to raise awareness of the fact that crimes on a lesser scale are being committed on a daily basis by a significant state in the Middle East.

Notes

[1] He was referring to those opposing the Iranian leadership at the time.

About the author:

Alison Assiter is Professor of Feminist Theory at UWE, Bristol, the author of a number of books and articles, including *Kierkegaard*, *Eve and Metaphors of Birth*, and a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Dissent*.