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ROUNDTABLE: WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDURING CRISIS

## Politics of Vengeance in Iranian Diaspora Communities

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The death of the young Kurdish Iranian woman, Mahsa Jina Amini, on September 16, 2022 following her arrest by Iran's now-suspended Gasht-i Irshad (guidance patrol or morality police) for apparent lax conformity to the Islamic dress code ignited protests across Iran. The protests, known as Women, Life, Freedom (*Zan, Zendeḡi, Azadi*) quickly spread to Iranian diaspora communities across North America, Europe, and Australia. Initially, diasporic Iranians organized their protests to support and amplify their compatriots' calls for justice. As the protests continued in Iran and the demands for change grew louder, some members of the Iranian diaspora shifted their focus from the Islamic Republic to the public shaming of Iranians living outside Iran for their purported support of the Iranian regime. Some of the tactics employed by those engaged in public humiliations of suspected regime supporters recalled Gasht-i Irshad's methods of trapping and accosting individuals for perceived infractions. These public confrontations were aimed at isolating, shaming, and silencing perceived allies of the Islamic Republic and, by extension, denouncing the regime for its abrogation of women's and human rights. I refer to this phenomenon among diasporic Iranians as *gasht-i intiqām*, roving avengers, which reflects a frustration with the absence of justice in Iran and targets purported proxies for the regime. There have been many instances and types of denunciations aimed at silencing and ostracizing individuals, academics, and institutions. As Daniel Block points out in his analysis, "The attacks overwhelmingly target women, most notably in North America and Europe. The victims include gender equality activists, journalists, foreign policy analysts and a historian, each of whom has been accused of colluding with the authoritarian Islamist regime in Tehran." Block further points out that many of the attacks are anonymous or originate from fake social media accounts. The common denominator he finds among those who target individuals is opposition to "Western-Iranian diplomacy or reporting information that adds subtlety to the debate over how the United States and its allies should handle the Islamic Republic."<sup>1</sup> Often those deemed regime collaborators are Iranian American individuals, journalists, or institutions that supported the 2015 the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, otherwise known as the nuclear deal.

The anonymity, lack of accountability, and retaliatory nature of these attacks instill fear and produce a chilling effect in the Iranian communities abroad, as do the Islamic Republic's own propagandist efforts outside Iran. Even more importantly, the actions in question raise serious ethical questions about how diasporic Iranians engage with one another as they attempt to lend support to protestors in Iran. At height of the protests, when the end of the theocratic regime appeared realistic, the Iranian diaspora became more fractured. Ironically, the very possibility of a free Iran generated the most antidemocratic behaviors

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Block, "I'll Burn You Alive," *Politico Magazine*, 22 April 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/04/22/iran-diaspora-harassment-00092598>.

in the diaspora. Although the protests in Iran have abated, the targeted campaigns continue. Far from changing Western foreign policy toward Iran, these attacks undermine solidarity among the Iranian diaspora and reinforce the type of authoritarian practices the attackers and protestors decry in the Islamic Republic. Given the continued and widespread nature of these attacks, the Iranian diaspora needs to engage with and counter the efforts to undermine its right to maintain diverse and discordant views about Iran.

To illustrate and analyze the modalities at work in *gasht-i intiqām*, I will provide a case study drawn from the work of a middle-aged Iranian Canadian, Nasser Pooli Mamaghani, who has targeted those he believes to be supporters and/or agents of the regime. He posts videos of his encounters with Iranians he suspects of being Islamic Republic sympathizers on YouTube. The videos are not edited to preserve the sense of immediacy, highlighting the accosted individual's frustration and the attacker's sense of gratification and redress. Pooli Mamaghani is typically accompanied by a woman whose voice we often hear in the recordings. The investigative team of citizen reporters sometimes hold file folders containing pictures and other documentation to substantiate their claims. Pooli Mamaghani frequently points out that as a Canadian citizen he is entitled to ask other Iranians residing in or traveling to Canada about affiliations he finds questionable, making himself into a personification of the law. The open and public nature of the encounters he records distinguish him from those online who hide under the veil of anonymity. Laying bare his intentions and providing the logic undergirding his efforts, Pooli Mamaghani serves as a particularly apt case for analysis.

I will focus on one public encounter filmed on Christmas eve of 2022 at the Toronto International Airport. Pooli Mamaghani and his team learned that a woman was due to arrive from Iran with her young son.<sup>2</sup> She previously worked in the Office of the Iranian President for both Hassan Rouhani (r. 2013–21) and Ebrahim Raisi (r. 2021–). The video narrative is over twenty minutes long and appears to begin at the Pearson International Airport's arrivals level.

Pooli Mamaghani approaches the woman and asks if she worked at Rouhani's office. Before she responds, Pooli Mamaghani and two other members of his team ask in Persian: "What are you doing here?"<sup>3</sup> Some of the claims that Pooli Mamaghani and the woman accompanying him make during the encounter include the targeted woman having the blood of young Iranians on her hands and her plans to embrace Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Another accusation is that the woman worked for the Iranian president when Ukrainian International Airlines flight 752 was struck by two surface-to-air missiles of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, leading to the death of all 176 passengers and crew on board. As the targeted woman attempts to move away from Pooli Mamaghani and his team, the accusers' voices grow louder and Pooli Mamaghani switches to English and states: "You are working for a terrorist regime," and he shouts "Call the police!"<sup>5</sup> The glaring lack of accountability on the part of the Iranian government presumably informs this public demand for acknowledgment of wrongdoing, if not from the highest echelons of the Iranian state at least from individuals who worked under its aegis. The woman's function at the Office of the President of the Islamic Republic remains unclear and does not seem to matter to her accusers. In their eyes, working for the former and current presidents of the Islamic Republic is sufficient proof of her culpability and justifies such harassment. The public and raucous nature of Pooli Mamaghani's intervention is not intended to offer the accused woman an opportunity to dispute the multiple charges leveled at her. Pooli Mamaghani believes that the woman should not have received a visa from the Canadian authorities who, in his view, failed to investigate her role as an employee of the Office of the Iranian President. As a self-appointed

<sup>2</sup> Nasser Pooli Mamaghani, YouTube video, 25 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYCzF0GJ0Xk>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 0:26–0:29. All translations from Persian are my own.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 0:30–34, 0:51–1:00.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:08–1:11.

embodiment of Canadian law, Pooli Mamaghani appears to see himself as its ultimate arbiter.

Another woman, who attempts to shield the accused woman and her young son from the accusers, shepherds the two away. When the three try to take an elevator, they are followed by Pooli Mamaghani and his team, frustrating their efforts to get away. Airport customer service personnel intervene to no avail. At one point, the woman's young son states that she is now retired, aiming to distance her from the Office of the President of the Islamic Republic.<sup>6</sup> This claim does not appease Pooli Mamaghani. The woman accompanying the travelers loses her patience and waves a hand in front of and apparently strikes the camera. She then leaves to find airport police officers. When the police arrive, Pooli Mamaghani and the woman who accompanies him claim to have been struck and would like to file charges against the unidentified woman. The officers ask for evidence supporting this claim, and Pooli Mamaghani offers a video clip the officers examine and dismiss as not substantiating his claim. During this exchange, one of the police officers asks Pooli Mamaghani about his objective, to which he responds that he wants to know how someone who worked in the Office of the Iranian President could receive a visa to Canada. In Persian, while following the woman, her son, and the unnamed woman accompanying her, Pooli Mamaghani shouts "*sūrākh-i mūsh*" (mouse holes), alluding to his motivation to block all escape routes for those he believes to have had a hand in the imprisonment and killing of young Iranians.<sup>7</sup>

At one juncture, Pooli Mamaghani suggests that the Canadian authorities are unaware of what he considers legitimate reasons that would bar the woman and her son from legally entering Canada. His attempts to insist on his rights as a Canadian citizen to report his concerns lead to a testy exchange with an officer who tells him there is nothing further to discuss. Pooli Mamaghani asks for the officer's name and badge number and, to his frustration, the officer gives him his badge number but not his name.

Pooli Mamaghani and his team have made a number of similar videos. In another one they corner an Iranian Canadian realtor and accuse her of money laundering for the Islamic Republic.<sup>8</sup> In another, they accuse an Iranian cleric they find at a private home.<sup>9</sup> And in others Pooli Mamaghani screams obscenities at demonstrators on the streets of Toronto.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there is a video entitled "If I am killed for whatever reason, the perpetrators are Justin Trudeau and the Canadian government."<sup>11</sup> The plethora of Pooli Mamaghani videos are countered by one video narrated in Persian decrying the violations of the Canadian Charter of Rights by individuals who use aggressive tactics to further their goal.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the tone of many of Pooli Mamaghani's videos, this recording is a measured response not only to Pooli Mamaghani but also Iranian Canadian municipal and provincial politicians who have been photographed with him and have not denounced his abusive language and unsubstantiated accusations. Issuing a plea to both Iranian Canadian politicians and citizens to adhere to Canadian laws and the Charter of Rights, this counternarrative aims for a civil discourse. Unfortunately, this plea is drowned out by Pooli Mamaghani's postings, numbering over fifty.

Pooli Mamaghani's desire for accountability and revenge might well stem from painful experiences, injustices, and losses that have lingered over the past decades. As Manijeh

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:45–4:48.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8:46–8:50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Nasser Pooli Mamaghani, "Confronting Iranian Mullah in Canada Living in Luxury!" YouTube video, 11 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TczTmCW9KW0>.

<sup>10</sup> Nasser Pooli Mamaghani, YouTube video, 20 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dF4gmMMFdDU>.

<sup>11</sup> Nasser Pooli Mamaghani, YouTube video, 23 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGJCDQepuZM>.

<sup>12</sup> Saeed Soltanpour, "No to Violence in Toronto," YouTube video, 29 October 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BobWFSvBgI>.

Moradian demonstrates in her study of the Iranian Students Association's archives and memories of its activities in the US and Iran, "From this tangle of grief and hope, revolutionary affects continue to circulate, this time without ideological certainties and party lines. Revolutionary affects emanating from the long Iranian freedom struggle find new forms of expression as they move across generations and borders, haunting the diaspora from the margins."<sup>13</sup> The collective memories of loss and trauma can find an effective outlet in mobilizing public testimonies and acknowledgments of atrocities committed in the Iranian homeland. Ashwini Vasanthakumar argues that "by bearing witness to the injustices from which they have fled, exiles alert the world to the need to assist those left behind. Exile testimony is critical to transnational and international assistance, and recurs throughout the different roles exiles play."<sup>14</sup> Pooli Mamaghani does not act as a direct witness, but instead he represents himself as a voice for those who have been victimized by the Islamic Republic. His secondary aim is to ensure that those in the service of the Iranian government do not find safe haven in Canada. He speaks for a collectivity, Iranian Canadians, who were forced to leave home and settle in Canada, and he acts as a gatekeeper keen to prevent those Iranians he suspects of collusion with the regime from immigrating to and integrating into Canadian society. Such attempts on the part of exiles, as Vasanthakumar acknowledges, can exceed the desire for solidarity with their homeland and produce internal conflict, "which can hinder how effectively exiles act as a group, and how they enable solidarity with outsiders. And, while their roles as witnesses and solidary intermediaries place exiles in the service of those left behind, acting from shared identity authorizes exiles to speak of their own interests and ideals—irrespective of whether these are shared by those remaining behind."<sup>15</sup>

By denouncing those he believes to be regime sympathizers, Pooli Mamaghani appears to want to deflect Canadian policy vis-à-vis Iranians seeking a visa, but his tactics run counter to lawful processes and attest to an overwhelming desire for vengeance. His certitude in the culpability of the accosted individuals and his disregard for their rights supplant judicial procedures to which he, like other residents of Canada and including Iranians visiting Canada, is entitled. In fact, the punishment he exacts makes a travesty of any legitimate claims he might have. His rush to judgement and punishment are reminiscent of the days following the 1979 revolution and the summary trials and executions that tarnished the revolution and fueled the desire for vengeance we continue to witness more than four decades later. The glee with which the victors of the 1979 revolution displayed the corpses of the executed monarchical officials foretold the revolutionary movement's undoing.

As diasporic Iranians mourn the lives lost in Iran over the past several decades, they are naturally compelled to action, but what form(s) their demands for accountability and justice take matters a great deal. Should they remain sanguine about those who choose to become arbiters of the law? They might ask themselves what responsibility they shoulder in condoning what I call *gasht-i intiqām*. Many academics among diasporic Iranians have been targeted by fellow diasporic Iranians who have determined that they are guilty of whitewashing the Islamic Republic by speaking and writing in ways that do not offer outright condemnations of the regime. Faced with such denunciations, some have attempted to disavow their affiliations with organizations such as the National Iranian American Council, whose support for the JPCOA and diplomacy is interpreted as support for the regime. Others have adopted self-censorship or silence to avoid being the target of attacks. Are these attempts to clear one's name or retreat from the public space appropriate or adequate responses to *gasht-i intiqām*? What language and mode of action could guide diasporic Iranians in their interactions with one another? That work must begin today for a future in which vigilantism does not become

<sup>13</sup> Manijeh Moradian, *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 273.

<sup>14</sup> Ashwini Vasanthakumar, *The Ethics of Exile: A Political Theory of Diaspora* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 186.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–87.

the sole means of dealing with the legacy of the Islamic Republic. Although there are no obvious remedies, the collective failure to engage with the difficult ethical questions diasporic Iranians face today will shape the nature of justice tomorrow for Iranians in and outside Iran.

An open letter written by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the renowned Iranian filmmaker who left Iran in the wake of the protests contesting the results of the 2009 presidential elections, issued in 2018 to the former Iranian crown prince, Reza Pahlavi, serves as an example of engaging in debate across seemingly unbridgeable ideological divides.<sup>16</sup> The young Makhmalbaf was imprisoned during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and was released after the 1979 revolution. He became known for his revolutionary fervor and denunciation of prerevolution filmmakers, but he gradually distanced himself from his earlier zeal. His transformation is evident in some of his self-reflective cinematic works and is attested to by Hushang Gulmakani in a 1999 article: “Makhmalbaf, who used to judge everyone, albeit in his imagination, and believed that individuals could be divided into the two groups of innocent or worthy of punishment has now stopped judging and sentencing others.”<sup>17</sup>

As a former revolutionary, Makhmalbaf has now joined the Iranian diaspora in France, from where he penned the open letter to the former crown prince. In this letter, Makhmalbaf speaks about being tortured in prison under the crown prince’s father’s rule and requiring four surgeries to be able to walk. Makhmalbaf is quick to point out that he does not believe the father’s sins should be attributed to the son, and he adds that he is opposed to vengeance. Instead, he offers his reasons for warning against a return to monarchy. He also points to contradictions in the former crown prince’s embrace of democratic values and his silence when faced with critiques of his father’s rule. More significantly, Makhmalbaf points out that by virtue of allowing his acolytes to respond abusively to those who do not embrace the idea of monarchy, the crown prince condones their actions, undercutting his own claims to respecting and tolerating differences of opinion. Makhmalbaf’s respectful tone, despite what he had to endure in prison under the last shah’s rule, models a space for dialogue and debate. Perhaps Makhmalbaf’s experiences under a monarchy and a theocracy he once endorsed but has long since disavowed have made him appreciate that avenging the misdeeds of the past does not guarantee a future free from them. Makhmalbaf did not receive an answer from Reza Pahlavi, but his open letter garnered some responses from fellow Iranians, representing discordant political views and recalling Makhmalbaf’s own earlier role as a state propagandist. The virtual space created by this open letter, predating the current protests, highlights both the powerful impact of painful memories of the past and the need for engaging with them to build toward a future for the Iranian diaspora less burdened by the politics of vengeance.

<sup>16</sup> Mohsen Makhmalbaf, “Namih-i Sargushadih-i Mohsen Makhmalbaf bih Reza Pahlavi: Simurgh Irani na Saltanat-i Murus,” *Melliun Iran*, 25 February 2018, <https://melliun.org/iran/157477>.

<sup>17</sup> Hushang Gulmakani, “Az Khushunat va Ta’ssub ta Mudara va Mihrvarzi: Yik Silliy-i Dardnak-i Bidarkunandih va Hushdardahandih, *Kiyan* 8, no. 45 (1999): 193 (the English translation is my own).