

SEVEN

Politics of Silence and Denial

1988 Enforced Disappearances and Executions in Iran

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Savagery is a defining condition of the animal kingdom, but only humans, blessed with reason, can invent death camps, inquisitions, the subtle instrumentation of torture, and mass executions. We continually amaze ourselves with viciousness, the cause of which is less often bloodlust or brutality than it is mere expediency.

—Robert Coover, *Kissing the Sword: A Prison Memoir*

This statement resonates with the brutality of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the mass executions of its opponents in the summer of 1988. Thousands of political prisoners affiliated with the banned political organizations—the Mojahedin, Fadaian, Peykar, and Komala, among others—became targets of this brutality.

Eye-witness accounts depict a gruesome picture of this massacre in the capital, Tehran. Mehdi Aslani, a member of the Fadaian Organization, imprisoned in Gohardasht Prison from 1985 to 1989, explained

One late night in early August, . . . we saw a number of masked people loading and unloading a refrigerated truck of meat. We recognized masked prison guards from their green Revolutionary outfits . . . sanitizing the area. Later we learned that when they hanged people, the smell of feces and urine at the execution site took over

the whole area. Apparently, because of the extreme heat of August, to fight the stench, they felt sanitizing was necessary.¹

Ebrahim Mohammad Rahimi, a member of the Mojahedin Organization, imprisoned from 1979 to 1981, had a similar account of the executions in Evin Prison:

The windows were barred, but we twisted one of the bars so there was a small space through which we could take turns watching what was happening outside. We could see the guards dragging corpses and putting them into large black trash bags or body bags. The guards were throwing the bodies inside these bags, into the back of a nearby truck.²

Reza Ghaffari, imprisoned from 1981 to 1991, on suspicion of being a member of a socialist group, described how the executed bodies were removed from Gohardasht Prison

One day, a lorry stopped within clear view. It was loaded with large parcels. Each parcel was wrapped in plastic sheeting, tied with twine at either end. From the unsteady way in which the guards found their footing as they jumped from the truck onto the parcels, it was obvious what was in the packages—bodies.

There had been a constant movement of these meat-wagons to an unknown graveyard for at least two months.³

These prisoners did not know who the executed prisoners were, but they recognized their prison-issued plastic slippers. Monireh Baradaran of the Revolutionary Workers Organization, who was imprisoned from 1981 to 1990 and whose brother was executed, explained in her memoir, *A Simple Truth*, that some prisoners had seen a prison staff member “pushing a hand wagon full of slippers.”⁴ The slippers gave the political prisoners a clue about what was awaiting them, and each felt his or her life hanging by a thread.

What explains the Islamic Republic’s executions of thousands of Iranians in 1988? The answers lie in the making of the revolution and in post-revolutionary political developments.

Power Struggles and the Revival of Repression

The Iranian revolution was the culmination of decades of mobilization by political forces, secular and religious. These forces shared a common goal: to overthrow Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. They regarded the Shah's regime as illegitimate. After World War II, Iran was experiencing democracy: freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and the right to membership in political parties of various persuasions. In 1951, the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, a Swiss-educated lawyer, led a campaign to nationalize Iranian oil, which was under control of the British Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Mossadegh's political party, the National Front of Iran (Jebh-ye Melli Iran) formed in 1949, was the largest secular pro-democracy organization. The Front, along with the leftist Tudeh Party of Iran (*Hezb-e Tudeh Iran*), created in 1941, as well as a number of smaller political groups succeeded in their oil nationalization campaign, and, drawing on that support, Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Persian Oil Company 1951.

In the context of the Cold War, Iran's political stance threatened to undermine British economic and geopolitical interests and thus raised the ire of the British and United States governments. In 1953, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), via "Operation Ajax," and the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), with "Operation Boot," removed Mossadegh and reinstated the Shah.⁵

Sixty years later, in 2013, the CIA acknowledged its role in the 1953 coup.⁶ By forcibly overthrowing Mossadegh and installing the Shah, the United States and Britain secured the flow of Iranian oil to the Western market, controlling its price, and curbing the influence of the Soviet Union, their Cold War rival.⁷

The Shah's opponents resisted his oppressive rule, but his repression notwithstanding, Iran benefited from his many modernizing policies, such as the enfranchisement of women, free and compulsory education, and the formation of a literacy corps. But ultimately, his uneven socioeconomic developments along with arrests, imprisonments, and executions led to his downfall. He had underestimated the strength of his opponents, particularly the religious factions.

By 1978, two underground revolutionary organizations were gaining popular support inside Iran. The Organization of Iranian People's Fadaian, *Sazman-e Fadaian-e Kbalq-e Iran*, founded in 1963, adhered to Marxism-Leninism. The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, *Sazman-e Mojahedin Kbalq-e Iran*, formed in 1965, adhered to an ideology drawn from

Shi'a Islam and egalitarian aspects of Marxism. The two organizations had strong support among the Iranian intelligentsia and youth.

Meanwhile, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, an Iranian Shi'a religious leader living in exile in Paris,⁸ tried appealing to large segments of the Iranian population, speaking of a *qiyam-e mardomi*, or popular uprising, rather than an Islamic uprising, which would be more likely to attract Iranians who feared religious rule.⁹ He drew on vast networks of mosques throughout Iran exploiting Islamic ideologies to mobilize a revolution.

Secular forces inside Iran, mostly in disarray, failed to present an alternative to Khomeini and, fearing the loss of public support, they shied away from directly criticizing him. Though they did not accept Khomeini's leadership, they accepted his anti-imperialist and anti-Shah stands.

Khomeini, whose use of Islamic language resonated with traditional segments of population, emerged as the leader of the upcoming revolution. In late 1978, Iranians—mobilized by old as well as newly formed political organizations¹⁰—took to the streets demanding the Shah's departure, leading to the 1979 Revolution.¹¹

Khomeini adamantly refused to include the word “democracy” in the title of the Revolution or the Iranian Constitution. Once the Revolution was secured, Khomeini and the ruling clerics embarked on the Islamization of Iran and set forth to suppress any opposition. Political groups received the brunt and were disbanded.

In overpowering its adversaries, the regime benefited greatly from the attack by Iraq's Saddam Hussein on Iran on September 22, 1980, which led to the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and gave the regime the opportunity to heighten Iranian nationalism. It labeled its opponents as unpatriotic and, worse, agents of Saddam Hussein or the United States.

To exert political control, the clerics broached no dissent, even among their own rank and file. When the first president of the Islamic Republic, Abolhasan Banisadr (elected in 1980) disagreed with the regime over domestic and international matters, he was impeached in 1981. This brought thousands of protestors to the streets, who were met with violence, arrest, and imprisonment.

In response to ongoing repression and the rulers' refusal to share power with political groups, the Mojahedin Organization began a campaign of terror. In June 1981, they assassinated several Iranian officials and detonated bombs in the head office of Islamic Republic Party, killing seventy-three high-ranking Iranian officials, hoping to weaken the regime and empower the disillusioned population to overthrow it. Yet this campaign served only to intensify the regime's determination to eliminate its

adversaries. According to historian Ervand Abrahamian, “In 1981–85, the regime executed 4,995 Mojahedin and 547 Marxists. These figures do not include those killed in armed struggle with the regime.”¹²

With “Revolutionary Rage and Rancor”: *Fatwa* and Executions

By 1988, thousands of Iranians—men, women, old, and young, from various social classes, ethnic, and religious backgrounds—were imprisoned. Members of the Baha’i faith and the Kurdish ethnic minority suffered the impact of the regime’s oppression. Some prisoners belonged to banned Iranian organizations, some were merely sympathizers, others were wrongfully arrested simply on suspicion of being opposed to the regime.

Physical and mental torture forced prisoners to confess to alleged oppositional activities and profess allegiance to the regime. The most common forms of torture, Abrahamian recorded, “were whipping—sometimes on the back but most often on the feet with the body tied to an iron bed—sleep deprivation, suspension—by the arms—from ceilings and high walls, twisting of forearms until they broke, crushing of hands and fingers in metal presses, insertion of sharp instruments under fingernails, cigarette burns, submersion under water, standing in one place for hours on end, and mock execution.”¹³

It is believed the torture also included sexual abuse and rape.¹⁴ These unbearable torments drove many male and female prisoners to suicide¹⁵ with broken glass to slit their wrists or intestines, by drinking disinfectant, or hanging.

By 1988, the Iran-Iraq war had reached an impasse, and in July, Khomeini reluctantly accepted the United Nations Security Resolution 598, calling for a cease-fire.

Five days later, Mojahedin leadership, now exiled in Iraq and enjoying the support of Saddam Hussein, waged a military attack on Western Iran, hoping their incursion, *Forough-e Javidan* (Eternal Lights), would lead to a general uprising. The regime succeeded in driving them back to Iraq within days.

The Mojahedin attack only heightened people’s nationalistic sentiments, giving the regime a greater opportunity to wage war against its opponents, some of whom were already in prison. Their supporters, in general, accepted their version of the sequence of events. Former political prisoners, however, concur with scholars and human rights organizations that these executions were planned before the Mojahedin’s attack, and

were coldly premeditated, authorized at the highest levels of government.¹⁶

Even before the Mojahedin's incursion, the regime had categorized its opponents into believers and non-believers in Islam and the Islamic Republic. Special commissions with instructions to execute "Mojaheds as *mohareb* (those who war against God) and leftists as *mortad* (apostates from Islam)" were set up.¹⁷ The Mojahedin Organization was labeled *monafeqin* (hypocrites).

On July 19, 1988, with no prior notice, prisons holding political prisoners were closed.¹⁸ Prisoners were ordered to stay in their cells. Scheduled visits from families were cancelled. What was awaiting them? The answer came in a *fatwa* (a decree issued by an Islamic religious authority) from Khomeini regarding members and sympathizers of the Mojahedin Organization.

In an undated letter distributed to prison authorities throughout Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini declared, "It is decreed that those who are in prisons throughout the country, who remain steadfast in their support for the monafeqin are considered to be mohareb and are condemned to execution. . . . It is naïve to show mercy to mohareb. The decisiveness of Islam before the enemies of God is among the unquestionable tenets of the Islamic regime. I hope that you satisfy almighty God with your revolutionary rage and rancor against the enemies of Islam."¹⁹

Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's designated heir, objected to the fatwa. In a July 31, 1988 letter, he referred to the executions as unlawful and against the principles of Islam and warned that they could be perceived as acts of vengeance and vendetta.²⁰

Nevertheless, the task of implementing the fatwa in Tehran was entrusted to a judicial panel comprising Hossein Ali Nayyeri, a religious judge, Morteza Eshraqi, a Tehran prosecutor, Ebrahim Raisi, Eshraqi's deputy prosecutor, and Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, representative of the Intelligence Ministry. Prisoners in Tehran referred to them as the "Death Committee." The panels differed depending on their provinces.

On July 29, 1988, the "Death Committee" convened to begin the first wave of executions.²¹ It quickly determined each prisoner's fate. None had legal representation. The panel started with Mojahedin members and sympathizers some of whom had already completed their prison sentences but were not released. If they admitted they had been members of the Mojahedin, the questioning ended, and the panel concluded the prisoner was still loyal to the organization. But if the prisoner referred to the Mojahedin as hypocrites—as the regime labeled them—the interrogation continued with questions such as

- Are you willing to go on camera and denounce your organization?
- Will you name the members and sympathizers of the Mojahedin?
- Are you willing to go to the war front and walk on Iraqi minefields?

On August 26, 1988, the panel began the second wave of executions.²² This time, the targets were prisoners belonging to or sympathizing with dissolved leftist organizations, such as Fadaian. The leftist prisoners, however, had neither supported the Mojahedin Organization nor its military incursion against the regime.²³ The prisoners were asked

- Are you a Muslim?
- Do you believe in Allah?
- Do you pray?
- Will you go on camera and denounce your leftist beliefs?

As with the Mojahedin, the leftist prisoners who were steadfast in their beliefs and loyalties were sent to the execution halls. When the first series of prisoners answered the questions truthfully and ended up dead, the remaining prisoners decided to provide tactical answers (*pasokh-ha-ye tak-tiki*), twisting the truth to save their lives.²⁴

In Tehran, executions took place in Ghohardasht and Evin prisons. Gallows were erected in lecture halls or amphitheatres. Blindfolded prisoners in groups of six were stood on chairs, nooses around their necks. Their bodies were dumped in a meat truck and carried away. Throughout Iran, bodies were buried in unmarked graves and vacant lots. With thousands killed, managing the dead and secretly disposing of bodies became the regime's immediate concern.

Unmarked and Mass Graves

In Tehran, executed Mojahedins were taken to Behesht-e Zahra, the main Muslim cemetery. Some were interred in unmarked or old existing graves. To avoid public attention to the magnitude of these burials, the regime inscribed false names and dates of burial on the tombstones. Some were buried in mass graves in canals, which were then covered with cement, rendering them undetectable.

Authorities believed that the leftists, as apostates, should not be buried among Muslims. Therefore, in 1981, a vacant land in southeast Tehran, later called Khavaran, was allocated for them.²⁵ Khavaran is a vast burial

site in southeast Tehran,²⁶ divided into sections, each allotted to non-Muslim religious minorities such as Christian Armenians and Baha'i.

In Khavaran, the bodies of executed leftists were dumped into a secret mass grave adjacent to the Baha'i cemetery. It was discovered by Afghans living and working in the area, who alerted the families of political prisoners about the comings and goings of meat trucks and bodies buried in shallow graves at night. Heavy rains washed away the soil exposing the bodies. Stray dogs, detecting the smell of flesh, "dragged these hastily buried bodies out," Shahla Talebi wrote in *Ghosts of Revolution*.²⁷ Families "came face-to-face with shocking proof of their [loved ones'] deaths in their traumatic encounter with the uncovered arms, legs, or faces of the young dead men, who had been buried with their clothes on,"²⁸ as opposed to wrapped in customary white shrouds.²⁹

Families informed other families, who rushed to Khavaran and dug with their bare hands, uncovering bones, body parts, and articles of clothing. In shock and tears, they took photos to document the mass grave. They placed flowers on random sites referred to by the regime as *Lana-tabad*, or "Place of the Damned," and renamed it *Golzar-e Khavaran*, or "Flower Garden of Khavaran."

Despite continuous disruptions of their gatherings at the site by the authorities, the families made Khavaran a cemetery of their own. Gradually, more mass graves were discovered in Khavaran and throughout Iran.

Impact on the Families

In October–November 1988, the families of political prisoners were finally allowed into the prisons to visit. A limited number of them got to see their loved ones. Others, however, were informed that their loved ones were no longer there or were handed two plastic bags, one containing belongings, the other a last testament. Families were told the prisoners died of natural causes, or "that the prisoner had been killed during a prison riot or had been executed for taking part in a riot."³⁰ Many families never got answers nor did the authorities release the bodies. Their loved ones simply disappeared.³¹

Families were instructed by the authorities not to talk about the executions. They were not to hold funeral services at home, in mosques, or in cemeteries. They were not allowed the customary seventh and fortieth memorial days. Families who did not receive the bodies of their executed loved ones remain in an ambiguous state of perpetual loss and deprived of closure.

For cultures such as Iran's, proper burial is an essential observation and sanctification of death. A grave enshrines the deceased's identity and is significant for coming to terms with loss and reaching closure. Shahla Talebi, who lost her husband, Hamid, to the executions remarked, "[M]y Hamid and other loved ones were denied not only their lives but also their deaths."³² Even without graves, she felt the urge to talk to her loved ones and have them hear her through the soil that covered them.³³

Nina Toobaei expressed her need for a grave for her executed brother, Siamak. She lamented, "I wish I could visit his grave and talk to his bones."³⁴ Maryam Nuri, whose husband was executed, stated, "I needed Rahmat to have a grave. I needed to see what we had heard was his grave, even though it was a common grave."³⁵

There are no definitive figures on the number of executions. The Mojahedin Organization estimates thirty thousand.³⁶ Based on information provided by families, political parties, and organizations, the names of about five thousand executed political prisoners have been compiled.³⁷ This does not include those whose families, fearing retaliation, have not shared the names. Moreover, between 1981 and 1988, around twenty-thousand dissidents disappeared, either dying under torture or executed by firing squad or hanging.³⁸

This wave of executions came to an end before the tenth anniversary of the Islamic Republic in February 1989. To mark the anniversary, Khomeini gave amnesty to repenting political prisoners.³⁹ Why did the Islamic Republic take such draconian measures against its opponents in the first place? Khomeini, then dying of cancer and sensing political divisions that could undermine the regime, accelerated the process of eliminating the opposition. His order "was intent upon preserving his creation: an Islamic Republic without opposition."⁴⁰

Khomeini did not leave Ayatollah Montazeri's objection to the fatwa unpunished and admonished him for lacking qualifications to serve as heir designate.⁴¹ Khomeini died in June 1989. Gradually all political prisoners were released. Thanks to the silence inside Iran, as well as the tacit silence of the international community, the Islamic Republic managed to cover up the 1988 executions.

The Significance of Silence

Political silence can be both the outcome of political repression and a contributing factor to its continuation. Some post-revolutionary regimes draw

on revolutionary rage in dealing with their opponents, therefore setting the stage for muzzling any objections.

Sadly, the Islamic Republic has capitalized on rage from its earliest days by establishing the Revolutionary Tribunal to determine the fates of the Shah's officials and thus their executions. Many prominent figures, such as Ayatollah Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari, Abdol Karim Lahigi—an important human rights lawyer—and the regime's Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, (April–November 1979) a well-respected politician, objected to the executions. Yet the tribunal carried on. In total, 497 individuals were executed,⁴² including the Shah's prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda (1965–1977).

Many Iranian political organizations were complicit. The Mojahedin Organization, the Fadaian Organization, and the Tudeh Party, each with a significant base of support among the public, did not object to the executions.⁴³ They, too, believed in *Ghabr-e Enghelabi*, or revolutionary violence. Had they objected to the executions, they could have sensitized the public to the rights of the accused and in turn elevated human rights in Iran. By not objecting to the use of revolutionary violence, they effectively normalized it and themselves became the subjects of revolutionary rage captured in Khomeini's fatwas.

The scope and secrecy of the 1988 executions depict one of the darkest periods in Iranian history. Yet most Iranians claim they did not know about these executions. The Islamic Republic had indeed succeeded in keeping them secret, while generating fear, which in turn produced silence even among those who were aware of the executions.

Arts and literature of resistance have been deeply rooted in Iranian culture and Iranian intellectuals, through their work, have opposed repression. Faraj Sarkohi, an Iranian literary critic,⁴⁴ decried the unprecedented silence of Iranian intellectuals in Iran.⁴⁵ “We Iranian intellectuals inside Iran had remained silent. . . . I do not forgive myself for this silence.”⁴⁶

The silence of the international community was noteworthy considering that Amnesty International, in a comprehensive 1988 report, brought the massacre to the world's attention.⁴⁷ Iranians in diaspora, including political organizations abroad, as well as families of the executed and disappeared, continued to expose the Islamic Republic's atrocities by holding rallies in which photos of the victims were displayed. They lobbied the United Nations to investigate. The international community, particularly European countries, pleased with the success of the Iran-Iraq 1988 cease-fire, focused on postwar reconstruction. When issues of human

rights violations were raised, they were told by the Islamic Republic that those executed had been involved in armed conspiracy and acted against the regime's sovereignty. European countries accepted this narrative and secured access to the Iranian market.⁴⁸ More disturbing was the silence of the Soviet Union and China. Their silence disillusioned Iranian intellectuals, Marxists, Leninists, or Maoists, who looked up to them as revolutionary models and sources of inspiration. But these countries maintained their vested interests in the Islamic Republic, which they considered to be anti-imperialist and anti-American, meanwhile benefiting from Iran's resources and growing consumer market. The United States, self-appointed champion of human rights, also stayed silent about the 1988 massacres.

All this can be attributed to the politics of the Cold War and the ways in which the West in general, and the United States in particular, used religion as a powerful weapon against communism and its various ideologies.⁴⁹ Despite open enmity between the United States and Iran, they shared an anti-communist agenda. Thus, there were extensive contacts between the Jimmy Carter administration (1977–1981) and Ayatollah Khomeini while he was still in Paris before the 1979 Iranian Revolution.⁵⁰ Despite publicly upholding an embargo against selling arms to Iran, President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) secretly approved weapons sales to Iran in what became known in 1986 as the Iran-Contra Affair.

Mobilizing Islam as a buffer against communism was part of the United States' Cold War strategy.⁵¹ The Islamic Republic's executions of communists, Maoists, and Islamists influenced by Marxist ideology effectively corresponded with the U.S. anti-communist Cold War agenda. Moreover, Iran's 1988 executions took place at the time when the United States was heavily involved in combating the spread of the Soviet Union's influence in Afghanistan, Iran's neighbor to the east.⁵²

Thus, U.S. silence was in line with its global Cold War strategy. The U.S. Congress continues to claim supporting human rights in Iran but has not, as of this writing, passed a resolution condemning the executions.⁵³

The UN reaction to the events of 1988 was mild, considering its magnitude. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl (1986–1995), brought the violations to the United Nations' attention in his 1989 report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where he expressed grave concern and pointed out that "there was a renewed wave of executions in the period July-September whereby [during which] a large number of persons died because of their political convictions."⁵⁴

Galindo Pohl's written complaint about the "wave of executions" received the Islamic Republic's usual responses that these killings occurred during the encounter with the Mojahedin. Yet despite his awareness of the Islamic Republic's concealment of the truth, Galindo Pohl failed⁵⁵ to further investigate, despite what he had seen.

The United Nations special procedure which continues to this day pursuing the 1988 crimes is the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID). Yet the WGEID's continual requests to visit Iran are declined. By not complying with the UN, the Islamic Republic benefits from the geopolitical power dynamics between Russia, China, and a host of other undemocratic regimes which favor it.

Revealing the Truth: Mothers of Khavaran

In the face of the Islamic Republic's atrocities, the Mothers of Khavaran have shown unwavering determination to bring the executions and the enforced disappearances into light.⁵⁶ The group is a loose network of mothers, their families, and friends seeking justice for their loved ones. They number in the thousands and are divided by social class and ideology, secular and religious, yet they are united in presenting the true narrative of what happened to thousands of Iranian political prisoners.

The Mothers have continued to demand accountability, redress, and access to truth. They met with high-ranking Iranian officials including Ayatollah Montazeri who opposed the executions. They wrote to then-United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cueller (1982–1991). Inspired by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the Mothers of Khavaran are the sole advocacy group for those who perished in Iran.

The Islamic Republic's response has ranged from blocking the entrance to Khavaran to, in 2009, bulldozing parts of the cemetery,⁵⁷ and arresting and imprisoning protestors. Nevertheless, the Mothers continue to make their presence felt and demand justice for their loved ones. Their quest for truth, accountability, and prosecution of those involved in the 1981 to 1988 executions have brought them international recognition. In 2014, the Mothers of Khavaran were awarded the prestigious South Korean Gwangju Prize for Human Rights.⁵⁸

They have also been instrumental in revealing the truth and its details to Iranians in diaspora, international human rights organizations, as well as the UN. Sadly, they are aging, many have passed away, while their quest for justice has remained unfulfilled.

Mobilization for Justice in Diaspora

After the executions in 1988, the regime gradually released political prisoners. Some left Iran taking residence primarily in Europe, Canada, or the United States. A number wrote their prison memoirs in Persian or English, which have offered a more complete picture than would ever be possible inside Iran of what happened in the prisons and provided detailed accounts of the 1988 executions. Ex-prisoners' memoirs have greatly contributed to the preservation of this grim history.⁵⁹

These historical memories have received significant attention from Iranians in exile. Iranian human rights organizations⁶⁰ are actively contributing to the documentation of the 1988 executions and to seeking justice. The Iranian Tribunal—a grassroots organization established in 2007 by the families of the victims and human rights activists—has sought to hold the Islamic Republic accountable for its crimes.⁶¹ In 2012, they organized an international tribunal modeled after Bertrand Russell's People's Tribunal.⁶² At a three-day hearing held at the Peace Palace in The Hague, seventy-five survivors and families of those executed provided testimonies on camera and revealed the range of atrocities committed by the Islamic Republic. Based on these testimonies, the judges, international legal experts, Johann Kriegler (South Africa), Makau Mutua (Kenya), Margaret Ratner Kunstler (United States), Michael Mansfield (United Kingdom), among others, concluded that the Islamic Republic has indeed committed crimes against humanity.⁶³

From Denial to Destruction of Evidence

For years, the Islamic Republic has denied the 1988 mass executions. But new evidence has challenged this denial. A forty-minute audio file of the late Ayatollah Montazeri, who had objected to Khomeini's fatwa, was released online by his son Ahmad in 2016.⁶⁴ In this file, Montazeri speaks vehemently to members of the "Death Committee" (Hossein Ali Nayyeri, Morteza Eshraqi, Ebrahim Raisi, and Mostafa Pour Mohammadi), criticizing them for their complicity in the slaughters: "In my view, the biggest crime of the Islamic Republic for which history will condemn us, has been committed at your hands. They will write your names as criminals in history."⁶⁵

Montazeri's audio file verified the executions and triggered strong reaction from the regime. The authorities set out to destroy any evidence that

could prove and incriminate its atrocities. According to a joint report by Justice for Iran, an Iranian human rights organization based in London, and Amnesty International, Iran has been actively destroying mass graves in cities across the country.⁶⁶ Based on satellite imagery from Google Earth,⁶⁷ video footage, and photographs,⁶⁸ the report illustrates that “There may be more than one hundred and twenty [mass grave] locations across Iran that contain the remains of these victims.”⁶⁹ The Islamic Republic has accelerated the pace of destroying mass graves by “bulldozing, hiding the mass graves beneath new burial plots, constructing concrete slabs, building roads over the graves, and turning them into rubbish dumps.”⁷⁰

The destruction of mass graves and the evidence of the 1988 mass executions has been expedited now that Ebrahim Raisi is in power as the president of Iran (term: 2021–2025). Raisi, a member of “Death Committee,” played a key role in the extrajudicial executions of thousands of political prisoners in 1988.⁷¹

In June 2022, Iranian authorities began erecting high concrete walls and installing security cameras around the perimeter of Khavaran to restrict family access. The walled cemetery will allow the Islamic Republic to further destroy any evidence of the executions: the bones. Raisi’s rise to the presidency is a further blow to human rights protection in Iran and the quest for accountability and justice.

A Path Forward

The United Nations could play a central role in holding the Islamic Republic accountable for the 1988 executions and enforced disappearances. After decades of inaction, in 2020, seven UN human rights experts, including Luciano Hazen, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and Javaid Rehman, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, sent a letter to the government of Islamic Republic demanding accountability.⁷² They called for investigation of the 1988 executions and enforced disappearances by a UN-authorized team and expressed concern, “that the situation may amount to crimes against humanity.”⁷³

Should the Islamic Republic refuse to comply with its legal obligations under international human rights laws, the UN experts are prepared to call for establishment of an international investigation of the events of 1988.⁷⁴ The unequivocal UN letter was a positive development but, as of this writ-

ing, the Islamic Republic has not responded to this letter. Nevertheless, the United Nations should continue to exert pressure on Iran.

Human rights organizations concur that the Islamic Republic has committed grave crimes against humanity.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, Iran is not signatory to more recent United Nations instruments such as the 2007 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. But Iran is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, which states in article 7 that “no one shall be subjected to torture, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment.” The Islamic Republic has not only breached international human rights treaties but its own Constitution as well.⁷⁶

Addressing the gruesome events of 1988 requires comprehensive measures and partnership by the UN and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which must allow the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances to visit Iran to investigate.

With that investigation, the Islamic Republic would be obliged to provide the names of the executed political prisoners and reveal the locations of their graves. With the consent of the families, graves might then be exhumed by independent professional forensic experts and the remains of bodies properly preserved. The bodies should be accurately identified and buried according to the families’ religious and cultural traditions. Families would necessarily be consulted and engaged throughout the process.

The tragedy of Iran’s 1988 executions and disappearances, as in so many places worldwide, must be seen, spoken aloud, admitted, victims’ names reinstated, and restitution take place to restore victims and survivors in history.

Notes

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1. Mehdi Aslani, in *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran 1988. Witness Testimonies and Official Statements: An Addendum*. (Washington, DC.: Abdurrahman Boroumand Foundation, 2013), 51–60, 57.

2. Ebrahim Mohammad Rahimi in *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran 1988*. (Washington, D.C.: Abdurrahman Boroumand Foundation, 2013), 209–12, 212.
3. Reza Ghaffari, *A State of Fear: My 10 Years Inside Iran's Torture Jails* (London: John Blake Publishing, 2012), 28.
4. Monireh Baradaran, *Haghighate Sadeh (A Simple Truth)* (Essen, Germany: Nima Verlag, 2000), 402.
5. Mohammad Mossadegh was arrested and tried in a military court and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Upon his release from prison, he was kept under house arrest until his death on March 5, 1967. The Shah's regime denied him a public funeral.
6. The National Security Archive, "CIA Confirms Role in 1953 Iran Coup," *National Security Archive Briefing*, Book No. 4, 435, August 19, 2013. This declassified document was posted on George Washington University website, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/>
7. Soviet Union influence in Iran was mainly exercised through the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party and through support for the Iranian separatist movements of Iranian Azerbaijan (1945) and Iranian Kurdistan (1946).
8. Khomeini lived in exile in Iraq from October 1965 until October 6, 1978, when he was expelled by Saddam Hussein. Khomeini then settled in Paris.
9. Amir Taheri, *The Persian Night: Iran Under the Khomeinist Revolution* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), 78.
10. For a list of political organizations please refer to *The Massacre of Political Prisoner in Iran 1988*, 385–94.
11. While Iranians in general refer to the revolution as *Enqelab-e Iran*, or Iranian Revolution, Khomeini and his supporters declared the revolution as *Enqelab-e Islami*, or Islamic revolution.
12. Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999), 131.
13. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 139.
14. Shadi Sadr and Shadi Amin, *Crime and Impunity* (London: Justice for Iran, 2012), 171–89.
15. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 215; Baradaran, *Haghighate Sadeh*, 228 and 295.
16. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 218; Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 38; Kaveh Shahrooz, "With Revolutionary Rage and Rancor: A Preliminary Report on the 1988 Massacre of Iranian Political Prisoners," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 20, 2007, 227–61, 251; Amnesty International, *Iran: Violations of Human Rights 1987–1990*, (AI Index 13/21/90)13; Human Rights Watch, *Ministers of Murder* (2005), 2; <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/iran1205/>; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *Deadly Fatwa: Iran's 1988 Prison Massacre* (New Haven: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2009), 1. <https://iranhrdc.org/deadly-fatwa-irans-1988-prison-massacre/>
17. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 210.
18. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 209.
19. *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran 1988*, 28.

20. Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *Deadly Fatwa*, 94.
21. *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran 1988*, 373.
22. *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran 1988*, 374.
23. Sharooz, "With Revolutionary Rage and Rancor," 251.
24. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 213.
25. Nasser Mohajer, *Jonbesh-e Madaran-e Khavaran (Mothers of Khavaran Movement)* (2009), 231. <https://www.bidaran.net/spip.php?article>
26. Khavaran Cemetery is in southeast Tehran on Khavaran Road, off Lapeh Zanak Street. It is ten miles from Tehran on Imam Reza Highway (Tehran-Mashhad Highway).
27. Shahla Talebi, *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 33.
28. Talebi, *Ghosts of Revolution*, 34.
29. Ritually washing the body and wrapping it in a white shroud, with some variations, apply to Muslims, Jews, and Christian Armenians who were also among the executed.
30. Jafar Yaghoobi, *Let Us Water the Flowers: The Memoir of a Political Prisoner in Iran* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2011), 320.
31. Amnesty International has recognized prisoners' disappearances in Iran as enforced. Amnesty International and Justice for Iran, *Criminal Cover up: Iran Destroying Mass Graves of Victims of 1988 Killings* (2018), 5.
32. Talebi, *Ghosts of Revolution*, 36.
33. Talebi, *Ghosts of Revolution*, 31.
34. Author's interview with Nina Toobaei, December 12, 2015.
35. Maryam Nuri in *The Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran* (1988), 239–250, 249.
36. National Council of Resistance of Iran, *1988 Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran*, <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/1988-massacre-of-political-prisoners-in-iran>
37. Babak Emad, "How History Will Judge Us," *Iran Tribunal*, 2009. <https://irantribunal.com/how-history-will-judge-us/>
38. Emad, "How History Will Judge Us." The names and profiles of the executed and disappeared political prisoners are posted on a number of Iranian websites in diaspora, *Iran Tribunal*, <https://irantribunal.com/mass-executions/list-of-executions/>; *Bidaran*, "Khavaran-e Majazi," <http://www.bidaran.net/spip.php?rubrique19>; and Iraj Mesdagi's website, <http://irajmesdagi.com/>
39. Shahrooz, "With Revolutionary Rage and Rancor," 241.
40. Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *Deadly Fatwa*, 63.
41. Iran Data Portal, *Letters Dismissing Ayatollah Montazeri*, March 26, 1989. <http://irandataportal.syr.edu/letter-dismissing-montazeri>. On March 29, 1989, Montazeri resigned as the heir designate.
42. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions*, 125.
43. Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 148; Shadi Sadr and Shadi Amin, *Crime and Impunity*, 49.
44. Faraj Sarkohi was cofounder and editor in chief of Iranian magazine, *Adineh* (1988–1996). It was a significant magazine of art and culture in 1980s and 1990s Iran. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faraj_Sarkohi

45. Sarkohi, *Vakonesh-e roshanfekran-e dakkhel-e keshvar dar barabar-e koshtar-e 67 (The Reaction of Intellectuals inside Iran Toward the 1988 Executions)*, October 13, 2006. <http://asre-nou.net/1385/mehr/21/m-1367.html>
46. Sarkohi, *Vakonesh-e*.
47. Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Iran Political Executions*, AI Index MDE 13/14/88, September 22, 1988, 2.
48. Germany, France, Former Yugoslavia, and Romania, to name a few, benefited from a growing consumer market in Iran.
49. Dianne Kirby, ed. *Religion and the Cold War*. (New York: Palgrave, 2003).
50. Saeed Kamali Dehghan and David Smith, "U.S. Had Extensive Contact with Ayatollah Khomeini Before the Iran Revolution," *Guardian*, June 10, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/10/ayatollah-khomeini-jimmy-carter-administration-iran-revolution>; Kambiz Fattahi, "Two Weeks in January: America's Secret Engagement with Khomeini," *BBC News*, June 3, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36431160>
51. Robert Morrison, "Faith Fights Communism: The United States and Islam in Saudi Arabia During the Cold War" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 2009).
52. From 1979 to 1989, the CIA, in what was dubbed "Operation Cyclone," spent billions of dollars arming and financing Islamist fighters, Afghan and non-Afghan, to fight Communism and drive the Soviet army out of Afghanistan.
53. Nevertheless, much later, Resolution 159 (September 2016) and Resolution 188 (May 2017) were introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives, but no further action was taken. Author's email exchange with the Law Librarian of Congress, March 6, 2019.
54. Reynaldo Pohl, *Report on the Situation on Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, resolutions adopted by the General Assembly, 43rd Session, January 1, 1989, 211. http://repository.un.org/bitstreams/handle/11176/164166/A_RES-43-137-EN.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y
55. Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran*, 38; Shahrooz, "With Revolutionary Rage and Rancor," 242.
56. For more information on Mothers of Khavaran, please check the following sources in Persian: *Dastan-e Na Tamam-e Madaran va Khanevadeba-ye Khavaran (The Unfinished Tale: The Mothers and Families of Khavaran: Three Decades of Pursuit of Truth and Justice)* (London: Justice for Iran 2015); Nasser Mohajer, *Jonbesh-e Madaran-e Khavaran (Mothers of Khavaran Movement)* 2009, article 231. <http://www.bidaran.net/spip.php?>
57. Amnesty International, Iran, *Preserve the Khavaran Grave Site for Investigation into Mass Killings*, AI Index: MDE 13/006/2009, January 20, 2009.
58. The award is given in recognition of individuals and groups contributing to human rights and democracy. This award was shared between the Mothers of Khavaran and Adilur Rahman Khan, a human rights defender from Bangladesh.
59. Political Prisoners: The Art of Resistance in the Middle East, a website sponsored by University of Toronto, provides the list of these memoirs. <https://womenpoliticalprisoners.com>
60. Abdurrahman Boroumand Foundation (Washington, D.C.), the Iranian Tribunal (Sweden and England), the Center for Human Rights in Iran (New York),

Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (Connecticut), and Justice for Iran (London) are just some of these organizations.

61. For more information on this tribunal refer to Payam Akhavan, "Is Grass-roots Justice a Viable Alternative to Impunity? The Case of the Iranian's People's Tribunal," *Human Rights Quarterly* 39 (2017): 73–103.

62. Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre Tribunal, known as International War Crimes Tribunal, was a campaign against the American atrocities in the Vietnam War (1965–1967).

63. *Findings of the Truth Commission of International People's Tribunal* (Iran Tribunal: Sweden 2013), 7.

64. Ahmad was forced by the Iranian authorities to remove the audio file, but it had already been posted on other websites.

65. The audio file, with English captions, was posted on YouTube on September 16, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48lhBXm-dNo&t=362s>

66. Justice for Iran and Amnesty International, *Criminal Cover-Up: Iran Destroying Mass Graves of Victims of 1988 Killings*, April 2018. AI Index: MDE 13/8259/2018

67. Justice for Iran and Amnesty International, *Criminal Cover-Up*, 6.23.

68. Justice for Iran and Amnesty International, *Criminal Cover-Up*, 5.

69. Justice for Iran and Amnesty International, *Criminal Cover-Up*, 4.

70. Justice for Iran and Amnesty International, *Criminal Cover-Up*.

71. In addition to his role on the "Death Committee," Raisi, as deputy to the Chief Justice (2004–2014), played a visible role in the crackdown on protestors contesting the reelection of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009. The United States has imposed sanctions on Raisi for his human rights violations.

72. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, AL.IRN 20/2020, September 3, 2020. <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25503>

73. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 8.

74. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

75. Human Rights Watch, *Ministers of Murder: Iran's New Security Cabinet*, 2005, 3; Amnesty International, *Blood-Soaked Secrets: Why Iran's 1988 Prison Massacres are ongoing Crimes Against Humanity*, 2017, Index: MDE 13/9421/2018, 18; Center for Human Rights in Iran, *Stop Destruction of Mass Graves at Khavaran: Evidence of Crime Against Humanity Being Deliberately Wiped*, February 5, 2009. <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/209/02/khavarar/>

76. Iranian Constitution of 1979, chapter 3 in general and articles 34–39, prove the Islamic Republic has violated political prisoners' rights, https://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch03.php