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‘It's the common cause for justice and democracy that unites us’

Iranian activist Hamed Esmaeilion on the revolution in Iran, the problems with international support and the controversial nuclear agreement

Since Jina Mahsa Amini was killed in the custody of the morality police in September 2022, you have been organising demonstrations for the Iranian diaspora in more than 150 cities worldwide, mainly to support domestic protests against the regime. What were your motivations for this??

In January 2020, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps shot down the Ukrainian Airline Flight PS752. My wife and daughter were on the flight. After that, I formed the *Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims* to seek justice. The downing of the plane was another link in the long chain of crimes that the Islamic regime has committed in Iran. Over the past 44 years, thousands of families were victimised. When Mahsa was murdered by the regime in September 2022, our cause naturally resonated with the nationwide revolution. I was greatly inspired by the bravery of the young women and men in Iran, and, like many others who lived outside of Iran, I feel a bond with the millions of Iranians who strive for justice, freedom and human rights in our country. I did my part in bringing people together around the world and I helped to organise rallies in Toronto (1 October) and Berlin (22 October) to show our solidarity. It is this common cause for justice and democracy that unites us and that is my mission in life.

It’s been six months now since the death of Mahsa Amini. Is the protest movement inside Iran still active?

The Iranian women and youth are leading this revolution, and their resilience and commitment to peaceful civil disobedience endures. What we now know as the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ revolution is a major paradigm shift that is irreversible and unstoppable. Every day, I see video clips that demonstrate the extent of the bravery of Iranian women in defying the regime by removing their headscarves. They are

fearless in expressing themselves, and nothing can stop them. They refuse to live dual lives – one at home and another as 'second-class citizens' in public.

Iranian women have been oppressed for a very long time. It is not only about the forced hijab but also about the legal right to divorce, inheritance rights, being permitted access to their children after a divorce and the right to travel without permission by their male guardians. All of these rights have been severely restricted by the regime for more than four decades. That's why it is disappointing that it has taken the global community so long to acknowledge the reality of gender apartheid in Iran. Now, the new generation wants to experience a normal life, unfettered by barbaric restrictions, and I think that nobody should be permitted to deny them their basic human rights. This new generation is in control now and the revolution will continue with increasing waves of protests until victory.

Along with your colleagues from the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran, you published the *Mahsa Charter* in February. What prompted you to take this step?

The palpable demand for a principle-centric approach is what Iranians have been seeking and demanding. The alliance is comprised of individuals from different backgrounds, political beliefs and perspectives. Some are human rights activists, while others hail from the political arena. I was motivated by the prospect of bringing people together with a common cause that is rooted in basic, shared principles. We reached out to prominent activists within Iran and asked for their opinions, input and insights. When we commenced drafting the charter, we made every attempt to be inclusive and to incorporate their suggestions. We believe that this revolution is rooted within Iran and is being led by those who are paying the price inside the country. We must do everything we can to support it.

Some criticise the charter for being too superficial. What do you answer to that?

I am aware of some of the criticism, but I have also witnessed broad and public support for it. The charter was not a destination but a starting point. It is very difficult to bring together such a broad spectrum of ideas into one document and thus create a common ground. This charter demonstrates that different individuals from diverse political beliefs can sit together and cooperate in a constructive manner. This revolution is occurring inside Iran, not in Berlin or Toronto and Iranians on the ground should therefore

remain its driving force. My goal is to connect the Iranian diaspora around the world with people inside the country and reflect their different political views as well as show that we are essentially all on the same page when it comes to democratic values, justice and human rights. I think we have succeeded in this objective.

One of the most controversial figures of the Alliance is Reza Pahlavi, the oldest son of the former Shah. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock did not meet with him or with the prominent US-Iranian journalist and women's rights activist Masih Alinejad when they were at the Munich Security Conference. How do you react to this criticism of your alliance?

I do not have any problem with collaborating with people from different political beliefs to achieve a common objective. This diversity is a strength, a positive feature of the alliance. I am optimistic that this group can work together constructively while we each pursue our individual goals. The people of Iran deserve to see that different views coincide and co-exist between political figures inside Iran and in the alliance as well.

World leaders should respect the will of the Iranian people. Actually, we expected more diplomatic support from Germany, especially from the Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Chancellor Olaf Scholz. I know that they criticise the Islamic Republic of Iran, but we need action. They could talk to different political activists in the diaspora with other views, especially those inside of Iran, to better understand this paradigm shift in the country and the new generation that is leading a movement to shape Iran's future.

In the charter, you emphasise how important the support of other democratic states is. Have any bigger collaborations resulted from your efforts?

There are five elements that can spark any revolution. One is the crisis that exists inside the country every day. This trend is irreversible. The second element is the erosion from within the regime that ultimately compels individuals in the power structure to stand with the people. The third is protests and rallies on the streets that will continue. Forth is an erosion of support for the regime – that is an inevitability, but it must also resonate in the international community. The fifth element is for the international community, especially the 'free world', to acknowledge the inevitable reality inside the country. Since the members of the alliance live outside of Iran, that is what we are focusing on in our efforts.

There are aspects that democratic countries can assist us with, such as

securing internet access within Iran. Since the start of this movement, the Islamic Republic has escalated its attempts to censor and limit the internet. All social media platforms are filtered and it is very difficult for people to communicate freely with the outside world or with members of the diaspora. The other important issue is the dire situation of political prisoners in Iran. I understand that European countries are attempting to maintain an open channel of communication with the Islamic Republic of Iran, but they should not neglect the dreadful human rights situation. There are more than 100 political and public figures in Iran that are consistently under pressure. The free world should focus its attention on these individuals. We also call for sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and ask the 'free world' to recall their ambassadors to send a very clear message to the regime. We are still waiting for such concrete support and will continue to engage democratic countries on these important issues.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are drawing closer together after years of political ice age, with China as a mediator. How do you assess the situation?

The apparent rapprochement with Saudi Arabia confirms that the Iranian regime is attempting to salvage its legitimacy by using diplomatic relationships with other countries as a propaganda tool. This will solve neither the regime's domestic crisis nor its regional problems. China's intervention is out of self-interest and nothing in this arrangement will benefit the people of Iran.

As for Russia and China, I am confident that the recent indictment of Putin by the International Criminal Court is critical, and I refer to the remarks made by Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International, of double standards being applied in the last few years. If there is a political will, things certainly do happen. The European Union should not turn a blind eye to the situation in Iran.

The EU still hopes to hold on to the nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Do you think this should be on the table when it comes to any kind of negotiations?

First, I think that the JCPOA is a lost cause, and any effort to revive it is a tragic mistake. My personal experience over the last three years has been that the JCPOA undermined human rights causes, such as in the case of flight PS752. The EU and the negotiating group should not only focus on the JCPOA. Current negotiations have not adjusted to the recent developments in Iran or the will of the Iranian people. They have ignored the democratic aspirations of Iranians, and that is

exactly what the Islamic Regime wants.

I am often asked what will occur first: the Islamic regime's ability to obtain a nuclear bomb or the victory of the revolution. This is a very difficult question to answer, but we need to empower the people of Iran, not the tyrants who are ruling the country. Such a change of attitude by Western countries could ensure that transformation can occur peacefully and in the direction of democracy. When you pay attention to warmongers such as the Islamic Republic, you tend to forget that they do not really have an interest in a good-faith solution. The regime has spent millions of dollars on the enrichment of uranium and its nuclear ambitions, while at the same time entirely depriving and neglected other regions in Iran that now suffer because of the misguided nuclear ambitions of the regime. Western countries must not abandon their democratic values when they negotiate with a regime like the Islamic Republic. This is a tragic mistake for Europe and it is a tragic injustice to the people of Iran.

The interview was conducted by Lisa Felgendreff.



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Hamed Esmaeilion is a human rights activist and member of the Alliance for Democracy and Freedom in Iran. He has been organising demonstrations against the Islamic Republic for people in the Iranian diaspora worldwide since 1 October 2022. He is also the president and spokesperson for the survivors' organisation Association of Families of Flight PS752 Victims.