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“ALL OF US HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY AND HAVE TO DEFEND EACH OTHER”

Firuzeh Mahmoudi

• *By Renata Bahrapour*¹ •

Firuzeh Mahmoudi is a woman of Iranian origin, born in the United States. When she was a child she went to live in Iran with her mother and her sister. Her first contact with activism was at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. She describes this as “a very formative” experience in her life. “My mother was a political activist at that time. I used to go to protests even though I was very young. I experienced the revolution and didn’t go to school for months [because they were shut down in the entire country]. I saw history unfold”, she says.

Some years later, because of the Iran-Iraq War (1980 - 1988) and the economic instability her country was facing, her father took Firuzeh and her sister back to the United States. Even so, the time that she lived in Iran was enough for her to gain a perception of a life based on activism.

Her involvement in promoting human rights began with environmental activism when she worked for the United Nations and several non-governmental organisations. Every now and then, Firuzeh would go to Iran to visit her mother, who had stayed there until 1993, and to meet up with colleagues who she exchanged information with. However, her activities really took off through a march in 2009.

In that year, large-scale protests contesting the recent presidential elections were happening across Iran. Firuzeh decided to organise a day for global solidarity with the Iranian people on 25 July 2009, “Global Day of Action”. This day led to protests in 110 towns and

cities, with the participation of seven Nobel prize winners, in coordination with the Irish band U2 that performed on that same day.

Following this event, Firuzeh made the transition from her work as an environment activist to starting United for Iran, which she describes as "a group of thirty or more former political prisoners, dissidents and human rights activists working to improve human rights conditions and civic freedom in Iran. The group supports movements from within Iran as directly as possible".

For over 13 years, United for Iran has been providing technological tools to help build a free democratic society, with the participation of activists all over the world, from different geographical and ethnic origins of Iran. A third of her team lives in countries that have borders with Iran. They work together in a wide network of data collection.

One of these tools is the "Iran Prison Atlas", a database on all the political prisoners in Iran, detailing which prison buildings they are in and providing information on who the most rigid judges in the country are. Firuzeh believes that transparent documentation of these cases makes it possible to hold people accountable for the systemic abuse carried out by the Islamic Republic of Iran and therefore to defend all the political prisoners identified on the platform.

"IranCubator" is a project to design applications for civic engagement which aim to safeguard the country's citizens and to sustain and facilitate the efforts of civil society in Iran, akin to hacking the political and social system imposed in the country.

"Gershad" is one of the most noteworthy applications. It was built to obstruct the *Gasht-e Ershad*, the morality police and is a tool that shows the location of officers on the basis of denouncements and information shared by the users themselves, principally women, to help each other to make diversions in order to avoid the security forces.

"Gershad" would certainly have been very useful for Firuzeh when at 16 years of age she was detained by the Iranian morality police for five hours in the city of Kerman, her mother's home town in the southeast of the country. She was held because her hair had been seen in public when she was rearranging her headscarf.²

This story is shared by many Iranian women, including Mahsa Amini, the young Iranian woman of Kurdish origin who died at 22 years of age in the custody of the same police force in September 2022.³ Since then, according to an estimate by the independent television station Iran International, over 18,000 people have been arrested in connection with the protests throughout Iran that followed Mahsa's death. In addition people have been sentenced to death and others have already been executed.⁴

When asked about what this organised movement of Iranian women is, Firuzeh answers without hesitation, classifying this phenomenon as "unprecedented [...] not only in Iran but

in the region, or even globally”. The absolute leadership of the women in this process and the incredible level of solidarity they are receiving is also drawing attention. She explains that in the past, minority groups like the Kurds would have been attacked but that now “anyone who has been persecuted, killed, wounded or arrested has countrywide support. People appear in public, smiling, showing their support and love and saying that they have not been forgotten and that they are going to remain on the streets”.

There is a clear message being given to Iran by the people of Iran. “I swear by the blood of my friends and my fellow citizens that I will stay until the end”, Firuzeh recites, echoing one of the chants being repeated by young people on the country’s streets. She believes the demands presented in the protests go beyond compulsory wearing of the *hijab*. This is about having religious freedom, freedom of expression, gender equality, bodily autonomy, food security, environmental protection, access to education, being able to live life as you wish and being part of society. “This is about really having basic rights”, she says.

Another issue that goes hand in hand with discussions on women, politics and religion is the non-secular nature of the Iranian state which will inevitably have to be addressed. The ideology that has been in place since the 1979 Islamic Revolution has seeped into the private and collective lives of the population, exercising control over bodies and minds and oppressing over half the country and this problem directly impacts on religious minorities. “Obviously religious minorities in Iran are persecuted and the bahá’is are persecuted more than any other group”, says Firuzeh.⁵

Despite challenges, she says that the transition to a secular state “is not about not having a religion”. It is instead a question of living in a society without a theocratic government, a society in which people have the option to choose to demonstrate what they believe in and the way they want to believe in it. “I think it is not only possible but defines something of an awareness of the desire of the people of Iran. How did we build this state? This is a matter of how we make the transition to that which people want [...] and of understanding what they are saying on the streets.”

These desires may seem fundamental but they are the very pillars that sustain the Islamic Republic, or even Iranian society as a whole. So, what needs to be done for change to take place at the roots of society? And furthermore, how should this process occur? Firuzeh’s response is simple: guaranteeing that all persecuted groups, ethnic and religious minorities, all women and those who have in any way been targeted by the system, must be included in this process. She says “all of us have a role to play and have to defend each other. [...] This is a movement without leaders which means we are all leaders”.

Firuzeh also believes there is a very fine line between hope and despair in this situation, principally for those who are imprisoned. For this reason, the work of United for Iran is based on the belief that it is the people who are in Iran who have to take the lead. However, support is needed to show the effort they are making and make their voices heard, in places

where it is safe, which is why civic engagement apps are being developed. An additional objective is to make it possible for all human rights groups, outside the country, to speak with wide international audiences.

Firuzeh’s activism encompasses a strong sense of unity and oneness. She sees that we are all connected and that the way each country acts affects all countries. For her this means recognition that her work is not a mere choice but is a privilege she carries with her and that she has a duty to contribute for the betterment of the world. “Being able to do this every day and night as much as I can, is a blessing [...] Not everyone has the luxury of being able to do what they want, with purpose in their lives, do they? [...] I feel that we should all pull together to reach this dream [...]. So, I’m not doing this as a favour to anyone but because this is the world I want to live in”.



Firuzeh Mahmoudi.
Source: Personal archive photo.

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Original in Portuguese. Translated by Jane do Carmo.

NOTES

1 • Renata Bahrapour is a lawyer and member of the office of external affairs of the Bahá’í community in Brazil. Bahrapour works on issues of human rights violations against Bahá’ís in Iran and other countries. She is also on the District Committee for Religious Diversity and is secretary-general of the Commission of Religious Freedom of the Brazilian Bar Association/DF.

2 • Leah Hunter, “The Woman Building Iran’s Civic Tech

Sector (From Across The World)”. *Forbes*, January 3, 2017, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/leahhunter/2017/01/03/the-woman-building-irans-civic-tech-sector-from-across-the-world/?sh=4bd9f46853c8>.

3 • Farnaz Fassihi, “In Iran, Woman’s Death After Arrest by the Morality Police Triggers Outrage.” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/middleeast/iran-woman-death.html>.

nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/middleeast/iran-death-woman-protests.html; Patrick Wintour, "Mahsa Amini: dozens injured in Iran protests after death in custody." *The Guardian*, September 18, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/18/mahsa-amini-dozens-injured-in-iran-protests-after-death-in-custody>; David Gritten, "Mahsa Amini: Protests over woman's death claim more lives in Iran." *BBC*, September 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62986057>.

4 • "Iran: 26 people risk execution in relation to protests," Amnesty International, December 16, 2022, accessed on December 31, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/6309/2022/en/>; "Iran Executes Two Prisoners Arrested in Ongoing Protests, Threatens More to Follow," *Death Penalty Information Center*, December 12, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/news/iran-executes-two-prisoners-arrested-in-ongoing-protests-threatens-more-to-follow>; "Iran To Try 10 Underage Protesters On Death Penalty Charges," *Iran International*, November 30, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202211303156>.

5 • "The Baha'i community is among the most severely persecuted religious minorities in Iran, according to

the experts. [...] The UN experts said this year has seen a marked increase in arrests of Baha'is, as well as targeting. By April, they had received reports that over 1,000 members were awaiting imprisonment, following their initial arrests and hearings" ("Rights experts urge Iran to end 'systematic persecution' of religious minorities," *UN News*, August 22, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/08/1125162>); "The despicable onslaught against the Baha'i religious minority is yet another manifestation of the Iranian authorities' decades long persecution of this peaceful community. Baha'is in Iran cannot feel safe in their homes or while exercising their faith because they are at risk of persecution," said Heba Morayef, Amnesty International's Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa" ("Iran: Stop ruthless attacks on persecuted Baha'i religious minority," *Amnesty International*, August 24, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/08/iran-stop-ruthless-attacks-on-persecuted-bahai-religious-minority>); Sara Baptista, "I cannot find the words to express how happy I am to be able to say that I am a Bahá'í." *Sur Journal* no. 29 (2019), accessed December 31, 2022, <https://sur.conectas.org/en/i-cannot-find-the-words-to-express-how-happy-i-am-to-be-able-to-say-that-i-am-a-bahai/>.



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