

# Taking Responsibility in the Face of Evil: The Story of Two Impromptu Librarians and Their Hope

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Anti-Americanism,<sup>1</sup> hostage-taking,<sup>2</sup> war,<sup>3</sup> bombing,<sup>4</sup> terrorism, religious persecution, public flogging, stoning, mass executions, the execution of children, limb amputation, execution of homosexuals, Holocaust denial, and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction—these are what people in the West think of when they hear the name Iran. How to deal with Iran has thus become one of the major U.S. diplomatic and strategic concerns and a key issue in partisan bickering. The views on this issue range from one extreme to the other. Some advocate a policy of engagement; they argue that the Islamic Republic of Iran is the legitimate representative of the Iranian people, whose Islamic culture is different from Western culture with its standards regarding human rights. Questioning Iran's human rights record and pressing the government to reform and democratize, they claim, is a doomed policy. It would be better to reassure the government on its internal security, acknowledge its international role, and provide enough incentive for it to give up the support of terrorism on the international stage. Others believe such policy will only encourage Iran to continue on the same track, and so argue that the United States and other Western powers should take a firm stand against the rogue state that is run from Tehran and has carried out atrocities as far away as Buenos Aires, Argentina. They promote targeted sanctions against Iran, support for pro-democracy forces inside the country, and even military action as the ultimate deterrent against Iran going nuclear. Between these two extremes there are more modulated views leaning to one side or the other.

Crucial and fascinating as this debate may be, it is not the subject of this essay. For the same problem may be viewed from another standpoint, not one that puts the burden of acting on the shoulders of a foreign state, but rather one that focuses on how things look from the perspective of average Iranians, the ordinary people whose views and attitudes seldom, if ever, make headlines.

For indeed the elements listed above—discrimination, violence, terrorism, persecution, execution, relations with the United States, and the urge to know what is to be done—are part of the lives of millions of Iranians both inside and outside the country. I would like to tell the story of one such experience—one of those little known and seldom-noticed tales that, once put together with countless others, weave the fabric of a nation's history.

The story is about two historians—my sister Roya and me. We were, first, witnesses and, later, victims of political violence. We sought refuge in the United States and tried to shoulder our own individual responsibility in the face of evil by creating a foundation to memorialize the Islamic Republic's atrocities and to promote the cause of human rights in Iran. Our base is in the United States; our battleground is a virtual one; our arsenal is

a web site dedicated to the memory of those killed by the Islamic Republic of Iran and a virtual human rights and democracy library. **Omid, A Memorial in Defense of Human Rights** is

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the name of our project, and it can be found at the web site of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation (ABF), the address of which is [www.abfiran.org](http://www.abfiran.org).

This essay describes the connection between the underlying philosophy of Omid and our personal experience. I will share our experience as impromptu archivists and librarians, and will explore what we have learned since we launched the site in January 2006 and what lies ahead after the few experimental steps we have taken. My hope is that Omid will benefit from the advice and expertise of *MultiCultural Review's* readers.

## Political Violence, Guilt, and Shame

*Omid* means "hope" in Persian; hope is what brings us all to America. Hope for dignity, prosperity, and a better life. Of the people who have come to America over the past three centuries, many have fled poverty and many others have sought shelter from persecution. Like most of our fellow countrymen, my sister and I belong to the latter category. Ironically, we have run away from persecution, and yet we carry it with us to the land of our hopes. We Iranians carry outrage, suffering, and vivid memories of injustice like so much baggage in our souls. We find different ways of coping with the cumbersome load—maybe trying to forget, maybe haunted by the past, maybe a bit of both. As far as my sister and I are concerned, oblivion has never been an option.

Our migration had two stages. The first, in the late 1970s, brought us from an Iran in the grips of revolutionary upheaval to a France that at the time we considered the cradle of human rights, the mythic and almost mystical land of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. This first stop was cruelly disappointing. France was not a hospitable land for immigrants. And the persecution that we had fled caught up with us in Paris. At least nine Iranian dissidents have been assassinated in France since 1979. One of them was our father, Abdorrahman Boroumand, whom agents of the Islamic



something new does happen, due perhaps to the intensity of the pain and suffering. Somehow, its psychological impact is not commensurate with what one “knows” or anticipates. The day after my father’s murder, living had become such an ordeal that I felt the urge to find Holocaust survivors and ask how they had managed to cope, given the magnitude of what they had been through. The abyss of the experience affects one’s mind. The



Abdorrahman Boroumand, 1927–1991

notion of evil, once an abstraction, becomes palpable. One experiences an encounter with true evil, with the mystery of iniquity, perhaps because the moment the crime is committed there is an eclipse of humanity, and it is irremediable. A moment is by definition transient but paradoxically those framing the unspeakable become eternal. There is nothing you can do. It is done. Forever.

For a decade, I had been unconsciously seeking to prevent this crime. Along with Roya, I had worked to compile accurate and systematic reports about rights violations in Iran, while my historical studies of the French Revolution sought to understand human rights, to figure out what politics is, and what the ideological response to authoritarianism and totalitarianism should be. But I could not do anything about the killing of my own father. We, the children, were all crushed between the urge to act and our sense of total helplessness. Hence came the dark days of cohabitation with a crime that soils one’s own soul and shatters one’s self esteem, with all the loss of dignity that implies.

To recover one’s dignity and overcome the feeling of guilt, we had to figure out how to do the impossible, how to remedy the irremediable. The first questions we dealt with were “why?” and “how?” The answer to the “why” question requires years of scholarly work, but to

answer “how” is easier, because for such a thing to happen you need not only the evil thought and the executioner, but also all those who merely looked the other way, all those ordinary people like ourselves who kept silent when the first crime was committed in 1979, then the second and the third, and so on—all those millions of innocent accomplices and guilty bystander. Thus, to remedy the irremediable, we thought that we should first make amends ourselves, take our responsibility, break our silence, tell the truth, and blame the perpetrators.

And this is where the United States comes into the picture. Many Americans are inclined to blame themselves for political debacles around the globe. And many in the world have found in this scruple an easy way to evade their own responsibility. It may be fashionable to blame it all on America in general and on George W. Bush in particular, but our story refers to another America. The United States of our experience is not the U.S. government, the State Department, or elite policy makers. It is a democratic polity, open and hospitable, with all its shortcomings—a political entity where an ordinary immigrant or citizen does not feel or need to be invisible. This America is a place where age, gender, background, and accent matter little, a place where

Republic murdered on April 18, 1991. He was a lawyer and, more importantly, an advocate of democracy, and for this “crime” the Islamic Republic of Iran extrajudicially executed him. France did little to seek justice, to apprehend those responsible, or even to lodge an official protest against such a crime, committed on its very soil. We were left to seek justice on our own.

We had been living in fear for many years. We knew our father was at risk, even in Paris, for the government’s killing campaign abroad had started in December 1979 and had churned ruthlessly on ever since. We knew how pitiless the adversary was; we had witnessed the crescendo of executions in Iran.<sup>5</sup> I still vividly recall the first summary executions by the new regime in February 1979.<sup>6</sup> I was in Iran then. I had come back from France, where I was studying, to research the exciting revolution that was taking place in my homeland. It was a beautiful bright morning; I was in the middle of a seventeenth-

century square surrounded by blue mosques and royal buildings in Iran’s grand old capital, Esfahan. At the entrance of the bazaar (Iran’s traditional covered market) dailies featuring the bullet-riddled bodies of former high-ranking officials in the shah’s regime were placarded to the walls. They had received hasty, closed trials—in violation of any semblance of due process or the rights of the accused. In a proverbial eyewink, the shah’s officials had gone from big shots in a monarchical dictatorship to early victims of an emerging totalitarian regime. As they became victims, we—the supporters of the revolution—became responsible, at least morally responsible. That day, I lost my innocence.

What happened next is well known throughout history. First they kill your adversaries, then they take your acquaintances and your friends, and then they come for you or those closest to you. Step by step, we experienced this tragedy. We threw ourselves in the battle for human rights,<sup>7</sup> each time hoping that the publication of one of our damning reports would somehow stop the madness. Our delusion was shattered soon enough as one, two, three, and more of our friends were executed. We were left alone with our rage, our tears, and our sense of total helplessness and uselessness.

And so, when one’s own turn comes, the tragedy doesn’t bring (or seem to bring) some new intellectual experience with it. Yet

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### *Omid means “hope” in Persian*

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ideas and projects are greeted with interest, and where you often hear: “Go for it, you can do it!” It was in the United States with its miraculous gift to psychologically empower the individual that our project could flourish.

This may seem banal to Americans, but after my father’s death, we were amazed to find ourselves in a country where accessing one of the world’s most important libraries, the Library of Congress, requires no other formality or condition than having a photo ID and getting a reader’s card; where individuals from different walks of life are given the opportunity and incentive to set up foundations and help with projects and charitable works dear to their hearts; where civil society is strong and vibrant and has included us as members who have learned a lot from it and are still learning. Consider us Iranians, Americans, Iranian Americans, or citizens of the world—it matters little. What matters more is that nowhere else in the world could we do what we are doing in the United States—passionately, resolutely, but empty-handed. Native-born Americans may take this for granted, but to us it bears every appearance of a miracle.

Our project could not have been implemented without numerous U.S.-based NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that took an interest in supporting human rights around the world with three staples: idealism, money, and technological know-how. It is our Iranian experience, however, and our sense of responsibility growing from it, that provides the ground on which Omid stands.

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We knew that the Ayatollah Khomeini was not forced on the Iranian people. We knew about the 1953 coup that the United States had engineered against the Iranian Prime Minister Mosadegh,<sup>8</sup> but we had also seen that more recently, in 1979, the government of the United States had done its best to support what the people of Iran wanted. We knew that in April 1979, no one had conspired to send millions of individuals to the ballot boxes to cast foolhardy “yes” votes regarding the installation of an Islamic Republic the actual content and implications of which remained obscure.<sup>9</sup> We were well aware that no U.S. government agency had forced Iranian intellectuals, political activists, and ordinary people to approve or keep silent about the summary executions that started in the wake of the revolution and are still going on today. Our questions, then, were not about

*American* actions in 1979, but rather about what had been missing or faulty in *our* ideas, *our* ethics, and *our* political choices.

To recapitulate, we were facing two challenges. The first was how to remedy the irremediable loss of lives. The second was how to remedy the cultural, ideological, and ethical shortcomings that had allowed such evils to take place. For the two of us to take on such a titanic task of course seemed somewhat foolish. But we pushed back our feelings of inadequacy and pressed on anyway. What helped us to do this was our observation, based on several years spent closely monitoring what was going on in Iran, that a whole generation had begun to ask the same questions that we were asking, and had begun to look for solutions. We saw how introspection and self-criticism had come to rank as “done things” among the elite of the revolutionary generation. Clearly all those who had been given to dismissing us as “bourgeois” activists for promoting human rights during the 1980s were discovering that these universal rights were not so fictive and misguided after all. We also noticed how the children of the revolution had turned away from the totalitarian ideology that the regime had tried to drum into them at school, and were turning instead to liberal doctrines and values based on respect for human rights and the dignity of the individual.<sup>10</sup> We observed that many scattered but thematically sympathetic actions were being taken inside Iran by citizens groping for responses to the same questions with which we had wrestled. We understood that our effort might form one small but real strand in a humane, nonviolent, and liberal-democratic “thread of Ariadne” that might someday prove vital in escaping the totalitarian labyrinth in which Khomeini and his lieutenants had trapped our country.

### **The Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation and Omid**

Therefore it was with the utmost humility that we incorporated in March 2001, in Washington, D.C., the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation for the Promotion of Human Rights and Democracy in Iran. We named the foundation after our father to make two statements. The first and most obvious is addressed to his killers: You may have destroyed Abdorrahman Boroumand’s body, but you cannot kill his spirit or the principles for which he gave his life. On the contrary, others have taken up the struggle for his ideas.

The second statement conveyed by the name of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation is subtler and is meant to break with a tradition in our country that obstructs the development of a healthy body politic. Too often, Iranians are either exclusively focused on their private interests in the narrowest sense, and ignore the rights and duties of citizenship, or else they go to the other extreme and preach a kind of citizenship that views *any* self-interest as illegitimate and ignoble. By naming the foundation after our father—someone close to us whose memory, legacy, and honor we are privately and intimately concerned to promote—we are also calling for a new kind of Iranian commonwealth where individual interest, properly understood and informed by an ethical spirit of citizenship, in fact constitutes the true substance of public interest. A country exists, in other words, primarily so that its people may flourish, and not the other way round.

Our advocacy for a body politic founded on the equal rights of all without discrimination has taken the shape of Omid. We





seek justice for our father but we won't get it if we don't fight for the right to justice for all fathers, all brothers, all mothers, all sisters, and all children. There is no right for us if there is no right for them. Our indi-

vidual interest will be protected only when theirs is too. We want to tell our fellow citizens that we understand this, and invite them to think about it.

Evil consists in the eclipse of humanity. So what we sought to do *a posteriori* was to restore the universal essence of human nature and honor human dignity. The perpetrators kill to eliminate their victims. This cannot be undone, yet it is possible to bring these people back in memory. By violating their victims' human rights, the perpetrators sought to deny their human dignity. To remedy such an outrage, we could posthumously restore their human rights—hence the idea of creating a virtual memorial dedicated to all individuals whose violent deaths can be traced to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Omid intends to list and document, insofar as possible, the story of every person killed by the Islamic Republic and to create a file in both Persian and English that will serve as a virtual memorial to them, one that enshrines their stories and records their ordeals. The only common denominator is that each victim was a human being whose rights as a defendant were violated and who was killed outside the due process of law.

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In each story we list the abused human rights of the victim; by clicking on the article the visitor is able to read about the relevant human rights.

The question was how to begin, how to document all the executions. We chose as our primary source the official statements of the Islamic Republic's judicial authorities and their official publications, to which we added reports by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. We also find our information in reports published by the United Nations' special counsel appointed to investigate the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Political parties' statements and communiqués constitute yet another source. We started to work at the Library of Congress, one of the rare libraries in the world that has managed to acquire and

catalogue Iranian official newspapers covering the now almost 30 years since the revolution began. The Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago also owns copies of some of the important short-lived independent newspapers of 1979—a truly precious source of information. Since the advent of the Internet, we have been using all the official and semi-official judicial or news sources that the Iranian government has put online.

Part of our work consists in encouraging victims' relatives and friends to tell their side of the story, so that the perpetrator's narrative will not be the only record in the annals of history. We approach the victims' relatives and interview them. We also call on the victims' surviving cellmates to help us complete and rectify the information. We were lucky that Roya is not only a meticulous and well-trained historian, but one who also has extensive experience interviewing victims as a result of her work at Human Rights Watch. She became responsible for setting up the methods with which we document victims' cases and trains and supervises every researcher who joins our team. Roya's former colleagues at Human Rights Watch supported us with their comments and advice. We also were fortunate to have very early on the support and technical assistance of the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG), first based at the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS) and later at Benetech, and HRDAG's leader, Patrick Ball. He and his remarkable and dedicated team helped us with our technical infrastructure and provided us with Analyzer, a database designed for the statistical analysis of human rights violations. HRDAG customized Analyzer for our project so that we could have the data entered in both English and Persian and we could allocate a space in the database for the story of each victim.

Through Omid, we acknowledge each victim's humanity and create a space for empathy. We provide loved ones with a forum to talk about those they have lost to the Islamic Republic's injustice, and even a venue within which to mount the defense that the victim was not allowed to mount in life. There is no discrimination regarding nationality, gender, religion, political ideas, or charges lodged. The most fascinating and courageous political activist gets a file identical in outline to that of the most wretched and vile criminal, provided that this criminal was denied due process of law. For as much as we want to shame the perpetrators, we ourselves need to comprehend clearly what universality means. As victims we must understand that with regard to our human rights, nothing distinguishes any one of us from the others. It is by having an acute understanding of this principle that we will be able to draw the right lesson from our past errors and stop a similar tragedy in the future. For this reason the structure of the narrative for each victim is inspired by the international standards of the due process of law. To read the stories is to become familiar with the logic of due process.

This is our way of making amends as ordinary citizens, by acknowledging the wrong done to the victims, by educating ourselves about human rights, and by listing as accurately as possible what has happened and what is still happening. For the truth is the indispensable path to reform and change as well as peace and reconciliation with our conscience and with each other. In its mirror we can find out where we have gone astray and ponder the nature of the evil perpetrated by our persecutors, helped by our silence or our indifference.

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The endeavor has another virtue regarding the world's general understanding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Simply by making available accurate data, Omid can shed light on circumstances that are seldom brought to the world's attention, and thus make it more likely that some of the most enduring misconceptions about Iran will be corrected. For that purpose, we have equipped the memorial with a search tool that allows the visitor to find records based not only on name but on gender, age, religion, nationality, charges, country of execution, date of execution, and mode of execution. Take for instance the religious creed of the victims; many in the world would assume that under a regime that claims to represent the true face of Islam, the followers of this religion would enjoy a better fate than those of forbidden or merely tolerated faiths. Yet a quick search on Omid, (by selecting three categories of Muslim, Sunni and Shi'a) will show that the vast majority of the victims are Muslim. Omid is a work in progress and it will require a decade before the data gathered, processed and entered in the database can be used for statistical purposes.

### **ABF's Human Rights and Democracy Library**

We created the ABF to help with the quest to understand why and how the Islamic revolution came about. For almost 30 years, many of us have been reflecting on the causes of the Islamic revolution and wondering why the Iranian nation rejected liberal democracy when it had an opportunity, in January 1979, to embrace that form of government.<sup>11</sup> The Human Rights and Democracy Library is an electronic database meant to become a resource for all those who would like to explore these questions; it seeks also to promote knowledge and understanding of human rights and democracy among Iranians.

As we rake through our remembrances of the revolutionary era, we can't help but notice how poor was our generation's knowledge of political philosophy, liberal democracy, and human rights. Growing up under a dictatorship that did not allow any space for open debate and freedom of expression, schooled under an educational system that favored uncritical absorption of knowledge through memorization and paid no heed to the development of children's critical and investigative capacities, our generation was an easy mark for those pushing exciting, clandestine, totalitarian ideologies that were fashionable in the world during the 1960s and 1970s. Iran's life as a modern nation-state was too short and too authoritarian<sup>12</sup> to furnish us with historic sources and touchstones of the kind that might have underwritten a choice for liberal democracy. We had no Declaration of Independence and no Bill of Rights on which our potential Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, or Martin Luther King might have taken his stand. From the awareness of this deficiency came our idea of a virtual library that might contain faithful Persian-language translations

of all the vital texts on political philosophy, democracy, and human rights to which advocates of freedom around the world look for insight and inspiration. Some of these texts are already available in Persian; others we are having translated. The library also forms an annex to the Memorial by including a collection devoted to the stories of people whom the Islamic Republic tortured or subjected to cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishments but did not actually kill. The collections of the library are as follows:

#### ■ **Democracy Watch**

A selection of letters, communiqués and documents relevant to Iran's current pro-democracy movement are archived in this collection, translated into English, and made available to the public.

#### ■ **Human Rights Instruments**

This collection contains all internationally adopted declarations, covenants, principles, conventions, and protocols that guarantee and organize the implementation of the individual's natural rights in the political, judicial, social, economic, and private spheres. These instruments are part of the common heritage of humanity and although the rights they advocate do not enjoy the same legal status everywhere, their implementation is morally desirable regardless of their status in international law. Many of these instruments, in particular regarding the administration of justice, have been translated into Persian for the first time.

#### ■ **Human Rights Debate**

Texts related to debates and controversies regarding human rights will be gathered in this collection, which includes topics such as capital punishment, truth commissions, cultural relativism, women, and religious and minority rights. The objective here is to familiarize Iranian human rights advocates with the political and intellectual challenges that the discourse of human rights has had to confront throughout its history.

#### ■ **International Human Rights Organizations' Reports on Human Rights Abuses in Iran**

Reports on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran published since 1979 by international human rights organizations are gathered in this collection and will gradually be translated into Persian. In doing so, the library makes available to the Iranian public a juridical line of reasoning based on the universality of human rights, and it thus promotes an understanding of these rights. In browsing this collection, Iranian visitors can learn that the world did not ignore them during the harsh years of isolation and repression. What is more, these reports contain important pages of Iran's history, and so should be available to the public. The creation of this collection is also a way for ABF to pay tribute to those jurists and human rights advocates who have researched, compiled, and published these valuable documents.

#### ■ **National Human Rights Organizations' Reports on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran**

This collection contains reports and articles by Iranian human rights groups and advocates. The number and quality of these

texts is a good indicator of the level of the Iranian political elite's awareness of and sensitivity to human rights during the successive stages of the Islamic Republic's history.

### ■ The Islamic Republic Against Human Rights

This collection addresses the causes and circumstances of human rights violations by the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has four subcollections. The first one contains scholarly books and articles concerning the origins, nature, and modalities of human rights violations in Iran. The second gathers official statements and documents that reflect the official rationale sustaining human rights violations. In the third, documents related to the organization and functioning of the judiciary will be made available with analytical notes that stress the antithetical character of the existing system with respect to human rights standards. The fourth deals with laws and regulations that contravene human rights.

### ■ Official Documents

This collection aims at archiving whatever official documents and police investigations may shed light on the executions and

circumstances of their arrests and the conditions of their detentions will also be selected and translated. Excerpts from the memoirs and testimonies of the Islamic Republic's officials will be progressively archived and translated for this collection.

### ■ History

This collection is dedicated to the history of democracy and pro-democracy movements in Iran. Historical truth and collective memory are the first victims of totalitarian regimes. With no memory, people grow morally and intellectually dependent on their rulers and what their rulers tell them. No wonder, therefore, that the nascent Islamic Republic made freedom of the press one of its first targets. The History collection aims to archive different documents that bear witness to the failures and successes of pro-democracy movements in Iran since the mid-nineteenth century. By making these documents available to the younger generation in particular, the library wishes to evoke forgotten figures and moments of pro-democracy struggles in the midst of revolutionary ferment. This endeavor is a small contribution to the efforts of a generation to restore Iran's collective memory badly damaged by 50 years of monarchical dictatorship and 29 years of a violent totalitarian regime.

### Making Haste, Slowly

Understandably, Omid and the Human Rights Library are works in progress, and frankly the gap between our ambition and our means makes me smile. We would need a full-time expert for each of the library collections to be able to gather, translate, annotate, contextualize, and upload selected texts. The same is true of Omid and its thousands and thousands of victims and stories. Funding is a major challenge, but far from the only one we face. We need bilingual researchers, and many are afraid to join the team, often because of relatives still living in Iran, or because of hopes some day to return there. The fear and intimidation that the Islamic Republic spreads have made themselves felt in our work, as when relatives of victims express reluctance to add information to the stories of their loved ones. The last but predictable obstacle is the filtering of the site by the government in Iran, which is constantly working on new ways to jam the Internet. Eighteen months after Omid went live, the Tehran regime managed to make access to its full content from within Iran highly difficult.

Since Omid went live in January 2006, we have been monitoring visits to it and the Library. It appears that journalists, researchers, and the world public at large still know little about the resources that Omid holds. One reason is that our home page was made of images rather than texts, so Internet search engines were unable to find the web site if a researcher typed in "Iran human rights," for instance. We have changed our home page to fix this flaw. The other reason is that we have done very little to reach out to libraries, librarians, and universities to introduce Omid and the Library and to show how the information stored in these two databases can help researchers, journalists, and students who work on Iran. Being library rats, Roya and I tend to



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killings that agents of the Islamic Republic have carried out in Iran and other countries.

### ■ The Idea of Democracy

This collection comprises two subcollections.

- 1) Religion and Politics. Major classical texts of monotheist religions concerning the status of the human being in the body politic as well as the individual's relationship with God and secular authorities are selected and translated into Persian. This sub-collection contains four sections: A) Judaism and Democracy, B) Christianity and Democracy, C) Islam and Democracy, and D) Other Religions and Democracy.
- 2) Democracy. This subcollection is devoted to the idea of democracy and representative regimes. Texts regarding the religious and philosophical origins of the concept of human rights as well as basic writings regarding the idea of democracy and the advent of representative regimes constitute the content of this collection.

### ■ Testimonies of Victims of Human Rights Abuses in Iran

This collection is dedicated to documenting the suffering inflicted upon the victims of the regime. A number of former political prisoners have published their memoirs, excerpts of which will be made available in this collection both in Persian and in English. Letters and complaints written by prisoners that depict the



postpone advocacy in favor of research, and having but slender means we have not been able to delegate the task to professionals. This is not to say that people from around the world don't visit the web site. The highest percentage of our visitors is from Iran (varying between 40 percent and 70 percent), but we also have visitors from around the globe. They come from the United States and Australia, from all Western and Eastern European countries, from the Russian Federation, India, China, Mexico, Brazil, and other places. In 2007, we recorded 83,033 unique visitors who made a total of 142,276 visits, viewed 500,504 pages, and totaled 1,295,580 hits.

Another interesting observation addresses the way in which Iranians use Omid and the Human Rights Library. Since the average Iranian visitor is not trained to search actively for subjects of interest, the library is not used as well as it should be. We realize that even human rights activists who are familiar with our work have not explored the library, and each time we have to indicate what they can find in the library for their purposes. To remedy this problem, we decided to make the library go to them, to have it become an electronic itinerant library, so to speak. We are developing an e-list and sending out documents that we think might be of help according to circumstances. For instance in March 2007 the government of Iran started a violent campaign against women's rights activists in Iran and their "One Million Signatures Campaign for Gender Equality." Scores of women's rights advocates were arrested and their gathering was banned. We have translated into Persian the *UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*; we sent out the link to the declaration with an introductory note reminding readers that the Iranian government should refrain from harassing peaceful human rights advocates, but more importantly has a positive duty to protect them! The e-mail went to a thousand people, and the declaration was viewed 286 times. A few days later, in a gathering at the home of one of the women's rights advocates, their leaders explicitly referred to the Declaration and blamed the government for failing to assume its internationally recognized responsibilities. We also used the occasion of UNESCO's Day for Tolerance and the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to send out the links to the Persian translations of the *UN Declaration Against Discrimination and Intolerance* and a chapter from a historical work on human rights. Both texts received many viewings.

As a result, we were encouraged to choose the same approach for Omid. The plight of Iran's Baha'i religious minority is well known. In 2007, the government started yet another campaign of vilification and harassment against this peaceful minority. We chose the anniversary of the execution of 17 Baha'is in 1983 to send out a newsletter drawing attention to their plight today and their vulnerability under a government that has opted for violence against all kind of dissidents. We were pleasantly surprised to see that the newsletter was posted on several popular sites and that other Iranian political groups started to issue declarations in defense of the Baha'i minority. The positive feedback regarding this initiative prompted us to send out another newsletter when a number of Iranian-American scholars were arrested in Iran and forced to confess to crimes that they had not committed. We used our resources in the Library and Omid and drew up some copy about the history of coerced confessions in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The information found its way into an op-ed article in the

*Washington Post*. Posted on the library web site, the newsletter regarding coerced confessions was viewed 1,166 times.

The most encouraging sign with regard to Omid comes from the relatives of victims. Hardly had the site been launched—and with little notice to the Iranian public—before victims' kinfolk began to send us forms completing, correcting, or adding cases. We processed the information submitted as quickly as we could (which was not terribly quickly, I am afraid to say) and completed numbers of case files this way. Omid interacts with witnesses and asks them for more information and a photograph of the victim. We have been able to complete several hundred cases thank to witnesses' contribution. Numerous forms were sent from Iran.

Since the filtering of the site, the number of forms coming directly from Iran has sadly decreased. The Iranian Diaspora,

however, is slowly learning about Omid and has started to help with testimonies and information. In two years, more than 600 forms have been sent to Omid, and we have interviewed scores of victims' relatives or cellmates. A mother from a small provincial town in Iran scanned and sent us all the legal documents that she could gather regarding the death under torture of her son. She asked us not to include the name of her son, because she feared for her other children, but she nevertheless wanted the facts to be on record so that one day she could seek justice for him. We were stunned by her understanding of the due process of law and her courage and dignity. We had a story on Omid's home page that came from the memoirs of a former prisoner. Although the

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*Growing up under a dictatorship that did not allow any space for open debate and freedom of expression, schooled under an educational system that favored uncritical absorption of knowledge through memorization and paid no heed to the development of children's critical and investigative capacities, our generation was an easy mark for those pushing exciting, clandestine, totalitarian ideologies that were fashionable in the world during the 1960s and 1970s.*

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memoir did not give the name of the victim, we received a form from a viewer who knew the victim and could link the story on the homepage to a 1979 case reported by Amnesty International and included in Omid. Amnesty had a name, a charge, and a date of execution, while the cellmate had the story of the human being, complete with his biography, description, and hopes. The form we received indicated that our home page story was that of Mr. X in Omid. Laboriously, one by one, the quasi-anonymous execution cases become the story of the life and death of a human being.

We have learned a lot from the input of victims' relatives, and we have come to realize that Omid's work is only a very small contribution to the preservation of the truth. The magnitude of continuing abuses is such it will take dozens of organizations to document them all. The rulers of Iran continue without shame to abuse human rights. In 2007, they officially announced 449 executions; they still issue and implement sentences of stoning and

limb amputation and torture dissidents to death in their prisons. Our work should consist not only in documenting what we can, but also in encouraging other groups and individuals to document human rights abuses anywhere and anytime they happen in the country.

One day, all these scattered records will be compiled by an official truth commission so that Iran may come to term with its past.

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## NOTES

1. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989), the founder and first supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, was staunchly anti-American. One of his first and highly symbolic foreign policy actions was the approbation and support of the attack by Islamist militants of the U.S. Embassy on November 4, 1979. As a result and under the protection of the Ayatollah, the militants held 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days. In his speech delivered on November 5, 1979, to support the hostage taking, Khomeini called the United States of America the “Great Satan” and the U.S. Embassy the nest of spies and center of conspiracy against the Islamic Revolution of Iran. See Khomeini “Sahife-ye Nur” Vol. 10, p. 141, published by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, Tehran, 1983.
2. From November 4 to December 4, 1991, when the last American hostage in Beirut, Terry Anderson, was released, the government of Iran used hostage taking as the ultimate means to pressure Western governments and further its foreign policy agenda. Between 1982 and 1992, 96 foreign hostages and 21 national origins were held in Lebanon. Most of the victims were from Western countries. See Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanon\\_Hostage\\_Crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanon_Hostage_Crisis).
3. On September 22, 1980, Iraq launched a military attack against Iran in violation of the 1975 peace treaty, which had settled the territorial dispute between the two countries. The Iraqi army invaded several southern Iranian cities. The ensuing war between Iran and Iraq lasted until 1988. Once the Iranian army conquered the country's lost territories, the Ayatollah ordered the continuation of the war to establish an Islamic republic in Iraq. The war claimed an estimated one million Iranian and Iraqi lives and ended when Iran accepted United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, leading to the August 20, 1988, cease-fire.
4. The Islamic Republic of Iran has also resorted to terrorist bombing as the means to pursue foreign policy goals. The bombing on April 18, 1983, of the American Embassy (63 victims) and that of the U.S. Marine barracks (241 victims) and French paratroopers (58 victims) on October 23 of the same year resulted in the withdrawal of Western peacekeepers from Lebanon. From December 7, 1985, to September 17, 1986, Iran launched a campaign of bombing in Paris (13 victims). Stores, police station, and movie theaters were targeted. “Fuad Ali Saleh, the chief logistician, had been trained for terrorism in Iran and received orders from the Iranian embassy in Paris. Tehran's terrorist message to Paris had three parts: stop arms sales to Iraq, then at war with Iran; repay US\$1 billion loaned to France by Iran's deposed Shah; and crack down on Iranian exiles in France.” See <http://www.int-review.org/terr9a.html>. And also see [http://www.sos-attentats.org/index.asp?lan\\_id=eng](http://www.sos-attentats.org/index.asp?lan_id=eng). By 1991 most of the Iranian demands had been met by the French government. Several other countries have been targeted in three decades, one of the most tragic attacks being the bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA; Argentine Israelite [i.e., Jewish] Mutual Association) building in Buenos Aires on July 18, 1994 (85 victims).
5. “More than 3,200 people have been executed in Iran since the revolution of February 1979. This figure, which is based on reports that have become known outside Iran, must be regarded as a minimum. Opposition sources say the total is much higher.” Amnesty International, *Executions in Iran in Light of International Human Rights Standards, June–September 1981 More Than 1,600 Executions*, AI Index: MDE 13/12/81.
6. See for instance the case of one of the victims, Manuchehr Khosrowdad, in *Omid, A Memorial in Defense of Human Rights*, <http://www.abfiran.org/english/person--3306.php>.
7. See Ladan Boroumand, *Iran: In Defense of Human Rights*, National Movement of the Iranian Resistance, Paris, 1983.
8. On August 19, 1953, a coup orchestrated by British and U.S. intelligence with the participation of elements favoring Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) led to the overthrow of the liberal nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. A jurist and liberal nationalist statesman, Mossadeq had braved Western powers and nationalized Iran's oil industry controlled by the British. The fall of Mossadeq resulted in the strengthening of the Shah's autocratic rule that was ended by the 1979 Islamic Revolution.
9. On March 29 and 30, 1979, the Iranian people were called to vote in favor or against the Islamic Republic as the new political regime of Iran. Those favoring a referendum on the dissolution of the monarchy or the establishment of a secular republic were silenced. Ayatollah Khomeini did not publicize his political project and did not mention that he intended to claim the sovereignty of the religious Jurisprudent. People voted without knowing what the Islamic Republic was. The debate over the constitution started after the referendum. People voted overwhelmingly in favor of an Islamic Republic (98 percent of the voters), the content of which was a mystery at the time.
10. See L. Boroumand, “Prospect for Democracy in Iran” in *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Summer/Fall 2003, p.99–105.
11. In January 1979 the country was given a last chance to opt for a secular democracy. Dr. Shapur Bakhtiar (1914–1991), the last prime minister under the last king of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980), was a social democrat who opposed both the shah's dictatorship and the fundamentalist rule introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini. Bakhtiar accepted the shah's nomination because he believed that a successful transition to democracy required the restoration of the rule of law and democratic rights. While in office (January 3 to February 11, 1979), he dissolved the political police (SAVAK), freed all political prisoners, granted freedom of the press, and abolished censorship. He warned the nation against the rise of a new dictatorship and urged Iranians to form political parties and trade unions and prepare for the elections. Bakhtiar's government was overthrown by a popular insurrection that brought Khomeini to power. See his government's program in <http://www.abfiran.org/english/document-210-675.php>.
12. The transformation of Iran from a traditional tribal monarchy into a modern nation state dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1906 the victory of Iran's constitutional revolution resulted in the drafting of a new a modern constitution that consecrated the sovereignty of the people and inaugurated an era of structural reforms. A modern justice system, a centralized government, and a national army were among other key reforms to changing Iran into a modern nation state. Unfortunately modernization did not come with liberalization, and as it was modernizing, Iran became also an autocratic state.