

Iran: 1988 Massacre of Political Prisoners and Responsibility of the International Community

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The issue

In the summer of 1988, on the basis of a *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the religious dictatorship in Iran, political prisoners were massacred in the most brutal manner. The victims were predominantly members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI or MEK). The massacre has been described by many international human rights bodies as a crime against humanity. Although a lot of information about it has been published, particularly by the PMOI, because of the Tehran regime's extensive efforts to keep this crime a secret, its dimensions and details have been kept hidden from the world community.

On August 9th of this year, [an audio file was published](#) of a meeting which took place 18 days after the beginning of the massacre on August 15, 1988. The meeting was between Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, Khomeini's successor at the time, and four members of the "death commission" responsible for implementing the decree. The audio file reveals some of the dimensions of this appalling crime, a crime that continued in the weeks and months after the meeting.

The United Nations and the effective powers within it, in clear conflict with the values of peace and human rights upon which the United Nations is built, have adopted a position of silence and inaction in response to this atrocity that by any definition is a crime against humanity. The publication of this audio file once again emphasizes the need for an investigation of this atrocity by competent authorities, such as the Human Rights Council, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Security Council.

Preliminary analysis of Khomeini's fatwa

Irrespective of what happened on the ground, Khomeini's *fatwa* leaves no doubt that he ordered a crime against humanity; therefore, all of the people who had a role in executing this decree were involved in a crime against humanity. Khomeini's fatwa reiterates that "... Those who are in prisons throughout the country and remain steadfast in their support for the *Hypocrites* [MEK/PMOI] are waging war on God and are condemned to execution." This clearly shows that the sentence of execution was decreed for adherence to a political movement and political/ideological outlook, and had nothing to do with actions taken. It is a collective judgment intended, as later clarified, to destroy anyone supporting the beliefs of the PMOI.

In his fatwa, before issuing his verdict, Khomeini recalled the reasons why the PMOI (PMOI members) were at war with God (*Mohareb*) and must be executed:

"The treacherous Hypocrites [PMOI] do not believe in Islam and their statements are rooted in deception and hypocrisy..."

"Their leaders have confessed that they have become apostates..."

“They are engaging in classical warfare on the western, northern and southern fronts...

“They are collaborating with the Baathist Party of Iraq and spying for Saddam [Hussein] against our Muslim nation...

“They are tied to the World Arrogance...

“And in light of their cowardly blows to the Islamic Republic since its inception...”

Obviously, most of these claims are not true, but even if they could be proven, they are not crimes.

Elsewhere in his *fatwa*, Khomeini identifies the methods for implementing the carnage, writing:

“The task of implementing the decree in Tehran is entrusted to Hojjatol-Islam Nayyeri, the religious judge, Mr. Eshraqi, the Tehran prosecutor, and a representative of the Intelligence Ministry ... In prisons in the provinces, the views of a majority of a trio consisting of the religious judge, the revolutionary prosecutor, and the Intelligence Ministry representative must be obeyed. It is naive to show mercy to those who wage war on God ... Those who are making the decisions must not hesitate, nor show any doubt or be concerned with details...”

Thus, according to this *fatwa*, there was no need for any judicial procedure, even by the medieval standards of Khomeini’s regime. At the discretion of two out of three members of a 3-member panel, all of whom were well-known henchmen of the regime, political prisoners were to be executed.

In the final part of his *fatwa*, Khomeini gives practical guidance to the executioners:

“It is naive to show mercy to those who wage war on God. Decisiveness against the enemies of God is an undeniable principle of the Islamic regime. I hope that with your revolutionary rage and hatred towards the enemies of Islam, you will earn the approval of God Almighty.”

“The gentlemen tasked with deciding the issue should not doubt or be tempted; they should try to be hard on infidels”.

“To doubt the judicial matters of revolutionary Islam is to ignore the pure and clear blood of the holy martyrs.”

It does not end here. After the decree was issued, the head of the regime’s judiciary, Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili, asks three questions through Khomeini’s son, Ahmad:

1: Does the decree apply to those who have been in prison, who have already been tried and sentenced to death, but have not changed their stance and the verdict has not yet been carried out, or are those who have not yet been tried also condemned to death?

2: Those Hypocrites [PMOI] prisoners who have received limited jail terms, and who have already served part of their terms but continue to hold fast to their stance in support of the ‘Hypocrites’, are they also condemned to death?

3: In reviewing the status of the ‘Hypocrites’, prisoners, is it necessary to refer the cases of ‘Hypocrites’ prisoners in counties that have an independent judicial organ to the provincial centre or can the county’s judicial authorities act autonomously?

In response to the above questions, Khomeini replied:

“In all the above cases, if the person at any stage or at any time maintains his [or her] support for the ‘Hypocrites’, the sentence is execution. Annihilate the enemies of Islam immediately. As regards the cases, use whichever criterion that speeds up the implementation of the verdict.”

Khomeini thus unequivocally and brutally demands that the annihilation of the PMOI and all their supporters and relatives be carried out as soon as possible.

Reports published by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the PMOI and other relevant bodies affirm that in accordance with this *fatwa* and the responses to the follow-up questions, in Tehran and 24 provincial capitals, as well as in at least 50 other cities, panels comprised of three criminals were formed and subsequently began to mass murder prisoners in their cities with full authority. Prisoners called these panels “death commissions.” They were involved in the bloody cleansing of prisons from July to December 1988, and some even in 1989.

Human rights defenders declare massacre crime against humanity

In elaborating on some of the details of the massacre, the PMOI and many groups and human rights organizations have already described it as a crime against humanity:

- Amnesty International in its November 2, 2007 [report wrote](#): *“Amnesty International believes these executions amount to a crime against humanity. Under international law, valid in 1988, crimes against humanity consist of widespread or systematic attacks against civilians on discriminatory, including political, grounds.”*
- The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) [wrote](#) on September 20, 2013: *“A quarter of a century ago, in the summer of 1988, thousands of Iranian political prisoners who had already been tried and were serving prison sentences, stood show summary re-trials and were executed. As of today, the Iranian authorities, some of whom were also in power at the time, have not acknowledged these crimes. In a report published today, ‘25 years on, and still no justice: 1988 prison executions remain unpunished’, FIDH and LDDHI qualify them as extrajudicial and arbitrary executions and crimes against humanity. While their extent remains unknown, it is certain that in the span of a few months, several thousand prisoners were executed. Iranian sources have managed to document the names and particulars of at least 4,672 victims so far.”*
- Human Rights Watch [wrote](#) on October 24, 2005: *“The deliberate and systematic manner in which these extrajudicial executions took place constitutes a crime against humanity under international law.”*
- Canada’s Parliament [adopted the following motion](#) on June 5, 2013: *“That the House condemn the mass murder of political prisoners in Iran in the summer of 1988 as a crime against humanity, honour the memory of the victims buried in mass graves at Khavaran cemetery and other locations in Iran, and establish September 1 as a day of solidarity with political prisoners in Iran..”*

Audio tape emphasizes bitter truths

The publication of the audio tape of Mr. Montazeri's meeting with the chief perpetrators of the massacre in Tehran illuminates the scale of the disaster. To understand the dimensions of the carnage, we must first see what the conditions of this meeting were:

- The meeting occurred on August 15, 1988, i.e. 18 days after the massacre began. That means that a smaller portion of prisoners had been executed to date, and that the rate accelerated after the meeting.
- The participants in the meeting comprised only the death commission of Tehran and did not include people from other cities.
- The participants tried to downplay the scale of the killings for fear of rebuke by an angry Montazeri, who was still Khomeini's successor.
- It is clear from the content of this meeting that Montazeri had little information about the situation in other cities, referring only to reports from Ahwaz and a couple of other cities.

Considering the above mentioned points, we can deduce that the scale of the massacre that had so angered Montazeri was actually far greater than he knew.

Despite the points referred to in Article 11, seven important facts can be observed from this 40-minute audio tape of Mr. Montazeri's remarks and the responses of the henchmen:

1. The carnage was large scale and the mass murder had been planned several years earlier. In addition to Khomeini and his son, the MOIS had strongly supported the plan.
2. All factions of the regime were responsible for and participated in the massacre. The Chief of the Judiciary, whom Montazeri refers to as a liberal; the current Minister of Justice under Rouhani, Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, and other people affiliated with Khomeini's faction all participated in this crime.
3. During Khomeini's lifetime, decision-making after Khomeini consisted of the heads of the three branches of government: Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, Speaker of the Parliament and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces; Ali Khamenei, President; and Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili, Head of the Judiciary; as well as in many cases Mir Hossein Mousavi, the Prime Minister. All undoubtedly were involved in the decisions relevant to the massacre. In addition to the fact that Khomeini's name is mentioned in the audio, both Khamenei and Rafsanjani strongly supported the bloodbath in public speeches a few months afterwards.
4. In addition to prisoners, many people were arrested and executed in Tehran and other cities
5. Pressure on PMOI women was more brutal and women's resistance astounding. Examples of this pressure cited in the audio tape include the execution of pregnant women and girls as young as 15.
6. Mr. Montazeri and the henchmen explicitly and implicitly acknowledge that executions in other cities were much more brutal than in Tehran. Ahwaz and Kermanshah are specifically named.
7. The henchmen, who are currently top officials of the clerical regime, acknowledge their involvement in the crime, affirm that it was carried out on Khomeini's orders, and assert they had no choice but to implement it.

Mr. Montazeri's remarks

In the context of the above points, some of Ayatollah Montazeri's points are noteworthy:

"In my opinion, the greatest crime committed during the Islamic Republic, for which history will condemn us, has been committed by you. Your names will in the future be etched in the annals of history as criminals."

To Pour-Mohammadi: *"In my opinion, this (the mass executions) is something that Intelligence was after, and had invested in, and Ahmad Agha [Khomeini's son] has been saying for three or*

four years that the PMOI, even the ones who read their newspaper, to the ones who read their magazine, to the ones who read their statements – all of them must be executed.”

“This judge, that judge, in this town, in that town, have condemned someone to 5, 6, 10 or 15-year sentences. Well now if we go and execute them without any new activity; that means of our entire judicial system is wrong.”

“Now, without their having carried out any new activities (the prisoners), we go and execute them. This means that all of us screwed up, our entire judicial system is flawed. Isn’t that what it means?”

“This one guy, his brother was in prison. Eventually when, you know, he got caught up in this, they said his sister was also suspect. So they went and brought the sister. They executed the guy. The sister – it was only two days since they had brought her – when they told her (of the brother’s death), she said, well I liked these people. The sister was 15 or 16 years old. They said, now that her brother has been executed, and after what she said, execute her too, and they did.”

“In the month of Moharram, at least in the month of Moharram, the month of God and the Prophet, it shouldn’t be like this. At least feel some shame before Imam Hussein. Cutting off all meetings and suddenly engaging in such butchery, dragging them out and Bang! Bang!!!”

“Simple belief does not make a person a Mohareb (Enemy of God) and rebellious.”

“Mr. Mousavi Ardebili whom I know is more liberal than others, goes to Friday prayers and says all of them have to be executed ... He says in the Friday Prayers ‘hypocrite’ prisoners should be executed.”

“Executing them without (their having committed) any new activities brings into question all prior judges and judgements. How do you justify executing someone who was sentenced to something less than execution? “

“I saw several religious and wise judges who were sad and were complaining about the manner in which it was carried out, and said it was extremism. They gave many examples where unjustified executions took place.”

“The People’s Mojahedin (PMOI) are not individuals. In referring to a [feudal] landlord, we say we will kill him and we will get rid of him. But this is not an individual ... it is a logic. And they have induced this logic in the minds of others ... We had to obliterate this school of thought with another school of thought. Since we didn’t have anyone who could talk to them logically, should we execute them? Ultimately, the People’s Mojahedin are not individuals; they are a way of thinking and interpreting. They are a kind of logic. A faulty logic must be answered with a correct logic. Killing will not solve anything; it will spread it.

“I reminded Khomeini that according to the decrees of most religious experts, a woman, even if she is a Mohareb (enemy of God) must not be executed. But he did not agree, and said that women, too, must be executed.”

“For example, you go to Bakhtaran and they say, ‘My kid—whatever the hell he was, [in the end] he simply had an idea. Why did you execute him for his idea?’”

Nayeri (one of the executioners): “As for the girls, God is my witness as far as we could, we tried to bargain with them. I have very strong nerves, but day before yesterday when I saw only one of them I was really shaken up. I started pleading with her to just write a couple of lines [of repentance] so we would send her back to the prison.”

Excerpts of Ayatollah Montazeri's dialogue with the officials responsible for the 1988 massacre are enlightening in terms of understanding the real dimensions of this hideous crime against humanity. On the one hand, the executioners seek to portray the executions as very limited in scope. On the other

hand, they admit that they have been assigned to carry them out and assert that they, therefore, are not responsible. At the same time, they want Mr. Montazeri's endorsement to carry on with subsequent executions.

Ayatollah Montazeri to Nayyeri: *"Tomorrow they will tell you, Mr. Nayyeri, why did you execute someone who had been sentenced to 10 years in prison? You must be able to answer. You'll have to say Mr. Khomeini told us to do so. But will you say that?"*

Pour-Mohammadi: *"We must say that Mr. Khomeini gave it in writing. This is what we are supposed to do."*

Nayyeri: *"And you can be sure that if it were any group other than us, the number of those executed in Tehran would have been three times greater."*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"In other cities, they have done everything imaginable... and in Ahwaz it was really horrendous. Do you know that in Isfahan, there was a pregnant woman among them? In Isfahan, they executed a pregnant woman!"*

Another Death Commission member: *"At any rate, we had to make sure that the decree which has a firm backing would not be messed up. We had to protect it from excessive, extreme and unruly practices..."*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"It is the month of Moharram. For the sake of Imam Hussein, stop. It is enough!"*

Nayyeri: *"A few days ago, I told the gentlemen that we used to halt all court proceedings in the month of Moharram. I pleaded with them to finish our work before Moharram..."*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"[You mean,] let's kill them off more quickly [before the month of Moharram]..."*

Death Commission members: (Loud laugh)

Nayyeri: *"I insisted that our entire task be finished... We must hurry to finish everything that is left in a matter of a few nights. I was not here for the past few days..."*

Morteza Eshraghi: *"We had to start work early in the morning, Sir! And God is my witness that we stayed until 10 or 10.30 at night."*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"Have you thought of the families who come for visitation? What will you say? Who will answer the families?"...*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"Two days have passed since the beginning of Moharram and today we must pay homage to Moharram..."*

Nayyeri: *"As for the month of Moharram, with your permission, we have brought some of these (prisoners) out of their cells to deal with them. We have dealt with them once, but have not yet issued our ruling... They are in solitary confinement for now. If we do not issue our ruling now, and they return to the ward, it will create some new problems. So, with your permission..."*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"I do not give permission for anything...."*

Nayyeri: *"It is about 200 people that we have...."*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *"I do not give any permission. Not even for one of them. I already told you that I disagree with this. You know it. I have already informed you of my opinion."*

Another Death Commission member: *“With your permission, since the status of these [200] people remains undetermined, it is not possible to let them go back to their wards, because the situation is turbulent in some places and we cannot detain them in their cells.”*

Ayatollah Montazeri: *“No, I will not give any permission... Although I know that Mr. Khomeini wrote (the decree) and the order comes from Mr. Khomeini... I feel sorry for the revolution. I told Ahmad Agha [Khomeini's son] that I feel sorry for Mr. Khomeini, himself. It will be written in history that Mr. Khomeini was such a person. No one dares to say so now, but in future they will. I didn't want it to happen this way. People feel repulsed by the ‘Velayat-e Faqih’. I did not want [the principle of] ‘Velayat-e Faqih’ to end up like this.*

Conclusions and demands

The facts indicate that not only did the executions not halt after this meeting, but their numbers actually increased significantly. The killing continued throughout the month of Moharram and the subsequent months. In many cities, the bloodbath continued until the end of 1988. Amnesty International published the testimony of an eyewitness regarding the Prison of Isfahan: “A former prisoner in Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan said that almost every day between August and December 1988 prison guards came to his section of the prison and read out a list of up to 10 names. These people were then taken out of the cell, which generally housed between 150 and 300 people, and were never seen again. The prisoners did not know what was happening to those taken away, but the guards said that they were to be executed. Later, prisoners were transferred to Dastgerd Prison from other prisons and news of similar events in these prisons spread among the inmates in Dastgerd.”

On Sunday 28 August 2016, Pour-Mohammadi [confirmed his role](#) in the massacre: *“We are proud we have implemented God’s order about the ‘Hypocrites’ (PMOI). We have stood against the enemy of God and people and confronted them with power.”* A day later [he added](#): *“I didn’t even have one night of sleeplessness in all these years because I acted according to the law and Islamic Sharia.”*

As the International Committee in Search of Justice cited the statute of the International Criminal Court and indicated in its [report](#) on 16 August 2016, the massacre of political prisoners in Iran is an example of both a crime against humanity and a genocide.

Rarely has there ever been an atrocity such as this which clearly contains so many parameters:

- The motivation for the crime
- The person who ordered the crime
- The type of victims
- The perpetrators in charge of carrying out the crime still in office and proudly defending their actions
- The political perpetrators and backers of the crime and those who paved the way for it
- The documents that reveal the nature and dimension of the crime

If we examine the background of major crimes presently under investigation by international courts, the above parameters have never been so clearly evident before the international investigations started.

Therefore, silence and inaction in the face of this unprecedented crime in history seem rather to emanate from political considerations combined with economic interests.

Based on international conventions, neither crime against humanity nor genocide are expired with the passage of time. It is the duty of the international community, including the Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council to examine this case and bring its masterminds and perpetrators to justice, particularly that the officials responsible for the 1988 massacre still play active roles in the ruling clique and are among the main political, security and legal decision-makers in Iran.

In light of the above, the following actions are imperative:

- 1) The 1988 massacre should be placed on the agenda of the upcoming session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva in September 2016;
- 2) The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights must issue a call for an investigation in this regard;
- 3) The upcoming session of the General Assembly in New York (September – December 2016) must issue a resolution and call for an investigation into this massacre and refer its dossier to the Security Council;
- 4) The UN Security Council should form an international tribunal to examine this case and prosecute its masterminds;
- 5) The European Union and its Member States, the US government, and the UK must deploy all of their political and legal resources to investigate this case;
- 6) International organizations defending human rights should deploy their good offices to investigate the five articles stated above.

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