

IDEAS

WHO'S AFRAID OF MASIH ALINEJAD?

The journalist and activist is caught between a regime that hates her and a diaspora whose elite isn't eager to give her credit for anything.

By Graeme Wood



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When Masih Alinejad, Public Enemy No. 1 of the Islamic Republic of Iran, met me at a hotel in Lower Manhattan, she sat with her back to a ground-floor window. Her frizzy hair was framed in the glass and visible to tourists and office workers walking by—and, it occurred to me but seemingly not to her, to any assassin who might want to take her out. The threat is not theoretical. In July, police arrested Khalid Mehdiyev, of Yonkers, New York, after he was found prowling around Alinejad's home in Brooklyn with an AK-47 and nearly 100 rounds of ammunition. One year before, the Department of Justice announced that it had thwarted a plot to kidnap Alinejad, take her by sea to Venezuela, and then spirit her to Iran for imprisonment and possible execution. She now lives in hiding, but she told me she doesn't think about threats to her safety. "I don't know why. I'm just missing this," she said, pointing at her head, at the absent neuroanatomical structure that causes normal people to be afraid of being shot dead. "I don't have this fear."

The Iranian government wants to kill her because for the past eight years, she has been the most prominent champion of the right of Iranian women to forgo the hijab, or headscarf. She fled Iran in 2009, and since 2015, she has been a presenter for Voice of America, a U.S. government media service. (She makes about \$80,000 a year, in a job without benefits or insurance.) But her main activity is on social media. Her accounts are the preeminent clearinghouse for videos of the countrywide protests that have erupted, and barely let up, since September, when the 22-year-old Iranian Mahsa Amini was arrested for violating rules on modest female dress. For this sin, Amini was beaten to death in police custody. Now videos surface daily of women strutting around with flowing hair—or beaten into crumpled, bloody messes by government thugs. Many of these videos emerge through Alinejad, who solicits and receives them, even though the government considers anyone who sends them enemies of the state.

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More surprising is the reaction of some prominent Iranians who are critical of the Islamic Republic but spare some vitriol for Alinejad, too. Nahid Siamdoust, a professor at the University of Texas, wrote that Alinejad is “*persona non grata* among leftists and progressive feminists” in the diaspora because her focus on hijab is smiled upon by Westerners who have an “obsession with women’s oppression in the Muslim world.” Hamid Dabashi, who holds the chair in Iranian studies at Columbia University, told me by email that “the significance of this person in the current uprising in Iran and at this heightened stage is nothing, zilch, zero—perhaps [she is] even a liability, a discredit, an embarrassment.”

She is caught between a regime that hates her and a diaspora whose elite isn’t eager to give her credit for anything. “When the protests started, Iranian-studies scholars were silent at first,” Kelly J. Shannon, a historian at Florida Atlantic University, told me. “Then when they spoke up, one of the first things they did was criticize Alinejad.” As a feminist, Shannon said, she found it odd that a woman campaigning for women’s rights had risen so high on the list of priorities for critique. Siamdoust called Alinejad a “pawn” of “neo-imperialists” like Mike Pompeo, with whom Alinejad once posed for a photograph. An open letter from hundreds of other Iranians, upset that *The New Yorker* called her the “leader” of the protests, added another Trump senior official, John Bolton, to the list of unacceptable people Alinejad has allied herself with. (Bolton, the letter said, led the “charge to destroy women’s reproductive rights in the United States.”) Dabashi allowed that Alinejad had once mattered, but “she lost that grace when she stood next to Mike Pompeo and sided with imposing crippling economic sanctions that have devastated an entire nation without any effect on the real criminals who run the country.” For his part, Dabashi has a long and unblemished record of apologizing for these “real criminals” and despising America and all its works, whether authored by Pompeo or not.

“For years and years, I’ve been ignored by many activists and analysts outside Iran,” Alinejad told me. “I made them hate me because I said, loudly, that reformists—those who seek change within the Islamic Republic, rather than its downfall—are the ones actually betraying the people of Iran.” She said ignoring those activists

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and analysts right back is easy, because her networks of supporters in Iran and overseas are much larger. “They see me as a person who gave a voice to women who say no to compulsory hijab, and who compared compulsory hijab to the Berlin Wall.” Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, took note of that comparison in a speech referring to Alinejad (“an American agent”) and seemed to agree that forced veiling is a load-bearing pillar of the regime.



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“[My critics] try to downplay hijab, and say it’s ‘not a big issue,’ or ‘part of our culture,’” Alinejad complained. She urged me to think about how it might feel to look in the mirror every morning and primp, not according to your own wishes, but according to the wishes of a government that you hate, and that might beat you senseless if displeased by your appearance. “Just think about this humiliation,” she said. She added that a young protester told her how much the issue matters to her. “My mom is worried for me every day when I go out [to protest]. She’s worried that I’m going to get killed,” the woman said. “My mom doesn’t know that I’m already a dead person” because of the humiliation. “This generation has nothing to lose,” Alinejad said.

In contrast to the Green Revolt of 2009, Alinejad said, this movement lacks identifiable leaders who can call off the protests when things get too hot. “There is nobody to stop these people. We have so many local leaders. This time is different: It’s not reformists versus conservatives. It is about slavery.”

Dabashi of Columbia told me, “There are scores of heroic women risking their lives leading one of the most glorious chapters in modern Iranian history,” and instead the American media keep boosting Alinejad, a “totally discredited careerist.” He said she is “an American product,” and that she Americanized her birth name (Masoumeh Alinejad Ghomi-Kolayi) “to make it palatable to her American manufacturers.”

Alinejad described the origins of her nickname—an unusual one; it means “messiah” or “Jesus” — in a 2018 memoir that detailed her childhood in a poor family in

Mazandaran province. *Masi* was short for *Masoumeh*, and a teen boyfriend wrote a love poem extending the name to *Masih*:

But you, my Jesus,
When they place the Crown of Thorns on your head,
Spring will have just begun.

“I had never felt comfortable with Masoumeh. Somehow Masih was more my style.”

Her detractors can be forgiven for wondering whether someone who calls herself Masih might have a bit of a Messiah complex. Siamdoust told me that Alinejad’s “complete alignment” with the Trump administration led her to believe that Alinejad was no longer “representing the interests of the Iranian people but rather pursuing power for herself.”

Alinejad said she was flabbergasted by accusations that she supported Trump. She has met with Pompeo and supported his policy of harsher sanctions on Iran, but she has also met with senior Biden officials. The correct charge, in other words, is not megalomania but monomania. “Obama in power? Trump? Biden? What does it matter?” she asked. “For me, what matters is *who should not be in power in Iran*. That is the Islamic Republic.”

Many of her critics in the Iranian diaspora are overseas because they have the luxury of second passports, or enough wealth to make exile in the West a choice. She grew up in Iran, without summers abroad—indeed, without indoor plumbing—and suspects that her humble origins and natural connection to ordinary Iranian people make her high-flying compatriots uneasy. “I know the language of the working class; I know the language of poor people. I used to wear secondhand clothes. I know the pain of being a woman *in Iran*. They’ve never even lived inside.”

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“I think back to how lonely I was,” she told me, her voice quavering slightly. “Eight years. *Every single day*. I was alone, uploading videos from inside Iran, rejecting forced hijab, and practicing civil disobedience.” Where, she asked, were her critics? “I went by myself, on my own, to the Iranian embassies to practice civil disobedience.” The critics went to the embassies too—not to protest, but to vote in sham elections, and cooperate in the fiction that an oppressive regime could be reformed. Demolishing that fiction, she said, is precisely the goal of the protests that her critics now so fervently support. “For these people, as soon as Michelle Obama and Ellen [DeGeneres] say something is bad, then it’s bad,” Alinejad told me, bitterly. “But when I was saying that—when they put my brother in prison, when they tried to kill me—that was not so bad. Of course they hate me. I was right.”

Siamdoust told me she was still sympathetic to Alinejad, whom she knows personally and has followed for almost 20 years. “There was a time for reform, but I think that time is over,” Siamdoust said. Alinejad may be right about the prospects for reform, she added, but “that doesn’t mean the last seven to eight years of Masih’s activism just disappears now.” A photo with Mike Pompeo is a lot to live down.

Alinejad seems skeptical about reconciliation with her critics. “It’s never late if [the ex-reformers] make an apology, and if they [demand] an end for the gender-apartheid regime,” she said, then paused, thinking through the mechanics of repentance. “They are sitting in their safe place,” she said, looking out the window for an Uber that was about to take her to a TV studio in Midtown. “But some people are facing guns and bullets.”

This article originally misstated how an open letter characterized Masih Alinejad's relationship with John Bolton. This article also originally misstated Alinejad's home province. She grew up in Mazandaran, not Gilan.