



## Islam, Political Islam and Women in the Middle

### East

Maryam Namazie



The situation of women living in Islam-stricken societies and under Islamic laws is the outrage of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Burqa-clad and veiled women and girls, beheadings, stoning to death, floggings, child sexual abuse in the name of marriage and sexual

apartheid are only the most brutal and visible aspects of women's rightlessness and third class citizen status in the Middle East.

#### **This is Nothing but Islam**

Apologists for Islam state that the situation of women in Iran and in Islam-stricken countries is human folly; they say that Islamic rules and laws practised in the Middle East are not following the true precepts of Islam. They state that we must separate Islam from the practice of Islamic governments and movements. In fact, however, the brutality and violence meted out against women and girls are nothing

other than Islam itself. According to the Koran, for example, the fornicator must be flogged a hundred stripes (The Light: 24.2). Those who are guilty of an 'indecent' must be 'confined until death takes them away or Allah opens some way for them.' (The Women, 4.15). 'Men are the maintainers of women' and 'good' women are obedient. Those that men fear 'desertion', can be admonished, confined and beaten' (The Women, 4.34). Wives are a 'tilth' for men, which they can go into their 'tilth' when they like (The Cow, 2.223). Veiling is promoted in the Koran: 'O Prophet! Say to your wives and your daughters and the

women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments' (The Clans, 33.59).

Apologists for Islam say that these verses have been misinterpreted. They go so far as to claim that there is gender equity in Islam and Islam respects the rights of women. Regarding the verse in the Koran sanctioning violence against women, they say that Islam only permits violence after admonishment and confinement and as a last resort. They say, since men would beat their wives mercilessly at that time, this is a restriction on men to beat women more mercifully (Women Living Under

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## Another Asylum Seeker Commits Suicide

On Tuesday 12 March 2002, 27 year old Iranian asylum seeker, Mohsen Amri, committed suicide in his room in Handsworth, Birmingham. Amri had come to the UK two years ago from Iran. Though he had made several requests for employment authorisation, he had been refused permission to work. His asylum application had also been refused by the UK Home Office on a technicality.

This was the third such incident in less than a two-

year period. It remains no mystery as to why asylum seekers resort to such desperate measures. Why is it that people prefer death to life in the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Mohsen Amri fled a society where representatives of the almighty have turned the lives of over sixty million people into a living hell over the past 23 years. The Islamic regime in Iran has denied the citizens of that society any glimpse of hope for a near normal existence.

People in Iran have the right to seek a way out of this miserable life. The response of Western governments to this human tragedy has been to close borders, deny asylum and instead offer generous support to the brutal regime in Iran so that it may maintain its grip over people's lives.

Undoubtedly, the UK government bears the responsibility for Amri's death. With every refusal, Immigration authorities sign another death certificate for an asylum seeker.

The International Federation of Iranian Refugees extends its sincere condolences to the family and friends of Mohsen Amri and reaffirms its pledge to defend the rights of asylum seekers. The UK government must grant asylum to all those fleeing the Islamic regime. Once again we call on all asylum seekers to refrain from self-inflicting harm and heed our plea for organised and positive action to attain asylum rights.

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Muslim Laws, For Ourselves Women Reading the Koran, 1997). In a Gender Equity in Islam Web Site, this verse is explained in this way: 'In extreme cases, and whenever greater harm, such as divorce, is a likely option, it allows for a husband to administer a gentle pat to his wife that causes no physical harm to the body nor leaves any sort of mark. It may serve, in some cases, to bring to the wife's attention the seriousness of her continued unreasonable behaviour.' On the verse that says women are men's tilth, they say the Koran is encouraging sexuality, even though women are killed for expressing theirs (Women Living Under Muslim Laws, For Ourselves, Women Reading the Koran, 1997). Regarding the fact that women are not to judge or consult, one mullah from Qom using a female pseudonym says: "Or, Let's suppose that in other planets, women are stronger and more learned than men, do we accept their custom or do we reject it totally?" (Zanan 4 and 5). On the Gender Equity in Islam Web Site it states that 'Islam regards women's role in society as a mother and a wife as her most sacred and essential one. This may explain why a married woman must secure her husband's consent if she wishes to work. However, there is no decree in Islam that forbids women from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature best and

in which society needs her most.'

These 'Islamic feminist' interpretations are an insult to our intellect and cannot be taken seriously. Islam has wreaked more havoc, massacred more women, and committed more holocausts than can be denied, excused, re-interpreted, or covered up with such feeble defences. Misogyny cannot be interpreted to be pro-woman even if it is turned on its head just as fascism, Zionism and racial apartheid cannot be interpreted to be pro-human. These are mere justifications for reactionary people who want to legitimise their beliefs and religion or reactionary states and movements with a vested interest in maintaining Islamic rules and laws. They apologize because even they don't want to associate with the outrages committed by Islam throughout the world. Nothing can hide the fact that Islam, like other religions, is anti-woman and misogynist and antithetical to women's rights and autonomy.

### **Political Islam is a Contemporary Reactionary Movement**

There are always those who say that we can't blame Islam for the status of women in Islam-stricken countries. Apologists like Jackie Ballard, an ex-MP from the UK who is now living in Iran says blaming religion for the denial of women's rights in countries like Iran 'disguised as concern for human rights' is tantamount to 'blaming Protestantism in Britain or

Catholicism in Mexico for endemic domestic violence' and to seeing 'paedophilia as a symptom of a Christian or western culture'. This is nonsense. Islam is in political power in Iran and many countries of the Middle East and North Africa and cannot be compared to Protestantism in Britain. The Bible is not the law of the land in Britain, while the Koran is in Iran; it is not in the constitution and penal code nor enforced in the courts and by morality police in Britain, while it is in Iran.

And that is exactly why Islam, and not Christianity for example, is at the forefront of the debate on women's rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Islam in political power, or as a movement targeting political power (political Islam), is as much a political ideology as it is a religion; it aims to establish Islamic states and rules and needs political power to do so. This political power has enabled it to maim, gag and kill women on a mass scale. Political Islam is a reactionary contemporary movement that was the Right's alternative during the Cold War and also the result of Arab nationalism's failure. In Iran, in particular, political Islam was brought to the fore of the 1979 revolution vis-à-vis the Left and as a Cold war tool and because of an anti 'westernisation' and Islam-ridden tradition dominant in a majority of the intellectual and cultural sections of society. It was in Iran that the Islamic movement became a notable political force vying

for power. This meant that the misogyny in Islam was given a state, laws, courts, the military and herds of police, Pasdars, Baseej, sisters of Zeinab, and Hezbollah's at its disposal to carry out its laws. In Iran, women were slashed with razors and had acid thrown in their faces, many were killed and imprisoned until the Islamic regime in Iran was able to enforce compulsory veiling and establish its rule.

### **It is Racist not to Condemn Islam and Political Islam**

This vile political Islam - which has sentenced women who have been raped to death for 'adultery', and has blamed mothers for not satisfying husbands as the cause of child sexual abuse - also has its defenders. Some of them say that women in England, like in Iran and Afghanistan, also face violence. Of course women face violence everywhere but surely the situation of women in Afghanistan and Iran are incomparable to situation of women living in France and England. And since when do we excuse violations because they happen elsewhere? When speaking of the status of women in Iran, they compare it with Afghanistan and state it is better. As if that's all those born in the region can expect. They even go so far as to state that women in Iran have freedoms denied to many in the West. According to these racist cultural relativists, it is as if

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women living in Iran cannot expect more freedoms or don't want them. They say Iran is an Islamic society and are incensed when we say it is not Islamic but Islam-stricken. They choose one of the many complex characteristics of a number of people living in Iran and label the entire society with it. Did they call it Islamic during the Shah's rule? They go on to say it's the people's culture and religion. They ignore the fact that Islam imposed its rule in Iran through violence and terror. They say Iran is Islamic so that they can more easily ignore the violations committed against women by implying it is people's choice to live the way they are forced to. In fact, there is an immense anti-Islamic backlash in Iran with people resisting Islam and its state despite the repression. They call Iran Islamic so they can prevent us from condemning Islam and political Islam by implying that any condemnation is an insult to people's beliefs. In fact, they call it Islamic in order to make it so. Though it's untrue, even if every person living in Iran had reactionary beliefs, it still wouldn't be acceptable. If everyone believes in the superiority of their race, must we respect and accept their beliefs? Respecting people's freedom of expression, belief and religion or atheism is one thing; that doesn't mean that we must respect any belief, however heinous. Of course human beings must be respected, but that doesn't mean that all beliefs must

also be respected. Should we respect fascism, racism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism - they are all beliefs after all. And when we raise these realities, condemn Islam and political Islam and defend women's rights, they say we are racists and are promoting abuse against Muslims. Criticising beliefs is not racism. Is it racist to condemn fascism, nationalism, capitalism, sexism, religion? Does a critique of fascism, nationalism or racism promote abuse against fascists, nationalists, and racists? If we criticise child labour, does it mean we are promoting abuse against children who are forced to work? This is the pathetic whining of reactionaries who want to silence defenders of women's rights and frighten them into inactivity and submission. Racism, rooted in capitalism, exists in society and has nothing to do with a critique of Islam. Don't non-Muslims also face racism? These apologists go so far as to call it Islamophobia. This is nonsense. Xenophobia and homophobia, for example, are the hatred of people: foreigners and homosexuals. You cannot have a phobia against an idea. If we are opposed to racial or sexual apartheid, does that make us apartheid-phobic! If we are opposed to racism and fascism does that mean we are racist-phobic and fascism-phobic? Come on. Opposing violations of women's rights in Islam-stricken countries does not serve racism - just like

opposing Zionism does not make one an anti-Semite. In fact, it is racist to assume that all those living or born in the Middle East are supporters of Islam and political Islam and that these vile governments and the Islamic movement represent women when in fact women are their first victims. Labelling women's rights activists as racists is a dim-witted ploy to justify and excuse women's status under Islam and political Islam, and deny women and people living in the Middle East and Iran universal rights and freedoms. Those who say these things do so because they want to maintain Islam. They want to justify it. Excuse it. They have an interest in safeguarding religion and political Islam. Or at best, they believe women in Iran and the Middle East are sub-humans who actually enjoy being segregated, veiled, stoned, flogged and dehumanised. Like Islam, political Islam is antithetical to women's rights. It is not just a matter of consciousness-raising and creating a renaissance that pushes religion out of the public sphere and eliminating its role in people's social lives, but also completely eliminating political Islam and Islamic states and its movement (as was done with Christianity). Well-meaning people assert that we need to separate Islam from political Islam in order to defend rights. In fact, to defend universal rights, we must have the courage to confront both. Any compromise with

Islam is a compromise on women's rights. There can be no compromise on people's rights and dignity.

### September 11: The True Face of Political Islam

On September 11, the world came to know political Islam as never before. What happened in New York is happening everyday to women and people living under the sword of Islam. On September 11, the monster created by Western governments moved beyond its control and the West is now moving to contain it. The USA and Western governments want to contain only aspects of it - those aspects of it that are moving outside of the region. It has no problem leaving it contained in the region to continue its reign of terror. That is where 'fundamentalism' comes into good use. It distinguished between the Islamists acceptable to the West and those which are not.

This is an important moment for those of us who have

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Monday  
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**Maryam Namazie,**  
Executive Director

**Keyvan Javid,** Deputy  
Executive Director

# Sign Petition against UNHCR's Violations of Refugees Rights in Turkey

UNHCR Ankara  
Sancak Mah., 12. Cadde 212 Sokak No.3  
06550 Cankaya, Ankara, Turkey  
Tel: +90312-4411696  
Fax: +90312-4412173  
E-mail: Turan@Unhcr.Ch

We, the undersigned, condemn the inhuman situation and rightlessness of Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees and refugee claimants in Turkey and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) treatment and performance vis-à-vis thousands of refugees and claimants in Turkey. We demand that the UNHCR 1. Recognise the right to asylum for all those fleeing Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, especially women and children; 2. Recognise Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan as unsafe countries; 3. Immediately re-open and review all closed case files; 4. Improve the determination procedures, including the disclosure of the reasons for rejection, increasing the number of appeals and interviews and expediting reviews; 5. Provide basic living and health needs for refugees and refugee claimants and their residence in cities away from the border areas and outside the reach of terrorist agents; 6. Intervene resolutely against deportations. The UNHCR is responsible for the threats to the lives and safety of deportees; 7. Immediately resettle those recognised as refugees to a safe third country, including those Iranians who have fled Iraqi Kurdistan for fear of their lives and the inactivity of the UNHCR offices in Northern Iraq; and 8. Recognise the rights of refugees and claimants to protest.

Name, Organisation, Country

Copies of letters can be sent to:

UNHCR Geneva, UNHCR, HQPRO 2, Case Postale 2500, CH-1211 Geneva 2 Depot, Switzerland, Fax: 011-41-22-739-7353, Tel: 011-41-22-739-8643, E-mail: Hqpr00@Unhcr.Ch

International Federation of Iranian Refugees (IFIR), P. O. Box 27236, London N11 27F, Tel: +44 (0) 7730 107 337, ifir@ukonline.co.uk, <http://www.hambastegi.org>

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struggled against Islam and political Islam. For us, though, none is acceptable. Just as it not acceptable for women, men and children to be massacred in New York, it is unacceptable for them to be slaughtered in Iran, Afghanistan and Northern Iraq. Getting rid of political Islam is a precondition to any improvements in the status of women and people in the Middle East. The establishment of a Palestinian state and an end to sanctions against Iraq will get rid of the primary grounds for political Islam's recruitment. The

overthrow of the Islamic regime in Iran will also weaken political Islam considerably. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a pillar of political Islam; its overthrow is being delayed by Western government support. Those who truly support women's rights must demand secular societies in the Middle East. The separation of religion from the state, education, and a citizen's identity, relegating religion to the private affair of people is not only realizable but a necessity after the experience in Iran, Afghanistan and the Middle

East. They must also defend the right to asylum for all women fleeing Islam-stricken societies. It is our task to move public opinion towards people's movements in Iran and the Middle East for secularism, freedom and equality and universal rights and away from both poles of USA and Islamic terrorism.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century must be the

century that rids itself of political Islam. This will begin in Iran.

*The above is Maryam Namazie's speech at a March 8 conference entitled 'Islam, Secularism and Women in the Middle East', organised by the Middle East Centre for Women's Studies and Medusa on 9 March 2002 in London.*

**Editor:** Maryam Namazie; **Asst. Editor:** Javad Aslani  
**E-mail:** ifir@ukonline.co.uk  
**Tel:** +44 7730 107 337  
P.O. Box 27236, London N11, England  
[www.hambastegi.org](http://www.hambastegi.org)