

Climate Literacy in the Land of Oil

Interviews with female political
prisoners in Evin



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FOREWORD

A BEAUTIFUL MIND

Camera traps are devices that allow conservation biologists to monitor wildlife over long periods of time, both at day and night. It helps them to see, monitor and ultimately protect their object of study. But sometimes camera traps are used against conservationists. This is what happened in February 2018, when Ms. Niloufar Bayani and her colleagues of the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation were arrested and accused of espionage when they were monitoring the shy Asiatic (or Persian) Cheetah, one of the most endangered large cat species in the world.

Ms. Bayani was our colleague at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Geneva between 2012 - 2017. She joined our team directly at the end of her Master's studies at Columbia University, USA, first as an intern, then as a project assistant. Deeply committed and hardworking, her work focused on enhancing the resilience of communities against disasters and climate change. She was also lead author of several UNEP publications that examined how the regulatory functions of ecosystems could provide a buffer against disasters.

However, as a conservation biologist by training, Ms. Bayani's heart lay in conserving Iran's natural heritage and unique species. In 2017, she returned to her home country to work on efforts to conserve the Asiatic Cheetah. She was arrested in January 2018, only 8 months after arriving in Iran.

In 2019, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison and is serving time for a crime she did not commit.

But her spirit remains free and the researcher in her is very much alive. The manuscript that you are about to read was drafted by Ms. Bayani from Evin prison in Tehran over the course of one year between April 2022 and March 2023. At first, the manuscript seems to be a rendition about a study group on climate change that Ms. Bayani formed in 2022, about her efforts to educate fellow inmates, and about the importance of climate change to the future of Iran and beyond. But interwoven is a much deeper tale about the courage of a young woman more concerned about the lack of action on climate change while being held at one of the most notorious prisons. It is also about the relationships she forges with fellow inmates, among the most educated and brilliant minds of Iran.

In the domain of disaster risk reduction where we all worked together with Niloufar, we often talked about resilience. But reading this document and understanding its context, one will really understand the meaning of the term and the degree to which she, and her fellow inmates, possess it.

For more information and our petition for the release of Niloufar Bayani and her colleagues: <https://chng.it/GcxRLT6Nnx>

Muralee Thummarukudy

Karen Sudmeier Rieux

Marisol Estrella

INTRODUCTION

It is May 2022, more than 1,580 days since my arrest along with 13 other environmental activists. When I was arrested, it had only been 8 months since my arrival in Iran. Currently, I have almost 6 years left to serve out of a 10 year sentence. I cannot picture what the world would look like in 6 years. Today, over our minimal phone time - around less than 50 minutes per week - my sister tells me Antonio Guterres has been pleading to the international community to take immediate action. The latest IPCC report shows that we are only 100 weeks away from reaching a 1.7° C increase in the earth's surface temperature. Once we hit that mark, certain impacts will be irreversible, and we will enter the 2 to 3°C channel of global warming, a tipping point with unavoidable consequences, climate hazards and adverse risks to humanity and many other species.

In 2015, at the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention to Climate Change, or UNFCCC in Paris, UN member states agreed to “halt the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels”. At that time, I was work-

ing for the UN Environment Programme on Disaster Risk Reduction. My life was different, and I was hopeful. Now I am in prison, and we are reaching those limits by 2025. I am disappointed. Desperate by the empty promises of governments and the private sector. What world would I face when I step out of this prison in 2028? And what hope can I have that there will be urgent action and follow through with agreements to avoid the alarming projections?

I wanted to learn whether my fellow in-mates felt the same and what they thought about climate change. I decided to conduct a survey.

According to the Paris Agreement, greenhouse gas emissions must have been reduced by 45% by 2021. Not only have we missed that target, but we also hear of increased production and consumption of fossil fuels. The Ukraine war has shifted priorities to focus on energy independence, moving us further away from set targets. The last 7 years have been the hottest ever on record. The surface temperature in Middle Eastern countries will likely increase twice as much as the global average by 2030. Last year, the city of Ahwaz in Iran saw temperatures above 50°C. The south of Iran and other countries around the Persian Gulf will become uninhabitable.

Photo of Niloufar Bayani before being arrested. She was working with UNEP on ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction in Haiti.



The future is dystopian from my barbed-wired view. Wildfires, floods, hurricanes, droughts, millions displaced, killed, injured. A planet empty of its biological diversity. I picture the evolution of international dialogue around climate change. Environment might have thrown a few crystal glasses and broken a few porcelain plates, here and there, at the dinner table of money and power, making them feel uneasy and perhaps even terrified of environmentalists' potential. But over time, environment seems to have become a tamer guest; rather than breaking table legs or shaking the floor, as feared by the gentlemen's club, the once young and barefoot guest has transformed into the acceptable dude. While environment might raise a few inconvenient questions, its MBA graduate air, polished leather shoes and fine silk suit put the hosts at ease.

Environment has learned to enter the conversation between money and power, navigate into mainstream waters, and once in a while make polite suggestions. Nevertheless, only those ideas requiring the smallest changes might be welcomed with a patronizing pat on the shoulder. Environment has become accustomed to compromising. The hosts have popped enough champagne to make their unwelcomed guest drunk out of its mind, so that it can come to terms with sacrificing millions of years of unrepeatable evolution of life on this planet. Or have money and power replaced the environmental weirdo with one of their handsome high school friends, who has more in common with them and is more lenient towards their eternal goals? And by doing so, have they not left all other rude and spitting representatives of animals, plants, algae, and humans behind the door, with the sign "by invitation only"? Has the dialogue been highjacked, or is this intimate dinner party a necessary step towards more fruitful efforts to stop climate change? If that is the case, it seems to be getting late. The party has been going on far too long

while the destructive hurricane is gaining speed, pushing more species off the cliff and threatening the future of more and more people, most of whom will never be invited to the table.¹

Conferences of the Parties or COPs of UNFCCC are still the single most important events that raise the profile of climate change in international news. Held once a year, they are useful instruments for pressuring governments into acting in the best interest of future generations and avoiding catastrophic levels of climate change. The attention that COPs bring to the changing climate also sets a yearly checkpoint for civil society actors, the scientific community, media and others to review the state of the planet and progress made (or not) towards limiting climate change.

However, COPs have not been as successful as expected at changing how governments or highly polluting multi-national companies act. The non-binding nature of UNFCCC instruments allows for greenwashing or getting away with undelivered commitments and set targets. The solutions adopted have also become more and more reliant on the marvels of finance and economy to save the planet. In the meantime, the private sector, particularly multi-nationals and private-public companies such as national oil and gas sectors have been as bad if not worse than governments in failing to make meaningful changes in their operations and investments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is too much profit to be made from fossil fuels, while green finance and green economy haven't been able to dramatically reshape the business sector. As it has been pointed out by different authors, the best indication of climate commitments pledged at COPs remaining as empty promises to move away from fossil fuels are the lack of any changes in global stock markets after these events.

¹ In a symbolic move, civil society activists gathered behind the closed doors of banks during the official dinner reception at COP 26 at Glasgow to which only the heads of states were invited.

Despite all the efforts made, we have already reached a 1.09°C increase in global surface temperatures.² Humanity is facing an urgent threat to its existence. I want to know to what extent is the world's human population aware of the scale of the problem and its urgency. Governments are not following through with their commitments, even their voluntary nationally determined commitments, or NDCs, made in the Paris Agreement of 2015. Profit making reigns over the private sector, suppressing actions to avoid the catastrophe that threatens the economy and its own existence. But is there even enough public demand or pressure from bottom-up? Or small-scale local action to reduce reliance on fossil fuels or protect carbon sinks such as forests and oceans?

A first step to all of the above is public awareness, also referred by the IPCC as Climate Literacy, which “encompasses being aware of climate change, its anthropogenic causes and implications”³. If many, particularly the most vulnerable people are left out of the conversation, I ask myself, who is banging on the door asking to be included at the dinner party? And who is running the fringe talks, like you'd expect around any formal event? How big and how diverse is the concerned group? And who are leading the alternative actions?⁴ To what degree is the concerned group of global citizens more inclusive?

Indigenous groups of a few countries, certain workers' unions, youth groups and feminists are out there asking for real change, yet the perspective of limited time to avoid irreversible climate change turns my stomach. From where I stand, the crowd seems neither large enough nor diverse enough. Environmental activists have not yet been able to bring along all those who should be concerned. I think of the fishermen I worked with in Haiti, whose lives and livelihoods are constantly being hit by

more and more severe storms and hurricanes; of the Maldivian government employee who, having taken in 10 days of training on climate change and disaster risk reduction, concluded with these ice-cold remarks: “There will be no Maldives anymore”. And I think of the Iranian farmer on TV, who has lost all his [water] buffalos as a result of a never-ending drought. Have they joined the global movement to stop climate change? Have we, as environmental activists, been able to convince them that climate change is a severe, underlying factor in our problems?

To achieve change large enough to avoid catastrophe, we must unite as many people as possible. Climate change will not affect one country or one sector; it is a global issue at a scale that has never been experienced by humanity before. It cuts across every sector. It might be easiest to bring aboard those already active in the socio-political sphere, such as those fighting for human rights, economic equality, women's rights, freedom of speech, refugees, youth, minorities including religious minorities, labor unions, etc. Converging demands is not only a chance at empowering the environmental movement but also to strengthen all other social equality movements to recognize the common risks we share.

I live in a country that despite severe economic sanctions by western countries, is highly connected to the outside world through millions of international flights, millions of immigrants, including at least 3 million immigrants from Afghanistan and at least 7 million Iranians living abroad. A good example is social media. #metoo has been adopted as a national campaign to the surprise of many.⁵ Iran is also a country where most of the recent political uprisings have been linked to environmental problems, such as air pollution, dust storms, and particularly, water scarcity. Has the global climate change movement reached this part of the world? Have people made the

² Average of 2011-2022 compared with 1850 to 1900s as the reference period which approximates pre-industrial global surface temperature. Source: IPCC WG2 (working group #2), 6th assessment report, 2022.

³ IPCC WG2, 6th assessment report, 2022.

⁴ COP 26 at Glasgow 2021 was dubbed “the whitest COP”, although as a side effect of the inequitable distribution of covid vaccination globally.

⁵ This is a country where extramarital relationships could potentially lead to an extreme penalty by the law. Nevertheless, the global anti sexual harassment movement has shed light on a whole new layer of social relationships, and sexual relationships that lies under the traditional skin of our society

connection between local problems and global climate risks? In other words, do they even demand to be invited to the dinner table? Or is climate change an issue far too removed from their concerns?

Being confined for over 4 years in one place, a small square piece of land on the planet has gradually shifted my point of view. I used to think through maps, satellite photos and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) modeling, as if my desk was constantly soaring above the Earth. My point of view was of one looking down at interconnected land and water; global eco-regions and vast landscapes. From a satellite view, it is easy to imagine a united human population that is concerned about its common future, but when you land, as I have on this small parcel, the reality is very different.

Differences among people and the diversity of opinions reveal themselves, breaking up the portrait of homo sapiens as one species into a complex puzzle with billions of pieces. This piece of land on the northern mountains of Tehran imprisons many people's presents and futures. Here, the thoughts are not confined, although almost frozen in time. Contact with the outside world is limited to 50 minutes of strictly monitored phone time per week, and one family visit, a privilege for those whose families live in the city or are willing to travel long distances every week. This is a melting pot of social, political, and civil society actors, all in a "security prison", to use the official term, while the prisoners more accurately call it a political prison.⁶

Each of the 25 women around me is here because she cared about at least one social or political issue. They might not be the leaders of their movements, but for some reason, mostly unknown to myself, they were deemed threatening enough to deserve a sentence. It is difficult to classify the group into clear sub-groups. Most introduce themselves as social or political activists, although these lines are blurred as well. There are women who have

demanded freedom of clothing, i.e. removal of obligatory Hijab for women; others who have raised their voice in support of other political prisoners, whether for their family members, daughter, husband, or friends; and there are social media activists from various groups. There are also communists who support Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, ideologists⁷ or other socialist schools of thought.

Many prisoners of conscience have come and gone, including converts to Christianity and Baha'is⁸. We also have supporters of organized opposition groups based outside Iran, particularly the Mujahedin-e Khalgh (MEK) Organization, and Royalists, i.e. supporters of the son of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the ousted Shah of Iran [in power] until the 1979 revolution. There are also active members of teachers', students', and labor unions, although each have their own different political leanings. There is also an anthropologist from Science-Po in Paris, Fariba Adelkhal, whose research focused on the Howza, or Cleric's education.⁹ Then we have the polymer scientist/entrepreneur who previously worked with the Ministry of Defense. Lastly, there are two female environmentalists, myself included, and Sepideh Kashani, and another five who are next door in one of the mens' wards. We were arrested in 2018 on made-up espionage charges. The group was initially constituted of 14 people, and 4.5 years later, there are still 7 of us in prison, while one, Dr. Kavous Seyed-Emami, lost his life just two weeks after arrest. I have not included the opinions of our group of wildlife conservationists because I was curious to know how much environmental consciousness has been extended beyond people working in this field.

⁶ It happens to be one of the only two such prisons in the country for women. Political prisoners in other provinces such as Bushehr, Shiraz, or Khorasan Razavi, live in mixed prison wards where all crimes are held together.

⁷ ML, or MLM

⁸ Previously, there were also Dervishes, a Sufi group within Shia Islam.

⁹ Fariba Adelkhal was released from prison with a pardon on Feb 10, 2023 after having spent more than 3 years in prison. She is still not allowed to leave the country. Her French partner, Roland Marchal, also a researcher at Science-Po specialized in African Studies was arrested at the same time in 2019 upon arrival in the country, but was sent back to France as part of a prisoner swap deal.

THE SURVEY

Through my survey, I wanted to learn whether my fellow inmates were concerned about climate change. These women are by no means cut off from the rest of the world. Most were arrested because they were active on Twitter, Instagram, or Telegram. The newest entries have caught up with Clubhouse and extended their activism to Clubhouse discussion rooms. Most people have University degrees or teachers' training, with a few exceptions having less than a high school diploma. The youngest is in her early 20s, while the oldest is in her late 60s. The average age is 45 years.

These are people who read Michel Foucault and Marcel Proust; watch *Breaking Bad* or Korean soap operas, as much as they like Persian literature or Iranian TV series. They cook Indian Curry, Alfredo Pasta or Ratatouille; almost everyone loves Espresso coffee, a recent western influence. People's taste in music is probably one of the only spheres where the Iranian culture has remained introverted. All the information about interviewees such as education and age was based on their own accounts, while official information stated in their legal forms was less reliable and therefore not used. A majority of those surveyed have received higher education and have accusations related to their social or political activities.

Many are divorced or widowed, quite a few have sent their children abroad. This pattern nicely reflects that of the modern urban society in Iran. A few women are victims of child marriages which led to teenage pregnancy, abandonment of education, and divorce. Regardless of their family situation, most of these women are (at least currently) highly dependent on their families for financial matters. This dependence is cause for distress. The majority is also representative of the urban middle class; however, who has real economic power is difficult to guess.

Sexual orientation is also diverse, although it is never brought up formally, because being LGBTQ is a crime in itself, but also because being LGBTQ does not conform to certain traditional and strict models of how political prisoners must be and act. Interestingly, the culture of general prisons (i.e. non-political wards) is more accepting on this topic, as proclaimed by those familiar with both prison types.

Some of these women at Evin spend their time making handicrafts: knitting, making leather goods, wood carvings, or painting on wood by burnishing. There is also a wide range of self-study language learning and private or group lessons in English, French, German, Turkish, Spanish and Russian, which are offered voluntarily by prisoners themselves. Historically, political prisoners in this ward have generally stayed away from interpersonal relationships based on money exchange, and almost all services are provided pro bono, whether it is routine cleaning, language classes, or holding responsibilities, such as distribution of rations, managing the library, or second hand clothes.¹⁰ However, once in a while, certain services such as threading of facial hair might be paid for, and handicrafts are usually available for sale as a way to earn some income.

There are many book reading circles, or book clubs, from 7.30 am to midnight. The few people who are religious also study exegesis ("Tafsir") of the Quran and other religious texts. An inseparable part of prison life is exercise. Without physical activity, imprisonment gets to you and tensions rise, a correlation that is obvious in the winter when cold weather inhibits outdoor activity. As a result, volleyball games twice a week are held all year long, as long as there is no ice or snow on the ground. Many people also do indoor exercises. The majority of people have family members abroad, mostly in western countries.

¹⁰ The first go-to place for newcomers is called Tanakora, named after the star of a 1990s Japanese TV series that became popular in Iran and introduced the concept of second hand stores. Nowadays all such stores are called Tanakora across the country.

Direct international calls are prohibited but the magic of mobile apps, “add call” options, and speaker-to-speaker tricks make it possible to have brief conversations with family and friends abroad, despite low sound quality. Some people also have family in the government through whom they might be able to push their case forward.

More than a decade ago, when this ward was established, they were many reformists in prison after the contested presidential elections of 2009. Some of them were prominent figures. Nowadays the prison demographic and the image of the “activist” have changed. This is in most part due to the evolution of social media which has played an important role in fostering political creativity without formal knowledge or experience. As a result, the average political activist of today is no longer a trained member of an organized group, but rather the average citizen, often with limited connections, or facilities, or trainings, etc.

I ran individual interviews with 25 prisoners using 8 probing questions and participatory observations, i.e. notes were also taken on each interview subject based on private and daily exchanges before and after the interview. Before telling interviewees the topic of the interview, I asked them to name their main concerns in life. Clearly, in a place where people live together 24/7, the word must have got out after the first few interviews, as curious heads watched me asking questions and taking notes in a corner. Nevertheless, no one mentioned climate change or global warming as their main concern. Eight people however mentioned “environment” as their third to fifth concern. Those from Tehran especially, cared about air pollution.

Nayereh Behnoud, who is originally from Anzali, a coastal city by the Caspian Sea, worried about sea water pollution. Parisa Sadeghi, who has moved away from the hustle and bustle of Tehran and has taken residence in a small town on the forested foothills where

Alborz mountains extend towards the Caspian Sea, almost entirely equates environmental problems with the lack of waste management. Solid waste is a visible threat to the future of the ancient Hyrcanian forests which are considered a living museum of biodiversity in the world, a most unusual habitat in an otherwise semi-arid and arid country.

Jila Makvandi, from Ahwaz in the southern province of Khuzestan, who spends her time making dolls that resemble individual prisoners, was most worried about the drying up of “our Karoun”. That is the emblematic river that passes through Ahwaz and flows further south further south and into the Tigris. Local geography seems to understandably determine perceived risks. Nahid Taghavi, a petite Iranian-German who grew up in Shiraz, recounted her memory of visiting the plains of Dasht-e Arjan, near Shiraz, after more than 30 years: “I kept asking my brothers, when do we arrive? When they told me we were already there, I could not believe my eyes. The wetlands had completely disappeared, so had the waterlilies and the beautiful frogs. The scenery was completely unrecognizable”.

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

When asked about their opinions on climate change, the same patterns of local experiences shone through. Whether or not they knew the signs behind climate change, every single person has felt their local, regional, or nationwide climate alter over the years and can describe clear evidence of its implications from their lived experience. Most interviewees mentioned a warmer climate. Residents of previously snow covered cities such as Tehran, Kermanshah in the west, Ardebil in the northwest, small towns in Luristan province in southwest indiscriminately pointed out that snowfall has dramatically decreased since their childhood. Fariba Adelkhah, who is 63, remembered sledding on the streets of Tehran as a child in a middle-class neighborhood just east of the Grand Bazaar far from the northern hills. This area of Tehran now almost never receives any snowfall: ““Barf paaroo mikonim!” (“We plough snow!”) was the song we were accustomed to in the winter, she says. These men were asked to shovel the snow off the roof which they threw in the garden and then moved to the street where the piles used to reach as high as my head and remain there until Nowrouz. I remember the cold and the vapor of the hot tea we used to serve them”, she added.

Zahra Zehtabchi, who has the longest record of continuous prison time among us, recalled: “in the beginning of my arrival, 9 years ago, the prison yard used to be covered in snow for weeks at a time; our snowman didn’t melt for up to a week”. Her youngest daughter, Mina, was nine years old at that time. “Nowadays, however, we get a few days of snow in the winter on a good year”. She told me that she never imagined remaining in prison for more than five years. Now her daughter is a university student in Fine Arts, and Zahra always brings our attention to the call of Mina birds outside the window.

The scientist of the group, Maryam Haji-Hosseini, has inherited a piece of land on the eastern outskirts of Tehran; she pointed out a shift of seasons: “Cherry trees are blooming earlier and earlier in the winter, and unexpected cold damages cherry blossoms severely”, she said. All gardens around the beautiful Shekar-Aab, “sugar water” waterfall are now struggling with low fruit yields, she adds. Maryam used to cycle 4 hours on weekends to get to her family fruit garden. I reflect how small the prison yard must be to contain her athletic habits for another 8 years (she has a 10-year sentence).

Water scarcity, low rainfall and drought were problems witnessed by most interviewees. Recent uprisings in Isfahan and Khuzestan provinces were all linked to water, not to mention regular tensions in Iran’s Baluchistan. A new wave of civil protests is rising in the province of Fars, where the historic city of Shiraz is located. Discontented rural residents and farmers oppose unjust water allocations from Kor River that favor a steel plant over drinking and agricultural water.¹¹ In the fall of 2021, farmers of Isfahan gathered in the dry riverbed of Zayandeh Rud in protest of water allocation policies that denied the water rights for their agricultural land. Passing through this historical city, Zayandeh Rud had always been the beating heart of Isfahan. Now the riverbed lays dry since more than a decade. The scenery is as shocking as imagining the Seine dried up in Paris, or the Thames turning into a mudbed in the middle of London. Farmers camped out in the once Zayandeh Rud riverbed, and remained there for more than a week, until people of all walks of life joined the sitting. Women, men, and children had come together to ask for their most basic right: water. The peaceful protest eventually turned into a clash between the security forces and the protestors. An unknown number of people were arrested and the protestors were dispersed.¹² These uprisings have brought people’s attention to the growing problem of water availability for agricultural, urban, and industrial use.

¹¹ Etemaad newspaper, June 2, 2022.

¹² An agreement was eventually made between the farmers’ union and the government, however, the return of protestors to Zayandeh Rud later indicated unresolved tensions.

Discontentment about water mismanagement is so intense among the interviewees that any global cause pointing to less precipitation gets lost in an eruption of political criticism. For instance, several respondents mentioned the construction of poorly designed dams that have reduced water flows downstream, or severely reduced water quality by drilling down into a salt dome in the case of the Gotvand dam in Khuzestan, which has turned fresh water into salt water for thousands of people in the area.¹³ Again, as I listened to people talk about climate change, what they really describe are environmental problems in general, without making a distinction about its cause. For example, they mentioned inorganic food, pollution by discarded cigarettes, and even laws that fail to protect nature-guards (rangers) from prosecution for accidents that might happen while on duty. One person even considered earthquakes as climate change related, maybe because she bundles up her major fears into one group, and once we got into disasters they started naming many other issues.

We do not have a single climate denier in the group, however the issue is subverted. The layer of politics that imposes itself upon every subject diverts interviewees' attentions. Many people believe that environmental crises are used by the government as opportunities to exert more control over the population. For instance, the "pollution days of Spring 2022" were considered as an excuse to disperse civil protests across the country. The accusations against our group of wildlife conservationists who worked at an NGO was a case in point for many: No field of work can remain apolitical in this country.

The low management capacity of the government as well as the fear of disruption in national security has created an atmosphere in which every issue is politicized, mostly to the benefit of the government. In the absence of freedom of media or political activities and parties, we as citizens also tend to fall into the trap of illusion, bringing national politics before everything.

This in turn has helped the government to monopolize all narratives and issues and summarize them into problems of national security.¹⁴

The Left camp, which here is dominated by Marxists, was the most knowledgeable about the topic of climate change and spoke about global politics. "The foundation of capitalism lies on maximizing profits. Environmental issues are not exempt from this rule: destruction of mountains and forests to build villas, hotels, and roads; burning cheap fuel that pollutes nature and threatens human health; investment of developed countries in the third world where it is easier to exploit land at the price of environmental destruction, including building of factories in pristine landscapes, all confirm this rule", explains Bahareh Si-Soleimani. I asked her to elaborate, and she responded, "Politics as the superstructure dictates the modus operandi of the structure, which is economics, to reach the end goal of capitalism. Everything, from environment to lives of people and eventually the destruction of planet earth have fallen victim to the rule of profit. As a result, environmental destruction is a political issue. And any effort to protect it is in fact an effort to oppose the political economics of Capitalism and its output or dynamic". I have had many discussions with my Marxist friends about the solutions. "As humans, as long as capitalism is in place, we cannot stop climate change. At most we will be able to make reform, put pressure on governments through mass movements, reduce its effects but the same destructive cycle will continue", says Nahid Taghavi, who has been part of "her movement" for more than 40 years. She connected with Marxist groups when she was a student in Italy in the 1970s.

Sepideh Gholian is in her 4th year of imprisonment. She was convicted of leading one of the largest labor union protests in recent decades which took place in the impoverished Khuzestan province, which ironically is also the most oil-rich province.

¹⁴ We shall not ignore the fact that climate change is caused by world politics and is creating serious problems for national security in many parts of the world by reinforcing existing local tensions and creating a wave of climate refugees, to name a few.

The protests involved the workers of Haft Tepe factory. Sepideh is known as a national hero, a young female rebel who emerged from the most conservative society where patriarchy reigns over private and public life. However, before getting involved in the strikes of Haft Tepe as a public relations and media volunteer university student, she had participated in other local protests, away from the eyes of her family. Her first arrest was related to water. She was still in high school when she joined protestors in front of the Governor's office in Dezful. They demanded a halt on the transfer of water from Karoun's basin to Isfahan (now also a center of water protests) and away from the fertile agricultural land and populated cities of Khuzestan, which badly need this water. She had heard about the gathering on social media. The group was eventually broken up with the use of force and she ended up in custody for a few short hours. She still believes that "discrimination is in place, when air pollution because of dust storms affects Tehran, schools are immediately closed, while the same level of pollution in Khuzestan does not move a thing and students have to go to school", she tells me in her energetic and honest tone, as she tucks a strand of her now-dark hair which is parted in the middle behind her ear.¹⁵

"What becomes of Islam in a Muslim country without water?", asks Fariba, who has become extremely concerned about climate change ever since she spent hours discussing my research with me and giving useful comments. Water is the basis of duties ("ebaadat") and the notion of cleanliness in Islam. However, very few clerics have addressed the issue of water scarcity in modern times". She speaks of Ayatollah Soroush Mahhalati, in whose classes she had participated in the Howza in Qom where she was the only woman. This cleric has reportedly dedicated his classes in the last three years, to the problem of water. "100 weeks is a very short time to change our ways. It's tomorrow.

¹⁵ At the peak of union strikes, Sepideh Gholian became known for her funky-colored hair. Three and a half years of prison have given her a mature vibe which goes well with her ethnic retro style. Sepideh Gholian was released from prison on 15 March 2023 with a pardon but was re-arrested just 7 hours later and brought back to Evin with another accusation of "Advertising against the Islamic Republic regime", because of a 30 second video of her chanting slogans outside the prison gates at the moment of her release.

We must not wait for anyone to start taking action, nor should we see ourselves as incapable, or allow monopolization of this movement", Fariba exclaims with concerned black eyes, looking at me from behind her square glasses.

Dust storms was also an inevitable keyword in interviews. During the short period of my research, Tehran has topped the charts as the most polluted city in the world several times (e.g. 11 April 2022, 23 March 2023, etc.) The April 2022 pollution peak was not due to the usual industrial pollution from the west of the city, nor the horrendous quality of fuel and vehicles' exhausts, but because of the ultra-fine particles (< 10 microns) of dust that allegedly rose from desertified land in the neighboring country of Iraq. And we are seeing similar events over and over again, also from internal dust bowls in our degraded landscape. Bahareh Si-Soleimani, a tall lab technician with long silvery hair that stands in a beautiful contrast with her young face, said that "both Kermanshah, where she grew up, and Tehran, where she's lived all her adult life, used to have cold weather with blue skies. Now, the weather is hot and their skies are grey with air pollution and dust". Indeed, in 2020, dust storms in Ahwaz cut the municipal water system, internet, phone lines and other municipal infrastructure which led to the closing down of government offices, schools, and universities. Then in the spring of 2022, 23 provinces of Iran were affected by dust storms. In the province of Yazd, the dust storm reached 100 km/h and caused serious damage and even deaths.¹⁶

The Government of Iran is attempting to solve the issue through transboundary cooperation with neighboring countries, especially Turkey - which has built many dams upstream on Tigris and Euphrates - but also with Iraq and Syria. However, the head of the Department of Environment admits that the desertification of 2.5 million hectares of Iranian land in the past decade should not be ignored as an important reason for worsening dust storms.¹⁷

¹⁶ Source: Ettelaat newspaper, June 7, 2022

¹⁷ Source: Etemaad newspaper: June 11, 2022.

Two people also remembered the devastating flood of Nowrouz (the Persian New Year), of 3 years ago, where 25 out of 31 provinces were affected by flooding in a short period of time. 235 cities and 4304 villages were hit. 76 people were killed and 1000 were injured. However, again the culprit according to them, was mismanagement. It should not go without saying that in truth, much of the devastation in Shiraz and Turkaman Sahra (in the north-east) was due to problems related to urban planning and railroad or road constructions that blocked the free flow of rainwater. The unusual and unpredictable intensity of rainfall as contributing factors were brushed off by interviewees, while scientific sources pointed out that these floods were warnings about climate change impacts in Iran.

Most interviewees also clearly identified the economic impacts of such climatic shifts on agriculture, fisheries, low-income groups, etc. Nayereh Behnoud from Anzali (by the Caspian Sea), says “because of Iran’s low level of development together without lack of awareness coupled with profit seeking, the implications will be more severe for us. We are like a person who has built their house on a riverbank”. She painted a vivid image which shows how well she understands the abstract concepts of exposure and vulnerability to disasters.

Interestingly, only two people mentioned the recent increase in forest fires in Iran, while one other had followed the news about the forest fires of California. The burning of forests in the Zagros mountains that run northwest to southeast in Iran has become a major environmental problem, in part due to warmer weather but also as a result of deliberate fires set to initiate an illegal land use change process. Every year, thousands of hectares of these forests are lost to fire while hundreds of hectares more are destroyed because of plant disease. These fires cater to schemes that gradually replace vast areas of pristine forest (70% oak, but also maple, pomegranate, wild figs, etc.) with residential or agricultural land.

As most interviewees live in Tehran, the eminent threat of forest fires is not felt, even among those who are originally from the Zagros area. These individuals have noticed changes to local weather in Zagros in comparison to their childhood years, yet their more recent accounts come from their experiences as adults living in the capital, hence their lowered attention to the unusual forest fires.¹⁸

In short, everyone, without exception, has felt the local impacts of climate change; however, less than half the group (10 people) were aware of its global effects and linkages to local issues. Among these, Asiyeh Ahmadi, 36, and a social media activist, is heartbroken for the penguins and “cries every time she sees pictures of melting ice sheets”. However, the understanding of climate change in the other 60% was limited to local effects and personal experiences. Only 8 people had watched documentaries about climate change. This might explain the lack of a global view in the group about the changing planet; a reality I was forced to accept upon landing from my high-in-the-sky point of view. We do not have a common homo sapiens psyche, but rather a local or national perspective at best. The most popular documentaries were “Planet Earth” and “Blue Planet”, referred to by my interview subjects as “Attenborough’s work”. Only 4 out of 25 people were aware of any meetings held at the international level on climate change. Two of them, Fariba Adelkhah (the French-Iranian anthropologist) and Bahareh Si-Soleimani, the lab technician, were in Paris during COP 21; and the other two had heard about UNFCCC COPs through Europe-based Persian language TV channels, particularly from the young female Iranian reporter, Shouka, who had won the best environmental reporter award. None remembers the exact title of the events they referred to.

¹⁸ At least 20 environmental activists have lost their lives in the past 5 to 6 years while putting out forest fires in the Zagros mountains. 4 members of Chia Green Association in Marivan in Kurdistan province in 2018, 3 people from local environmental organization in Kermanshah in 2020, and 4 members of a semi-nomadic pastoralist family in Fars province in 2021 (Etemaad newspaper, June 6, 2022).

Greta Thunberg “the protesting schoolgirl” was more popularly known than international events, amongst those interviewed. The reason why they had a vague memory of a big event on environment was because they had seen pictures of a girl giving speeches or holding up signs. Nine out of 25 people knew about Greta, an exciting find for me, as I’ve been in prison longer than her campaign. But again, I had heard about her from my sister during one of my rare 3-minute phone calls from the high security detention side where my colleagues and I were held in cells for 2 years before being sent to what was in comparison nothing short of heaven at the time, that is, my current prison ward. Hearing about a lively campaign by a young person had given me hope that the world might be waking up in unpredictable ways, that my suffering was not after all in vain.

Locked up in a cell, I used to console myself by thinking that all this suffering could bring more attention to our cause: Protecting nature. At the time, my love for nature was costing me my life. I was accused as “Mofsed fil Arz”, which is the most dangerous kind of criminal whose presence on earth should be put to a stop. This accusation was finally replaced with “cooperation with enemy states”. To hear of such exciting news about Greta made me feel less alone, and more purposeful.¹⁹

¹⁹ Two years later, during COP 26 in Glasgow, Greta Thunberg called for our release from prison!

One of the interviewees said that the work of the late Mahlagha Mallah, who is known as the Mother of the Environmental Movement in Iran, was instrumental to her awareness about environmental issues. Mallah established the Iran Women’s Society Against Environmental Pollution in 1984 and was active in this field until her death in 2020 at the age of 104. The same person also considered the exceptional work of Kaveh Madani, as instrumental in the field of climate change. Dr. Madani, who is a water resource management expert, used to teach at Imperial College in London. He moved to Tehran in 2017, just a few months after my return. He was offered a position as the Deputy Director of International Affairs at the Department of Environment of Iran. At the same time as our arrest, Dr. Madani was also called in for many rounds of questioning until he had no choice but to abandon his job and his home country. The circumstances around his departure along with the accusations to all of us has been pointed out as a turning point in the environmental movement becoming a dangerous field of work in Iran from a security point of view.²⁰

²⁰ Dr. Madani is currently the Director of the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH).

CAUSES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

When asked about the causes of climate change, responses were shorter and less confident. My most unexpected discovery was that the most common factor mentioned as the reason for climate change was the hole in the ozone layer. The 9 people who gave this answer included some of the most educated. The second most common answer, by 8 respondents, was that the low quality of fuel (but not the type of fuel) is causing climate change. This is most likely due to the air pollution that has become an endless problem in Tehran, and most other big cities of Iran with no effective solution in sight. A number of people who have lived in the south or visited oil-rich provinces said that climate change might be caused in part by flaring, a process of burning gases that are considered as impurities in oil refineries, or when associated gas from oil production is not deemed profitable enough to extract. Tall towers of fire from flaring can be seen day and night around many southern cities of Iran such as Abadan and Ahwaz. Flaring indeed is an important source of greenhouse gas emissions in the process of oil extraction.

Keywords that have always attached any discussion of climate change were seldom used. The term fossil fuels was only mentioned by one person, Aliyeh Edghdam-doust. At the age of 67, this syndicalist, who introduces herself as a teacher and a factory worker is in prison for the 3rd time in the past 40 years.²¹ She spent 6 years in prison in the 1980s, 3 years in the 2000s and now 6 months. Just before coming to prison this time, she had spent a few months in bed because of a heavy case of covid-19 contraction. Now she walks with her back bent at a 90 degree angle with her head sometimes reaching even closer to the ground. Aliyeh is a most notable person I interviewed on this topic. She spoke with scientific language, gave precise references to COP 21 Paris Agreement, suggested feasible solutions such as using public transportation and clean energy, and

knew of many environmentally active groups. Aliyeh was also one of the only two people who used the term “greenhouse gases”, although a third person said climate change is happening because of greenhouses! One person referred to CO₂, another to black oil (a toxic polluting fuel that was used in power plants outside of Tehran and caused unprecedented air pollution in the winter of 2020).²² Solar energy was mentioned twice as a solution. The absence of climate change vocabulary in discussions reflects the low level of technical or scientific knowledge about this imminent problem.

When asked if interviewees saw a link between the oil and gas industry and climate change, the most common response was an unsure “I don’t know”. One person even believed that the more pollution we make the more oil we will have underground; because living organisms will be destroyed at higher rates and “this is exactly what the global council that rules the world wants in order to reach its end goal of advancing technology”. I’m not sure I followed her logic; however it was right at this point that I reached my most important finding: only 6 people saw the link between oil, gas and climate change.

This is the country with the world’s third-largest oil and second-largest natural gas reserve holder in 2021²³, an economy mostly dependent on its national oil and gas sector, major oil fields operations in multiple provinces and extensive off-shore drilling, and at the same time a place where impacts of climate change are so severely felt by every individual and the increasing intensity of the effects (droughts, dust storms, floods, etc.) are combined with high vulnerability to disasters. Here, only 6 out of 25 sociopolitical activists could identify a relationship between these two matters, painting a grim picture of the future. Meanwhile, national newspapers report that greenhouse gas emissions of Iran have increased extensively between 2006 and 2022, according to a study at Yale University.²⁴

²¹ She worked in the reference library of an automobile factory for a few years.

²² Black Oil, also called Mazut, is a carcinogenic pollutant. Iran’s Black Oil has 70% more carbon than the international standard, (3.5% carbon compared to per 0.05 % which is the international standard).

²³ Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/pdf/iran_exe.pdf

²⁴ Source: Etemaad Newspapers, June 6, 2022.

As a result, and among other reasons such as habitat destruction, Iran's global ranking in environmental indicators has dropped from 58th out of 180 in 2006 to 133rd in 2022.

Is it because as Iranians we are proud of our oil and gas reserves? After all, the nationalization of oil in 1950 was a dramatic high point in our modern history. The responses do not reflect a nationalistic pride in this area: 6 people outright considered these natural resources to be "the reason behind our misery", with 3 of those interviewed identifying the link between climate change and oil and gas). This could be considered a negligible minority; however, another 12 people had very negative views toward the national oil and gas industry. They believed that the resources are being poorly managed and profits are not being used for society's needs. That means 18 out of 25 people were seriously critical of the oil and gas industry. Of the remaining 7 people, 3 disagreed with "the entire capitalist system that shapes global resource extraction and use, and determines our relationship with nature". If we add this number, we find that 22 out of these 25 Iranian women and of which 4 at least have or had immediate family members working for the national oil company - were critical towards this publicly-run industry.

If #metoo against all odds can become a national campaign in Iran, then a massive global campaign like the Global Climate Action movement should also be able to reach every corner of human society. Feminism has a long history in Iran, and the tireless efforts of generations of Iranian and international feminists have laid the ground so that in the right moment #metoo was able to rise as an independent new wave. Is publicly shaming one person or a small group even if it means tarnishing the reputation of movie moguls in Iranian cinema easier and less risky than rising against the humongous oil and gas sector?²⁵ Are we even ready to point out the faults in the economic sector that our country so heavily relies on?

²⁵ Most recently a letter by a group of prominent actresses has revealed the prevalence of sexual harassment in Iranian TV and cinema.

IN SEARCH OF BLOCKADIA

In the last decade, environmental crises have transformed into social and political crises. The first wave of environmental protests started in Urumia, in response to the drying up of Lake Urumia. Such protests continued in other places such as Tabriz. More recently, particularly since 2017, uprisings in many provinces -Khuzestan, Isfahan, Chahar Mahal and Bakhtiyari, Fars, and Bushehr- have been directly linked to water and dust storms, both of which are caused by the disastrous duet of mismanagement of natural resources and climate change.²⁶ Angry protestors go to the streets, demanding their most basic human rights: water and breathable air. They criticize plans and policies that move water away from their lands and cities and dedicate it to other areas and to water-demanding industries such as steel plants. “We want water, we want jobs! Do not shoot, do not set fire! Protest is peaceful!” These are the words of a Khuzestani protestor in 2021.

In Khuzestan, 50% of wetlands of Hur ol-Azim, now one of the dust bowls of south of Iran, have been burnt and dried up since 1988 to tap into the Azadegan oil reserves lying beneath this critical ecosystem. Oil, the same substance that is polluting their local air and one that we are addicted to burning and smoking it up to the atmosphere as harmful gases that trap energy and warm up our planet, is making weather in this area more extreme and less predictable. Fossil fuels are making their water more and more scarce, and dust storms that rise from dried up lands are becoming more and more frequent. In the future there will be even less water and even the best water management will no longer be effective. The same areas that provide this oil happen to be some of the most vulnerable to the effects of the changing climate; however, few people in the land of oil are aware of this utmost vicious cycle. Meanwhile, politicians get away with empty promises without people-at-risk even noticing this betrayal.

Aside from uprisings mentioned before, there has been one case in Iran in which environmental activism directly targeted the oil and gas industry. In April 2022, #notopetrochemicals launched a national (popular) social media campaign against the establishment of the petrochemical plant in Miyankaleh. The area has been designated as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar convention since 1975 and a biosphere reserve under the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Program since 1976. It is a most unique area on the southeastern coast of the Caspian sea for migratory birds and the last remnant of the Caspian delta river system. The petrochemical plant required desalination of 25 million meter cubes of the Caspian Sea’s water. Transfer of propylene from the plant through the Hyrcanian forest to Damghan would also damage this ecosystem by passing 200 km of pipelines through the forest.²⁷ Serious criticism of the petrochemical project was started by the local herders who were joined in situ by environmentalists. The protestors included Hedieh Tehrani, a famous actress and environmental activist, as well as online campaigners. Environmentalists based their arguments on documents and regulations that showed the project was illegal. Another group, alumni of Tehran University, sent an open letter to the head of the country’s Judiciary. So far the campaign has been successful at halting the project in proving that the ecological and intrinsic value of the wetland is more than the exaggerated number of jobs that the plant would be able to create. The argument turns around the misplacement of the plant, which should be located in the oil-rich south instead. It is a case of “not in my backyard!”, which focuses on habitat destruction and pollution. The campaign, however, is disconnected from other campaigns in the south for water, and the links to greenhouse gas emissions have not been mentioned.

²⁶ In 2020, the Iranian Parliament’s research center states that increased water tensions in the country will have security consequences and will lead to social unrest.

²⁷ Source: Iran newspaper, April 10, 2022.

There is currently little popular pressure on the government to act on climate change mitigation and to invest in renewable energy. Iran's cumulative CO₂ emissions in the period 1902-2021 has been 19.5 billion tons^{28 29 30}. In 2020 Iran was the 6th highest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. Its CO₂ emissions is at 690 million tons, which is more than France, Britain, Sweden and Norway together (676 million tons). It is the 4th biggest emitter in Asia, after China (11.94 billion tons), India (2.39 billion tons), and Japan (1.05 billion tons). Iran emits more CO₂ than Saudi Arabia (574 million tons), Brazil (441 million tons) and Australia (376 million tons)³⁰. Iran is a silent but big player in this field.³¹

Blockadia, a term used for the first time by anti-tar sand activists in Texas, has grown to become what Naomi Klein describes in her book, *This changes everything*: it refers not to a geographic location but a constantly changing landscape of resistance against excessively hazardous exploitation of land for oil and gas and open mines. It is a global network of communities which are as diverse as the places they live: Greece, Canada, Inner Mongolia, China, Romania, Ecuador, etc. This new movement opposes the current situation in which exploitative industries are in the position of power and decision making, and instead demands the transfer of power to local communities in order to oversee activities that put their essential resources -water, air, soil, etc- at risk. Klein believes that Blockadia demonstrates how collective reaction to the climate crisis is transforming from closed-door policy-making meetings to something lively and unpredictable, which takes place in the streets, farms, mountains or forests.

Certain elements of Blockadia can be seen in Iran's recent environmental protests; however, the missing link is the lack of an understanding of global climate change. The notion - that the same reasons for local environmental degradation (desertification, deforestation, air pollutions, species loss, etc.) are also causing worldwide environmental threats to many other societies, and that global benefits and concerns are also linked to local ones - should therefore not be ignored. Until this notion is in place, local environmental groups in this corner of the world will not unify with the global mass of their environmentally-minded counterparts. Such isolated movements are also quickly politicized in the context of Iran, as mentioned before. The criticism of protestors in Iran, while being rightful, is not holistic. As they worry about water transfers, a much bigger problem is taking place. Soon there will be no water to meet the demands.

In the national action plan on water scarcity, 31 billion cubic meters of water has been allocated for the province of Khuzestan. Last year, 2021, only 10 billion cubic meters entered the province due to the combination of climate change, low local precipitation, dam construction and increased water use upstream. Khuzestanis are angry about water being sent to Isfahan, and Isfahanis are disgruntled by the high quantity of water being used by people and industries upstream; however, the increasing reality is that there is little water available to begin with, and this problem will only be solved through immediate powerful climate action at the global level, by all governments, the private sector, and citizens; all working together as one threatened species: the Homo Sapiens.

28 Boden, T.A., G. Marland, and R.J. Andres, Global, Regional, and National Fossil-Fuel CO₂ Emissions, Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, U.S.A., 2016.

29 CDIAC-FF, nation 1751-2017, Research Institute for Environment, Energy, and Economics, Appalachian State University, North Carolina, USA, 2020.

30 Crippa M., Guizzardi D., Banja M., Solazzo E., Muntean M., Schaaf E., Pagani F., Monforti-Ferrario F., Olivier, J.G.J., Quadrelli, R., Riskey Martin, A., Taghavi-Moharamli, P., Grassi, G., Rossi, S., Oom, D., Branco, A., San-Miguel, J., Vignati, E. CO₂ emissions of all world countries, JRC/IEA/PBL 2022 Report, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2022.

31 Source: Our world in data <https://ourworldindata.org/co2/country/iran>

IMPORTANCE OF CLIMATE LITERACY

We must spread this understanding that stopping climate change will be beneficial to all of us. Environmentalism, which includes climate action, must become a social value. We must especially bring on board those who are in isolation to make lasting connections. Grassroot movements connected to each other might be our best bet. This gamble is dangerous. We need everyone to demand a stop at 1.5°C global warming. Zooming out, I wonder how many other societies around the world are still absent from this global movement. Certainly, there are many other equivalents of Khuzestan and Isfahan in other states. And most likely, many other such communities in the Global South, who are grappling with severe effects of climate change (always combined with inadequate natural resource management). But without being aware of the big picture, local problems - and local grassroot movements - will hang in limbo. If we want to make that 100-week deadline to turn the tide and avoid a 1.5° increase in temperatures, we have no choice but to be as inclusive as possible, to reach out to all global stakeholders and join forces. It is not enough to have climate activists. Everyone must be involved.

In the months following my interviews, Iran saw a new wave of nationwide protests which were sparked by the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, while in custody of the special police for her refusal to wear the Hijab (women's clothing and head covering prescribed as Islamic by the Islamic Republic). Women are at the center of the uprisings; the main slogan being "woman, life, liberty!". As of today, at least 500 have been killed and (several) thousands arrested, wounded, or both. There are now more prisoners in our ward, although the demography has remained much the same.³² However, recent events shed more light on the importance of better understanding levels of climate literacy among political prisoners.

³² A few women with previous experience as political prisoners have been brought here, while the political prisoners scattered in general wards of Qarchak in the south of Tehran were moved to Evin prior to the new rise of protests.

On October 15, 2022 there was a riot inside Evin prison as well as an extensive fire followed by a brutal crackdown by special forces independent from the prison establishment. At least 8 people (all men) were reported dead, while an unknown number of prisoners went missing, including allegedly youth recently detained in the widespread uprisings after Mahsa Amini's death. The world watched from live videos as Evin prison was burning.

In our building, angry female prisoners hysterically shaken by the incessant sound of gunfire coming from surrounding parts of the compound, unhinged the metal door that separates the prisoners from the warden's office and made it to the main exit behind the compound. They yelled anti-government slogans while a line of special forces awaited them on the other side of the door. The riot went on for hours past midnight until those with family members (husbands, sons, fathers, brothers) in mens wards were allowed phone calls to make sure they were alive. According to unofficial accounts, the riot had started in reaction to the transfer of certain political prisoners of wards 7 and 8 to other prisons. Following this, in ward 4 men started the riot thinking that street protestors have come to their rescue, a promise that has been made numerous times. I stood on the margins of the riot in the women's section, watching through teargas and disbelief, the crimson flames that rose just over the hill and died into clouds darker than the evening sky.

Evin has played a pivotal and disturbing role in the long history of political movements before and after the 1979 revolution in Iran.³³ It has been the most high security prison where political prisoners have been detained, tortured, and up to a certain time, executed (now executions take place elsewhere). It also carries in its history the formation of political alliances and ground stone for enmities among individuals and groups. It is beyond a mere geographic location, it is a symbol of political struggles in Iran.

³³ One of the critical points of that time was the ambush and liberation of political prisoners of Evin just a few months before the Shah's regime was toppled.

Evin holds a unique place in the human geography of the country, matching Enghelab Square as a political pole. Hundreds gathered outside Evin on the night of the October fire, and attempted to enter and free political prisoners.

Even if singled out from its past, the ambiguous events of the night of October 15, 2022 and subsequent international attention point to the importance of not only the prison, but also the role that political prisoners play in the national political scene. It goes without saying that a number of individual men and women in Evin are influential personalities and have played an important role in recent events as well. Rather than idolizing individual prisoners, I believe that the totality of thoughts and opinions that are held within these walls is influential in the direction of social and political change. This a place as dynamic as our fast changing society. At any point in time, the diversity of prisoners reflects the spectrum of movements in society, as well as the issues most under control by the government.

For instance, there have been waves of arrests of journalists, students, academics and researchers, labor union women's and children's rights activists, followers of religious or spiritual beliefs, reformists, environmentalists, and most of all, tsunamis of protestors taken from the streets. More and more commonly, we also see foreign or dual nationals who are hostages for lucrative prisoner exchange swap deals. These include Fariba Adelkhah and Nahid Taghavi as mentioned before; Siamak Namazi, a dual Iranian-American citizen who has spent 7 horrific years in Evin awaiting a prisoner swap; Nazanin Zaghari-Radcliff, who was [recently] exchanged with Britain after 6 years; and my colleague, the founder of the wildlife conservation NGO (PWHF), a triple Iranian-British-American National, Morad Tahbaz, who has fallen victim to diplomatic games between the countries for the past 5 years. The fate of the rest of our group of environmentalists is at least partially dependent on Morad's exchange with the US.

There is good reason to believe that the opinions reflected here show the tip of the moun-

tain of the politically active layer of society. One could imagine that the fire burning on the height of the capital on October 15 was but the fumes exiting the furnace of anger and turmoil that runs down all the way to the center and farther into the low-laying impoverished neighborhoods of Tehran and beyond.

It is therefore all the more troubling that a problem as serious as climate change has such a faint trace among the concerns of the interviewed group. It seems that climate change as a specific issue is missing from the agenda of organized opposition groups as expressed by their representing prisoners: Pahlavi loyalists, the MEK, and their left-leaning allies. At most, current environmental problems such as the drying-up of Lake Urumia and the burning of forests are mentioned as political criticism of the Islamic Republic's mismanagement, mostly on foreign-based opposition TV channels. However, these groups have failed to consider climate change as an independent issue or provide their alternative plans, unless their supporters in prison have missed those plans.³⁴

Similarly, the issue is not in any way central to supporters of less popular opposition, reformists, or leftists groups. This is while inside and outside of Iran, many speculate continued uprisings against the regime, and some even expect an overthrow of power. Nevertheless, given the aforementioned findings, we must consider the path ahead as relatively unchanging with regards to advancing climate literacy in Iran. Serious work on awareness raising, education, and tailoring research to the local needs will remain as crucial, regardless of any potential changes in politics. For instance, it will be essential to remove current barriers to spreading climate knowledge. Language barriers that have so far played a role in the isolation of the Iranian public from global environmental movements must be removed through more and better work on translating climate discourse, making key literature and up-to-date discussions available in Persian, adapting and internalizing our current knowledge and promoting research on local climate predictions and tailored solutions for mitigation and adaptation.

³⁴ One supporter of the Pahlavi dynasty explained that the ousted crown prince has put forward a general plan called Phoenix for ruling the country which includes more attention to the environment, but it does not go into any detail.

Currently, groups of activists working in climate-related issues are under extreme pressure. The conviction of our environmental NGO and the fate of its employees and founders is one example of how environmental work has become a political crime. This is the case, especially for institutions that make an attempt at reducing the isolation of Iran's environmental movement by cooperating with international institutions, all of which has been used against our group as "cooperation with enemy states". The Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF) was an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) member, a partner to the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and cooperated on wildlife conservation research with the World Conservation Society (WCS) as well as numerous universities abroad, and yet, its work on wildlife conservation, as well as participation of its members in international conferences and cross-sectoral attempts to tackle water and climate issues, was deemed a crime. Such activities will be required again, to fill in the huge gaps of knowledge, expertise, data, and awareness. In light of the current political crisis, different avenues for such activities may become available in alternative political paths. This may be possible if the Iranian national economy moves away from its reliance on oil revenues and the government is less reliant on this sector.

Whether there will be a change of power or the unpopular path of reform, any wise government will have to address the imminent threat of climate change and its impacts. If a different attitude is not taken, the country will face more serious climate-induced crises to add to the political turmoil, long before we rot in prison along with a growing number of political prisoners. A political movement is dynamic and it won't come as a shock if the dry spell that lies over the country sparks a coercion between water demand and "Woman, Life, Liberty" movement, hence intensifying the situation. While the knowledge gap on this issue is obvious, it is important to keep in mind the difference between current political prisoners and actors on the streets, before making blanket statements. Just as ocean currents are layered, so is the politically active society.

I see my inmates as being closest to the surface, flowing over many other layers. One could expect a shift in the demography of Evin's political prisoners with a lag time of a few months to a few years depending on the (il)legal process of trials. However the most recent entries to the women's ward are again those who have had a previous form of political activities such as reformist parties. Other detainees are held elsewhere, in temporary detention sites or makeshift places that can accommodate the high numbers. As a result, we are relatively isolated from the high traffic of arrested people, mostly the youth. But currently political prisoners present the political elite, more so than the masses. There is interaction among these layers, however. Sometimes individuals with a name or opposition groups drive the movement, sometimes the reverse happens. What seems to be happening at the moment is the latter.

Organized opposition groups seem to be riding the wave that has gained momentum in the public. I have hope that the unorganized masses revolting across Iran, most of whom are teenagers or in their twenties and therefore much younger than my focus group, will be more climate literate and up to date.³⁵ Nevertheless I'm in a difficult place in terms of access to reliable information about the events on the streets. Official news on national TV is so highly controlled that it is hard to extract any reliable information except for the common knowledge that "nothing is true unless the "20.30 News" denies it". On the other hand, a lack of access to other news sources leaves no choice but to put together the information conveyed by the families, a lot of which is based on accounts shared on social media and rumors. Therefore I make no claims about understanding the movement on the streets and can only recommend a broader study on climate literacy and environmental demands to be conducted on the other side of prison walls.

³⁵ In fact these are some the words of the song "Baraye", meaning "for all the", by Shervin Hajipour: "for this polluted air", "for Pirouz and the threat of his extinction". The former national talent show champion (runner up) wrote and sang "Baraye" taking some of the most popular hashtags in a nationwide twitter campaign. The song went viral, especially when the singer was arrested in his hometown in the north of Iran, and the song has become the de facto anthem to the uprisings. Pirouz is the famous Asiatic Cheetah cub that was born in captivity in a controversial Cheetah reproduction program and has since stolen the hearts of the Iranian Public.

HOPE

Months have passed since I embarked on this research in the spring of 2022. I write these lines as I sit in the courtyard of our small ward in the unbearable lull of a long weekend. My spirit is weighted down by the silence and the polluted air. The sudden visit of a small blue butterfly in the prison yard distracts me from my dystopian thoughts. It has been a long time since I've last seen such colors, radiant blue with purple shades. Its beauty is doubled by the bland background of asphalt and bricks. It must be a rare species. Its presence has calmed down my anxiety. It reminds me that rare does not mean impossible. Mahsa Amini's death was one of such rare moments. As tragic as it was, her death became a scream as colorful and lively as my rare visitor; a uniting force that brought together unprecedented energy, power and resistance, to defend her unjust death. It brought the issue of women to the center of demands for justice and freedom. Many taboos were broken, particularly Hijab. Lines were crossed that will never be uncrossed again. The vibrancy of the uprising tells us that we have the capacity to become more aware and to see the injustice and the intersection of critical issues; those of women, minorities, workers, and environment, and to act while there is still time. As I follow the swift movements of my visitor, my mind is pulled towards a possibility: a colorful surge of people from all corners of the world coming together and demanding a future in which the climate of our planet does not imperil our existence, or that of other species. I come to think that it is possible. As possible as the first encounter with a rare blue butterfly in a notorious prison.

END.

Niloufar Bayani

*Following Niloufar's survey and research findings on climate literacy in Evin Prison, she and her fellow inmates developed a 9-week climate seminar series which was designed to increase awareness and knowledge about climate change, its impacts as well as mitigation and adaptation actions. One important output of this 9-week climate course was an Open Letter signed by women political prisoners in Evin calling for climate action in Iran.

[Women of Iran's Evin Prison Raise the Alarm on Climate Change and the Future of Iran - Zamaneh Media \(radiozamaneh.com\)](https://www.radiozamaneh.com/en/women-of-iran%E2%80%99s-evin-prison-raise-the-alarm-on-climate-change-and-the-future-of-iran/)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Niloufar Bayani is an Iranian wildlife conservation biology researcher and environmentalist. She was born in 1986 in Tehran, Iran. She graduated in 2009 from McGill University in Canada with a BSc degree in Biology, and holds an MA degree in Conservation Biology from Columbia University.

2012 to 2017 - After her graduation, Bayani worked as a consultant and project adviser to UN Environment Programme (UNEP) at the Geneva Office. A deeply committed and hard-working colleague, Ms. Bayani focused on enhancing the resilience of communities against disasters and climate change. This mission took Ms. Bayani to work with different countries including: Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Ivory Coast and Sri Lanka. She was also lead author of several UNEP publications that examined how the regulatory functions of ecosystems could provide a buffer against disasters. She contributed to advance Ecosystem-based Disaster Risk Reduction (Eco-DRR) in the global environment and disaster risk reduction agendas and the Partnership for Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction (PEDRR).

2017 - She joined the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation (PWHF), an Iranian environmental organization co-founded by Kavous Seyed-Emami and other Iranian environmentalists. PWHF is a not-for-profit organization supervised by a board of trustees and an executive board whose members are well versed in conservation strategies and natural resource management. In Iran, she worked on the wildlife projects to monitor the critically endangered Asiatic cheetah.

2018 - Bayani was arrested in January by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, on charges of espionage. Others arrested and imprisoned from PWHF included Seyed-Emami, Amir Hossein Khaleghi, Abdolreza Kouhpayeh, Hooman Jokar, Morad Tahabaz, Sam Rajabi, Sepideh Kashani, and Taher Ghadirian.

2019 until today - She was convicted of espionage by Iranian authorities in a closed-door trial in Iran, and received a 10-year prison sentence. She is now currently serving her time at Evin prison in Iran.