

Preface to
**Maryam Rajavi's *Iranian Women Against
Fundamentalism***

English Edition,

by

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Inside the pages of this book, you will find the latest political and theological reflections on fundamentalist Islam in Iran by a very remarkable woman, Maryam Rajavi, the President-Elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran. Although Mme. Rajavi is known to few people in the West, as a leader of the Resistance against the tyrannical rule of the Mullahs on Iranian soil (a scourge which has been making the lives of the Iranian populace miserable since the revolution in 1979), she has had a career of resistance spanning decades. In her time, she has had her picture on a stamp, been rated as one of the 50 most powerful women in the world, and received accolades from many political bodies for her fierce defense of women and minorities inside Iran. Her face is everywhere around the world: she can be seen on YouTube in her many appearances at the European Union Parliament, at the Vatican, and in other venues where countries which are invested in Human Rights invite her to speak. Yet, she is not welcome in the United States, Canada or her home country of Iran, although in the latter she is both beloved by the people and vilified by the clerical leadership at every turn. She has been the target of assassination attempts, imprisoned for her beliefs and work, been the victim of scurrilous lies and demeaning personal portraits authorized by the Mullahs, and as a part of a gesture to so-called reformers in Iran, she and her

supporters were – and continue to be – branded as terrorists by the Clinton Administration of the United States in 1997, with members of the European Union following suit to curry favor in exchange for access to Iranian oil resources.

Why all the fuss?, one might ask, if this leader is, as the Mullahs maintain, only a mere woman who cannot possibly have anything intelligent, relevant, or effective to say in political, theological or intellectual matters. The Mullahs' hysterical response to Rajavi is telling, since their official position is that no female is capable of speaking to political, social or cultural goals of Islam. They ignore her critiques of the Human Rights abuses and denigration of Islam by their ruling dictatorship, while simultaneously maintaining that she is both extremely dangerous *and* too trivial to merit notice. Given their attempts to silence this courageous woman, it is clear that her words do *indeed* speak directly into the heart of the current political tragedy which continues to repeat itself over and over again in Iran and the countries into which Iran attempts to project its political and ideological influence. For this reason if no other, it behooves those in the West who are concerned both about the rise of a fanatical Islam which underwrites terrorism around the world, as well as those who are concerned about Human Rights – especially those for women, children, and minorities – to become acquainted with Maryam Rajavi's thoughts on the experience of living under extremist clerical rule.

Born in Tehran, in 1953, Rajavi's story began much like that of many other girls of the period. She was educated by a family who believed in the education of girls and attended Sharif University of Technology where she earned her degree in metallurgical engineering. Like many other young people attending university, she was horrified by the abuses of everyday people which took place under the regime of Shah Reza Pahlevi. She looked at political theories, and joined discussion groups while at school during this period, little knowing the cruel cost that would be exacted from her and others for this relatively innocent act of considering how democratic change

might come about for her country. Modest to a fault, Rajavi maintains that her experience is no different from that of hundreds of thousands of others in her beloved country: her family suffered torture and execution under the Shah, and this continued under the new dictatorship instituted by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. By this time, however, she had made her choice to fight against oppression – especially after the Mullahs’ execution of her pregnant sister Massoumeh – by aligning herself with the political party that would later become known as the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK), under the inspirational leadership of a young law student, Massoud Rajavi, who would later become her husband and colleague in leadership of the remnant of this group. Today, she is still the able leader of this group and its political wing, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, though the former is currently held captive in Iraq as Protected Persons under the Fourth Geneva Convention, and the latter is headquartered in France from where it works tirelessly to defend the rights of these dissidents and to bring about regime change within their country of origin. Along the way, she has served in military units of the National Liberation Army of the MEK, worked as a political leader and organizer, and as a self-taught student of Islam, she began to put forth a well-reasoned and experientially-based understanding of what a progressive, democratic Islam might look like for her country.

Originally, the MEK under the leadership of Massoud Rajavi and others was, as one Iranian-American observer described it, “just another opposition group to the Shah--nothing special.”¹ The “nothing special” aspect of this political party, according to the observer, was that like many others of the time, it was composed of young people who were influenced by the academic trend of Marxist social analysis, and who objected to the atrocities and policies of Shah Pahlevi, a regime which was heavily underwritten by the United States and enforced by covert operatives of the CIA. The leaders were mostly young men, the rhetoric drawn from popular secular liberation movements favoring socialist methodology, and the goal was clear: get rid of the Shah, and begin the work of

¹ Personal communication, name withheld. Talk at Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, Florida, February, 2009.

state building which had been so brutally cut off by Western interference under the British earlier in the 20th century. These beginnings of unrest and sometimes violent action taken against the Shah's government (though not by members of the MEK) , combined with the reliance on Marxist theory, frightened the West during this period of the late Cold War, when it had not yet come to terms with its *own* meddling in countries which had been exploited by colonial powers. The Soviet government during this time had been quick to take advantage of nationalist movements in the Mideast which sought to turn out exploitative Western forces pillaging their lands of resources. Such trade agreements for Western development took the form of unfair market prices which benefited only the rich in the country and the sprawling corporations that made their living from the development of energy sources. Naturally, this outreach by Communism to those countries in the Mideast considered essential for Western energy resources did not go unopposed, and the United States and others in the West made a point of supporting dictatorships which were friendly to the West, especially in the face of Marxist challenges by people in the region.

Of course, this reliance on Marxist theory was everywhere a feature of most academic education and social analysis during the period of the 60s, giving rise in the United States, parts of Europe and Central America to reform movements, some of which advocated violence against the government. Repression of these groups was considered a matter of national security, so that when the inner cities of the United States erupted in minority violence in the 1960s, it only proved what a menace all forms of local reform might be to ruling establishments everywhere. These beginnings of a Marxist-inspired social critique of dictatorships and abuse of power in the Mideast would later return to haunt the MEK, as it would be wrongly labeled as "communist" and a threat to the West, even after the Soviet union had long since perished. This label is still brandished by both the Mullahs of Iran and the US State Department, along with other characterizations equally as scary: in their eyes, the MEK has become over the years, not just Marxist, but also Leshian and Terrorist.

While many opposition movements fought together to rid Iran of the Shah in 1979, this alliance of disparate groups did not last long once the opportunist Khomeini usurped power and hijacked a truly democratic and widespread opposition to the dictatorship of Pahlavi. Almost immediately, Khomeini began to systematically eliminate his political rivals, including the MEK. Instituting a dogmatic assertion that only clerical leadership could set the policies, laws, and shape of the new government, the so-called "*velayat-e faqih*", or principle of "supreme clerical rule", Khomeini embraced the most narrow, bigoted and fanatical view of Shiite Islam as a way of undergirding his own stranglehold on Iranian society. It is no wonder that the writings of Khomeini had always appeared in Arabic or Turkish, rather than Farsi; the people of Iran, largely unfamiliar with his work and values, would have rejected his plans for their country out of hand. Instead, he was able, through the use of brutality and widespread violence, to hijack a revolution which had begun in such hope and general cooperation. When the MEK refused to assent to *velayat-e faqih* in 1980, its members were declared to be public enemies. The group at large which had won many political seats in recent elections was outlawed, and leaders were assassinated wherever they could be found. Once Massoud Rajavi's name had been struck from the list of candidates running for office, a program of systematic elimination of all MEK members and values began, with outrageous loss of life and to the dismay of the general populace. Surviving members fled to Iraq, where they were accepted by Saddam Hussein, no fan of the Mullahs, and a very good friend of the United States at that time.²

Members of the MEK who had fled the pogrom against them founded bases along the Iraq – Iran border, where they continued to strategize and train in order to aid internal movements inside Iran which still worked in secret to overthrow the theocratic dictatorship. Supplied with weapons from supporters around the world, they made themselves ready both as a paramilitary group and

² See, for example, extant photographs on the Internet of later Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld shaking hands jovially with Saddam Hussein, in celebration of alliance and lucrative weapons sales.

as a strategic planning body that could, in the aftermath of an overthrow of Khomeini and his allies, help to institute a provisional government as Iran reorganized itself for free elections with universal suffrage for women and minorities under a new democratic leadership.

Remaining neutral when the Iran-Iraq war broke out in the 1980s, the members of the MEK found themselves poised between two leaders, each determined to exterminate the other. In solidarity with the Iranian people, they retained neutrality and refused to aid Hussein in his invasion of Iran. Yet, they could not easily join with the people of Iran as they fought, because that meant, in no small measure, defending the sources of power of the Mullahs they were determined to oust. However, when Saddam Hussein did cross the border and began taking the fight into Iran, the MEK mobilized and joined their Iranian compatriots in fighting against Hussein's invasion. They found themselves at this time being made the target of hostilities on both sides: as they crossed the border with their military units, they found themselves being shot at by Hussein's advancing troops, while at the same time from the rear, the Mullahs' battalions joined in, considering it more important to pick off the MEK than to fight the foreign invader.³ Only after the armistice between Iran and Iraq was signed did the MEK enter the fight against the Mullahs in earnest, thinking that the military had been weakened enough at this point that their engagement with Iranian forces might constitute the tipping point which would help remove Khomeini from power. Bloodshed took place at this point in the conflict between the MEK and Iranian forces, but civilians were never targeted by the paramilitary group. Still, in the Mullahs' tale of the events of this time, not only did they brilliantly defeat the MEK, but any civilian violence that took place was the result of atrocities committed by these organized dissidents. Interviews with families living in the cities and towns where civilian violence took place, however, tell a different story. Testimony given in the courts of the United Kingdom in 2006 when parliamentarians sought to remove the MEK and the NCRI from the list of terrorist organizations where it had been placed by the United

³ Personal interview, MEK member, name withheld, 2006, Auvers sur Oise, France.

States, made clear that "... The MEK had never used violence except in self-defense or in the defense of life".⁴ Reviewing all of the evidence, the British courts in 2008 reversed the decision to consider the MEK terrorists, noting that its designation as such was "pernicious", and an egregious appeasement of Iranian agents seeking to discredit their most serious opposition. To date, no credible proof has ever been presented that any member of the MEK has ever engaged in terrorist activities or targeted civilians; during an investigation of the group during the second Gulf War, the United States Pentagon undertook an exhaustive investigation of each member of the dissident group in Iraqi bases which had been disarmed by the United States entering troops. They found that not one person could be charged with any form of terrorist activities.

Still, at this time the charge remains before the US State Department, although federal courts have directed the State Department to delist the MEK from its list of Proscribed Terrorist Organizations. The Mullahs' agents have successfully influenced the American government to such a degree that despite many appeals to overturn this designation as terrorists, the label still stands. Both the United States Army and the United Nations declared the dissidents in Camp Ashraf in Iraq to be Protected Persons under the Fourth Geneva Convention, and certainly no terrorists but rather refugees who must not be extradited to Iran. As this preface is being written in 2012, the people of Ashraf, a city built from the sand up to make the desert bloom with a Democratic Islam, a group beloved by sheiks and Human Rights groups alike in the Diyala province of Iraq, remains at dire risk of extradition, torture, and murder. US generals, US congressional leaders, political figures, Human Rights activists, religious groups, members of the European Union, and democratic groups around the world are striving to obtain visas so that third-party countries can offer asylum to this long-suffering resistance group. However, the State Department continues intransigent, in collusion with the Iranian-influenced Iraqi government, and refuses to remove the label terrorist, which is the sole barrier to obtaining visas for the members of the MEK. Federal courts in the United States have

⁴ Baron Corbett of Castle Vale??

directed the Department to comply with its ruling that the MEK must be delisted by October of 2012. The fate of this group remains open, as the Department gestures towards vague issues of "national security issues". Willing to offer more gestures of appeasement to Iran in the vain hope of deterring the development of nuclear weapons, the US government seems fated to fall for the patent lies of the Iranian government on this deadly and looming issue. Meanwhile, the Mullahs make the claim that the MEK is responsible for the assassination of its nuclear scientists and the development of the so-called "stuxnet" virus which disabled Iranian centrifuges needed for developing plutonium for weapons. Always in search of scapegoats, the Mullahs find the MEK an excellent target, just as they blame the modest display of women's breasts to be the cause of earthquakes in Iran and around the world. Even though an irrelevant and ineffective group, which is the official position of Iran, the MEK still figures as the bogeyman who may be pulled out of the closet as the perpetrator of every evil which the dictators find obstructing their path to a global Islamic government ruled, of course, by them. Meanwhile, in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain and throughout the region, the Iranian dictators relentlessly work to stir up ethnic and religious strife in order to stymie the democratic goals of the Arab Spring, and make impossible any settlement between Israel and Palestine.

The Beginning of Something Special

What is it, we may ask, about Rajavi, her leadership and the MEK which so obsesses the Mullahs and inspires democratic women around the world? After the devastating loss of so many leaders of the MEK while in Iran, and later through assassinations, how did this group which began as "nothing special" freely re-imagine itself and rise from the flames of disaster like a phoenix? The answer here is simple, and attends to many of the points Rajavi makes in her writings below: when male leaders had been decimated, the remainder of the MEK made the deliberate decision to place

the rights and leadership of Iranian women at the center of all of their processes, programs, and plans for a future Iran.

Taking seriously the nature of the Prophet Mohammed's message in the Quran, as well as the historically documented roles of women in both the spread and maintenance of early Islam, the Rajavis took their cue from a progressive and thoughtful interpretation of the liberating message of the Quran. They noted that the Quran speaks frequently of the restriction on any compulsion of people in matters of faith and conscience. They read in the Prophet's message how often men and women, as equal partners, are called out as moral agents qualified to choose their own fates. Studying the misogynistic and primitive interpretations of the Quran put forth by Khomeini and other imams now in power, they realized that interpretations were being made based on oral traditions which almost never had the strong support of more mainstream interpretations which did require reputable documentation (the so-called strong and moderate *hadith* vs. weak *hadith*, or oral stories of the Prophet's explanations and actions, which were collected from the time of his death onward, and fixed in writing by the time of the 12th century of the Common Era). All this caused them to return to study of Islam as a revolutionary and liberating resource for political and social change, a somewhat surprising move given that their daily experience of their faith as promulgated by the Mullahs was a repressive and degraded set of restrictions that only increased the misery of the people of Iran.

Likewise, Shiite Islam offered them a great treasury of resources, since women's leadership in Shia had become important after the death of the Prophet. In Shia Islam, women's inheritance is valued and traditionally maintained as a sacred duty; women were instrumental in the conversion of early figures to Islam.³ Indeed, the first Mystic of Islam was a woman from Basra, Rabi'a, the famous theologian and holy woman. Rabi'a, born to a poor family with many children (her name in

³ Ayatollah Akbar Ganji; research on women in early Shiite Islam presented at a symposium in Auvers sur Oise, France, 2006.

Arabic means "four"), her deep faith and penetrating understanding of the nature of Allah was so amazing to her master that he felt forced to grant her freedom. At that point she became legendary to her community, often performing the same kinds of symbolic actions, prophetic in nature, which are associated with Hebrew and Christian prophets. One of her greatest moments was when she appeared in the city marketplace holding a flaming torch in one hand and a pitcher of water in the other. She was asked what she was doing and the meaning of the flame and the water. She replied that she was running into heaven to set it aflame, and descending into hell to quench the fires.⁶ This understanding of Allah's universal compassion was at the heart of her message, and miraculously has endured among the mothers, sisters, and women religious of Islam. No wonder the women of Iran were outraged by Khomeini and his colleagues' deformation of their Muslim heritage!

The women of the MEK rose to the challenge of freely relearning their sense of self after years of hearing womankind denigrated by the ruling theocracy. Rajavi has written and spoken previously of the long process of recovering the knowledge of how to be a full person after the relentless program of propaganda aimed at women which was intended to make them passive, fearful, and disbelieving of their own moral agency. Though such mental changes were difficult to implement at first, the women of the MEK had been surrounded by so much suffering and torture inflicted on their mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends, that they were willing to undertake the difficult task of acquiring the habit of freedom, self-determination, and the skills of leadership. This is why Maryam Rajavi speaks of Ashraf below as a "brilliant example"; it is also why the extradition and execution of these courageous women and men is a source of deep concern for people around the world. Like the enslaved Israelites of the Bible who had once been slaves under a cruel leader, those wandering in the Iraqi wasteland found their moral courage and rekindled their hope for a humane future there in the desert out of which Ashraf bloomed. Maryam, whose name is another

⁶ Schimmel, Annemarie. 1978, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

form of 'Miriam/Mary' of the Bible, sings a song of freedom for her people whenever she appears publically, just as Miriam, the sister of Moses the Liberator, did so long ago.

For reasons such as these, the Mullahs have attempted to minimize her inspirational leadership, as well as that of her husband, as some sort of 'cult of personality', along the lines of the official deification of Communist leaders like Stalin or Kim Jong Il. In fact, this is the case of the "pot calling the kettle black", for the cult of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran is the real offender here: his stern photographs still appear everywhere overlooking the atrocities being visited upon the people under his approving gaze. No one who understands the difficult path that women leaders and scholars have taken in an Islam interpreted through patriarchal and tribal misogynistic attitudes can fail to understand the honor and unique position which Maryam Rajavi and other women of her ilk hold for their followers. Because women have been traditionally excluded from education – especially theological education, translation and interpretation of the Quran – feminist leaders, writers and scholars like Rajavi are both scarce and beloved. They are subjected to every kind of calumny, and face incredible backlash as they make their way in the modern world. That women and men gladly risk themselves to protect these Mothers of Islam dedicated to a peaceful future for our planet ought to occasion no surprise to informed onlookers. Activist and woman leader Suhad Jabi Masri of Palestine, an area increasingly subject to Iranian interference to thwart peace processes, sums up the circumstances for Muslim women well:

"The way most of the world's women are raised is to think they are not equals to men and therefore unable to make any of the changes they would like to incorporate into their lives. They did not grow up with encouragement to seize their goals, let alone were they told that they are deserving of achieving them. It is instilled in them that they are second-class citizens."

-Suhad Jabi Masri, Psychosocial Program Manager at Tomorrow's Youth Organization⁷

⁷ <http://www.peacexpeace.org/2012/08/women-in-nabulus-organize-to-address-gender-divides/?org=334&lvl=100&itc=398&lea=16012&ctr=0&par=1>, accessed on August 23, 2012. This religious view of women is in no way confined to Islam: see, for example, B. Meyer, "Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 447-74.

One of the US generals, head of Military Police, who served in Camp Ashraf during its control by US Forces in Iraq and who has joined in the effort in Washington DC to save them from genocide writes of the women there,

"Bottom line: the women of the Iranian Resistance have given up everything in life to get their country back. One even told me that she was 'denied the right to be born in her own country.' I had to think about that one, and refer back to it often. Especially when I hear people state that the MEK are blind followers of a Branch Davidian-like cult."⁸

Vive la Différence!

Changes in centuries-long cultural attitudes, as well as resistance to deliberate propaganda about women's inferiority in Muslim thinking does not simply reverse itself overnight, or with a magic wand waved over the human psyche; deliberate policies and actions take must take place in order to achieve such goals. This is exactly what has happened in Ashraf under the leadership of the various women of the MEK, but most especially as articulated by Maryam Rajavi. Unlike Muslim women scholars working in the West, or more moderate Islamic countries, Rajavi has formed her thinking in the crucible of daily action in shaping the work of the Resistance with respect to gender attitudes. Women scholars in Islam are often caught between two worlds, and none can blame them if they have taken a more neutral position in order to secure their own lives, safety, and academic advancement. If they write about abuses in the interpretation of Quran with respect to

⁸ Personal communication from Gen. David Phillips, July 19, 2012.

gender ideology, they are likely to be viewed as Western sellouts, and in extreme cases, find themselves saddled with fatwas or up against covert monetary influences in the form of Iranian or wahhabi donations to Western academic institutions. Such money has a pernicious influence not only in decisions about which women are even allowed into study programs at the graduate level. Fundamentalist money also creates a chilling atmosphere which determines the types of scholarship that are considered acceptable for women who do succeed in gaining the appropriate education in Quran and Islamic studies, and who then gains employment in a reputable university setting. While there are certainly exceptions of brave women who defend both their faith and their gender in academic settings, it has been much easier for women to fall back on the strategy of their Western sisters in religious studies from recent times: engagement in narrow historical or theological studies of the past which, while certainly exposing gender ideology, do not necessarily move into the arena of discussion of what such insights might mean for practical changes in one's societies of today. On the other hand, women activists in Muslim communities who seek to change gender discrimination are seldom accorded any place at the academic table when such issues are discussed in scholarship on gender in Islam.

Rajavi, then, has found herself in a special situation where she has held both an activist role and a theoretical one, bringing the two arenas together to create genuine social change in gender attitudes among the men and women of the Iranian resistance. Because she does not rely on academic discourse as a source of her authority, nor does she skirt the practical issues of day-to-day change of attitudes, she presents a blend of lived theology and religious discourse which is valued precisely when it bridges the gap between theory and practice.

Some of the practices of progressive re-formation have come in as a special target of criticism by the Mullahs' regime, as they to attempt to label her work as lesbian, anti-heterosexual, and Communist or terrorist. For example, feedback sessions conducted among women and men's groups separately by gender are considered to be a form of communist or lesbian indoctrination which is surely "proof" that she is a mindless social engineer whose Stalinism is a threat to both East and West.⁹ However, around the world such institutionalized feedback discussion groups, even where separated based on gender, race, social circumstance, or occupation, have proven to be the method of choice for advancing psychological, emotional, and practical social change, as well as the acquisition of occupational and social skills. Both women and men must be trained to reflect on their own conditioned responses to gender attitudes — or to attitudes on race, appropriate occupational status, or goals and aspirations, all of which turn out to be "human" features belonging to both sexes rather than genderized givens that are set by biological sex.¹⁰ Naturally, participation in such groups is likely to seem foreign at first and be experienced as deeply uncomfortable by those who have never reflected systemically on how their

⁹ Particular to the charges and worries of the Mullahs of Iran is the separation of the sexes among the Resistance: not only do those fighting religious tyranny have no time for typical male – female sexual role-playing, they are also committed to placing no children or anyone under the age of 18 at risk. For this reason, men and women live separately in dormitories, and usually eat at separate tables. Those who were married prior to joining the Resistance have divorced during this time when they fight for the freedom of their country people. All this, of course, is a horror to the patriarchal leadership in Tehran: the idea that men, by nature, should not have complete access to sexual servicing by women is anathema! These same Mullahs who insist that women attend separate universities in modern Iran, and that they walk in special gutter lanes on the street in order to avoid giving offense to men who occupy the sidewalks, now stand up for the privileges of male – female congress and charge the MEK with lesbianism for their rejection of gender ideology and sex roles. But not to worry! The Mullahs have clearly not read all of Khomeini's work, since he gives clear directions as to how men may sexually assault girl babies as young as 18 months, without having to designate them as one of their wives, even should their sex play devirginate the baby. Apparently, despite the teachings of the Quran, no man's sexual appetites should ever be placed under restraint.

¹⁰ "Genderization" is the process by which a society assigns one particular behavior to either gender based on social ideology. For example, it is a genderized view to assume that only men can be pilots, or only women can be caregivers for young children. Gender is a social construction; sex is a biological given.

views of what is right and proper have been shaped by social context. This is true whether we are speaking of male veterans returning from the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drug addicts seeking a return to sobriety, or the new women and men arrivals across the border from Iran into MEK settlements in Iraq. Such discomfort with the process of changing attitudes is routinely cited by Iran and its agents in the West as a sure sign of nefarious brainwashing, leading to the label of personality cult or communist sect.

Such nonsense is belied by the fact that over the years, only 300 members of the MEK have ever left the organization and sought repatriation in Iran. The MEK has routinely maintained that any member of its group is free to leave at any time, and has challenged and invited international observers to verify this by visits to all MEK facilities. No place within MEK settlements has ever been considered out of bounds, nor has any group ever restricted observers from sitting in and witnessing the activities taking place on a daily basis. Surprise visits, observations, and extensive long-term residents have always been a hallmark of the transparency and openness by which the MEK has tried to refute these ridiculous charges. Yet, it is often the case that this very openness is viewed as some kind of trick, because, of course, some international bodies (like the International Committee of the Red Cross) have deemed it too dangerous to visit MEK installations, especially after the second Gulf War commenced. Hence, only more hardy and concerned groups have had the courage to send their observers to Ashraf and elsewhere, causing those observers to then be considered "partisan" and their testimony dismissed. However, no one could accuse the United States Pentagon and its functionaries of partisan support of communist or terrorist entities, and such long-term observers have demonstrated again and again that no one in Ashraf or elsewhere has ever been held against their will or subjected to the kind of

brainwashing that the Mullahs themselves practice as they attempt to break dissidents of their views in their notorious prisons. Reports coming out of Iran by former MEK members have doubtless been coerced by threats to the family of the former member; similarly, families that are sent by Iran to demand to see their relatives in Ashraf and who claim they were refused are usually under threat and orders by the Iranian regime, sometimes benefiting financially from their willingness to participate in the Mullahs' attempts to slander the group.

It should be noted that the processes of the MEK has been thoughtfully carried out with respect to the social realities of younger and newer members who were not part of the original nucleus under Massoud Rajavi and who have joined the group subsequent to the major executions of 1983 and following. Social attitudes toward gender cannot be changed simply by focusing on the victims of those views – that is, the women, as many studies in global development have shown. Not only would such a program teach women to think of themselves as victims without moral, intellectual, and psychological agency, but without change on the part of those who benefit from the systematic gender discrimination of the Mullahs' regime – mainly the men – no change could ever seriously be expected to take place. I have written in another place that as remarkable as the women of the MEK most certainly are, the men are equally deserving of praise and recognition for the mighty challenge which they undertook in re-forming their own consciousness of gender roles in society, theology, and relationships.¹¹

¹¹ *With Eyes of Flesh: The Bible, Gender and Human Rights* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, UK, 2008).

Those who are interested in seeing a global change in the role that religion plays in underwriting systematic gender discrimination and authorization of violence against women often despair of how their programs and practices failed to achieve their goals. This is because unless one takes up the formation and structural implications of masculinity, instead of just studying versions of femininity, one is doomed to fail.¹² What good is it in global development programs to secure small monetary loans for women, if the family practices of asymmetrical gender relations go unchanged, such that the male head of the family simply appropriates that money for drinking, gambling, and his own pursuits? How can human trafficking be changed by simply teaching women of situations of which they ought to be suspicious, like grand offers to work as domestics in richer countries, when fathers have been taught to view girls as financial burdens (usually because of dowries or the perception that education of girls is wasted because they will eventually join the family unit of their husbands) rather than integral family members who are as needful of protection and support as the favored male offspring? If men do not change, the women will be unable to improve their lives, no matter how many initiatives are aimed at achieving that goal.

For this reason, the astonishing reversal of attitudes shown by the men of the MEK is a beacon of hope to people around the world. In a single generation of concerted action, these men have been able to change their relation to centuries' old traditions which had decreed that they are master and women are slaves. They too have studied the Quran and seen its thoroughly radical view of human equality; they have, from their own experience in the Resistance, seen that when the male leaders were exterminated, their women

¹² S. C. White, "Men, Masculinities, and the Politics of Development", *Gender & Development* 5:2 (1997), pp. 14-22.

compatriots, likewise devastated by grief and loss, were fiercely determined to take up the torch and carry the movement forward. By adopting what Rajavi calls a position of "positive discrimination", which determined that women should be trained and moved forward into all positions of leadership, the MEK went from being a typical opposition group to a testament of the ability of both women and men to effect radical change in social attitudes and concrete practices. It was neither easy nor quick, but the men of the Resistance work side-by-side with their women colleagues, serving under their leadership and authority, and show considerable satisfaction and delight in their ability to adjust to and affirm these practices.

This is everywhere noticeable as the women and men of the Iranian Resistance interact with Western observers, friends, and supporters, as well as non-Iranian Muslim groups. Whether they are discussing their surprising devotion to women's leadership, or talking about the history of the movement, they are justifiably proud of their self-discovery of the power of new gender relations. When asked by one European woman parliamentarian how their new attitudes came about, one male leader replied, "We had lost everything (*referring to the execution of the male leadership early in the 1980s*); we were, we thought, without resources, horrified and overwhelmed. We thought there was nothing we could do to rebuild our hopes and our movements. But then, when we looked around, we saw that the women were still there. It only made sense to utilize their talents and their dedication as we began to rebuild. And look at everything they have achieved!"¹³ At the grand assembly in Paris in 2009, the present writer was seated with women leaders of the NCRI at dinner in a hotel, while just a small distance away, men of every nationality were

¹³ Comments made at the Dignitaries Dinner, Conference on International Women's Day, Paris, March 2012.

clustered around the bars television screen watching the World Cup soccer match of the day. All the men -- except those from the Iranian Resistance. When asked, and even encouraged to go and watch the match with the men enjoying a close soccer game, one of the men from the Resistance firmly said, "Why would we do that, when the real action in this room is here at the table with our women leaders? Once you know that all the decisions that affect a whole people are being made by the women, why would you prefer to watch men playing games?" At another event, one Western supporter, Elizabeth Sidney, O.B.E., president of the International Federation of Women against Fundamentalism and for Equality (WAFE) commented as she watched the men of the Resistance performing the dinner service as waiters, "Look at that! These men are engineers, PhD's, politicians, writers, professors, and lawyers, and yet they serve of the women -- unheard of even in progressive countries of the West!" Most endearingly, at a formal dinner at her headquarters in Auvers sur Oise on a very hot day in June, her women assistants had carefully positioned a huge fan behind Rajavi when it was clear that she, like many other women attendees, was experiencing that surge of heat particular to female biology. She picked up her program and began to fan herself vigorously. At the same time, all of the men of the Resistance seated at her table likewise retrieved their own programs and began to fan themselves in solidarity with all the women elders. Somewhere, the Prophet Mohammed must have been smiling, even as Khomeini spun in his grave!

At another event on International Women's Day when Rajavi was addressing activist women from around the world, one of the men raised his hand and began to speak of the impact of this woman's leadership upon his own understanding of the teachings of the Quran saying that she had changed him from a man who had a heart of stone into a real

human being. As usual, she modestly deferred his praise to share it with all her sisters of the MEK. While the women murmured amongst themselves, Mme. suggested that perhaps it was time for the men to hold feminist conferences for themselves to discuss some of these issues, sparking much laughter and many nods of approval by both sexes. But it created a poem, as this writer reflected on the profound healing that had taken place between these women and men from an Iran bludgeoned by discrimination and division:

This is Woman's special art--

to give to men a human heart,

"You must not wait!" you hear her say;

"you must begin, this very day!"

And they did.

Rajavi's Special Contribution to Quranic Theology and Islamic Studies

As previously noted, Maryam Rajavi is neither an academically nor traditionally trained Islamic scholar or theologian (Ayatollah, Imam), yet she has attained a status as an interpreter of Quran and student of Islam that few women of her time can match. This has come about through her own close readings of the Quran, her active and well-trained mind, and her context of interpreting from within a resistance movement that has endured much and achieved much -- "by the hand of Woman", as the Hebrew Bible would say (Book of Judges, chapter 4). Faced with a national constitution which aims at the production of full-scale gender apartheid, Rajavi has taken on the declarations of the so-called reformers of her nation, as well as the most hardened and bigoted conservatives. She notes that, in fact,

the views of both camps are essentially the same if one peels away their deceptive language. Rafsanjani, a former President of Iran, hopefully painted as a moderate by some in the West, is only re-articulating what Khomeini had written into Iran's constitution when he says,

"... Differences in height, fitness, voice, growth, structure of muscles and physical abilities between men and women indicate that men are stronger and more capable in all these regards... The man's brain is larger; men are more rational and logical while most women are emotional and sentimental... These influence the allocation of responsibilities, duties and rights." (Chapter 2, present work)

Rajavi's leadership and experience in working with the women of the MEK puts total lie to the official ideology of Islamic fundamentalists in Iran. No wonder their universe trembles to its foundations when they consider what the women of the Resistance have done, and their powerful example as it impacts the self-esteem of the women still held captive in Iran. "Do NOT believe what you hear the Mullahs say about us," opines one young Iranian woman on *Facebook* with reference to the continuous slanders of the MEK and the populace's supposed hatred of them. "We love the Resistance with our whole hearts! You are our hope. Do *not* believe their lies!" Rajavi is fond of citing Iran's Supreme Leader when he links the Cosmos to female agency, proclaiming "the heavens tremble when a woman decides for herself to get a divorce!" "Well, then," says Rajavi to eager audiences of both sexes, "let them tremble! They should tremble! We will *make* them tremble." That her remarks are made with a combination of serenity and power, femininity and strength, is all the more of a conundrum, for such personal qualities are thought to be gendered and

seldom found together in the same person, but the Resistance is a place where strong women and gentle men have deliberately formed themselves as an act of witness against their enemies. No wonder some call her "Lady of the East"¹⁴, one who is a Rose of Persia¹⁵, and call out her leadership as a very special gift given to Muslim and all women. Unlike the shining women heroes confined in the House of Women in the hallowed Persian epic, the *Shah Nameh*, her glow is not hidden by a veil like a moon whose light shines from behind the clouds.

In many respects, Rajavi's role as interpreter of a religious text and leader of a reform movement, one who deals with both daily and broad social problems, places her in a social context that has been seen in the lives of many early Christian Church Fathers, or Rabbinic authorities of the Jewish Diaspora. That is, she is a "pastoral theologian" *par excellence*; her interpretations are made out the daily interface between religious teachings and real life. She does not dream of legislating a religious view of life for any of her people, and urges the separation of religion and state in a future Iran as the only way to honor the Quran which requires that none should be compelled by religion. She engages all sorts of matters on the behalf of those she leads, and so her advice is sometimes heard with an aura of command -- though nothing so coercive as "command" really fits her style of counsel. No one, in her estimation, is too young to learn the story of resistance, or too old to learn French. But, she does not have to hide the fact that she is indeed a *woman* leading, for she inhabits her female sex proudly, seeing in it a source of strength, not a disability she can never overcome. She seems like a loving mother of her people, teaching them for the first

¹⁴ Najat Abu-Bakker, of the OPT.

¹⁵ The red rose is an important symbol for martyrs of the faith in Shia Islam.

time how to ride a shiny new bicycle, not content in turning them loose on the streets with training wheels as she returns to her other duties. Instead, she gently steadies the back of the bicycle while she encourages with words, teaching the new riders skills of coping which will never be forgotten when they are grown. When she is able to let go of the bicycle and observes those around her pedaling away into the future, there is no trace of jealousy of their potential (though so much of a normal life has been denied to her), and no one delights more in their progress and abilities.

Besides her flawless ability to carry out her duties as leader of agents of change as well as comforter and teacher of her people, Rajavi offers a key insight to those who study Islamic fundamentalism. Many, if not most, of the progressive or feminist academic specialists studying gender relations in Islam view gender asymmetry as an unfortunate import from the patriarchal cultures whose tribal values were incorporated into the Islamic faith when it was enculturated in the societies of the past. That is, for them, misogyny is an ill-fated side effect and not a key, essential ingredient of any version of Islam; one might easily detach it from the fundamental message of the Quran and the Prophet's actions, with no loss of theological message or clarity. This view is equivalent to that of early Christian feminists, who once hoped that by detaching or "de-patriarchalizing" the Christian Bible, they could retain the entire scope of its anthropology, ethical practice, and theological truth. Jewish feminists have had an easier time of it, at least since the events of the Holocaust. For them, the misogyny of their text may be fully granted, its application decried, with no loss of their Jewishness or the importance of their texts. Their texts are owned not as primal authorities without error (except by Jewish deniers of the Holocaust), but as the literary and cultural production of the Jewish people over time. For

that reason, ethical problems found within the text may be openly acknowledged and transcended by modern Jews.

Rajavi, however, tackles the issue of gender in fundamentalist Islam straight out both in its earliest forms *and* today. She does not see it as mainly as a natural byproduct of the rejection of modernity in hopes of returning to an idealized, unproblematic past of "pure Islam", or as a compromise in responding to the uncertainties of contested male and female gender roles in changing societies over time, although she certainly sees fundamentalism as a countervention of the Prophet's message. In fact, such views are easier for a member of the Shia tradition to embrace, given the early historical split of the religion on matters of interpretation and practice after Muhammed's death. Her "hermeneutic of retrieval" (reading the Quran for its ignored egalitarian content on gender and other matters) places squarely with her academic sisters.

It is in her examination of the theocratic rule in Iran at present time where her lived experience has taken her further in understanding the role of gender politics in a Muslim society ruled by fanatics. Today's version of Islam in Iran relies on the suppression of women and their talents for its stranglehold on people. For Rajavi, gender apartheid is not just a key *strategy* for Khomeini-type fundamentalists; it is also an essential *core* of how they view the world and the heart of their heresy. It is an emblem of their pervasive bigotry: just as Woman is to be slave to Man, so those who are not members of their elite clerics are to be enslaved by the Mullahs. This includes progressive Muslims, secular Muslims, religious minorities within Iran, Christians, Jews, socialists, tribal entities, and every other form of human who does not remake him or herself in the image of their

ideology. Further, man's sovereign position as he tries to replace God, also gives elite men total control over and mastery of the natural world -- a horrifying prospect given what is already happening worldwide to Nature (Gaia) held captive in the hands of male-dominated government and corporations. Rajavi objects to all of these positions on the theological grounds that it is a sin against the *tawhid* (oneness) of Allah, since the Mullahs are putting man in the place of God, and denying the equality of creation and agency that is everywhere a consequence of the power and compassion of Allah as Creator. For her, this basic understanding of the unity of all things within God is the foundation for her dedication to democratic ideals. To institute theocratic rule as a state form is to dishonor what God has created; her Muslim Ideals do not require her to legislate religion, only create a system where free choice may rule, and human agency flourish. For her, neither gender apartheid nor theocratic rule can be considered authentic versions of Islamic social or theological ideals.

Rajavi is no narrow feminist or political theoretician who seeks to implement a program whereby women replace men as the approved sex, hence leading to a new form of social oppression. Rather, she understands that engaging women and men in the dismantling of gender apartheid is the only way to secure human dignity for those of both sexes, as well as for countries and the whole planet. Her conclusions about the way forward today are twofold:

1. Women's engagement in heated political struggle aimed to remove the obstacles against equality is an indispensable need.

2. The subject of this struggle in the present circumstances is to confront the tide of fundamentalism rising throughout the Middle East. (Page 9, present manuscript)

For all of these reasons, the destruction of Ashraf, and Western appeasement of Iran in the hope of deterring their nuclear ambitions (since mere peaceful use of nuclear power has nothing to do with their aspirations), as well as any Western invasion of her country, are not viable solutions. Rajavi has been speaking for over a decade of a "Third Way" between war and appeasement: empower the Iranian people, delist the Resistance, rescue the MEK from extermination in Ashraf, Camp Liberty, and Iran, and let these long-suffering groups perform their own lasting liberation from the fanaticism that rules in Tehran and tries to spread its tentacles across the globe.

Read on, dear friend or welcome stranger, and discover what else she has to say, because when she speaks, hearts all over the world turn and take hope.

Viva Azadi¹⁶!

Viva Ashraf!

Viva Rajavi!

About the Writer

Carole R. Fontaine is a Professor of Biblical Theology and History in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, where she holds the oldest chair of its kind in theology in the United States. She is author of several books and over one hundred articles on women's studies in the ancient Near East and Bible, and serves as the Religion Editor of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. A published poet, she has worked as a Human Rights Activist with international

¹⁶ Freedom (Farsi).

women's NGOs since 1999, specializing in women and religious freedom the MidEast and South Asia. She studied Islam and Arabic while finishing her doctorate at Duke University. Her first contact with the Iranian Resistance occurred in 2005: she came as a welcomed observer, and remained as a friend. She currently facilitates an advocacy group, the Interreligious Committee in Support of Protected Persons in Ashraf and Camp Liberty, Iraq, and serves as VP of the International Federation of Women Against Fundamentalism and for Equality (www.wafe-women.com), where she serves with members of the NCRJ Women's Committee, and other devoted global women activists. She is currently at work on a volume recording the personal stories of women political prisoners and members of the MeK, entitled *Daughters of Allah: Tales of the Feminist Résistance in Iran and Iraq*.