



A Conversation with Masih Alinejad, Iranian American Human Rights Activist, The Washington Institute's 2022 Scholar-Statesman Honoree

On November 17, 2022, The Washington Institute honored Iranian American human rights activist Masih Alinejad with its Scholar-Statesman Award at an event in New York City. During the program, Alinejad was interviewed by Robert Satloff, the Institute's executive director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy. The following is a transcript of their conversation, edited for style, grammar, and clarity.

ROBERT SATLOFF: Ladies and gentlemen, Masih Alinejad.

MASIH ALINEJAD: Thank you so much. I am very overwhelmed, to be honest. I want to say first that I dedicate this medal to the brave women of Iran, to my heroes, to the leaders who live inside Iran and face guns and bullets every day. They are saying a simple thing—“women, life, freedom”—and they are not just fighting for themselves, they are fighting for democracy, dignity, and freedom. They are fighting for the whole world. So I dedicate this to the women and men in Iran. Thank you so much. Thank you to The Washington Institute.

I am speechless. Last year, The Washington Institute gave the award to the richest man in the world. This year, I do not know how they picked the poorest activist in the world. Thank you so much. I am not used to getting that much love. I am just used to getting death threats, being cursed, and being bullied by the mullahs.

Thank you so much for being my family. When I saw the flowers, which I am not going to say the story behind the flowers, but you made my day and I needed that—especially these days following the news from Iran. [Editor’s note: all attendees at the gala were given flowers to wear in their hair or lapel, mirroring the flower that Alinejad wears in her hair that has become her personal symbol.] People are getting killed. Children are getting killed. Teenagers are getting killed. Every day I go to bed with tears, and you made my day. Thank you so much. Thank you.

SATLOFF: This is a tough conversation to have, but before we start, I do want to recognize two people. First, I know that Masih just said she does not get enough love, but I am sure there is at least one person in this room that will protest, and that is the person you saw in our video—her husband, Kambiz Foroohar. I do not know if you can see Kambiz, but he is there, there he is. And then there is another gentleman, you saw him in the video as well. He did a sterling job narrating this video and is a terrific expert on Iran. I’m delighted that he is here tonight, Karim Sadjadpour.

ALINEJAD: My brother in arms!

SATLOFF: Masih, we have a lot of ground to cover and I have a lot of questions to ask about you. But first, I want to talk about what is going on [in Iran]. You have sources that none of us have. What is the latest?

ALINEJAD: I have to say that the revolution—a historical revolution—is taking place in Iran, which is being led by women but supported by men. For years and years, I have been warning about the dangers of morality police and the hijab laws, but the brutal death of Mahsa Amini, a twenty-year-old Kurdish woman, created huge anger because she was not part of a civil disobedience protest; she was not even unveiled. She was just wearing an “inappropriate” hijab. Can you believe that? All you women here, you paid a lot of attention to your hair to make yourself look beautiful before coming here, no? For such a simple thing, in Iran, women are getting killed. That is what is happening in Iran right now, it is a revolution.

Yes, it started because of protesting against compulsory hijab laws and protesting against the brutal death of Mahsa Amini, but it is all about getting rid of a gender apartheid regime. The compulsory hijab is not just a small piece of cloth when it is in the hands of the Islamic Republic or the Taliban or ISIS—it is one of the most visible symbols of oppression and the main pillar of religious dictatorship. So that is why the Iranian people are getting killed every day: they made up their mind, and they are taking back to the streets every single day to end such a barbaric regime.

This is all I can say to you. More than 300 people have been killed and 15,000 have been arrested. Schoolgirls are in prison. Teenagers are in prison. But the more people that the Iranian regime kills, the more people are determined to end this regime. This is just the beginning of the end, the end of one of the most dangerous regimes, which is called “Islamic Republic.”

You know, I have to say this. Jews and Iranians are historical friends. Jews came to Iran thousands of years before Islam came to Iran. We have common friends, the great Kourosh Kabir, the great Cyrus. We are all fighting for the same goal. We want to have a country where Bahai, Jews, minorities, men, women, Kurds, Turks, Baluch, and everyone has dignity and freedom. That is what is happening in Iran right now.

SATLOFF: I have heard you use the metaphor that the hijab is the Berlin Wall. Tell us what you mean.

ALINEJAD: You know, not only you heard that, Rob.

[Laughter]

SATLOFF: I am sure.

ALINEJAD: The Supreme Leader—I hate the word “supreme”—Ali Khamenei, he heard that as well. For years and years, I have been comparing the compulsory hijab to the Berlin Wall and I strongly believe that. If women can say no to the one who told them what to wear, they can say no to big dictators as well. I believe that if we are successful in tearing this wall down, the Islamic Republic will not exist. Recently, Ali Khamenei actually referred to my comparison between the compulsory hijab and the Berlin Wall in front of the Revolutionary Guards. He definitely did not name me because he is scared of my name and he is scared of women, but he said [to the Revolutionary Guards] that the American agent who compared the compulsory hijab to the Berlin Wall, “You have to take a stance against her. You have to take action against her.” I was actually very happy in my safe house shouting, “Yes, he referred to me. Finally!” But my husband said, “Don’t you get it, he said to the Revolutionary Guards ‘take action against her.’”

So yes, the FBI moved us to a different safe house. But this actually means that we won the battle. [Khamenei] actually knows that compulsory hijab is the Berlin Wall and that we will end the Islamic Republic. This is why they are really scared of Iranian women within the country. They are not scared of me. Believe me, my job is to echo the voice of Iranian women and that is why they do everything to shut me up, kill me, assassinate me, and

kidnap me. It is because I am echoing the voice of leaders and powerful women who are trying to tear this wall down, as President Reagan said.

SATLOFF: I have to pursue this. You are here, in the United States.

ALINEJAD: I am not, my body is here.

Iranians are here!

«چند نفرتون قلبتون توی ایران الان»
-همه امون

(How many of you have your heart in Iran right now?
All of us!)

How many of you cry every day? How many of you feel that you are there every day when people are chanting:

آزادی زندگی، زن،

(Women, Life, Freedom)

So Rob, my body is here but my thoughts, my soul, and everything else is there. When I was a little girl, I remember—I was a naughty girl, as you all know that—when I was making trouble my father used to kick me out of the room. My mom told me that I was able to find a window to sneak back into the same room. So yes, the Iranian regime kicked me out from my beloved homeland, but I am able to find my own window to sneak into my homeland. My windows are social media: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. I have more than 10 million followers. I am not an actress, I am not a model. I have more followers than the mullahs and the ayatollahs all together. So I am there [in Iran] every day.

SATLOFF: So that is the answer to the question I was going to ask you...It is tough to get a word in here, right?

[Laughter]

ALINEJAD: No, but believe me, I let President Macron have a word!

SATLOFF: Why even here? Why would they send their agents thousands of miles away to shut you up? You must have really angered them. You must be really making your point and really making progress inside Iran.

ALINEJAD: I strongly believe that they are scared of women who dare to send videos to me and who dare to speak up against the gender apartheid regime. Let me give you one example so that you will understand what they are really scared of.

The Iranian regime did everything to shut me up, to keep me silent. First, they went to the women that sent videos to me. They arrested twenty-nine women of the White Wednesdays campaign in only one day, which I felt guilty about. I was going to stop the campaign. They arrested Saba Kord-Afshari and Yasaman Aryani—a twenty-year-old and a twenty-two-year-old. [The Iranian regime] sentenced [Saba] to a twenty-four-year prison sentence—more than her age—and sentenced [Yasaman] to sixteen years in prison. Immediately, their mothers joined the campaign. They took to the street and they said, “Now, we are the voice of our daughters.” These are the Rosa Parks of Iran. [The Iranian regime] did not stop me, and as long as [the people of Iran] are speaking up, I have to give them a voice. That did not stop me and the campaign.

So the Iranian regime decided to go after my family. They put my brother in jail for two years. They brought my sister on TV to denounce me publicly. They actually sent people [to the United States] to kidnap me. The FBI arrested a man with a loaded gun in front of my house just three months ago. [The Iranian regime] made a law that says that anyone who sent videos to Masih Alinejad could be charged up to ten years in prison.

Can you believe that? But here you are. The [mother of a protester] that got killed in Iran protests—Pouya Bakhtiari, his mother Nahid Shirbisheh—immediately sent a video to me and said, “Iran is a prison for me, but you are scared of me going to prison?” She started to be the voice of not only her son, but the people of Iran. She is in jail right now. Other mothers joined her saying that “We are not as scared of you [the regime].” So you see now, it is not about me. It is about brave women inside Iran who became the leaders of change. This scares the regime. Otherwise they could kill me, but they know that it is not about me. There are millions of Masih in Iran that are braver than me.

They are scared of “women, life, freedom.” This is why they want to make an example of me, by killing me, they want to kill the hope. Now, Iranian women are fearless. For forty years, [the regime] put the fear inside us. Now the Iranian regime is scared of its own women. Believe me.

SATLOFF: Masih, I want to ask you a couple of very serious questions. This is a room of active, engaged people—people who follow the news and appreciate the danger that Iran poses. I want you to imagine that you are talking to a different type of room—a room full of Americans who do not follow the world, ordinary Americans in Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, and

even New Jersey. Why should they care? Why should they care about you and about what is going on in Iran? Why should they support a movement to bring change to your country?

ALINEJAD: Honestly, that is a really good question. None of the journalists have asked me this. You see, these days I am everywhere. Iranians are not fighting for themselves, Iranians are trying to save the whole world from one of the most dangerous regimes. Right now, as I am talking to you, the Iranian regime is sending drones to Putin to kill innocent Ukrainians. You know, when Putin went to Georgia, people in America said, "We are not Georgian." When Putin went to Syria, some of you might have said, "We are not Syrians." For years and years, anti-Putin activists have been warning about the danger of Putin, no? Now, Putin is in the heart of Europe, in Ukraine, but Putin is not alone and Khamenei is helping him. Dictators around the world help each other. Believe me, dictators are more united than democratic countries. From Russia to China to Iran to Venezuela, and everywhere. But right now [as] I'm talking to you, American citizens are in prison [in Iran]. UK citizens, Swedish citizens, French citizens, German citizens are all being used like bargaining chips to get a nuclear deal.

So you see? Imagine a day when all democratic countries unite and downgrade diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic and ask them to release all innocent political prisoners. If the democratic countries do not unite to end Islamic terror, believe me, the Islamic terrorists will unite. The dictators will unite and they will end democracy. They will end us. Every single one of you. And that's why you should care about it. When the burkini ban happened in France, feminists around the world united. When George Floyd was brutally killed, the whole world united. There were women's marches everywhere, [chanting] "My body, my choice." What is different between the women of Iran and the women of the West?

Lastly, I have a simple question I really want you to answer. If it was not the women of Iran, if it was the women in America being kicked out from a stadium, what would have been your reaction? Outrage. If it was not girls from Afghanistan [but] girls in America being kicked out from schools just for being girls, what would've been your reaction? What is different? What is different between the girls in Afghanistan or Iran, and the girls and women here in the West? This is unacceptable.

Women's rights and human rights are global issues. I don't accept when the politicians in the West say, "We don't want to interfere in an internal matter." By keeping silent, sending billions of dollars to the Iranian regime, or negotiating with them, you are actually interfering because there is a war being imposed on women and men in Iran by the Iranian regime. When you go and negotiate with the warmongers, you are taking sides and

interfering in internal matters. I want you to stay on the right side of history with the people of Iran. Thank you for asking this question.

SATLOFF: You just took us into the world of policy. So let me ask you: the United States government has recently said that it is shifting. It's no longer emphasizing its pursuit of a nuclear deal. It did not say it was stopping, just that it was moving away from it.

ALINEJAD: We are getting there.

SATLOFF: And you have met with senior U.S. government officials, so let me ask you: do you feel as though you are getting the right level of support? Do you feel as though the U.S. government is adopting the right policy, and what more would you like to see the Biden administration do to advance the cause of freedom in Iran?

ALINEJAD: With your help, we are going to get there. First, what I have to make the U.S. government, the Biden administration, understand is that when we talk about Islamic terror, the Islamic Republic, or gender apartheid regime, it should be a bipartisan issue. It should not matter whether you support the Republicans or Democrats. You believe in women's rights, no? You believe in democracy, no? If not, you care about the safety of Americans, no? So that is why we have to see this as a bipartisan issue.

I am coming back from Paris where I met with President Macron. I actually made him recognize that the uprising is a revolution. I am not saying that this is going to happen overnight, this is a marathon. We have a long and tough road ahead, but this is a revolution. We need action. [The West] can say, "Yes, we are not going to negotiate with the Islamic Republic until they stop killing people," but we do not need empty words, we need actions.

First, recognize the revolution.

Second, call your allies to recall their ambassadors.

Third, we want the leaders of the G7 to kick out all the diplomats and Islamic Republic officials who are killing Iranian teenagers and children in the streets. Is that too much to ask?

President Biden was actually [in favor of] banning South Africa, do you remember that? The Islamic Republic is gender apartheid as well, so I need him to call on [America's] allies to ban the Islamic Republic from everywhere because the Islamic Republic is a gender apartheid regime.

Right now, oil workers have walked out of work. Teachers and university professors are actually supporting this revolution, but we need help and support from Western countries. We need actions and not empty words.

To be honest, I am going to actually repeat that again. Many people ask, “So you are asking your American government to save Iranians?” No. I want them to stop saving the Islamic Republic.

SATLOFF: Look, I think it’s fair to say that you’re a poster child for Adderall. You are a true bundle of nonstop energy.

[Laughter]

ALINEJAD: Rob, the Iranian regime called me an American agent. How stupid they are, if I was [an] American agent, then I had to support a nuclear deal, no?

SATLOFF: Do you ever let yourself entertain the possibility that you succeed? That the Islamic Republic falls?

ALINEJAD: We already succeeded. I mean, are you kidding me? The Iranian government is scared of me and I’m only forty-five kilos.

What does it mean? I do not have a weapon, I do not have guns and bullets. [The regime] assassinates, kills, and executes people, but they are scared of teenagers in Iran. They are scared of schoolgirls and schoolboys in Iran. It means that we already won the battle, and for years and years. As a girl coming from a very traditional family in a tiny village, like millions of other students, I was told that I have to say “Death to Israel” so loud that Tel Aviv could hear us. I was told that we had to say “Death to America” so loud that the White House could hear us. Now Iranians are saying “Death to Khamenei” so loud that Khamenei can hear them. That means that we won the battle.

For years and years, we have been brainwashed that our enemy is outside—America and Israel. But now you hear people in the streets saying loud and clear that [the Iranian government] lies to us when they say that our enemy is America and that our enemy is Israel. Our enemy is right here and it is the Islamic Republic. We are going to end this regime whether the West helps us or not. Sooner or later, we will end the Islamic Republic.

SATLOFF: So, friends, this is a copy of *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran*. It is an absolutely terrific memoir. Not all memoirs are terrific. Some memoirs

are self-congratulatory and just plain boring. This is riveting, compelling, powerful, and it's also here for everyone after they leave our program tonight.

ALINEJAD: Wow.

SATLOFF: Waiting for you outside in the lobby.

ALINEJAD: Believe me, it is not the wind in my hair anymore—it is a storm in Iran. It is a hair revolution against a gender apartheid regime.

SATLOFF: I want to say thank you for all that you do, selflessly—you and your husband. I want to thank you for everything that you both do to bring about remarkable things in this world, which is to empower and give voice to the women and men of Iran so that they can be free. That is a gift. What you do—

ALINEJAD: Thank you. Can I say something for the young generation as well?

SATLOFF: No, just let me finish a sentence. My god!

[Laughter]

ALINEJAD: I love him!

SATLOFF: Kambiz, I have a lot of sympathy for you.

[Laughter, applause]

ALINEJAD: He cannot divorce me.

SATLOFF: So, alright, go ahead, say what you want to say.

[Laughter]

ALINEJAD: I love you. Thank you so much, I haven't been able to hug my family for thirteen years. But tonight I was like oh my god, and I hugged everyone. If you didn't get a hug, just stay with me and I am going to hug you. Thank you so much.

But I want to say something to [the younger generation] because I see a lot of young men and women here. I need you. Look, for years and years the Iranian regime said that America is the Great Satan and the biggest enemy. I received death threats. One of the well-known

Basij, who was featured in the *New York Times*, actually threatened me. Oh my god, he was live on BBC Persian and said “I’m going to butcher your tongue and chest and send it to your family, and I will hire someone to do it in America.” So I went to the Interests Section of Iran, which is kind of Iran’s embassy in Washington, DC, to make an official complaint about this Basiji. Guess what happened? They did not let me in. They said, “Cover yourself first.”

I said, “Are you kidding me? The reason I receive death threats is because I am fighting against compulsory hijab. Now you are telling me to cover myself and then make an official complaint about death threats?” I did not do it, so I practiced my civil disobedience in Iran’s Interests Section. Guess what happened? They called American Secret Service to save themselves from an unveiled Iranian woman.

[Laughter]

You see? They say that Iran’s biggest enemy is Israel or America, but they are scared of unveiled women. I want you to believe in yourself, young women. Call for an international women’s march for the women of Iran and for the women of Afghanistan. Remove your hijab, go to the embassy, and go everywhere you can and be the voice of your sisters. Be the voice of Iranian women. We can do a lot, and do not forget that we are stronger together. Thank you so much.

SATLOFF: Ladies and gentlemen, Masih Alinejad.