

# “There is no answer to any of these things”: Religious Street Politics in Tehran 1978ff.

IMAGES: HENGAMEH GOLESTAN

TEXT SELECTION: SANDRA SCHÄFER

For a public presentation during the *Global Prayers* Forum in February 2013, I invited the Iranian photographer Hengameh Golestan to make a selection from the photographs that she took during the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79. Alongside the photographs we talked about her approach as a photographer to the events as well as about the actual events, as such, and the role of religion. When I saw her selection for the first time I was very surprised, as I did not expect so many photographs that highlight the private sphere and the role of women in particular. In what I had seen up until then, the Revolution had appeared, rather, as a public event of masses of people taking over the streets and the public sphere. That's what made me even more curious about her explanations to each of her photographs. The captions present some of Hengameh Golestan's comments and are taken from our conversation of February 2012. This conversation was a continuation of our collaboration that started in 2004,

when I got to know Hengameh Golestan in Tehran during my research for the book *Kabul/Tehran 1978ff: Film Landscapes, Cities under Stress and Migration* (2006). My co-editors, Jochen Becker and Madeleine Bernstorff, and I invited Hengameh Golestan to contribute to this book with a series of photographs by her and her husband Kaveh Golestan. While working on my video installation *On the set of 1978ff* (2011), a video on the role of political Islam and media in the Iranian Revolution 1978/79, Hengameh Golestan became an important counterpart and contributor. Nevertheless, it took until 2012 to get to know this broader selection of her work. In the exhibition *The shape of truth changes and shapes the truth* at the exhibition space Depo in Istanbul in November 2012, I included this selection of photographs. It was shown like an exhibition in an exhibition.



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1. "This photograph was taken at the cemetery Beheshte-Zahra, which is located twenty kilometers from the city center of Tehran. During the Revolution, people would honor those who had been killed (whom they saw as a Martyr) after seven days and then after forty days, and then after a year. It was becoming a very popular place, where people would gather, pray, and show their respects to all these people who dedicated their lives to the Revolution."

2. "This was a protest on the holy day called Arba'een. Khomeini told everybody that they should be out in the street and almost 2 million people turned up to this demonstration. I was just trying to capture some moments around the fringes of this demonstration."

*"But you selected a photograph where the size of the crowd cannot really be seen. And although you see the posters in one direction, there are some people walking in the other direction. This made me wonder where the center of this protest is. You can also see two girls hugging each other in the foreground, which gave me the impression that people felt quite comfortable in public."*

3. "In those days members of the general public were not armed, so they made their own weapons to protect people in case the soldiers would attack them. ... This tent is at Enqelab Avenue at Tehran University, where most of the demonstrations started from."

4-6. "It's actually the day they invaded all the military compounds and people just went inside and took the weapons out. I was at my friend's house having lunch, and then her two brothers and her husband brought three, four rifles."

7. "This was in the very beginning—when Khomeini came to Tehran. In those days they were giving weapons' training to women and lots of them would stand guard in front of some government-owned buildings like these two ladies. It's just in the street, that's how I could take the picture. It's still around Enqelab Avenue near Tehran University. ... These were just ordinary women. We didn't take it very seriously; it was much more for show. They would never use their weapons. Once we published one of these pictures in the *Guardian* and an arms' specialist wrote in commenting on the fact that the women were actually holding the guns incorrectly in a way that would injure them if they were to fire."



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8+9. “There was a project to train all the women, children, and schools with weapons. This is also in a mosque in Khomeyn because I knew the people there. But after one or two months they said, ‘No, we don’t need that,’ and they stopped the training. ... But when the war with Iraq started, they didn’t let any woman go to the frontline. As a photographer I required permission from the Ministry of Islamic Guidance to go to the frontline. In those days, there weren’t that many women photographers—there were no more than five or so. So we united and went to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance to get permission to go to the frontline and they still said ‘No’ to us. We got very angry and asked, ‘What about all these stories we hear that the Imams and all the holy people had their wives helping them?’ But their justification was that they would stay behind the frontline and make food and things for the soldiers.”

10. “This picture was taken just after a victory of the Revolution and it’s at Enqelab Avenue. Different kinds of people sit next to each other—some youngsters, military, old men. And the slogans at the back are saying: ‘Death to the Shah,’ ‘Viva Mujahadeen-e-Khalq,’ which was a group of Marxist Islamists, and the picture of Khomeini. And then there’s a big slogan that says ‘Death to the Shah. Viva Khomeini.’ So it is the chaos of all these slogans, and people are just sitting there.”

*“Enqelab Avenue is the new street name and it means Revolution Avenue. Formerly it was called Shah Reza Avenue. It is the location of Tehran University, where there are many bookstores. The street also leads from the previous International airport, via Azadi Square to the university. It is a symbolic axis that divided the city into two halves: the rich north and the poorer south. And it is also considered the symbolic space of the new middle class. Enqelab Avenue became the first space where different social classes met and encountered each other.”*



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11. “The Shah was still in Iran when I took this picture. My husband, who was working for *Time Magazine* in those days, interviewed Marhemat Mokhtari. Because her family didn’t feel comfortable to sit in front of him, I took the pictures. The mother of my friend was from Khomeyn and knew all the details of Khomeini’s life. For instance, she was saying that his father was a rich man and whenever they had the harvest he would leave the door of the storage open for the people who didn’t have a good harvest to take some from his. She was a follower of Khomeini (in a religious sense). So she was very proud of him. When we were leaving the room, my friend’s mother was telling me, ‘I’m sure you’re going to give us to the SAVAK,’ the secret police. She was really brave to hold Khomeini’s picture in those days.”

12. The article points out that the family of Marhemat Mokhtari belonged to the huge group of poorer peasants, who decided to move to Tehran, because the land reform of the Shah made it impossible for them to earn their living in the countryside anymore. This article was published in *Time* magazine on February 5, 1979.

13. The double-page spread presents the two opposing families: the family of Marhemat Mokhtari in their home in Tehran and the Shah on so-called vacation in Egypt.

14. This photograph was taken by Hengameh’s husband, Kaveh Golestan. “Wall newspapers” were one of the alternative methods of spreading news.

15. “They announced in the paper that from tomorrow all the women who go to work have to wear the hijab, and nobody went to work, they all went on strike; all the students, teachers, nurses, everybody, and you can see it’s a huge demonstration. Everybody was in the street, all the women, and they were backed by some male students as well, who were protecting them. It started very peacefully, they were just singing songs and chanting slogans that ‘We don’t want the hijab; if we have the hijab, the men should wear the hijab as well.’ But very soon we were surrounded by some—it looked like ordinary people—but they were called Hezbollah. They were very fundamental Muslims, [who] started beating us up and telling us to go home.”



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## The Grateful Family

*Why today is the Shah reviled and Ayatollah Khomeini revered? One reason is that millions of Iranians poor were touched by the new wealth of the monarch's industrializing society; meanwhile, many remember the role traditionally played by the Shi'ite mullahs as protectors of the oppressed. TIME Correspondent William McWhirter talked with one peasant family, uprooted from the Ayatollah's birthplace of Khomein (pop. 12,000) in central Iran. His report:*

Surrounded by her sons and daughters, in-laws and grandchildren, the handsome 36-year-old matriarch, Marbat-Mokhtari, talks nostalgically about the old feudal life in one of Iran's poorest areas. Fifty years ago, Khomein was controlled by landlords. A peasant who herded sheep was paid 30 rials, the equivalent of half a dollar, for a year's work. Tenant farmers who came to the area were given quotas to meet: often their entire crop of wheat was for the landlord, with nothing left over to make bread of their own. Mrs. Mokhtari remembers that the Ayatollah's grandfather and father were "always the dissenters, the militants." They allowed poorer farmers to take produce from their own lands, persuaded richer tenants to share their crops, distributed the tributes they received from the devout to those most in need.

Khomein today remains as poor as it was then. People and animals share one-story clay hovels; water is scarce. Instead of seeking out the mullahs to resolve disputes, the people are now subjected to the local

police and to the bureaucracy in Tehran, 180 miles away.

In desperation, the Mokhtaris moved to Tehran 30 years ago. They have done better than most. Until four years ago, twelve members of the family lived in a one-room shack at the bottom of an abandoned ravine, surrounded by scrap, refuse and old tires. They struggled and sacrificed their way from the bottom of the ravine to the top of the hill. They built a two-story house with a Mediterranean-style courtyard, with electricity to power a TV set, a hi-fi and an air conditioner. Mrs. Mokhtari is proud of the honest work of her sons, who helped pay for these luxuries, but financial security remains elusive. The Mokhtaris were told that they must pay \$36,000 to have their house connected to the water supply line because they were outside the Tehran municipal jurisdiction. "We've paid one-third of that, but we haven't been able to get those drops of water," she complains. Meanwhile, an apartment building up the street, owned in part by the Shah's brother, Gholam Reza, was invariably booked up. "Why is he inside and why are we outside?" asks Mrs. Mokhtari.

At the same time that she yearns for an Islamic republic guided by the Ayatollah, Mrs. Mokhtari is grateful for the new luxuries for women that gave her three grown daughters the opportunity for an education and good jobs. She has no illusions about returning to the rough but simple life of Khomein a half-century ago. "We know the problems that any modern society faces," says Mrs. Mokhtari. "There is no way that we are going backward. The main trouble was that the government of the Shah was so corrupt. What we couldn't take was injustice."



Matriarch Mokhtari holding Khomeini portrait



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16. “When I look at it now, it makes me laugh because this is a group of students and they are saying: ‘We students are not going to take the insult that the people did to us telling us to wear the hijab; that is an insult.’ And from that day they had to wear the hijab, all of them. That day was a very important one, because women couldn’t believe that could happen; they were sure they could confront and dissuade them [Hezbollah]. ... In all the demonstrations you can see lots of women with the chador or with the scarf who were backing the other women. That was about their freedom, it had nothing to do with Islam or the hijab or anything. They were saying it shouldn’t be forced on women to wear the hijab, they should have their own choice, even the traditional or religious women—like, my grandmother always wore a hijab, but she would never tell us to wear it, it was our own choice.”

17. “That is just the beginning of the demonstration and these women were joking and stopping all the cars and saying that if the hijab was compulsory, the men should wear it as well, and everybody was laughing. But none of it worked.”

18. “In this picture, the demonstration became violent and the men started beating up the women. Ayatollah Taleghani—who was a very peaceful ayatollah and much loved by people—sent some of his guards to protect women.”

19.+20. “And he also sent the mullahs to just talk to the women and tell them that we have to talk with each other, we can sort it out; don’t get angry. But it didn’t work in the end, it was really violent and everybody was beaten up and stabbed. I remember when I wanted to go out to take pictures, I used to put a hat on my head so it would be covered, but it’s not a hijab. But little by little, all the women who were wearing the hijab, they would come to us and say ‘Oh, you’re wearing something, so why don’t you wear the hijab,’ and we would say ‘No, it’s our own wish if we want to wear the hijab,’ and they wouldn’t say anything. But gradually we found that—ah, yes, we were naïve. In those days I had to change my film quickly, that is what I’m doing, because we didn’t have digital [cameras] in those days. In those days, people were really behaving well towards the photographers because they thought we are the people who are going to talk on their behalf and spread their message publicly. I remember several times when I was trapped in between the crowds some of the women just made me go in behind the chador and helped me to run away. In those days they had a very good attitude towards photographers and journalists, which doesn’t exist anymore, unfortunately.”



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21. “These policemen from Ayatollah Taleghani had come to calm the crowd. They are saying to the women that we should negotiate, we shouldn’t get violent, but in the end ....”

22. “They call it the student’s day: all the demonstrations were taking place in front of the American Embassy. By that time they had changed its [the embassy’s] name to ‘Nest of Spies.’ They still call it that: if you say American Embassy they don’t know where it is, but if you say ‘Nest of Spies,’ they will. These are mostly students and ordinary people having a rally in front of the American Embassy. ... The Shah was fond of America, and I remember just before he left Iran, he had a meeting with [President] Carter. In all the papers it said that Carter has come to Iran to get some advice from the Shah. There were lots of Americans living in Iran, and people were so angry. Where I live, in the north of Tehran, there were lots of American families living around us and they wouldn’t pay any respect to the local people. The women would come out half naked—in our eyes. Iranian old people, they’ve been working all their lives on their land, and then suddenly a group of Americans took over and they were just planting grapefruit trees, which was something very strange to us. And in Isfahan, Americans had their own kind of cabarets and discos, which was really too much for people. People couldn’t take it. Even me, who—I wasn’t religious—I was angry about it, it was like a cultural invasion.”

23. “This is again my favorite subject, a group of children going on a demonstration. After the Revolution they started pitching tents in public where the Revolutionary Guards would distribute religious pamphlets. They used this picture as a flag in front of the tent and I went to them and said, ‘Can I have one of those flags?’ and they said, ‘No, go away,’ and I said, ‘That’s my picture!’ And they said, ‘Okay then!’ And I still have the flag. In Iran we have no copyright law. At that time I was working for a children’s magazine, it was published in there, and they would have taken it from there. Just last year, when I went to Iran to publish the Farsi edition of my husband’s book, they didn’t give me the permission. But they were using some of his pictures in the street, so I took a picture of it, brought it to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, and said, ‘How come you use my husband’s pictures and you don’t let me?’ There is no answer to any of these things.”



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24. “I used to visit Khomeyn, which is the birthplace of Khomeini, and after the Revolution I wanted to go there and see the changes. Before that, in all of my pictures are the portraits of the Shah, and they just changed it to Khomeini and Banisadr, who was the president at the time. I thought it’s just a symbol of the Revolution, the picture of Khomeini in all the houses.”

25. “It’s during the same wedding that I took that picture. I thought that this is the new generation who was growing up under the Khomeini regime. ... Some of this new generation, they know nothing about the Revolution; it’s not the same feeling as we had. They don’t care about it as much, the youngsters now, because most of them have been born after the Revolution. Some of them blame the older generation, some of them agree with it. It’s a totally different generation. I am lucky that I have a young son. Through him I can understand the young people better, because otherwise,

they are just aliens to me the way they act. Even the way they talk—I don’t understand them, the words they’re using ... my son translates it for me, because he’s with the youngsters.”

26. “I never thought that I left Iran. Even my son, who was eight months old when we left Iran, he calls himself Iranian. He’s got a British passport, but he never calls himself British. My relationship was always with people, they’re the same people, and I still love them and I love Iran. Nothing has changed except for some political things, which is not my concern. I was never involved in politics or anything like that. Tehrani people have changed a lot, but the people from the villages haven’t changed at all.”



November 2009 at Hengameh’s house in Tehran, where she spends part of her time



24



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## GLOBAL PRAYERS

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