

Saving Gays from Iran: The Iranian Queer Railroad (IRQR) (I)

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Homosexuality is a capital crime in Iran. Recently the Iranian Queer Railroad (IRQR) was set up in response to this. It is a new organisation designed specifically to help the growing number of LGBT Iranians forced to leave their country because of the violently homophobic policies of the ayatollahs' theocracy. Gay activist, Arsham Parsi, founded this body dedicated exclusively to helping sexual dissidents flee persecution. He chose to call his agency the Iranian Queer Railroad (IRQR) after the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century which was an informal network of routes and safe houses helping black slaves in America to escape to freedom in Canada. IRQR works together with other human rights organisations, consulates and offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in transit countries like Turkey, Pakistan and India.

Iran's Culture of Homophobia

Few will forget Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's response during an appearance at Columbia University on September 24, 2007, when asked about the persecution of homosexuals: 'In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country. We don't have that in our country. In Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don't know who's told you that we have it.' Although Ahmadinejad skirted the question, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, homosexuality is punishable by death. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, many executions have been reported, as well as countless cases of torture and abuse.

However, according to Arsham Parsi, this persecution goes beyond the government: 'It's not all about government, it's mostly about society and culture. Families will not accept homosexuals. The government may have the death penalty, but society is not educated about diversity, not about religion, or cultures. The government does not create a safe space for queers, and there can be honour killings.'

He provides a specific example to illustrate this point: 'In the city of Rasht in November 2005, an eighteen-year-old boy was set on fire by his father when he found out his son was gay. Outraged and saddened with the news of his son's homosexuality, the father first poured gasoline on his son and then on himself in order to save his family's honour. The boy died from severe burns. The father survived with burns on his hands and face. A father burned his son to death! It's killing just to save the family's honour, and the Ministry of Justice won't do anything.' Not only by the government, but also in the family, gay and lesbian rights in Iran are systematically violated. The state, society and family are often united in creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, fear and danger for Iranian queers.

Within the Middle East, Iran is distinguished by the overt severity of the penalties it imposes

on consensual, adult homosexual conduct. 'Sodomy' or *lavat* - consummated sexual activity between males, whether penetrative or not - is punishable by execution, regardless of whether the partner is passive or active. Article 111 of Iran's Penal Code states that, '*Lavat* is punishable by death so long as both the active and passive partners are mature, of sound mind, and have acted of free will'. According to Articles 121 and 122 of the Penal Code, *Tafkhiz* (the rubbing together of thighs or buttocks, or other forms of non-penetrative 'foreplay' between men) is punishable by one hundred lashes for each partner. Recidivism is punishable by death on the fourth conviction. Article 123 of the Penal Code further provides that, 'if two men who are not related by blood lie naked under the same cover without any necessity', each will receive 99 lashes. Iranian lesbians are not allowed to have an existence either. Many are forced by society and/or family to live a lie and marry a man. Women convicted of lesbian sex face flogging or, after conviction for a fourth time, the death penalty. When arrested, they are raped, whipped and tortured to death. If they are raped by strangers or acquaintances, they and their family members are often reluctant to file a formal complaint because being raped is itself a matter of shame and disgrace.

According to Iran's Penal Code, which is consistent with Islamic law, an accused person can be convicted of sodomy if he repeats a confession to the act four times. The practice of torture is prevalent in Iran, torturing prisoners to extract confessions is common. Forced confessions are openly accepted as evidence in criminal trials.

The death penalty for *lavat* is not merely a paper punishment in Iran: it is enforced.

Trials on moral charges in Iran are held in camera, and international outrage over the frequency of executions has led the government to exercise tight controls over press reporting of the death penalty. For these reasons, confirming the frequency of executions for *lavat* is effectively impossible.

Arsham Parsi (2)

Arsham Parsi was born in Shiraz, Iran, in 1980. As a gay Iranian, he felt alone until at the age of fifteen he discovered solace in the Internet and then he understood what it means to be gay. Parsi began volunteering for local queer (underground) gay organisations. At the age of 22, he began working for the Persian Gay and Lesbian Organisation (PGLO). In a country where being found out as gay can get you killed, homosexuals are in hiding, as are local advocacy efforts. Parsi's underground advocacy work in Iran included networking with doctors to get access to HIV testing as well as responding to emails from suicidal gay teenagers: 'We would get e-mails from people saying they were going to commit suicide because their families had found out they were gay. I would travel to their towns and speak with the families who were having problems and explain to them that we are not abnormal and I would show them articles. We get many letters about people wanting to kill themselves or being beaten and tortured.'

In 2004, Parsi was still living in Iran. The strict laws against homosexuality forced him to keep his work secret from friends and family. After four years of keeping his activist life a secret, Parsi's role as a queer advocate placed him in jeopardy: 'The police were going undercover on the Internet, pretending to be gay and arranging dates in chat rooms and then arresting the men who showed up. The people arrested said the police were after a man named

Arsham. I understood that the police was searching for me and that I would be arrested. I escaped to Turkey and one week later the police were in my home. I cannot return to Iran, even though my family is still there. Homosexuality is forbidden and if I went back I would be arrested at the airport or border and in a couple days they would kill me.'

In March 2005, he realized the police were looking for him so he fled to Turkey and registered as a refugee at the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Ankara, where he spent thirteen months and continued his work to publicize the plight of LGBT Iranians. He was eventually granted asylum as a sexual refugee by Canada. Many gay refugees fleeing Iran end up in countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, and India before the commissioner accepts their cases. This process can take years, and is often a traumatic experience. In 2006 Parsi moved to Toronto and changed the name of the PGLO to the Iranian Queer Organisation (IRQO). He became the executive director of the Iranian Queer Organisation (IRQO) and director of the organisation's online magazine, *Cheraq*.

In October 2008 Parsi started the Iranian Queer Railroad (IRQR) and is now working on Iranian queer asylum cases. Parsi travelled to Turkey in August 2008 to meet with Iranian LGBT refugees and plead their case with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights located there. The UNHCR must grant these queer exiles official refugee status before they can be accepted for asylum in gay-friendly countries. As the result of that trip, Parsi concluded that a new organisation dedicated exclusively to helping sexual dissidents flee persecution in Iran was necessary.

Parsi and his organisation are now in contact with 145 LGBT Iranian refugees currently in limbo and seeking permanent asylum - 85 in Turkey, which shares a lengthy border with Iran and where cultural and political homophobia is rampant, while the rest are scattered throughout Europe, including in the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, and Norway. Some 22 are in the United Kingdom, which has been extremely reluctant to grant permanent asylum to gay Iranian refugees, and where in the last several years two Iranians have committed suicide after receiving deportation orders back to certain torture and possible death in Iran. There are many more queer refugees from Iran who haven't yet been in contact with the Iranian Queer Railroad and who also desperately need help.

One of the goals of the Iranian Queer Organisation was to increase the level of awareness about the Iranian queer situation and the horrible persecution that goes on daily in Iran, and to provide a steady stream of information about homosexuality and the transgendered via Internet into Iran. After several years of working with PGLO and IRQO, it was clear to Parsi he needed a new organisation with fresh blood and a structure dedicated solely to helping queer refugees, to help them flee Iran, to support them while they are still in transit countries like Turkey, to assist them in finding their way through the harrowing bureaucratic maze that faces them in order to gain asylum, and to help them get settled and cope with setting up a new life in gay-friendly countries.

Since being granted asylum in Canada, Parsi has been able to make a number of trips to Turkey to help gay refugees and has built a relationship with the UNHCR office there: 'I'm so happy I've been able to build a strong relationship with the UNHCR, who are now aware of the Iranian queer situation, and of our organisation, and on each of my trips I've been able to secure international refugee protection status for more and more Iranian LGBT refugees in

Turkey, which is the necessary first step to being granted asylum. After my last trip there in August 2008, we now have twenty more refugees who've been newly granted this status and are now awaiting flights to gay-friendly countries like Canada and Australia.'

Parsi was able to help a 29-year-old Iranian lesbian refugee: 'She had a terrible life in an abusive situation. Her family forced her to marry with one of their relatives, and her legal husband raped her every night, and she could do nothing about it because one of the first duties of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran is sexual delivery to their husbands. This girl went to a doctor after all the rapes, and the doctor told her, "You appear to have been raped by an animal, and you need urgent health care now". But her family ordered her to be patient and stay at her husband's home. She was severely beaten repeatedly by her husband and eventually escaped and went to a friend's house. But while she was there, her brothers came while she was out and told her friend they were going to kill her to save the family's honor because she left her husband and has suspicious connections with other women. That's when she fled Iran to Turkey, where she was put in touch with the Iranian Queer Railroad by one of our members in Iran. I told her, "Don't go back to Iran, we don't want to lose any more members of our queer family".'

Exile in Turkey and Arriving in the West (Canada)

Parsi's dedication to these refugees is fuelled by his own experience as an exile in Turkey: 'It was the hardest experience in my life. To suddenly find myself in an unexpected situation in a hostile country without money, with no personal safety or security for thirteen months wasn't easy. I cannot forget the day in Turkey when I was walking with Amir, another gay refugee who had been tortured and flogged in Iran. We were chased in the street by a homophobic crowd, who beat us hard and tried to kill us. Nobody helped. There were no police who came to our assistance and people were just standing around watching as we were beaten, simply for being gay refugees in their country. I'll never forget my refugee life in Turkey, and that's why I've decided to dedicate myself exclusively to making queer refugees' stay in Turkey as short as possible and to help them get to freedom in gay-friendly countries.'

'Two of our refugees in Turkey - one who is 28 and one who is 29 - who had rented a room together, were visited by the mother of the landlord who told them, "We just found out you are gay, and you have to leave because you are gay". Our two refugees, who didn't speak much Turkish, called the police, who instead of admonishing the landlord arrested our refugees. While in custody, one of them, who is diabetic, went into diabetic shock, but was not allowed by the police to take his insulin. The police insulted them and told them, "If you're not happy here, go back to Iran". Turkish police are very hostile to gay people in general and to gay Iranian refugees in particular. Beatings are very common. That's just another illustration of why it is so urgent to get these refugees out of Turkey to a safe country.'

'The most difficult part of living in Turkey is the waiting. Most of the refugees that come have to wait two to three years in a small apartment until they can be granted legal, international recognition of their status as refugees by UNHCR. In Turkey, India, or Pakistan, they cannot go out, because they are beaten. The police won't do anything for them. They have to stay at home, they don't know what they should do, and have no friends. It is extremely hard. Whenever they call the UNHCR or a western embassy, they tell them to wait. These places are not gay-friendly.'

Even after the wait in Turkey is over, the journey has just begun for many of these gay refugees. Inland refugee claims made at airports and border crossings are determined based on their eligibility according to an officer of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. During hearings of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), an independent quasi-judicial tribunal that is responsible for applying to the Canadian federal Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and making decisions on matters related to immigration and refugees, gay refugees must prove that they are gay. Those who are unable to do so are deported back to their home countries. The one-person panel of the IRB must decide whether or not a person is homosexual. Many gay refugees, particularly those from Iran, have had to hide their sexuality for decades. Proving to someone that they are gay can pose an extreme challenge. Parsi: 'I have a case here in Toronto, where a queer man was interviewed by a judge. The judge told him, "You are muslim, and how can you be muslim and homosexual?" He denied him asylum, and wanted to deport him. To avoid being deported, he married another gay man.' With the burden of proof being laid upon gay refugees, many are unable to prove their sexual orientation and thus face deportation.

Personal Histories

Here are some statements left on the IRQO and IRQR websites from Iranian queers giving their personal histories. The stories were posted as part of their applications for assistance in finding asylum.

Ali, who is 30, escaped from Iran to Turkey in December 2007, where he is now awaiting resettlement: 'I was caught when I was having sex with a guy by his father, who was a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard. As a result, I lost my job and I and my family were threatened with death. I was arrested several times in Iran, the last time was in the summer of 2007 while I was on vacation in the north of Iran, and the Islamic Guard arrested me simply because I was wearing a T-shirt and jeans and had spiky hair. I don't feel safe even here in Turkey because the father of the guy I had sex with is in the Revolutionary Guard and has the ability to find me here and have me killed so he can cover up the scandal of his queer son. I didn't do anything, I'm just a gay man who was born in a country in which my existence was forbidden, just for being gay, just for having a special feeling which is not that of a majority of society. I love guys. It is my right to be free, but I have to live in exile for it. I need help.'

Hosseini, 22, escaped from Iran to Turkey in September 2006, where he has been languishing while awaiting official refugee status and the granting of asylum in a gay-friendly country: 'I am a musician and I used to perform at various celebrations, including weddings and parties. These gatherings were often raided, but usually the host would pay the authorities a bribe and that would end the matter. I am homosexual. I had my first relationship at age twelve with the son of a neighbour, it lasted two years. In September 2006 I was playing along with other musicians at a private gay party in a home. The party was raided and the police attacked us viciously. One person was beaten so badly that later I learned he had died from it. I was beaten for ten minutes and lost consciousness for about ten hours. I was later arrested while I was in hospital. Eventually my mother and a friend of mine came to the hospital, my friend was dressed in the uniform of a sergeant in the disciplinary forces, and pretended to relieve the soldier who was guarding my room. I put on a hospital worker's uniform and was able to escape. After I was smuggled into Turkey, my family's home was raided and my mother

190 and father arrested for three days on charges of helping me escape for being gay. My father was detained and tortured for a year and later died. I'm waiting to be granted refugee status by UNHCR and I need your help.'

Parsi's Iranian Queer Railroad was also involved with the case of Pegah Emambakhsh, who was granted refugee status in the UK. Emambakhsh arrived seeking protection there almost four years ago when religious authorities in Iran learned that she and her partner were lesbian. Her partner was later tortured and sentenced to death. The UK government dragged its heels in reviewing her application, doubting that Emambakhsh faced any credible danger at home, and eventually in 2007 put her on a plane to be deported back to Iran. While she was at the airport, Parsi was tipped off about the situation, and sent out a press release to the IRQR network asking people for help. Within about two hours, the British Home Office's fax machines were so inundated with messages that they changed their number, and with five minutes to go before the plane took off, she was taken off the flight.

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Notes

- (1) This article is based on information on <http://www.arshamparsi.net/1814.html>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arsham_Parsi and www.irqo.net.
- (2) In 2009, Parsi and the IRQO were honoured by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission with its Felipa Award for pioneering gay activism.