



Masih Alinejad,  
New York,  
September 2022

# Staring down injustice

Die Exil-Iranerin Masih Alinejad, die heute in New York lebt, kämpft allen Gefahren zum Trotz unermüdlich für Frauenrechte – und ist überzeugt davon, dass es Frauen sein werden, die das Gewaltregime ihres Heimatlandes irgendwann stürzen werden. Von LORRAINE MALLINDER

**ADVANCED US**

The first thing you notice about Masih Alinejad is her hair – a mass of springy curls as full of life as the woman herself. As she once said of herself in a 2016 interview with former *Vanity Fair* editor Tina Brown: “I have too much hair, too much voice, and I’m too much of a woman.”

Alinejad, the self-styled voice of women’s rights in Iran, is certainly too much for the Islamic Republic. As a journalist in Tehran, she repeatedly risked her life to challenge the theocratic regime on its hypocrisy and injustices.

Forced into exile in London and then New York, she turned to activism, supporting women back home in their fight against what she calls “gender apartheid.”

## The world mustn’t forget

In 2022, when Iranians went onto the streets to protest against the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a young woman arrested for allowing hair to show from under her hijab, Alinejad rose to prominence with her attacks on the regime.

Since then, this revolution led by women has been subdued, but Alinejad has kept up her fight to ensure the world doesn’t forget.

Long considered a prime target for the Iranian regime, the 47-year-old has spent the past few years living in FBI safehouses.

The U.S. government has reportedly advised her to change her identity and go into hiding, but, determined as ever, Alinejad refuses to give up. “It means that I have to ... disappear. This is what exactly the Islamic Republic of Iran wants,” she told the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee in September.

## In the shadow of the regime

Alinejad had a humble start to life. Raised in a two-room mud hut in Ghomikola, a village in Iran’s northern province of Mazandaran, she’s the daughter of a farmer who sold chickens and ducks for a living.

It was her mother who instilled bravery in young Masih, advising her daughter to overcome her fear of darkness by staring it down: “If you are scared of it, then the shadow grows bigger and it will envelop you and swallow you whole,” she told her.

A small child at the time of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Alinejad grew up in the shadow of the regime. In her 2018 memoir, *The Wind in My Hair*, she tells how her father, a fervent member of the Basij, a paramilitary volunteer militia, enforced the regime’s strict rules on the streets and at home.

Alinejad had to wear her headscarf at all times, even in bed. As a teenager, confused by her developing body, she called her breasts “my two orbs of sin,” and used to walk with a stoop to hide her curves.

**Name:** Masih Alinejad  
**Born:** September 11, 1976  
**Famous as:** Journalist, author, human rights and women’s rights activist, presenter/producer at VOA Persian Service  
**Memoir:** *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran*



### INFO TO GO

February 11, 2024, is Islamic Revolution Day, when Iran officially marks the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

#### VOA (Voice of America) Persian Service

[ˈpɜːʒiən]  
 • US-Auslandssender in persischer Sprache

#### springy curls

• Kringellocken

#### self-styled

• selbsternannt

#### hypocrisy

[hɪˈpɑːkrəsi]  
 • Heuchelei

#### police custody

• Polizeigewahrsam

#### subdue

• unterdrücken

#### reportedly

• Berichten zufolge

#### U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee

[ˌfɔːrən əˈfeɪrɪz kəˌmɪti]  
 • US Ausschuss für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten

#### humble

[ˈhʌmbəl]  
 • bescheiden

#### mud hut

• Lehmhütte

#### instill sb. with sth.

• jmdm. etw. beibringen

#### fervent

[ˈfɜːvənt]  
 • leidenschaftlich

#### enforce sth.

• etw. durchsetzen

#### orb

• Kugel

#### stoop

• Buckel; hier: gebeugte Haltung



Alinejad, calling on the Iranian government to grant women more freedom, Brussels, 2023

### The “righteous path”

But modesty was not her style. While representing her school in a Quran-reciting competition, she was dragged away from the stage when she stopped reciting a religious verse and switched instead to reciting an epic poem in Persian by a modern Iranian poet – leaving the other students cheering in delight. After being caught stealing books from a local store, she was expelled from school. But her mother stepped in, persuading officials to let her daughter attend a better school in order to keep her on the “righteous path.”

At 18, she found herself in prison for having formed a political club with some friends. The group’s activities: reading books and distributing leaflets.

“We thought we were rebels and intellectuals, but we were just teenagers with awkward manners and bad haircuts,” she writes in her book. The authorities saw it differently, detaining Alinejad and her fiancé, Reza. Alinejad discovered she was pregnant while in prison, and her sentence of five years and 74 lashes was suspended.

After their release from prison, the young couple got married, and their son, Pouyan, was born. Determined to succeed, Alinejad juggled motherhood with working as a wedding photographer.

But life with Reza was no bed of roses and the marriage broke down. Under the regime’s cruel divorce rules, Alinejad lost custody of her son.

### Exposing injustice

By now, Alinejad was 24. She applied for an internship with a reformist newspaper, *Hambastegi*. As soon as she saw the newsroom, she knew she’d found what she wanted to do. Although she had no university education and no contacts, she managed to persuade the editor to give her a chance.

Alinejad made the most of her new job, going over her editor’s head to report on power struggles between Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, and the parliament. Having secured her first scoop, she was promoted to the high-profile role of parliamentary reporter. Controversial from the start, she ignored the all-black dress code, and was suspended for wearing a denim coat and red shoes to parliament.

Three months later, she was back. After criticizing the security forces for a violent crackdown on student protesters, she was summoned by the prosecutor general. He tried to accuse her of adulterous relationships – charges that could have got her stoned, flogged, or even hanged.

She escaped punishment by writing a half-hearted apology but was finally expelled from parliament after reporting on corruption within the system. Unapologetic, she wrote *The Crown of Thorns*, a book about her struggles against discrimination, as a divorced woman and as a reporter. By the time the 2009 elections arrived, with hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad standing



A protestor marching after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, Tehran, October 2022

#### modesty

- Bescheidenheit

#### Quran [kəˈrɑːn]

- Koran

#### reciting

- Vortrags-

#### drag

- ziehen, zerren

#### expel sb.

- jmdn. ausschließen

#### righteous [ˈraɪtʃəs]

- redlich, rechtschaffen

#### leaflet

- Flugblatt

#### awkward [ˈɔːkwɜːd]

- peinlich, ungeschickt

#### detain sb.

- jmdn. festnehmen, inhaftieren

#### fiancé [ˌfiːɑːnˈseɪ]

- Verlobter

#### sentence

- Urteil

#### lash

- Peitschenhieb

#### suspend sth.

- etw. aussetzen

#### juggle [ˈdʒʌɡl̩]

- jonglieren, unter einen Hut bringen

#### custody

- Sorgerecht

#### internship

- Praktikum

#### newsroom [ˈnuːzruːm]

- Nachrichtenabteilung, Redaktion

#### head: go over sb.’s ~

- über jmds. Kopf hinweg handeln

#### scoop (ifml.)

- Exklusivbericht

#### crackdown

- hartes Durchgreifen

#### summon sb.

- jmdn. gerichtlich vorladen

#### prosecutor general

- Generalstaatsanwalt, -anwältin

#### adulterous [əˈdʌltərəs]

- ehebrecherisch

#### flog sb.

- jmdn. auspeitschen

#### unapologetic

- ungerührt

against reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Alinejad had been forced to go into exile.

## Running free

From England, Alinejad managed to obtain an exit visa for her son from Iran. She started a new life, contributing to the Persian service of both Voice of America and the BBC, while also studying communications at Oxford Brookes University. She flew to America, hoping to interview the new president, Barack Obama. Her brave attempt failed, but Alinejad told *The New Yorker* about what she had hoped to do, and the article caught the attention of a journalist with Bloomberg, who contacted her for a meeting. The journalist was Kambiz Foroohar, her future husband.

During their transatlantic courtship, Foroohar took a photo of Alinejad running in a street lined with cherry blossom, her wild hair flowing free in the wind. She posted it on social media, with the words: “Whenever I’m running free and my hair is dancing in the wind, I remember that I come from a country where, for 30-odd years, my hair has been taken hostage by those in the Islamic Republic.”

The post went viral, inspiring thousands of Iranian women to record themselves ignoring the hijab rule, and then to send Alinejad photos and videos to upload to her Facebook page. A new movement was born: “My Stealthy Freedom.”

## The voice of Iranian women

Alinejad’s vocal campaigning had made her Tehran’s top public enemy. After she went to live in New York, she and her new husband had to move house frequently. The Department of Justice thwarted a plot to kidnap her, which – if it had worked – might have resulted in her execution in Iran. In July 2022, police arrested a man found walking around outside her home, armed with an AK-47. But none of this put her off, encouraging her instead to intensify her campaign against the regime.

Months later, when Mahsa Amini was killed in Tehran for daring to show some hair straying from under her scarf, the country erupted, with protesters shouting “Death to Khamenei”



The death of Mahsa Amini sparked Iran’s biggest anti-government movement in over a decade

in electrifying scenes of civil disobedience. Sensing an existential threat, the hard-line government of President Ebrahim Raisi responded with brutality. Human rights groups report that security forces killed at least 500 protesters, with thousands being arrested.

Alinejad’s campaign had undoubtedly played a role in pushing the country toward activism. In an interview on the BBC programme HARDtalk, she was asked whether her voice had put people back home in danger. Her response, once again, was unapologetic: “What put people in danger is not me, it’s the Islamic Republic who hang people, who kill people, who throw acid on their faces, who beat up Mahsa Amini,” she said. “Iranian women have agency. Many of them ask me to be their voices.”

The story is no longer in the news headlines, but the fight for women’s rights in Iran continues. More than 40 years after the Islamic Revolution, many people believe that the regime’s fixation with female modesty is a tool for survival. State television in Iran regularly accuses Alinejad of working for the American government, a charge the activist has denied.

“The Iranian regime will be brought down by women. I believe this,” she told *The New Yorker*.

Tehran wants her gone. But for now, the girl from Ghomikola is still staring down the darkness – just as her mother told her to do.



Masih Alinejad’s memoir was published in May 2018

### communications

• Kommunikationswissenschaften

### courtship

• Beziehung, junge Liebe

### cherry blossom

• Kirschblüte

### hostage: take ~

• als Geisel nehmen

### stealthy ['steɪli]

• heimlich

### Department of Justice

• Justizministerium

### thwart sth. [θwɔːrt]

• etw. verhindern

### AK-47

['eɪ keɪ fɔːrti ,sevən]

• Kalaschnikow, Sturmgewehr

### put sb. off

• jmdn. abschrecken

### stray

• hier: hervorspitzen

### erupt

• ausbrechen, sich entladen

### electrifying

[i'lektʀifaɪŋ]

• mitreißend

### civil disobedience

[,sɪvəl ,dɪsə'biːdiəns]

• ziviler Ungehorsam

### acid ['æsɪd]

• Säure

### agency

• Kraft, Wirkung