

A teal background with a grid of dots. A white paper airplane graphic is in the top left corner, containing the text 'ARTICLE 19'. A white line curves across the middle of the page.

ARTICLE 19

Iran: Defending from the Outside

A Needs Assessment of Iranian Human Rights Defenders in the Diaspora

November 2015

Country Report

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Executive Summary

Much human rights work relating to Iran is done by Iranians and organisations outside Iran. These Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) are activists, academics, lawyers, scholars, artists and journalists who have left Iran due to pressures from the Government, often finding themselves unable to return.

Those HRDs who are forced to leave Iran often feel that they gradually lose their connections and support networks, and the authority and legitimacy which their activist status conferred upon them. This is a victory for the Iranian authorities who are using this method to successfully muzzle human rights activism relating to Iran, domestically and internationally.

It is rights activists in the diaspora play a vital role, both in highlighting Iran's human rights violations, and supporting their in-country colleagues. This report looks to highlight the plight of Iranian HRDs working in the diaspora, and to pinpoint the challenges they face in order to ensure that they are supported in their struggle to protect human rights in Iran. ARTICLE 19 interviewed 37 HRDs based in 5 different countries in order to outline the obstacles faced by Iranian HRDs in the diaspora.

Numerous successful (as well as a few unsuccessful) projects have been granted considerable funding in support of the cause of human rights in Iran, but these projects have rarely been the result of a thorough needs assessment. This report assesses the immediate needs and hurdles faced by Iranian activists striving to continue their work outside Iran. It outlines programmatic gaps, resource needs and priorities, as well as inefficiencies, redundancies and overlaps in funding. It also provides a brief assessment of security knowledge in order to verify whether these HRDs have access to the tools and knowledge required in order to securely maintain their in-country networks and continue supporting activists in Iran.

The report revealed that the most valuable resources available to the HRDs were felt to be: a good connection and unrestricted access to the internet, along with the plethora of uncensored information available outside Iran; open access to academic institutions, think-tanks and other NGOs; and the human rights community itself as a source of knowledge and support.

Those who have fled from persecution do, however, suffer from a number of gaps in resources which hamper their ability to work effectively: these include psychosocial support and language training; training on proposal writing and funding sources; constructive feedback on unsuccessful proposals.

Donors were deemed to be out of touch with grantees when it came to Iran's human rights work, and certain myths and misunderstandings prevail, including the notion of an 'expiry date' on exiled HRDs. HRDs also spoke of a lack of communication and transparency regarding funding allocation, and funding fads: it was felt that work has become increasingly donor-driven, rather than based on the issues identified by Iran human rights experts in meaningful consultation.

Networking avenues were also widely seen as a fundamental issue, and making them stronger, more accessible,

more interdisciplinary, and more inclusive was a priority. Activities such as mentorship, fellowships and paid internships were considered effective means to this. With so much expertise, and limited funds available, Iranian HRDs in the diaspora recognise the need to work together in order to address the gaps in their programmatic, research or funding needs.

The language barrier also prevents many human rights journalists working on underreported issues, blocking opportunities from highly skilled individuals who have appropriate knowledge but lack the necessary language skills or are unfamiliar with the systems of their new country of residence. Ensuring that a knowledge of English (or the native tongue of the country in question) does not become the main criterion in selecting spokespeople on Iranian issues could help ensure that the highest quality information is being distributed by providing a voice to those who do not speak those languages.

Work as effective HRDs can only continue if some level of contact with Iran can be maintained: assessing the security of these communications is thus vital. It is clear that security knowledge is lacking for some HRDs, who are resistant to the increasing focus on digital security and the numerous training events and workshops dedicated to it.

Currently available training events are not perceived to be fruitful, lacking tailoring and research necessary for deciding who should be involved. There must be prior needs assessments identifying the different levels of need and appropriate trainers will ensure that training events become accessible and adaptable. Training events need to be reduced and spread over longer periods, to avoid a barrage of information which overwhelms and frightens them.

Digital security is not a significant issue for some of Iran's ethnic rights activists: many of their contact groups do not even have access to the internet, while the internet is the main method used to contact LGBTI groups in Iran.

By fostering an environment where many HRDs fear for their safety, but one which is open enough for them to leave Iran for the foreseeable future, the Iranian regime has managed to partially disintegrate Iranian civic space by forcing a large number of HRDs into exile. This has left the remaining HRDs feeling insecure and isolated, and those who have left the country feeling disconnected for a significant amount of time. Therefore, Iranian human rights networks are weakened from within, and those thrown into exile in the unknown need patience and resources to find their feet, if they can.

More often than not, international civil society and the UN bodies interested in Iran have misconceptions about this exiled community, simply because they tend to form opinions based on assumptions rather than facts. This is true of states, donors and funders: their assumptions seldom reflect truth, and in many cases simply oblige other interests.

ARTICLE 19 has conducted this research with the aim of clarifying the misconceptions about the needs of HRDs in exile, and bridging the gap between these groups and potential funders. ARTICLE 19 believes the findings of this study will also help civil society make better plans for future human rights work in Iran.

1. Glossary and abbreviations

Donor: An individual or organisation that provides resources (financial, social, intellectual or time) to a non-profit organisation, public charity or fund.

Funder: A provider of funds for the support of a non-profit organisation or public charity.

HRC: Human Rights Council, an inter-governmental body within the United Nations system made up of 47 States for the promotion and protection of all human rights around the globe.¹

Human Rights Defender/Human rights activist: Human rights defenders or human rights activists (used synonymously) are people who, individually or collectively, act to protect or advocate for human rights.² The terms human rights defender (HRD) and human rights activist are used loosely here to include journalists and artists whose work has involved (to a significant extent) coverage of Iran's human rights issues and work with activists from Iran. This has resulted in a broader picture of those people involved in human rights work relating to Iran, highlighting their needs and issues, along with their general observations.

Iranian Cyber Army (*Artesh Sayberi Iran*): An Iranian computer hacker group, thought to be linked to the Iranian government, though it has not been officially acknowledged by the Iranian government. Professional hackers either join the group willingly or because they are threatened with imprisonment.³

⁰¹ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *United Nations Human Rights Council* <http://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/pages/hrcindex.aspx>

⁰² See United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Who is a Defender?* <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/SRHRDefenders/Pages/Defender.aspx>

⁰³ Center for Strategic and International Studies, *The Iranian Cyber Army* <http://csis.org/blog/iranian-cyber-army>

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

Office for the Consolidation of Unity (*Daftare Tahkim Vahdat*): The largest student group in Iran, it is the central office of various university-based Islamic societies.⁴

Psychosocial issues : Problems that can be emotional and behavioural that arise as a result of external, societal factors.

UN: United Nations

UN Special Rapporteur: These are independent human rights experts with mandates to report and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective. The Special Procedures cover all human rights: civil, cultural, economic, political, and social.⁵

⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Like the Dead in Their Coffins” *Torture, Detention, and the Crushing of Dissent in Iran*, Part VI <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/iran0604/6.htm>

⁰⁵ United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council* <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Welcomepage.aspx>

2. Foreword

By Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran

In 1998 the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus the *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*. In doing so, Member States, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, reaffirmed that certain rights are instrumental to the defence of human rights. This includes inter alia the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, the rights to association and peaceful assembly, and the right to gain access to information.

In March 2011, twenty-two members of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) voted to re-establish a mechanism that would monitor and report to the United Nations on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran amid widespread reports of systemic and systematic human rights violations emanating from the country. Among these reports were allegations of arbitrary arrest and detention, widespread abuse, torture, and prosecution of individuals for internationally recognised activities. A year later, I joined several United Nations independent experts in condemning the ongoing arrests and harsh sentencing of human rights defenders in the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁶ We urged the Government to ensure that these individuals are provided with adequate protection and not targeted for carrying out their legitimate activities.

A number of national laws that either continue to be or have become incompatible with international standards, and with the Declaration in particular, remain at the heart of this situation. This includes laws that govern the information journalists may publish, and the content individuals may share or access online, as well as vaguely worded national security laws that violate national and international protections for fundamental rights. In many cases, the Iranian authorities have used these laws to legitimise violations of human rights and to seriously impair the work of human rights defenders. In addition, even where efforts are made to adopt laws that are in line with international standards, in practice, inefficient implementation undermines progress.

⁶ Independent UN experts urge Iran to ensure protection for rights defenders, see: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41918#.VZHYYsZKXWA>

“These individuals form an international Iranian civil society whose commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights in Iran remains undaunted by distance.”

Iranian human rights defenders endure defamation and often face arbitrary detention and prosecution for seeking accountability through cooperation with international and regional human rights mechanisms. Reprisals against these individuals (penalising those who may cooperate with a special procedure such as the Special Rapporteur) have the effect of instilling fear, having a chilling impact on the spirit of cooperation, and they can deter mandate holders from meeting and interviewing alleged victims and other stakeholders who may be vulnerable to such punishment, thereby punishing them twice.

This situation has severely limited the space for human rights defenders, and has led to the ongoing emigration of hundreds of Iranian journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and academics. These individuals form an international Iranian civil society whose commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights in Iran remains undaunted by distance. Their work is facilitated by safe, cheap, easily accessible communications platforms that allow them to develop innovative methods to document the situation at home, raise awareness, and advocate for remedy. The HRC’s work, including my own mandate, has greatly benefitted from their work and support.

However, these individuals, and the organisations they work to support, require the ongoing support of international actors in order to leverage their successes and increase their capacity to contribute to the realisation of a legal system that constitutes comprehensive and equal protection for the rights promulgated by the international human rights treaties ratified by Iran. Our efforts to support their work to establish these preconditions may one day lead to an environment that enables human rights defenders to carry out their work to promote and protect the rights of all Iranians.

Dr Ahmed Shaheed

3. Introduction

3.1. Iran's human rights activists in exile

“The [Iranian] authorities want activists to leave,” Nasim Sarabandi told ARTICLE 19. “And they do what they can to make that happen. After the activists leave they are pretty much dead [to the authorities]. [They are] seen as nonentities, and this feeling is transferred onto the exiled activists, who are left with limited avenues to pursue their activism.”

Sarabandi, researcher and human rights activist, echoes the message of many of the human rights activists who, between November 2014 and March 2015, were interviewed for this report. For these activists and human rights defenders (HRDs), it has become increasingly difficult to contribute to the improvement of the human rights situation in Iran. HRDs within Iran struggle and are weakened due to the enduring government-led crackdown against them; a climate which encourages them and many of their colleagues to leave the country to evade imprisonment. Those who do leave feel that they gradually lose their connections and support networks, and the authority and legitimacy which their activist status conferred upon them. This is a victory for the Iranian authorities who are using this method to successfully muzzle human rights activism relating to Iran, both domestically and internationally.

⁰⁷ Including Germany, Italy, and France

⁰⁸ Human Rights Watch. *Why They Left*, part IV Their Lives as Refugees: <http://www.hrw.org/ru/node/112004/section/9>

⁰⁹ *Ibid*

Since the 2009 post-election protests in Iran, there has been a surge of asylum applications from Iranian civil society actors. Due to the intensity of the crackdown by the authorities during these protests, a number of European Union countries⁷ granted visas to Iranian activists, journalists and political dissidents.⁸ Statistics from 44 countries indicate that there were 11,537 new asylum applications from Iranians in 2009; 15,185 in 2010; and 18,128 in 2011.⁹ The large majority of these applications were from human rights or political activists.

Despite the huge difficulties facing HRDs – not least the Iranian authorities' effective weakening of civil society – they continue with their activism in exile. For this reason, this report looks to highlight the plight of Iranian HRDs working in the diaspora and to pinpoint the challenges they face in order to ensure that they are supported in their battle to protect human rights in Iran.

3.2 Background: The exodus of HRDs

Over the past few years, human rights actions relating to Iran have become more prominent in the international arena. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, was appointed in June 2011,¹⁰ and has facilitated collaborations between Iran's major human rights voices.¹¹ These collaborations, which highlight Iranian human rights issues in international bodies such as the UN,¹² have ensured that the situation in Iran remains prominent in international human rights dialogues.¹³ However, much of this work is carried out by Iranians and organisations outside Iran. These HRDs are activists, academics, lawyers, scholars, artists and journalists who have either left Iran due to pressures from the Government or who find themselves unable to return.

Working for the promotion and protection of human rights in Iran today is regularly construed as a political act. It has led to the arrests of HRDs and the closure of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs).¹⁴ During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, between 1997 and 2005, NGOs working on a multitude of issues flourished.¹⁵ However, under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad between 2005 and 2013 they suffered enormously.¹⁶ The term "NGO" took on political connotations; they were often accused of being "tools of foreign agendas".¹⁷

¹⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *About Shaheed*: <http://shaheedoniran.org/about-shaheed/>

¹¹ Including workshops and trainings for Iranian HRDs

¹² Such as Impact Iran <http://impactiran.org/about/> which draws attention to human rights in Iran and encourages the government to address concerns expressed by the international community. The latest examples include: <http://www.article19.org/azad-resources.php/resource/37883/en/joint-letter-from-the-civil-society-on-the-renewal-of-sr-mandate-on-iran>

¹³ For example: <http://smallmedia.org.uk/content/105>

¹⁴ World Organisation Against Torture, *Closure of the only independent human rights NGO in Iran* (in French): <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4958d32a2.html>

¹⁵ The Hand Foundation, *Are NGOs Returning to Iran?*: <http://thehandfoundation.org/newsletter/2014/07/are-ngos-returning-to-iran/> and Iran Rooyan, *Civil Society In Iran Fact Sheet*: http://iranrooyan.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Civil_Society_Factsheet1.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid and World Organisation Against Torture, *Closure of the only independent human rights NGO in Iran* (in French): <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4958d32a2.html>

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch. *Why They Left*, part I: Background <http://www.hrw.org/ru/node/112004/section/6>

As a result, the Government became highly sensitive to civic engagement in Iran, much of which was no longer tolerated.¹⁸ After the 2009 post-election protests, most NGOs were closed down.¹⁹ HRDs– including people interviewed by ARTICLE 19 for this report – reported receiving intimidating calls, threats (to themselves and their families), and blackmail from individuals connected to the Government and law enforcement agencies in Iran,²⁰ both before and after being arrested. There are also accounts of courts routinely suspending sentences of HRDs, leaving open the possibility of arbitrary arrest.²¹ Daily harassment and the likelihood of reimprisonment, coupled with reports of torture and degrading treatment in prisons, led to many HRDs fleeing Iran at the first opportunity following release.²²

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Human Rights Watch. *Why They Left* <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/12/13/why-they-left>. This Human Rights Watch report reveals some stories, and the torment they endured prior to their departure.

²¹ *Ibid*; one example of this hostile attitude toward civil society was its crackdown against the One Million Signatures Campaign (Read about the campaign: <http://we-change.org/english>). ARTICLE 19 interviewed a number of the volunteers and organisers involved in the campaign who informed ARTICLE 19 of the numerous raids and arrests that ensued.

²² Human Rights Watch, Iran: Activists Fleeing Assault on Civil Society <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/12/13/iran-activists-fleeing-assault-civil-society> ARTICLE 19's latest report focusing on Computer Crimes and the online behaviour of Iranians that leads to the harassment and arrest of activists in Iran shows the policies and events that have led to the exodus of Iranian HRDs who are active online. You can access the report here: <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38039/en/iran:-computer-crimes-in-iran--risky-online-behaviour>

There has been little improvement under the Hassan Rouhani administration,²³ demonstrated by the increasing number of HRDs in prison since Rouhani took office in August 2013.²⁴ Many activists have no choice but to leave Iran if they want to continue with human rights activism and support their activist networks in Iran.²⁵

The fear that it is possible to accomplish only limited human rights work in Iran without being at risk or subjected to arrest, intimidation and harassment means that human rights activists in the diaspora play a vital role both in highlighting Iran's human rights violations, and supporting their in-country colleagues.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ ARTICLE 19, *Joint Letter Supporting the Iran Resolution at the UNGA*: <http://www.article19.org/azad-resources.php/resource/37769/en/joint-letter-supporting-the-iran-resolution-at-the-unga#sthash.vskGoOtr.dpuf> and ARTICLE 19, *Joint Letter from the civil society on the Renewal of SR Mandate on Iran*: <http://www.article19.org/azad-resources.php/resource/37883/en/joint-letter-from-the-civil-society-on-the-renewal-of-sr-mandate-on-iran#sthash.0thxplpp.dpuf>

²⁵ Human Rights Watch. *Why They Left* <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/12/13/why-they-left>

3.3. Closing the gaps

Who better to ask about the needs of Iranian HRDs in the diaspora than the activists themselves?

This report assesses the immediate needs and the hurdles faced by prominent Iranian activists outside Iran as they strive to continue their work. It outlines programmatic gaps, resource needs and priorities, as well as inefficiencies, redundancies and overlaps in funding. It also provides a brief assessment of security knowledge in order to verify whether these HRDs have access to the tools and knowledge required in order to securely maintain their in-country networks and continue supporting activists in Iran.

This report shows that many projects relating to Iranian human rights are undertaken without a systematic process identifying the ‘gaps’ in current conditions or the ‘needs’ of those targeted by the projects, and are instead based on donors’ priority areas or assumptions about the areas of need.

Over the years, and particularly since the 2009 election protests, projects aiming to promote and protect human rights in Iran have become more prevalent. Numerous successful (as well as a few unsuccessful) projects have been granted considerable funding in support of the cause of human rights in Iran. Yet, as became apparent through the interviews, these projects have rarely been the result of a thorough needs assessment. It seems that only one organisation, Small Media,²⁶ conducted needs assessments prior to their workshop and training sessions for Iranian HRDs.²⁷ ARTICLE 19 hopes that this practice will become standard in all future Iranian human rights projects.

²⁶ Small Media is a non-profit organisation based in London that aims to increase the flow of information in Iran and other closed societies: <http://smallmedia.org.uk/>

²⁷ Small Media, *Media Outreach and Advocacy Campaign Support For Iranian Human Rights Organisations: An Assessment of Iranian HROS in Media and Advocacy*

Projects have also failed to examine the needs of the various groups involved in the Iranian human rights dialogue, particularly those groups which have a specific focus to their activism, such as minority rights. Their needs can differ significantly from those of other HRDs. Despite time, funding and resource constraints, ARTICLE 19 ensured that this report included a wide and representative demographic.

HRDs – both inside and outside Iran – must be provided with all the relevant assistance, tools and information they require to continue their work securely. Achieving this is our ultimate goal. Rather than viewing Iranian human rights activists in exile as vulnerable victims of an authoritarian regime, this report focuses on empowering these groups by making use of their expertise and knowledge, and draws on their authority and legitimacy in explaining how NGOs and international organisations can best assist them.

ARTICLE 19 was founded in 1987 with a mission to protect peoples' rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information. ARTICLE 19's Iran Programme, active since the beginning of 2009, has conducted a number of projects to protect the online and offline space for Iranians HRDs living in Iran and the diaspora, and to minimise the gaps between the different groups. In order for Iran-focused human rights projects to be both relevant and successful, it is essential that the gaps and misconceptions about the needs of HRDs in the diaspora are documented, with the aim of meeting these needs in future projects.

4. Methodology

Disclaimer:

This document has been prepared in good faith on the basis of information acquired by the researcher from in-depth interviews. As stipulated below, the findings of this study are explicitly tied to the information gathered from the interviewees who participated in the study. Given the sensitive nature of the report, a number of the HRDs asked to remain anonymous or to have sensitive information retracted from the report. Statements of facts in this study and conclusions drawn accordingly have been obtained from sources considered reliable, but no representation is made by ARTICLE 19 or any of its affiliates as to their completeness or accuracy. In certain cases, ARTICLE 19 has not published evidence for statements which we believe could compromise the safety and security of the interviewees or their networks in Iran. This report strives to be representative of the different groups involved in the Iranian human rights dialogue. To this end, ARTICLE 19 contacted an equal number of women and men, and representatives of different ethnic, religious and LGBTI groups.

ARTICLE 19 interviewed 37 HRDs based in five different countries in order to outline the main obstacles faced by Iranian HRDs in the diaspora. With the assistance of partner organisations and trusted networks, the first step was to identify target groups who would be willing to take part in the interview process. Washington D.C, New York City, Berlin and London were chosen as the four areas with the highest concentration of exiled Iranian HRDs. Long-distance interviews were also conducted with Iranian human rights activists based in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Canada and in other cities in the USA and Germany.²⁸

The interviewees were required to conform to set criteria in order to be eligible to participate.

The interview questions were designed to identify the needs of HRDs and the problems they face, as well as to reveal HRDs' ideas on how donors, organisations and larger NGOs can minimise these difficulties and address the requirements highlighted in this report.²⁹

The interviews used qualitative research methodology. They were semi-structured, which allowed our interviewees to explain their motivations more clearly, and helped reveal prevalent trends in their opinions and experiences.

²⁸ Such as Boston and Cologne

²⁹ Annex 1

5. Findings

5.1. Current Resources

HRDs who embark on a journey to continue their activism outside Iran face many obstacles and hurdles. However, in this report our interviewees were asked, despite the numerous obstacles they face, what resources are available to them in their current countries of residence. This was to discover the facilities and assistance that they felt were already available to them, which in turn was intended to highlight the gaps and the types of support they would require to continue their work.

The main resources available to HRDs are outlined in the next section. However, the availability of these resources does not necessarily denote sustainable and successful activism. By analysing these resources and the explanations given by the interviewees, it became clear that success for HRDs living in the diaspora (especially financially) depends on a combination of:

- Their location
- The length of time they have been actively involved in human rights issues
- The strength and size of their networks.

Knowledge of how best to utilise the above elements has allowed HRDs to establish themselves and lead successful projects. However, this requires experience, which excludes those who have left Iran recently, those with language barriers, and the younger generation of activists working in exile. The resources to which they had access in the diaspora, whether or not these assisted them in developing successful projects, varied enormously. The three resources outlined below were the most important, mentioned directly or indirectly by all of our participants.

What are the principle resources available to HRDs?

- Access to the internet, social media and uncensored information online
- Access to International Organisations
- Access to Media Outlets
- Access to the Iranian Community, and Iran-focused NGOs

5.1.1 Information

“The most important resource I have access to is the open and high speed internet here, you can find all the information you need online. In Iran I didn’t have access to this,” said Solmaz Sharif, Washington DC journalist and founder of Shirzanan Global.³⁰ Unrestricted access and a good connection to the internet; open access to academic institutions, think-tanks and other NGOs, along with the plethora of uncensored information available outside Iran, are resources whose value was frequently mentioned in the interviews.

Access to information is vital for work outside Iran, not only providing the international community with information, but also supporting their activist networks within Iran. For instance, Kamil Alboshoka, a UK-based human rights activist, mentioned the importance of having access to reports concerning the environmental situation in Ahwaz,³¹ especially as environmental rights activists in Iran cannot freely benefit from this information themselves. This allows HRDs such as Alboshoka to act as a bridge for information into Iran.

³⁰ For more information about Shirzanan Global, visit: <http://non-stopmedia.org/projects-list/shirzanan-global-edition-2/> 31

³¹ Justice for Iran, *11 NGOs urge UN experts to intervene in the environmental crisis in south-western Iran* <http://justice4iran.org/publication/call-for-action/environmental-crisis-iran/>

Social media tools are the preference of many of the interviewees who are continuing their activism outside Iran. Having access to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, from which they can easily reach thousands of people, is vital for Iranian human rights campaigners trying to establish themselves within the expatriate community. These tools require minimal cost and can be highly efficient in gaining support. Negar Mortazavi, an independent journalist and political commentator, elaborates: “My main tools, and the main resources I have access to, are via the internet. Actually 90% of my work is through the internet...but also social media. So [it is] not just the internet, but the structures that social networking platforms have created, such as Twitter, [that] are very important resources for an independent journalist.” However, it was predominately participants under the age of 35 who felt able to use social media most effectively.

Although all of our participants had access to the open internet, social media and academic institutions, and all agreed this access was crucial for their work, it did not necessarily ease the difficulties they faced as Iranian HRDs in the diaspora in a significant way.

5.1.2 Location, location, location

The resources available to HRDs vary from city to city. The importance of location was most apparent with Taimoor Aliassi, President of the Association for Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran at the UN in Geneva.³² Aliassi told ARTICLE 19: “We are privileged to be in Geneva, we have easy access especially to all the international NGOs, important networks, we can easily contact UN Rapporteurs, we have access to all the UN members in Geneva, can attend major events and conferences, especially those conferences arranged by the Geneva University.” Aliassi’s location is particularly advantageous for his human rights work: something from which most other participants did not benefit.

Shadi Sadr, a prominent lawyer, human rights activist and Co-Director of Justice for Iran,³³ decided to move to the UK because of the resources she felt would be available. The main reasons she chose the UK included:

³² For more information about Association of Human Rights in Kurdistan of Iran-Geneva, visit: <http://www.kmmk-ge.org/?lang=en>

³³ For more information about Justice for Iran, visit: <http://justiceforiran.org/>

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- The large and interconnected Iranian community and Iran-focused NGOs;
 - Access and exposure to major Farsi media outlets, such as Manoto and BBC Farsi; and
 - Access to prominent international organisations such as Amnesty International and ARTICLE 19.

Hossein Alizadeh, from the International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Committee (IGLHRC) noted that being based in the USA is particularly beneficial for fundraising, though the bureaucracy associated with funding can slow the pace of human rights work. Nasim Sarabandi suggested that Washington DC is the optimal location to work on human rights issues because of the access to funds, institutions and information unavailable elsewhere. Other interviews conducted in Washington DC confirmed that there were good funds and resources available in the capital compared with other cities in the USA; however, as Sarabandi pointed out, “[funds and resources] are only available to those that [know] how to access them.”

5.1.3 Communities as resources

The length of time that an HRD has been active can also be also a distinct advantage. 8 of the participants mentioned the resources they gained from having ties within the human rights community of the city or country they lived in, developed over a period of time. Those who had been working in the human rights field for more than a decade and had established themselves in the community were in a particularly positive situation. Roya Boroumand, co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation,³⁴ mentioned media visibility as well as connections and allies she had made in her previous positions in high-profile human rights NGOs. The resources created through these connections were invaluable for the creation of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation. Such connections have been vital for those HRDs in need of technological assistance, especially those with limited funds available, though only 5 of the interviewees felt they had this type of interdisciplinary network.

³⁴ For more information on the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation's projects, see <http://www.iranrights.org/>

Mani Mostofi, Director of Impact Iran,³⁵ agreed with this. Mostofi was educated in the USA where he has spent most of his adult life there. A lawyer by profession, he notes how vital networking abilities are for success in the international human rights community. “My ability to network is my biggest contribution to the community... a lot has to do with growing up outside the country, getting a sense of how the NGOs and social communities operate.” He notes the scarcity of resources available to those who have recently left Iran; the major resource they have is their community. This is the idea of communities as resources. He and a number of other New York-based participants observed that communities are where the majority of networking is fostered, stimulating project ideas and employment. “It’s finding a way into that community that can be tricky,” stated one of our anonymous participants in the USA.

³⁵ Impact Iran draws attention to human rights in Iran and encourages the government to address concerns by the international community. For more information, see <http://impactiran.org/>

5.2 Gaps and Proposed Solutions

Due to the array of difficulties Iranian HRDs face outside Iran, only the most frequently mentioned and immediate areas of need have been discussed below. This is structured according to two elements: *gaps*, i.e. the principle problems faced by HRDs in exile when attempting to continue with their human rights activism; and the *solutions*: what is needed or requires changing, which will be based on recommendations from the HRDs on how these issues could be remedied.

In general the *solutions* proposed can be provided by external agencies such as large NGOs, UN agencies or governmental and non-governmental donors. We and our partner organisations aim to address the most immediate needs of these HRDs, and ease their workload by altering our approach to human rights work relating to Iran. Highlighting such issues will foster a much-needed dialogue that has been absent from Iran-focused human rights work.

5.2.1 Psychosocial support

Why it is important to focus on psychosocial issues?

- Many HRDs who have fled Iran suffer from differing forms of stress that affect their psychosocial wellbeing.
- There has been a serious lack of consideration of this area up to this point.
- Lack of cultural integration, language barriers, and marginalisation intensify other obstacles to effective work.

Gaps

There are a number of hurdles faced by HRDs when they first leave Iran. Those who have fled from persecution often suffer from psychosocial issues, which are exacerbated by having to acclimatise to their new surroundings.³⁶ The interviewees felt these issues are rarely considered. Many interviewees suffer from exhaustion, trauma, and other forms of stress that affect their psychosocial wellbeing. This is amplified by sociocultural differences within their new country of residence and a lack of understanding between these newly arrived HRDs and their host country.³⁷ Many activists fleeing the country to avoid time in prison for their activism require basic training in order to be able to operate successfully as HRDs outside Iran.

Significant factors which intensify the problems of HRDs who have left Iran are the lack of cultural integration, language barriers, and marginalisation. For many of the interviewees, their lack of language skills have resulted in their becoming isolated and unable to function fully as HRDs.

Kurdish and women's human rights activist and law graduate Kaveh Kermanshahi stated that the language barrier has a significantly negative effect on HRDs from minority ethnic groups: "People who started to learn English in Iran can quickly adapt here [in Berlin] but I – someone who, whilst in Iran, did all I could to learn Farsi so that I could succeed – didn't have the opportunity to learn English too."

Solutions

For those HRDs who have experienced exile and its traumatic effects, psychosocial support is an unaddressed issue that requires urgent attention. The support that could be offered by NGOs and other interested international institutions would be invaluable for HRDs who have chosen to continue with their human rights work after being subjected to harassments, imprisonment and torture.

³⁶ If a work environment becomes too stressful, it may exceed a worker's coping mechanisms, leading to mental and physical health problems. This can happen especially when a person is abused, threatened or assaulted at their work in a manner that compromises their safety and/or wellbeing. Typically the threats, abuse, violence etc. are exerted by forces external to the victim's workplace

³⁷ Uma A. Segal and Nazneen S. Mayadas, *Assessment of Issues Facing Immigrant and Refugee Families*: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.467.4575&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

For 10 of the interviewees, language lessons or assistance for HRDs with communication difficulties was seen as vital in targeting the initial and most prevalent barrier for HRDs living in exile. Online courses or small low-cost language lessons would help them become acclimatised to their new surroundings, overcome certain effects of the psychosocial trauma and continue with their activism.

5.2.2 HRDs vs. Donors

Throughout the interviews it became clear that there is a lack of understanding amongst HRDs of what is needed to attract the support of donors; there is also a lack of understanding amongst donors about what they can require from HRDs without endangering or marginalising them or losing their trust. The main, more prevalent, problems are highlighted below.

5.2.2.1 What HRDs need to know

A. Starting and running a project

What are the main obstacles to launching a project?

- Knowledge of appropriate procedures and best-practice.
- Available assistance, especially for already marginalised groups.
- Lack of constructive feedback from donors and partners

Gaps

When it comes to pursuing a human rights project, the most important problem for individual HRDs and those from smaller NGOs was their lack of knowledge about how to start and manage a project. HRDs have not been trained to understand what donors require of them or what a successful project involves. As a result, despite being experts in their fields of focus, their actual impact is limited. Prominent trade union representative and activist Mansour Osanlou mentions that “most of those leaving Iran due to their activism are ‘professional revolutionaries’... their life has been based around being an activist, so when they leave Iran and realise they need to change their methods, they’re faced with big challenges.”

21 participants mentioned a gap in knowledge that severely affects their ability to continue with their human rights work. These gaps include:

- Knowing about grant and proposal writing;
- Knowing who to approach for funding and support; and
- Project management skills.

Much of the work interviewees had done while still in Iran was through informal networks and was highly organic in nature - especially given the rarity of NGOs in Iran, and the threats those working in the human rights field may face. Thus, finding out how to start and manage a project is vital for the continuation of their work.

Mehdi Abarshahi, student activist and former secretary of Daftare Tahkim Vahdat (Office for the Consolidation of Unity), saw the lack of knowledge about how human rights projects are run outside Iran as fatal for HRDs who have recently left Iran. Nasim Sarabandi also said that due to their lack of experience, many HRDs have limited knowledge of how NGOs operate: "...the development of activists is low. It's very hard to get the necessary knowledge which makes it difficult for [HRDs] to continue."

Kamil Alboshoka agreed that he and colleagues working on issues involving Iran's marginalised communities would benefit from workshops and training to help them understand the procedures involved in running funded human rights projects in the diaspora. Groups with a narrow focus tend to have limited access to resources to help them, he felt, thus necessitating assistance from larger institutions that can aid or train them.

In addition, for those who do have an understanding of most of the procedures involved in starting a project, a consistent flaw in the initial stages (particularly with funding procedures) is the lack of feedback given to unsuccessful project proposals by potential donors. Without constructive feedback, it is difficult for HRDs to develop an understanding of the needs of potential funders. Ali Bangi, the co-Founder of ASL19, and Negar Mortazavi described this as a key issue for the HRDs trying to establish themselves in the diaspora and one which donors should seek to address.

Solutions

“Rather than throw [us] into the pool headfirst, [donors and organisations looking to support HRDs] should teach us how to swim,” Solmaz Sharif stated. Such training and support is vital for HRDs if they are to successfully win funding and run human rights projects. Women’s rights activist and researcher Nasrin Afsali agreed, “We need a greater focus on the preparing and teaching of HRDs... providing us with a clearer view of the processes through accessible and up-to-date training packages. This is especially important for women who are under-represented.”³⁸ Many other HRDs interviewed who wanted face-to-face training acknowledged that online and longer-term training packages that could be fitted around the lifestyles of HRDs would provide much-needed flexibility.

Amir Rashidi, human rights defender and digital security expert, explains that those activists looking to lead successful and meaningful human rights projects “...need to know how to write proposals on what [their] project is; how to express and identify what the intention of the project is as well as its mission...Some [HRDs] struggle to understand the difference between a mission and goal...teach them how to write about the project and how to develop it, then how to make a funding proposal. After this they will need advice on who to approach for funds.”

Institutions looking to support Iranian HRDs can do this by providing them with mentoring. Bronwen Robertson, Director of Operations at Small Media, told ARTICLE 19 that mentorship opportunities, one-to-one training and workshops have a positive impact on the work of Iranian HRDs - something with which many interviewees agreed. According to Small Media’s experience of working with Iranian HRDs, these personalised one-on-one sessions have been very effective.

Furthermore, the interviewees suggested that HRDs be provided with constructive feedback about unsuccessful project proposals, to foster development. If HRDs’ shortcomings and errors are not pointed out, they will not understand what donors require of them.

³⁸ Such as the funding and project management processes

B. Finding funding

Why do HRDs face issues with funding?

- Unfamiliarity with application procedures
- Difficulty in locating available funds
- Lack of information about how funds are allocated
- Shortage of available funds
- Lack of assistance and mentoring
- Falling outside of funding trends (a particular issue for marginalised groups)

Gaps

After the processes are understood, the next barrier facing these HRDs is locating what funds are available and how to access them. Iranian human rights work is a niche area where numerous individuals and organisations compete for limited funds from a limited number of sources. Thus, the majority of the interviewees voiced concerns about the lack of funding pools available to them and the manner in which funds are allocated. Of the interviews conducted, 33 out of 37 people complained about this shortage of funding, so it was important to ascertain why so many viewed funding as the biggest hurdle to their work. This links to the previous section, since many issues relating to access to funding are linked to a lack of familiarity about how projects are managed.

³⁶ If a work environment becomes too stressful, it may exceed a worker's coping mechanisms, leading to mental and physical health problems. This can happen especially when a person is abused, threatened or assaulted at their work in a manner that compromises their safety and/or wellbeing. Typically the threats, abuse, violence etc. are exerted by forces external to the victim's workplace

³⁷ Uma A. Segal and Nazneen S. Mayadas, Assessment of Issues Facing Immigrant and Refugee Families: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.467.4575&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

Yousef Azizi (Bani-Torof), a journalist, Arab rights activist and General Secretary of the Centre for Combating Racism and Discrimination against Arabs in Iran,³⁹ observes that a shortage of funding pools is a huge hindrance for his work and limits the efforts of these Arab rights activists to bring these issues to international audiences, to the extent that they are unable to register as a charity in the UK. Neither he nor his colleagues know who to approach for funding. They also have limited experience of writing proposals and grant applications, which are required when approaching the appropriate institutions.

The main questions that arose for interviewees were: firstly, how to know what resources are available; secondly, who to turn to for support and/or assistance; and finally, how to approach these individuals and/or organisations. Nasim Sarabandi told ARTICLE 19 that if there were institutions which were able to give her advice on how to find funding resources and outline projects, she would be in a better position to continue her work.

Solutions

In addition to the training and mentoring of HRDs mentioned above, larger NGOs and international institutions interested in Iran's human rights work can assist by improving the visibility of funding opportunities for Iranian HRDs and improving their access to them. Most large NGOs have specific personnel trained in targeting donors and identifying funding opportunities; this is a luxury that smaller NGOs and individual HRDs do not enjoy and could be invaluable for them if it were shared.

³⁹ For more information, see <http://www.ahwazstudies.org/en/Article.aspx?aid=688> and <http://www.ahwaziarabs.info/2013/05/discrimination-against-arabs-in-iran-is.html>

Problematic Donor Behaviour

- Fallacy of an ‘expiry date’ on HRDs, forcing some into a ‘limbo state’
- Lack of transparency and accountability around funding allocation
- Lack of adequate needs-assessment or preparation
- Duplication and overlap between projects funded
- Funding fads which neglect pressing and prescient issues
- Neglect of minority issues, which often fall outside of funding fads
- Over-focus on in-country intervention rather than on impact
- Falling outside of funding trends, a particular issue for marginalized groups

One potential method of helping HRDs who are unsure about who to contact about funding would be to create a database or directory of donors who fund projects relating to Iran. This would greatly facilitate the HRDs’ search for interested donors; a recurring difficulty for interviewees.⁴⁰

Further focus needs to be placed on making funding opportunities more inclusive so as to include minority groups. By making the processes for gaining funding more transparent and accessible, efforts can be made to encourage participation of HRDs from – and working on behalf of – marginalised groups in Iran.

⁴⁰ Similar databases exist for general human rights funding, such as: <http://www.fundsforngos.org/featured-articles/list-european-funders-human-rights-projects-ngos/> or <http://www.youthpolicy.org/mappings/donors/directory/informationources/>

5.2.2.2 What HRDs need from donors

A. Funding

Gaps

The issue of how donors perceived the length of time HRDs spent outside Iran was a theme in a number of interviews. Many interviewees felt that some donors were out of touch with their grantees when it came to Iran's human rights work. Although having larger networks and being established in a new country of residence was seen as a vital resource for HRDs, our interviewees felt that there are two main groups that enjoy success in furthering their human rights work in the diaspora: those who have very recently left Iran and have direct, 'fresh' connections with Iranian networks; and those who have adjusted to their new country of residence, and understand how successful projects are managed.

Donors are frequently looking to fund and support Iranians who have very recently left Iran. Artist and human rights activist Shahin Najafi explained that accessing resources in Germany is particularly difficult for an exiled Iranian musician. Najafi left Iran after realising he could not continue with his work due to numerous barriers such as the intense level of censorship and lack of safety for artists within the Iranian system.⁴¹ He remains one of Iran's most well-known artists, yet he - and many other interviewees - agreed that being an Iranian artist outside Iran means they are of less interest than those who stay behind. "If I were in Iran, I would have a better chance of getting support from German donors than I have now, exiled in Germany."

Sarabandi explained the dilemma which Iranian activists face after leaving Iran and losing the credibility of being an in-country activist: "They have two options. They can either get on with their lives or remain active. But this activism has its own expiry date - you only have the connections you need and an insider's understanding of Iran's complicated issues for a certain amount of time."

This idea of an 'expiry date' affects donor interest in these activists, especially if the funds allocated are based on the in-country impact. The interviewed HRDs who spoke of this felt that donors and other interested organisations look either for 'fresh' activists who have very recently left Iran, or for activists who have been

⁴¹ See ARTICLE 19, *Revolution and the Evolution of Art* <http://www.article19.org/azad-resources.php/resource/37853/en/iran:-revolution-and-the-evolution-of-art> and IFEX, Iran: Rouhani's mixed messages on artistic freedom <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/03/iran/>

established outside Iran for a number of years. Numerous HRDs fall between these two categories and the situation creates a 'limbo state' for those caught in the middle, whose well-informed projects and ideas are left without funding.

When funding is provided, most donors have specific conditions attached to the funds. One of the most controversial of these is the 'vetting' requirement. This requires that all those directly in receipt of funding from the donor's award are vetted for security purposes. This can be a very time-consuming process with security risks.

"It poses so many potential risks for us and all those involved with our projects. We can't provide the information they want from us. This is why we have to reject any funding with vetting requirements," said Shadi Sadr. Project funds have had to be refused by some interviewees due to these concerns, while others have had their projects hampered in the attempt to meet vetting needs.

Solutions

Interviewees mentioned a need for open dialogue between donors and other interested parties and HRDs. HRDs who have failed to establish themselves and/or associate themselves with larger organisations lack support. The HRDs interviewed felt that there needs to be an understanding that the amount of time spent out of Iran does not necessarily correlate to HRDs' effectiveness.

Open dialogue would allow HRDs to demonstrate that the notion of an 'expiry date' is redundant. With support from larger institutions and organisations, the knowledge and capabilities of these HRDs would not be lost, and they could become part of the larger Iranian human rights community. This dialogue could take place through skill-sharing via online networks, workshops bringing the two sides together, or individual dialogues, and would serve to highlight the section of Iran's human rights community that has been largely untapped and unsupported, especially since 2009.

Requirements and processes of vetting as a condition for receipt of funding should be carefully considered, particularly considering the security risks of those involved in projects in high risk countries.

B. Transparency and Accountability

Gaps

The interviews showed a general distrust about where funding has been going, for what projects and to whom. Most participants felt that a system of accountability for beneficiaries is required, to bring much-needed transparency and clarity to

access to funding for projects. Many participants noticed a lack of debate and analysis about what the areas of focus for funds should be, harming the organic nature of human rights work overall.

Amir Rashidi and journalist Ehsan Mehrabi felt that some workshops and projects that are granted funding not only lack proper organisation, but are also run by unsuitable people. “Donors shouldn’t say yes to just anyone,” Rashidi stressed. “They need to see that they are funding the wrong projects and wrong people a lot of the time. There is a need for real evaluations of these projects and the applicants before such large sums are handed out.”

Our interviewees gave examples of security training events that had been conducted by ill-prepared or unsuitable trainers which they felt could be damaging to the wider Iranian human rights community.⁴² Rashidi believes there should be an evaluation prior to the events to match the knowledge of the trainees to the right trainers, something which, in his opinion, has rarely happened. Mehrabi gave examples of journalism talks and training events given by people who were not recognised as leading figures within Iranian journalism which he saw as highly problematic. To Mehrabi this affects the prestige and credibility of both the event and the event’s organisers. Many participants felt that these decisions are made by donors without consulting experts in the fields who would be able to advise the donors as to whether the projects would be feasible and/or suitable within an Iranian context.

Other reasons cited for HRDs not receiving funding included donors’ tendency to focus on projects that are popular at a specific time. Eight HRDs cited this as one of the main barriers to their work. With funding patterns constantly changing, topics that are perceived as particularly salient take priority and are more likely to receive funding. For example, security training has recently become increasingly popular, though many question its usefulness and necessity.

Many HRDs have their own specialities and areas of focus and do not wish to follow such trends, which leads to gaps with issues of vital importance being neglected. The HRDs felt that it is important to ensure that funding and resources are distributed fairly, without undue concentration and duplication of the same few projects.

⁴² It should be noted that this did not refer to a lack of knowledge on behalf of the trainers, but rather to the difficulty faced by them in bestowing their digital security knowledge on to students

Yet with regard to financial resources, those advocating for marginalised groups suffer the most as they generally fall outside of funding trends. Rahman Javanmadri, a Kurdish rights activist, told ARTICLE 19 that when working on general refugee issues he received significant funding from the government of the Netherlands, but when he shifted his focus to marginalised groups in Iran (Kurds, Arabs, and Baluchis), he was repeatedly refused funding, how already lack of funding for such projects can further marginalise already-marginalised groups in Iran.

Solutions

Donors must be informed about the areas and projects which require their focus and further resources. By bridging this information gap, smaller organisations that have the knowledge and understanding to work on these areas will be more able to secure funding and ensure that vital human rights issues which fall outside common trends are not overlooked.

Shadi Sadr, from Justice for Iran, felt there is a need for an organisation (perhaps set up by Iranians) that monitors what funding is granted to work relating to Iran. This organisation could analyse funding trends and their impact, and could also note the recurring trends that are perceived as harmful to HRDs and their work. The recommendation to set up a ‘watchdog’ organisation to monitor Iranian human rights projects was made three times. Although such an organisation may not currently be feasible, the desire for it indicates a distrust of how funds and resources are allocated and projects are handled at the moment. There is a desire for increased analysis of the following issues:

- Current funding trends for Iranian human rights work;
- The actual impact of past projects; and
- Areas of need and calls for proposals.

Such analyses would highlight where and how these resources are currently distributed, and how and why specific projects are chosen. This would bring a level of transparency and accountability, as well as increased trust and cooperation between donors and Iranian HRDs.

C. Communication

Problems caused by lack of communication:

- Unrealistic expectations of HRDs
- Limited consideration for HRDs from different levels of knowledge and expertise
- Donor-driven push for high-risk and inadvisable projects which involve ‘in-country intervention
- Donor-driven projects, as opposed to projects based on issues identified

Gaps

A lack of clear and open communication between Iranian HRDs and donors has led to a number of major obstacles according to those interviewed. Ranging from limited consultation with HRDs to whom funding has been provided, to a lack of discussion with Iranian human rights experts, this communication block has resulted in mounting distress for these HRDs, as well as the adoption of insecure, ineffective and inappropriate projects.

There was a clear divide between the interviewees who represented bigger organisations and those from smaller, underfunded organisations, including HRDs who work alone. Many of those from the latter group who have successfully secured funding in the past spoke of donors’ high expectations of them.

Journalist Solmaz Sharif recalled her experiences with donors when she was in the process of setting up the first Iranian women’s sports magazine. She had very recently left Iran and was not only learning English and getting accustomed to her new surroundings, but also running an ambitious online publication, *Shirzanan*,⁴³ almost single-handedly. She was receiving very limited wages, and felt under considerable pressure. “People can work on what they are passionate about up to a certain point,” she reflected, “there are sacrifices and there are realities.” For her, a real hurdle was getting donors to understand the difficulties faced by HRDs in exile, but also to provide the support HRDs require to deliver meaningful and sustainable projects.

⁴³ For more information on Shirzanan, see <http://non-stopmedia.org/projects-list/shirzanan/>

Many participants, including Sharif, also mentioned the limited amount of consideration offered to HRDs with different levels of knowledge and expertise. Sharif recalls being provided with legal contracts in English when she had only just started to learn the language. “Even if it’s not translated, it could have been explained.” This lack of communication is highly stressful for HRDs already in a vulnerable situation.

This also creates problems for the projects’ contents. A number of interviewees mentioned donors stipulating that projects must have an impact on Iran to merit funding - i.e. projects must be directly involved with or have a direct impact on people in Iran. What concerned them were the increasing calls for more direct in-country intervention, as opposed to impact, a trend which our participants unanimously criticised.

The main cause for concern cited by our interviewees was the use of workshops and training events held outside Iran organised for Iranians who are based in Iran. These workshops use a variety of methods to bring Iranians out of Iran to the workshops or training events for a few days. Our interviewees questioned whether thorough SWOT analyses had been carried out by those involved in the projects and the donors to ensure the participants’ security. The interviewees felt that these important security concerns could be addressed through discussion with Iranian HRDs and experts.

Digital security researcher Amir Rashidi described this as a highly risky and expensive trend. Rashidi stated that “the participants were probably unaware of the level of risk involved, where their return [to Iran] after taking part in such a project could be detrimental to their safety.” It was felt that such projects increase the risk of being brought to the attention of, and monitored by, governmental forces. The risk of interception and/or being harassed is too high and should be avoided – especially since this can lead to national security charges. Rashidi and three other interviewees agreed that needs assessments to see where actual security needs lie have been limited so far, and questioned the cost and risk of conducting these sessions.

11 HRDs agreed that Iran’s human rights work has become increasingly donor-driven, rather than based on the main issues identified by Iran human rights experts. They felt that there have been limited meaningful consultations with experts and HRDs in this regard. Shadi Sadr observed that current calls for proposals indicate a narrowing of boundaries for HRDs looking to secure funding from donors. These narrow boundaries also affect the human rights trends

which the interviewees saw to be moving in the same direction. They noted that this causes overlaps, leaving vast areas of need untouched if they fall outside these boundaries.

Solutions

It is important to address the gaps between donors' expectations and the reality of what HRDs want to achieve. Many interviewees drew attention to the fact that the level of strain placed on HRDs has resulted in a number, some highly notable, turning their backs on human rights work. When asked how this issue could be addressed, Sharif responded: "By approaching us, sitting down with us and asking us what we need and what the issues are. A lot of stress could be easily avoided."

Iranian HRDs felt they are given a budget without advice, support or an evaluation of their needs. It would be to the benefit of both parties to provide support both prior to and throughout the process – especially to those that are new to the project-building process.

Others felt that HRDs' relationship with donors should be more balanced; they felt that donors currently punish groups for their shortcomings and move on to another group for the next project without providing constructive feedback. It is necessary for the relationship between donors and recipients to be re-evaluated. Given the vulnerable status of many Iranian HRDs in exile, a system needs to be in place to support the continuation of their work. In this way, the donors would receive the outcomes anticipated from the project, and the recipients would perform to the best of their ability.

Furthermore, donors require their projects to have a sustainable impact on the country in question, but when working on issues relating to Iran, they must analyse this differently and see Iran as one of the exceptional cases. In Iran, human rights work can be very risky and dangerous for those involved. The interviewees wanted donors and those involved in projects relating to Iran to steer away from workshops or training events (currently favoured by donors), deemed too risky and with a limited long-term impact. It is felt that these fail to deliver sustainable impact in-country, and the risks they post outweigh the benefits gained.

To achieve real sustainability, a different analytical framework should be employed: there must be rigorous needs, impact and security assessments to evaluate the projects' long term impact and judge whether such risks are worth taking.

Participants concerned about the above issues felt that donors need to deepen and develop their understanding of Iranian issues, which can only be done via meaningful discussions with Iranian HRDs and experts in the diaspora. Only then will it be possible for calls for proposals and funding criteria to be set. This will decrease the likelihood of credible and highly-skilled groups rejecting projects and leaving them to be undertaken by ill-prepared groups.

5.2.3 Community building

Barriers to utilising the community as a resource:

- Networking in Iran is much more informal than outside- the transition can be difficult
- Networking is closely linked to information and funding- exclusion from the community can exacerbate existing barriers to effective work
- Lack of facilitation for networking further marginalises certain groups: often those already marginalised by funding and information-sharing processes
- Lack of facilitation for skills-sharing and identification of expertise

5.2.3.1 Networking

Other actions remain to be undertaken by the Iranian human rights community (including interested parties) and HRDs themselves. Throughout the interviews there was a clear correlation between general issues concerning HRDs continuing their work and their limited networking abilities. For this reason, a large majority of the participants saw better networking avenues as a fundamental issue needing to be addressed. Although networking and community connections were seen as one of the main resources to which Iranian HRDs in the diaspora have access, many of the HRDs interviewed felt they did not have the right network connections, or felt further efforts should be made to strengthen existing networks.

Gaps

For numerous HRDs – especially those that have recently left Iran – networking and contact with the ‘right people’ is a big obstacle. Many have struggled to adapt to how networking is done outside Iran (in this case in Europe and the USA).

Mani Mostofi, from Impact Iran, has witnessed this first-hand while attempting to connect Iranian NGOs. He views lack of networking ability as a big problem for the community, especially when attempting to work at an international level. “A lot of things in Iran happen through informal rather than formal networks. But when [HRDs] leave the country they have troubles transferring these networking skills.”

Mostofi notes that outside of Iran there is less intimacy and not as personal.

“Networking and having a relationship also only gets you in front of someone.

You then have to be able to sell what you have to offer and match that to what the person is looking for or needs.” This can be detrimental to the work of HRDs who are unprepared, since competition in the Iranian human rights fields is fierce.

Peyman Majidzadeh, a prominent researcher covering human rights and socio-economic issues relating to Iran, noted that for HRDs (especially in Washington DC), building connections is vital in order to access resources. This is an area that he felt many human rights organisations could and should be facilitating. The ability to network and develop contacts is seen as a survival tactic, ensuring that HRDs remain relevant in the human rights arena.

Funding is closely linked to networking; without a network, access to funds is minimal. Nasrin Afzali, also based in Washington DC, echoed this, stressing the difficulties faced by Iranians who have recently left Iran, have no connections and are thus excluded from funding and resource monopolies. Afzali feels that this is particularly the case for women in Iranian HRD circles. She sees that women are approached far less often than men to participate in events, workshops and research – especially women focusing on gender issues.

Networking difficulties are amplified for advocates of marginalised groups. Not only are they faced with language difficulties – English as well as Farsi – but they are further excluded from tribunals and networks, preventing them from distributing information and getting the attention required for their issues.

Artists suffer in a similar way. Shahin Najafi informed ARTICLE 19 that he was unaware of any NGOs willing to assist musicians like him to continue with their work, which seems to be the result of a lack of interdisciplinary networks.

Solutions

“Like funding, networks have been monopolised. Human rights work is becoming more about the business than the issues at stake,” asserted musician and television personality Arash Sobhani. As demonstrated above, many other HRDs felt the same. To avoid this pitfall, networks, like funds, must be de-monopolised.

Community building is a highly important element which is slowly being realised. According to interviewees, more and more networking opportunities have been created for HRDs, such as workshops set up by the University of Essex and Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed,⁴⁴ as well as the Iran Cyber Dialogue conferences held by ASL19.⁴⁵ These are positive prototypes for future events that could bring about partnerships and wider platforms for HRDs, especially those who fall between gaps in support. Conferences, workshops and other events created to open dialogue and an exchange of ideas are seen as fundamental for the Iranian human rights movement and its evolution.

Events bringing academics, activists and artists together to work on the same issues can strengthen networks and open a fairer platform for those looking to access resources. The 2015 Iran Cyber Dialogue conference, for example, brought together funders, activists and experts from interdisciplinary fields, creating opportunities for HRDs to voice their opinions in a way which would have been otherwise impossible. These types of events would also be beneficial to donors themselves who would be able to become more actively involved in Iranian human rights dialogue, and to improve their funding approaches.

Mani Mostofi and two other participants told ARTICLE 19 that students on fellowships make up an important part of Iran’s human rights community. This has been an effective route, helping them establish connections, familiarise themselves with their new surroundings, and gain employment. Fellowships and paid internships have been conducive to network building and integrating Iranian human rights activists. More of this type of programme would grant further exposure to human rights outside Iran, and allow for more meaningful assimilation.

⁴⁴ Future events can be found at: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/hri/>

⁴⁵ For more information about ASL19, see: <https://asl19.org/en/icd/2015/>

5.2.3.2 Skill sharing and identification of expertise

Gaps

The issues of skill-sharing and skill-identification was raised (either directly or indirectly) in every interview. With so much expertise, and limited pools of funds available, Iranian HRDs in the diaspora recognise the need to work together in order to address the gaps in their programmatic, research or funding needs.

One example was provided by participants over the age of 40, a number of whom have neither a full grasp of social media nor in-depth technological knowledge, which hinders their work. This creates worrying security dilemmas for such groups.

English language assistance was also a key need for many HRDs of differing ages. Most HRDs who raised these issues were aware that there are numerous organisations and NGOs with technical, social media and media experts who could share their expertise and assist these organisations in disseminating information safely and widely.

The language barrier also prevents many human rights journalists working on underreported issues from contacting foreign media outlets and organisations. For Ehsan Mehrabi, this has meant that journalists without the necessary knowledge, but who are proficient in English, are approached, leading to misinformation which is then reproduced internationally. Mehrabi stressed the negative impact this has on human rights work relating to Iran, as well as on the reputation of the international media outlets or organisations who quote such journalists.

Alboshoka was one of six participants to mention a need for legal training or assistance. The legal framework surrounding Iranian human rights work - be it the understanding of international human rights law, or the domestic laws of Iran - is highly complex and inaccessible to many non-lawyers, yet a good understanding of it is crucial due to the frequency with which legal issues arise in such work.

Many felt that skill sharing has not been properly nurtured, leaving many underfunded NGOs with large skills gaps. “The problem with human rights organisations and NGOs is not that there aren’t enough well-educated or highly qualified people available,” Rahman Javanmardi notes, “...there are in fact too many skilled people, which increases competition, leaving many jobless... unfortunately these are predominately those who cover minority [issues] and the more nuanced issues affecting marginalised people.”

Farhad Payar, an activist, freelance journalist and documentary filmmaker, pointed out that this issue relates to the Iranian human rights community’s lack of communication (relating to the aforementioned issue of networking). For many like Farhad, it is important that groups and experts investigating important issues share their findings as widely as possible. Identifying the skills and resources of groups, individuals and cooperating groups also avoids wasting time and resources on repeated or overlapping projects, increasing instead the breadth and quality of the work that is produced.

Interviewees pointed to the number of highly reputable HRDs who have left Iran including students, experts and some high-level activists, writers and political figures who have significant experience in research and analysis, and who could be instrumental for the Iranian human rights community. Without any skill-identification or skill-sharing, many of these HRDs have become depressed and disillusioned, leading to a drain of expertise and important knowledge.

Solutions

Hessam Misaghi, a Bahá'í human rights activist, felt media outlets should give a platform to the work of smaller NGOs and individual HRDs, and that it would be a simple and low-cost means of providing a space for unknown HRDs. Most Iranian HRDs do not have the resources to access certain organisations and media outlets that have a large international following. By bringing attention to the work of smaller groups, the human rights community could avoid marginalising smaller groups and enrich dialogues and networks. Shahin Najafi saw this as one of the main points of assistance that international NGOs and institutions could provide to artists and activists alike.

It is essential to identify the capabilities of Iranian HRDs, and pinpoint what opportunities are available for these highly skilled individuals who have appropriate knowledge but perhaps lack the necessary language skills or are unfamiliar with the systems of their new country of residence. Ensuring that a knowledge of English (or the native tongue of the country in question) does not become the main criterion in selecting spokespeople on Iranian issues could help ensure that the highest quality information is being distributed by providing a voice to those who do not speak those languages. In this context, creating a pool of experts where their skills are identified and presented alongside contact information would be invaluable.

Cooperation between well-established and well-resourced organisations and HRDs who leave Iran with vital expertise and insider knowledge would address those critics who claim that many international NGOs and human rights organisations are out of touch. As journalist Solmaz Sharif explained, organisations should facilitate these collaborations and the creation of databases that can support the process of skill identification. Interviews with some larger NGOs and prominent HRDs showed that many would be willing to facilitate such cooperation. This call for further alliances is realistic and could be reached through collaborative efforts to bring together those involved in Iranian human rights dialogue.

5.3. Maintaining safe contact

“There is a clear correlation between how established and well-funded an individual or NGO is and the level of security they use when contacting their networks in Iran.”

According to the interviewees, the election of President Rouhani in 2013 revitalised communications between HRDs in the diaspora and activist networks in Iran. A large majority of the HRDs interviewed agreed that their work as HRDs will only continue if they can maintain some level of contact with Iran.

Assessing the security of these communications is thus vital. This report explored whether HRDs in the diaspora have the tools and knowledge to maintain their vital in-country networks and continue supporting activists in Iran securely. It became clear that security knowledge is low for some HRDs who are tired of the increasing focus on digital security and the numerous training events and workshops dedicated to it. Further questions were asked to see what has led to this disillusionment and why previous security advice has been ignored or forgotten.

NB: In each interview the interviewees were asked whether their communications with activists in Iran had led to their (the activists in Iran) arrest or intimidation. From 37 interviews, only two answered in the affirmative. Yet further investigation revealed that the problems were not due to insecure communication from the HRDs outside but to simple security protocols being broken by their contact(s) within Iran (i.e. not deleting their written conversations, making contact via social media using an insecure and open profile). After being arrested, many activists in Iran are coerced into giving away their passwords, and revealing who their connections are inside and outside Iran. This has led to the arrest of others in the network and to vital information being leaked. This demonstrates that certain digital security measures were in place and being used by HRDs in the diaspora, but that this knowledge had not been passed successfully to their networks.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ More detailed information about the digital security issues in Iran in the first report of ARTICLE 19's Computer Crimes in Iran- Risky Online Behaviour2015 - <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38039/en/iran:-computer-crimes-in-iran-risky-online-behaviour>

The findings below indicate that there is a clear correlation between how established and well-funded an individual or NGO is and the level of security they use when contacting their networks in Iran. They also include a call to address the issues faced by those HRDs working with marginalised groups, which they feel are rarely addressed.

5.3.1 Making contact safely

About a third of the participants mentioned that contact with their networks in Iran had become less systematic since the 2009 election protests, but that it was slowly recovering. Eight participants maintained consistent and daily contact with sources and contacts in Iran, and twenty-five interviewees saw this contact – regular or sporadic – as vital for the continuation of their work, which must be fully in touch with up-to-date events in Iran.

Gaps

Reasons for insecure contact

- HRDs basing the method of contact on the preference of their person in Iran
- Security advice is usually given to HRDs informally via friends
- HRDs not using risk assessment procedures before making contact
- Unchanging online habit and a lack of advice and assistance

Some of the journalists who were interviewed reported that losing some of their networks in Iran (either due to arrest or because the activists had left Iran) post-2009 has affected their work. However, they have employed social media to keep up-to-date and ensure that they are reflecting, at least to some extent, the views of Iranians on the ground. The internet and online tools are the primary method used by these HRDs to make contact with networks in Iran. A variety of tools were mentioned in the interviews, ranging from those generally considered safe by Iranian HRDs (based on consensus established in interview) due to encryption⁴⁷ to more nuanced and advanced communication methods.⁴⁸ Mani Mostofi, from Impact Iran, commented that many use less secure means (such as social media) to make initial contact, before switching to a more secure platform to continue the conversation.

When asked how they chose a tool or certain method to contact their networks in Iran, the vast majority of interviewees reported that they based their knowledge about the safety of particular platforms on advice from friends. Others made contact using only the method suggested by their source in Iran.

Only 6 of our interviewees – 4 of whom have technical expertise in digital security issues – made these decisions based on security training or in-depth research on digital security matters. The HRDs understand that the security of communication tools is constantly changing, and that Iran's Cyber Army is quick to adapt, meaning that information quickly becomes outdated, which can lead to insecure contact. They therefore rely on the advice of trusted friends.

22 interviewees felt they have sufficient security knowledge to safely make contact with their networks in Iran. Many HRDs, including those from smaller NGOs, felt that the best method to ensure the safety of their contacts was by making contact only on a 'need-to-know' basis or talking indirectly about a sensitive issue, so that if their conversation were intercepted, limited information would be given away.

⁴⁷ These are tools and servers that always use an encrypted connection. For example the encryption technology used by Skype: <http://www.skype.com/en/security/#encryption>

⁴⁸ See e.g. Rise Up: <https://help.riseup.net/>

Only researcher Peyman Majidzadeh and one other unnamed activist interviewed, discussed the risk assessment procedure they use prior to making contact. “It’s not a difficult task, but it is a necessary one. I have been trying to convince my friends who are making contact with activists in Iran to change the way they make contact and conduct this risk assessment. But it’s a bit of a culture shock for them”, said an unnamed participant of these procedures.

A. The distinct needs of marginalised groups

In what ways do marginalised groups have distinct needs for communication?

- Many HRDs who work on ethnic minority issues work with individuals who do not have access to the internet.
- Basic security mistakes are made by in-country contacts, particularly those from marginalized groups who have only a very basic understanding of the internet.
- LGBT groups principally use online tools for communication, having to employ tactics such as avoiding keywords, and avoiding written communication entirely.

Digital security is a distant worry for some of Iran's ethnic rights activists. As a number of our HRDs who focus on ethnic minority issues (such as Azari, Balouchi and Arab issues) highlighted, there are bigger issues for minorities; many of their contact groups do not even have access to the internet.

Some, however, do not know how to use the internet, and thus have limited knowledge of making secure contacts. This can be detrimental to their safety, and HRDs generally do not want to risk the security of their contacts by contacting them by phone.⁴⁹ Human rights activist Kamil Alboshoka recalled the issues that arose when Reuters required interviews with Ahwazi activists in Iran for a report on the region. Unfortunately he was given just one week for the task. "As we avoid calling people on their personal lines, the usual route is to obtain a non-Iranian SIM card — usually Iraqi — and get this to them over the border."⁵⁰ On this occasion, it took Alboshoka one month to arrange.

Similar situations were mentioned by the Azari HRDs interviewed. In Alboshoka's case, the pressure to have accurate news on time was particularly challenging - ensuring the safety of the contact on the one hand, but not losing the interest of the news outlet due to prolonged delays on the other. "Sometimes it gets tiresome trying to explain how risky it can be if we don't take the right precautions, but I also worry that this will put them off and they will move on to the next topic," said one other Azari HRD.

Those who do have access to the internet generally have only basic digital knowledge. When making contact with HRDs, NGOs and other human rights organisations outside Iran, they make very basic security mistakes - including using keywords (sensitive words or phrases that can gain the attention of the authorities if the communication is under surveillance), making contact via insecure tools and even using their real names on public posts and private messages.

⁴⁹ All of the HRDs interviewed generally agreed that communication via mobile or landlines in Iran is highly insecure and susceptible to interference.

⁵⁰ This method of maintaining contact with ethnic minority groups is one of the main methods used by Iranian HRDs to make secure contact with their in-country networks. As Ahwaz is located by the border of Iraq, it is practical for the HRDs to arrange for SIM cards to be smuggled to activists inside the country over the border. However, due to the complexity of such operations and the dangers involved, the process can take weeks. 51 Iran Human Rights Documentati

The internet is the main method used to contact LGBTI groups in Iran. This is because, as Hossein Alizadeh from the International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission explained, “many HRDs are involved in online activism in Iran.” Alizadeh pointed out that when it comes to LGBTI groups and individuals, it is vital to pay attention to the language used and to avoid ‘keywords’. For example, using words like ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ can be very dangerous for those in Iran⁵¹ by bringing them to the attention of the authorities who may be intercepting the conversations where such words are used. Alizadeh also highlighted the increased difficulties for HRDs working on LGBTI issues when contacting their networks in Iran. By attempting to sidestep communication risks, basic processes take longer, especially if using a third party to make contact. Avoiding written text is also a security method used by LGBTI groups and other HRDs.

Solutions

Yousef Azizi, whose work focuses on the human rights of Arab citizens in Iran, asked ARTICLE 19 to help his organisation with security issues: “We need to know how to ensure the safety of our sources” he said. Hossein Alizadeh stressed that for HRDs working on these issues there is a “need for more work on basic security measures.” He and many other HRDs felt that the obvious difference between being a HRD and a security expert needed to be highlighted: “We’re not all tech-savvy. We need up-to-date information on what is safe to use and how to remain safe in our communications [...] most human rights activists or even smaller NGOs don’t have an IT section with expertise in counter-hacking and security circumvention tech,” he continued, “we need a clearing house with advice and warnings on what shifts Iran’s Cyber Army have made.”

This *clearing house* would constitute a group or organisation with up-to-date knowledge on security issues in Iran. For example, it would provide intelligence on which digital tools are safe, and give weekly updates where necessary to

⁵¹ Iran Human Rights Documentation Canter, *IHRDC Releases Report on Human Rights Violations against LGBT Persons in Iran* <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/news/press-statements/1000000400-ihrc-releases-report-on-human-rights-violations-against-lgbt-persons-in-iran.html>

support Iranian HRDs in making contact. Many HRDs feel that they need a trusted organisation or source to turn to for immediate and urgent advice to safeguard themselves and their networks. The 'digital security doctor' analogy appeared on a number of occasions in the interviews. HRDs saw this method of security assistance as vital and when they had received it in the past - mainly informally - it had been the best security assistance they had received.

Though such a clearing house could provide expert advice, it could also facilitate a culture change for HRDs in the diaspora or other interested partners, helping them to implement basic security protocols that could then be shared with their networks in Iran.

5.3.2 The dilemma of digital security training

Gaps

Why has digital security training proven ineffective?

- Information and tools are not *future-proof*
- Information is presented in a condensed and complicated way
- Use of inaccessible technical jargon
- Lack of communication skills in allocated training staff
- Lack of research and tailoring to the particular audience attending, and their level of knowledge and experience with digital technology.
- HRDs are deterred from engaging with digital security by the style of the sessions

Digital security training (DST) was a controversial topic in our interviews. Those who had never participated in a training session felt that such a session could be very helpful for the continuation of their work, and indicated interest in participating in future sessions. However, those who had previously participated in digital security workshops and training events were predominately unsatisfied with the results.

Human rights activist Kaveh Kermanshahi told ARTICLE 19, “If I were asked to participate in another training tomorrow I’d say no straight away.” Kaveh and other participants expressed dissatisfaction and were heavily resistant to the idea of future DSTs which they saw as having a limited effect and happening far too often.

Although all the interviewees agreed that digital security knowledge is vital and highly necessary for those working on Iranian human rights issues, they did not see the currently available training events as fruitful or long-lasting (due to the ever changing nature of digital security).

One of the main issues that arose was the condensed and complicated nature of the training events. Using technical jargon that most of the HRDs were unfamiliar with made the sessions inaccessible to them. Many felt that the trainers, though clearly knowledgeable, were not well-suited to explaining complex issues to those unfamiliar with the topic.

Shadi Sadr, from *Justice for Iran*, and security researcher Amir Rashidi felt that these training events lacked tailoring and the research necessary for deciding who should be involved. They should seek to categorise who they are looking to train, their level of knowledge and the actual security needs (i.e. what tools they use), and be conducted by the right trainer. HRDs who had been involved in DSTs felt that currently people from all different levels of knowledge are grouped together, making training futile for the majority of participants. “Everyone has their own style and their own needs,” Sadr explained, “They need to reflect the fact that not all HRDs have the same work pattern and digital security needs”. Amir Rashidi was also concerned about the lack of organisation and planning involved, which led to ineffective sessions.

Kaveh Kermanshahi agreed: “Nothing is added to our knowledge by them. There have been so many...it’s the same things being repeated. They are also so complicated and over-the-top that you just give up on digital security. If you have to do all of this then you can’t do any of your work.” This issue was particularly concerning in the interviews. Many of the HRDs felt that, far from being helpful, they were scared off by the DSTs, or made to feel like ‘spies’, as Solmaz Sharif described it. She felt that the training events need to be reduced and spread over longer periods, to avoid a barrage of information which overwhelms and frightens the participants.

Much of the disillusionment was caused by some feeling that once one starts using secure forms of communications, such as over-encryption, it becomes a red flag for Iran’s Cyber Army. Amir Rashidi heavily disagreed with this, however, and saw this as a big problem when attempting to tacking digital security needs. “People are not aware of the security issues involved. They need to take it seriously...thinking encryption makes people more suspicious is dangerous misinformation...The issue is that some people are just lazy. They need to keep up-to-date [...] what we need is an encryption revolution.”⁵²

Solutions

Many feel that there is a need for organisations and institutions that are looking to assist Iranian HRDs with digital security to understand that they are human rights experts, not digital security experts. From the HRDs’ perspective, the best means of assisting them is to focus funds, time and planning on providing them with tools that can be set up for them. “A tool like Tor⁵³ but predominately for secure contact,” one participant noted. 5 participants stated that the creation of a pre-encrypted database tailored to their needs or to the needs of those contacting networks in repressive regimes would be highly beneficial.

⁵² This can mean using devices with in-built encryption. For example the encryption technology used by Skype: <http://www.skype.com/en/security/#encryption>

⁵³ See Tor Project: <https://www.torproject.org/>

Mentoring was also seen as vital. Training events carry an expectation that HRDs will constantly use new methods and procedures to make contact, but interviewees felt that this does not work and that these security protocols would not be followed. For them, having a mentor sit down with them, giving one-to-one, tailored advice and installing the necessary tools on their device(s) would be the most helpful and effective way of aiding HRDs. Sadr said it would be most useful to have “someone we can turn to every two months or so and ask for a digital security ‘check-up’. That person can then ask questions and give me a plan based on my activities and tools I use.” It is clear that for HRDs, a personal approach is necessary for security matters.

Furthermore, if training events are to be conducted, there must be prior needs assessments to clarify who is teaching whom. Identifying the different levels of need and the right trainers to involve will ensure that training events become accessible and adaptable. This would require high levels of pre-planning, organisation and communication with participants and trainers prior to the training sessions.

6. Conclusion

It seems that the Iranian state has found a way to ensure that HRDs inside Iran can never cause serious concern to the regime: that solution is extremely cost-effective. By fostering an environment where many HRDs fear for their safety, but one which is open enough for them to leave Iran for the foreseeable future, the Iranian regime has managed to partially disintegrate Iranian civic space by forcing a large number of HRDs into exile. This has left the remaining HRDs feeling insecure and isolated, and those who have left the country feeling disconnected for a significant amount of time. Therefore, Iranian human rights networks are weakened from within, and those thrown into exile in the unknown need patience and resources to find their feet, if they can.

More often than not, international civil society and the UN bodies interested in Iran have misconceptions about this exiled community, simply because they tend to form their opinions based on assumptions rather than evidence-based facts. This is true of states, donors and funders: their assumptions seldom reflect truth, and in many cases simply oblige the interests of their respective countries and policies.

Faced with the Iranian state's strategy, ARTICLE 19 has conducted this research with the aim of minimising the gap between Iranian HRDs in Iran and those in exile, clarifying the misconceptions about the needs of HRDs in exile, as well as bridging the gap between these groups and potential funders. ARTICLE 19 believes the findings of this study will also help civil society make better plans for future human rights work in Iran.

7. Recommendations

Recommendations to HRDs (including larger and smaller NGOs, groups and individuals)

Support and capacity building

- Provide psychosocial support for Iranian human rights defenders, based on research identifying essential support programmes which would address the nexus between Iranian human rights work and the need for psychosocial support.
- Increase mentorship opportunities for HRDs who have recently left Iran in order to assist them in assimilating to their new environments. These opportunities could include voluntary or internship positions at high well-established human rights NGOs, fellowships and scholarships.
- Organise capacity-building workshops that work to empower HRDs partaking in sustainable human rights work in the diaspora, including (but not limited to) training events for:
 - Proposal and grant writing;
 - Project management and implementation; and
 - Campaign building.

These efforts should also include opportunities for one-on-one mentoring that explore the specific needs of each HRD.

- Place special focus on marginalised groups and HRDs representing marginalised groups. The training events must ensure the inclusion of these groups with a special and tailored focus on their unique needs and wants.

Community-building and Skill-sharing

- Increase the number of community building events that encourage networking opportunities, de-monopolising existing networks, and promoting dialogue between interdisciplinary actors and diverse groups involved in Iranian human rights issues.
- Increase support from larger institutions and organisations to enable dialogue between HRDs and donors. This dialogue could take place via online networks, allowing for skill sharing, workshops, or individual conversations. Focus needs to be placed on the inclusion of marginalised groups such as women, LGBTI groups and ethnic minorities.
- Promote the work of smaller groups and individual HRDs (including artists), and avoid the marginalisation of smaller groups by providing them with a platform to voice their ideas and concerns, and giving them access to larger and international audiences.
- Create a pool of experts in which skills are identified and presented alongside contact information. This should identify the capabilities of Iranian HRDs, and pinpoint what opportunities are available for individuals who have the necessary knowledge, yet perhaps lack the language skills, or are unfamiliar with the systems of their new country of residence.

Funding

- Develop and share a donor database outlining up-to-date Iranian human rights related funding opportunities, with the aim of equality of access and increased transparency for funds relating to Iran.

Safety and security

- Undertake research to assess the possibility of creating a clearing house, which could provide intelligence on which digital tools are safe, and be the trusted organisation or source for HRDs to turn to for immediate and urgent advice to safeguard themselves and their networks.
- Commission ‘digital security doctors’ who could be referred to once monthly, to provide one-to-one tailored advice. These sessions could be treated as digital security ‘check-ups’ where tailored advice is given, and an examination of the digital security health of the HRDs conducted.
- Analyse the exact methods that could be used to assist HRDs working with marginalised groups in Iran. Each group has different security needs and will need appropriate protocols and templates that they could adopt.
- Identify different levels of need, and the appropriate trainers to partake in and lead digital security sessions, and ensure that training events become accessible and adaptable. This would require high levels of planning, organisation and communication with participants and trainers prior to the sessions.

Recommendations to Donors and Funders

- Provide constructive feedback to unsuccessful project proposals.
- Organise/participate in roundtable sessions with large and small NGOs and with prominent HRDs to ensure that vital human rights issues which fall outside common trends are not overlooked. These events could bring together funders, activists and experts from interdisciplinary fields, granting opportunities for HRDs to voice their opinions in a way which would be impossible to them otherwise.
- Organise/participate in networking events allowing for an exchange of ideas from HRDs and preliminary constructive feedback from donors.
- Place emphasis on consultations with experts, to monitor the projects and groups being granted funding and evaluate the impact of these projects. This would curb overlapping efforts and funds being granted to ineffective ventures.
- Reconsider vetting procedures for Iran human rights projects. Certain exceptions should be put in place when considering the security risks of those involved in projects in high risk countries.

Annex

Questions:

1. Are you happy with the current interview arrangements?

Part I

2. If you are comfortable stating, when and why did you leave Iran?
3. How long have you been active, pre and post leaving Iran?
4. What kind of work do you/your organisation undertake?
5. What resources do you have access to in your current country of residence for this work (e.g. institutions, programs, people, outreach channels)?
6. In your opinion, in order to continue with this activism, what are the needs that you have/your organisation has difficulty fulfilling? For example, if you have three projects you would like to launch right now, what would hold you/your organisation back?
7. In your opinion, what kind of external support would assist you/your organisation in filling these needs (i.e. from NGOs or other institutions)?

Part II

8. Are you/your organisation in regular contact with activist networks in Iran?
How often?
9. How vital would you say this regular contact is for the continuation or your/your organisations work from outside Iran?
10. What methods do you/your organisation use to make contact with these activists in Iran (e.g phone, social media, email)?

-
11. Are you aware of the security risks involved in making such contact from outside Iran to inside Iran?
 12. What methods do you use to ensure you make secure contact with activists inside Iran (e.g. encryption)?
 13. Have you had digital security training in the past? If yes, under what capacity? If no, why do you think this is (e.g. money, connections)?
 14. To the best of your knowledge, has the contact and work you have/your organisation has undertaken, directly or indirectly, led to the arrest of an activist from your networks in Iran? Has this contact ever been cited in their conviction?

Part III

15. In your opinion, how helpful do you think external pressure, activism and campaigning has been for Iranian activists in Iran after their arrests?
16. Briefly, what do you feel are the gaps in Western perception (i.e of NGOs, donors, governments, UN) of the needs of activists in Iran, if any?
17. If you had the time, money and resources to do one project in regards to your work as an activist, what would it be? Can you describe it?
18. If you had the opportunity to participate in ONE workshop, organised by ARTICLE 19, what would it be?

Part IV

19. Any other comments?



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