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Dying to do Research in Iran?

Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal two researchers at Sciences Po University in Paris were arrested together at the beginning of June in Tehran. The pretexts used to justify their arbitrary arrest – espionage, jeopardizing state security and other nonsensical accusations – seem to be as credible in the Middle East today as were the indictments during the Stalinist era of the Soviet Union. Since their arbitrary arrest in June Fariba Adelkhah and Roland Marchal have been languishing in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran, cut off from world except for a monthly visit from the French Consul for Ronald Marchal - but not for Fariba Adelkhah because of her double French-Iranian nationality - and the rare and limited telephone calls with their family, occasional conversations with their lawyers and, perhaps, for Faiba Adelhah some fleeting contact with her sister.

Diplomatic efforts by the French authorities to obtain their release have, so far, been fruitless. An Iranian lower court requested their release with bail in December, but the Iranian public prosecutor overturned this decision and transferred the case to a Revolutionary Tribunal. In other words, the two French researchers seem destined for long term imprisonment, like the fifteen or so other Western academics held in Iran for years, to be released according to the whims of the Iranian authorities when it seems to meet some less than transparent political agenda.

Given this sombre perspective, Fariba Adelkhah decided on the 23th December alongside an Australian colleague, Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who herself has been arbitrarily imprisoned for some fifteen months, to undertake a limitless hunger strike to obtain their freedom. This drastic action was also undertaken to protest against the elementary rights to academic freedom of all researchers in the Middle East. The two academics condemn themselves to an atrocious death. Nothing would seem to call into question their determination. Several years ago Fariba Adelkhah created an internet women discussion group on social issues on Telegram with the emblematic title, “The Lionesses”. As friends and colleagues for many years we are absolutely convinced that Fariba is quite prepared to die as a lioness to defend her freedom, that of her vocation as a researcher and her human dignity, after having experienced the psychological torture she mentions in the letter she cosigned with Kylie Moore-Gilbert and that have been confirmed by several testimonies coming from the prison since November. It is to be feared that once Roland Marchal becomes aware of their joint terrifying decision, he will join them in solidarity.

Our Turkish colleagues, confronted under similar circumstance against an authoritarian regime consider a hunger strike can be characterized as the battle of David against Goliath. Alas, even a democratic nation such as Britain could allow a hunger striker to die. Nevertheless, how could we not accept the decision of our colleagues, however painful it may be? How can we be deaf to their plea, for it is indeed a plea? A plea not only for their

individual liberty, but a plea for the unhindered pursuit of knowledge, of academic freedom, of the freedom to think. In short, a plea for our own freedom.

We are very conscious and appreciative of the untiring efforts of the French government to obtain the release of Fariba and Roland. But the time has come for results. It is time also for the Iranian government to stop avoiding its responsibilities by proffering as an excuse for their pernicious inaction the factional cleavages within their hybrid political system which justifies the inability of the so-called “moderates” from being kind and reasonable. As much as we know, Iran has only one seat at the United Nations. Iran’s Revolutionary Guards are an institutional component of the Iranian State, under the authority of the Supreme Leader. Under his authority—or more accurately that of his delegate—the Expediency Discernment Council and the Supreme National Security Council are the two competent institutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran in this situation. The freedom of our colleagues is in their hands, the responsibility for their deaths also.