

BOOK REVIEW

## Axis of Hope: Iranian Women's Activism across Borders

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*Axis of Hope* places welcome focus on the One Million Signatures Campaign to End Discriminatory Laws (OMSC) in Iran and is novel in its turn to conversations with OMSC activists in the diaspora of the Iranian women's movement, specifically the California branch of the campaign. Indeed, the second chapter's focus on campaigners in southern California showcases Sameh's skill in highlighting the voices of women who negotiate the rights discourse between the two contexts of Iran and the US. This engagement of Iranian women's rights activists in the diaspora is an excellent addition to the literature on the Iranian women's movement. More generally, Sameh's study of transnational activist communities is also notable for its detailed attention to the central work of figures such as Shirin Ebadi and Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, both of whom have certainly come to embody and represent exilic and diasporic notions of connection to Iran. And the book poses important questions in relation to women's rights activism in the Iranian diaspora. In asking what happens when "contours of home and community shift dramatically and not by choice" (4), Sameh highlights plainly the way in which agency and geography are inextricably linked and opens another productive dimension for engagement alongside the more regularly interrogated private/public spatial inquiries that often characterize investigation of the women's movement in Iran. However, notably absent from the *Axis of Hope* are other central figures in the Iranian Women's movement who live in exile. Ebadi's close colleague, Mehrangiz Kar, is one prominent example. This may be a function of the concentration on California and an engagement with an audience of activists for whom the works and profiles of Ebadi and Abbasgholizadeh are more easily accessible or more regularly referenced. Sameh notes that of the eight activists she spent time with in research for the book, seven were part of a small cluster of fourteen activists in southern California, of whom half were first-generation Iranians and half Iranians who had been in the United States for fewer than ten years at the time of the interviews. Sameh also notes, "[u]nlike many Iranians in the Southern California diaspora, the campaign activists were not those who fled Iran after the 1979 revolution, but they were deeply connected to activist networks inside Iran and strongly committed to the possibilities for change from within" (58). Although the choice of critical focus does not impinge in the least upon Sameh's detailed scholarship, it does demonstrate how the diasporic activism

Sameh seeks to engage and understand may in instances have underdeveloped paths of engagement with otherwise central voices within the Iranian women's movement. This is not to gainsay the chapter on Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, which would make a wonderful case study as a teaching text for a module on Islam and gender. However, while Abbasgholizadeh is fully deserving of this space and attention, the frequency with which she occupies a central space in such studies cannot escape notice—my own book on Islamic feminisms (Fazaeli 2017) is subject to the same criticism. However, given the amount of attention that has already been afforded Abbasgholizadeh, the question remains as to why Sameh chose not to include other OMSC activists, some of whom, such as Sussan Tahmasebi, were also exiled around the same time as Abbasgholizadeh, and who could have provided additional firsthand insights into the campaign.

A related disjuncture may be noted in the way that Sameh engages questions of colonialism throughout the book. From early on in the work, Sameh seeks to trace “a partial and modest history of decolonial feminist world-making” (5) through the stories and discourses she analyzes. In her own words, “[w]ithin the online, print, and oral narratives gathered throughout this book, an overwhelming life force and politics—a collective voice—emerges that I distill as decolonial feminism” (5). This interpretive framework of decolonial feminism is both obviously relevant to her diasporic field of inquiry, but at the same time fairly novel in an Iranian context. Although potentially productive, it is largely out of place in relation to both the literature of the women's movement in Iran and the Iranian women's rights activists who were central to the OMSC. Whether such a decolonial turn in effect boxes in the OMSC and its founding activists within a feminist framework that they themselves did not identify with, I must leave to the activists themselves to weigh in on; future critical discussion of the approach with activists within Iran may prove fruitful. However, academically I find Sameh's use of decolonial feminism—though intriguing—at points also forced, and occasionally on the edge of being dangerously romantic where it seems to overlook the repression of the Islamic Republic. Particularly for those who lived in Iran during the postrevolutionary period, arguments about “improvements in women's health, education, and life chances” (23) will ring hollow against the backdrop of state repression of activists and the executions of 1988. I will reserve more substantial comments on some of the feminist aspects of this approach for concluding thoughts. An example of the decolonial cast of the argument, however, proceeds as follows: “Since the revolution, the demonization of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), regular cycles of war talk, and decades of crippling sanctions by the United States and other Western powers have produced Iranians as de facto colonial subjects” (14–15). There is certainly much scope for new interrogations of Iranian history in relation to the forms, influences, and mechanisms of colonial powers. And specific to the Iranian women's movement, early periods in relation to the concessions of Qajar times and Pahlavi modernization suggest themselves as ripe in this regard. However, I must admit that I find myself in significant disagreement with the way in which Iranians are understood as colonial subjects in the context of *Axis of Hope*. This may simply be owing to differing structural and definitional understandings of how the politics and ontologies of colonialism might be best understood in the context of Iran. If so, however, then surely another contribution of this book is in encouraging many in the field of Iranian studies to reckon with how theories and histories of colonialism might be deployed in ways that are culturally consonant with the specific histories of Iran.

The reliance on decolonial theory is much less jarring where Sameh situates her line of inquiry in the Iranian women's movement along the transversal of US politics. Indeed, perhaps as one result of focusing on the diaspora in California, Sameh "locates Iranian women's rights activism within the long-standing tension between Iran and the United States, intensified in the post- 9/11 period by the Global War on Terror (GWOT), and the ongoing demonization, isolation, and economic strangling of Iran through decades of sanctions" (5). This position brings some benefits in understanding one lens through which portions of a diasporic community interpret the struggle for women's rights in Iran. However, at the same time, the work magnifies this position to such an extent that it might be feared readers unfamiliar with the Iranian women's movement will fail to recognize that Iranian women's activism is located foremost in opposition to the state-mandated discriminatory laws against women in Iran.

Questions of reform also preoccupy Sameh in *Axis of Hope*. Some of these reflections offer a helpful space in which to consider how the language of reform is used and understood in relation to the Iranian women's movement, especially by a diasporic audience. Throughout the book, Sameh refers often to reform and reform-minded people and activists. However, the breadth that reform occupies as a category in Sameh's work invites some contestation. Rouhani's election to the presidency in 2017, for instance, is discussed as "a victory for reformers in the state and a reflection of the democratic participation and majoritarian desires among the populace for a softer, more reform-minded government" (9). Surely it is in part because of something more akin to a centrist, rather than a reformist stance, that Iranian civil activists, including women's rights activists, have found their activities curtailed during Rouhani's presidency, with many having faced harsh and disproportionate prison sentences. In ways similar to the dissonance of decolonial feminism, such political assertions around reform in the book do not always chime with the dissatisfaction that significant portions of the Iranian populace experience with regard to the Islamic regime. Although it is true that some legal reforms were instituted during the reform era (1997–2005), nevertheless, even during this period, women's rights activists, along with others, still faced significant repression. As just one example, Abbasgholizadeh herself was arrested in 2004. An assumption underpinning Sameh's understanding of reform, and shared by the book's subjects, seems to be "that women's legal equality under the Islamic Republic is achievable, desirable, and the highly anticipated outcome of a society that has democratized everyday life and relationships" (11–12). Such an assumption reads as being unnecessarily distant from the everyday life and reality faced by many women's rights activists in Iran. Although Sameh does in some places distinguish between an authoritarian, state-mandated anti-imperialism and the method of reform used by Iranian women's rights activists, including Ebadi (for example, 106), throughout the book there is more often an unnecessary conflation of reformist thought with the increasingly secular sociolegal methodology of the Iranian women's movement. *Axis of Hope* does not always contextualize the criticism offered by Ebadi and human rights activists, who at the time of their criticism lived in Iran. As a result, there are some misreadings of conversations around reform that would be better understood as method. This might have been easily corrected by establishing clearly that within the context of Iran, one cannot openly criticize Islam and that any criticism of religion is seen as criticism of the state itself.

In the case of OMSC, it is important to be clear about the ways that the campaign was seeking to end legal discrimination instituted in the name of Islam within an Islamic state. *Axis of Hope* unfortunately neglects full treatment of this dimension,

including the ways that the women's movement after the revolution became embedded within religious and state rhetoric. As a result, an opportunity was missed to update some of the early work that has been done on how women who had the power to reform discriminatory laws were those within the state apparatus—for example, women members of parliament or women presidential advisors. Also missed in Sameh's approach to the language of reform is engagement with precisely how gender talk became intertwined with the politics of the reform movement, especially during the reform era. Women reformist parliamentarians, in particular in the sixth parliament (*majlis-e sheshom*), did fight for women's equal rights; however, these women were not part of a separate women's party, but rather of the reformist camp. Since 2004, when the conservatives took a majority of seats at the seventh parliament (*majlis-e haftom*), there has been a shift in the movement away from political power and the conservative Islamic framework, and toward autonomy and secularity. Women who are active in the movement, unlike the reformist political groups in the past who used women's issues as political tools, are not seeking political power; they are seeking tangible solutions to women's problems (Fazaeli 2017, 42).

Even though the force and rationale of OMSC's solution-oriented approach does not always reverberate throughout *Axis of Hope*, the parts of Sameh's argument that attend to OMSC's unique mobilization efforts, and the supports they have enjoyed nationally and internationally, are still strong and convincing. However, what remains missing in Sameh's analysis is how the OMSC also used human rights norms as measuring sticks for its objective of attaining nondiscrimination and equality of genders. On this point the book may leave the reader in some confusion as to the general tendencies of the OMSC and the Iranian women's movement toward positions of secularity; these are not always spelled out explicitly. Relatedly, more attention to the ways in which the campaign employed religious rhetoric methodologically, rather than ideologically, would have helped clarify some of the fuzzy logic that occasionally appears to link Islamic justification in socioreligious terms with justification of Islamic politics.

I wish to conclude by giving proper attention to Sameh's use of "gender as a frame of analysis" in the context of a decolonial approach, which is certainly worthy of a great deal more attention than this review can afford. Sameh makes a significant contribution in her observation and accounting for the ways "in which anticolonial resistance becomes equated with male revolutionaries, whose politics often sideline feminism or understand women's political investments in gender-differentiated terms" (115). I agree fully with Sameh on the importance of bringing feminist and women's voices to the fore of decolonial studies, and *Axis of Hope* helpfully maps out some ways in which this might be accomplished. However, I must disagree with the way that Sameh characterizes the Shari'ati and Khomeini discourse on women with regard to gender equality. Try as I might, I simply cannot see how the use of equality as a normative framework fits with the views that Shariati and Khomeini express with regard to women across the full breadth of their writings and actions. What these ideologues pushed for was not gender equality but complementarity of genders. Sameh herself alludes to this descriptively early on in the book in recognizing how the postrevolutionary confines of women's roles "as central family figures—that is, wives, mothers, sister and daughters" abnegated previous promises of equal rights (17). By locating and articulating more explicitly the ways in which complementarity discourse functions within the relevant Islamic frameworks, Sameh might have avoided even the perception of a tendentious argument in which Khomeini is taken as a proponent of women's equality. I do not think, although I may be corrected, this is what Sameh intends when she

introduces the term “Islamicate feminisms” in order to “encompass various religious and political identities, some of which might seem to be at odds with one another” (24). In general, though the appeal to this new term may indeed be helpful as a placeholder within the internal logic of *Axis of Hope*, I would still wish to read more substantial theoretical and empirical work in support of its use in order to be convinced that it represents a substantial and deployable contribution to the existing literature around Islamic feminism.

## Reference

Fazaeli, Roja. 2017. *Islamic feminisms: Rights and interpretations across generations in Iran*. London and New York: Routledge.

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