Struggling for family acceptance in Iran: the story of two gay men
Struggling for family acceptance in Iran:
the story of two gay men
In order to achieve a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence, respecting people who seem to be different from us should be taught to all kids from a young age. Unfortunately co-existence and mutual respect is mostly absent from many aspects of Iranian culture. LGBT people are not recognized or respected; they are humiliated and discriminated against. This degrading attitude toward LGBT individuals is most prominent in legal and official settings but can also be visibly seen in social interactions. Such behavior toward LGBT people is all too common in Iranian society, despite what Yousef says in the graphic novel: “I was raised to seek and speak the truth. I was raised to avoid lies and stay away from hypocrisy.”

Honesty and embracing the truth are a top educational priority for Iranian society and families, but still too many people prefer to turn a blind eye to the reality of LGBT lives. Even under the best circumstances, LGBT individuals are advised to conceal their emotions and live a hypocritical life by marrying someone of the opposite sex to deceive society. What people don’t realize are the horrible consequences that result when LGBT people are forced to live such a double-life.

... In order to take the first step towards positive change, Iran should raise awareness and build a culture of diversity. We must teach ourselves that others are and can be different and they have the right to be who they are.

This graphic novel is an effort to portray the [prejudice and] pain of those among us whose fellow country men and women refuse to accept their existence.

I long for the day when we all accept that all human beings have the right to be diverse and live their lives differently from others.

-Shirin Ebadi
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate,
Founder of Defenders of Human Rights Center in Iran
Introduction

The story of Yousef and Farhad, a young couple in Iran, is in many ways a classic love story, with all of its poetry, challenges and triumphs.

But a relationship between two men in Iran is rarely a simple romance. As is true in countries across the world, LGBTIQ Iranians are denied basic protection from their government. In fact, Iran is one of more than 75 countries globally that criminalizes homosexuality and is one of a few to go so far as to stipulate punishment by death.

Yet, daily life is infinitely more complicated than laws on the books. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex Iranians know how to navigate these complexities. Away from the prying eyes of the law, they manage family and community expectations of marriage, career, and children within the assumptions of a heterosexual marriage. In spite of it all, LGBTI Iranians find boyfriends and girlfriends, support from members of their families, and even the most unlikely of protectors. But their journey is not easy, and not everyone enjoys a happy ending. There is much work to be done.

Since 2012, we at OutRight Action International have been working in community with LGBTIQ Iranians and their allies. We run the world’s most popular Persian website dedicated to LGBTI rights. We have created criminal defense guides for lawyers representing LGBTIQ Iranians charged with homosexuality. We have trained more than 110 Persian language journalists on sensitivity in reporting. This graphic novel is our latest project – our idea to reach people’s hearts rather than just their heads. We partnered with two artists and gave them considerable license to imagine possibilities. As in projects like this, we seek to bring attention to the denial of human rights while helping to change the narrative around the LGBTIQ community in Iran.

There is no doubt that Iranian society is changing, including for LGBTIQ Iranians. With this extraordinary novel, we at OutRight hope to reach Iranian families struggling with the sexual orientation of their loved ones with an appeal for acceptance and dignity. The story has aspects that may seem like a fairy tale, but after all, dreaming is how we change the status quo. And reaching people through a story like Yousef and Farhad means reaching people where they live.

- Jessica Stern
Executive Director
OutRight Action International
Yousef et Farhad
COME IN, PLEASE. MIRIAM WILL BE WITH YOU IN A MINUTE.

ZAHRA KHANOUN, YOUR CAB IS HERE.

WATERMELON JUICE?

WHAT'S WRONG?

SIGH

NOTHING!....

WHY, IS TRAFFIC THAT BAD?

SOB

GOD FORBID, WHAT'S HAPPENED? HAS SOMEBODY DIED?

I WISH!....

OK, MISS MIRIAM, ARE YOU READY?

I'M IN NO RUSH, AND YOU'RE IN NO SHAPE TO DRIVE!

THANKS

MR. JAFARI, WHAT'S TROUBLING YOU SO?

I, I CAN'T. THERE ARE NO WORDS FOR IT...
What is worse than death... and there are no words for it?

Ready, Ma’am.

Mr. Jafari, please...

Hop!

My world, my life... all gone.

Who is this?

What is that?

He has no name.

He was... my son.

Toss.

Fumble.

Please, Miss Miriam, don’t open my wound. Throw it in the trash.

Was?

What has he done? That is so terrible?

I will do no such thing.

Miss Miriam, please...

Miss Miriam, please...
WHAT HASN'T HE DONE? HE'S DESTROYED HIS FAMILY, RUINED HIS FUTURE.

DRUGS?

HE'S FLUNKED?

NO

WORSE

THEFT?

WHAT A RIDDLE! I GOT IT, I GOT IT. HE'S A JUDGE!

ISTAGHEF- RALLAH!*

... MURDER?

GOD FORBID!

MY SON? NEVER!

SO HE'S NOT AN ADDICT, NOT A THIEF AND NOT A MURDERER...

... BUT WORSE THAN ALL OF THEM COMBINED?

ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE MY MURDERED SON, MEHDI...

YOUR MEHDI MAY BE DEAD, BUT HE LIVES INSIDE YOU.

OOH, THAT'S NO PLACE TO DIE! HERE HE IS, BACK FROM THE DEAD - ELVIS PRESLEY HIMSELF! DAD MINUS THE MUSTACHE.

MINE IS ALIVE, BUT HE'S DEAD INSIDE ME.

OHHH, WILL EAT HIM UP!

GIRLS? HA! IF ONLY! PLEASE, I CAN'T BEAR TO SEE HIM

BUT WHY?

ALAS, ZAHRA KHANOOM, MY SON IS SICK!
HE HAS A DISEASE? CANCER?

A SICKNESS WITHOUT A CURE...

THE PLAGUE?

DISHONOR....

OH GOODIE! YOU MEAN SEX? I LOVE DISHONOR!

THERE IS NOTHING LOWER, NOTHING FILThER, AN ABOMINATION, A CRIME AGAINST NATURE

AGAINST NATURE? IN TEHRAN? YOU MEAN HE DRIVES A CAB TOO?

NO, MY SON, MY SON IS A...

YOUR SON, LIKE MY LATE SON MEHDI,* IS 1001 ADJECTIVES

ONCE PEOPLE FIND OUT, THERE WILL BE NOTHING LEFT OF US. WE WON'T BE ABLE TO STEP OUT OF THE HOUSE. YOU KNOW HOW THEY WAG THEIR TONGUES....

THE MORALITY POLICE?

HOW COULD YOU BE SO SELFISH, MY SON? I SPEND A LIFETIME CONFINED IN THE COFFIN OF A CAB, ENDURE EVERY INSULT TO PAY FOR YOUR GIGOLo EDUCATION, AND YOU SPIT IN MY FACE?

THIS IS HOW YOU REPAY YOUR FATHER? TURNING OUR FAMILY NAME INTO A LIRINAL?
I had no idea...

This is my Iran, as boundless as the horizon...

God is so much greater up here than down there.

Ah, my beauty...

I'm going to hold on to this moment forever...

How? I will arrest the moon and prolong our night.

And the sun?...
YOU ARE MY SUN...

MY SHAMS*

YOUR FACE IS MY KAABA**

YOUR SMILE IS THE ANSWER TO ALL MY PRAYERS. THE END OF ALL MY PILGRIMAGES.

JUST LIKE HIM, MY LOVE, THE ARC OF MY BEING BENDS IN YOUR DIRECTION...

YOU MEAN RUMI'S LOVER?
How long has this been going on?

What?

* * *

SLAP!

Don’t lie to me!

These letters are from a... Farhad?!

So what if they are?

“Yousef, my beloved, a glimpse of your face, and I lie gored, your beauty a javelin thrust in my heart...”

A javelin? Thrust where?

You call this filth poetry?

And these?

I love him!

Pardon? You love who?

Farhad

What about marriage? And family? Who will take care of you in your old age?
MOTHER, I'VE HAD IT WITH LIES! I WANT TO LIVE MY LIFE ON MY TERMS!

ON YOUR TERMS? IN MY HOUSE?!

RRRIP!

GET THE HELL OUT OF MY HOUSE!

HERE!

CRUMPLE CRUMPLE

YOUR GODDAM POEMS!

TSK- TSK

EVA KHANAR*

FAGGOT

SHAME! AND FROM SUCH A RESPECTABLE FAMILY!

AASHEGHAM BAR HAMEH AALAAM KE HAMEH AALAM AS COST **

* COOK, SISTER!

** I AM IN LOVE WITH ALL OF CREATION FOR ALL OF CREATION EMANATES FROM THE CREATOR
FARHAD-KHAN HAD TO GO ON A TRIP, HE LEFT HIS MOBILE BEHIND.

RING!

RING!

HI, AUNTIE.

HOW COULD YOU DO TO MY SISTER? SHAME ON YOU!

HEY, GOOD-LOOKING, HOW MUCH?

YOU FILTHY HOMO! YOU'RE TOO GOOD FOR ME?!!

HI, AUNTIE.

HOW COULD YOU DO TO MY SISTER? SHAME ON YOU!

HEY, GOOD-LOOKING, HOW MUCH?

YOU FILTHY HOMO! YOU'RE TOO GOOD FOR ME?!!
LATER THAT NIGHT

SO, HOW ARE THE MOUNTAINS?

GRAND... FARHAD

NOTHING LIKE CLIMBING THOSE PEAKS, MOTHER NATURE'S MAGNIFICENT BREASTS, AND YOU AND YOUR FRIEND, WHAT'S HIS NAME...?

YOU TWO GET TO EMBRACE MOTHER EARTH!

NOTHING MORE VOLUPTUOUS THAN THE MEADOWS AND THE VALLEYS

AAH, NOTHING LIKE THE BREEZE TOUCHED BY THE SCENT OF A WOMAN'S LOCKS OF HAIR, FRAGRANCE, FLOWERS...

UNCLE, WE CLIMB ROCKS!

AKH, HOW YOU RENOUNCE GOD'S CREATION! THE EARTH, MY BOY, IS COMPOSED OF DIVINE MATTER, WINE AND WOMEN

I'LL BET YOU AND FARHAD KNOW HOW TO PITCH A TENT! DID YOU TAKE YOUR GIRLFRIEND WITH YOU?

UNCLE, YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW?

KNOW WHAT?
UNCLE, REMEMBER HOW WE USED TO PLAY HIDE AND SEEK?

HOW COULD I EVER FORGET? THE PLACES YOU USED TO HIDE!

UNCLE, WHAT IF ONE DAY YOU HIDE SO PERFECTLY THAT NOBODY EVER FINDS YOU?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

WHAT IF YOU HIDE FOR SO LONG THAT YOU STOP BEING YOURSELF? WHAT IF YOU DISAPPEAR... VANISH IN A MIRROR THAT CONCEALS YOU OUTSIDE SPACE AND TIME...

LIKE THE HIDDEN IMAM?...

WHAT'S HIS NAME?

FARHAD

AND YOUR FATHER?

HE KNOWS

AND YOUR MOTHER?

HEART-BROKEN

AND YOU?

HOMELESS...

YOU'VE HAD A LONG DAY. GET SOME REST

KEEP AN EYE ON HIM TOMORROW. THIS IS SERIOUS

I MUST TALK TO MY BROTHER BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE
To my beloved family and friends, my Iran,

The time has come for me to bid you farewell. In truth, I died many years ago. I have always known that such a day would come. I knew it when I was ten... I knew it when I was twelve. I knew it when I was sixteen. I have known it every time I felt love.

Time and time again, I have killed my love. I have killed it so many times, and in so many ways, that I have become death.

I was raised to seek and speak the truth. I was raised to reject and deny the lie. And yet, every day, I am asked to conceal the truth, to turn to the lie, to become the lie. All in the name of virtue.

I have become a veiled man.

Only I cannot cast off this veil. I have become my veil. The shadow of death is stitched into my skin, its threads run through my every nerve, its dyes course through my blood.

Today, I stop performing. For my last act, I will cast off this veil of virtue and exit a world that is nothing but a shroud of hypocrisy. Everything and everyone that I love has turned against me. Every day I die in your midst, I die in your hatreds, I die in your fear, I die in your silences.

Forgive me for the sorrow I have caused.

Yousef
FIRST DISHONOR, AND NOW THIS.....

MEY, HE'S NOT DEAD!

NOBODY NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT THE SUICIDE ATTEMPT. WE'LL SAY IT WAS FOOD POISONING

AHEM, EXCUSE ME, MR. JAFARI. HOW'S YOURSELF?

PLEASE FOLLOW ME

YOU HAVE CORRUPTED MY SON, YOU HAVE WRECKED MY FAMILY, AND NOW YOU SHOW YOUR FACE HERE, IN PUBLIC?

FRIEND? MY SON IS PAYING THE PRICE OF YOUR FRIENDSHIP, YOU BASTARD!

YOU SHOULD BE IN THAT ROOM, NOT HIM!

BUT HOW IS HE? AS FAR AS YOU'RE CONCERNED, DEAD!

I'M HIS FRIEND. I HAVE A RIGHT TO KNOW

YOU ARE A FAGGOT. YOU HAVE NO RIGHTS! YOU ARE NOT TO CALL OR CONTACT HIM, EVER AGAIN, UNDERSTOOD?

UNDERSTOOD?!

GOOD! HE WANTED YOU TO HAVE THIS. NOW GET LOST BEFORE I SLIT YOUR THROAT WITH IT. AND NEVER MENTION MY SON'S NAME AGAIN, EVER!

WHO WAS THAT?

NOBODY
AH, SLEEPING BEAUTY AWAKENS!

WHERE AM I?

YOU WERE ON THE ROAD TO LOVE... AND THEN YOU TOOK A SLIGHT DETOUR.

I CAN'T GET ANYTHING RIGHT, NOT LOVE, NOT DEATH.

WELL, I CAN ASSURE YOU YOU CAUSED QUITE A STIR!

YOUR LETTER WAS QUITE AN INDICTMENT. I LOVED IT!

WELL, ALMOST ALL OF IT. THE ENDING SUCKED.

IF THE HERO KILLS HIMSELF, WHAT DOES HE BECOME? WHAT HAPPENS TO HIS LOVER? WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO LOVE?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

IT'S WEAK -- AN EASY WAY OUT. AND IT'S CHEAP. HIS SUICIDE ATTEMPT IS NOT AN ACT OF LOVE. IT IS VENGEANCE.

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT. YOU CAN DO A LOT MORE WITH YOUR PRESENCE THAN WITH YOUR DEATH.

TELL THEM I'M DEAD!

COME, COME. WE HAVE ENOUGH MARTYRS AS IT IS. PRACTICE RESURRECTION.

WHAT DO YOU PROPOSE?

YOU MUST RETURN HOME.
WEEK LATER:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS, ZAHRA KHANOOM. IS HE OKAY?

WOULD YOU BE IF YOUR FATHER HAD THROWN YOU OUT OF THE HOUSE?

BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR REPUTATION? WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?

WHAT’S HAPPENED TO YOU? OUR DON JUAN HAS BECOME THE LOCAL MULLAH?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

TELL ME, YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU TWO FELL IN LOVE?

YES, BUT NOT EVEN A SLEDGEHAMMER COULD SEPARATE THE TWO OF YOU!

IT WAS SUCH A LONG TIME AGO

IT WAS DIFFERENT THEN. IT WAS THE TIME OF THE SHAH

SO IT WAS OKAY FOR YOU TO HOLD HANDS, OKAY FOR YOU TO KISS, OKAY TO MAKE LOVE - IN MY ROOM MAY I REMIND YOU!

SHHHHHH, THEY WILL HEAR YOU!

LET THEM HEAR, PARI!

DO YOU REMEMBER WHO KEPT YOUR SECRET FROM OUR PARENTS?....

WELL LET ME REMIND YOU: ME!

DO YOU REMEMBER WHERE? LET ME COUNT THE WAYS: IN THE CLOSET; UNDER MY BED; IN MY CAR...

BUT THAT WAS DIFFERENT

WHAT MAKES YOUR LOVE HOLIER THAN HIS? YOU WEREN’T MARRIED, WERE YOU?

WERE YOU?

AND IF HER PARENTS HAD FOUND OUT...

THEY WOULD’VE KILLED HIM - AND THEN ME
THAT WAS THEN, TAYMOUR, THIS IS NOW. I DON’T WANT HIM HANGING FROM A CRANE. HE MUST MARRY!

AND IF I DON’T?

THERE ARE NO GAYS IN IRAN, AND MY SON WON’T BE THE FIRST ONE!

HERE, WE HAD SAVED THIS FOR YOUR WEDDING

GO FIND YOURSELF ANOTHER FAMILY, ANOTHER FATHER, ANOTHER MOTHER AND, WHILE YOU’RE AT IT, ANOTHER COUNTRY!

LET’S GO, WOMAN!

WE’LL FIND YOU A PLACE. I WOULD TAKE TO MY PLACE, BUT...

YOU’SEF CAN STAY HERE FOR AS LONG AS HE WISHES

NYC 18
A FEW DAYS LATER:

HOW'S THE PRISONER?

STILL IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

POST HUSH HHH POST HUSH...

POST KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

CHEER UP! A FRIEND OF MINE, A FORMER REVOLUTIONARY GUARD, IS SMUGGLING YOU TO THE SHRINE OF LOVE, THE ULTIMATE GAY REFUGE. GUESS WHERE?

HOLLYWOOD?

NOPE! TOO DULL. CLOSER, MORE FUN...

AMSTERDAM, THE GAY GAMES?

NEVER! YOU THINK YOUR JEALOUS AUNTIE WOULD LET THOSE BLUE-EYED BLONDIES swoon over you?

SO WHERE'S MY REFUGE?

GUM. THE GUARD HAS OFFERED TO TAKE YOU TO HIS UNCLE, AYATOLLAH TABBIZI'S RESIDENCE

YOU MUST BE JOoking. WHO IS THIS GUARD?

HE MUST REMAIN NAMELESS

BUT IN ONE OF MY PALMS YOU'LL FIND A CLUE

GET IN, YOU SHAMELESS BEASTS! AT THIS PACE YOU'LL NEVER MAKE IT TO GUM!

GASP

FARHAD!
QUM, HOLY CITY, CENTER OF RELIGIOUS LEARNING

HIS EMINENCE IS IN THE GARDEN

NOT IN HIS STUDY?
YOU KNOW THE AYATOLLAH

MY UNCLE’S A FRIENDLY FANATIC

A TOLERANT AYATOLLAH? ISN’T THAT AN OXY-MORON?
NEVER SAY NEVER. LOOK AT POPE FRANCIS

AND HE KNOWS?
YES, HE’S MY UNCLE. I TELL HIM EVERYTHING

EVERYTHING? ... THEN I’M DEAD!
RELAX
AH, SMELL THIS! THE FIRST OF MY MOHAMMEDIS

HMMMM... SUBLIME!

NOTHING MORE BEAUTIFUL, WHICH IS WHY THEY ARE NAMED AFTER THE PROPHET, PEACE BE UPON HIM.

OF GOD'S EXISTENCE. WE ARE SURROUNDED BY HIS MIRACLES.
NOT JUST MY ROSES! CHECK OUT THIS OLD MULBERRY TREE! IT'S AS OLD AS TIME!

ALL LIFE IS A MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S LOVE

OF WHAT?

CAREFUL, YOU DON'T WANT TO SQUASH THAT LADYBUG!

ALL CREATURES WORKING IN THIS GARDEN, LADYBUGS, BEES, WORMS, HAVE RELIGIOUS IMMUNITY

ALLAHU AKBAR WA ALLAHU ASGHAR!

PRECISELY! DO YOU GARDEN?

YOUR FRIEND WILL BE SAFE HERE, FARMAD

THANK YOU, UNCLE
BACK IN TEHRAN

STOP DRIVING LIKE A GIRL OR I'LL STICK THIS UP YOUR ASS!

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

SO WHAT IF I'M A FAGGOT? YOU HAVE A PROBLEM WITH FAGGOTS?

NOOO! NOT AT ALL!

GOOD THEN WHY DON'T YOU APOLOGIZE TO ALL OF US FAGGOTS?

MY DEEPEST, MOST SINCERE APOLOGIES!

HEY, COME BACK! WHAT WILL YOU BE WITHOUT YOUR STICK?

Pesara Mooshan, Mesleh Khargooshan, Dokhtara Sheeran...

* (OLD SCHOOL CHANT) "BOYS ARE MICE, JUST LIKE RABBITS, GIRLS ARE LIONS..."
Afterword

Love Indivisible

Iranians are no strangers to love. Of all our empires, the one that has withstood the ravages of time, is the empire of love.

Our civilization is held together by the oldest and most precious of elements: love.

Love is abundant: present in every heart and home across the planet. It is no precious metal. No need to cheat and lie or dig and die for it.

Love is not a body of matter. It has no mass. It is not subject to the laws of gravity. Its properties cannot be bound by time, fixed in space, frozen in numbers, stored as light or saved in mirrors.

No religion holds a patent on love. No tribe owns its properties. No tycoon sets its price.

Love is just there in the fabric and foundation of the universe. It is present in everything, flows through everyone.

Love creates time and space. Out of its own essence. It is a field of pure energy. It transcends and transforms all other forces. It is the great general equation that can bind our hearts and hands in friendship and unite our faces and faiths as one.

To be Iranian is to love, and to love with utter abandon, to love with no conditions, to love with no distinctions.

Of course, Iranians are not strangers to death either.

Iran has been conquered many times, and shattered many more. It has known terror and it has known treachery; it has known tyranny and trauma, captivity and servitude. Sometimes for decades, sometimes centuries.

But time and time again, no matter where we have been scattered, we have witnessed the rebirth of Iran, the rebirth of love and life out of the crucible of time.


We have Attar, Rumi and Hafiz spinning and spiraling in our DNA.
Love is who we are. Love is how we have been. Love is what we will become.

Love flows through our poetry, our culture, our history and our religion.

It flows through our friendships, our families and our faiths — from A for Abraham to Z for Zoroaster.

Love is at the root of our languages. It radiates through each and every letter, dances on the tip of every tongue.

Love is in our nature and in our science, in our art and music, in our architecture and cosmology.

Love is in our soil and our seasons, in our mountains and in our skies, in our suns and in our stars.

Iran is nothing if not a shrine and a sanctuary, its prophets the mirrors, its poets the pillars, its mothers the fountains, its children the fruits of God’s love.

Just as there can be no life without water, there can be no Iran without love.

Death is not the end of life. Death is the absence of love in life.

Our god is love unfolding through the universe.

We are born out of love, and with love, to love we return.

* * * *

When OutRight Action International invited us, as authors of *Zahra’s Paradise*, to collaborate on a campaign to raise awareness about the state of the LGBTQ community in Iran, Khalil and I knew we had to jump in.

Who can resist an invitation to launch a true jihad—a jihad for love.

Love, after all, is indivisible. It is the bedrock of all human rights, from the freedom to speak to the freedom to worship, the freedom from fear to the freedom from ignorance.

Iran’s LGBTQ community is placing love where it belongs: at the center of conversations about what it means to be human.
To love, as Yousef and Farhad love, is for them to create space and time, it is to create truth and trust.

To love, as they do, is to restore each other’s honor and humanity. And ours.

Once we make love the axis of the universe, the pole that binds heaven and earth as one, which philosopher can split the universe back into male and female, good and evil, pure and impure, rational and emotional, sacred and satanic?

Once love comes into play and friendship becomes the rule, which preacher can build a wall to conserve hatred, which prince a barricade to preserve enmity, which merchant a fence to protect fear?

Who can contest the sovereignty or challenge the majesty of love? With which army? In which language? In whose name?

Despite all the propaganda against humans, all the problems with our labels, packaging, and systems, despite all the growling and snarling, moaning and groaning, being human can still be intoxicating.

As human beings, we are still capable of ravishing acts of love, still capable of leaps of faith, still capable of creating moments of utter grace.

It is hard not to stop and marvel at the wonder of it all, the rapture, the mysteries and the miracles that weave our lives, worlds and universes together as one. It is hard not to fall in love over and over again.

It is everywhere. In everyone. And everything.

Iran’s LGBTQ community are the face of a culture and civilization touched by the scent of a love so sublime that it can turn death into life, absence into presence, enmity into friendship, shame into pride, cruelty into compassion, misery into joy, and silence into song.

Perhaps it is not they who need our love, but we who need theirs.

- Amir Soltani
Formerly a Sheikholeslami
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Amir Soltani

Amir Soltani is a dreamer – a writer, filmmaker and human rights activist. His New York Times bestselling graphic novel, *Zahra's Paradise*, tells the story of an Iranian mother, Zahra’s search for Mehdi, a student activist who has vanished in Iran’s 2009 presidential elections. Published by FirstSecond, *Zahra's Paradise* became a global multimedia phenomenon, and was recognized as an innovation in human rights activism. It was translated into 16 languages and nominated for two Eisner Awards.

Two years later, in partnership with United4Iran and dozens of other human rights organizations, Zahra defied Iran’s supreme leader and Council of Guardians and ran as a virtual candidate in Iran’s 2013 presidential elections. She was the only candidate to run on a human rights platform calling for an end to executions, discrimination against women and minorities, corruption, intimidation and hypocrisy. IGLHRC’s “LoveforAll” campaign on behalf of Iran’s LGBTQ community is her latest virtual human rights campaign.

Amir’s other human rights projects have included an “Open Letter to President Khatami,” signed by over 12 Nobel Laureates and over 100 academics, in response to assaults on students and scholars at Iranian universities. He is currently working on *Dogtown Redemption*, a documentary film on poverty in the United States. Amir attended the Parthian School in Tehran, and studied social and intellectual history at Tufts and Harvard.

Khalil Bendib

Khalil Bendib is an award-winning political cartoonist whose work is distributed to over 2,000 small and mid-sized newspapers nationwide. His cartoons have also been published in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times* and other major newspapers.

His 2011 graphic novel *Zahra’s Paradise*, co-authored with Amir, has been translated into 16 languages.

Mr. Bendib’s website is www.bendib.com/. He can be reached at kbendib@sbcglobal.net.
Every day around the world, LGBTIQ people’s human rights and dignity are abused in ways that shock the conscience. The stories of their struggles and their resilience are astounding, yet remain unknown—or willfully ignored—by those with the power to make change. OutRight Action International, founded in 1990 as the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, works alongside LGBTIQ people in the Global South, with offices in six countries, to help identify community-focused solutions to promote policy for lasting change. We vigilantly monitor and document human rights abuses to spur action when they occur. We train partners to expose abuses and advocate for themselves. Headquartered in New York City, OutRight is the only global LGBTIQ-specific organization with a permanent presence at the United Nations in New York that advocates for human rights progress for LGBTIQ people.

OutRight Action International
http://www.OutRightInternational.org
In the Islamic Republic of Iran, individuals are doubly persecuted based on their sexual orientation. As in many countries, lesbians, gays and bisexuals are stigmatized by society and castigated — or worse — by family, friends, and social institutions. But the Iranian government itself casts these individuals into the shadows. When they are not being discursively wished out of existence by political and religious leaders, they are criminalized and harshly punished for their sexual orientation. They are chased from society by parents, teachers, and friends, only to find that the State offers no relief, and in fact sanctions their exclusion, leaving them vulnerable to further abuse.

The persecution of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in Iran is commonly justified by reference to religious precepts. But no great religion, and certainly not Islam, calls for harming or punishing another individual merely because of her or his identity or who they love. Islam teaches compassion, Divine justice, and empathy, even as some political leaders may use it to preach hate, intolerance, and vigilante justice. And the first responsibility of every modern State is to provide and protect the rights to life, liberty, and security of person for all individuals.

Yousef and Farhad is as beautiful as it is tragic. Their story offers an intimate and charming glimpse into the complexities of a society like Iran, but the characters’ challenges are unfortunately all too universal, and their story all too common.

I look forward to the day when this tale will remind us of a cruel and unjust bygone era, when we will shake our heads and breathe a sigh of relief because we have left this dark blot on our human story far behind. For now, though, I invite you to treat this sad but touching and ultimately redemptive story as a poignant reminder that we have much work to do before we reach that point.

- Ahmed Shaheed
UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran