

Iranian woman on Swiss neutrality: "At some point you pay the price".

The mullahs are using the money in Swiss bank accounts to pay for the war against their own people, says Iranian-born political scientist Azadeh Jassemi. She does not feel safe anywhere, not even with us.

About the person

Azadeh Jassemi has lived in Switzerland for the past six years. The political scientist was born in Tehran in 1979, 14 days after the Islamic Revolution. Two years later, her family fled. Her father, who had worked for the government of the Shah, did not want to support the mullahs' course. A crime like any resistance against the regime.

The Jassemi family ended up in Germany. Here, Azadeh Jassemi spent her childhood with her parents, who were not allowed to return to Iran. In 2008, the government under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pardoned some exiled Iranians. Those who were not politically active, including Azadeh Jassemi's parents. She was studying in Paris at the time and was happy about the chance to finally get to know her home country.

She was determined to travel to Iran. She even adapted the topic of her thesis and planned to spend a year in Iran researching the Islamic doctrine on which Khomeini had based his revolution. Today, Azadeh Jassemi works as a life and business coach and spends almost all her free time working with other activists to raise public awareness of the atrocities committed by the Iranian regime and thus build international pressure.

Interview between Journalist Deborah Stoffel and Azadeh Jassemi

Journalist:

Azadeh Jassemi, you travelled to Tehran in December 2008 with your then 72-year-old father yourself. What memories do you have of it?

Azadeh Jassemi:

The security forces stopped my father right at the airport when we landed there and took him for questioning. They questioned him for about two hours. Then we were allowed to leave. But after only a few hours in Tehran, my father said: "My heart is bleeding." This was no longer the country he knew. When my parents were young, the Iranians were at least as westernised as the people in Switzerland and Germany - if not even more so. And suddenly there was a country where everyone had to be veiled. And that was only the tip of the iceberg.

The repression, the morality police and their brutal approach have also been the trigger for the current protest movement. There has been no progress in recent years.

Holding hands, kissing, meeting up to have a coffee with a woman as man or vice versa - all that is not possible. We had this experience together, my father and I.

When the morality police stopped us, we had to show our identity cards to prove that I was his daughter. Then I wore tight jeans and boots that went above my knees, and a coat that went below my buttocks, but it was tight. They said that I had to change my clothes immediately.

We had to buy something new on the spot. Only then were we allowed to leave the shopping mall where they „caught us“. I still got away with it, probably I got off lightly thanks to my

father who was an older man and knew how to strike the right note with the morality police.

Journalist:

Do men get away with it most of the time? Are they more lenient with men?

Azadeh:

No, men are allowed to wear a T-shirt, but if the sleeves don't reach the elbows, they are also taken away by the morality police.

Journalist:

What do you remember most from that time? What is burnt into your memory the most?

Azadeh:

Once I invited my friends to a house party. They were swimming in the pool in my garden. I saw the scars on their backs. I thought maybe they were from a vaccination. I asked a cousin about it.

She reacted with surprise: "Are you seriously asking me that?" The scars were from the beatings and lashes received from the vice squad. That's how this generation grew up, with constant fear of punishment; signs of violence marked over their bodies.

Journalist:

In response to the protests that have been going on for weeks now, the regime has shut down the internet. Communication is difficult.

Do you have contact with friends and relatives in Iran?

Azadeh:

Hardly at all, and that is terrible, feeling powerless beyond being able to describe this feeling. Our friends and families are being tortured and beaten to death. I haven't had a period for 61 days ever since. I've been taking two sleeping pills every night for the past 41 days.

Journalist:

You yourself demonstrated against the regime in 2009.

Azadeh:

Yes, and I saw then what the guards of the revolution, the Basij militia, are capable of. When you go out on those streets, you know you're lucky if you only take a bullet. Otherwise, when captured, they torture you to death or rape you to death. Back in time, a sniper shot and killed a young man right in front of me. The videos that are leaking out only hint at the brutality of the police.

One of the many examples is that a girl was "raped to death". Doctors should have given a different cause of death. One doctor could not do this any longer. This how this girl's fate became public. The girl's mother took her own life afterwards.

Journalist:

It is said that doctors and parents are forced to make public statements in which they say that their loved ones and relatives have died because of cardiac arrest.

Azadeh:

Yes, doctors have protested because of the police presence in the clinics treating protesters. They have also protested against having to falsify the causes of death. A doctor was shot in front of everyone. The other doctors were beaten up and arrested. This is against international law, and the entire world knows about it.

Journalist:

Repression and violence have been tormenting Iranians for years. Why have the protests flared up with that kind of an intensity now?

Azadeh:

I think it has been brewing in the population for a long time, at the latest since the bloody protests of the „Green Revolution“ back in 2009 and for sure since the massacre in November 2019. Over 1500 people were killed back then. Until then, many still believed that the regime would eventually become more restrained at some point. This hope died for good after November 2019. In each Iranian mind, the picture of Navid Afkari has been burned: This young Iranian wrestler of the country's national team who captured and brutally tortured before being executed. Thanks to digitalisation- everybody could witness how Masha Amini was beaten up by the security forces. And the Iranian people think: It cannot go on like this.

Journalist:

Is that the difference: the digital media create a new public sphere, a different visibility of the violence controlled by the regime?

Azadeh:

The digital media enable a reach that has never existed in this form before. While many big media houses kept undercover for a long time before they started reporting what was really happening in Iran, Iranians from within Iran were able to send out the first videos and news, increasing the visibility of the atrocities. At the same time, it is no secret that traditional media houses follow certain political guidelines and pressure, and thus the reporting is often one-sided. Digital media have created a counterweight here. Nothing can be swept under the carpet or glossed over so easily anymore.

Journalist:

The capital, Tehran, has a population of 20 million. Do protests in the countryside, in the villages and smaller towns also occur?

Azadeh:

Absolutely. The regime has also attacked other towns and villages, especially Kurdish ones. They bombed a hospital to prevent the people there from smuggling arms to Tehran. A newborn baby and its mother died.

Once 150 demonstrators are armed, do you think the Revolutionary Guards would still be fighting the protesters in the streets? No, they are only fighting my people because they are defenceless on those streets.

Journalist:

What do you think is the likelihood of something like this happening? Any armed, paramilitary resistance?

Azadeh:

It's low, it would need coordination. This is impossible at the moment, because all communication is cut off. It would have to get help from outside, from Israel or another state.

Journalist:

Switzerland has not adopted the EU's latest sanctions against members of the Iranian regime and its organisations. It justifies this with its neutrality and its mandate as a protecting power. What do you think about this?

Azadeh:

Neutrality always comes at a price. It is no secret that dictators and terrorists have their money in Switzerland. With these funds and the access that the mullahs have to this money, they pay for the war against their own people. If the Basij militias no longer receive money, they will no longer crack down the protests of their people.

When Switzerland speaks of good offices, we have to say: no, YOU are enabling the brutal repression of these protests in order to protect your own interests. But at some point, you are going to pay the price for that.

Journalist:

What are you thinking about?

Azadeh:

In 1979, the US equipped the Taliban to fight the Soviets. To this date, we all are paying the price and people have been suffering. Ayatollah Khomeini came to Iran from Paris with the help of France, the USA and Great Britain. Of course, the West has to protect its interests, but at what price?

Every few years there are attacks by Islamists and we say: terrible.

But we don't look back and admit to ourselves that we ourselves are partly to blame here.

Journalist:

What do your friends say when you reach out to them: Is there a daily routine for them at the moment?

Azadeh:

Everything is in limbo. During the day they try to go about their routine, and in the evening they take their backpacks and go out on the streets. They have learned that they must not meet and protest in large groups. So that the snipers can't shoot them all at once.

Journalist:

Are you safe in Switzerland?

Azadeh:

Not really. At demonstrations, some infiltrated spies of the Islamic Republic were arrested and the police have looked at their mobile phones and have seen that they have the faces of the demonstrators zoomed in. So sometimes we get the impression that we can't trust anyone anymore. More than a week ago, a demonstrator was stabbed in front of the Iranian embassy in Berlin. And the regime is smuggling in informers who are trying to get political asylum. The embassies in the West know about it and protect these terrorists. What about the so-called neutrality here?

Journalist:

Are you afraid?

Azadeh:

When I see what the Iranians dare doing, risking their lives there, I'm not afraid here. I would be ashamed if I were afraid.

Journalist:

What do you do from Switzerland?

Azadeh:

Together with exiled Iranians in the United Kingdom we have founded an association and we now write letters day and night to governments, human rights organisations, etc. We try to do proper research as much as possible, to document the atrocities, to say: This is what is happening. Please do something!

Journalist:

Have you received any answers?

Azadeh:

So far, the only political institution that has responded is the British Parliament, not the German Foreign Minister, not Switzerland, not the EU.

Journalist:

What is the next step?

Azadeh:

We want to raise money to bring medical supplies into the country. Because this is a big problem at the moment, as the people no longer trust the hospitals and have to treat themselves at home.

