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**IMPRISONED
IN IRAN:**
Homa Hoodfar's
Fight for Freedom

Hosted by MICHAEL SERAPIO



**NEWS
IN
REVIEW**

IN THIS ISSUE

Imprisoned in Iran: Homa Hoodfar’s Fight for Freedom (Duration 18:56)

She is a highly regarded anthropologist and academic and an expert on the role of the veil in Muslim societies. Yet at 65 years of age Homa Hoodfar, a Canadian–Iranian scholar, was arrested while researching in Iran. She was thrown into the notorious Evin Prison and cut off from her friends, family and any kind of legal assistance for 112 days. This is the story of how a Canadian woman became a pawn in international political manoeuvring.

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IMPRISONED IN IRAN: Homa Hoodfar’s Fight for Freedom

THE STORY

Task #1

Rank your response to the following statements before reading the story that follows:

Canada should protect its citizens regardless of where people choose to travel.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Canada should care about the human rights records of foreign countries.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Canada should focus more on human rights violations here at home instead of human rights violations in foreign countries.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Canada should use political and economic pressure to ensure the protection of human rights in foreign countries.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Canada should use its military to fight for the protection of human rights in foreign countries.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Discuss your choices with a partner or small group. Which statements do you feel most strongly about? Why? What other questions arise from your discussion of the statements?

Task #2

As you read the story that follows, choose three (3) sections and create a summary of the “most important information and ideas” and “least important information and ideas” in each section.

	Most important information	Least important information
1.		
2.		
3.		

Who is Homa Hoodfar?

How did Homa Hoodfar, a 67-year-old retired professor of anthropology at Concordia University, end up in an Iranian prison for 112 days? Hoodfar's experience is a story of extraordinary legal rights violations as well as a broader story examining how different countries value, interpret and protect (or don't protect) human rights.



Hoodfar is an Iranian, Irish and Canadian citizen who traveled to Iran in February 2016 to visit friends, to observe an election, and to go to the parliamentary library to conduct research. She had been entering Iran on and off since 1991 without any trouble from the authorities. This trip came a year after her husband's death from a brain tumour. She was looking forward to connecting again with family and friends.

What happened to her?

In early March, security forces from the Counter Intelligence Unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard raided her apartment and took her cell phone, computer and passport. She was told to appear for interrogation the next day. Hoodfar was familiar with the tactics of the Revolutionary Guard and complied with their directive.

The Revolutionary Guard is a branch of Iran's Armed Forces whose primary role is to protect the Islamic governmental system. They focus on preventing foreign interference (particularly from Western countries) as well as coups by the military or other "deviant movements" working within Iran's borders. Anyone who raises a dissenting voice to policies in Iran faces surveillance, interrogation and, often, imprisonment.

Canada listed the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard's** Quds Force as a terrorist entity in 2012. The Quds Force is a special forces unit that seeks to express Iranian interests outside of Iran. They are linked to the terrorist group Hezbollah and their actions include terrorist activities.

Despite the lengthy initial interrogation, Hoodfar didn't think she would be imprisoned. She thought this was just a typical warning from the Revolutionary Guard with the central message being: "Don't meddle in Iranian politics." After her interrogation, she was released on bail and told to come in again for further questioning.

Over the course of three months, Hoodfar was called in 42 times for interrogations. It was on the occasion of her 42nd interrogation, on June 6, 2016, that she was taken into custody. Nine days later, the Iranian authorities announced that she had been creating security problems within the Islamic Republic by taking part in feminist activities. It pointed to her association with Women Living Under Muslim Laws, a group that works to bolster Muslim women's rights in Iran, as evidence that she was involved in disruptive activities.

Why was she arrested?

Hoodfar's academic work doesn't stand out as the reason for her arrest. She frequently condemned Western prejudice against Muslim women who chose to wear the Muslim veil known as the hijab. She argued that the veil is often a free choice — even a liberating one — rather than a symbol of male oppression. She had also given the Iranian government credit when they enacted policies that benefited women.

It seems that Hoodfar may have been a pawn in a larger international conflict between Iran and Canada. Several European nations, the United States, Canada and Israel had imposed sanctions on Iran following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. They increased these sanctions due to concerns over the Iran's expanding nuclear program in 2006. The impact of the sanctions were devastating to the Iranian economy with the percentage of Iranian families living in poverty rising from 22 per cent to more than 40 per cent over an eight-year period. Western medical supplies and drugs were blocked from entering the country and the price of food skyrocketed.

Canada's relationship with Iran worsened significantly after the sanctions were imposed. After the British embassy in Tehran was mobbed and looted in 2011, Prime Minister Stephen Harper shut down the Canadian embassy and ordered all Iranian diplomats in Canada to leave within five days.

Iran adopted a constitution in 1979 which has been called a **mixture of theocracy and democracy**. While Articles 1 and 2 vest sovereignty in God, Article 6 mandates popular elections for the presidency and the parliament.

The Canadian government considers Iran a totalitarian regime. In Iran, there are two levels of governments: one that is elected by the people, with a president as the leader, and the

other is a non-elected body, with a religious cleric in charge. The non-elected branch of government is currently being led by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Ayatollah is, among other things, in charge of the Revolutionary Guard. The Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guard have the lion's share of political and economic power — and they have the final word on all matters of state. Power struggles between the elected and non-elected sides of government are common in Iran.

"Lion's share" is an idiomatic expression that means the larger or great part. An idiomatic expression is a commonly used phrase where the understood meaning does not literally mean what is expressed. For example, in this case, there is no lion involved in what is being articulated.

Hoodfar was visiting Iran during the election of the Assembly of Experts in February 2016. This involved the election of an 88 member body that was responsible for endorsing and/or removing the Supreme Leader of Iran. The assembly meets for at least two days every six months. All candidates in the election must be approved by the Guardian Council, half of whose members are selected by the Supreme Leader. As such, the Assembly has never criticized or attempted to remove a Supreme Leader. However, in this Assembly of Experts, moderate clerics defeated hardliners for the first time to dominate the assembly. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Hassan Rouhani, along with 50 of their allies, secured 59 per cent of the seats. Moderates had only held 20 seats in the assembly in previous meetings. Hoodfar commented in an interview with the CBC that, since the anti-West conservatives lost the election, the authorities may have been looking for someone to blame for the loss — and those people may have included foreign intellectuals like her.

What happened to Hoodfar in prison?

Professor Hoodfar was taken to Tehran's notorious Evin prison where many Iranian intellectuals and journalists are imprisoned. She was denied a lawyer and was not permitted to see family members. On June 23, 2016, Tehran's public prosecutor stated that Hoodfar was being investigated for "dabbling in feminism and security matters."

As an anthropologist, she was used to conducting field work, observing people interact and documenting what she observes. She chose to use her time in prison as a type of field work. She made mental notes and wrote with the end of her toothbrush on the marble wall.

The guards tried to break her spirit and dehumanize her with the threat of execution. Psychological harm is one of the main weapons used in the prison. Hoodfar also endured physical hardship since she has a neurological condition that causes severe headaches, and affects her voice and breathing. She was denied her medication. She was eventually transferred to a nearby hospital due to her deteriorating health.

Why was she released?

There were many human rights groups that advocated for Homa Hoodfar's release, including Amnesty International, who sent a petition to the Iranian government with 50,000 names on it calling for her release. Her colleagues at Concordia University and many other feminist organizations also demanded her release and criticized the government of Canada's handling of her case.

But something was going on behind the scenes that no one knew about. Prime Minister Trudeau had an informal meeting with the foreign minister of Oman during a gathering of the UN General Assembly in New York in September. Oman has a good relationship with Iran and

offered to get the Canadian message of concern regarding Homa Hoodfar to the right people in Iran. On the hundredth day of her imprisonment, Canada's Foreign Minister Stephane Dion met with his Iranian counterpart informally to discuss "consular cases." Here's is the gist of the message Dion (and, by extension, PM Trudeau) was trying to convey: Canada wanted to normalize its diplomatic relationship with Iran but that was impossible as long as Homa Hoodfar was imprisoned. Soon after this meeting, the Iranian government announced that she was to be released on "humanitarian" grounds — after she paid bail of five billion rials (\$159,000 USD).

Did you know that Iran ranks second in the world for **natural gas reserves** and third in the world for **oil reserves**?

On the day of her release, she was taken to a beauty salon in order to make her look healthy prior to her flight home. Hoodfar was reunited with her family and friends in Montreal and gave interviews detailing her experience. When asked if she would ever return to her homeland, she said, "I had hoped to go back and teach sometime, but told them I will never go back to Islamic Republic again, I'm too heartbroken."

Sources:

1. Amnesty International. (September 29, 2016). Good News! – Homa Hoodfar Freed After Global Campaign. Retrieved from amnestyusa.org/.
2. Cochrane, David. (September 26, 2016). Private meeting at UN between Trudeau team and Omani officials led to Hoodfar's release by Iran. CBC News.
3. O'Brien, L. (Producer). (October 6, 2016). Homa Hoodfar shares her story after 112 days in an Iranian prison. CBC Radio: The Current [Radio broadcast]. Retrieved from cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/.

Followup

1. Return to Task 1 at the beginning of the story. Would you change your responses to any of these questions based on what you have learned from the Homa Hoodfar case? Why or why not?
2. **Human Rights 101**

Part One

Answer the following questions based on your personal knowledge of human rights.

- a) What does the term “human rights” mean to you?
- b) Without referring to outside sources, list as many human rights as you can.
- c) Considering your list, what do you think is the purpose of human rights?
- d) Do you think human rights are important? Why?

Part Two

Watch the video “What are human rights?” by Benedetta Berti — [youtube.com/watch?v=nDgIVseTkuE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDgIVseTkuE) — and answer the following questions.

- a) What articles of human rights did you have on your list? After viewing the video, which ones did you forget or didn't even know existed?
- b) Why is it so difficult to enforce human rights?
- c) Which human rights do you think are most important? Which do you think are least important?
- d) Why do human rights change over time?
- e) Why do you think some nations do not value all these rights?
- f) What countries do you think have good overall human rights records?
- g) What countries do you think have poor human rights records?



Try This!

Create a 45-second video on a prisoner of conscience that you believe should be freed from imprisonment. Use software such as Shadowpuppet, Storehouse, Gravie or Adobe Voice (Show Your Story) to make a memorable and impactful video to share.

You could also write a letter to your member of parliament and create an online petition calling for the release of the prisoner of conscience you chose. Using social media, encourage others to write letters in support or sign and ask them to share your petition.

VIDEO REVIEW

Before Viewing

Amnesty International defines a prisoner of conscience as:

// ...a person who is imprisoned because of their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth, sexual orientation or other status provided that they have neither used or advocated violence. **//**

1. Create a list of prisoners of conscience. They may be current or historical examples. Consult online sources if you need help identifying these prisoners.

2. What happened to these people? Did they die in prison? Were they released?

3. Who fights to release prisoners of conscience? Why do they fight for these people?

Viewing

1. Homa Hoodfar was a psychologist from Concordia University. True False

2. What was the focus of her research in Iran?

3. What did Iran's Revolutionary Guard do to Homa Hoodfar?

4. Canada has an embassy in Iran. True False

5. What other Canadian woman has been sent to Iran's Evin prison and for what reason?

6. What did the Iranian government accuse Homa Hoodfar of doing?

7. How many days did Hoodfar spend in prison? 100 days 112 days 200 days

8. Canada is not interested in formalizing ties with Iran. True False

9. How did the prison interrogators use psychological torture on Hoodfar?

After Viewing

1. Given the opportunity, what questions would you ask Homa Hoodfar?

2. What questions would you ask her Iranian captors?

3. What questions would you ask the Canadian government?
