



MINISTRY OF POP CULTURE

Oscar Nominee/Political Prisoner

The courageous filmmaking of Iranian director Jafar Panahi, and his fellow screenwriter, and political prisoner, Mehdi Mahmoudian.

[SAUL AUSTERLITZ](#) MAR 02, 2026 (ON SUBSTACK)

This story was scheduled to run prior to the start of the U.S. bombing campaign in Iran, and the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. We are keeping the people of Iran in our hearts and hoping for a swift end to this war. You can donate [here](#) to support Doctors Without Borders' efforts in the region.

At the end of January, as deadly protests rocked Iran, a longtime activist named Mehdi Mahmoudian was arrested after signing on to a letter criticizing the country's dictator, Ali Khamenei, for his clampdown on protest. **Mahmoudian is perhaps better known for the surprising second act of his career: he had just been nominated for an Academy Award as the cowriter of the screenplay for *It Was Just an Accident*.**

Mahmoudian was held incommunicado for more than two weeks before finally being released, raising the specter of one of Iran's most internationally celebrated citizens, whose name will be called from the stage of the Dolby Theater in Hollywood later this month, also being a prisoner of the regime.

Iran is a politically repressive theocratic regime that has repeatedly clamped down on protesters, murdered dissidents, and imposed a repressive religious-fundamentalist regime on the country. It is also, at the same time, a country with more than half a century of internationally acclaimed filmmaking, much of it flowing through the careers of two of the most acclaimed directors of the past four decades: Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi, Mahmoudian's cowriter and the director of *It Was Just an Accident*.

Panahi got his start as Kiarostami's assistant on 1994's *Through the Olive Trees* (which was famously purchased, and then buried, by Miramax and its movie-hater-in-chief, Harvey Weinstein, who loved to buy outstanding international films and then dump them as soon as it became clear they could not be milked for Oscars). Kiarostami's Koker trilogy, which concluded with *Through the Olive Trees*, demonstrated that the simplicity of the Iranian approach—with movies often about children or families—masked narrative virtuosity and intellectual rigor of a sort unmatched by filmmakers anywhere else in the world.

A straightforward story about friendship between two boys in the first film of the trilogy, 1987's *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, is unfolded and refolded to reveal a metafictional hall of mirrors: a Kiarostami stand-in traveling with his son to investigate the aftermath of an earthquake that may have harmed the actors from the earlier film in *Life and Nothing More*, and then *Through the Olive Trees*, a follow-up about the disjunction between art and life for two young actors asked to play husband and wife in the second film.

Kiarostami was a keen social observer who used his films to quietly interrogate the wrenching social and cultural changes that swept Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, including the fallout of the Iran-Iraq war and the arrival of Afghan refugees fleeing unrest. Panahi was far blunter in his social critique than his mentor. 2000's *The Circle* (coincidentally the first film I ever reviewed for a publication) was a scathing critique of the Iranian regime's misogyny, which would become a recurring theme of his work. The film, I wrote in my review, "implicitly posits that Iran functions as a large-scale prison."

"I'm a socially committed filmmaker that makes films about the conditions in my country," Panahi told me when I spoke to him in 2007 about his film *Offside* for *Moviemaker* magazine, concerning young women who sought to bypass a ban on female attendees and sneak into a World Cup qualifying match.

"So it's natural that when I make movies about limitations in Iran, my natural subject would be women, because they are more subjected to limitations. Only two days ago, there was a peaceful demonstration by women who were agitating for their rights. That peaceful demonstration was not tolerated, and 33 of those women were arrested. There is no official tolerance to hear these grievances, and that's why they immediately react by beating up the

women and arresting them. It feels very natural to me as a socially committed filmmaker to try to make these kind of movies that arouse discussion.”

Soon after the release of *Offside*, Panahi was arrested at the grave of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman murdered during protests in 2009, and briefly jailed. The next year, he was arrested again and taken to Evin Prison, notorious for its inhumane conditions. He was sentenced to six years for supposedly attempting to make a documentary about the 2009 protests. Panahi went on a hunger strike to protest his jailing and the miserable conditions in which he was being held. American filmmakers like Steven Spielberg and Paul Thomas Anderson (one of Panahi and Mahmoudian’s fellow nominees in this year’s screenwriting categories) signed a letter calling for his release. President Barack Obama called Panahi a political prisoner of the regime.

After being convicted, Panahi was placed under house arrest and banned from making further movies. Panahi was undeterred. Primarily using his iPhone to shoot, Panahi crafted a series of films that utilized no sets, no actors, and no script, and skirted the margin between fiction and documentary. The coyly named *This Is Not a Film* (2011) was made for about \$3,000 and smuggled out of the country on a USB drive. If there could not be any actors or sets, there was just Panahi: talking, worrying, making calls, imagining the movies he might be making, in a better world.

With all respect to the American filmmakers and actors who like to call themselves activists because they showed up once at a march or shared somebody’s Instagram post, Jafar Panahi was willing to go to prison—and did—in order to speak freely as an artist. Panahi would go on to be jailed again in 2022, and sentenced to one year in prison in absentia in 2025 for “propaganda activities.”

It Was Just an Accident is a landmark in Panahi’s career because it speaks more directly about what the director had personally experienced as an artistic dissident. Its characters are each haunted by what they have experienced in prison, and restlessly debate whether and how to seek revenge on the man they believe might have been their sadistic jailer.

The research for *It Was Just an Accident* was compiled accidentally and entirely against the will of its chief researchers. Panahi and Mahmoudian do not appear in *It Was Just an Accident*, but we can understand each of the characters in the film as mouthpieces for their

own rage and horror. Panahi had met Mahmoudian during his most recent imprisonment. He described him as “a pillar” for the other prisoners, according to a recent Associated Press report. Mahmoudian had been jailed on three previous occasions for speaking out on behalf of those tortured and killed by the regime.

Their film is about how the sound of your jailer’s footsteps echoes, no matter how many years it may have been since you last heard it. And now Mahmoudian has had the experience of being back in the place he so courageously shared with audiences, for signing on to a letter that denounced “the mass and systematic killing of citizens who bravely took to the streets to bring an end to an illegitimate regime constitutes an organized state crime against humanity.”

Being an American looking at Iran right now is like glimpsing a few steps forward into a nightmare future. The author of one of the most acclaimed films of 2025 was in prison, even as Oscar voters streamed his film and debated whether to cast their ballots for Best Original Screenplay on his behalf.

Speaking the truth does not come without a cost in authoritarian regimes. We should probably remember that.