

WOMEN LEAD A YEAR OF TRIAL AND PROTEST IN IRAN

Reflections from the Middle East
Women's Initiative

Edited by Brooke Sherman &
Alexander Farley



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ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

The Wilson Center's Middle East Women's Initiative (MEWI) builds on the work of the Middle East Program and the Haleh Esfandiari Forum in promoting the empowerment of women in the region. Through an open and inclusive dialogue with women leaders from the Middle East and continuous research, MEWI aims to deepen understanding of both the challenges and opportunities in gender development and prescribe policy recommendations for governments, civil society, and the private sector to achieve gender parity across the region.

In 2020, the Middle East Women's Initiative published its flagship report *Ready to Lead: Understanding Women's Leadership in the Middle East and North Africa*, which introduced a first-of-its-kind data tool designed to quantify women's representation in leadership in the public sector. In March of this year, MEWI released *Women Entrepreneurship in MENA: The Cases of Bahrain, Lebanon, and Tunisia*, building on findings from *Ready to Lead* and evaluating why women's entrepreneurship continues to lag in the region.

MEWI hosts policy dialogue sessions with gender development experts, regional experts, and women leaders from the Middle East representing both public and private sectors and civil society. In March 2019, MEWI launched *Enheduanna: Voices of Women in the Middle East*, a blog featuring diverse voices of women from the region. It is a space where these contributors share thoughts and express ideas about the state of women in their countries, as well as their often ignored, yet important, work to advance women's issues across the region.

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INTRODUCTION

By Merissa Khurma, Director of the Middle East Program

Having followed and worked on women's issues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) throughout my career in foreign policy and development, it comes as no surprise that even though women are rarely at the helm of governments or businesses, they are exercising leadership at various junctures across the region. Leadership is a practice and not a position. It is an act of advocating and working for change despite uncertainty and in the face of challenges. This principle inspires and feeds the work of the *Middle East Women's Initiative* (MEWI) at the Wilson Center's [Middle East Program](#) (MEP). MEWI builds on the tireless work of MEP Director Emerita Haleh Esfandiari in highlighting women's issues and amplifying female voices across MENA.

This publication, *One Year After Mahsa Amini's Death: Female Protests in Iran*, is the embodiment of Haleh Esfandiari's commitment to scholarly research and independent analysis of the developments in Iran over the past year following the death of the 22-year-old Mahsa Amini and waves of female-led protests the country has witnessed since. It represents MEP's commitment to explore the sociopolitical dynamics at play in the Islamic Republic, the role of young girls and women in mobilizing voices for change, the response of the clerics and those at the highest echelons of power, as well as the reactions in the rest of the MENA region.

As noted in many of our publications including *Ready to Lead* and the most recently launched *Women Entrepreneurship in MENA*, most females in the MENA region today are, on average, well-educated and often surpassing their male counterparts in secondary and tertiary educational institutions. While the average female labor participation rate in the region is around 20%, significantly below the global average of 48%, women are increasingly joining the workforce even in the face of legislative or social barriers. In Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the female labor employment rates are around 44%, 55% and 35% respectively.

However, barriers remain on the legal fronts as well as the socio-cultural and religious realms, which results in realities that continue to place the MENA region at the bottom of the Gender Gap Index (GPI), published by the World Economic Forum. The 2023 GPI report notes, "In comparison to other regions, Middle East and North Africa remains the furthest away from parity, with a 62.6% parity score." While this index captures the overall picture of constraints and obstacles as well as progress in educational, economic, health and political spheres, women's stories of suffering, courage, and success represent the essence of the realities and developments of females across the region.

The world turned towards Iran for months as the tragic death of Mahsa Amini inspired females of all generations to lead the protests across the country, raising high and proud the slogan "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi!" or "Woman, Life, Freedom," not only in Tehran and 50 other cities and towns around Iran, but across the globe. As I wrote one month after Mahsa's death, for many women in

the MENA region – from Jordan to Bahrain, Egypt to Tunisia, and especially in Taliban-captured Afghanistan – it is the ‘female factor’ in Iran’s protests that has inspired females across the Middle East and North Africa region to speak up, protest for women’s rights, and stand tall in solidarity with the women of Iran.

This compilation of essays includes 12 by Haleh Esfandiari, as well as reflections and analysis by MEP Fellow Marina Ottaway, Wilson Center alum Geneive Abdo, MEP Associate Brooke Sherman, and visiting authors Elham Gheytauchi and Omar Munassar. Esfandiari’s expertise and experience as a freed and defiant hostage by the Islamic Republic, and deep understanding of the textures of Iran, its politics, people, and culture, examines various junctures of the past year, highlighting the stories and reflections by the Iranian people in her country of birth and across the diaspora. Ottaway, together with Esfandiari, looks at the similarities and differences with the uprisings witnessed in the Arab world in 2010-2011 as well as 2019. Abdo writes about how the protests in Iran have re-ignited debates in neighboring Iraq about wearing the hijab or headscarf. Gheytauchi details the evolution of the protests over the first eight weeks, and Munassar analyzes why Arab governments “stayed noticeably silent” compared to the support from Western nations. Sherman, as a leading editor of MEP’s *Enheduanna* blog reflects on what this past year signifies about women’s perseverance.

We are yet to see whether the protests will be revived as this first anniversary nears, or how the regime will ‘prepare’ itself with more repressive policies and legislative restrictions, such as the new hijab law that further limits women’s freedoms. The trends in Iran and the rest of the region continue to signal to all of us analysts, observers, and MENA specialists that the future is female in MENA. I stand by my conclusion back in October 2022 that the women of Iran represent a beacon of hope for a region that continues to struggle on various fronts of human and economic development. Research has shown that when women are at the decision-making table, they not only advocate for change that impacts girls and women but the entire society. That is the power of female and that is what fuels the work we lead at the Middle East Program.

The Death of Mahsa Amini Ignites Women-Led Protests Across Iran

*Articles by Haleh Esfandiari,
Director Emerita of the Wilson Center's Middle East Program*

July 2022 – August 2023



IRANIAN WOMEN UNDER SIEGE - AGAIN

July 13, 2022

Iran's clerical-dominated state has launched a new campaign to impose the Islamic dress code on women. They are also trying to roll back women's other hard-won freedoms in matters of economic participation, social behavior and public presence. This appears to be part of a larger and broader crackdown—on journalists, intellectuals and artists—and reflects either a heightened sense of insecurity, or the opposite of that—overconfidence—on the part of the Islamic Republic.

With the full support of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the government designated Tuesday, July 12 as the day of "Hijab and Chastity." Many women have gradually and successfully made their way from the total hijab to discarding it altogether in the public space, a development that discomfited Mr. Khamenei. Like many other high officials, he conveniently labelled the shift a plot by foreigners to undermine the Islamic Republic.

Since he took office last year, President Ebrahim Raisi has advocated for a return to strict observation of the hijab as in the early days of the Islamic revolution. He recently ordered the High Council of the Cultural Revolution, a government body, to revive and implement a resolution passed in 2005 regarding women's hijab and chastity, which had not been implemented by his predecessors.

As the news of these new measures spread, women across the country took to social media with the slogan *Hejab bi Hejab*, or "No to Hijab," an echo of the struggle for freedom from dictates by the state that women have waged since the establishment of the Islamic Republic 43 years ago. It has been a long struggle.

One of the first measures of the newly established Islamic Republic was the requirement that women observe the Islamic dress code in public. Thousands of women poured out into the streets on March 8, 1979 to protest this new measure, announced the previous day by the government. The demonstrators were attacked by vigilantes. Eventually, in a sort of uneasy compromise, rather than the traditional and full head-to-ankle veil, women were left alone as long as they wore a long baggy coat, the *manteau*, and a hood-like head cover, the *maghna'e*. This proved to be only the first of an across-the-board assault on women's rights.

The government suspended the Family Protection Law, the most important piece of legislation passed under the monarchy regarding women's rights. Among other rights, the law gave women the right to seek a divorce and to gain child custody; and it raised the age of marriage to 18 for girls. The government also disbanded the family courts established under the monarchy to deal with family disputes. Women lost the right to seek a divorce and the age of marriage was lowered to nine, or at puberty, in keeping with Islamic law. Women were purged from decision-making positions in government offices. Male teachers were barred from teaching in girls' schools, and women were barred from a number of fields of study at universities. Female and male

students were separated in classrooms and could no longer study together in libraries. Women and men who were not related to one another were not allowed to appear in public together. The law of retribution became the law of the land. Women were flogged for not observing the hijab; stoning for adultery became the law of the land.

Faced with these and other restrictions, women decided not to rely on some eventual show of generosity from the Islamic government but to take matters into their own hands. It has been hard work, but the perseverance has paid off. It took ten years to raise the age of marriage from nine to 13; the family courts are back, albeit with a narrower mandate; and child custody is not automatically denied to the mother. Women still cannot become judges, but they appear in court as lawyers. Universities are not only accessible to women, but in nationwide entrance exams, more women gain entrance than men—a development that leaves the government uneasy. Parliament has even toyed with the idea of affirmative action where university entrance is concerned—for men.

Women now sit as deputies in Parliament and hold senior positions in ministries; there have been female vice presidents. Women are also active in the private sector and run small and large businesses. Nor have women shied away from demonstrations protesting government repression and shortcomings that have taken place in towns and cities across the country in the last decade and more. Arrest, imprisonment, and the risk of injury have neither deterred nor silenced them.

Yet it is baffling that the government of President Raisi has picked this particular moment, when the government is facing sanctions, strained relations with its Arab neighbors, the hostility of Israel and the US and a host of other problems, to once again try to impose the traditional hijab and to battle what his officials call “*bad hejabi*,” or indifference to strict observance of the hijab. True, in recent years a number of women, especially in the younger generation, have been discarding or pushing back against the headdress at a rapid pace. The hood has become a scarf, and the scarf has fallen back from the head to the shoulders. Young women’s drab, baggy long coats have grown shorter and shorter, tighter and tighter, and in all the colors of the rainbow.

Women post their pictures on social media, exposing their hair; they remove their scarves in public and post videos of themselves doing so. They mix with men in coffee shops, restaurants, movie theaters, and other public places. Thanks to social media, the younger generations are not isolated from the rest of the world; and these children of the revolution have shown they are fed up living under restrictions that don’t exist in neighboring countries and the western world.

This has been the prevailing situation for a number of years. Yet a few days ago, government officials - or at least a number of them - announced that women and men should not mix in government offices or public places, and that banks and public institutions should not allow women without the proper hijab on their premises. Officials and government media have accused women who defy or campaign against the hijab of being in the pay of the foreign enemies of Iran.

How to explain this sudden and unexpected refocus on the near-dormant hijab issue? It is possible we are simply witnessing the influence of the ultra-conservative President Raisi. It is also possible that the government, facing a host of problems and growing public discontent, wants to focus public attention somewhere else, although in this case scapegoating 'foreign plots and foreign enemies' and accusing women of being in their pay is so transparent an obfuscation as to be laughable. The parallel crackdown on journalists, writers, and filmmakers may suggest that an out-of-touch government feels it need not tolerate any hint of opposition anymore.

The authorities may blame foreign elements as instigators of the anti-hijab movement, but they know better than anyone else this is an indigenous movement of Iranian women who want the right to choose what to wear and who refuse to be dictated to.



Protestors take part during a demonstration in front of the Iranian embassy in Brussels, Belgium on Sept. 23, 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini. Alexandros Michailidis/shutterstock.com

IRAN'S FAILED HIJAB POLICY CLAIMS ANOTHER VICTIM

September 20, 2022

The death last week of a young woman at the hands of Iran's Morality Police raises a simple question: How many more Iranian women have to die, be subjected to brutality, torture, imprisonment and coerced confessions before the authorities give up trying to enforce the mandatory observance of the *hijab*? How many more women will be victimized because of what they choose to wear, the length of their robes, their makeup and nail polish? And how much longer will women's freedom be sacrificed before the leaders and government of the Islamic Republic's obsession with women's looks and appearances finally is sated?

This obsession's latest victim is 22-year-old Mahsa Amini from Saqqez, in Iranian Kurdistan. Mahsa was visiting Tehran with her family. On September 13, she was stopped outside a metro station by the notorious *Gasht-e Ershad*, or Morality Police, for allegedly violating the *hijab* dress code. She was forced into a van and driven to the office of the *Gasht*. Within hours her unconscious body was transported to a local hospital; two days later, she was pronounced dead.

The official version put out by the Morality Police is that Mahsa had heart problems and was rushed to a hospital after suffering a heart attack. But the hospital attributed her death to, "cardiac arrest as a result of brain death," meaning she was brain dead when she was brought to the hospital. Her family immediately rejected the Morality Police's claims; her father said Mahsa did not suffer from a heart problem or seizures; and reports circulated on social media, citing eyewitnesses, that Mahsa collapsed after she was hit on the head while in the van and her head was slammed against the van wall, causing her to collapse.

Widespread protests have followed Mahsa's death. The social media have gone viral, and Facebook and Twitter have been full of pictures and comments about yet another life taken because of the *hijab*. Over one thousand people gathered for her funeral in her hometown, Saqqez, on September 17. Students, athletes, shopkeepers, men and women from all walks of life joined protest demonstrations that have been growing every day in most cities in Kurdistan, and also in Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, Rasht, Tabriz, Mashhad, the Island of Qeshm in the Persian Gulf and even the city of Qom, the bastion of the clerical Community. In almost all protest marches, women were in the front rank; as the demonstrations were spreading. Slogans by the demonstrators were aimed at the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, himself. Although in recent days he gave two speeches, Khamenei has not yet commented on the incident. Among the slogans: "Justice, freedom and voluntary *hijab*"; "This is our final message; our target is the system;" "We will fight, we will die, we will reclaim Iran"; and "Death to the Dictator."

At the burial of Mahsa some women defiantly removed their *hijab*. Others, cut their hair in front of the camera, and posted their pictures online. A number of women followed the example of a woman in Rasht in north Iran who set fire to her headscarf. They too removed their scarves and

added them to a bonfire. Prominent clerics, artists, intellectuals and former politicians continue to call for restraining, or even dismantling, the Morality Police and for women to be left alone.

The authorities, clearly alarmed by boiling anger, have this time tried what might be called conciliation. President Raisi, who didn't object to the most recent effort to enforce the *hijab*, called the family, offered condolences, and promised a thorough investigation. The head of the judiciary announced an investigation of what occurred in the van that transported Mahsa to the office of the Morality Police and that office itself. Some members of parliament suggested examining what happened. None of these assurances calmed the explosion of anger across the country; this was hardly the first time women were mistreated, beaten, and even died at the hands of the security services with no consequences for those responsible. An early indicator that this time will be no different: the family of Mahsa demanded to see the videos that were taken in the van, but the Morality Police claim their cameras were turned off.

Moreover, the security police, present in large numbers during the demonstrations, behaved as they have done in the past: according to reports, they used tear gas and water cannons to disperse the demonstrators; they made arrests; they even used arms. Several people were wounded. According to the BBC, in Divan-Dareh in Kurdistan alone at least ten demonstrators were wounded and two were killed. As of Wednesday night, the number of dead demonstrators had risen to seven, and several hundred people have been wounded. Unlike past protests, the demonstrators did not disperse and have continued to confront and fight the security forces. The government has slowed down the speed and access to the internet, and people are blocked from using hashtags.

Mahsa's fate can befall any woman in Iran. After four decades of failure in imposing the *hijab* on Iranian women, it is time for Iran's leaders to let women choose for themselves whether or not to cover their hair, wear a scarf or observe the full *hijab*. Otherwise, they may discover the business of the *hijab*, to which they have devoted so much attention and energy for the last forty years, will prove to be the Achilles Heel of the Islamic Republic.

IRAN: CHILDREN OF THE REVOLUTION FIGHT BACK

October 3, 2022

Over two weeks have passed since the first demonstrations in Iran to protest the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while in the custody of the Morality Police. The crackdown on the demonstrations by the security forces has been brutal. Riot police and forces used water cannons, tear gas, and live ammunition against the demonstrators. In the 16 days of protests, they have already killed 133 men and women. In the city of Zahedan alone, 43 people lay dead after security forces fired on a crowd just after Friday prayers had ended. More than 1,000 people, among them were women journalists, poets, and even popular athletes who supported the movement, have been arrested.

A threatening verbal assault by government officials has matched the physical attack. President Ebrahim Raisi warned that government forces will deal decisively with the protesters, whom he labelled “rioters” disturbing the public order, security, and calm. In a closed session of parliament Sunday morning, deputies, to show their full support for the government’s harsh measures, raised arms and closed fists while crying out, “Thank you, police.” The minister of Islamic Guidance (or Intelligence) issued a statement that the Revolutionary Guards know full well how to deal firmly with those who engage in spreading “division” among the people; while the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, Hossein Salami, made clear that the Guards are trained to deal with such crises.

Clearly, the rulers of the Islamic Republic, along with their security forces and rubber-stamp parliament, are determined on a no-compromise, no-retreat course of action, on crushing any whiff of dissent. They believe that any sign of weakness or retreat on their part could lead to even wider protests and spin out of their control.

A promised “thorough investigation” of the cause of Mahsa Amini’s death has not taken place (though, no one seriously expected it would or produce honest results). When Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, finally spoke out after two weeks of silence, he blamed the protests on Israel and the United States, claiming the protests were “planned by the Zionist regime” and the work of the “paid agents” of the two countries. He strongly supported the security forces who, he said, had been criticized “unjustly.” Significantly, aside from one or two exceptions, the senior ayatollahs in the shrine city of Qom have also remained silent—either because they have already been cowed into silence or because they too fear the massive protests that would follow if they joined in supporting the protesters.

The harsh crackdown by the authorities, and the verbal warnings of even more to come, have failed to achieve what the regime intended. They have not deterred the young women and men who come into the streets with the slogan, “Woman, Life, Freedom”—a slogan first adopted

after Mahsa was killed, simply for violating the Islamic dress code. Several characteristics of the current protests are worth noting.

There have been many protests and demonstrations in forty years of life under the Islamic Republic, but they have ended in two or three days in the face of a show of force by the authorities. This time, to the government's surprise, the protest movement has been sustained over two weeks already and promises to continue. Secondly, this has been a protest movement of the young—the very women and men who were born and came of age under the Islamic Republic. The women who came out into the streets when a young woman ended up dead simply for showing a bit of hair know her fate could befall any one of them under a government and security forces that are accountable to no one, least of all to the people. These women displayed their defiance of the government and the kind of Islamic ordinances that it seeks to impose by removing their hijabs in public, throwing their head scarves into bonfires on the streets, cutting their hair, and some even shaving their heads in public and online for all, including officials and the Morality Police, to see.

At the same time, much more than in the past, this younger generation is connected via social media. The young women of Tehran were aware of the actions of young women in Shiraz, Mashhad, Tabriz, and other cities and small towns. The protest movement, by now, has spread to 80 towns and urban centers and continues day after day. All over the country, university students have gone on strike or issued protest declarations. More and more people from different walks of life are joining the protest movement.

Finally, in these protests, although still in their early stages, the younger generation of Iranians are saying, loudly and clearly, that they reached the end of their tethers with a regime that wants to dictate how they dress, behave, and intermix; that tries to dictate what they should believe; that is unrepresentative and that has become a simple dictatorship of the few. They are saying that this is not the kind of regime to which they aspire or under which they want to spend the rest of their lives.

IRAN: THE PEOPLE AND THE REGIME MILES APART

October 11, 2022

When Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi chose to attend the opening day of the new academic year at the all-women's Al-Zahra University on Saturday, October 8, he was expecting to be welcomed by the students. He was welcomed, in what appeared to be a well-planned and choreographed visit, from an auditorium full of young women all wearing the Islamic headdress. But Raisi also encountered a reception he didn't expect: scores of female students on campus, removing their scarves and with their heads bare, defiantly waving their head-scarves above their heads and crying, "Raisi get lost," and "We don't want a corrupt man as our guest." It was a forceful reminder to him and his supporters in and outside the university of the women's revolution playing out on the streets of Tehran and other towns and cities across Iran, and of the protestors—women and men, young and old—who face arrest, imprisonment, and even death at the hands of the security forces in an expression of opposition to the regime.

As the protests enter their fourth week, a disconnect remains between the regime and the people. The government has neither acknowledged nor seems to understand the roots of the women's revolution and the deep discontent of the people. When Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, after a two-week silence, finally addressed the turmoil on the streets, it was not to calm the protests or to bridge the anger of the people against an unrepresentative, repressive government. Rather, he condemned the demonstrations as the work of Israel and the US and their paid agents in Iran—an old ploy that no one believes. And instead of addressing people's anger with the riot police and other units that have been brutally mistreating arrestees, using live ammunition and killing peaceful demonstrators, he threw his full support behind the security forces and said they had been treated unfairly. A handful of senior clerics in the city of Qum echoed his sentiments. In the past, what leaders in Qum said carried weight, but in this movement it has proven irrelevant. By tacit support for a despised regime through their silence, these once weighty senior ayatollahs have marginalized themselves.

High officials have also echoed Khamenei. The president, the chief of intelligence, the chief of police and the commander of the Revolutionary Guards warned that they were prepared to deal firmly with those they called "rioters." A rubber-stamp Majlis, or parliament, cheered on the security forces. Tehran's chief of police assured senior clerics in Qum that the Morality Police will be back on the streets in November—conveniently ignoring the fact it was the Morality Police who triggered the current uprising against the regime when they arrested 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 13 and beat her into a coma, causing her death.

The leadership speaks with one voice because the regime is hunkering down; it is determined to crush the protests at all costs. One important reason, I believe, is that they fear a replay of the 'colored' revolutions in East Europe that led to the collapse of governments in the former Soviet

bloc. They fear that if the protests and demonstrations are allowed to continue unhindered, they will spread and grow until they overwhelm the regime. When I was arrested and imprisoned in Iran in 2007, it was clear from my extensive interrogations that what my interrogators feared most was that activists or developments could snowball into a 'velvet' revolution in Iran. My interrogators didn't want two groups protesting on the streets: women and students. They and their colleagues in the security services are witnessing a nightmare come true: Students and women are on the streets calling for regime change. One reason for the large deployment of forces on the streets; thus, the brutal treatment of women and students.

Consider the vicious attack on a peaceful protest by students at Sharif University in Tehran. The university is home to the cream of the crop of students at all Iranian universities, particularly in engineering and the sciences. Its graduates are responsible for much of the highest quality work Iran achieves in the science and technology field. Yet the message to a shocked Iran was that none of this mattered to a regime that feels it is threatened and under siege. A substantial number of Sharif students were arrested, pushed into vans and taken to detention centers; and this scenario has played out on university and college campuses across the country. High school and even middle school students have joined the cry of "Death to the dictator," a slogan that is aimed directly at the Supreme Leader.

Important new groups are joining or at least supporting the protests. On Saturday, for the first time, the Tehran Grand Bazaar closed down in solidarity with the demonstrators, as did most shops in the separate Tajrish Bazaar in north Tehran. The bazaar and shop closures are significant and must have sent shudders down the spine of the government. The merchant and shopkeeper class have close relations with the clergy and in general have been supporters of the regime. Bazaar and shop closures interrupt trade and business and suggest the clerical rulers of Iran could lose what has been an important pillar for the regime. On Monday, workers in a number of petrochemical plants went on strike "in support of their compatriots"

Coverage of the protests in Persian press, radio and TV has generally echoed the government line. The country's two largest newspapers, *Kayhan* and *Ettelaat*, continue to refer to the protesters as rioters and the protests as the work of foreign agents. They echo the regime in asserting that Mahsa Amini died as the result of a heart attack and that other casualties, including Sarina Esmailzadeh and Hadis Najafi died by jumping out from rooftops. They must know well that readers won't believe these reports, but it is an indication of the extent of government control of the press that they do so. Such reformist papers that still exist, such as *Etemad*, while covering what goes on the streets only sparingly, have urged dialogue between the government and the demonstrators and urge the government to address the grievances of the younger generation. The state media, radio and TV, no longer have credibility. That is why the people turn to the internet, social media, and foreign radio broadcasts for the news. The U.S. can help by facilitating access to the internet and the social media platforms that the Iranian government seeks to block.

The events of the last three weeks underline that we have in Iran a regime and a society that no longer have anything in common. Iran's current leaders rule by force; as in all dictatorships, government claims and declarations are half-truths, if not outright lies; corruption is endemic. Among the many slogans of the protesters one said, "This is no longer a protest, it is revolution." We're not there yet; but the next days and weeks will tell whether the protests spread and are sustained. What is clear is that a large number of Iranians are saying they've had enough.



Protestors take part during a demonstration in front of the Iranian embassy in Brussels, Belgium on Sept. 23, 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini. Alexandros Michailidis/shutterstock.com

IRAN: A REGIME IN LALA LAND

November 3, 2022

We are nearing the end of the seventh week of protests and demonstrations across Iran, which began after 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested for violating strict Islamic dress code. In the last seven weeks, more than 270 protesters have been killed by the security forces, among them over 40 children. A larger number were wounded, and several thousands were arrested and are in prison awaiting indictment and trial. Elementary and middle school children have been taken away to rehabilitation centers for “reeducation.” The regime is waging an all-out war against its own young citizens—against the generation born, raised, educated and (the regime believed) fully indoctrinated under the Islamic Republic. Yet this is a generation that is social-media savvy; it is connected to the outside world; its young women and men are as alert and smart as their contemporaries around the world. They want freedom and they want regime change.

The regime either does not comprehend the aspirations, grievances, and frustrations of this young generation, or it understands, but only grasps the threat they pose to its repressive autocracy and outdated—even medieval—social norms that it wants to impose on them. As a friend told me the other day, the leadership of the Islamic Republic “is living in LaLa Land.”

Consider, the Supreme Leader has blamed the widespread protests by his angry countrymen and women on foreign governments and their intelligence agencies, particularly the US CIA and the Israeli Mossad. President Raisi along with the Commander-in-Chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the chief of its intelligence unit (the Minister of Islamic Guidance), and the government press have all echoed him. To prove that a ‘foreign hand’ is behind the protest movement, the security agencies arrested a number of foreign nationals who happened to be in Iran during the protests. The two women journalists, Niloufar Hamedei and Elahe Mohammadi, who broke the story of Mahsa’s death and reported on her funeral in her hometown of Saqqez, in Iranian Kurdistan, have been arrested and charged as agents of the CIA.

Nobody in Iran believes these fictions—just as no one believed the government’s claim that the fire that broke out in Evin Prison last month was started by inmates in a workshop, that Mahsa Amini died from a heart attack, or that another woman killed by the security forces had jumped off a building rooftop. The regime has lost all credibility among the people.

Nor are the young women and men protesting on university campuses and in the streets intimidated any longer. On Saturday, October 29, General Hossein Salami, the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC, issued an ultimatum: either the demonstrations end or the demonstrators face the IRGC itself. (So far, it has been the special units of the riot police and the paramilitary Basij forces that have tried to crush the protests). In a speech the next day, President Raisi reminded the public that government security is “the red line” no one will be allowed to cross, and the

protests must end. The head of the unit charged with “Promoting the Good and Forbidding Evil” announced that his organization will continue to impose the proper hijab, but now with the backing of the paramilitary Basij forces, and the two organizations will establish joint offices in local mosques across the country. Yet the protests have continued; crowds in Saqqez who gathered at the graveside of Mahsa Amini to mark the 40th day after her death, echoed the cry, “Death to the Dictator.”

The authorities persist in following their already discredited playbook. Last week, they announced public trials for the hundreds arrested during seven weeks of demonstrations. Mass trials are nothing new in Iran. Thousands of protesters crying “Where is my vote?” were arrested when President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad was elected to a second term in 2009, in what many regarded as a rigged ballot. Then arrestees appeared sitting in long rows on benches in a courtroom in a mass trial. Yet these courts have no legitimacy. The long prison sentences they issue, often to solitary confinement, are intended to intimidate would-be dissenters and protesters and their families. Another show trial seems to be in the offing.

With a younger generation that’s on edge and a population that’s had its fill of political repression, maladministration, sanctions and economic hardship, any incident could have ignited public anger and protests. But the current uprising was a product of the government’s own foolishness. Where the hijab was concerned, a kind of modus vivendi had been reached. Women covered in public, but with a skimpy scarf. In the more affluent, northern parts of Tehran and even in some residential areas in other cities, women wore their scarves loosely draped on their shoulders. By and large they were left alone.

Yet, out of the blue, President Raisi announced a few months ago that government offices, banks and other organizations had to require the strict Islamic hijab; once again, the Morality Police (Gasht-e Ershad) began to try to enforce the hijab on the streets. It was this ill-considered order that led to the arrest of Mahsa Amini for infringement of the dress code, her beating while in custody, her death, and the explosion of protests.

The regime must have believed that, as previously, they could contain the demonstrations in a few days. In the past several years, there have been protests against the high cost of living, unpaid salaries, and a rigged election. On each occasion, the Basij forces and the riot police were called out; and soon arrests and repression worked. The crowds were dispersed, and the protests died down.

This time, however, has proven different. The regime didn’t count on the perseverance of the demonstrators, the enduring power of the slogan, “Women, Life, Freedom” or the international support that the image of a young woman killed simply over the matter of a scarf too loosely draped over the head would engender. The courage women showed facing the Basij, riot police and the other security forces galvanized women in Iran and also women’s groups and leaders around the world. The often-divided Iranian diaspora found a common cause and has played a

central role in publicizing the reports and videos coming out of Iran of the protests and the brutality of the security forces. They have organized marches and demonstrations in a number of cities and towns around the world.

By its ill-considered yet characteristic attempt to dictate to a people who have no say in how they are ruled, the regime let the genie out of the bottle; all its riot police, Basij forces, IRGC and their threats cannot force the genie back in.



Iranians woman protests a 22-year-old woman Mahsa Amini's death after she was detained by the morality police, in Tehran, Saturday, Oct. 1, 2022 AP Photo/Middle East Images

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A NEVER-ENDING STORY IN IRAN

November 29, 2022

The killing of Mahsa Amini while in the hands of Iran's Morality Police six weeks ago was yet again an example of violence against women perpetrated by the Islamic Republic—and the violence has been not only physical, but social, legal, and economic as well. The constitution of the Islamic Republic guarantees equality of all its citizens under the law; but, in practice, the state continues to discriminate against women. Four articles of the constitution address issues related to women, but all within the framework of Islamic law provide ample room for discrimination. Neither the constitution nor the civil status law protects women's rights.

Under the Islamic Republic, physical violence against women starts in the home and extends into the society. While today Iran is a male-dominated country, before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the state did not impose a uniform dress code on women; women were free to choose to veil or not to veil. Within weeks of the revolution, however, the Islamic hijab became mandatory. Men welcomed it; it gave them the means to control their women folk. But most women, especially women of the younger generation, rejected this attempt by the state to dictate how they dressed. When they came out to protest on the streets of Tehran, they were attacked by vigilantes, and the police did nothing to stop the attackers.

Since then, women have ignored the dress code in small and increasingly bolder ways, and they have paid for it. Under the law of retribution, adultery is punishable by stoning and violating the hijab is punishable by seventy lashes. Many young and middle-aged women received this punishment—a striking example of the state practicing corporal violence against women.

The Islamic Republic imposed other legal manacles on women. The pre-revolution and hard-won personal status law was suspended. This meant a man could once again unilaterally divorce his wife and notify her by mail. Child custody was only granted to the mothers under strict conditions until the child reached a certain age. The age of marriage for girls was reduced to nine (the supposed age of puberty). Family courts, where women could seek recourse on a range of issues including domestic violence, which was on the rise, were suspended. Polygamy was once again permissible, allowing men to take a second, third, or fourth wife without the permission of his existing spouse(s). During the Iran-Iraq War, the late President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani urged women to patriotically let their husbands marry war widowers.

In fact, during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, many families lost their male breadwinner; the number of families run by women grew, and women were forced to join the labor force to feed their families, while at the same time looking after their children. Yet they faced employers who preferred to hire men; even professional middle class women were forced to settle for menial jobs for which they were overqualified. This has remained the pattern in the Islamic Republic. Employ-

ers feel more comfortable with male employees. Many working women in Iran with whom I've talked over the years spoke of the discrimination and male resentment they faced at their places of work. One friend told me: "Violence does not necessarily mean being beaten up by your husband; it is also your employer, not even looking into your eyes, informing you he preferred to give the promotion you deserved to your male colleague because, after all, he is the breadwinner in the family." This is an attitude encouraged by the state.

A striking feature of the current widespread and continuing protests in Iran, which are pushing the country to the brink of revolution, is they were triggered by violence against a woman. It was women who came out into the streets with the slogan, "Woman, Life, Freedom." One can add that, bizarrely, when it comes to the use of brutality to crush these protests, the regime is treating men and women equally. Women, like their male counterparts, have paid dearly for demanding an end to violence, for the rule of law rather than of religion, for equality under the law, and for economic opportunity for all, not just the men in power. So far, at least 27 women have been killed, and a large number of women have been arrested. According to CNN, women and young girls, as well as men, are being physically abused and raped — another horror account of what they face in prison simply for protesting peacefully on city streets.

IRAN: A REGIME AT A LOSS?

December 12, 2022

In a double-cover issue, *TIME* magazine named Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky “Person of the Year”; while it deservedly named Iranian women “Heroes of 2022.” Zelensky is courageously fighting aggression by a foreign invader. Iranian women are courageously fighting aggression by a government against its own people. The protests they launched in the name of Mahsa Amini, the young woman from Iran’s Kurdistan region who was killed by the morality police, have grown into an uprising of the nation’s young against a brutally repressive government.

The regime may have expected that, as in the past, the use of arrests, imprisonment and killing of demonstrators would bring a quick end to the protests. But not this time. The protests are now in their eleventh week, and the target is no longer simply the imposition of the hijab on women; the target is the regime itself.

To the initial and highly popular slogan of “Woman, Life, Freedom” has been added the cry of “Death to the Dictator,” meaning the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who symbolizes the regime. And while the young in universities, high schools, and even elementary schools have remained the principal engine of the protests, there have also been scattered strikes by factories and—ominously for the government—days when shops and bazaars in cities across the country have shut down in sympathy with the protestors.

The regime’s crackdown

Confronted by a younger generation that refuses to be intimidated, the regime has continued to rely on brute force. But it is also showing some signs of confusion or uncertainty on how best to bring an end to this uprising. The crackdown, if anything, has grown more vicious. *The Guardian*, in a December 8 article based on sources in hospitals, wrote that the Basij paramilitary forces were deliberately firing at women’s faces and genitals in order to disfigure them. Earlier reports stated that the Basij were shooting at men’s eyes and blinding them. CNN and Iran Wire have reported that young women and men taken to prison are being raped.

According to Human Rights Activists in Iran, some 18,000 people have been arrested and nearly 500 killed. Among the dead are 50 or more children and 43 women. Trials behind closed doors have also begun. The courts have so far found eleven people guilty of “waging war against God”—a concept from early Islam that is a convenient catch-all for the revolutionary courts to use against dissidents and sentence them to death.

Under this charge, on December 8 the government sentenced and executed a young man of 23, Mohsen Shekari, for allegedly stabbing a Basiji. The trial took place without a public hearing,

and he was denied his own lawyer, leaving no way of verifying the accuracy of the charges. The execution has understandably alarmed families of those found guilty of the same—“waging war against God.” The mother of another young man convicted of the same crime has been begging people—anyone—to help save her son from execution. Today, the regime held its second execution of a protester in the city of Mashhad, Majidreza Rahnavard, 23, also accused of stabbing a Basij officer.

In public statements, the regime remains firm in its condemnation of the protesters as “rioters” and the instruments of foreign powers. However, on some issues, the remarks of its spokesmen are also contradictory—an indication, perhaps, that the government is at a loss on how to deal with a protest movement against which force has not proved effective enough. On one hand, the head of the judiciary, Mohseni Ejei, told the Basij forces to show no leniency toward the protesters. Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi praised the Basij for their effective work.

On the other hand, the attorney general, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, announced that the Morality Police will be suspended from the streets. Almost immediately, a member of parliament insisted that the enforcement of the hijab is here to stay. (For good measure, he added that women who violate a soon-to-be-announced set of regulations on the hijab will have their bank accounts frozen). To add to the confusion, a spokesman for the Office of Promoting the Good and Forbidding Evil offered the view that enforcement of the hijab must continue but in “newer” ways and by the use of “electronic” means. In the meantime, women have been going about freely ignoring the hijab, even as the government goes on killing people because it fears the demonstrations will grow and overwhelm it.

Others show support

We are also hearing dissenting voices from some former high officials and members of the elite. They are speaking out against harsh measures, advising moderation, and paying attention to the complaints of the protesters. Last week, former President Mohammad Khatami spoke out against the harsh measures employed by the security forces and advised the government to address the demands of the people. He praised the slogan of “Woman, Life, Freedom” and spoke highly of the students and university professors, saying “Freedom and security should not be treated as in opposition to one another and that as a result, freedom is trampled under the pretext of maintaining security or that security...is ignored in the name of freedom.”

Former foreign minister Javad Zarif, the former speaker of parliament Ali Larijani, Alireza Beheshti, the son of one of the founders of the revolution Mohammad Beheshti, and the grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini, Hossein Khomeini, have all advised the government not to use force and listen to the grievances of the demonstrators. Badri Hosseini Khamenei, the sister of Ayatollah Khamenei and her daughter, Farideh Moradkhani, both criticized the Supreme Leader for the way the regime has handled the protest movement of the young. Mrs. Khamenei went so far as to

ask the Revolutionary Guards to lay down their arms. Her daughter referred to the regime as a “child-killing regime.” Moradkhani was imprisoned after the tape of her talk was circulated on social media and sentenced to 3 years in prison.

It is unlikely that the regime will listen to these voices of moderation. At the moment, it also seems unlikely that the young women and men of Iran’s Gen Z—the true heroes of this uprising—will leave the streets. The outcome of this confrontation is anybody’s guess. It still hangs in the balance.



Protestors take part during a demonstration in front of the Iranian embassy in Brussels, Belgium on Sept. 23, 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini. Alexandros Michailidisshutterstock.com

WHAT WENT WRONG? FOR WOMEN, EVERYTHING

February 1, 2023

On the 1st of February 1979, exactly 44 years ago today, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran's revolution, returned from his 14-year exile in Iraq and Paris to be received by a euphoric population. For nearly a year leading up to his return, strikes and demonstrations had swept Iran's towns and cities; what began as a protest against economic and political conditions grew, under Khomeini's leadership from abroad, into a demand for the overthrow of the monarchy and its replacement by an Islamic government. Their slogan was, "Independence, Liberty, Islamic Republic." Now, on this crisp February morning, millions poured into the streets to welcome Khomeini home, anticipating a new dawn and a new era of freedom, prosperity, and justice for all. Khomeini himself, it was thought, would retire to the shrine city of Qom, leave actual governing to others, and serve as the spiritual leader and religious guide of the country.

Before this long-awaited moment, expectations were high everywhere. When asked, a bookstore owner told me he thought the revolution would bring "democracy." One of Iran's leading intellectuals described Khomeini as the "Gandhi of Iran." A friend, dismissing concerns about the consequences of regime upheaval, remarked, "Once the Shah is gone, everything else will fall into place." Middle and upper-class women, who had never observed anything resembling the hijab, in a gesture of respect to the revolution Khomeini was leading in the name of Islam, donned scarves to join the massive marches taking place in cities and towns across the country. Warnings and notes of caution went unheeded. I remember the mother of a friend, a woman in her seventies, telling her daughter: "Do you know how hard women of my generation worked to end the hijab and now you people are going back to it voluntarily?" But her daughter and many other women friends who had joined the revolution believed this was merely a temporary accommodation: "Things will go back to normal, and we will finally have the democracy we desire."

The regime shows no mercy

In fact, things did not turn out as expected. The revolution consolidated the power of the clergy, the radicals and the violent. Almost immediately, the revolutionary terror began: there were purges, arrests, trials, and grisly executions. On street corners, young vigilantes in fatigues and armed with sub-machine guns stopped cars and demanded to see IDs. Revolutionary committees sprang up all over the country, arresting people and hauling them before self-appointed revolutionary courts and the unmerciful judgements of self-appointed judges.

For women, too, the hammer came quickly in the form of the mandatory hijab and much more. Banks, government offices, schools, and shopkeepers reminded women times had changed; they had better observe the hijab and the new dress code. This dress code included a baggy, long coat

coming down to the ankles, referred to as the “manteau,” a scarf completely covering the hair or a black hood, the *maghna’e*, that covered the head and fell down on the shoulders, and—always—clothing in dark colors. Bright colors were considered frivolous and immodest.

Women were soon purged from decision-making positions in government departments, and women and men were segregated in public places, government offices, and university classes. Male teachers could no longer teach in girls’ schools, and women were barred from certain fields of study at universities.

The long road back

Within a month, on March 8, 1979, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, thousands of women in the city of Tehran marched to the prime minister’s office to protest the imposition of the hijab. It did them little good. The protest was attacked by vigilantes, and the government refused to back off, nor, in an atmosphere of renewed Islamic fervor, did the population in general support the women. The hijab was enforced with a vengeance. And a pattern was set from the first months of the revolution that was to be repeated in subsequent years: any serious protest, opposition, or dissent would be silenced by force—brutal force if necessary.

The Iran-Iraq War that broke out in 1980 and stretched out for eight years imposed an additional hardship on women. As men in large numbers went to the front and joined the fighting, women became the family breadwinners. They found themselves responsible for holding the family unit together, struggling to obtain scarce food rations, and desperately looking for jobs to survive.

For women, the post-war years were not an easy time either. As the situation normalized a bit, women started taking matters into their own hands. They pushed for equal access to education at every level, they forced their way into formal employment, and they pushed for changes in the personal status laws. Once the mourning for the war-dead was over, women dared once again to wear colorful clothing and to claim a voice in the political and economic affairs of the country. None of this was easy. It has meant a 44-year struggle for women to regain their lost rights, and to end government interference in their daily lives and the imposition of what to wear and how to live and behave.

An explosion was bound to occur, and it came in September of last year when the young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, was killed in hands of the Morality Police. Her brutal death triggered an uprising by young women, who were soon joined by young men. What we witnessed in Iran over the last few months was the uprising of Iran’s Gen-Z. Their protests have been a striking rejection of the regime of the clerics. 44 years after the euphoric reception of Ayatollah Khomeini and the high expectations that accompanied the establishment of his government. Their slogan, ringing out from the windows of homes and apartment buildings in the dark of night has been, “Death to the Islamic Republic.”

FOR IRANIAN WOMEN, A BITTERSWEET CELEBRATION

March 7, 2023

Women around the world are preparing to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8. But the preoccupation among women in Iran will be with the mysterious and widespread cases of poisoning of girls (and in fewer cases, of boys) in schools across many parts of the country. The first cases appeared in the city of Qom in November, where 18 schoolgirls fell ill and needed to be hospitalized. Since then, over 900 girls have suffered from similar symptoms in schools in Tehran, Ardabil, Kermanshah, Isfahan, and other towns and cities. Some of the victims have been hospitalized with heart palpitations, numbness in their hands, and nausea. Many reported dizziness and a foul smell, as of rotten fish or rotten fruit, in classrooms.

The Minister of Health, Bahram Eynollahi, was initially inclined to downplay the seriousness of the outbreak, describing the symptoms as only of 'light poisoning'. But the BBC has reported videos of schoolgirls being loaded into ambulances and lying in hospital beds. While in many cases the symptoms disappeared in a short period of time, in others, girls continued to feel ill for a long period of time. The minister himself spent hours visiting girls in the hospital in Qom. While he initially asserted that investigating the causes of the poisoning was not necessarily the Health Ministry's responsibility, he later announced a committee of the best toxicology experts in the country would work to determine the cause of these poisoning cases. President Ebrahim Raisi has also ordered an investigation, but, in a reflection of the government's confused and often contradictory response to the illness outbreak, on March 3 he blamed Iran's "enemies" for the poisoning of schoolchildren. On March 6, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, in brief remarks said the perpetrators must be severely punished once identified. This was an admission that the poisonings were a deliberate act.

The promise of a thorough investigation will not quiet public suspicions. 'Investigative committees' and 'committees of enquiry' under the Islamic Republic usually end up in a whitewash or are dragged out until people lose interest. After the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Morality Police on September 13 last year—the incident that led to months of protest demonstrations—President Raisi promised an investigation into the circumstances of Mahsa's death and an early report. Now, six months later, there is still no report; the government has forgotten about the promised investigation.

In the absence of any meaningful official explanation for these widespread cases of poisoning-attributed illness, rumors have been rife, and members of the public have come up with their own ideas. According to the BBC, some girls and their mothers believe the suspected poisonings are a punishment for girls who took part in the recent protests. Others believe the aim is to discourage girls from attending school or an attempt to close down girls' schools altogether. Surprisingly, this was an idea articulated by none other than Younes Panahi, the deputy Minister of Health. "It became clear that some people wanted all schools, especially girls' schools, to be shut down," he

said. But Panahi quickly retracted his statement, claiming he was misquoted.

But if such were the aims of the unexplained poisoning outbreak, the authorities will be disappointed. They should know by now that the young women of Iran's Gen-Z cannot be easily intimidated. For the last six months, beatings, tear gas, arrests, imprisonment, and rape while in custody failed to deter young women from continuing to come out in large numbers to protest the killing of Mahsa Amini. The government's attempt, in these last few months to reimpose some form of the Islamic hijab has basically failed and its future remains shaky. In many neighborhoods of Tehran and other Iranian cities, women have discarded their hijabs altogether, and women with and without the hijab mix in public. Clearly wary of another uprising, the Morality Police are leaving women alone for the time being.

More broadly, for this younger generation, there is no turning back to conditions that existed before last year's uprising. Women draw encouragement from the massive support they received and continue to receive from the Iranian diaspora and its effort to draw media attention to the struggle of Iranian women. Women in Iran also know that their movement has energized women's movements, civil society and human rights groups from North America to Australia, from New Zealand to Europe. There is hardly an activist group that is not now familiar with the slogan birthed by the death of Mahsa Amini: "Woman, Life, Freedom." International recognition provides the incentive for Iranian women to continue their long struggle for freedom and rights. Despite unending official harassment and repression, on this International Women's Day, Iran's women have something to celebrate after all.

A HIGH PRICE TO PAY FOR IRANIAN WOMEN

April 13, 2023

The Iranian government is continuing and even expanding its fierce and relentless war against Iranian women who ignore the Islamic hijab. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, last week described the hijab as a requirement of Islam and the law. Ignoring it, he added, is “forbidden both under Islam and politically.” His language, insistent and unbending, provides a key, or perhaps is the key, to the Islamic Republic’s renewed obsession with the hijab.

The expectation among many observers was that the death of the young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, while in the custody of the Morality Police for violating the hijab, and the widespread protests that ensued, would lead the government to ease up on hijab enforcement. Instead, however, the regime has responded with a severe crackdown on any violation of the hijab.

The end of flexibility

Ayatollah Khamenei himself initially, referring to what he called “weak hijab,” said women who don’t observe the strict hijab should not be termed as “without religion and anti-revolutionary,” suggesting some flexibility regarding the hijab issue. No more. And government officials and organizations have echoed his stance.

The Ministry of Interior earlier announced that hijab rules will remain in place, and that women who ignore these rules will face consequences. Shopkeepers and banks were ordered not to serve women without the hijab and to require their female employees to fully cover their heads and hair with the requisite black hood. In a second announcement last week, perhaps issued lest the public think they detected a slackening in official determination, the ministry said: “Regarding the hijab we will not retreat.”

Iranian President Raisi has reminded citizens that the hijab is “the law of the land.” A member of the Majlis, or parliament, issued a kind of ultimatum to the government: either the cabinet come up with new laws to enforce the hijab or the Majlis will do so. The head of the Tehran police, General Ahmad Reza Radan, warned that cameras will be set up in public places to identify loosely-scarved women, and those so identified will face a judge in court. There has been talk of penalizing ‘non-observant’ women with heavy monetary fines or confiscating their driving licenses or passports.

One bank president was dismissed and a number of shops closed down and sealed because women without scarves covering their hair were allowed to enter and were served. In one case, two women entering a shop were arrested for not observing the hijab and the shop was closed—although only for a day or two.

The government phalanx

In addition, several cases were reported in numerous towns and cities of schoolgirls experiencing illness and nausea, resulting, it was thought, from some kind of gas. Many believed the perpetrators were members of agencies connected to the government and that the intent was to punish young students for supporting the anti-hijab, anti-government protests.

There was also at least one case where a member of the public took matters into his own hands. Ten days ago, near the city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran, a man in a grocery store poured a large container of yoghurt on a mother and daughter he considered improperly dressed. Ironically, it was the women who were arrested. (The yoghurt-thrower was arrested too, but later released).

For a brief moment, there was one small sign of a crack in the regime's seemingly solid phalanx of government officials denouncing hijab non-observance. The chief of the judiciary, Mohseni Ejei, in the early days of the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini threatened women protesters with prosecution "without mercy." But in a speech last week, he conceded that "arresting and imprisoning" for the sake of compulsory hijab has come "with a high price." He added: "We won't get desirable results if we seek to solve cultural problems" by force. If his remarks suggested a split in the leadership regarding hijab policy, it was short-lived. Last week, he called for support of the security forces in the performance of their duties and ordered all judicial officials to work in support of government policies.

The regime's monster

What can explain this renewed and fierce obsession with hijab rules? After all, preceding the current crackdown, a kind of *modus vivendi* had been reached between the government and women seeking to choose for themselves how to appear in public. Traditional women continued to observe the strict Islamic hijab; some women wore only scarves, but fully covered their head and hair; others wore their scarves very loosely; and some abandoned the headscarf altogether. There were occasional confrontations, but by and large, the government and Morality Police appeared willing to let things be. But then, eight months following the death of Mahsa Amini and the demonstrations that turned quickly into protests against the regime itself, came the current crackdown.

Several possible explanations come to mind. Despite the brutality of the security forces, the recent protests continued week after week for eight months. Young women and men—Iran's Gen-Z—proved that they no longer fear the government, the religious leadership, or the security forces. The threat of physical mistreatment, arrest, prison and even death did not deter them. The regime's nightmare is loss of control over this younger generation.

Moreover, the hijab has become a symbol of something much more fundamental in its implications. For women (and all those who joined them in the protests), freedom from hijab rules has

become synonymous with the aspiration for freedom itself. And for the regime, insisting on and imposing the hijab has become synonymous with control, not only of women, but of society. It is precisely in this context that the Supreme Leader’s remark that the hijab violation is “politically illegal” must be understood. It is a recognition, on his part, that the struggle over the hijab is a political struggle—over the future of the Islamic Republic itself.

Eight months after the beginning of the protest movement against the hijab, and despite the current crackdown, the government appears still at a loss as to how to deal with women who are determined to resist the government. Against such women, threats have failed and are certain to continue to fail. Surely, the reasonable solution for the government would be to leave women to make their own decision whether to observe the hijab, and to stop constantly dictating how women should dress. The Islamic Republic has created a monster for itself called hijab. Regime officials must realize by now that hijab defiance will remain part of their daily life, and that the monster will continue to make their life miserable.



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THE MORALITY POLICE ARE BACK; OR ARE THEY?

July 28, 2023

Two weeks ago, Iran's Morality Police unexpectedly reappeared on the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities. They had been discreetly withdrawn after the death of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, while in police custody in September last year, which led to months of widespread anti-regime protests and demonstrations and a savage crackdown by security forces.

The latest harsh decision by parliament on how to confront women who don't observe the hijab is testimony to the authorities' deception. The reappearance of the Morality Police, announced by the police spokesperson, Montazeri al-Mahdi, signaled a renewed attempt by the regime to enforce the observance of the hijab on the country's women and girls. But, this time, rather than the severe response to the defiance of the hijab that led to last year's protests, the regime pretended to be trying a softer approach, a new ploy, that nobody believes will succeed.

The regime's new ploy

President Ebrahim Raisi expressed the view that success in achieving observance of the hijab requires a "polite" encounter between officials and women appearing in public without it. Such women, he said, were simply "uninformed," and notably, he did not label them violators of Islamic law. The head of the judiciary, Mohseni Eje'i, offered the view that moderation might be more effective than force in persuading women to observe the hijab.

Hossain Shariatmadari, the editor of the right-wing newspaper, *Kayhan*, reported that policemen and policewomen are dealing with women without the hijab with great respect, and seeking to "counsel" them to cover themselves. He also seemed to be trying to downplay the problem, claiming that the majority of women who had discarded the hijab have resumed wearing it—a claim belied by the widespread defiance of the hijab in cities and towns all over the country.

The new hijab enforcement campaign even has a new name, "Modesty and Hijab"—designed perhaps to emphasize a new approach and a renewed determination to enforce it. There are indications that the plan, now, is to make hijab violation a matter to be addressed by enacted law, rather than by the uncertain mercies of the Morality Police. The Judiciary Committee of the Majlis, or parliament, has been working with the government on such a law. It will specify when and how the hijab must be worn and the consequences for women, shopkeepers, banks, universities, artists and others who do not observe it. Once the law is passed, the judiciary will enforce it.

An intriguing question is the position of the Supreme Leader in this matter. Ayatollah Khamenei has described the hijab as an Islamic requirement on which there can be no compromise; in practice, it is he who sets the rules and the government and parliament that implements them. But Shariatmadari, the editor of *Kayhan* who is close to the Supreme Leader and often reflects his

views, has said the new hijab campaign was a decision taken by the president and the head of the judiciary, as if to distance Ayatollah Khamenei from the softer approach, or to shield him from blame if another explosion of public discontent follows.

Aftermath of the uprising

The protest movement, with its resounding cry of “Woman, Life, Freedom,” that followed the death of Mahsa Amini, and the harsh response of the security forces, resulted in the death of hundreds, the arrest of thousands, and then trials, mass trials, and long prison sentences. Credible accounts of torture, mistreatment and rape in prisons followed. The intensity of the protest movement and widespread support the protestors received from other countries and from the Iranian diaspora, came as a shock to the regime.

Moreover, women remained defiant. Post-protest, officials resorted to threats—such as the loss of cars and driver’s licenses, closure of bank accounts, and detection by street cameras—which proved ineffectual. Thus, the decision, at least for the moment, was to leave women alone. Those women who had worn the hijab have continued to wear it, and those who had stopped covering, in schools and universities, city streets and public spaces, and in some offices, continued to do so.

Yet it remains a question whether the regime, though shaken by last year’s protests, has yet fully grasped, or is willing to acknowledge, the deeper causes that propelled the uprising: the absence of freedom or the rule of law, widespread corruption, economic hardship, the wide chasm between the haves and the have nots, an unrepresentative government determined to control the personal lives of its citizens. Instead of addressing the people’s legitimate grievances, the regime continues to obsess over the hijab and acts as if its very survival depends on whether women dress modestly. A young woman is killed over a piece of head-covering, triggering an uprising, and instead of acknowledging that the causes are rooted in its own misrule, the government falls back on the comfortable (and false) claim that the widespread protests were instigated by foreign governments hostile to the Islamic Republic.

The voices in Iran that dare speak of the consequences of such heedlessness are few, but they exist. Former president Mohammad Khatami took the government to task for going after women once again. He warned of “the danger of the regime imploding from within” and said such an implosion “becomes more likely with measures such as the appearance, once again, of the Morality Police on the streets.”

With the anniversary of Mahsa Amini’s death approaching, common sense should have led the regime to keep the streets calm by not continuing to make an issue of the hijab and to leave women alone. On the contrary, the new law, when finally passed, suggests an even more severe crack-down. We may therefore be inching toward yet another explosion of “Woman, Life, Freedom.”

HIJAB, SEE-THROUGH CLOTHING, AND EXERCISES IN FUTILITY

August 10, 2023

While world headlines are focused on the important deal the US reached with Iran to release Iranian-American prisoners, the regime in Tehran has been equally busy with the new hijab law. Iran's President Ibrahim Raisi seems haunted by the idea of Iranian women continuing to go in public without the Islamic headdress. In fact, he can't stop talking about the subject. In a speech honoring "the defenders of the shrine"—a reference to Iranian troops who died fighting alongside the forces of President Bashar Assad in Syria—he made a point of promising his audience that the problem of hijab-less women will be settled very soon. They "should not worry," he said, as if Iranians are experiencing sleepless nights, worrying whether women are observing the *hijab* or not.

Iranians do worry—a lot—about abysmal economic conditions, inflation, the high cost of living, and the rise in food prices. They resent rampant official corruption. They desire an end to interference in their private lives by meddlesome officials. They dream of a government answerable to the will of the people. They demand an end to long prison terms and executions of the young protesters who poured into the streets last year over the hijab and ended up calling for an end to the dictatorial regime. They want to see the 20,000 young women and men who were jailed during the protests and still awaiting trial or already serving time to be freed. Instead of addressing these serious issues topmost in people's minds, the regime continues to obsess over the 'grave' problem of hijab observance.

Following last year's severe crackdown on protesters, which proved futile so far, as hijab observance is concerned, the regime seemed to have concluded that it was best to leave women alone to choose whether or not to wear it. But in early August, the Morality Police reappeared on the streets as the Judiciary Committee of the Majlis, or parliament, was considering a new law to enforce hijab observance.

At the same time, numerous other security forces came out on city streets to reinforce the efforts of the Morality Police. Tehran municipality is due to send out its own team called the "Hijab Wardens." Its job, according to regulations still under discussion, will be to ensure women observe the hijab when boarding the metro. While the Hijab Wardens will not have the authority to arrest or fine violators, this is small comfort to women. There are several other security forces with such authority.

Meanwhile, there is the serious, yet laughable new law drafted and approved by the Judiciary Committee, with no less than 70 articles being considered by Parliament. The law bears the resounding title of "Hijab and Modesty." Once the law is enacted and approved by the Guardians Council, a body of 12 clerical experts in Islamic law, it will be ready for implementation by the government.

The law will criminalize violating the mandatory *hijab*, imposing heavy fines or prison terms. A provision under consideration will allow the judiciary to withdraw such fines directly from the person's bank account and block an account holder's access to her own account.

Businesses that allow women without the hijab on their premises will face heavy fines and the possible closure of their business for still-to-be-specified periods of time. A friend who is a shopkeeper in Tehran told me that, to avoid calamity, he has tens of headscarves stacked up in front of his shop. An employee hands them to scarf-less customers as they walk into the store and urges them to wear it.

Other provisions of the law would delight the anchors of late-night political satire shows like Saturday Night Live, had they existed in Iran. The law is intended "to stop the spread of the culture of nudity, unchastity, hijab-lessness and ill-dressing." What precisely these vague terms mean is anybody's guess. Women are barred from wearing in public "see-through" clothing and tight-fitting dresses that emphasize the shape of their bodies, or dresses that expose any part of the body "below the neck and above the ankle." And lest men feel left out, they too are prohibited from wearing "see-through" outfits, or clothing that leaves bare their chests, shoulders, or anything above their ankles. (The parliamentarians seem to be guarding against the imaginary. During many visits to Iran in earlier years and in conversations with friends since then, I have never seen or heard of women or men walking around in see-through clothing).

In the new law there is once again discussion of reimposing male-female segregation on university campuses, in workplaces, and places of medical practice. In the early years of the Islamic Revolution, the regime tried to segregate university classes and bar male doctors from treating female patients and women doctors from treating male patients. But this impossibly impractical measure was short-lived. On university campuses, the government settled for having male students sit on one side of the classroom and women on the other, while banning intermixing and even conversation between male and female colleagues. All these measures soon fell by the wayside. Now, four decades later, in their mystifying wisdom, Iran's parliamentarians are reverting once again to these exercises in futility.

IRAN: WHY SO MANY DRASTIC MEASURES?

August 30, 2023

Two weeks before the first anniversary of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini's death in police custody and the many months of revolutionary uprisings that followed Iran's Islamic Republic has bared its iron fist towards the families and other Iranians preparing to pay their respects to the dead—over 500 women and men who sacrificed their lives and futures for the cause of "*Woman, Life, Freedom.*"

Preventing a resurgence of protests

The regime has opted for a massive show of force and drastic measures to intimidate and crush all possible anti-government demonstrations. A month ago, it sent the Morality Police back to the streets of Iranian cities, which were quietly withdrawn last October, and is putting in place additional security forces to ensure women observe the Islamic head covering, or hijab. The regime's message is that not only will women who don't cover properly be targeted, but all demonstrations and protests on the streets, universities, and other public places will be crushed. The reason is clear: the regime fears it will be unable to contain or control a revival of the protest movement ignited last September. Nor, apparently, does the regime feel it can afford once again to arrest thousands and kill several hundred of its young citizens. Thus, early preparation of preventive measures is essential.

Last week, the BBC reported widespread arrests of women activists by judiciary and security forces in Gilan, Mahabad, Oshnouyeh, Tehran and Tabriz. The Gilan activists, with the usual hyperbole, were accused of "Preparing the ground for fomenting riots and insurrection in the Gilan province and some cities in the Kurdistan province." Families who sought information about where their women were being held were given none. Over 200 gender and political researchers, artists and journalists in Iran and the diaspora have protested the arrest of the activists in Gilan and other provinces, as well as the false accusations brought against them.

The regime is also threatening the families of the protestors killed during the demonstrations last year. These families are, by implication, being warned not to hold observance ceremonies, visit the graves of their loved ones, or pay their respects to those who lost their lives during the uprisings. Reports are circulating that shopkeepers and businesses have been warned not to close their premises to mark the anniversary. The deputy head of the judiciary also warned protestors who were pardoned by the Supreme Leader and freed from prison not to participate in any new demonstrations; if arrested for a second time, they would have to face harsh punishment, he said.

No segments of society are safe

The regime has also been purging academics from universities across the country that supported the students who participated in last year's demonstrations and protested the arrests and im-

prisonment of their colleagues. The targeted institutions include Tehran University, Iran's 'mother' institution of higher education, and Sharif University, a technical institution widely considered Iran's MIT, where the country's leading engineers and scientists are trained. A substantial number of students have also been barred from attending classes and completing their studies.

These measures represent a throwback to the so-called 'cultural revolution' of the early days of the Islamic Republic when large numbers of professors were dismissed from universities. Iran's syndicate of university professors has publicly condemned the "destructive interference" of security and intelligence forces in university affairs. The regime is replacing dismissed professors with less qualified academics. One professor compared this purge to the thirteen-century Mongol invasion of Iran, spreading waste and destruction everywhere.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Higher Education is revising the humanities curriculum of subjects like Western philosophy and dropping several topics, including English language and literature, cinematography, and sculpture. It also expands the teaching of Islamic philosophy, Islamic law and Islamic ethics. According to some reports, a number of universities across the country will admit fewer women and are considering total segregation of women and men in university classes.

Even athletes and athletics have not been spared in this new crackdown. Last week, the people of Tehran woke up to astonishing news. On the eve of a popular national soccer tournament, whose matches are attended by tens of thousands of Iranians, bulldozers were busy demolishing the spectator stands in Tehran's largest stadium. Only last July, under pressure from international soccer organizations, the government decided women could attend these games – albeit sitting in segregated stands. The reason behind the recent demolition seems clear: the government cannot afford to have tens of thousands of male and female spectators under one roof. The regime also cannot risk the probability that the majority of women will remove their hijabs or the high likelihood that the spectators will not only cheer the players but convert their cheering into slogans against the regime.



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Iranian Protests in the Middle East Context

Articles by Gender and Iranian Experts

October 2022 – March 2023



WHEN DO PROTESTS SUCCEED? THE CASE OF IRAN AND THE ARAB WORLD

By Haleh Esfandiari and Marina Ottaway on October 17, 2022

Iran is in the midst of an uprising precipitated by women. Women across Iran are protesting the attempt of President Ebrahim Raisi's government to re-impose strict hijab rules, as well as the death of Mahsa Amini, a young woman who was arrested for wearing the hijab improperly and was subsequently killed while in police custody. Since her death, the wave of protests has spread across the country and included people of all walks of life. The Tehran and Shiraz bazaars closed for a day in solidarity with the demonstrators, and the workers in parts of the petrochemical industry in the south went on strike on October 10 also to show their support.

Precursors to protest

The current protests are only the latest in a long series that started with the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The uprising was successful in overthrowing the Shah, but soon after, Iranians discovered that the Islamic Republic did not lead to the freedom, economic prosperity, or justice they expected, and disappointment began to set in. In just a few months, women were out in the streets to protest the imposition of the mandatory hijab. They were supported by a handful of men but opposed by a large crowd.

Their attempt to change the hijab law didn't go anywhere; however, the spirit of protest persisted. In 2009, hundreds of thousands of people crying, "Where is my vote?" came out into the streets to protest a presidential election rigged in favor of the government favorite, Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, and defeat of Mir-Hossein Moussavi, a former prime minister, the Green Movement candidate and popular choice. As the demonstrations grew larger, the military stepped in to arrest, imprison, torture, and kill protestors. In those demonstrations, a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, became the face of the uprising after she was killed by a plain-clothes policeman. In 2017 and 2018, demonstrations took place over the high cost of living and low level of income. Demonstrators even called for the Supreme Leader to step down. In 2019, high petrol prices were the cause of widespread protests. Despite the courage and determination showed by Iranians, particularly the Iranian women who took part alongside men, the protests failed to bring about change. The only successful uprising so far has been that led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

The Arab countries had a similar experience in the past two decades, with popular mass movements that did not succeed in bringing about the desired change. Beginning in December 2010, a wave of uprisings swept through Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen. A second wave involving Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon started in 2018. The outcome of these movements was limited, despite the initial high hopes generated by the willingness of people to take to the streets in open defiance of their government. Some managed to force the incumbent government out of

power, but not to install new, more democratic regimes. In the most tragic cases, Syria, Libya and Yemen, the outcome was wars that have still not abated. In the most successful countries, Tunisia in the first wave and Sudan in the second, there was some progress towards democracy, at least temporarily.

The importance of organizing

What explains why the Khomeini revolution succeeded and all other uprisings in that country failed? Or why did protestors in Tunisia and Sudan have some success while they failed elsewhere? The key factors, closely connected, appear to be leadership and the existence or emergence of organization among the protestors. Spontaneous uprisings can draw huge crowds demanding change, produce dramatic pictures and make headlines across the world, but in the absence of strong organization and leadership, they eventually succumb to government repression.

The protests and demonstrations that led to the 1979 revolution were highly organized and persisted for almost a full year. Millions of protestors calling for change came out on the streets in towns and cities across the country. Widespread strikes in the oil industry, government ministries and other sectors, in addition to bazaar shutdowns, disrupted day-to-day life and paralyzed the economy and government activity. The clergy, led by Ayatollah Khomeini from exile in Iraq, was instrumental in organizing mass marches; their followers distributed leaflets and cassette tapes of Khomeini's statements. The mosques became foci for political organization, and the leading clerics in towns and cities used Friday sermons to arouse their congregations and spur them into opposition activities.

In Tunisia, protestors were organized from the beginning because of the intervention of the labor unions. Meanwhile, the government side was in disarray, with the president leaving the country and failing to offer leadership. The outcome was an orderly process of electing a constituent assembly, in which political parties, including the Islamist Ennahda, played an important role. Despite setbacks at times, the democratization process seemed to be underway and for almost ten years, Tunisia was seen by many as an emerging success story for democratic transformation. But a new president, Kais Saied, intent on reviving the early unfettered power of the Tunisian presidency, thus his own power, put an end to the hope for democracy in July 2021 by suspending the parliament and curbing the role of political parties. The resurgence of authoritarianism was met with dismay by many Tunisians, although not necessarily by a majority. Most importantly, independent, organized civil society forces like the labor unions, that had made possible the initial transition, did not intervene. Tunisia is likely to return to the pre-2010 autocratic rule.

In Sudan, the initial spontaneous and loosely organized groundswell of rage against the military regime was transformed into an effective movement by the intervention of the professional associations, which had a long history of political activism. Coming together as the Forces of Freedom and Change, these groups managed to negotiate a complex transition process with the military,

including protracted periods of power sharing. The agreement, if fragile, has been challenged by the military, but so far, the civilian forces have been able to withstand the threat.

Implications for Iran

What are the short- and long-term prospects for the current protest movement? On one hand, there are signs the protests are spreading and growing in significant ways. Every day, new groups join the demonstrators and their supporters. Famous Iranian actors and actresses, athletes, artists, academics, and members of Iran's Bar Association have declared their support for the protestors. They have also called on the government to stop the killing of demonstrators and for the release of all detainees, including students, women journalists, activists, and others.

On the other hand, the prospects for organization and leadership are not good, because it is clear the government will immediately move against any identifiable groups or leaders. The head of the judiciary, Mr. Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei, invited the demonstrators to come forward to discuss their grievances. None of the protesters will probably heed this vague invitation to talk, considering it a ploy to identify any leaders of the protests and knowing full well that once such leaders come forward, they could be arrested, imprisoned, and put on trial. In fact, within two days of issuing his invitation to the protesters, Mr. Mohseni-Ejei urged judges to "show no weakness" when demonstrators are brought before them. History shows that without organization and leadership, prospects for success are dim.

The strikes and shutdowns will probably multiply. However, as made clear in the Supreme Leader's remarks a week ago and reiterated on Wednesday, the government is determined, once again, to crush all dissent by all the force it has at its disposal. It is too early to say how it will all end.

THE KILLING OF MAHSA AMINI SPEAKS TO WOMEN'S STRUGGLES IN MENA

By Merissa Khurma on October 27, 2022

This week, 40 days have passed since the death of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old woman from the Kurdish region of Iran, while in police custody in Tehran. Her crime: disobeying the Islamic Republic's dress code, requiring her to wear the *hijab*. Since Mahsa's death, thousands have taken to the streets of the capital as well as [50 other cities](#) across Iran to protest not only her death, but the hijab. They are calling for women's rights and objecting to the theocratic regime itself and its autocratic rule.

Iran has seen waves of protests against the regime in the recent past, starting with the 2009 Green Movement. However, these protests differ in scope because they are "led by women," as Iranian scholar Haleh Esfandiari notes. It is the woman factor in these protests that has inspired women across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to speak up, protest for women's rights, and stand tall in solidarity with the women of Iran.

Women across the region speak out

For many women across the MENA region, from Jordan to Bahrain and Egypt to Tunisia, the oppression and brutality that led to Mahsa's death is a story that hits too close to home. Akin to the women of Iran who are organizing, mobilizing, and keeping the pressure on the government today, many women's rights activists and women's groups understand that they have the power to lead the change they want to see. "What women are doing in Iran today is an extension to women's struggle for liberation elsewhere," noted Samar Saeed, a historian and women's rights advocate from Jordan. "In the past few years (2018 and 2019), women in Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan and Algeria protested against their oppression and demonization but also protested the political situation in those different contexts that hinder living in dignity and freedom for all people," she added.

In many countries across MENA, footage of Iranian women demonstrating, cutting their hair or burning the hijab and chanting, "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" (Woman, Life, Freedom) was widely shared, including in Arabic, French and English. "Numerous Tunisian women answered the call to demonstrate in front of the Iranian cultural center in Tunis, to show solidarity with Iranian women," noted Lilia Labidi, former Tunisian Minister of Women and Family Affairs. One political and civil rights activist in Tunis, Naila Qiddiya, [told](#) A24 News Agency in Tunisia that she and other women are "here in solidarity with women in Iran and against the tyranny they are subjected to, including forcing them to wear the hijab and suppressing their freedoms," adding that their presence is also a reminder that Tunisian women "face the same threat after the adoption of the

July 25th [Tunisian] constitution and under the new electoral system that excludes women and deprives them of their right to equality.”

Last month, Beirut witnessed demonstrations in support of Iranian women and their struggle for freedom. Many protesters were clear to note they are also protesting the patriarchy across the region. As one Lebanese protester [commented](#), this is not merely about the hijab, rather it is “about women’s right to choose.” Hundreds of women in Kurdish-controlled Northern Syria staged a protest in support of the women of Iran and their fight against the oppressive regime and its repressive policies. A member of the Kongra Star women’s rights organization there [noted](#) they demonstrate to say “no to injustice, no to oppression and yes to women’s rights.”

In neighboring Afghanistan, women remain steadfast in their [support](#) of Iranian women and they too have taken to the streets, not only to support their neighbors but to protest Taliban rule and the violence women and girls are subject to on a daily basis, particularly after the September 30 suicide attack at a Kabul educational center in which 53 girls were killed. As Leila Nabizada, a young Afghan woman who works on youth issues in her country wrote to me, “Most of the women lost their loved ones during the explosions and most of them lost their jobs, but besides all these pains and suffering, they are still protesting for the murder of a young woman who lived in our neighboring country.” She added, “It is honorable for us. It shows the strength, dignity and compassion of Afghan women.”

Old wounds opened

In Egypt, women’s groups likened what happened to Mahsa to what took place during the January 2011 revolution, in an incident known as the “Girl in the Blue Bra,” explained Radwa Elsaman, an Egyptian women’s legal expert. A young Egyptian woman who was protesting in Tahrir Square was dragged by soldiers and stripped of her clothes, revealing her blue bra and bare skin. While many activists condemned what happened at the time, when the Iranian authorities claimed that Mahsa died due to an illness, many Egyptians were reminded of Islamist activists and conservative sheikhs (religious clerics) who pointed their finger at this young Egyptian woman asking, “Why was she even in Tahrir Square?”

The hypocrisy in the approach from the religious establishment was another trigger for many in the region. Most of these repressive policies, especially when violence is involved, are pushed in the name of religion. In Bahrain, whose population is majority Shiite like Iran, Mahsa’s death sparked a “wide debate” about the wearing of the hijab. Wafaa Alaam, a Bahraini journalist, told me that while women’s groups “clearly expressed sympathy with Iranian women and their right to choose whether or not to wear the hijab,” conservative Shiite groups, “launched a fierce attack against it, considering the hijab a red line that is not negotiable,” adding that “wearing it is a settled issue as it is an order from God.”

A former Algerian Member of Parliament and women's rights advocate Kahina Bouagach told me that, "while it is painful to find words for such a revolting act," referring to the death of Mahsa and other young women in Iran in the last 40 days, she asked: "If such crimes against women's freedom to choose are publicly owned [by these states] without any international intervention, then how many women are oppressed, in private, when they are behind closed doors?" In fact, according to UN Women, one in three women worldwide has [experienced](#) some form of gender-based violence, mostly by an intimate partner, and in the Arab world, "37 percent of women have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime," with an alarming uptick during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Whether these acts of violence against women are on display in public or are tucked away in the name of private family affairs, the women-led protests in Iran and the solidarity shown across the MENA region by women's rights activists are a brutal reminder of the entrenched patriarchal systems that continue to strip women of their basic rights and freedoms. They are also a beacon of hope, showing that women have the agency and capacity to tap into their own power and lead change, not only for girls and women, but for the entire society. That sentiment is what many women feel deeply in the region. I certainly do and I am inspired.

WOMEN-LED PROTESTS IN IRAN EVOLVE: REGIME-CONTROLLED INDUSTRIES ARE THE NEXT TARGETS

By Elham Gheytauchi on November 14, 2022

Women have led mass protests in Iran for more than eight weeks now. From school-aged to university, young women in Iran are rebelling against the suppression and humiliation their mothers have endured over the past 43 years. Iranian women have played a major role in demonstrations since the 1979 revolution. They were key in social protests like the 2009 Green Movement and some actively participated in White Wednesdays, a social media campaign initiated by Masih Alinejad, an exiled reporter, in 2016.

So, it was no surprise that women poured into the streets after Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman, was killed by the “Morality Police” in Tehran in September 2022. However, what is surprising is how widespread, intergenerational, and multi-faceted this transnational movement has become. Young women and girls are chanting “Death to the dictator,” “Mahsa is our code,” and “No hijab, no force, we want freedom and equality.” It is not only the secular or unveiled women who are protesting and subjected to regime brutality, but also brave religious women such as [Fatemeh Sepehri](#), Faezeh Hashemi, and others who are protesting despite being imprisoned or threatened.

It is no surprise that President Ebrahim Raisi and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, have stated, once again, that the protests are provoked by the US and Israel and their spies inside Iran. It is also consistent with their logic to cover up the death of Mahsa Amini and many other young men and women who have been killed by the security forces. [Nika Shakarami](#), [Sarina Esmailzadeh](#), and [Asra Panahi](#) are among the young girls whose brutal killings are denied by the Iranian authorities; their families were forced to confess on state-run TV that their loved ones were “suicidal” or had “pre-existing disease” that led to their deaths. Reports indicate more than 350 people have been killed since September 14, 2022 in Ardabil, Zahedan, Rasht, Mashhad, Tehran, and other cities.

The movement evolves

The current social movement is spreading in the following ways: students in major universities (112 and counting) are on strike, high school students are walking out of classrooms, street protests are occurring almost every night, especially on Wednesdays, and on the traditional 40th day of passing of each ‘martyr’ killed by security forces.

However, a new tactic is at play. For the first time, people are [boycotting](#) Mihan products, a manufacturer of everyday goods and groceries that is tied to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and [more recently](#) Digikala (Iran’s Amazon) – another IRGC-controlled company.

The workers in the Mihan Company have [published](#) a video on social media denying their link to the government – indicating the boycotts are having an impact. Another company targeted is Zamzam, a bottled water company, whose directors are closely affiliated with the IRGC. Pictures published on social media show plain-clothed men cracking down on protesters in universities with bottles in their hands. The newest targets are Snap, Pegah, Refah, Etekah and Tapsi.

In addition, massive ranks of workers in major industries have [repeatedly](#) gone on strike due to poor salaries and unfair working conditions. The protests since September 2022 are not like the ones in 2009, 2018 or 2019. The protesters are young and brave; they no longer want mere reforms and have defied the crackdowns. Like the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the strikes are spread by workers. They include Southern Pars Industries (Asaluyeh and Bandar Abbas), Haft-Tapeh Neishekar, Kian Tire, Ghadir Steel Factory, Abadan Petroleum, Bushahr Petroleum, Petro Kangan, and more. When and if these strikes become widespread, the regime will indeed face an existential crisis.

Iran is under sanctions and its economy is weak. Thus, it relies on aggressive Russia, even at the cost of more sanctions, in an effort to keep the economy afloat. Both the Iranian working and educated classes want a meaningful say in the affairs of the country. Iranian women comprise 60 percent of the university graduates and are not satisfied with strict Islamic rule that governs every aspect of their lives. There is a huge Iranian diaspora in the US, Canada and Europe who have [announced](#) their solidarity with the demonstrations. The West can ensure a democratic future for Iranian society by unanimously obliging the Iranian government to guarantee women's and human rights.

[A determined regime](#)

To those who lived through the 1979 revolution, this might present an eerie resemblance to the days leading to Shah's departure. After all, 83-year-old Khamenei is also said to have cancer like the Shah. But the similarities end there. Rumors are spreading that the IRGC and the Basij, Iran's domestic paramilitary militia, can use their influence among Shia throughout the region to summon a wave of armed militia to target the "the enemies of Islam."

Another way the regime can suppress the protesters is by engaging in an armed conflict. The IRGC has recently [conducted](#) a military exercise in the Aras River on the border with Azerbaijan. During the past month, the military forces have bombarded Kurdish targets across the border in Arab and Balooch-populated areas of Sistan and Baloochestan. These are provocations that can easily lead to armed conflict and once a war is waged, the Islamic Republic will be able to execute its critics inside the country under the banner of "protecting national security."

The October 15 [fire](#) in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran, which killed eight, [shows](#) evidence of arson. Many dual citizens as well as political figures who oppose the regime are imprisoned there. Some European countries [called](#) the Iranian ambassadors to relay the message that all

responsibilities for the life of their citizens imprisoned in Evin lie with the Iranian government. For Iranians, the memory of Cinema Rex, which was set ablaze in 1978 by the Islamists, killing more than 400 people, was painfully invoked.

This is not history repeating itself. Khamenei is not the Shah and the national armed forces are not just the Army. The IRGC, the Basij, armed plain-clothed men, and foreign Shia armed and aided by Iran can undermine national will of the Iranian people. We are facing a multifaceted, aggressive, and expansionist government that claims to lead the Shia Muslims of the world. This is not the time to make deals with the Iranian regime.

What the world owes to Iranian people is a united and laser-focused approach to distinguishing the national will of the people from all other claims. What started as a public revolt against the regime's medieval subjugation of women, has already evolved into a sophisticated targeting of industries tied to its institutions. The world must stop now and listen. Reverberating in the streets of Iran is the will of all women to life and liberty.

IRAQ REACTS TO IRAN PROTESTS: WOMEN RECKON WITH HIJAB DEBATE

By Geneive Abdo on December 5, 2022

Since protests began in Iran this September over the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for allegedly violating the dress code in the Islamic Republic, theological debates have re-ignited in neighboring Iraq over whether Islam requires women to cover their hair and even if young schoolgirls should, too.

Iraq is a socially conservative yet officially secular country where wearing the headscarf, or *hijab*, is not compulsory as it is in Iran. Nonetheless, views on the issue between young female activists on social media and some clerics are vastly different. While educated urban women may be less fond of religious symbolism, such as the hijab, Iraqi society is polarized between them and others who believe Islam should play a role in governance, according to recent opinion polls.

New platforms

Iraqi women have joined the worldwide social media campaign in support of Iranian women, spreading the hashtag “#No_to_compulsory_hijab” which has trended on social media in Iraq. A new campaign against supporters of enforcing the hijab in public schools has surfaced on social media as well. The activists hope to investigate the scale of the practice, which has been debated on Iraqi television in recent weeks.

The campaign has prompted accusations online that these women activists are against Islam. For example, some clerics are speaking out, including Ayad Jamaladdin, a former member of the Iraqi parliament who was once described as progressive in media reports and who is a staunch opponent of Iran’s theocratic form of governance, *velayat e-faqih*. In recent Instagram posts, Jamaladdin criticized the women protesting in Iran and said they are “blinded by an inability to distinguish between Islamic principles and restrictions imposed by Iran’s regime,” which he implies are un-Islamic. “Certainly, the whores [the Iranian protesters] will not succeed in their efforts to destroy Islam and the integrity of Iran’s society,” Jamaladdin wrote on Twitter.

Such views are in sharp contrast to posts from Iraqi female activists. “Women’s clothing is not an invitation to harassment, and this does not give you permission to disrespect women, nor does it give you permission to slander them, nor does it give you permission to continue the guardianship and control of women’s bodies,” tweeted activist Dina Raad al Ayoubi, who is the director of Women’s Team for Women in Iraq and a mechanical engineer. She recently issued a questionnaire on Twitter, asking women to share their experiences of wearing a hijab in schools.

In one televised debate on the issue in late August on Al Sharqiya News, the female presenter asked a cleric, who she identified as Sheikh Nour, what the relationship is between wearing the hijab and having morals. The cleric answered that, “having morals is to abide by Islam,” implying that part of this morality is to wear a covering. But the cleric noted that veiling is not compulsory in Iraq and pointed to the presenter, who does not have a hijab, as an example.

Old debates

In September, the hashtag #No_to_forced_veiling trended on Twitter in Iraq after discussions emerged over imposing the veil on schoolgirls. Feminist activists launched a protest campaign calling for an official decision by the Ministry of Education to prevent “imposing the veil as a condition for academic admission” and to punish anyone who imposes it. Although veiling for young girls in schools is not officially required, school staff in some parts of the country pressure parents and girls to wear the hijab.

This debate between secularists, religious figures and Islamists has resurfaced, but did not [begin](#) with the protests in Iran. Over the last decade, the Ministry of Education has been called upon to ban the behavior of teachers and other school staff around the country who have not only applied pressure to wear the hijab but also to perform religious rituals during the Shia spiritual celebrations, such as self-flagellation.

At different times, Iraqi officials and religious figures have also called upon the Ministry of Education to restrict what they consider to be inappropriate dress in schools, or allow women and girls to display their beauty outside the home, referred to as *tabarruj*. On January 19, 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is the highest religious authority for Shia in Iraq and elsewhere, [replied](#) to an inquiry made by an Iraqi university student seeking his opinion on the phenomenon of *tabarruj* in colleges and other institutions. In a response published in various media outlets, Sistani said, “A woman’s spirit is not reflected in her *tabarruj* and ornaments, rather in her chastity and conservative appearance before other people.” His statements were considered to be in support of women dressing modestly in public.

Iraqi opinion divided

Like many countries in the Middle East, Iraq is a polarized society. Opinion polls indicate vastly different views on issues regarding the role of religion in the state and in the public sphere. Opinion polls conducted since 2019 show Iraqis increasingly favor a secular state that is divorced from religious influence. For example, a series of surveys conducted by Arab Barometer, a research organization at Princeton University, [concluded](#) that current political systems in countries like Iraq, serve to make religious identity more dominant. But in 2019 polling, Arab Barometer determined there had been a decline in trust in religious-based parties across the Middle East, even though there is more trust in religious leaders than the parties, which are perceived to be corrupt.

A recent [poll](#) published in November by the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center confirms this trend. In that poll, 47 percent of respondents who were interviewed in a nationally representative sample said the best system of government for Iraq should be a secular democracy with a clear separation between religion and state. The respondents live mostly in urban areas, are relatively educated and employed.

By contrast, a [survey](#) conducted by Chatham House, a London-based think tank, surveyed supporters of the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who is a key political figure. The survey, published in August, showed that 55 percent of his supporters living in Sadr City, a poor area of Baghdad, agreed with the idea that the government should rule in accordance with Islamic law.

These competing interests in Iraq bear only some similarities on a much smaller scale to the uprising in Iran, which some Iranians are now calling a “revolution” against the theocratic state ruled by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But the Iraqi debates reflect an ongoing question in the region of the role of Islam in society, which has been underway for at least thirty years. Now, a younger generation of women is pushing boundaries in new ways.

UNDERSTANDING ARAB RELUCTANCE TO REACT TO IRAN'S PROTESTS

By Omar Munassar on March 1, 2023

When protests in Iran broke out in September 2022 following the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini by the Morality Police, the world showed immediate support for the outraged Iranian women who took to the streets. Unlike before, these protests gained momentum as popular demands shifted from greater freedoms and economic reforms to the overthrow of the oppressive regime. The Iranian government's harsh repression, on the other hand, has sparked international condemnation and sanctions against officials and entities, including the Morality Police itself.

However, compared to strong responses from Western nations, Arab governments have stayed noticeably silent. This pattern of silence from Arab governments on internal Iranian issues, in contrast to Iranian involvement in Arab protests and revolutions, has been evident since the 2009 "green movement" in Iran and raises questions about the relationship between Arab states and Iran during times of popular upheaval. While certain Arab nations, [including](#) Saudi Arabia, harbor a desire for the downfall of the Iranian regime, their reluctance to engage with Iran's protests and internal politics is due to a multitude of challenges and constraints.

Politically

Many Arab governments, particularly those in the Gulf region, have a complex relationship with Iran. They may disapprove of the suppression of protests, but they also see Iran as a regional rival and may not want to give the impression of supporting domestic dissent, in effect allowing Iran to justify its interventionist policies elsewhere in the region.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, are grappling with the [uncertainty](#) surrounding the potential consequences of taking a unilateral adversarial approach towards Iran amid concerns about US security commitments and a decline in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, since the early days of the protests, Iranian authorities have repeatedly blamed foreign nations, including Saudi Arabia, for instigating the demonstrations.

In this vein, IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami [warned](#) the Saudi leadership, saying, "You are involved in this matter and know that you are vulnerable; it is better to be careful." This warning was in reference to media supported by Saudi Arabia, such as funding for Iran International TV, which broadcasts in both Persian and English from London. It also refers to other [Saudi-funded](#) media outlets like *Al-Arabiya* and newspapers like *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, *Okaz*, *Al-Riyadh*, and *Al-Madina*, as well as Qatari and Jordanian newspapers. *Arab News*, a Saudi English-language newspaper, even [dedicated](#) special coverage to the protests.

To such accusations, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the Saudi Foreign Minister, [stated](#), “A country that strengthens itself with good governance and a clear vision does not need to turn to the outside, and the Kingdom firmly adheres to the principle of non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs.” Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that Iran was planning to attack Saudi Arabia, either directly or through its allies, such as the Houthis in Yemen, allegedly to distract from the protests.

Indeed, there is a state of uncertainty regarding the trajectory of events within Iran that raises four concerns. First, it is unclear whether the current wave of protests will be more impactful than previous ones in affecting the regime. Given the past failures of protest movements to achieve their demands, it is understandable for Arabs to expect the current protests to fail or remain focused solely on reforms without aiming for regime change. Second is the possibility of a desperate retaliation from the regime on neighboring states and interests should the protests escalate to the point of overthrowing the government—the ‘Samson option’. Third is whether the support for the demonstrations will pressure the regime to respond positively to the JCPOA negotiations or vice versa. Fourth is what the new regime will look like if the mullahs’ regime [falls](#) (to avoid repeating the deception of the 1979 Islamic Revolution) and the role of opposition groups already plagued by sharp internal division.

Comparably, the silence and reticence of Arab capitals towards the Iranian protests are rooted in their varying relationships with Iran and their perceptions of the threat posed by the Islamic Republic. Countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain hold a hostile attitude toward Iran, while Iraq, Syria, and Algeria maintain close ties and similar ideologies. Oman tries to maintain a balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while Qatar has strong economic connections with Iran that have only grown stronger in recent years after the GCC blockade in 2017. In some ways, this explains *Al Jazeera*’s limited media coverage of the protests in Iran compared to that of the Arab Spring uprisings. But at least the Qatari Foreign Minister, in his interview with Bloomberg, [indicated](#) that, “We are opposing using violence by security forces against civilians whether a woman or a man. This is a domestic issue, and we don’t normally interfere in domestic issues with countries.”

Ideologically and morally

Arab governments may be hesitant to speak out against the Iranian government’s repression of protests due to their [fear](#) of a domino effect. This fear stems from the potential for revolutionary contagion, as seen in the Iran Islamic Revolution and Arab Spring uprisings, and the potential undermining of ideological ties with Iran. It is clear that since the Arab Spring uprisings, the change in the power dynamic in the region has worked in Iran’s favor, allowing it to expand the axis of resistance it leads, particularly to the detriment of Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, these Arab governments may avoid taking a stance on the issue to avoid drawing attention to their own [history](#) of suppressing protests and to prove their goodwill and non-interference in Iran's internal politics on the principle of good neighborliness—moral grandstanding. Thus, they believe this would strengthen their negotiating positions with Iran on outstanding and complex issues and strengthen their legitimacy in the international community.

Socially and culturally

Arabs and Iranians share the same region and religion. However, they both have proud and distinct heritage, speak different languages and follow different branches of Islam, with Arabs predominantly Sunni while Iranians are Shiite. These cultural and linguistic differences create communication barriers and binary stereotypes, making it difficult to understand each other's current common interests and demands.

Arab and Gulf media focus primarily on Iran's regional influence and power struggles but pay little attention to local issues such as popular protests and human rights violations against minorities. The lack of meaningful Arab media dedicated to in-depth coverage of Iranian society has heightened the divide between the Arab and Iranian peoples. The deliberate media stereotyping that portrays Iran merely through its regime and regional behavior, viewed from a narrow religious perspective, obscures the overall picture of Iranian society and erodes the trust and sympathy of the Arab public. Meanwhile, Iran has a [vast](#) media apparatus aimed at both the Arab and Iranian publics that reflects the views of the Iranian regime and presents political events through ideological and sectarian lenses.

Meanwhile, Arab elites, especially after the Arab Spring uprisings, continue to face restrictions on freedom of demonstration and expression. Indeed, this impedes their ability to back advocacy campaigns for the protests in Iran organized by civil society. Again, authorities are balancing a political equation that prevents them from officially supporting the protests in Iran. Nevertheless, some interaction with the protests, such as solidarity statements, condemnations, and vigils, can be observed in a few Arab capitals and elsewhere in the diaspora.

In Arab countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, which have close ties to Iran, any upheaval in Iranian politics could be viewed as a window of hope for those who grapple with their own internal struggles to challenge Iranian political influence.

In Lebanon, for example, Fe-male, a feminist organization, [held](#) a vigil to show support for the Iranian women protesting against mandatory veiling under the title "From us to you, [sending] all our love and support." The vigil featured slogans in Arabic and Persian, including mantra of the protesters, "Woman, Life, Freedom." Other activist groups [sought](#) to organize a protest in front of the Iranian embassy in Beirut, calling it, "From Tehran to Beirut, the killer regime is one," but failed amid threats from Hezbollah's militias.

In Iraq, some women on social media [launched](#) the “No to Compulsory Hijab” campaign to support Iranian women facing regime repression and the mandatory dress code. Also, in Tunisia, human rights and feminist organizations [held](#) a rally outside the Iranian Cultural Center to express their support for women in Iran. The demonstrators denounced the discrimination and mistreatment of women in Iran and chanted slogans such as “Tunisian women support Iranian women,” “Here to voice our solidarity with Iranian women,” and “revolution and freedom.”

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), along with a coalition of Arab feminist and human rights groups, [issued](#) a statement on October 7, 2022, to express solidarity. The statement, ‘We stand in solidarity with women and demonstrators in Iran,’ condemned the suppression of peaceful protests.

Finally

We likely won’t see decisive Arab reactions to the protests in Iran any time soon. Despite Arab grievances to Iran’s regional behavior, states will maintain political neutrality given the uncertain trajectory of the protests. Furthermore, they may fear exposing themselves ideologically if they endorse foreign protests. Lastly, in a cultural dimension, there is already a wide gulf between how Arabs and Iranians perceive each other. Despite what limited civic action we have seen, these factors inhibit any broad social expression of solidarity as seen in the west.

With the challenging and fading prospects of altering Iran’s behavior or the entire regime from within, Arabs still have other choices. These include waiting for a full-fledged revolution in Iran, capitalizing on international stances and sanctions, and luring its allies to abandon it, as were tried recently with China, Russia, and Iraq.

REFLECTION & EPILOGUE

By Brooke Sherman, Middle East Program Associate

This series of articles authored by Haleh Esfandiari and other gender experts showcases the hijab debate in Iran signifies more than an article of clothing or women's dress. The leadership in Iran aims to control how women are permitted to behave in public spaces and dictate what political, economic, and social opportunities they are allowed to access. The regime requires citizens to adhere to its view of a woman's contribution to society, stripping half its population of individual ambitions and desires. The response to Mahsa Amini's death and the protest movement that followed sends a distinct message: women will be expected to acquiesce to the leadership's dictatorship over their bodies; no matter how much progress women have made in regaining some of their basic rights since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, men intend to maintain supreme rule.

In response, women are sending a clear message of their own. For decades, they have risked arrest, injury, and even death to demand visibility and equal rights in public spaces. Over the past twelve months, they have organized a concerted, determined effort against the mandatory hijab – a relic of the Islamic Revolution and modern-day governance in Iran – in addition to the struggles Iranians face as a result of their tyrannical government. Girls as young as middle school age have embarrassed and undermined the men who want to decide whether they can learn alongside boys. Young women have risen as leaders, mobilizing support from across Iran and the world, to force the question of why they are not worthy of the same freedoms as their male and foreign counterparts.

For example, on June 12, 2006, activists spearheaded the [One Million Signatures](#) campaign to persuade the Majles, or parliament, to reform gender-discriminatory laws. Inspired by a campaign in Morocco of the same name, women aimed to dismantle the systems that grant men opportunities at their expense, in addition to educate citizens about the social implications of these harmful policies. Unfortunately, the government wielded its security apparatus against the campaigners, forbidding public seminars, shutting down its website, and arresting members. While activists pursued a strategic and determined effort – one that notably did not take aim at Islam – the regime's actions ultimately rendered the campaign what Haleh Esfandiari describes as stillborn.

While reading the series of articles, I am struck by the government's weakness and distress. Regime leaders are fearful of the anger they have ignited among the public over stealing their futures. President Ebrahim Raisi chooses to send his security forces to silence Iran's daughters and sons, its brightest minds and most fervent spirits, because he fears the power of their voice. In December 2022, *TIME* magazine named Iranian women Heroes of 2022 and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky Person of the Year. Haleh Esfandiari noted, "Zelensky is courageously fighting aggression by a foreign invader. Iranian women are courageously fighting aggression by a government against its own people." Women in Iran are forced to face a government that would

rather beat, torture, rape, and kill than grant them the power to decide whether to veil their hair, and how to appear in public.

As months of demonstrations continued, time represents the government's intention to maintain its grip on unbridled, corrupted power. More importantly, it symbolizes women's strength to endure this fight against a brutal institution, and conviction to demand an equal place – with equal rights – in society. Their strength has galvanized the awe and support of the Iranian diaspora, as well as women and men across the Middle East and the world. On a recent trip to Venice, Italy, I was surprised to discover that a "Women, Life, Freedom" sign greets visitors to the small island. In all corners of the world, people recognize the courage and urgency of Iranian women's struggle for freedom.





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