

Iran in a Transformative Process by Woman, Life, Freedom¹

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Abstract

This article presents an overview on various aspects of the new social movement of "Woman, Life, Freedom" known also as Jina or Mahsa movement. Intellectually and theoretically, this movement is reflective of an "existentialist moment" in Iran especially among the younger generation of women and men of urban middle and working classes shaped by the recent decades of "glocal" processes. The movement is strongly expressive of a deep yearning for liberation and reclaiming of a dignified "normal life" and self-determination especially by young women. It indicates a deep cultural, political, and moral chasm between most people and the corrupt repressive ruling Islamists in power. While it is a novel split from the present ideological and political establishments, many of its demands and values are rooted in Iran's recent history of over 120 years of striving for human/women's rights, the rule of law, democracy, liberty, justice and persuasion of happiness and prosperity. The intersectional and multidimensional aspects of the movement, including gender, sexuality, generational, ethnic, socio-economic class, and environmental concerns are analyzed. The paper ends with a brief look at the shortcomings of the movement as well as its prospect based on the achievements made so far.

Keywords

women; liberation; bodily autonomy; existentialism; generation Z; Jin-Jiyan-Azadi

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On September 15, 2022, Jina/Zhina Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who lived in Saqqez, Iranian Kurdistan, was visiting Tehran along with her brother when detained by the “Morality Police” for not wearing her hair fully covered. The next day, her brother found her in a coma at Kasra Hospital. Her family and veteran journalists Niloofar Hamed and Elahe Mohamadi, made the arrest public. Hamed and Mohamadi posted photos of the young woman at the hospital and an interview with her family. The article about Jina/Mahsa’s mistreatment, her coma and subsequent death went viral, and hundreds of protesters gathered in front of the hospital.

It is not the first time that a woman has died in the custody of the morality police or in prison. This case, however, was difficult to cover up. Instead of offering an apology or presenting a plan to clarify responsibilities, or allowing an independent forensic investigation, as requested by the family, the authorities arrested the two journalists for breaking the story and sentenced them to five years in prison.²

In order to avoid a large concentration, the government authorities tried to force the burial in Saqqez to be quick. But the Amini family bravely disobeyed the order, and the next day thousands of people from different cities in Kurdistan came together for the obsequies. Videos of the

ceremony went viral, in particular the banner above the headstone quoting probably the words of the young woman’s parents: “Mahsa, you are not dead; your name will become a symbol.” In the video, thousands of people shouted the name of Jina/Mahsa and the Kurdish resistance slogan: “*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*” or Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF), which soon became the rallying cry of protestors in almost every city in Iran and expatriate Iranian communities and other people around the world. As predicted, the name Jina/Mahsa Amini indeed became an international symbol by soon breaking the world record of 300 million Twitter hashtag.

It was a similar moment to the one that followed the death of George Floyd³ in the United States, except that, in Iran, instead of being a glaring display of the systemic racism present in the police structure, it was a blatant demonstration of systemic effects of sexism and misogyny underlying the ideology and policies of the Islamist state in which the “morality police” have functioned as one of the many instruments of oppression and humiliation. It revealed the intimate connection between the control and assault on the dignity of women’s body with the control and assault on the dignity of the entire nation. For this reason, the women-led protests soon acquired the characteristics of a revolutionary uprising, or of a revolt

² Deepa Parent, “Iran accuses journalists who reported Mahsa Amini’s death of spying for CIA,” *The Guardian*, October 29, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/oct/29/iran-accuses-journalists-who-reported-mahsa-aminis-death-of-spying-for-cia>

³ Clark Merrefield, “America uprising: Scholars reflect on the death of George Floyd. Plus, 10 tips for journalists covering protests against police violence,” *The Journalist’s Resource*, June 3, 2020, <https://journalistsresource.org/politics-and-government/scholars-reflect-george-floyd/>

against something more than the compulsory nature of the hijab that also called for the overthrow of the entire regime with slogans such as “Down with the dictator!”, “Death to Khamenei”, and “We do not want the Islamic Republic.”

Despite the increasingly violent and brutal repression by the government’s various armed forces, the nation-wide fearless protests went on non-stop, day and night, for almost five months. According to a long and detailed report, during the first 82 days of protests alone, there have been 544 street demonstrations carried out in 160 cities of different provinces of Iran. Plus 615 collective and organized demonstrations by students in 143 university campuses.⁴

How the WLF movement differs from previous uprisings:

The “woman-Life-Freedom” (WLF) or Jina/Zhina movement represents a transformative and irreversible turning point for society, political culture, religion, gender relations, and sexual mores in Iran.⁵ For one, it is the first time in Iran’s history (as in the history of many other countries) that hundreds of thousands men took to the streets day and night for over five months in over 160 cities to support women protestors

while chanting along with them “Woman, Life, Freedom” in defense of women’s rights and against the dictatorship. Over 500 people, most of them men, were killed, about 20,000 were arrested and many injured and several men were executed for the cause of WLF.

A prominent Iranian sociologist, Saeed Madani, who is presently imprisoned because of his critical writings, has been studying the patterns of similarities and differences among the social movements under the Islamist regime in the past 44 years. He believes Iran’s society has been in a “movement mood” since the mid-1980s because of a growing public dissatisfaction, sequences of socio-economic crises, and political structural crisis.⁶ Particularly in the years following the brutal suppression of the Green Movement of 2009-2010,⁷ the frequency of protests has increased and the interval between them has decreased. Most of the uprisings or protests have been triggered by a disturbing event such as water shortage, or draconian state measures such as the decision to raise the gas prices three times in 2019 or shutting down of the Ukrainian airplane in 2020; or the murder of an innocent citizen (Jina Mahsa Amini) in the custody of the

⁴ “A Comprehensive Report of the First 82 days of Nationwide Protests in Iran,” Human Rights Activists News Agency in Iran (HRANA), reported also by BBC-Persian, Dec 8, 2022, <https://www.en-hrana.org/a-comprehensive-report-of-the-first-82-days-of-nationwide-protests-in-iran>

⁵ Several scholars of Iranian Studies, especially sociologists would agree with describing the certain impacts of Jina movement as transformative and irreversible. See for instance Afary 2022, Bayat 2022, Hoodfar & Tajali, 2022, Jahanbegloo 2022, Kadivar 2022, Kashani-Sabet, 2022, Khosrokhavar 2022, Paivandi 2022, Talattof 2023, and Tohidi 2022 & 2023.

⁶ Saeed Madani, “Sad sāl va sad ruz: darbāreh-ye Xyzešeh Mahsā [Hundred Years and Hundred days: About the Mahsa uprising],” Evin Prison, November, 2022 [Dey, 1401].

⁷ Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*, (New York: Melville House, 2011).

state authorities. As scholars have observed, in an unpopular, inflamed, unstable and crisis-ridden system, any disturbing event has the potential to instigate a nationwide revolt (Goldstone 1991).⁸

On its 100th day of non-stop protests of the Jina or WLF movement, Madani published an analysis on this movement while comparing it with the previous uprisings.⁹ He views the Green Movement of 2009 with its main slogan of “Where is my vote” as a national pro-democracy political movement supported by millions of Iranians; a non-violent organized movement that drew larger turnouts in street demonstrations in several major cities. But geographically, Madani observes, the Green Movement was not able to mobilize protests as widespread across medium size and small size cities or across ethnic groups as the Jina movement did. In each city too, Jina movement was spread out in various neighborhoods of different class backgrounds.

Both two short-lived massive uprisings of 2017 (Dey 1396) and 2019 (Aban 1398), were triggered by economic grievances but because of violent crackdown on them, protestors quickly turned to radical political

slogans. Members from the middle classes and working classes as well as the youth and university students, female, and male, took part in those protests that were quickly and violently suppressed in a few days. Another rather massive protests took place in 2020 against the downing of the Ukrainian civilian passenger flight by two surface-to-air missiles fired by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on Jan. 8, 2020, that resulted in killing of all 167 passengers. That protest was an outrage against the government’s unaccountability and attempts to cover up that criminal action. Despite being peaceful, it was violently dispersed in the course of a couple of days and several people were arrested, including a prominent women’s rights activist Bahareh Hedayati who was sentenced to four years and eight months in prison.¹⁰ The last one in Madani’s comparative list of uprisings is the chain of protests in summer of 2021 concerning environmental issues, especially the water shortage and air pollution in several cities in the province of Khuzestan, in the city of Esfahan, and about the Lake Urmia in Azerbaijan province.¹¹

In all the above-mentioned protests as well as other demonstrations by

⁸ Jack Goldstone, *Revolutions of the Late Twentieth Century* (Westview Press, 1991).

⁹ Saeed Madani, “Sad sāl va sad ruz: darbāreh-ye Xyzešeh Mahsā [Hundred Years and Hundred days: About the Mahsa uprising],” Evin Prison, November, 2022 [Dey, 1401].

¹⁰ “Prominent Activist Sentenced to Four Years in Prison for Protesting Downing of Ukrainian Passenger Plane,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, July 27, 2020, <https://iranhumanrights.org/2020/07/prominent-activist-sentenced-to-four-years-in-prison-for-protesting-downing-of-ukrainian-passenger-plane/>

¹¹ Masoud Azar, “Eterāzāte Xuzestān; Bi Ābi va Mamad Nabudi [Khuzestan; The lack of water],” BBC Persian, July 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-57764427>; “Dovomin Haft-e Eterāzāte 1400: Tadāvom-e Eterāzhā dar Kermānshāh, Kordkoy, Bahārestān va Karāj [The second week of protests in the summer of 2021: the continuation of protests in Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Baharestan and Karaj],” Zamaneh Media, July 28, 2021, <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/679064/>

students, workers, teachers, pensioners, and the like, women and youngsters were actively present but not in such a massive scale and leading role as they did in the Jina movement. Many scholars, including Madani point out the larger share of women's participation in the Jina movement, even in some very conservative regions of Iran such as Zahedan of Baluchistan that traditionally Sunni women would not join street demonstrations.

I believe, this quantitative and qualitative increase in women's participation in Jina uprising is due to 44 years of intensive gender-based oppression on the one hand, and the rising strength of feminist consciousness and women's rights movement in Iran, and the gendered nature of the event that triggered the uprising that is, an uncoverable murder of an innocent young woman (Jina/Mahsa) because of the compulsory hijab.

On the 100th day of the emergence of Jina movement, Madani, applying a sociological categorization, views it as an uprising that has grown from a youth rebellion into a "new social movement" with a stronger potential for becoming more integrative, inclusive, and expansive "new social movement" at a national level. He points out to the importance of connections between all the protest movements in the past four decades as each has added to the repertoire of the activists through a synergistic process. Madani was cautious, however, to make any

prediction about the future of Jina movement as it would depend on so many unpredictable variables. Now that almost 8 months have passed since the start of the Jina movement, we do not know how Madani would assess its present state and future direction. He is still in prison struggling with his long sentence and has limited access to the needed information for such a sociological evaluation.¹²

Existentialist and Humanist orientation of the WLF movement:

In my view, the Jina or WLF movement compared with previous uprisings or social movements in Iran, is, in short, a liberation movement, or a humanist movement, akin to an "existentialist moment," against the current context of a hopeless, futureless repressive clerical totalitarianism in Iran. Let's remember that "existentialism as an intellectual movement that exploded on the scene in mid-twentieth-century France, is often viewed as a historically situated event that emerged against the backdrop of the Second World War, the Nazi death camps, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all of which created the circumstances for what has been called "the existentialist moment" (Baert 2015), where an entire generation was forced to confront the human condition and the anxiety-provoking givens of death, freedom, and meaninglessness."

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¹² Saeed Madani is among the social scientists in Iran that are either fired from their faculty positions, or/and imprisoned or forced to exile because of not only telling the truth, but also joining activists to participate in the process of changing the tyrannic status quo.

¹³ "Existentialism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, published Jan 6, 2023, rb.gy/h9len

The characteristics of the WLF movement, especially the simple, yet profound themes that lie in the song *Baraye* that functioned as the seminal manifesto of this movement, reminds me of the existentialist ideas of Simone de Beauvoir articulated as the requirements for human liberation, particularly for women's liberation in her important book *The Second Sex* published in 1949.¹⁴ Her emphasis on freedom and autonomy, the struggle for self-creation, the importance of self-realization for each woman to become a complete citizen; to grow from the state of "*en Soi*" (in itself) to "*pour soi*" (for itself), that is, from an object to a subject. In other words, to assert her/his/their agency and reclaim their authentic identity and way of living inseparable from their bodily autonomy and their own voice based on the right to freedom of choice in lifestyle, including what to wear or not to wear.

De Beauvoir's emphasis on ethics, while rejecting the idea of moral absolutes and universalizing judgments about right conduct, not promoting moral nihilism, but possibility of a moral or praiseworthy "normal life" as indicated in the song *Baraye*. "It is one where we acknowledge and own up to our freedom, take full responsibility for our choices, and act in such a way as to help others realize their freedom."¹⁵ The same ideas that informed the radical and emancipatory politics of feminists in the second wave of feminism and in Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the

writings of Black intellectuals such as Du Bois.

Moreover, the emphasis that existentialism puts on *meaning* and *purpose of life*, and *anxiety* when life becomes *meaningless* and out of one's control is so relevant to the context of the Jina movement. Also, the emphasis that existentialists put on the "novel conception of the self not as a substance or a thing with some pre-given nature (or "essence") but "as a situated activity or way of being whereby we are always in the process of making or creating who we are as our life unfolds." This means, as de Beauvoir's famous saying goes, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one." That is, "our essence is not given in advance; we are contingently thrown into existence and are burdened with the task of creating ourselves through our choices and actions."¹⁶

Philosophically, another theoretical implication of this existentialist orientation is that, thanks to the WLF movement, Iran's gender politics and feminism seem to be evolving from its phase of the "women's rights movement" into a phase of "women's liberation movement." This phase or perhaps this newly added orientation to various other feminisms in Iran begun manifesting itself in the most recent years and has been associated with paying increasing positive attention to the body and sexuality aspects of gender dynamics. The primary cause of this evolution or addition has been, ironically, the Islamist-clerical obsession

¹⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheela Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

¹⁵ "Existentialism," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, published Jan 6, 2023, rb.gy/h9len

¹⁶ Ibid.

or fixation with sexuality, especially women's body, and their hair. Another reason has been the *glocal* processes that have facilitated Iran's feminist consciousness analogous to the global trends of feminism.

The term "women's liberation movement" was used during the second wave of feminism in the West in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was created as a parallel to other liberation and freedom movements of the mid-20th century, such as "national liberation" and "black liberation," as well as the intellectual movement of existentialism. "The root of the idea was a rebellion against colonial powers or a repressive national government to win independence for a national group and to end oppression...The term 'liberation' resonates not just with independence from oppression and male supremacy for individual women, but with solidarity among women seeking independence and ending oppression for women collectively. It was often held in contrast to individualistic feminism. (Napikoski, 2019)¹⁷

Generally, Iran's feminism in the past 4 decades has been, for the most part, pragmatist while including liberal and socialist tendencies as well. But during the 1960s and 1970s, the years of rising Islamism in Iran that preceded the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there was a very dualistic and binary approach toward

body and mind, as I have elaborated elsewhere (Tohidi, 1990).¹⁸ Among the secular militant Left (Marxist-Leninists and Maoists) as well as Islamist revolutionaries who opposed the Shah's regime, the disciplined and underground living experiences fostered a sort of asceticism and body-aversion, at times to the extent of somatophobia, especially toward women's body and beauty. Activists, especially female activists were supposed not to look feminine or attractive and follow very neutral, asexual, simple, rough, and practical dress code. In a way they needed to train their bodies as endurable and resistant to torture and prison conditions in case of getting arrested by the notorious secret security organ (SAVAK). Serious and scholarly students and professional women too were supposed to focus on strengthening their minds and avoiding bodily indulgency.

As a counterculture to the ruling Islamist theocracy, however, women and men, especially the younger generations have developed opposite attitudes toward body and sexuality and the whole culture of martyrdom. For example, one of the earliest slogans of the Islamist propaganda machine, especially during the 8-year war with Iraq was: "My sister, your hijab is more lethal than my blood," meaning by wearing hijab, you can be more effective in defeating the enemy [of Islam] than a martyr who offers his life/blood in the war. So, the continuous

¹⁷ Linda Napikoski, "The Women's Liberation Movement: A Profile of Feminism in the 1960s and 1970s," Thought Co, September 10, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/womens-liberation-movement-3528926>

¹⁸ Nayerreh Tohidi, "Rošanfekrān va 'masaleh-ye zan' dar dahehāye axir [Intellectuals and the 'Woman Question' in the Recent Decades]," Nime-ye Digar [The Other Half], No. 10 (1990 [1368]): 21-65. Republished by Feminist School in 2012 and reprinted in several sites, including: <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php?/social/more/32820>

insistence by the ruling Islamists on the imposition of the hijab as the central flag or symbol of control and supremacy of the state ideology, has led to the gradual prioritization of the anti-hijab resistance by women, especially many younger activists (feminist or non-feminist) and at times to an exaggerated attention to the bodily aspects of their identity and resistance.

The non-partisan, non-sectarian, non-religious and secular, feminist, especially humanistic, and environmentalist demands of the WLF movement have appealed and resonated among all genders, sexualities, classes, ethnicities in Iran and internationally. It has emphasized the quest for freedom and liberty from oppression, discrimination, poverty, violation of civil and human rights, especially from the daily assaults on bodily autonomy and the state invasion into people's private sphere of life. It is about freedom of choice, style of life, freedom of thought, beliefs, and speech. It is a national yearning for a "normal life," for pursuit of happiness and national dignity. At the same time, this quest for liberty is not just on a personal and individualistic level. As the movement's slogans and artistic graphics have indicated, it is about reclaiming of life and country itself ("*Iran ra pas migirim*," i.e., "we will take back our Iran"). This movement, then, has the potential for evolving into a national liberation movement as people increasingly perceive the oppressive and heartless rulers akin to an occupying colonial force (Bayat, 2023)¹⁹ who keeps robbing and exploiting the

hard working people, abusing their natural environment, and violently imposing their sub-culture or preferred way of life on the majority of Iran's inhabitants.

But what was so particular about the death of Jina/Mahsa and its timing in Iran's socio-political history that made it a tipping point to spark an extraordinary, transformative, and inspiring uprising at the national and international levels?

Intersectional aspects of the WLF movement:

Like any other uprisings and social movements, the Jina/Mahsa movement too did not happen overnight. In the following pages, I try to briefly address specific historical, political, socio-cultural, economic, and glocal processes that have contributed to the shaping of this movement.

The multi-dimensionality of this movement arises from its intersectional character, reflected in its main figure from the symbolic and spiritual point of view: Jina/Mahsa Amini, a young, Kurdish and Sunni Muslim. Each of the aspects of her identity highlights factors such as gender and sexuality, ethnicity and religion, and age or generation, all of which are major bases of discrimination subject to layers of oppression by the ruling Shia theocracy. Jina's tragic death was caused by the daily pattern of violent invasion of woman's bodily autonomy and human dignity. It became a clear example of the intimate connection between sexism, compulsory hijab, lack

¹⁹ Asef Bayat, "Is Iran on the verge of Another Revolution?" Journal of Democracy, March, 2023.

of freedom of choice, and the ongoing humiliation across the country, of both men and women.

Fortunately, many current advocates of the WLF movement uphold an intersectional, inclusive, and pluralistic approach, considering gender, ethnic, class, and environment-related grievances, as well as (so far) neglected issues, such as those related to LGBTQ+ sexual minorities. Throughout the paper, I have discussed the gender and sexuality aspects of this movement in general. Below, I address a few other aspects or factors that also need special attention.

Ethnic Factor:

To foster mistrust and division in the movement, the regime, based on its usual policy of securitization of ethnicity, has accused activists in Kurdistan and Baluchistan, two of the ethnic provinces most active in the current revolts, of separatism. But so far, the feeling of national solidarity among the various ethnic, religious, and cultural groups has brought hopeful omens. Compared with the previous uprisings, there has been more active participation of ethnic minorities, especially Kurds, and Baluch in the Jina movement. Some of the slogans of the WLF movement are “From Kurdistan to Tehran the attacks against women continue,” “All over Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, people have lost patience,” “Azerbaijanis are alert and support Kurdistan,” “Kurd, Baluch, and Azeri united for freedom and equality.”

Another difference in the WLF or Jina movement compared with previous uprisings is that rather than only the

central and mega cities such as Tehran, it has been the provincial and smaller cities such as Saqqez and Sanandaj in Kurdistan or the city of Zahedan in Baluchistan that have also played key roles in the initial mobilization of the movement and in its maintenance. We owe the main slogan of this movement, that is Woman, Life, Freedom (Jin, Jiyan, Azadi), to our Kurdish feminists. And the growing attention to the call for referendum and to a new constitutional assembly has been bravely supported by Baluch people and their spiritual leader, Molavi Abdelhamid.

Kurdish scholars and activists such as Farangis Ghaderi and Ozlem Goner have been deliberately using the name Jina/Zhina instead of Mahsa, to underscore the Kurdish dimension of the movement. They want us to be aware and critical of the assimilationist policies toward the ethnic minorities, including the “continued hegemonic state-enforced names.” For example, they argue that “acknowledging the state-enforced name of Mahsa in ways that continue to dismiss her Kurdish name Jina (Zhina) and histories of non-Persian Others” is not helpful for “understanding racism, ethnocentrism, ethno-national populism, and the contours of state-sponsored-violence...We must not forget the histories of [central authorities in] Iran actively prohibiting Kurdish place

names and Kurdish names for children.”²⁰

Ethnicity and how to address ethnic related demands have been one of the subjects of continuous dialogue and debates among Iranian scholars as well as activists and policymakers, especially in more recent years. Several studies have indicated that discrimination based on ethnicity and religion including patterns of hegemonic centralization of government, and uneven and unfair distribution of power and economic resources have produced large development gaps between various provinces, especially between the center and the periphery of Iran. Such misguided and overcentralized inequitable development policies have not been unique to the present regime; they relate to also the top-down and overcentralized modernization and development strategies used under the Pahlavi dynasty (Matin 2022,²¹ Rehman 2019,²² Tohidi 2009²³).

On the other hand, in several countries, identity politics, including the ethnic-related ones, have become a danger against democracy and national solidarity. People, including in the case of Iran, have not yet reached to certain

national or international consensus on the policies and models that can help with the resolution or at least management of ethnic-related conflicts (Fukuyama, 2018).²⁴

Generational and Class Factors:

Women and youths have been the main targets of control, humiliation, and trauma under the increasingly repressive and invasive theocratic patriarchy. Therefore, it is no surprise that women and the youth (half of them female) have become the primary agents of change in Iranian society. Jina/Mahsa’s innocence and her brutal murder triggered the eruption of a pent-up anger and frustration particularly among the Generation Z long waiting to explode.

The young female and male members of the Gen Z (born between 1997-2012) who fearlessly took to the streets and shaped the Jina movement, have been directly or indirectly informed or inspired by their mostly urban middle class parents. The gender and political views of their parents, especially mothers have been influenced by their own daily living experience of oppression, particularly of the bloody suppression of the 2009-2010 Green Movement. At the same time the gender

²⁰ See, for example: Stanley Thangaraj, “Jina in Iran, Erased Kurdish Histories, and the Words We Need,” Tropics of Meta, December 5, 2022, <https://tropicsofmeta.com/2022/12/05/jina-in-iran-erased-kurdish-histories-and-the-worlds-we-need/>; Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, “Can non-Persians speak? The sovereign’s narration of “Iranian identity”,” Ethnicities 19, no. 5 (Summer 2019): 925- 947.

²¹ Kamran Matin, “Decolonising Iran: A Tentative Note on Inter-Subaltern Colonialism,” Current Anthropology: University of Chicago Press 63, no.2 (2022).

²² Javaid Rehman, “Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” UN Assembly Report, October 22, 2019, NY, N1922262.pdf (un.org)

²³ Nayereh Tohidi, “Ethnicity and Religious Minority Politics in Iran,” In Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics, Ed. Ali Gheissari (Oxford University Press, 2009), 299-324.

²⁴ Francis Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics; The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy,” Foreign Affairs, August 14, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama#from%20Left%20to%20Right>

and political consciousness of parents of Generation Z has been raised by the enlightening effects of four generations of feminists in Iran's modern history. They are particularly enlightened by the 43 years of women's rights movement and feminist non-movements through literature, journalism, arts, poetry, music, cinema, daily and incremental acts of civil disobedience and civil resistance against the compulsory hijab. Particularly inspiring have been several semi-organized campaigns such as the One-Million Signatures Campaign against discriminatory laws and more recent civil disobedience actions of the Girls of Revolution Street against the compulsory hijab as will be discussed here later.

Thanks to the recent technological revolution and its subsequent digital era of communication, views of the Gen Z have been shaped also by the globalization and glocalization processes that have equipped them with the new technological tools and skills such as the internet, social media, smart phones, and satellite TV for learning, networking, communicating, organizing, and mobilizing in Iran and transnationally.

According to some research reports in the US, Gen Z members are highly collaborative, social, self-reliant, self-confident, non-ideological, and pragmatic. They usually value flexibility, relevance, authenticity, and non-

hierarchical leadership. Through the internet, they are exposed to diverse styles of life, cultures, art and music, diversity of sexual orientations, political discourses such as human/women's rights, democracy, pluralism, and the advantages of liberal and social democracies and open societies in contrast to dictatorship. In their imagination, the era of monolithic cultures or ideologies has ended.²⁵

Recent sociological studies in Iran too show similar characteristics among members of Iran's Gen Z and similar effects of globalization and the internet on them (Kazemi, 2022²⁶ Tadayon, 2022²⁷). At the local/national levels in Iran, this generation has also benefitted from certain demographic and social changes that have occurred in Iran's social institutions such as the marriage patterns (that includes non-registered informal cohabitation and "white marriages"), and changes in the family structures and functions due to more urbanization, more educated parents, lower fertility rates, smaller nuclear families (with 1-2 children), a growing trend toward child-centered and less patriarchal families, that tend to provide kids with more space for privacy, individuation, and self-autonomy, including bodily autonomy.

In all previous movements of the past 43 years, from the Reform movement of 1997-2005, and the Green

²⁵ See for instance: Melissa De Witte, "Gen Z are not 'coddled.' They are highly collaborative, self-reliant and pragmatic, according to new Stanford-affiliated research," Stanford News, January 3, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/2022/01/03/know-gen-z/>

²⁶ Abbas Kazemi Varij, "Barāye Yek Zendegeye Mamouli [For a Normal/Ordinary Life]," *Andisheh-ye Pooya*, no. 82 (Nov/Dec 2022 [Azar va Dey 1401]): 49-52.

²⁷ Mehdi Tadayoni, "Bidāri-ye Nasle Z [The awakening of generation Z]," Iran TC, 2022, rb.gy/gw3m5

Movement of 2009-2010, till the Jina movement of 2022, members of the youth have had active and massive participation. This continuous pattern is attributed, in part, to the “youth affordance” because of stronger physical strength, energy, and agility, but also their versatility, technical skills, especially digital ones, global awareness, forward-looking perspective, and lesser family and financial responsibility (unlike their parents). In the case of Jina movement, however, the average age of the protestors has decreased to 20, most of them being 18-year-old or younger. The age range of the arrested people was 15-30 and among the estimated 500 protestors killed during the street crackdown, about 70 children have been identified.²⁸

The Middle Class Poor:

Another alarming trend that has been recognized in recent years by economists and other scholars as a significant factor contributing to the economic crisis and the rising dissatisfaction and frustration with the status quo in Iran is the shrinking size and economic decline in the status of the modern and educated middle class.²⁹ The economic, budgetary, and cultural policies of the ruling Islamists, even their policies pertaining to “population rejuvenation,” have aimed at a deliberate weakening

and dispossessing of the modern, secular urban middle class (Chamlou, 2022).³⁰

It is not surprising then, that the younger generation of this impoverished middle class have been very active participant in the Jina movement. Many of them are university students, whose modern, secular, and egalitarian value system and cosmopolitan or globalized lifestyle conflict with the ruling Islamists. Because of the increasing economic decline of their parents, the rising unemployment rates, and the lack of any prospect for change in Iran’s international isolation and economic stagnation, they see no hopeful prospect for their own future. Iran has been suffering from high rates of brain drain, an issue ignored by the current rulers. Many members of the Z generation too, want to leave the country for good or at least be able to earn an advanced degree from a university in an open society. But their parents are no longer able to provide them with any financial support. The combination of all these negative factors has created a hopeless situation leaving many among the GenZ frustrated, and ready to explode. (Kazemi, 2022)³¹

In her recent article, Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, a prominent feminist writer and activist in Iran, has tried to analyze why despite lots of

²⁸ “Deaths during the Mahsa Amini protests,” Wikipedia, Accessed May 24, 2023, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deaths_during_the_Mahsa_Amini_protests

²⁹ Mohamad Reza Nikfar, “Tabaqeye Motevaset-e Irān va Lāye-haye Faqir-e Ān [Iran’s middle class and its poor strata],” Zamaneh Media, October 11, 2021 [19 Mehr, 1400], <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/688626/> See also, Sussan Yahyapour, “Tabaqeye Motevaset-e Irāni Čeguneh Faqir Šod [How did the Iranian middle class become poor?],” Tejarat News, October 31, 2022 [Aban 9, 1401].

³⁰ Naderreh Chamlou, “What Drives Iran’s Population Rejuvenation Policy?” Journal of Freedom of Thought, no.12 (Fall 2022): 29-49, <https://doi.org/10.53895/ftj1210>

³¹ Abbas Kazemi Varij, “Barāye Yek Zendegeye Mamouli [For a Normal/Ordinary Life],” Andisheh-ye Pooya, no. 82 (Nov/Dec 2022 [Azar va Dey 1401]): 49-52.

sympathy and moral support for the Jina movement by the middle-aged generation of the middle-class, many of them have not joined it actively. In addition to the fear of repression, she attributes it to their shaky economic situation, hence the fear of losing their jobs. Like their children they have suffered from the oppressive and repressive policies of the regime against their dignity and freedom, and all these 44 years they have struggled against the regime's compulsory hijab and other compulsions and impositions. Their struggles have been through daily deliberate civil disobedience and incremental transgression. But they do not see it prudent to tie the call for the downfall of the Islamic Republic directly to the call of "no to the compulsory hijab." Because, she argues, such a tactic can hardly draw the silent majority (the so-called grey stratum) to an active and united uprising.³²

Based on Khorasani's analysis, one may assume that the freedom of choice concerning the compulsory hijab is not as much an existential issue for many middle-aged members of the middle-classes as it is for the youth. However, given the overwhelming impact of repression and violent crackdown on the Jina movement, it is hard to be sure what

are the most determinant reasons behind behaviors of each stratum of the population in Iran. For example, will the continuous execution of the young protesters, and the chain of bioterrorism (the poisoning against schoolgirls³³) result in further outrage and continuation of the movement or its decline and suppression?

Another interesting example is the fact that, despite the continuous pressure by the regime against unveiled women, we still see considerable number of middle-aged as well as younger women who bravely continue to appear on the streets of Iran with no hair cover. Although, it is noteworthy that their latest civil disobedience continues without associating it with a radical political slogan against the ruling regime.

Regardless of how we analyze the intersection of the class factor with the generation and gender factors in this case, many can appreciate the following conclusionary remark made by Khorasani: "We can acknowledge the Jina movement as a social movement of women and the youth and admire the huge socio-cultural achievements it has already made so far without questioning its failure in attracting the 'grey stratum.' Moreover, it is not unrealistic to expect that the culturally and socially

³² Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "Hejābe Ejbāri, Jonbeš-e Jina va Tabaqe-ye Motevaset [Mandatory hijab, the Jina movement and the middle class]," Asoo, May 7, 2023 [Ordibehesht 17, 1402], <https://www.aasoo.org/fa/articles/4353>

³³ Starting in November 2022 and over the course of months, thousands of schoolgirls were hospitalized under circumstances that some attributed to a sequence of mass toxic gas poisoning attacks, with some eyewitnesses reporting signs of toxic gas attack. Some critics claimed the poisonings might have been by pro-regime actors in retaliation for the role schoolgirls played in the protesting the mandatory hijab. International scientists stated an independent investigation would be required, including access to hospital test results and interviews with patients; otherwise, it could be difficult to draw any firm conclusions. The Guardian and others criticized Iran's authorities for its slow, opaque, and contradictory responses to the epidemic.

revolutionary achievements that the Jina movement has flowed into our society will continue to penetrate our people's consciousness and may bring about important political consequences as well, but perhaps not necessarily the way some have been predicting."³⁴

Historic roots of the WLF movement:

As argued by several scholars ³⁵, the Jina movement could not have happened overnight. The social capital of women's activism, the direct and indirect impact of over 120 years of women's rights movement and "non-movements," and feminist discourses in Iran, especially the ones during the past four decades, have informed and influenced the feminist dimension of the 2022 WLF or Jina movement.

In extensive research reports by academics and writers, we have found earliest sporadic and individual cases of rebelling or complaining against women's oppression in literature and poetry produced by female poets such as Mahsati Ganjavi of 12-13 centuries and then in the mid-19th century during the Babi movement in the poetry and radical actions of Tahira Baraghani, known also as Zarrintaj and Qurrat al-'Ayn (1823-

1850). She was a leading figure of the Babi reform movement³⁶ who is also known as the first woman in the Muslim world who took off her veil in 1848 during a public lecture resulting an uproar even among her own followers, let alone the clerical establishment who later pushed for her execution by the ruling king.³⁷

Another individual figure that represents the earliest pioneers of the women's rights movement in Iran was Bibi Khâtoon Astarâbâdi (1858/9 – 1921) a notable writer, satirist and teacher who lived under the Qajar dynasty and played an influential role during the Constitutional Revolution. She founded one of the first schools for girls and her articles in defense of universal education for women appeared in the constitutionalist newspapers. Her book *Ma'ayeb al-Rejal* (Vices of Men) that was published in 1895 as a satirist response to the pamphlet *Ta'deeb al-Nesvan* (Disciplining of Women) published earlier by an anonymous author, is known as the first Iranian feminist book and some consider it as the first declaration of women's rights in Iran's history.³⁸

Iranian women's rights movement and collective actions began through

³⁴ Ahmadi Khorasani, "Hejābe Ejbāri."

³⁵ See for instance, Afary 2022; Bayat; Hoodfar & Tajali 2022; Madani 2022:16; Kashani Sabet 2022; Sanasarian 2022; Shams, 2022, Siamdoust 2022; and Tohidi 2022 & 2023.

³⁶ Abass Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Cornell University Press, 1989) ...her rise to leadership aptly characterized the messianic ethos around which the entire Babi movement was formed...

³⁷ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and words: the emerging voices of Iranian women writers* (London/ NewYork: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1992).

³⁸ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Bibi Khanum Astarabadi's Ma'ayib al-Rijal [Vices of Men]* (Chicago: Midland Printers, 1992); Hasan Javadi, Manijeh Marashi, and Simin Shekrlou, *Ta'dib al-Nisvan va Ma'ayeb-e al-Rijal [Disciplining of Women and Vices of Men]* (Maryland: Jahan Books, 1992).

some semisecret associations during the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911). Women's struggles have continued with their ups and downs in the context of the authoritarian and top-down, but still rather women-friendly processes of modernization carried out by the two monarchs of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979). This era led to the creation of a small yet growingly visible and influential educated, modern, and professional middle class women in Iran.

During more recent history of Iran, the violent imposition of systemic sexism in all aspects of life began in the early days the "Islamic Republic." The first laws of the Shah's regime that Ayatollah Khomeini decided to annul were the reforms made in 1967 and 1975 in application of the Family Protection Law, which restricted polygamy and other provisions related to marriage, divorce, and custody of children favorable to men. He also ordered that female judge be dismissed and affirmed that women, by their nature, are not suitable to become administrators of justice or leaders of a country.

Another significant political change, which became a new law two years later, was Khomeini's declaration that the veil was a mandate of Islam and therefore a mandatory requirement of the new Islamic state. This declaration of Khomeini has been contested and rejected by several scholars of Islam who unlike Khomeini find no Quranic basis for making hijab mandatory.³⁹ The Ayatollah considered the freedom of

choice of dress, as well as any modern style of clothing for women, to be part of Western decadence. These retrograde and anti-women statements were made just days before the International Women's Day, March 8 in 1979 which secular Iranian women intended to celebrate en masse in public for the first time in the country's history.

Faced with those terrible proclamations by Khomeini, the women decided to turn the celebration into a great protest chanting "*We did not make a revolution to go backward*" or "*freedom is neither Western nor Eastern, it is Global.*" About 50,000 women, mostly from middle class and educated families, supported by a few progressive secular men, continued to demonstrate for five days despite the physical assaults and taunts from Islamist vigilantes. The women only stopped protesting when the moderate wing of the new state withdrew the mandatory hijab, unaware that it was only a temporary and tactical gesture by Khomeini and hardliners. However, after a year, when the Iran-Iraq war began in 1980, women lost momentum and warmongering misogynists won the power game for 44 years. However, that historic protest heralded the flowering of a new wave of feminism in Iran, this time under a misogynist theocracy.

By vindicating their agency and power of action, and their daily resistance, women have not allowed the forces of misogyny and patriarchy, Islamic or secular, to carry out all their

³⁹ See for instance writings by Ahmad Qabel, Hassan Yousefil Eshkevari, Ayatollah Mohsen Kadivar, and Sedigheh Vasmaghi among Shii scholars who have rejected Khomeini's interpretation and declaration of hijab as an Islamic mandate.

sexist plans successfully. The new modern middle- and working-class, urban, and educated women who have been raised in contemporary Iran have not submitted to the hostile dictates of the clerical state. Thanks to women's capacity for intelligent, courageous, and creative actions, and their persistent presence and social participation in many spaces, both traditional and non-traditional, women have made great strides in several social domains despite all the imposed obstacles. Therefore, women's overall conditions have remained contradictory and full of tensions. For example, in the domain of education, women have achieved over 85% literacy rate. But, while women make up over 55 percent of university students, their rate of unemployment is twice as much as that of men, and the female participation rate in formal economy is about 16 percent, one of the lowest in the world and even in the MENA region.

Moreover, thanks to the processes of globalization or "glocalization" and the new communication technologies, and the presence of large communities of active and highly educated Iranian exile and immigrants in different parts of the world, Iranians who aspire change of the system in Iran, including feminists, are provided with a chance of cross-pollination of gender and feminist

consciousness among them inside and outside the country as I have elaborated elsewhere in Tohidi, 2017⁴⁰ and 2002⁴¹.

Among the concrete recent activism of women's rights movement and feminism that have influenced the WLF movement, include the organized or semi organized collective actions or campaigns such as the "One Million Signatures Campaign Against Discriminatory Laws," also known as the "Change for Equality Campaign." This campaign that received several international awards, has been one of the most enlightening and influential feminist actions in Iran's recent history with branches in several cities. Despite the repression and arrests of its members, that campaign could continue its online publications and sustain its face-to-face consciousness raising and interactions with ordinary citizens for almost three years (2006-2009)⁴².

Another campaign of the women's rights movement that has included a chain of actions against the gender apartheid was the one by feminists wearing white scarfs or male clothing while trying to enter the sports stadiums banned to women's participation. Also, campaigns pushing for women's rights to drive bicycles as a means of transportation or sports have been active in different cities.⁴³ Another campaign in

⁴⁰ Nayerreh Tohidi, "The Women's Movement and Feminism in Iran: Revisiting a "Glocal" Perspective," In *Women's Movements in the Global Era*, Ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 397-443.

⁴¹ Nayerreh Tohidi, "The International Connections of the Women's Movement in Iran: 1979-2000," in *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interaction in Culture and Cultural Politics*, Ed. Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 205-231.

⁴² Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, *Iranian Women's One Million Signatures Campaign for Equality: The Inside Story* (Women's Learning Partnership, 2009).

⁴³ See for example this report on such a campaign in the city of Mashhad:

a transnational format aimed at stopping the custom of stoning to death of women and less frequently of men too for committing adultery. That abhorrent custom was revived under the Islamic Republic and practiced in different parts of Iran per the orders issued by clerical judges. The campaign was rather successful since it resulted in stopping of the practice in 2009 but not its illegalization yet. Another successful campaign was against the so-called “the bill of protection of family” that was meant to further facilitate polygyny, divorce, and child custody in favor of men during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. An effective coalition of feminist lawyers and activists through pressing the Majlis (parliament) and petition collection, stopped passing of that anti-women bill in 2008.

Many feminist interventions in the media and press as well as cultural productions in literature, poetry, painting, and other forms of fine art, especially cinema and sports have been considered as part of the non-movement aspects of growing feminist influence in present Iran. Feminist publications, online and offline, translations, and women-owned publishers, and the academic programs of Women’s Studies in various universities have all been among sources of gender-related education and feminist enlightenment.

Women’s Studies programs in academia have been under continuous state-imposed patriarchal interventions, censorship, and distortion of the curriculum and pressures on faculty members. Nevertheless, they have survived with various degrees of success and failures.⁴⁴

An important aspect of women’s movement in the past 44 years has been women’s “non-movement” (as theorized by Asef Bayat, 2010⁴⁵) in reference to women’s daily social presence, daily actions of gradual and incremental civil resistance, defiance, and transgression against the state-dictated edicts concerning style of life, specifically dress codes and the compulsory hijab. For example, because of such daily assertion of their agency, the black, slippery all covering and restrictive *chador* propagated by the Islamist state as the “superior hijab,” has been abandoned by many women. Similarly, the *mantoo-roosary* (loose long and dark color overcoat plus dark color headscarf) has been gradually turned into colorful, fashioned, tighter and shorter styles of overcoats along with colorful scarfs covering lesser and lesser parts of hair.

Furthermore, thanks to the new communication technology and increasing use of the internet and social

Najva Mashhadi, “Tajrobe-ye Zanān az Dočarxehaye Ešterāki-ye Bydo: Az Nešāt tā Mamnu’iyat [Women’s experience of Baidu shared bicycles: from joy to prohibition],” *Zamaneh Media*, August 28, 2021[Shahrivar 6, 1400], <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/683155/>

⁴⁴ Nayerreh Tohidi, “Rešte-ye Motāle’at Zanān dar Irān: Nemoodi digar az parādox Jomhourī-ye Islami [Women’s Studies Discipline in Iran: Another Display of the Paradox of Islamic Republic],” *Journal of Azadi Andisheh*, No.1 (Summer 2015): 150-214

⁴⁵ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics, How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

media, new online blogs created by women and men, several campaigns against the compulsory hijab and the ban on music, singing and dance, especially for women, have further facilitated the growing process of civil disobedience against the oppressive state-imposed rules. But even before that, several critical writings against the compulsory hijab were published in various journals and books, including one by Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani (2011/1390) that offers a critical historical review on the issue and how Iran's intellectuals have approached it.

The first organized campaign ever that called for "No to Compulsory Hijab" was initiated in 2012 (Tir 1391) by a collective who called themselves "Liberal Students and Graduates of Iran" (Daneshjooyan va Danesh-Amookhtegan Liberal Iran). In addition to activist students, there were several journalists, political activists, and human rights activists (female and male) involved in this collective. The Facebook page membership of this campaign from inside and outside of Iran reached 69000.⁴⁶ In 2013 during the annual international Bobs competition of Deutsche Welle (German Public Broadcaster) they won the award for the highest number of public votes for the best social activism concerning the promotion of freedom of speech and ideas and enhancing rich public dialogue on the Internet. In the context of this

campaign, Narges Mohammadi, a prominent human/women rights activist, was arrested by the Morality Police in 2013. In her open letter from prison, she condemned the "morality police and compulsory hijab so effectively that even some state-run newspapers and pro-reform groups issued statements criticizing the police and her arrest.

Another campaign, probably inspired by the earlier one inside Iran, began outside Iran two years later (in 2014) called "My Stealthy Freedoms," initiated by Masih Alinejad, an Iranian activist journalist living in the US.⁴⁷ Operating outside Iran free from the state repression and censorship, this campaign became quickly a well-known online campaign that gained popular support among the Iranian diaspora with many followers inside Iran as well, several of whom were arrested and sentenced to years of imprisonment, including 24 years old Saba Kord Afshari who was arrested in 2018 along with her mother Raheleh Ahmadi for appearing without hijab in public and posting their video on social media; they were released in 2023.

Another creative campaign of a more daring nature was initiated again inside Iran by Vida Movahed, a 31-year-old mother of one. On December 27, 2017, her photo dressed in black, standing on a platform in the Revolution Street while

⁴⁶ "Kampeyne na be Hejābe Ejbāri [No to compulsory hijab campaign]," Melli Mazhabi News, July 16, 2012, <https://melimazhabi.com/%DA%A9%D9%85%D9%BE%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C/>

See their Facebook page that was still active in 2016: <https://www.facebook.com/na.be.hejab.ejbari>

⁴⁷ Masih Alinejad, *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2018).

taking off her hijab and silently waving it on the end of a stick, went viral. Her stick with waving hijab turned into a symbolic flag of freedom and the image of her bravery inspired many Iranian women to join her in solidarity and protest.⁴⁸ On the following days, many young and older women and at times along with men too began following this performative non-violent civil disobedience action as individuals and not in a group yet.⁴⁹

These silent, peaceful, and individual actions soon was dubbed as the movement of “The Girls of Revolution Street” on social media. Despite its peaceful and silent method, the government felt threatened by it and could not tolerate any continuation of such actions against the compulsory hijab. As part of a crackdown, Movahed and 29 other people were arrested, including Iran’s most prominent human rights defense lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, who had accepted to defend four of those arrested women.⁵⁰ In two separate recent articles, Mansoureh Shojaei and I have made succinct reviews of the main trends within Iran’s hundred years of women’s movement that can shed further light in the connectivity, continuity, and differences between

those 100 years of struggles and the ones in the current Jina movement. Shojaei, 2022⁵¹ and Tohidi, 2022⁵².

So, despite certain novelty and unprecedented qualities in the WLF movement, specifically the pivotal role of women and centrality of gender issues, this movement is neither about women’s rights and feminist movement only, nor is it separate or a complete break from previous uprisings and social movements in Iran’s history. Like many other nations, Iranians have been struggling for building a modern, democratic, prosperous, and just society for about 150 years now. Their aspirations for the rule of law, freedom and justice articulated during the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 have not been fulfilled for most people, especially women. While certain political and democratic aspects of constitutionalism were neglected or violated by autocratic policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, the current Shia theocracy has violated and subverted almost all progressive aspects and achievements of the Constitutional Revolution.

For instance, the concept of “bodily autonomy,” that, thanks to feminists,

⁴⁸ Annika Hernroth-Rothstein, “The Girls of Revolution Street, Waving Their Veils,” National Review, March 8, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/03/the-girls-of-revolution-street-waving-their-veils/>

⁴⁹ For more information on this, see: Nayereh Tohidi, “The Women’s Rights Movement and Feminism in Post-Islamist Iran,” SUR 24- 13, no. 24 (2016): 75-89.

⁵⁰ For more information on Nasrin Sotoudeh, see her fascinating and insightful book called *Letters of Prison*, 2023.

⁵¹ Mansoureh Shojaei, “Yek Qarn va do Xizeš Besooye Jonbeš-e Āzadi-ye Zanân Irân [One Century and Two Risings toward Iranian Women’s Freedom Movement],” *Iran Academia Journal*, no. 9 (Summer 2022): 9-16.

⁵² Nayereh Tohidi, “Ravand-ha va Motâlebat-e Asli Konešgary barâye Hoqooq-e Zanân Irân dar Sad Sal Gozašte [The Primary Trends and Demands within the Women’s Rights Movement in the past 100 years],” *Iran Academia Journal*, no.9 (Summer 2022): 1-8.

has been added to the human rights and democracy discourses of Iran only in recent years, was not completely alien to the leading Iranian intellectuals of the Constitutional Movement. Ali Mirsepasi (2023) cites from a famous treatise known as “*One Word*” written by a leading intellectual of the constitutional era, Mostasharoldoleh Tabrizi (one of the advisors to Naseeruddin Shah in 1870s), who saw the rule of law, citizenship, human dignity, and bodily autonomy as primary bases of articulation or imagination of Iran as a modern and cosmopolitan nation. According to Mostasharoldoleh, “bodily autonomy,” requires respect for privacy and personal boundaries of each citizen.⁵³

This is only one example to show how retrogressive the current Islamist discourse and its devices such as the compulsory hijab have been compared to the progressive potential of the Constitutional discourse of 120 years ago. While pointing to such historical connections between the past liberating and progressive ideas prescribed in the “*One Word*,” (the rule of law) with the present liberating ideas prescribed in the three-word slogan of Woman, Life, Freedom, Mirsepasi calls for articulation of a new “national discourse.” He is among those of us who suggests that with a broader historical perspective, we as Iranian citizens can unite around this “three-word” slogan to come up with a national liberationist and humanist new social contract (Paivandi, 2023).⁵⁴

Therefore, the WLF movement in a way is also a return to the unfulfilled constitutionalist values, reclaiming certain modern and secular principles of a liberal democratic revolution of the constitutional era. At the same time, however, it is far more than that; millions of Iranians, especially the younger generations of them, women in particular, members of working class, middle class, millions of students, teachers, and nurses are demanding also secular social democratic alternatives to the present corrupt clientelist, and rentier state made up of mafia type militaristic and clerical oligarchs.

The 43 years of trying to mend and strengthen the republican aspects of this so called “Islamic Republic” have been systematically sabotaged by the Islamist hardliners. The fight for reform from within the system reached its futile point and total defeat during the 2021 presidential and parliamentary elections. The hardliners meant to turn that round of elections to a total homogenization of the state organs of the elected as well as appointed bodies. Thus, the remaining few reformers and even the moderate conservatives such as Hassan Rouhani were completely sidelined or removed from positions of power, bringing all the state organs under the control of the “deep state,” that is the “*beyt*” (court) of the supreme leader, and the IRGC security and military organs. The engineering of the latest election process was more obvious and total than before that resulted in a massive boycott of the

⁵³ Ali Mirsepasi, “Ta’āmolāti Darbare-ye Jonbeš-e Zan, Zendegi, Āzadi [Reflection on the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement],” *Sepehr-e Andisheh*, No.3 & 4 (Spring 2023 [Spring 1401]): 101-114.

⁵⁴ Saeed Paivandi, “Goftgoye Melli Pirāmune Qarārdād Ejtemā’i-e Novin [National dialogue about a new social contract],” *Mihan bimonthly Jornal*, No. 47 (Spring, 2023 [16 Bahman, 1401]).

elections and the lowest turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic.

As a result, the most hardliner and incompetent cabinet with Ebrahim Raisi as its President came to power. The bloody background of Raisi who served on a committee that had ordered the extrajudicial execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988⁵⁵, left many people, especially the thousands of grieving family members and supporters of human rights in a state of disgust and frustration. There was left no prospect for reconciliation with the West nor a new agreement over the nuclear conflict, removal of sanctions and normalization of the economic crisis. Khamenei, proud of his achievement in the total victory of hardliners, called for the revival of the Islamist revolutionary zeal of the 1980s leaving no hope for moderation and reform through election and ballot. The mistrust and chasm between the regime and the majority of people reached its deepest level.

The trend toward a revolutionary approach against the totality of the regime had gradually begun during the last years of President Rouhani's second term because of rising inflation and deepening economic crisis, and failure in meeting his promises made during the election campaign. It was in 2017 during the massive revolt around economic grievances (Dey 1396) that some university students chanted a new slogan, namely: "Reformist, Fundamentalist, the game is over!" (*"eslah-talab, osoulgara, digeh tamoomesh*

majara!") That calling, at least on the part of a small segment of population, was to oppose both the reformist and fundamentalist factions of the regime. Many saw that slogan as the beginning of the end of any hope to seek reforms and improvements from within the system.

But that slogan found growing support only after the 2021 sham elections and its consequent increasing repression, corruption, and omnipresent "Morality Police" in its physical assault and daily humiliation of the youth, especially women over the "bad hijab" and "bad style of life." Along with all these pressures has been the increasing economic decline among the middle class as well as working class; high rates of unemployment and hopelessness for the future of the youth and even university students; and the complete and open "turn to the East" in the state's foreign policy that meant increasing militarization and stronger alliance with the despotic and non-democratic regimes of China and Russia. Raisi's trip to Russia and siding with Putin in his invasion of Ukraine, plus the increasing anger and frustration accumulated during the bloody repression of the non-violent protests by workers, teachers, students, farmers, and pensioners under Rouhani and Raisi all contributed to the restlessness and explosive state of society prior to the September 2022 massive uprising in response to Jina Mahsa Amini's death.

⁵⁵ See the report and evidence here: "Ebrahim Raisi," 1988 Massacre of Political Prisoners in Iran, September 20, 2016, <https://iran1988.org/seyyed-ebrahim-reissi-al-sadat-aka-ebrahim-reissi/>

Strengths and Weaknesses of the WLF Movement:

In previous sections of this article, the positive aspects and strengths of Jina movement have been discussed; below are some of the worrisome shortcomings. Many describe this movement as homegrown, spontaneous, leaderless, party-less, and a non-ideological, non-religious and non-violent revolutionary initiative. But some aspects of radical or violent tendencies within the movement, reinforced by the contradictory messages and influences aired by some of the satellite TVs run by Iranian exile or diaspora communities have been attributed to the extreme right-wing populist and monarchist groups mostly based outside Iran, who have been criticized as divisive and polarizing, thus the subject of contention and splits rather than solidarity.

The lack of centralized leadership and hierarchy has been seen by some as an advantage, and strategically designed for the Islamic Republic, a regime that has never hesitated to crack down on and arrest opposition leaders. However, it is difficult to deny the long-term dangers that the absence of leadership has for a movement, such as the lack of cohesion, strategy, and coordination that allow for a clear roadmap and vision for the future (Khosrokhavar, 2023).⁵⁶

For this reason, despite the many sympathies, moral and practical solidarity, and support for the protesters by different ethnic groups and workers from different sectors, strike calls have

been met with limited collective action. Many did not risk joining the demonstrations or going on strike for more than a few days, in a symbolic gesture. The economic burden of imprisoning a breadwinner is not a negligible sacrifice, especially when it is not known who are at the head of the protests or what alternative the movement is capable of making a reality.

What Next?

It appears that the streets are once again, at least temporarily, under the control of the armed security forces of the Islamist regime. It seems that the Jina movement has passed the first phase of its exciting and revolutionary emergence; the thunder and lightning has turned into a light rain. Now is the time for reflection, self-assessment, self-critique, calm dialogues and discussions over differences and commonalities among the supporters of the Jina movement. Leadership training, organizing, and consolidating distinct political parties and united blocks based on shared values and political orientations manifested in various charters recently published and roadmaps that are being articulated inside Iran even within some prisons, as well as outside Iran. And then, building coalitions toward reaching a broad national front with strong and capable leadership organs that can lead Iran in going through an expectedly very difficult transition. Transition not only from the present dictatorship of a brutal and violent Islamist theocracy, but also into a challenging process of building a

⁵⁶ Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Without Real Support, the Revolt in Iran is Running out of Steam," *Le Monde*, Feb 20, 2023.

lasting and sustainable democratic secular republic. It is at this phase that we see intense political rivalries, sectarian fights and not always constructive demarcations based on not only the nature of political goals but also the strategy, tactics, and methods (for instance, violent versus nonviolent) among various alliances.

The degree of national and international moral and political support has been unprecedented. The response has come from civil societies, human rights organizations of different countries or international entities, as well as personalities, writers, celebrities, athletes, journalists, artists, and members of academia. Various governments and authorities too have also exerted pressure, issued statements, and imposed sanctions against the brutal organs or figures of repression. The most notable have been the practical stop of nuclear negotiations (though in part due to the lack of cooperation by Iran's government), the condemnation of Iran's rulers by the United Nations, and Iran's expulsion from the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and the formation of a Fact-Finding Committee to investigate human rights violations in Iran. But many among the decedents do not see these pressures sufficient or effective enough and expect more serious and coordinated political and technological support concerning the internet access.

Obviously, Iran is not in a "revolutionary situation" yet ⁵⁷ even though the Jina movement began as a revolutionary episode. So far, there is no hard evidence of significant major splits within the ruling circles, nor a considerable split within the repressive armed forces serving the regime. But there have been increasing signs of disappointment, estrangement, and disillusion among various influential groups and personalities. Several statements of forceful condemnation of "immoral policies," "increased corruption," economic mismanagement, mistreatment of political prisoners, and the execution of protesters have been issued by entities close to the establishment, even some calls for the supreme leader to resign. The number of seminary students and volunteers to become clergy have been declining as distrust and aversion toward the clergy have increased. Overt complains and concerns are expressed by statesmen about issues such as the declining number of mosque attendees and participants in religious services and Friday payers. For example, Haj Abolqasem Doulabi, the special representative of President Raisi on "Clerical Affairs" has recently warned that out of 75 thousand mosques in the country, the doors of 50 thousand are closed.⁵⁸

One of the internal divisions that could have consequences has been the

⁵⁷ In Leninist terminology, for example, a revolutionary situation emerges when "the bottoms don't want, and the tops cannot live in the old way".

⁵⁸ This information is cited from the Telegram channel of Mehdi Nasiri, a disenchanted hardliner and former editor of Keyhan Newspaper (the infamous major daily hardliner close to the Supreme Leader). While posting the analysis of an independent clergy, Shahabedin Haeri Shirazi about this dramatic decline in

statements issued by Sayed Mohammad Khatami, the reformist former President of Iran, who admits the inability of the regime to reform itself. The other, most forceful statement of opposition from the former members of the ruling circle, came from Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a Khomeini-appointed prime minister in early years of the Islamic Republic (1981-1989). During the rigged 2009 presidential election, Mousavi was “defeated” by Mahmud Ahmadinejad, giving rise to the Green Movement. The then candidate and his wife, Zahra Rahnava, have been under house arrest for 12 years now for leading the Green Movement. On Feb. 3, 2023, Mousavi issued a statement calling for the non-violent removal of the regime through a referendum, free elections and a new Constitution leading to a peaceful transition towards a democratic and secular government.⁵⁹

Another important opponent within the regime is Abdulhamid Ismailzahi, a prominent Sunni cleric, leader of the Baluch people of Sistan and Baluchistan Province. During the Friday prayers in Zahedan there are anti-regime protests and repeated bloodshed caused by the security forces. Ismailzahi has been calling for a national referendum and deep structural changes for eight months now.

Despite criticism at many levels, the Tehran regime pretends to be confident and determined to resist all oppositional

voices and threats from within and without. It appears to be relying in part on support from Russia and his armed proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in the event of a larger uprising. It has also relied on continuous suppression, executions, arrests, and even mysterious poisoning of schoolgirls to frighten people and force them to submission. This familiar strategy under Islamists is openly called “*Alnasro bel Roab*” (النَّصْرُ بِالرَّعْبِ) meaning “victory by terror”.

The current impasse is being watched with concern around the world. Nothing is certain, except that it can be considered unlikely that the regime will be able to respond satisfactorily to the legitimate demands of the population. It is also unlikely that the population will place its trust or acceptance in a regime whose legitimacy has eroded over time and, in recent events, has been portrayed as hopelessly incompetent, brutal, and corrupt.

While the international moral, political, technological (especially internet) support is obviously needed, the current impasse can be changed primarily by Iranian people themselves. Iranian women and the youth are the primary agents of change, especially inside Iran. The role of the Iranian diaspora outside Iran too is very important, but so far, it has been a mixed blessing. It needs a process of reflective re-assessment and dialogue for a more realistic and appropriate ways of support

mosque attendance, Nasiri agrees with him in attributing “this alarming trend” to the loss of the independence of the mosque from the state. (Entekhab Newspaper, 11 khordad 1402 [June 1, 2023]).

⁵⁹ “Opposition Figure Musavi Calls For 'Free' Referendum In Iran, Drafting Of New Constitution,” Radio Farda, February 4, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-musavi-free-referendum/32255674.html>

for the repressed people inside Iran. A more coordinated sense of responsibility and care for political prisoners and the injured people, a sense of solidarity rather than competition over the leadership of the opposition or opportunistic exterior motives. If the humanistic, existentialistic, egalitarian, liberationist, inclusive, and pluralistic principles of the Woman, Life, Freedom are our guiding framework, we shall overcome the ruling tyranny in Iran.

I would like to end this article by citing a few words from Narges Mohammadi stated during a recent written interview with New York Times while still in Evin prison in Iran. She is one of Iran's leading feminist activists whose decades-long efforts have been among those women and men that have helped raise a grassroots awareness contributing to the revolutionary movement of Woman, Life, Freedom. "For Iran to transform into a democracy," she says, "change must come from within the country through the development of a robust civil society." "Like many activists inside the prison, I am consumed by finding a way to support the movement. We the people of Iran are transitioning out of the Islamic Republic's theocracy. Transition won't be jumping from one point to the next. It will be a long and hard process, but the evidence suggests it will definitely happen." (Fassihi, 2023).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Farnaz Fassihi, "She Lost Her Career, Family and Freedom. She's still fighting to change Iran," New York Times, June 2, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/02/world/middleeast/narges-mohammadi-iran-political-prisoner.html>

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