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ARTICLE

"Revolution" as Restoration: Woman, Life, Freedom in the Diasporic Imaginary

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Abstract

This article examines diasporic Iranian responses to protests sparked by the death of Jina (Mahsa) Amini in September 2022. While Amini's death galvanized widespread dissent inside Iran, it also spurred diasporic Iranian solidarity, often expressed through the call to "be the voice" of Iranian protestors. I analyze two key practices of diasporic narration: first, framing the Woman, Life, Freedom protests as a "revolution" in social media discourse; and second, the circulation of nostalgic video montages idealizing pre-1979 Iran as a lost era of political freedom. Together, these practices reveal how diasporic narratives may dilute protest demands by fitting them into revisionist frameworks. The conclusion reflects on both the potential and limits of diaspora narration in shaping political memory and understanding.

Keywords diaspora; narration; nostalgia; social movements; Iran; solidarity

On September 13, 2022, Jina (Mahsa) Amini was arrested by Iran's Guidance Patrol during a visit to Tehran, allegedly for wearing improper hijab. Amini collapsed while in police custody and died in a hospital three days later, with eyewitnesses reporting that Amini had sustained severe beatings by the police.[1] When reports of Amini's death became public, they generated massive protests in Iran. The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" (Jin, Jiyan, Azadi in Kurdish; Zan, Zendegi, Azadi in Persian)—first used by Kurdish women activists in Iraq and Turkey—was chanted at protests following her funeral and quickly spread to other demonstrations.[2] For many members of the Iranian diaspora as well, the emergence of protests after Amini's death was an emotionally charged development. Protests were organized across North American and European cities, and on social media Iranian and non-Iranian women posted videos of themselves cutting their hair in solidarity with Amini and women protesting in Iran.

[1] "Iran: Mahsa Amini's Father."
[2] Zeidan, "Woman, Life, Freedom."

The protests quickly became a crisis for the Iranian government, which began shutting off mobile Internet connections, social media applications, and mobile text messages containing Amini's name as early as September 19, 2022.[3] In the face of Internet shutdowns, several demonstrators called on people outside of Iran to "be their voice." Western media outlets and diasporic Iranian observers wasted no time in amplifying this call, perhaps most straightforwardly exemplified by a letter published by the Atlantic Council on September 28, 2022, from "Sarah," a 22-year-old female student inside Iran. The letter was titled, "I'm a member of Gen Z from Tehran. World, please be the voice of the people of Iran."[4]

Diasporic amplifications of recent Iranian state violence against protesters, and the political struggles against state violence in Iran, can take—and have taken—different forms, including mass protests, the creation and circulation of memes and digital content, social media activity, public billboards supporting Iranian protesters, and in formal and nonformal educational settings panel discussions, teach-ins, and webinars. The call to "be the voice" of the Iranian protesters, and diasporic Iranians' responses to this call, are the points of departure for this reflection.

In this essay, I consider how attempts to be the voice of protesters, as a practice of diasporic Iranian solidarity, invites us to think about the politics of diasporic narration, and the expansive diasporic license taken to speak for the political demands and objectives of protesters in Iran. I pay attention to two forms of this practice during and after the protest movements of 2022 following Amini's death: first, the use of the term "revolution" in hashtags on social media sites like X and Instagram to name and refer to the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. Second, widely viewed videos (notably one produced by the US State Department) depicting still images and video footage of daily scenes of life in prerevolutionary Iran as an era of personal freedom, gender equality, and professional opportunity that was lost after the 1979 revolution.

Putting these two practices alongside one another, I argue that taking up calls to be the voice of the protesters also cues our attention to some of the limitations of diasporic witnessing and narrating from afar. Naming the widespread Woman, Life, Freedom protests of 2022 a "revolution" was, as subsequent political developments in Iran illustrated, premature. Relatedly, the rush to reduce the heterogeneity of political grievances to a unified call for revolution is emblematic of an ongoing diasporic trauma in which the 1979 revolution represents a profound temporal rupture.[5] Iran before the revolution has become idealized in popular discourse and diasporic media as a modern, energetic, and, for women especially, a "free"' society. In this discourse, the tragedies that followed the revolution have included the imposition of strict religious codes, the systemic subjugation of women, and the brutal suppression of all political dissent. Although elements of these claims may be accurate, they nonetheless fall into a well-rehearsed diasporic binary: prerevolutionary Iran was good, postrevolutionary Iran is bad.[6] Moreover, as my analysis of the video segments illustrates, the documented state violence, surveillance, and repression of political dissent of the Pahlavi monarchy is erased from depictions of the "good" prerevolutionary era. The revolution advocated by these diasporic observers can be understood as a recuperation of what was "hijacked" or "paradise lost."[7]

[3] Burgess, "Iran's Internet Shutdown."

[4] Sarah, "I'm a Member of Gen Z from Tehran."

[5] Moruzzi, "Paradise Lost"; Mobasher, "Cultural Trauma."

[6] Mobasher, *Iranians in Texas*; Naficy, *Exile Cultures*.

[7] Bowden, "How Iran's Revolution Was Hijacked"; Matin-Asgari, "Iranian Protests"; Milani, "Forty-Four Years"; Firouz, *In the Walled Gardens*; Moruzzi, "Paradise Lost."

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Iran's revolution, or revolutionary situation?

The protests that ensued after Amini's death have been described on social media in different ways: as protests,[8] uprisings,[9] but also as a revolution.[10] The latter term was quickly put to use by well-known anti–Islamic Republic diasporic political actors aligned with the US government, such as the National Council of Resistance in Iran (an organization linked with the Mojahedin-e-Khalq), Masih Alinejad, and Reza Pahlavi, who were linking the protests with the hashtag "#iranrevolution" as early as September 27, 2022.[11] But the use of the term "revolution" to describe the protests in Iran was not limited to polarizing diasporic political figures alone—a wide range of diasporic accounts on social media platforms have featured content tagged with the same hashtag, or naming the protests as such. For example, Negar Mortazavi, an Iranian journalist and contributor to Anglophone outlets like *Foreign Policy* and the *Intercept*, posted the following caption to a photo of an Iranian woman protester in Iran on her Twitter account on September 25, 2022:

> This feminist revolution is led by brave women and men inside Iran, sparked by the death of #MahsaAmini in police custody, built upon decades of resistance against tyranny and patriarchy, demanding basic rights and dignity.[12]

Other diasporic journalists and observers have posted similar sentiments, usually a photo or video of a protest or protesters within Iran, with a caption describing the scene within as a revolution, or Iran's "new" revolution.[13] In some cases, posts feature footage of protesters in Iran calling their actions a revolution.[14]

There is also a related genre of social media posts that characterize or call for diasporic action to support the revolution. Texas-based Persian language instructor, Leyla Shams, founder of the popular Persian language learning account *Chai and Conversation*, posted the following on her Instagram page on January 8, 2023:

> I've been thinking a lot about the Persian word vazeefe, وظیفه. It means "duty."
> We Iranians, especially the diaspora, have a very clear imperative to do everything in our power, use any skill we have, our loudest/strongest voice, to support this revolution. It's our vazeefe.[15]

Roja.Paris, a self-described collective of leftist feminist groups that posts Persian-language content on Instagram, has posted footage of Iranian protesters in Europe calling for revolution during protests commemorating the one-year anniversary of Amini's death.[16]

[8] Iran Human Right Organization (@ICHRI) "Woman! Life! Freedom!" In front of a mall in Bandar Abbas, southern Iran."

[9] Kamran Matin (@KamranMatin) "Yesterday I talked to @BBCWorld @bbcworldservice on the latest development in #iran's ongoing revolutionary uprising & the reasons for Iranian regime's unbridled violence in #Kurdistan."

[10] Iran Human Right Organization (@ICHRI) "Woman! Life! Freedom!; Kamran Matin (@KamranMatin) "Yesterday." Twitter (now X) was the main social media platform examined in this article. The search parameters were for the hashtags #mahsaamini and #iranrevolution during the period of September 16, 2022 to September 16, 2023. I also looked at posts with the same hashtags on Instagram.

[11] Reza Pahlavi (@PahlaviReza) "Iranians abroad"; NCRI-FAC (@iran-policy) "#IranProtests2022 at a Glance"; Masih Alinejad (@AlinejadMasih) "These fearless women."

[12] Negar Mortazavi (@NegarMortazavi), "This feminist revolution."

[13] Yashar Ali (@Yashar), "This is among the most powerful videos."

[14] Bahman Kalbasi (@BahmanKalbasi), "Critical chant."

[15] See post at Leyla Shams (@chaiandconversation) Instagram page. As of this writing the account has more than 118,000 followers.

[16] See post at Roja.Paris (https://www.instagram.com/roja.paris) Instagram page.

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Although these brief examples are by no means an exhaustive sample of diasporic digital content created in response to the protests, and diasporas are not political monoliths, this recurring usage of "revolution" across various diasporic interlocutors to make sense of the protests invites a conceptual reflection: What does revolution mean to those in the diaspora who are being a voice for protesters? And what political horizons does a diasporic call for revolution gesture toward?

Such questions point to several related points: first, that the Iranian diaspora is an important, heterogenous site of popular meaning-making with regard to Iranian politics; second, the early and recurring invocation of revolution by the distinctive diasporic actors noted above underscores the dominance and durability of the concept across the diaspora as a heuristic for meaning-making of Iranian politics; and finally, diasporic characterizations of the protests as a revolution assign an already-known political end point that does not necessarily reflect the iterative nature of revolutionary movements. Political sociologist Mona El-Ghobashy's work on the uprisings in Egypt from 2011 to 2013 provides a useful overview of how the concept of revolution has been theorized—and theorized too narrowly—following the French and Russian cases. El-Ghobashy defines revolution as a political regeneration, in which a country's political life is completely transformed by a definitive seizure of state power, with the assumed liberation of oppressed masses to follow.[17] Revolutions, as El-Ghobashy tells us, are a set of struggles with histories that establish new political orders.

This definition is useful for assessing diasporic prognoses of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement as a revolution, although it is important to acknowledge that any assessments of the legacy of the protests in Iran nearly one and one-half years after they began remain speculative. Furthermore, they cannot be divorced from recent protest movements in Iran, in which several constituencies active in Woman, Life, Freedom–inspired protests also have participated, including educators, students, pensioners, nurses, farmers, truck drivers, sugar mill workers, and contract oil workers. Acknowledging these connections is vital, as they underscore that protest movements in Iran cannot be analyzed as isolated events, and that the recurring participation of different groups in protests suggest longer trajectories of organized political struggle against systemic arrangements in Iran.

Activists within Iran have described the intensity, heterogeneity, and duration of the 2022 protests as unprecedented. In the words of Red Revolutionary Youth Committee of Mahabad, these developments "provide the conditions for a radical revolutionary context."[18] The wave of protests in 2022 provided an arena for different groups to come to the streets with their own grievances, and to forge connections across these struggles. Indeed, protesters and artists have underscored these connections, perhaps most visibly in the lyrics of Shervin Hajipour's song "Baraye," but also in handwritten protests signs that proclaimed that Baluchi struggles are Kurdish struggles, and that all peoples in Iran deserve respect. The protests also highlighted new and existing forms of mutual aid[19] in response to aggressions from the state and its coercive apparatus.[20]

In these respects, the protests provide fuel for diasporic political longings for a revolution. Although undeniably significant, these protests did not amount to revolutionary outcomes. Although unique in their magnitude, the critiques of the political present that Iranian citizens mobilized are not quite the same as envisioning and building a different political future. These distinctions matter, because despite diasporic references to the protests after Amini's death as a revolution, the political order in Iran remains intact, as

[17] El-Ghobashy, *Bread and Freedom*, 36–37.
[18] Slingers Collective, "On the Way to Revolution."
[19] In Iran, Doctors Come to the Rescue of Protestors.
[20] Ghiabi, "Mutual Aid"; Golshiri, "In Iran."

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does the state's security apparatus to silence and target dissent. Simultaneously, the emergent solidarities noted here, and shared experiences of protest born in the aftermath of Amini's death, endure as a collective reference point. They are a shared memory of dissent. Between these positions, visions for a just future in Iran are still taking shape within Iran, as are collective strategies to realize them. This unfinished and ongoing nature of just future–building by Iranians within Iran stands in contrast to the reified and nostalgic telos of revolution that circulated across much of the Iranian diaspora during the protests.

Recalling the good life lost

To some extent, calls to be the voice of protesters in Iran have resulted in diasporic Iranians narrating their own political imaginations as well. Among the Iranian diaspora, the incident that triggered Amini's arrest—alleged non-compliance with the state's Islamic dress codes—prompted the widespread circulation of video clips detailing Iranian women in scenes of everyday life and leisure before the 1979 revolution. These clips were not all made after the Woman, Life, Freedom protests, but they were widely circulated thereafter—and they adhere to similar representations of the prerevolutionary past. There are different producers of such clips, including one posted by the US State Department, which has been viewed nearly 30,000 times on YouTube, and a clip from an Iranian American journalist in San Diego interviewing her mother about her prerevolutionary memories of Iran, viewed more than 6,500 times. Other clips with similar themes were produced earlier and have much higher view counts, like a 12-year-old clip with more than seven million views titled "Iran Before 1979" made by user "Josh Peace." Other video clips and images of women in prerevolutionary Iran also have been featured in posts and stories on platforms like X and Instagram.

Given their popularity, what do these clips do, acting as the voice of protesters? Arguably, very little, beyond providing a foil for the Islamic Republic's policies toward women. The video by the US State Department, titled "Iran before the Regime," was first posted less than two weeks after the January 3, 2020, US assassination of Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani in Iraq, but was widely shared on social media after Amini's death. The roughly 90-second clip features a montage of images and footage of Iranian women, beginning with unveiled women dancing and laughing, images of Iranian women as university students, solving equations on blackboards, young couples enjoying one another's company, and Iranian women marching in military garb. The semiotic cascade of prerevolutionary modernity is accompanied by ahistorical captions that inform the viewer that (before "the regime"):

> Iran was a place of peace. Of joy. Of equality. A land of unlimted (sic) potential and endless opportunity for every Iranian. Many bright years have been stolen but the Iranian spirit remains undefeated and one day, the Iranian people will be free.

A clip from CBS San Diego 8, hosted by an Iranian American journalist, Neda Iranpour, begins with a juxtaposition of footage from protests in Iran with photographs of parties and coed get-togethers. Iranpour's narration begins by declaring that Iran

> Looks like it has been ravaged by war lately. It's hard to fathom, but Iran used to be a country full of culture, freedom, the arts, women who were allowed to wear their hair and dress as they wanted. Those memories of Iran are what many Iranian Americans in San Diego hold near and dear. US Department of State, "Iran Before the Regime."

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Although aspects of the claims of these videos may hold merit, they nevertheless propose a highly sanitized, revisionist history of the Pahlavi monarchy and the conditions of economic and sociopolitical life in Iran during that time. The State Department's characterizations of prerevolutionary Iran as a utopia brazenly erases the amply documented political repression and socioeconomic inequities of the time. Likewise, Iranpour's equating of the 1979 revolution to the end of Iran's culture and arts suggests that Iranian cultural production and women's political activism are past tense phenomena, claims that are demonstrably false as well. Neither clip addresses Reza Shah's 1936 *kashf-e-hejab* edict banning Islamic veiling, a move that constituted the Pahlavi regime's regulation of Iranian women's public appearance, in that case, to accelerate women's participation in state-led "modernization" and development efforts. Nevertheless, visual representations of Pahlavi-era Iran as a paradise lost—released and recirculated at a time of heightened political protest in Iran—suggest that the protests today should be understood as a larger reclamation project. This project locates Iranian women's rights and broader possibility of social justice in Iran in its prerevolutionary past.

Concluding thoughts: Revolution beyond restoration

Read in tandem with diasporic calls for revolution, the production and circulation of the video clips idealizing the prerevolutionary past indicate that for many observers in the diaspora, and within the US government, the terms and vision for a Woman Life Freedom revolution are already set. Here, the prospects of revolution have little to do with the struggles and collective visioning of Iranians who staged widespread protests and defied the state's security forces beginning in September 2022 and extending through 2023. Instead, calls for revolution while disingenuously pointing to the past as a just future political horizon suggest that, for some members of the Iranian diaspora, the protesters in Iran who mobilized after Jina Amini's death are little more than accomplices tasked with restoring and reconciling nostalgia for a prerevolutionary Iran.

A processual view of politics tells us that the protests sparked by Amini's death may add to an aggregate of contentious politics in Iran, but they do not necessarily constitute a revolution as described by El-Ghobashy. The slogan itself—Woman, Life, Freedom—sets forth a basic vision of what is desired and not readily available in contemporary Iran—but even if we call these revolutionary demands they do not necessarily designate what the transformation of the state and political relations will look like, or how these demands are to be realized. What is clear, however, is that there is no shortage of interlocutors who are ready and willing to speak for protesters, and this enthusiasm is as much a point for caution as it is an act of solidarity.

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