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ROUND TABLE

Diasporic Jina Revolutionary Momentum in Berlin

Nader Talebi

Humboldt-Universitat zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany
Email: nader.talebi@hu-berlin.de

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Abstract

This article analyzes the diasporic dimensions of the 2022 Jina Revolutionary Momentum and its transnational resonance in Berlin, where more than 80,000 protestors gathered in solidarity with events in Iran. It argues that the momentum is best understood not as a continuation of previous movements but as a revolutionary rupture that generates new horizons of possibility through the politics of care, contrasting fear as the regime's dominant affective frame. Drawing on affect theory, the article explores how the revolutionary imaginary transformed both the Iranian diaspora and indirectly Berlin itself into sites of revolutionary performance. By situating the Iranian diasporic activism in the city's longer history as a node for exiled revolutionary activity, the analysis highlights how diasporic activism influenced the national imaginary, fostered transnational solidarities, and reshaped the meaning of Kharej (abroad) from one of exclusion to one of affection within a broader revolutionary geography.

Keywords: Berlin; diaspora; Iran; political affects; revolution

In October 2022, Berlin hosted the largest gathering of Iranian protestors in the diaspora in history, with over 80,000 people expressing solidarity with the revolutionaries who came to the streets in Iran.[1] The Jina revolutionary momentum in Iran was sparked by the tragic death of Jina Mahsa Amini on September 16, 2022, following her arrest by Iran's morality police. This revolutionary momentum also impacted the Iranian diaspora, particularly with regard to transnational power dynamics. The massive demonstration in Berlin was a unique event in its diversity of political views and the number of participants, many of whom had traveled from all over Europe and beyond. It marked a significant moment in the history of the Iranian diaspora and temporarily established Berlin as a vital hub for political activism among Iranian immigrants. In this article, I explore the diasporic aspects of the revolutionary momentum in 2022 and the political transformations of the Iranian diaspora in Germany, and in particular in Berlin. How has the momentum impacted the experiences of the Iranian diaspora and its relation with Iran?

The sociologist, Mohammad Bamyeh, suggested that any revolution is a crisis of established knowledge: "[It] torments what before it had appeared as solid, immovable

[1] BBC, "Iran Protests."

authority[;] a revolution also contests established knowledge."[2] Similarly, in public discussions and academic debates, many sought to assess the characteristics of the unfolding events in Iran in 2022 to determine if they aligned with a "true" revolution or yet another uprising.[3] Apart from the naming game, they often failed to transcend traditional sociological analyses rooted in Orientalist and developmentalist frameworks and their inherent dichotomies, such as state–civil society, public–private, individual–society, and secular–religious.[4] Here, I argue for approaching what happened in the fall of 2022 as revolutionary momentum. Rooted in complex histories of oppression, although the momentum did not bring a "duality of power" as in a "revolutionary situation" (in which the revolutionary forces challenge the binding of oppressive apparatus of the state), it did form a temporal collective of the "people" who imagined a future radically different from the present.[5] I also avoid rendering it as the result of a single historical "movement" (e.g., feminist or Kurdish) that describes it merely as a continuity or expansion of something that existed before. It also was revolutionary for its claims and consequences that shaped new transnational spaces of solidarity beyond Iran and distinguished it from an uprising or a simple regime change, as in the circumstances of the dominant republican aspirations of the 2009 Green Movement.

Following Asef Bayat, I understand the revolutionary momentum of 2022 as a struggle to "reclaim life."[6] "Jina" in Kurdish translates to "renewed life" or "a person full of life," which serves as a more fitting designation for the momentum than Jina's official Persian name, "Mahsa." This choice not only is linked to the iconic sentence written on Jina's gravestone in Kurdish ("Jina, dear! You will never die! Your name turned into a symbol!"), but also reflects the revolutionary aspiration toward life. I argue that reclaiming life is decisive in forming "the people" of Iran, integrating the diaspora, and bringing transnational solidarity. Not only the result of an accumulation of feminist struggles in Iran, it coincided with other anti-authoritarian feminist movements around the world in support of life, articulated around the care concept.[7]

The novelty of the revolutionary momentum is in the unexpected massive interbody force that changes the horizons of possibility and transforms politics toward care.[8] By care, I mean "a collection of principles, practices, and laws that facilitate communal gathering and the governance of politics" that put forward "an ethic, a relation, a form of labor, an element of cultural reproduction, and a building-block towards non-capitalist and non-dominative social relations."[9] In this sense, at the heart of the 2022 revolutionary momentum is a politics of care that inclusively reimagines nationhood and "we" by a rupture from the masculine ideas of Iranian nationalism.[10] Therefore, it differs significantly from the dominant "disgraced" and humiliated masculinity of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and 1905–11 Constitutional Revolution.[11]

For an understanding of the revolutionary momentum beyond the described traditional sociological dichotomies, and in particular its diasporic and transnational aspects, affective politics provides a fruitful perspective.[12] Following Spinoza, I consider affects as relational

[2] Bamyeh, "Ten Theses on Revolutions."
[3] For more on this, see Asef Bayat's responses to Saeed Madani and Jack Goldstone: Bayat, "Prison dialogues and Mahsa uprising"; Bayat, "Revolution of Mr. Goldstone."
[4] Towfigh and Yousefi, "Why Do We Need a New Sociology of Revolution?"
[5] Bayat, "Is Iran on the Verge of Another Revolution?"
[6] Ibid.
[7] Farvardin, "Other Feminisms."
[8] Bamyeh, "Ten Theses on Revolutions."
[9] Woodly et al., "Politics of Care," 892.
[10] Talebi and Farvardin, "Care to Revolt?"; Najmabadi, *Daughters of Quchan*.
[11] Talebi, "State Power and Revolution."
[12] For an example of diasporic revolutionary affect in the 1979 revolution, see Moradian, *This Flame Within*.

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interbody forces that influence the capacity to act.[13] This is not merely "atmosphere," which cannot account for the particularities of each person's affection and receptivity, as well as their active role in shaping affects.[14] In this sense, it also differs from the accumulation of personal affections (feelings) or individual expressions (emotions).[15] Without reducing affects to the impacts of social media, the widespread live circulation of multimedia content influences the revolutionary momentum and its transnational aspects.[16]

Before the revolutionary momentum, pacifying fear—instilled and perpetuated by the regime to discourage dissent and maintain its grip on power—was a pervasive frame in Iranian politics.[17] Politics, in this sense, was mostly reduced to wishful thinking, focused on avoiding the worst scenarios. The regime effectively utilized its apparatus to project a horrifying image of a future devoid of the Islamic Republic, exploiting the Syrian conflict as a potent symbol of a failed revolution and the potential for unlimited violence. However, Jina's revolutionary momentum shattered this climate of fear, replacing it with a potent wave of anger (toward the regime), care (toward the people), and hopes for better in the near future. The momentum exposed the deep-seated discontent simmering beneath the surface as Iran grappled with economic hardship, rampant corruption, and various forms of injustice.

The compulsory hijab, the most visible symbol of state control and gender apartheid, became a focal point of resistance; women unveiled in public as a powerful act of defiance. The collective anger, rooted in diverse experiences of oppression and injustice, transcended geographical and social boundaries, giving rise to a profound sense of care.[18] The slogan "Jin, Jian, Azadi" (Woman, Life, Freedom), originating from the Kurdish struggle for self-determination, became a rallying cry for the revolution, encapsulating the interconnectedness of the fight against oppression (symbolized by women), for Zendegi (life, against its ongoing destruction and exploitation), and toward freedom as the horizon.[19] It put forward a new revolutionary imagination of "us": born from shared recognitions of loss, injustice, and the urgency for rupture with the past, rather than uniform experiences or predefined categories such as social class.[20] In other words, it was an evolving, dynamic formation that arose at the intersection of diverse lives, shaped by empathy and solidarity rather than identical grievances.

Berlin: city of (defeated) revolution(arie)s

Although the Berlin demonstration of Iranians was a historic event, its emergence in that particular city was associated with Berlin's political history as a hub for exiled political activists from the Middle East and North Africa. In this context, the 2022 revolutionary momentum and its associated diasporic political performances changed the narratives of cities such as Berlin for Iranians. As in revolutionary cities in Iran, revolutionary and political performances in the diaspora influenced the narrative of places on various scales.[21] In other words, cities were drawn into the revolutionary geography through the political activities of their inhabitants. For example, in addition to the usual central spots in front of main state buildings or embassies, such as the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, migrant

[13] Slaby and Scheve, *Affective Societies*.

[14] Seyfert, "Beyond Personal Feelings and Collective Emotions."

[15] Albrecht, "Affective and Emotional Transnationality."

[16] On social media and affects see, for example, Sampson et al., *Affect and Social Media*; and Elmore, "Solidarity across Borders."

[17] Talebi and Farvardin, "Care to Revolt?"

[18] Farvardin, "Why Do We 'Care'?"; Rivetti and Saeidi, "Political Convergence."

[19] Rostampour, "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi."

[20] Talebi, "On the Necessity of a Revolutionary Approach."

[21] Massey, "Places and Their Pasts."

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neighborhoods like Kreuzberg and Neukölln witnessed gatherings supporting the revolution. These gatherings were primarily organized by groups that sought solidarity with the oppressed Middle Eastern revolutionaries or progressive political groups in Germany.

Berlin has a long history of (defeated) revolutionary residents from all over the world and is an important site for collective memory in German history and beyond.[22] Since 2009, it has emerged as a hub for the new generation of exiled political activists and artists from the Middle East who have been driven out of their countries by waves of political upheaval and repression.[23] Following the Arab revolutions, the Green Movement in Iran, Turkey's Gezi protests, the Rojava Revolution in Syria, and the conflicts between the AKP and the Kurdish or secular groups in Turkey, many individuals have sought refuge in Berlin to continue their activism and shelter from the oppressive regime they were fighting against. This includes but is not limited to Turkish and Kurdish academics who fled imprisonment after signing a 2015 peace petition, Syrian and Kurdish activists escaping the civil war, and Egyptian dissidents displaced by al-Sisi's coup. The cosmopolitan and politically engaged environment in Berlin has allowed these migrants to maintain ties with their home struggles while fostering a shared Middle Eastern identity. This evolving sense of belonging transcends nationalist, Islamic, and assimilative political narratives that refer to the past and promotes the possibility of a cosmopolitan future that reconnects Middle Eastern communities and amplifies the shared struggles and aspirations of these activists.

Berlin is also notable in the history of Iranian diasporic political activism. The "Berlin Circle" played a significant role in shaping the state project and Iranian nationalism in the early twentieth century.[24] Additionally, Berlin was the site of a pivotal event in the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1967, police officer Karl-Heinz Kurras shot a demonstrator, Benno Ohnesorg, during a protest against the state visit of Mohammad Reza Shah. This incident not only influenced student movements across Europe but also contributed to the emergence of the Confederation of Iranian Students as a crucial oppositional force against the last shah. In the post-1979 revolutionary era, Berlin emerged as a stronghold for Iranian progressive forces, providing refuge for many exiles fleeing the brutal oppression faced by leftists in Iran. However, the necropolitics of the Islamic regime extended beyond its national borders. Notably, in 1992, after the unification of Germany, the Iranian regime assassinated Kurdish and Iranian opposition members at the Mykonos Greek restaurant in Berlin, resulting in a diplomatic crisis between European countries and the regime. With the rise of reformists in Iran in 2000, a conference in Berlin titled "Iran after the Elections" became the scene of political clashes and was instrumentalized by the state media in Iran to discredit the exiled political opposition.

Additionally, diasporic revolutionary affects paved the way for the political engagement of many Iranian immigrants who previously had been politically inactive, rendering most traditional Iranian political organizations in exile peripheral to the revolutionary struggle. The newly engaged activists changed and influenced the content and aesthetics of political performances in the diaspora. It also gave rise to several smaller local groups and collectives that came into existence in the course of collective actions and participation in the demonstrations. Noteworthy was the leading role of women and young queer activists in pioneering these new groups, which were different from the traditional male-dominated political organizations. Many migrants from Iran chose self-exile as a performance of solidarity, to have the freedom to participate in revolutionary performances.[25] It gave a new meaning to the diaspora, based on a responsibility to act (manifested in performances of care) and appreciate relative freedom compared to those fighting in the streets in Iran.

[22] Till, "Staging the Past"; Flakin, *Revolutionary Berlin*.
[23] Ali, "On the Need to Shape the Arab Exile Body."
[24] Matin-Asgari, "Berlin Circle."
[25] See Oghalai, "Willful Self-Exile," in this roundtable.

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Figure 1. Illustration of multiple histories of oppression in the Islamic regime. Photograph by the author, Berlin, November 12, 2022.

Performances of care in "Kharej"

To understand the diasporic aspects of the revolutionary momentum, one needs to trace transformations of two interrelated concepts, Kharej and Kharejneshin. Kharej, as deployed by the regime, refers to anywhere beyond Iran's national borders, and Kharejneshin is an Iranian who lives abroad. But more than geographical designations, these terms are used to discourage and suppress political activism by Iranians in the diaspora and are part of a broader pattern of forestalling dissent that dates back to the regime's consolidation of power after the 1979 revolution.[26] To monopolize power, the newly established Islamic Republic violently crushed all antiregime political groups in the formative post-1979 revolutionary era. This bloody attack on political dissidents triggered a mass migration in the 1980s.[27] Since then, to control the growing diasporic population and the growing presence and visibility of opposition in diasporic spaces, the Iranian regime has constructed a narrative surrounding the terms Kharej and Kharejneshin. This narrative portrays the diaspora as a uniform group of those who escaped the hardships (sanctions and war) and portrays Iranians inside the country as devout and uniformly loyal to the regime's purported goal of building a better future. This image of migration has created an unbridgeable divide between those who stay in Iran to "protect" the country regardless of their collective suffering, and those who don't "care" and prioritize their individual interests by moving abroad. In this narrative, the Iranian diaspora is excluded from the nation as an "imagined community" because of their relocation to Kharej.[28] At the same time, Kharej, for the diaspora, denotes a sense of separation, a double temporality, and a horizon for return. The effort to belittle diasporic politics is but one of the regime's tactics to suppress opposition abroad. The Islamic Republic has expanded its power beyond its national borders through a combination of assassinations of vocal diasporic opponents and the expansion of a network

[26] Talebi and Delvarani, "Iran."
[27] Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, "Post-Revolutionary Iranian Exiles."
[28] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

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of spies.[29] Many individuals are coerced into complicity or are silenced through pressure exerted on them or their families in Iran.

In September 2022, the revolutionary momentum in Iran challenged the dominant official narrative about the Iranian diaspora. Migrants and exiled Iranians organized mass demonstrations worldwide, igniting waves of solidarity that transcended political and geographical boundaries. This shift significantly altered the relationship between Iranians in and outside Iran, facilitated by mass circulation of social media content. The revolutionary momentum also countered the regime's political narrative that Iran belonged only to its supporters and that dissatisfied citizens should emigrate. This was encapsulated in a well-known chant by revolutionaries inside the country: "Why would you leave? Stay and take it back!"[30]

One of the central performances of care in the diasporic spaces has been the protests. Particularly in the early months of the revolutionary momentum, calls for demonstration appealed to the Iranian diaspora. Two trends were distinguishable: performances of solidarity with the revolutionaries inside the country, and raising awareness in diasporic locations about the political situation in Iran. Many street activities, including demonstrations, human chains, collective mournings, encampments, and information points, attempted to include both "here" and "there" in their message. Most performances of care and solidarity aimed to convey that "we have not forgotten you (Figure 1)." This perspective was best manifested in this popular slogan abroad: "Although we are far from the homeland, we have your back, compatriots!" At the same time, Iranians in diaspora boosted initiatives to support dissidents who were leaving Iran to save their lives, and those injured by government forces. These events and developments have led to the emergence of new (cyber) networks among activists in the diaspora as well as between the diaspora and Iran.

Navigating the local and transnational political scales at the same time proved problematic. Although Iranians in the diaspora expected to build alliances and support the revolution, in many cases these efforts were co-opted for politicians' public relations campaigns or instrumentalized to serve the interests of certain political groups. For instance, Islamophobic factions, including right-wing European politicians, exploited Iran's struggle to justify their discriminatory policies against Muslim migrants in Europe. Consequently, although segments of the diaspora saw lobbying as their responsibility, their actions rarely translated into concrete pressure on the Iranian regime. Instead, they remained largely symbolic, benefiting political agendas in their respective countries more than the revolutionary cause. Moreover, their actions, seeking to ally with European political groups, reproduced the dominant "good immigrant" narrative, denoting assimilation and acculturation, and disassociation with the "Middle Eastern Muslim other." Such narratives presented Iranian migrants as fundamentally different from others from the Middle East.[31] Perhaps Iranian nationalism, with its anti-Islamic, anti-Arab, and anti-Turk features, aligned well with the dominant racist view of "integration."[32]

A striking aspect of the revolutionary momentum that has persisted since 2022 is the newfound prestige surrounding Iranian identity. Being Iranian has increasingly become a source of pride. Many individuals of Iranian background have embraced their identity more openly, perhaps because it is now connected to a revolution that resonates beyond Iran and offers a compelling narrative to the world. Additionally, non-Iranian actors have engaged with the movement to leverage the political opportunities it presents. A notable example in Germany is Düzen Tekkal, a second-generation Yezidi Kurd German citizen whose parents migrated from Turkey in the 1970s. Despite having no prior involvement in Iranian

[29] Michaelsen, "Exit and Voice in a Digital Age."
[30] Talebi and Delvarani, "Iran."
[31] Khosravi, "Fragmented Diaspora."
[32] Zia-Ebrahimi, *Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*; Talebi, "Talking Past Each Other."

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politics, she emerged as a prominent voice on the situation in Iran, illustrating how the revolutionary discourse has extended beyond the Iranian community itself.

In contrast to the state-oriented politics often framed as lobbying with "Western" powers such as European countries, the progressive segments of the diasporic opposition have successfully formed new transnational ties from below. Notably, Iranian feminists have leveraged transnational feminist networks to organize multi-city actions in collaboration with local feminist movements, connected by struggles to reclaim life.[33] For example, Feminists for Jina was established with the involvement of Iranian feminists and created a vast network of activists worldwide.[34] They have held actions in several cities and also coordinated a night march in Berlin on the anniversary of Jina's death. Another important transnational network engaged with the progressive parts of the Iranian diaspora is the Kurdish movement. The well-established Kurdish diaspora, primarily made up of migrants from Turkey, has long been active in advocacy efforts and has garnered substantial support among progressive political groups in local contexts. The revolutionary momentum brought Kurdish and Iranian progressive activists closer as they co-organized actions such as demonstrations and shared resources. Transnational networks also developed with Afghan diaspora activists, to combat Islamic dictatorship and obligatory hijab, as the main symbol of the ongoing gender apartheid in both countries. Furthermore, progressives and newly established groups, either independently or in collaboration with international collectives and organizations, have utilized graffiti, posters, and video projections to mark urban landscapes, thereby contributing to the collective memories of Berlin.

Conclusion

The revolutionary momentum sparked by the death of Jina Mahsa Amini reconfigured the political subjectivity of the Iranian diaspora, dissolving entrenched separations between "inside" and "outside" national borders and embedding diaspora members within a shared revolutionary horizon. Practices of care and transnational solidarity challenged the regime's exclusionary narratives of Kharej and Kharejneshin, transforming diasporic spaces from zones of detachment into fields of care and affective proximity. With its layered histories of exile and activism, Berlin became entangled in this evolving revolutionary geography through diasporic political performances, such as demonstrations, encampments, and collective mournings. In resonance with the revolutionary momentum in Iran—grounded in a politics of care and a collective aspiration to reclaim life—diasporic actors extended and sustained new imaginaries of solidarity without claiming authorship over them. The revolutionary momentum disrupted state-centered notions of nationhood and positioned members of the diaspora as integral participants in the ongoing production of transnational revolutionary space. Engagement with the revolutionary momentum connected the diaspora with revolutionaries in Iran and reshaped the diaspora's self-perception.

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[33] Farvardin, "Other Feminisms."

[34] For more information, see Feminists for Jina (website), https://feminists4jina.net.

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