

Women, Life, Freedom: three things the Ayatollahs hate – a weekly news review

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In the country where a woman on the street with her head uncovered is a revolutionary act, women have been dancing as they throw their hijabs onto public bonfires. The death of a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman at the hands of Iran's "Morality Police" for allowing her scarf to reveal too much of her hair, has opened a valve on pent-up anger against a regime that denies all rights, including the right to hope for a better future. Iran has erupted in mass

protests of extraordinary bravery, as ordinary folk, fired up with a vision of freedom, face up to security forces that have shown no compunction over the use of lethal power. Internet shutdown raises fears of what could be happening now, but last night's videos showed the uprising continuing and spreading, despite the regime's crackdown, with one small city, Oshnavieh, completely in the control of its people.

That Mahsa Amina – or Jina, to give her her Kurdish name – was Kurdish should come as no surprise. The Iranian regime demands the total subservience of women, and it also takes every opportunity to oppress its Kurdish minority, which opposed the imposition of Islamic rule. Of the many communities that make up the population of Iran, Kurds have been left with the least to lose, and, despite strongly patriarchal tribal traditions, many Iranian Kurds have also been exposed to the Kurdish Freedom Movement and its focus on women's freedom. The protests – which have developed into an uprising – have been especially strong in Kurdish areas, though they have now spread to all corners of the country. The movement's slogan of Jin Jiyan Azadi – Women Life Freedom – has become the call of the resistance, alongside anti-regime slogans such as Death to the dictator!

Such a movement does not appear out of nowhere. The Iranian regime has faced mass unrest before. In 2019, anti-government uprisings were taking place in over 2/3 of Iranian provinces when the government unleashed their security forces, leaving 1,500 people dead. Recent years have seen mass strikes by groups struggling to survive on starvation wages and pensions, and protests by farmers unable to get the water needed for their crops. And, long before this week, women were demonstrating a determination not to be cowed by the state, even at the risk of severe punishment. Women filmed themselves dancing on the street and in the underground trains, and, a week before Jina Amina's murder, there were major protests for women's rights in Rojhelat (East, or Iranian, Kurdistan) after a woman threw herself to her death out of a window to escape a rapist who had a history of violence but had been released by police because he was a collaborator with state security.

Western media has been quick to report on the current unrest and on women removing their headscarves, but even when they quote the Kurdish slogan "jin

Jiyan Azadi”, its full significance is not discussed. The women’s freedom demanded by the Kurdish Freedom Movement, inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, is part of a revolutionary approach to change the whole of society that also rejects Western liberalism and the demands of capitalism in favour of community-based organisation and grassroots democracy. That the slogan is also being shouted in Farsi – Zen Zendegi Azadi – is entirely in tune with the Movement’s emphasis on ethnic rights and inter-ethnic solidarity. Shouting that slogan need not imply support for all the ideas it represents – and there is no suggestion, other than from the Iranian authorities, that Jina herself was politically engaged – but the organisations of the Freedom Movement have been building clandestine support in Rojhelat, and it was these organisations – the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), Rojhelat Democratic and Free Society (KODAR), and the Society of Free Women of East Kurdistan (KJAR) – that called the general strike that shut down Rojhelat’s cities on Monday. Outlets that were happy to report calls by some reactionary elements in 2019 for the return of the Shah, are less keen to give coverage to the Kurdish Freedom Movement. The reaction of Western political leaders is reminiscent of Hilary Clinton’s enthusiasm for “The Daughters of Kobani”, when she bought the film rights to a book about the achievements of the Kurdish Women’s Movement without stopping to question America’s support for Turkey’s assault on the PKK, in which Bill Clinton played a very large part.

The state’s attack on Jina Amina took place on 13 September, when she was visiting Tehran with her family. As has happened to many other women before her, she was pulled aside by the baton-wielding defenders of “Islamic morality” for wearing her hijab “inappropriately”. In the police van, she was beaten repeatedly over the head, and within two hours she was taken to hospital in a coma. On Friday she was pronounced dead. The Iranian authorities attempted to claim that her death was the result of a list of existing health problems, all of which her family denied. On Monday, London-based Iran International tweeted “Medical documents and dozens of exclusive images of #Mahsa_Amini’s CT scans, which were provided to @IranIntl_En by a hacktivist group, show a skull fracture on the right side of her head caused by a severe trauma to the skull.” And they noted that Fars News, affiliated to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, had confirmed the authenticity of the

scans. Despite huge pressure from the state, and personal danger, Jina's father has given a public interview in which he states that "Everything they have said and shown is lies." He had even managed to speak to other girls in the van who described the assault.

The first protestors gathered along with the Amini family and friends outside the hospital in Tehran. Already, from that first day, there were reports of gunshots from the security forces and reduced internet connections. The authorities took Jina's body to the cemetery in her hometown of Saqqez overnight, and would have buried her in the small hours of the morning, but their plans were physically blocked by local people, and the funeral took place in front of a massive crowd the next day. Security forces shot at the mourners, leaving several injured.

Mass demonstrations erupted across Kurdish cities and quickly spread to other areas. Student support has been especially strong, including protests at many Tehran universities. Videos shared on social media show women with their hair uncovered, next to those with their heads veiled, each respecting the other's choice. We see women proclaiming their freedom from on top of cars, and filming themselves cutting their hair, and crowds, armed only with stones, forcing back security police. Besides burnt hijabs and torn down symbols of the regime, there are overturned police cars and torched security vehicles. But there have also been images, many too graphic to watch, of the bloodied victims of security force shootings, and portraits of people who have disappeared. Many of the videos record shooting, and the Kurdish human rights organisation, Hengaw, has reported security forces using semi-automatic weapons. The regime has been using ambulances to transfer weapons and to take people to detention centres. By Thursday, Oslo based NGO, Iran Human Rights, was reporting 31 known deaths of protestors at the hands of the security forces, along with many injuries and widespread arrests. The New York based Center for Human Rights in Iran gave a figure of 36 dead, with the comment "Expect the number to rise." Major internet restrictions are leading to growing fears that the situation is getting much worse. People on the streets need others to know what is happening – both in other parts of Iran, and in the wider world. In 2019 internet blackout preceded the regime's violent crackdown.

While Iran has been in turmoil, Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, who was one of four men responsible for the murder of thousands of political prisoners in 1988, was speaking to the United Nations about justice. Few of his listeners will have been persuaded by his hypocrisy, however, words of support for the Iranian protests by Western leaders are of dubious help. It is not just that many of these leaders have presided over injustices themselves, as Raisi is not alone in pointing out, and that US sanctions have had disastrous impact on the everyday lives of Iranian citizens. The supportive words of Western leaders provide ammunition to those who would seek to pretend that this is not a genuine uprising but a Western-inspired "colour revolution". Their dismissal of Iranian agency is, thankfully, not common, but awareness of US meddling across the globe has made some people so wary they can no longer envisage the possibility of revolutionary change even as they call for it. In an ironic twist, their sensitivity to US hegemony has made them victim to the US claim that there can be no revolutionary alternative, and they would rather quote the Iranian authorities than those fighting for their freedom. As one twitter user put it in response to this attitude, "Not everything is about your empires".

US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, claimed on Friday that the US had taken action to "advance Internet freedom and the free flow of information for the Iranian people", but all they have actually done is lift their own sanctions that prevented technology firms from trying to help Iranians connect to the internet. This followed a request from Elon Musk, who has announced that his Starlink network will now be available to Iranians, but this is not the magic cure that has been portrayed, as Starlink relies on small terminals for the users and ground stations in nearby countries. More generally, the power of one man to decide what movements get connectivity is a very worrying development.

Imperial diplomacies

Raisi met with Turkey's President Erdoğan and Russia's President Putin at the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand a week ago, and their foreign ministers met on the fringes of this week's UN

summit in New York, where they continued their discussions on the future of Syria. There has been no statement on what was discussed, but it is widely believed that it is actually Iran that is the restraining factor preventing Russia from agreeing to Erdoğan carrying out another full-scale invasion: the reason being Iran's own rivalry with Turkey.

Iran is basking in being made a full member of the SCO, while Turkey has only dialogue partnership status. Pro-government media highlighted photographs of Erdoğan talking to the other leaders in Samarkand, and he has made clear his intention to bring Turkey into full SCO membership, but doubts have been raised over whether this is compatible with NATO membership, not least by Russia. As ever, Erdoğan is attempting to play NATO off against Russia, and to play to the anti-Western gallery.

Meanwhile, Turkey's financial agreements with Russia have taken a hit as two Turkish banks responded on Monday to US sanction threats and suspended their use of the Russian Mir payment system.

In Syria

While Russia, Iran, and Turkey discuss a Syrian future to suit their own interests, people on the ground in North and East Syria struggle to get through daily life under constant shelling from Turkey and Turkey's mercenaries; and the security forces of the Autonomous Administration stay constantly alert to threats from ISIS.

Last Saturday, North and East Syria's Internal Security Forces, assisted by their Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), completed a 3 ½ week sweep of Al Hol Detention Camp, which houses the families of ISIS fighters. While this was taking place, ISIS called for retaliation, and ISIS cells responded with numerous attacks. This week, the security forces thwarted two planned vehicle-borne suicide bombings that are believed to have been intended to enable a breakout from Al Hol. On Monday night, two vehicle bombs set out for the camp. One detonated prematurely 12 miles from their destination, and this alerted the SDF who arrived within minutes. One would-be attacker in a suicide vest, from the second vehicle, blew himself up, and another man was

taken prisoner. Not long afterwards, acting on intelligence, the security forces dismantled a truck bomb being prepared at a nearby farm.

Lawfare in Turkey

This week, I also want to talk about a very different form of resistance that is currently being undertaken by progressive lawyers across the world, but, first, I will give a brief roundup of the week's developments in Turkey's ongoing erasure of the rule of law.

The Saturday Mothers are family members of people who were disappeared in the 1990s, and who protested every Saturday in Istanbul's Galatasaray Square to demand that the government investigate what happened to their relatives and that those responsible face justice. In August 2018, on the 700th Saturday of their protest, they were attacked by police, and many were detained. 46 people are now on trial for taking part in an "illegal gathering". Wednesday was the fifth hearing of their trial, and supporters gathered outside the court to read out a statement. But the police were having none of it. They attacked the crowd and arrested at least 10 people, including defence lawyers.

Last Sunday, another political prisoner died in suspicious circumstances while being held in for a week in solitary confinement as a 'disciplinary punishment'. Twenty-five-year-old Barış Keve was buried in his hometown in the district of Van, and politicians and activists were among hundreds of mourners at his funeral.

The office of the Governor of Istanbul has refused permission for an investigation into the police officers who battered journalists at the gathering, last May, to mark the 9th anniversary of the Gezi Park protests. The Journalists' Union of Turkey commented, "This decision means 'continue' to those who attacked journalists. We will not stay silent to impunity".

Meanwhile, in another example of the ruthless nature of international relations, Serbia seems set to extradite a Kurdish asylum seeker back to Turkey, and to certain imprisonment, as they negotiate an arms deal with

Ankara. The Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) has issued an urgent appeal on behalf of long-term political activist, Ecevit Piroğlu, who was detained when he arrived at Belgrade Airport over a year ago, and has been on hunger strike since the beginning of June. He is now being held in solitary confinement and is in danger of losing his life.

In a generally unchallenging interview on America's PBS Newshour, Erdoğan stated, "we have no concerns about winning the elections, nobody will replace us because there is no alternative." When interviewer, Judy Woodruff, asked "I have to ask you because you're in the United States. And, as you know, we have had an election here in the last two years, where one of the people who was running did not accept the results and challenged them.

Could you see something like that happening in Turkey?" Erdoğan responded, "Well, these are common things. They happen all the time. There is losing by a great extent and there is not winning. But we are currently in such a position that we will be able to be triumphant." As he is currently well behind in the polls, this does not bode well. Erdoğan also stated, in the discussion about Ukraine, "no invasion can be justified". No mention was made of Syria.

A legal challenge

Turkey's most significant miscarriage of justice is the 23-year-long imprisonment and isolation of Abdullah Öcalan. The European Court of Human Rights ruled, in 2005, that he had not been given a fair trial, and subsequent rulings by the European Court have criticised both his almost total isolation, and Turkey's refusal to consider parole, which deprives him of the right to hope. Öcalan has been denied visits from his lawyers since July 2011, apart from five visits in 2019 following a mass hunger strike, and tomorrow it will be 18 months since there was any contact with him at all. His lawyers are trying to break the logjam, and draw public attention to the situation, by inviting lawyers from across the world to sign up as lawyers for Öcalan and demand to see their client.

A week ago, 350 lawyers from 22 countries applied to the Minister of Justice to request a meeting with Öcalan. Last week, a press conference in Brussels,

hosted by Lawyers for Lawyers, and the European Association of Lawyers for Democracy and World Human Rights, publicised their letter. The press conference also called for more to be done by the European Union and the Council of Europe, and especially by the latter's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), which has the right to demand to visit Öcalan's island prison.

On Tuesday, a similar announcement was made in Qamishlo on behalf of 691 lawyers practising in North and East Syria, Tartus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia. All in all, 756 lawyers from Middle Eastern countries have applied to visit Öcalan. Besides Syria, these lawyers come from Morocco, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan.

There was planned to be a public announcement of this in Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but this was blocked by the security forces. The Kurdish region's compromising ties with Turkey have prevented them giving freedom of speech to lawyers highlighting an issue of human rights that is of vital importance to Kurds and to peace in the region and that was freely discussed in Belgium.

Most of us are not lawyers, but we can help this campaign by publicising it. And we can help give voice to the people of Iran by joining one of the many protests being held today. The jailed former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, is not free to join protests, but he, too, has demonstrated his solidarity, along with his cellmate, Dr Selçuk Mızraklı, by shaving his head.

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