

WOMEN'S FIGHT FOR THEIR RIGHTS

The protests that have set Iran on fire for the past two months touched Britain recently, when the BBC reported that journalists working for a UK-based Iranian-language broadcaster had been threatened by the Islamic regime. The Metropolitan Police notified the two journalists of credible threats from Iranian security forces, while Iranian Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib confirmed that the broadcaster had been identified by Tehran as a terrorist organisation, and, along with BBC Persia, placed under sanctions by Tehran for 'incitement of riots'. It fits nicely with the regime's explanation of the protests as being aided by foreign powers and fomented through legacy and social media.

Despite the threats from the Islamic regime, these broadcasters are many Iranians' main source of news in a country where the state carefully controls all information that is given to its citizens. Iranian independent media is constantly under attack in Iran and, since the start of the protests, some 61 Iranian journalists have been arrested and detained inside Iran, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The French media watchdog Reporters Without Borders has said Iran has become the world's biggest jailer of female journalists in the course of the current crackdown.

IT WAS ON 16 SEPTEMBER THAT NEWS came of a young woman who had died in the custody of Iran's Morality Police. Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, had been taken into custody because of a 'bad hijab'. She was visiting relatives in Tehran with her brother when the Morality Police had challenged her about a few strands of hair that were showing – in Iranian law women's hair and body must be covered by a headscarf and loose-fitting coat.

According to her brother, she was in custody for just two hours before collapsing and being taken to hospital, where she lay in a coma before dying. The authorities claim she had a heart attack from a pre-existing condition. Her family deny this and say her head and body were covered in bruises and signs of being beaten.

Reporter Niloufar Hamedy broke the story of her hospitalisation and death, with protests starting in Mahsa's homeland of Kurdistan, a western province in Iran where ethnic Kurds have long experienced discrimination. Journalist Elahe Mohammadi travelled to Saqqez to report from her graveside. Both Hamedy and Mohammadi were arrested soon afterwards and have now been charged with spying for foreign powers – a charge that carries the death penalty.

Mahsa Amini's real first name – Jhina – is Kurdish and could not be registered on her birth certificate as only Persian and some Islamic names are lawful in Iran. There is some speculation that the brutality of her treatment at the hands of the Morality Police was in part due to her ethnicity.

DESPITE 250 PEOPLE REPORTEDLY BEING arrested and five people killed – including a child – during two days of protests in Kurdistan following Mahsa Amini's death, the demonstrations didn't stop. In fact, they spread to the rest of the country, with

'The End of the Islamic Republic of Iran has Begun'

Having fled Iran following the 1979 revolution, **Kamin Mohammadi** believes that whatever happens next, the relationship between the theocratic state and its citizens is irrevocably broken



Protests at the grave of Mahsa Amini who died in police detention in Iran
Video

the Kurdish freedom cry of 'Woman Life Freedom' becoming the dominant chant in the biggest nationwide protests that Iran has seen since the revolution of 1979. The slogan comes from the Kurdish struggle for freedom, which centres the equality of women as a prerequisite for true liberty.

Protests have been recorded in at least 350 locations in the country over the past seven weeks and the number of dead has been put at 318 by IRNA, the state news agency, at the time of going to press. The reality is likely to be much higher. Some 15,000 people have reportedly been arrested – again these are official figures that are impossible to verify, but the reality could be much higher.

One of the most striking things about these protests is that they are being led by women, predominantly very young women of 'Gen Z', who have been tearing their headscarves off their heads to wave them triumphantly in the air, to burn them, to joyfully dance as they consign them to bonfires.

While the brutal treatment of Mahsa Amini over a 'bad hijab' was the spark that lit this conflagration of rage, the real heat of this movement comes from decades of repression and oppression of any viable opposition to the hardline clerical regime, its refusal to make any concessions to the population's demands, a free-falling economy, and the mass corruption and hypocrisy of a ruling elite which refuses to allow Iranian women some loosening of the mandatory hijab even as their own children stalk the streets of LA clad in barely-there outfits and post pictures of lavish

parties in their luxurious foreign mansions bought with the pilfered riches of the country.

The headscarf that is being waved, ban-shee-like, by Iranian women is, for the people of Iran, no longer anything to do with Islam but a symbol of the oppression that the regime has visited on its people in the name of religion. This is not a call for the end of Islam but a call for the end of the symbols of state power and abuse; a call that even religious Iranians have joined, objecting to the fact that the regime has taken the symbols of their faith and turned them into the tools of the suppression of half of the population. They are joining the protests alongside the girls who have so courageously whipped off their hijabs to face the regime's forces with their hair flowing.

THE WOMEN OF IRAN HAVE BEEN demanding freedom ever since Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979. The first demonstration against mandatory hijabs took place three weeks after his arrival, on Women's Day.

Before the revolution, Iranian women had some of the most liberal laws in the Middle East: they could wear what they liked, they could work in all sectors and even rise to be judges, they had equal rights to divorce and custody of children, and they had been voting since 1964.

The very first thing that Ayatollah Khomeini did after taking power – implementing what he called "God's own Government" – was to repeal the Family Act of 1976, the most progressive in the region.

Given all of the urgent problems that

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revolutionary Iran faced in 1979, it is telling that this was the focus of Khomeini's first act – to reduce the marriage age for girls from 18 to nine and take away so many of the rights of half of the population. Ironically, this half of the population had been very active in bringing about the downfall of the Shah's regime – widely despised for its corruption and human rights abuses. A common chant during the revolution was "there is no human rights without women's rights", with men forming a human chain to protect the thousands of women who took to the streets of Tehran to protest the proposed hijab laws and demand their rights.

It was not until 1983 that the mandatory hijab was finally made law for all women in Iran – and it was because of the devastating war with Iraq that started in 1980 that the regime was able to impose this.

The fact that Iranian women today enjoy the right to work and vote and appear in public spaces is testament to their relentless fight for their rights in the Islamic Republic. Of Iran's population of 85 million people with a literacy rate of 97%, women make up 65% of university

graduates. And all this for a gender whose word in court is worth half that of a man (you need two female witnesses to attest, where one man will do as a witness), who cannot sing, dance or show its hair or body in public, and can be married aged 13.

SIGNIFICANT UPRISINGS IN IRAN LED BY women took place in 1999, in 2009, 2017 and again in 2019. From 2009 onwards, men joined women in these protests, often adopting the hijab themselves to express their equality with women.

In 2014, the 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaign encouraged Iranian women to post pictures of themselves without a headscarf on a dedicated Facebook page. At the same time, a parallel campaign called 'Men in Hijab' saw Iranian men posting pictures of themselves with headscarves to show solidarity with their women.

The mandatory hijab law sits at the very heart of the revolutionary Islamic system that governs Iran and its interpretation is a litmus test of how permissive the authorities are willing to be.

Under reformist presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani, women loosened their hijabs without being harassed for it. But since conservative hardliner Ebrahim Raisi took the presidency last year, there has been increasing harassment of women on the streets by Iran's Morality Police and even sometimes by random mullahs.

Seeing the casualness of the violence meted out to women in the past months, the utter sense of entitlement of the men and women of the Morality Police who are authorised to manhandle women and girls has reminded many of the dark early days of the Islamic Republic, when hoards of Morality Police would slap women wearing make-up on the street or give them sponges to clean their face – in which were hidden razor blades.

After more than 40 years of Islamic rule, this summer, the order came from Raisi himself for a crackdown on women's "bad hijab" – a sure sign of the tightening of the hardliners' grip on the country.

The Iranian people's struggle for freedom and democracy goes back more than 100 years. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906 was quashed by Imperial Russia and Britain. In 1953, democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who nationalised Iranian oil, was removed in a coup engineered by the CIA and MI6 – up until that point Britain had received 87% of the revenue from Iran's oil and, after the coup, America became the main foreign power unofficially colonising Iran.

There are those who are convinced that even the revolution of 1979 was sanctioned by the West, which empowered the exiled Khomeini in order to clip the wings of a Shah who had become too good at wielding the power of OPEC (the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) against the West.

The West's position of influence in Iran has now been taken by Russia and it is the West's failure to effectively engage the Islamic Republic that now means our leaders have little influence over how the mullahs behave or in stemming of the great flow of killings, executions and torture of protestors.

IN SPITE OF THE BRUTALITY OF A HORRIFICALLY bloody crackdown – which has

seen not just live bullets and tear gas used against protestors; but shootings inside homes and cars; the arbitrary arrests of citizens, often breaking down front doors in the middle of the night; the tracking of artists, film-makers, activists, students, actors and musicians through delivery apps; the savage beatings of protesting school children in their school yards; the desecration and stealing of protestors' dead bodies; secret burials; and the killing of children as young as 11 – these demonstrations feel different in significant ways to those that have come before.

Without an apparent leadership or central organisation, the protests are explosions of absolute fury which appear to be bursting out spontaneously all over Iran.

They are led by young women but cut across all genders, age and socio-economic groups. They are centring not just women but ethnic minorities such as Kurds and Baluchis whose protests have been particularly brutally suppressed. As I write, the cities of Sanandaj, Marivan and Saqqez in Kurdistan are under the sort of shelling that recalls the post-revolutionary days of Khomeini, who attacked the region shortly after taking power to silence its opposition to his theocratic rule.

It is the facelessness of these protests, their simple demands for human rights, equality and democracy that are remarkable. As strikes have spread from the bazaars to shopkeepers to teachers to oil workers, we have seen things in these weeks that were beyond our wildest imaginings.

Schoolgirls with their hair loose taking down the picture of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei and stamping on them, chasing regime representatives from their school yards. Women quietly going about their daily business without a loose coat or head covering in powerful acts of civil disobedience. The retaking of public spaces by women who are using their physical bodies – and their hair – to take back the streets, the squares, the university campus.

These women are overwhelmingly young, but their cries of fury carry also the voices of all the women of Iran who have been silenced, not just in the past 43 years, but for centuries and for all the generations who have suffered indignity, humiliation and erasure at the hands of "God's own Government".

While Iranian journalists continue to risk their lives to report on the demonstrations, tracking the protests and what is happening on the ground can only really be done online, since phone lines into the country are not safe and contact via messaging services is also difficult due to the Iranian authorities' cutting off or slowing down of the internet. Cyberspace is now, as it has been for the past decade, the main place where the Iranian people can express themselves. It's not always a safe space given the Islamic regime's 'cyber army' but it's better than the streets which are patrolled by Morality Police.

AFTER NEARLY TWO MONTHS OF WATCHING the most extraordinary scenes being played out on the streets of Iran, I have had to limit my intake of videos coming out of Iran. They show an unparalleled use of force and violence against the protestors that make the blood run cold. Schoolgirls beaten to death in the school yard for not singing an anthem to the Supreme

Leader; mothers and fathers wailing over the graves of their loved one; and, just as upsetting, the testimonies of parents and family members describing the difficulty in claiming the body of their dead child from the authorities, the desecration of the body that has taken place, and death threats to family members if they speak to the press or on social media.

A horrific fire broke out one night in Evin prison – Iran's most notorious jail where political prisoners are kept, currently home to some of the brightest and most creative and brilliant minds in the country. The scenes of the flames licking the rooftops were accompanied by the horrific screams of prisoners. There were reports from those living nearby that, instead of fire engines, some 2,000 extra security troops were deployed there. We will perhaps never know what happened in Evin that night, but revelations from the mother of two imprisoned brothers has cast some light on the chaos in which prisoners were kept barefoot on burning floors and given no medical treatment. Families are still crowding the area around the jail, demanding to know the status of their imprisoned sons and daughters.

Iranian medics all over the world are giving free consultations over the internet and telephone to Iranians injured in the protests who do not dare to go to hospital – they are often immediately arrested when they arrive there. Iranian doctors held a protest in Tehran pleading with the authorities to allow them to treat the injured – instead the security forces opened fire on the protests and arrested many medics.

The latest news from the Iranian Parliament is that 277 out of 290 MPs have called on the judiciary to sentence to death all the protestors being held: a potential genocide of tens of thousands of people.

The naked repression and brutality of the regime means that, whatever happens next, the relationship between the state and its citizens is irrevocably broken. In the four decades since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iranians have protested peacefully and worked through all legal means to protect their rights. While some small gains have been made, today's protests mark an end to the population's attempts to reform the system and negotiate some greater freedoms with the ruling theocratic regime.

These protests mark the people's absolute frustration with the regime – the realisation that the mullahs have no interest in making concessions or in defining their citizens' demands in any way other than foreign interference and American and Zionist plots.

These protests are the latest – bloodiest – struggle for the heart and soul of Iran, with elderly clerics with pious facades and pockets bulging with Iran's riches on the one side, and Iran's overwhelmingly young, educated and switched-on population on the other.

These Gen Z Iranians have observed their parents' attempts to reform the system from the inside and have seen their failure to win any real change. Somehow, this generation has lost its fear and these kids are willing to put their bodies on the line for the sake of simple human rights – freedoms which we in the West enjoy without thinking twice. There is nothing extraordinary in what they want but

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everything extraordinary in their claiming their rights in a society whose three weapons of terror – shame, repression and killing – have kept the population in line for more than 40 years.

This loss of fear is the most threatening thing of all. It may not be this time or this year or next, but since the tenuous contract between state and its citizens has been so ferociously broken, the end of the Islamic Republic of Iran has definitely begun.

AS AN IRANIAN WHO HAS GROWN UP AND lived in Britain since the age of nine, I thought that I was long accustomed to the horror stories that come out of my birth country. Living in the diaspora with dual identities has been a balancing act, and I have spent a large part of my working life trying to humanise Iran in the West.

Since George W. Bush's 'axis of evil' speech, it has been a particularly tricky tightrope to walk – not daring to speak out about the appalling atrocities of the regime against our people for fear of repercussions for our family in Iran, for losing our own ability to travel there safely, and also for feeding the toxic narrative of Iran in the West and enabling an Allied invasion such as those on Iraq and Afghanistan.

And yet, for the first time since we fled Iran in 1979, I feel fully aligned with my people back in Iran.

The diversity of the protestors; the acceptance of everyone's grievances as being equally worthy; the idea that, for once, all Iranians are equal in their desire for the same goal – freedom to live a peaceful life with no abuse – makes me and those in the diaspora also feel included. This solidarity has seen global peaceful protests which last month saw some half a million people worldwide taking to the streets – including 100,000 Iranians in Berlin, the largest gathering of the diaspora ever seen. We are all united.

And now, for the first time in many years, I am allowing myself once more to dream that one day I can enter Iran without fear accompanying every step that I take. And this heady and delicate little hope has been given to me by the young women of our country: our heroes.

Over a decade ago, I wrote in my book that "it may not be tomorrow or next year, but I know that the women of Iran will one day take what is rightfully theirs, powered by nothing other than their huge hearts, fierce intellects and sharp tongues". These lionesses of Iran have at least given us back our ability to dream again, and it is this imagining of a new reality – of seeing it on the streets of Iran as women walk around without their hijabs – that is perhaps the biggest threat to the continuation of the status quo. *Woman Life and Freedom*.