

ROUND TABLE

Writing in Turbulent Times. Introduction to the Roundtable on the 2022–23 Iranian Protests

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The editorial decision to publish a roundtable on the 2022–23 protests in Iran has come with challenges and obvious limitations due to access and immediacy. The ambition of this intervention is to offer some initial reflections and some analytical instruments in the hope that they will be useful for future publications. We also want to write in this moment because we want to register its characteristics—emotions running high, the quick detours of power relations between the state and the protesters, the uncertainty, the changing political weight of the diaspora—along with the difficulty of doing analytical work in the midst of such processes.

As the authors gathered in early January 2023 to exchange ideas on this project, we observed that the reverberations of the Iranian uprising in our lives went well beyond the preoccupation for the safety of our dear ones in Iran and a more general, yet profound, disgust for state violence. We all noticed and felt that activists and protesters in Iran were questioning the usefulness of our work as public intellectuals and educators, asking us not to remain silent, with both positive and negative consequences. As someone who has been researching the dynamics of political activism, I have often been challenged by activists on the ground. Over the years, many have asked me to give them a reason for speaking to me, for opening up about their persuasions and for sharing sensitive information with me. I have responded to such questions by building confidence and trust as best as I could. I have engaged in long (and frustrating, I must confess) conversations during which my ego as a young researcher was literally shattered and treated with no mercy, and I have disclosed all possible information about myself and my work, revealing contradictions of which I had no awareness at the time. Those moments were revealing for me. With experience, those hard questions have come to inform my work in a systemic manner, making me a better researcher, I think. This is happening today, too, and I believe it is a positive exercise for us as researchers: to remember that we are part and parcel of a larger community in which we are immersed and to which we should be accountable, because we are often listened to when others are not.

However, in the current moment, these legitimate challenges to our role as intellectuals who have public visibility also have at times transmuted into questionable practices. Baseless accusations of serving the interests of the Iranian state and being complicit with state violence have been addressed to colleagues with a chilling effect, weakening everyone's sense of safety when expressing opinions or discussing research findings. Female intellectuals have prominently featured among those targeted with death and rape threats. These practices endanger academic freedom and the freedom of speech, and reveal a disturbing gendered pattern of violence. The restriction of a safe space for debate has had a negative impact on the academic community, leading some voices to go silent or stop engaging.

Furthermore, given the uncertainty of the current moment, such accusations have created more chaos than clarity, with no tangible positive influence on the protests in Iran. Confusion has reached a point at which some have suggested that those accusations originated from the Iranian state itself, as it has sought to enhance and take advantage of political divisions among the critics of the regime, whereas others have theorized that they originated from the secret services of countries such as Israel and the United States, to weaken antiwar and antisancctions voices.

There also is another aspect to the challenges coming from activists in Iran, and it relates to the theoretical references that inform the work of many intellectuals. Those who pay attention to intellectual developments in Iran and have been following current events closely have certainly noticed that postcolonialism as a theoretical and political tradition and other similar trends have been criticized by Iranian activists. It is said that they provide justifications to the regime for restricting civil rights in the name of “anti-imperialism” and in the name of contrasting Islamophobia in the West. There are several examples of this line of thinking, from well-known personalities to “everyday citizens,” who entrust their social media with their thoughts and, in this case, anger. Today, perhaps the most notorious example of this is provided by part of Bahareh Hedayat’s letter from Evin, in which she laments that

This current [in the West], which occasionally sees itself as anti-imperialist, in a precisely imperialist process, covers its ears when confronted with the voices of a Middle Eastern, Muslim-born woman, and from outside of these conditions accuses us, who are living within these conditions, of Islamophobia [...] Because the Western intellectuals face the issue of non-assimilation of Muslims in their own societies, and because [these intellectuals] have become stupefied by Islamic fundamentalism, and because they don’t believe that a phenomenon such as hijab has the capacity to structure a cycle of oppression and subordination and self-alienation without having any decisive relation to capitalism! And because they’re used to understanding everything only through the funnel of capitalism and their circle of comprehension does not move beyond that, they do not deem the Middle Eastern Muslim woman as having the right to lament so that the tensions and contradictions of their own intellectual apparatus would not be revealed! The 1401 [2022] movement [uprising] arose with the burning of headscarves and its second important accomplishment was that it immediately invited all those Western intellectual-type exemplars to see the truth.¹

Although postcolonial analysis is not directly mentioned and there are different opinions about Hedayat’s reading of the work of “Western intellectuals,” with some different takes on it presented in this roundtable, this trend among Iranian activists—and nonactivist Iranians, too—is significant and as such, it is worth analytical attention. All of the roundtable contributions offer a more or less evident glimpse of the implications that these issues have for the work that we do.

Writing in these turbulent times presents other challenges as well. All contributors write from outside Iran, with obvious limitations when it comes to experiencing events firsthand and having direct access to the field and the communities involved. As we discussed the composition of the roundtable, we have found ourselves unable to include our colleagues based in Iran. Issues related to personal safety and the conditions necessary for writing, such as time, personal space, and mental focus, are obstacles that we could not circumvent. We also are aware that there are gaps when it comes to the topics covered in the roundtable. Some of them are obvious, such as the lack of a piece focusing on Kurdish politics, but it has been impossible for us to find the right contributors who could deliver on time. We decided not to

¹ Bahareh Hedayat, “‘Revolution is Inevitable’: Bahareh Hedayat’s Letter from Evin Prison in Tehran, Iran (December 2022),” *Jadaliyya*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44720>.

postpone this publication in the belief that this is a beginning, an opening of a conversation, rather than a set of consolidated and definitive analyses. In this spirit, the roundtable unpacks different aspects that we see as relevant to the current events, and discusses them in some depth. The pieces do not have a common theoretical framework and do not utilize common concepts to examine processes and phenomena. They mirror the heterogeneity of the movement and of critical social sciences, as we utilize different epistemological approaches to examine specific aspects of the protests. This diversity also reflects the immediacy of our roundtable and is a testimony to the complexity of the moment as well as the liveliness of our scholarly exchange.

The contributions cover a wide range of issues. Altogether, they substantiate analyses of a longer period dominated by the ongoing crisis of the state in Iran and its multiple faces. Maryam Alemzadeh's piece offers a punctual examination of one of the most discussed issues, that is the role of state violence and particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in such crises. Grounded in historical analysis, Alemzadeh's work examines the IRGC's internal conflicts and the adjustments necessary to protect their privileges within the wider governance structure of Iran. She describes how the flexibility of the IRGC's chain of command—in which significant decentralization is present and results from specific historical and political circumstances—is perhaps a reason for the disproportionate violence that has been used against the protesters, worsening the state's crisis of legitimacy and deepening the IRGC's internal rifts. State hegemony is fragile in Iran, in part because of its institutional inability to attract and discipline larger portions of the population. Things have been “on the verge” for a long time, and it seems that the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini has provided the conditions for the perfect storm. In their pieces, Paola Rivetti and Shirin Saeidi, and Pamela Karimi examine a trajectory of radicalization and increasing mobilization in the expression of dissent on the part of activists and artists. The current uprising has provided a space for nonelite activists and non-star artists to become protagonists, unleashing a huge potential for radical political action, but at the same time revealing the structural weaknesses of activism in Iran. In fact, although we could say that “the art of the revolution is everywhere,” as Karimi also notices in her essay, and although the current moment appears to be a real turning point with no possibility of a return to pre-September 2022 life, as Peyman Jafari as well as Rivetti and Saeidi argue, the upending of power relations still seems to be temporary and not permanent. Videos from high schools in Iran (mostly the Kurdish region of Iran) featuring schoolgirls expelling principals and state representatives while insulting them (*bisharaft*, or dishonorable) are moments of subversion of normalized power relations. Although many, these moments do not seem to be enough—long enough, numerous enough, powerful enough, structured enough—to become a more permanent condition. Why? In his piece, examining statistics and data on workers' strikes, Jafari accounts for the structural weaknesses of the labor movement, which is up against powerful systemic constraints caused by state violence and labor laws. Furthermore, Jafari demonstrates that workers' struggles suffer from an invisibilization in larger mobilizations, as the middle classes—including a wide range of income groups—seem to be reluctant to build long-lasting forms of solidarity with them and incorporate specific workers' demands in a sustainable way, strengthening cross-class mobilization. Echoing such reflections, Rivetti and Saeidi also discuss some of the limits of the uprising, interrogating its solidarity practices and ideological configuration, yet emphasizing its potential.

However, Nahid Siamdoust reminds us that these moments of upheaval, when everything becomes political, are neither unique to 2022–23 nor new. Examining the role of music and current musical production, Siamdoust contextualizes the current uprising in a longer tradition of music that is political in two ways. First, music has been at the core of revolutionary and contentious politics in Iran for a long time, with protest songs being passed down generation after generation or being imported from abroad and translated into Persian for the current moment, like university students recently did with the famous “El Pueblo Unido”

and “Bella Ciao,” as described by Siamdoust. Second, the control of musical production has been a battlefield between the Iranian state and artists, who have managed to navigate the restrictions imposed by the state and make their music. Female vocalizing is illegal, yet there are many female singers in Iran, and while rap music never obtained state permission for production, a fierce and successful rap music community has made the Islamic Republic its home. These aporias and contradictions have provided a space for expressing dissent in a fragmented and uncoordinated manner, as Rivetti and Saeidi argue. Such expressions, when favorable conditions emerge, may combine and become a movement. We take this as a departure point for this roundtable, opening a conversation which, we hope, will be received with interest.