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ROUND TABLE

Political Convergence, Surpluses of Activism, and Genealogy: Examining Iran's Quasi-Revolutionary Situation

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In this intervention, we discuss the ongoing protest movement and the quasi-revolutionary situation in Iran with the goal of offering contextual as well as background analysis. Our objective is to examine the current wave of revolutionary politics in the frame of a longer history, that is, the one of the "unaccomplished" 1979 revolution. We do not argue that the current movement is in continuity with the so-called Islamic revolution; rather, we ask what afterlives of the 1979 revolution and successive waves of mobilizations reverberate within the current situation. We do so from a political transformative vantage point, which we understand as inherently feminist, in that we refuse to recognize any hierarchy between the struggles, the issues, and the demands as expressed by the protesters.[1] Indeed, we understand liberation as a collective project resulting from the intersection of struggles, demands, and issues. Following this line of reasoning, we interrogate the current moment along three thematic axes: the social composition, the prospects for political convergence, and the genealogy, or the ideational connection, of the current struggle with those of the past.[2]

Before moving into our analysis, we would like to share a note on terminology, building on work on Egypt by scholar Mona El Ghobashy and Algeria by journalist Hocine Belalloufi, as terms and expressions are not neutral.[3] El Ghobashy explains that a "revolutionary situation" is one in which the authority of the state has not yet collapsed, but comes under fierce assault. It leads to competing claims for sovereignty by power blocs, institutions, elite factions, and mobilized segments of the population, and is characterized by the inability of the state's coercive apparatus to crush rival claims. The period El Ghobashy examines through the lens of this theorization is the one following the ousting of Mubarak from power in Egypt and the emergence of a different sort of institutional arrangement to rule the country, which eventually saw the military successfully reclaiming sovereignty. As the regime in Iran has not gone through a similar breakdown, we also refer to Belalloufi's description of the situation in 2019 in Algeria as one "which only lacks very little to become pre-revolutionary," and to his analysis, which we find fitting for Iran, too, in its attempt at capturing the characteristics of Algeria's "open political crisis" in which the

[1] Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, eds., *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought* (London: Verso, 2020).

[2] We write this piece in January 2023. By the time it is published, some of our reflections may read as outdated. However, as we discuss issues related to persistent political processes such as alliance-building, the role of diasporas and post-mobilizations scenarios, we hope that this contribution remains relevant to future analysis.

[3] Mona El-Ghobashy, *Bread and Freedom: Egypt's Revolutionary Situation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021); Hocine Belalloufi, "Algérie: d'une crise de régime à une crise politique," *Contretemps, Revue de Critique Communiste*, 7 March 2019, https://www.contretemps.eu/algerie-crise-regime.

old hegemonic balances are just able to guarantee the survival of the state. It follows that we find the expression "quasi-revolutionary situation" relevant to present-day Iran, although we are not particularly keen on contributing to current debates about the labeling of events in Iran—whether it is a revolution, an uprising, or a protest movement. As recent scholarship has highlighted, the boundaries between revolution, protest, and social movements can be fluid, and revolutions need not only be constructed in their political form but also culturally and as an event which people can think of as possible.[4] As Peyman Jafari states in this roundtable, the September 2022 uprising has generated revolution as a possibility and ingrained this idea in popular imagination. Similarly, Pamela Karimi shows in her piece that the opacity, anonymity, and omnipresence of the artwork produced since September 2022 are parts of an Iranian revolution that is challenging how Muslim women have been perceived intellectually and artistically across the globe. In other words, what matters is that we see no possibility of going back to life before September 2022 because of the cultural reverberations of the woman, life, freedom movement. We take seriously the assertion of protesters in Iran that "this time, protests are different" from the past. With 29,400 arrests (including at least 44 defense attorneys), at least 519 protestors killed (including 69 children), and multiple death sentences carried out, we are hesitant to undermine the feelings of the Iranian people around how this moment should be historicized.[5] In what follows, we discuss the characteristics of the current moment, starting with the social composition of the protests, and conclude with a reflection on time and the revolution.

By social composition, we refer to the segments of the population that have participated in the struggle, whether in an organized manner or not. As we write this piece in early January 2023, four months after the killing of Mahsa Zhina Amini, we have seen large swaths of the population mobilizing, from organized students' unions, informal trade unions (among the many, teachers, casualized oil workers, truck drivers), and feminist networks to more loosely organized groups of individuals. At the beginning, the protests seemed to be poorly organized, with individuals of various ages and walks of life gathering in the public space and demonstrating against police brutality and mandatory veiling through highly symbolic acts such as burning hijabs, dancing, and cutting hair.[6] Often there was violence involved. Young individuals, with a variety of gender identifications and varying levels of political commitment to feminist ideologies, seemed to take the lead of street protests, burning police cars—police stations, in some instances—and clashing with the law enforcement forces.

As the weeks passed and the mobilizations continued, it became clear that some organizational structure had to be in place. Although the movement has not developed a parallel system to sustain the revolutionary struggle in all of its needs yet, it has been able to integrate its most spontaneous parts into some forms of structure.[7] News about informal networks of safe houses in the city center of Tehran, for instance, have emerged, along with news about clandestine doctors' offices and places where protestors can find food and rest during street protests. In the meantime, better organized players such as university students' unions, which have a consolidated history of activism, and trade unions have taken the lead by calling for national strikes and days of struggle. On social media, many celebrities

[4] David Motadel, ed., *Revolutionary World: Global Upheaval in the Modern Age* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[5] "Iran Protests: At Least 44 Defense Attorneys Arrested since September," Center for Human Rights in Iran, January 10, 2023, https://iranhumanrights.org/2023/01/iran-protests-at-least-44-defense-attorneys-arrested-since-september.

[6] L., "Figuring a Women's Revolution: Bodies Interacting with Their Images," Jadaliyya, October 5, 2022, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44479.

[7] Amir Kianpour, "The Rise of Woman, Life, Freedom: Strategic Considerations for Convergence," Radio Zamaneh, January 3, 2023, https://www.radiozamaneh.com/747057/?fbclid=IwAR2_R8HPuglwrM96-w4QsgLo5D7RQTecf-OgfH0wsS4Kst_y_QD6nGEZBEA.

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in Iran, from the cinema to sports, have weighed in to support the protests, some paying a dear price for their political stands. This added momentum has enhanced the international visibility of the protests and ignited a sentiment of unity in the population.[8]

This integrated system of representation and visibility presents variations according to the geography of Iran. In those areas where the resistance against the central state and the Islamic Republic has been decade-long, such as Kurdistan or Sistan and Baluchestan, organized actors have a different political background, with more emphasis placed on ethnic discrimination and their long history of enduring state violence. They also have different forms of organization, as identity-based political parties (often Illegalized) and guerrilla formations have been active before and after 1979. The reaction of the state also has varied according to geography. Although violent and repressive in all areas of Iran, state brutality has disproportionately targeted peripheral areas inhabited by minoritized communities, notably Kurdistan and the city of Zahedan. While claiming to target separatist armed formations, the state has in reality targeted civilians, as human rights organizations have reported.

It is important to keep in mind that active and independent civil organizations are extremely weak in Iran today. This has meant that various forms of state violence, including sexual assault against female prisoners, continue, with few options for placing limits on the state's coercive centers of power. As renowned human rights activist and current prisoner Nargess Mohammadi states in a recent letter from Evin prison, it is the absence of civil organizations locally that has made the international media a powerful platform for garnering support around particular issues such as executions and sexual assault.[9] Yet to date there is little evidence that the diaspora-dominated international media has been successful in undermining state violence or transforming the uprising into a takeover of the state. The spontaneous character of the uprising requires local leadership and support to continue expanding, but this structural form is currently weak.[10]

The current movement has been inspiring the most cross-class, geographically diffuse, and intersectional mobilizations in the history of the Islamic Republic. It also is the most mediatized movement in Iranian history, with around 300 million tweets in Persian on the Mahsa Amini hashtag between mid-September and mid-October 2022.[11] In the past months, we have seen beautiful expressions of feminist, antiracist, anti-neoliberal and pro-commons, environmentalist intersectional politics. In other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, uprisings have emerged with the untimely death of young men. However, it is the death in custody of a young Kurdish woman through state violence that brought Iranians onto the streets.[12] Although there are debates about the practical convergences and motivations of the September 2022 uprising, what is for certain is that a significant number of Iranian women and men were no longer willing to tolerate the mandatory hijab. Following the uprising, even the well-known Maddah affiliated with the state,

[8] Abolfazl Hajizadegan, "How Shifts on Instagram Drove Iran's 'Mahsa Moment,'" Bourse and Bazaar Foundation, December 28, 2022, https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2022/12/28/how-shifts-on-instagram-drove-irans-mahsa-moment.

[9] "Nargess Mohammadi's Shocking Letter about Sexual Assault against Prisoners," Iranwire, December 26, 2022, https://iranwire.com/en/politics/111879-nargess-mohammadis-shocking-letter-about-sexual-assault-against-prisoners.

[10] In February 2023, a coalition of 20 grassroots feminist, students', environmental organisations, trade unions, and professional associations issued a common statement and demands for the transition. While not claiming a leadership role for themselves, this statement currently is debated in Iran as a platform for alliance-building, involving more groups and individuals. We regard this as an important step in the direction of creating a democratic leadership and strengthening the progressive character of the woman, life, freedom movement within Iran.

[11] "Iran's Gen Z Movement and the Hashtag Wars," *The Take* (podcast), October 19, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/podcasts/2022/10/19/irans-gen-z-movement-and-the-hashtag-wars.

[12] Zoe Marks, Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, and Erica Chenoweth, "Iran's Women on the Frontlines: Why Female-Led Movements Succeed—But Also Risk a Backlash," *Foreign Affairs*, October 31, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/irans-women-frontlines.

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Mahmoud Karimi, asserted that when women come to his performances it is not his or anyone else's business if they are wearing hijab.[13] This was understood by many to suggest that he disagreed with the harassment of women without hijab at his events. Images of Iranian men protecting the bodies of women as an expression of solidarity and defense of a woman's right to bodily autonomy was moving for us. We use the term "expression" because we are aware that the presence of antipatriarchal, anti–state violence, antiracist slogans and actions in the field does not necessarily equate with the convergence of all active groups and subjectivities on a feminist, abolitionist, and pro–social justice progressive political agenda. For example, Salwa Ismail has emphasized that the 2011 Egyptian uprising was "a revolution against the police," and yet abolitionism never became a strategic ground for action and planning, one upon which Egyptian revolutionaries could converge and build a vision for the future.[14] Likewise, radical and progressive visions were present in Iran during the lead-up to the 1979 revolution and yet, after the fall of the monarchy, regressive, Persian-centric, and patriarchal legislation was adopted by the prevailing institutions, with the goal of disciplining and, when necessary, suffocating the plurality of voices and politics present in society. The question of how different ideological and political traditions are accommodated in a large movement and how they combine to find common ground for articulating specific demands beyond one general goal—the end of the regime—is central today. Convergence determines the possibility of identifying a shared political agenda, which is necessary to breaking down state authority and making sure that regressive and discriminatory legislation is not adopted in the postrevolutionary, transitory phase, should it ever come.

Maha Abdelrahman warned against the absence of sustainable organizational structures in Egypt's revolutionary situation.[15] She argued that after the mobilizational phase, during which movements lead mass protests, the lack of a consolidated strategy to govern blocked the prospects for a genuine revolutionary change, eventually benefiting the military and state continuity. In the case of Iran, there are a number of individual leaders who hail from both Iran and the diaspora and who come from different ideological backgrounds, ranging from the Kurdish liberation movement to monarchist and liberal camps. The difficulty of coming together on shared demands and political strategies is understandable but leaves the movement vulnerable to state violence and exhaustion, leading to demobilization. For instance, although protestors in Tehran have extended solidarity to protestors in Zahedan, Sanandaj, and other cities in West Azerbaijan and Khuzestan, there seems to be no consensus on calling for a territorial rearrangement that challenges that of a centralized state.

Transnationally, the Iranian movement shares many characteristics with other movements demanding radical democracy and the elimination of injustice, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) or the feminist Ni Una Menos. This is not surprising, as revolutions and movements, especially in the current global moment, are hardly contained within or determined by the nation–state, its borders, or imaginings of sovereignty.[16] In the case of Iran, both from within and in the diaspora, Black political strategies and language are utilized. From metaphors about the difficulty of breathing and exhortations to "say their names," to Hamed Esmaeilion's references to Martin Luther King's speech during the Berlin march in October 2022, Black political strategies are engaged and utilized. However, one might

[13] "Mahmoud Karimi Maddah: They Say that Women Come to the Committee but Their Hair Is Out, What about You and Me!" Modara, October 14, 2022, https://www.modara.ir/fa/news/204912/محمود-کریمی-مداح-میگویند-زنان-به-هیأت-میآیند-ولی-موهایشان-بیرون-است،-به-من-و-تو-چه-فیلم.

[14] Salwa Ismail, "The Egyptian Revolution against the Police," *Social Research* 79, no. 2 (2012): 435–62.

[15] Maha Abdelrahman, "In Praise of Organization: Egypt between Activism and Revolution," *Development and Change* 44, no. 3 (2013): 569–85.

[16] Motadel, *Revolutionary World*; Colin Beck, Mlada Bukovansky, Erica Chenoweth, George Lawson, Sharon Erickson Nepstad, and Daniel P. Ritter, *On Revolutions: Unruly Politics in the Contemporary World* (London: Oxford University Press, 2022).

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argue, this does not happen without contradictions. For example, the diaspora's commitment to being the "voice" of Iranians facing repression in Iran and the reliance on political lexicons invented by African Americans, such as the assertion that "Iranian Lives Matter" echoing BLM's slogan "Black Lives Matter," come with little reflection about the political nature of being in solidarity with an historically oppressed group and about amplifying someone's voice, which leads to questions about how to do it: which voices are to be amplified and which are not. Use of the hashtag #Iranianlivesmatter revealed a reluctance to center the genealogy of this slogan because it was feared that this might decenter Iran's prodemocracy movement. Moreover, although progressive movements elsewhere mobilize a postcolonial and intersectional vocabulary, many in Iran and the diaspora see it with suspicion for a number of reasons, including that the state instrumentally weaponizes an anti-imperialist and pro-subaltern discourse. Similarly, it seems that critiques of liberal and imperialist white feminism struggle to find a space in Iran and the diaspora, and the strong anti-police sentiment that originally was widespread within the population, and which brought the Iranian movement ideally so close to movements such as Black Lives Matter, seems today to be surpassed by expressions of a carceral mentality, as some of the leaders in Iran and the diaspora compile lists of academics, journalists, and intellectuals, accusing them of being regime apologists and co-responsible for the death sentences carried out by the Islamic Republic. We do not intend to portray the whole movement in Iran and outside of it as regressive, but we are aware that these contradictions matter because they influence the possibility for and modalities of political convergence, both internally and transnationally. Referring to past experiences of revolutions in Iran and elsewhere, we ask these difficult questions about domestic and transnational political convergence because we are aware that the engagement with intersectional politics and the centering of progressive values protect the movement from possible carceral, suspicion-centered, and punitive futures.

As pointed out by Matin Ghaffarian and others, the current situation has been in the making for years, and it is a part of a larger trajectory of mobilizations that goes back to the very establishment of the Islamic Republic.[17] Public protests against compulsory veiling were indeed common after the revolution, and there is a rich genealogy one has to look back on to situate the current position. Past mobilizations are critically used by protestors today to build a historical and political analysis that sees the Islamic Republic as not reformable, substantiating the claim that the regime must end. This opinion—likely prevalent in Iran today—has its own specific history and a genealogy that goes back to the reform period of the post-war era and that links back to state violence and the 1979 revolution.

As Shirin Saeidi and Mohsen Goodarzi have argued, the most visible form of citizenship following 1979 has been a disobedient activist one.[18] Structurally powerless and hopeless non-elite Iranians have relied on acts of citizenship after 1979 to continually push the state toward policy and political directions that it is unprepared and unwilling to pursue. Although political-structural openings that accommodated diversified political participation have occurred in postrevolutionary history, such as the reform movement of the 1990s and 2000s, they did not result in institutional arrangements guaranteeing democratic participation. For the last four decades, exclusion has been weaponized as a way to govern political participation, giving birth to rich informal spaces inhabited by excluded political and activist networks. The repeated inability to see results through organized political work at the elite level, in fact, has resulted in a popular move away from both reformist and principalist

[17] Matin Ghaffarian, "Why Are We Surprised?" Ettemad, December 28, 2022, https://www.magiran.com/article/4371602.

[18] Shirin Saeidi, "Creating the Islamic Republic of Iran: Wives and Daughters of Martyrs, and Acts of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 2 (2010): 113–26, and Shirin Saeidi, *Women and the Islamic Republic: How Gendered Citizenship Conditions the Iranian State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Mohsen Goodarzi, "The Disobedient Citizen: An Introduction to Iran's Future Character," Engare, November 22, 2020, https://engare.net/aasi.

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political fronts among nonelite Iranians.[19] In this context, many non-elite activists have managed to survive by navigating the aporias of state violence, producing a "surplus" of activism—that is, an amount of political work that the state neither included as legitimate nor succeeded in eliminating, but which "lingered there" and proved fundamental for the survival of autonomous activism and the intergenerational transmission of political knowledge.[20]

There is historical continuity in the way in which surpluses of political work have been present across of the history of the Islamic Republic, and also in the regularity with which they have come together. There is continuity in the slogans (for example, "death to the dictator," which is appropriated and repeated by each postrevolutionary generation) and in the centrality of death and sacrifice in the processes of socialization into politics (as evidenced, for example, by the heartbreaking message that Mohammad Moradi left before committing suicide). There also is continuity in the way in which the state has been able to disrupt the formation of alternative hegemonies, in spite of the frailty of its own sovereignty. These continuities suggest that we gain analytical leverage by not ruling out the significance of early events in the extended process and "work in progress–phenomenon" known as revolutions.[21] It is precisely here that the notion of time in revolution becomes notable. The life cycle of a revolution is not linear, with a proper beginning and end, at least not for people who have lived through one in real time or through familial relations. Instead, it evolves with the shifting context that proceeds it and the ambiguities and silences it pushes to the side. Our analysis has evolved from the timelessness we see embedded in the notion of revolution, and expressed in the voices of Iranians who emphasize how the protests are different "this time."

[19] Goodarzi, "Disobedient Citizen."

[20] Paola Rivetti, *Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave McMillan, 2020).

[21] Mona Lena Krook and Jaqui True, "Rethinking the Life Cycles of International Norms: The United Nations and the Global Promotion of Gender Equality," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (2012): 103–27.

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