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“Iranian women have become the face of the global feminist struggle”: a conversation with women activists

Article by Anna Shcherbakova, Noura Ghazi, Nuray Simsek, Pierre Ramond, Tatsiana Khomich
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After seizing the spotlight in 2022, the Iranian movement has gone global — and become a catalyst for other struggles. To understand the global reach of the protests and its place in wider feminist movements, Pierre Ramond we spoke with four activists and the 2022 laureates of the Marianne Initiative (a French programme for human rights defenders): Noura Ghazi, Tatsiana Khomich, Anna Shcherbakova, and Nuray Simsek.

Pierre Ramond: You’re currently working on a joint op-ed about the protests in Iran in support of Mahsa Amini, the young woman killed by the morality police in September 2022. When and how did you decide to write it? What were your respective roles in the writing process?

Nuray Simsek: We were talking to Noura and Tatiana and wondering whether we could do something on the death of Mahsa Amini. We wanted to write a piece that all Marianne Initiative laureates could be involved in. The result was a collectively written, very international op-ed that included some extremely different points of view. For some, like Noura and I, it’s about a neighbouring country; for others, this isn’t the case, but the suffering of Iranian women is akin to that felt by many women around the world — to differing degrees, of course.

Anna Shcherbakova: My role in the writing of this op-ed was to first prepare the French translation, because more than anything I wanted to add my name to the demands of colleagues who are more directly affected by this situation — to contribute without speaking for them. My interest in what’s happening in Ukraine and Russia this year didn’t stop me from following the movement in Iran, because the problems women face are all linked. It’s important to keep an eye on all the struggles and conflicts around the world, without one eclipsing the others due to current events.

How has the movement been perceived in the surrounding region, and Syria in particular?

Noura Ghazi: What might be called the Iranian women’s movement has already had

effects around the world. Seen from Syria, Iran isn't just a neighbour but the biggest backer of the Syrian regime and the reason for its survival. Because of this longstanding support, it had become hard for Syrians to distinguish Iranians from their government, just as it was hard to distinguish Russians from their government. Yet Syrians saw that the events happening in Iran were like those that took place in Syria in 2011, when children in Dara'a, in southern Syria, were put in prison and tortured, sparking protests that were local to Dara'a at first, but then spread across the whole country.

How events in Iran are unfolding is very similar. It changed how Syrians saw Iranians, and created lots of empathy towards this movement. When we see Iranians facing off against tanks to defend their rights, it reminds us of exactly what we were doing at demonstrations against the regime in Syria.

Indeed, many are comparing the current movement in Iran and what happened in Syria, particularly given the militarisation of repression. To what degree do you think that this comparison is valid? What does comparing both movements tell us about the future of the movement in Iran?

Noura Ghazi: At the moment, we're only in the first months and I hope that the Iranian movement doesn't meet the same fate as the Syrian revolution. The difference is that the Syrian regime doesn't use religion as conspicuously as the Iranian regime. At least Syrian women don't have to wear the hijab. But otherwise, the regime's authoritarian side is very similar. I'd say that Syria is a form of dictatorship that's halfway between the Turkish model and the Iranian model.

Nuray Simek: In Turkey, the constitution is secular, in theory. In reality, it's very different. Religious pressure isn't written into law but is nonetheless felt everywhere in society. It's not as clear as in Iran, but it is comparable. To give one example, in Turkey there is a Directorate of Religious Affairs, under the authority of the Presidency of the Republic. Last week, the director of this institution gave a speech saying that celebrating the new year is a "sin". It isn't a law, but every year shops are attacked because they have new year decorations; bars are targeted because they celebrate the new year.

In Turkey, women constantly compare their lives to those of Iranian women, because we fear that our lives are increasingly resembling theirs. We often say: "Watch out: we could end up in an Iranian situation!"

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As political activists, what have you seen in this Iranian movement that's unexpected, new? What have you found interesting about its development, its mobilisation methods? How could it be a source of inspiration?

Tatsiana Khomich: What's fascinating to me is that there's no leader; it's a spontaneous

movement that spread organically in Iran and then across the world. This means that you never know which event or situation will lead to an uprising. There has been discrimination and violence against women for decades in Iran, but this particular event started the movement. This movement gives me lots of hope for feminist organising, because it means that even people who have lived under an authoritarian regime for decades still have the ability to mobilise to demand respect for their rights and regime change.

Anna Shcherbakova: When I tried to learn Persian for six months ten years ago, I met many Iranians and had the feeling that there was a consensus among them: you have to follow certain state rules so as to be left alone, which means you can then ignore others. It reminded me of the end of the Soviet era – which I learnt about through accounts from my friends and family – when you had to strike a balance between following and breaking the rules. Yet in Iran today, this consensus no longer seem to exist!

So I get the impression that I'm seeing in Iran the same process that led to the end of the USSR: the balance between observing certain rules and the freedom to break others is no longer a societal model that works. Now, people are questioning all rules.

Noura Ghazi: What strikes me about the Iranian movement is that Mahsa Amini was Kurdish. It brought attention to the humiliations that Kurds suffer in the four main countries in which they live – perhaps Iraq is the country where they feel most comfortable because there is a region controlled by the Kurds and Kurdish is an officially recognised language in Iraq.

Nuray Simsek: I think that it's a turning point for feminist struggles at a time when, overall, the world is becoming more and more conservative. What I find most surprising is that Iranian women have put themselves in a position where they can no longer be silenced because their voice is being spread and amplified by people around the world. Iranian women have come to embody the global feminist struggle.

This movement is growing and could have a snowball effect. For example, the Turkish government is currently drafting a law on the hijab, which contains a description of the family as comprising a man and a woman, and notes on the importance of living as a family, and the benefits of the hijab. Turkish women are opposed to this law, saying that they don't want to find themselves it the same situation as Iranian women. So Turkish women's struggle is directly inspired by Iranian women's struggle.

Tatsiana Khomich: Each struggle is a fight against the objectification of women and for the expression of their voice. In 2020 in Belarus, a purposefully feminine movement was born in response to violence against the people. On 12 August 2020, women took to the streets dressed in white and carrying flowers. It was an extremely peaceful movement against the dictatorship. This movement changed the dynamics in Belarus for a few days because the regime didn't know how to react to this exclusively feminine movement.

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world. – Tatsiana Khomich

Some analysts have noted that even though the Iranian movement hasn't succeeded, certain rules are no longer followed as much as they were before. That's why people have talked about a "revolution in the behaviour" or "revolution in the subjectivity" of individuals. What do you think about this analysis and do you think that there are other examples?

Noura Ghazi: There are of course bottom-up changes that lead to social change. The other day, I was talking about the French Revolution. The Revolution created and spread the concept of democracy around the world, so effectively that we still discuss it today. In Syria, we are seeing changes, despite the violence against women, such as an improvement in their education and their increasing participation in the labour market. These bottom-up social shifts are essential.

Anna Shcherbakova: I'd say that it's also a revolution in awareness. In Iran, a murder sparked massive protests in the country and around the world. This violence against women already existed, but the fact that it is now unacceptable and provoked a revolutionary movement in response shows the change in mentality in Iran and the world towards violence against women, even in societies that may have thought themselves to be more progressive on women's rights. It's a booster shot for Western countries, where feminicides are far from being eradicated.

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of their voice, of their demands. – Nuray Simsek

You mentioned international support for Iranian women. How do you think this support could be turned into assistance? From your experience as part of movements that received backing from the international community, what support seems the most helpful for Iranian women today?

Nuray Simsek: There isn't a single type of support. Some can show their support on the streets; others can host Iranian refugees. Iranians don't need money or material support, but the support of individuals. The Iranians that I meet in Turkey tell me that the only thing they need is their voice amplified. What Iranians want is some sort of recognition: of their voice, of their demands.

To give you an example, this past 25 November, there was a demonstration in Turkey to mark International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women during which 200 people were arrested, including two Iranian women. Everyone was released the next day, except the two Iranians, whom the authorities wanted to extradite to Iran. After numerous demonstrations and protests against this decision, they were finally let go. Both these women are now free!

Tatsiana Khomich: I agree that we have to show solidarity with Iranians and ensure that this issue remains on the agenda.

Noura Ghazi: I'd like to add two hopes. I hope that the demonstrations don't turn into an internal armed conflict. And I hope that Iranians aren't abandoned by the international community, as the Syrians were.

Anna Shcherbakova: What matters most is that the international community and media listen to and faithfully broadcast what the Iranian people are saying. We need to be on the same page as them. Iranians who have long lived in other countries shouldn't be ignored either: they are a very important means of support that gets away from a narrow vision of the Iranian movement as just belonging to one nation-state. And to return to what Nuray just said about the Iranian women arrested at demonstrations in Turkey: often, expatriates don't have the same capacity for political action due to their status as foreigners. For me, this ties in with the global issue of foreigners' rights.

The movement's origins lie in opposition to the mandatory wearing of the hijab. Wider opposition to the role of religion in politics and society grew out of this. Do you think that this movement has dealt a blow to political Islam, not just in Iran but in other traditionally Muslim countries too?

Nuray Simsek: My view is that religion must be a private, individual matter. If those in power try to define a society based on religious rules, it leads to a form of authoritarianism. In the Iranian case, people aren't against religion per se, but against the religious authorities. It's the same in Turkey. Some of the women protesting wear the hijab, others don't; some are Muslims, others Christians, Jews.

In short, we're fighting authoritarianism everywhere; the political use of Islam is a form of authoritarianism. Women can't be free in a system that defines every aspect of their lives: education, relationships, use of public space. It's impossible to have a free society governed by religious laws, in my opinion.

Noura Ghazi: I agree with Nuray. People aren't against religion, they're against the religious justification of rules. Laws must come from civil authority! In Syria, for example, civil marriage doesn't exist. It reminds me of the situation in Europe in the Middle Ages, when religion was a tool for legitimising those in power and authoritarianism. Just as all laws in Europe became civil, so we hope that all laws in the Middle East and around the world will become civil too.

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It's striking to see that this movement, despite its scale, has not managed to change the law or topple the regime. In your differing experiences, what has the movement lacked that prevented it from succeeding? Also, you all work in states

where authoritarian figures have remained in power for several decades and have managed to create the impression that a political alternative is impossible. How can this impression be changed?

Noura Ghazi: Change always comes unexpectedly. Take the example of Saudi Arabia, which has changed enormously in just a few years. When I went there four years ago, I had to wear a hijab in the street, and my father, who was attending the Syrian opposition meeting alongside me, had to accompany me in the street when I went outside with my partner, which is not allowed in Saudi Arabia unless you're married or accompanied by a man from your family (a first- or second-degree relative). At the time, I'd never have thought that change could happen in this country. But two years later, it was already happening!

Nevertheless, while changes in attitudes are possible, taking back power from the political authorities in Iran seems very difficult to me. They will fight to the bitter end to hold on to it.

Nuray Simsek: These dictators never give up power easily. For example, after Erdoğan's party lost the parliamentary elections in June 2015, there was a series of attacks across Turkey, causing hundreds of deaths. In this violent atmosphere, Erdoğan ended up winning the November 2015 elections. Strong suspicions remain about these attacks, which took place between two elections and were attributed to ISIS, even though many people believe that Erdoğan was behind them. Likewise, in 2016, after the supposed attempted coup by a religious community, thousands of people opposed to the government were sacked on Erdoğan's orders.

So these authoritarian governments have multiple and very powerful means of repressing people. In Iran, more than 400 people have died in the streets, and now more are being executed regularly. Yet, we have to remain hopeful in their fight, because all we have is resistance and hope.

Anna Shcherbakova: Fundamentally, your question comes down to asking ourselves who might fill the absence of an alternative**.** In Iran, like in the other countries you mentioned, I think the revolutionary movement is creating connections between individuals from whom networks and alternative political figures may eventually emerge. It's perhaps optimistic, but this social fabric, this revolutionary solidarity, is the starting point for all political change.

Nuray Simsek: I'd like to conclude by saying that the Kurdish slogan *jin jiyan azadî*, a reminder of Mahsa Zina Amini's roots, sums up Iranian women's struggle and its importance for us and for the world.

This interview was first published by *Le Grand Continent* in French and Spanish.

Anna Shcherbakova is a Russian-born LBTQI+ rights activist who now lives in Marseille, France. Through her personal trajectory, her commitment to the LBTQI+ community is linked to the defense of the rights of refugees.

Noura Ghazi is a Syrian lawyer and human rights activist. She is the director of the organization No Photo Zone, which provides legal assistance to the families of detainees and missing persons.

Nuray Simsek, a member of the Union of Education Professionals, was fired in 2017 because of her political views. Detained and prosecuted, she did not stop her activism. In 2022, she was awarded the brand new Marianne initiative for human rights defenders launched by the French government in 2021.

Pierre Ramond, membre fondateur du Groupe d’Etudes Géopolitiques, est responsable des séminaires, tables rondes et rencontres du Grand Continent, notamment les Mardis du Grand Continent. Après une scolarité à l’Ecole Normale Supérieure (A/L 2015) au cours de laquelle il a étudié la philosophie, la science politique et le persan, il effectue aujourd’hui une thèse sur la diplomatie européenne sous la direction d’Alexandre Kazerouni et de Christian Lequesne.

Tatsiana Khomich is the representative of the Belarusian Coordination Council for Political Prisoners. After her sister’s arrest in September 2020, she became a spokesperson for her and all political prisoners of Alexander Lukashenko’s regime, traveling around Europe to draw attention to the human rights situation in her country.

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