

ROUNDTABLE: WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDURING CRISIS

Discord in the Diaspora: Agonism in the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement for Democracy

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The death of the 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022 sparked a movement that immediately captivated the Iranian diaspora around the world. The morality police had detained Amini in Tehran for allegedly improper hijab. Protests began in Iranian Kurdistan, where Amini was from, and spread across the country to regions and sectors of society that have historically been less involved in political protests than major urban centers like Tehran. What began as a street protest became a full-throated rejection of the status quo. Merchants, teachers, and students organized coordinated labor strikes, while protesters and security services clashed in the streets. Additional economic sanctions were implemented against Iran’s government by the United States and Europe; the United Nations Human Rights Commission initiated an independent investigation of the government’s response to the protests; Iran was expelled from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women; and the European Parliament cut diplomatic ties with Tehran. The United States has nearly abandoned the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) even as it was in the final stages of renegotiation, while calls by activists and the European Parliament to designate Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a terrorist group are ongoing.¹ We also saw significant global solidarity protests in numerous major cities in the United States, Europe, and Australia.

Almost all of these measures have become flash points for diaspora debates. As the Woman, Life, Freedom (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*; WLF) uprising unfolded in Iran, many in the diaspora have watched with bated breath, supporting the protesters in whatever ways we have felt were within reach, showing solidarity with their movement, and at the same time connecting with others in the community to have serious conversations about what could come next if this movement is successful in transforming the Iranian state into something closer to the democracy that was envisioned by so many who worked to remove Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1970s. However, what began as differences of opinion over the most effective strategy for weakening the government of the Islamic Republic quickly became litmus tests applied for the purpose of ascertaining the purity of one’s intentions and true ideological commitments.

Support for maximalist positions like broad-based economic sanctions is one particularly polarizing point of contention. The mere mention of the well-documented damage done by sanctions to the lives of countless Iranians who can no longer locate vital medical supplies like insulin and chemotherapy drugs—a problem sharply exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic—is interpreted by some as a covert attempt at “normalization” of the regime

¹ Anchal Vohra, “The Post-Iran-Nuclear-Deal World Won’t Be Pretty” *Foreign Policy*, 17 November 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/17/the-post-iran-nuclear-deal-world-wont-be-pretty>.

because sanctions relief would presumably benefit the Iranian government.² Lost on those who apply this particular purity test is the fact that the black market, where the wealthy are able to source vital medicines which remain out of reach for the vast majority of Iranians, is controlled by the IRGC; therefore, the sanctions regime enriches the government and its associates while subjecting the nonwealthy to the punishing toll of the brunt of the economic sanctions.

Another polarized point of contention arose around World Cup 2022 over Team Melli, the Iranian national soccer team. Because the team met with President Ebrahim Raisi prior to the match, at the height of the WLF uprising, some Iranians in the diaspora and in Iran questioned whether the team stood for the people or was instead a *maleh-kesh*, or “whitewasher,” of the regime. Reportedly, security forces in Bandar Anzali killed 27-year-old Mehran Samak in his car for celebrating the loss of Team Melli against the US on 29 November 2022.³ Prominent members of the diaspora including British Iranian comedian Omid Djalili made open calls to boycott Team Melli for their purported abandonment of the Iranian people. The symbolic significance of the national team’s political position continues to be debated among Iranians abroad.

Agonism

Agonism in politics can be incredibly generative.⁴ Contrary to the prevailing wisdom promoting compromise as the pinnacle of democracy and conflict as a chronic disease to be treated, agonism accepts that conflict is a not only inevitable but a necessary feature of democracy as a valued space for mutual engagement of contentious ideas. This process enables us to collectively build meaningful democratic social relationships and institutions. Therefore, it is incumbent on us not to reflexively shy away from conflict in these conversations even as they may be at times tense or uncomfortable. At the same time, the recent spike in hostilities within the US-based Iranian diaspora reflects a burgeoning of profoundly antidemocratic impulses in some corners of the Iranian American community. These impulses may be undermining the diaspora’s ability to support the democracy for which Iranians in Iran are fighting. Therefore, it is useful to reflect on how we may collectively work to recalibrate our approach to one another in a way that ultimately strengthens the path toward our shared goals while honoring the inherent tensions of a truly democratic politics. When Iranians in Iran say *Ma ro tanha nazarid* (Don’t leave us alone), it is a call not only to spread awareness about the struggle but also, crucially, to interrogate how our frameworks for engagement with one other can help support Iranians’ fight for liberation.

There are people who believe that referring to Kurdish Iranians as Kurds when reporting on state violence against them constitutes support of Western imperial “divide and rule” practices. Others argue that ignoring the Kurdish aspect of Kurdish Iranians’ identity obscures the particular repression and state violence Kurdish Iranians face, and they object to the Persian chauvinism that drives the erasure and marginalization of Kurdish identity in Iran. Some reports on social media suggest that non-Kurdish Iranians perceive Amini’s Kurdish identity as a threat to the community’s ability to mount a united front against the Islamic Republic. Non-Kurdish Iranians in some protests have tried to drown out Kurdish-language chants. Others have crowded out the Kurdish flag with the Iranian national or prerevolutionary flag in European and American cities. These are not typical

² Fatemeh Kokabisaghi, “Assessment of the Effects of Economic Sanctions on Iranians’ Right to Health by Using Human Rights Impact Assessment Tool: A Systematic Review,” *International Journal of Health Policy Management* 7, no. 5 (2018): 374–93, doi: 10.15171/ijhpm.2017.147.

³ Victoria Bissett, “Iranian Forces Kill Man Celebrating Country’s World Cup Loss, Activists Say,” *Washington Post*, 1 December 2022.

⁴ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

of all diaspora solidarity protests, but they are occurrences that reflect deep tensions in the ways some diasporic Iranians view the recognition of minoritized identities as a threat to solidarity or unity.

Significant divergences exist between the ways that Iranians within Iran are expressing their grievances and the ways the Iranian diaspora in the West is channeling its anger. Many of these conflicts are taking shape in very different ways inside and outside Iran, so it is important not to present an oversimplified or flattened picture of complex political developments around contentious issues. Although this essay aims to convey a sense of the internecine fighting the diaspora is experiencing, the very notion of diaspora tensions is itself a battleground. Many of those who call for unity use the very real imperative for a united front against a repressive regime as a cudgel with which to suppress legitimate criticisms or even differences of opinion. This action effectively renders the call for unity in actuality a call for conformity and a demand that Iranians everywhere fall in line behind one leader, even if that individual does not align with one's goals or values. The call for unity, when disingenuous, becomes a source of alienation for those Iranians abroad who deeply wish to engage in a truly democratic movement for liberation.

The fate of the *Shora-ye Hambastegi*, or Alliance for Freedom and Democracy in Iran, is a case in point that illustrates these divisions.⁵ The alliance's initial signatories were six opposition figures from various backgrounds. It was formed in the wake of a diaspora opposition panel at Georgetown University titled, "The Future of Iran's Democracy Movement." By the time the alliance formed in March 2023, two members of the panel, soccer star 'Ali Karimi and actor Golshifteh Farahani, had declined to join. The alliance's initial members included Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Mohammad Reza Shah; Masih Alinejad, an activist and journalist; Nazanin Boniadi, an actor; Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel Laureate and lawyer; Abdulla Mohtadi, the General Secretary of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan; and Hamed Esmailion, an activist as well as the former president and spokesperson for the Association of Victims' Families of Flight PS752, the Ukrainian passenger airliner shot down by the IRGC in January 2020. The alliance was intended to bring together a range of voices in the opposition movement in solidarity against the regime. The group's unity lasted about six weeks, at which point Esmailion resigned, citing the undemocratic behavior of Reza Pahlavi. Boniadi left the Alliance after temporarily deactivating her social media accounts in response to personal attacks. Pahlavi immediately unfollowed all members of the Alliance on social media and denied reports that he and his supporters had exerted pressure on the group. As of this writing, the Alliance's Twitter account has been inactive for two and a half months. The website has not been updated during that period.⁶ The five figures who had remained after Esmailion's departure intimated in late April that the alliance had come to an end, while pledging to work together in the future on other commitments supporting Iranians.

The fragility of the opposition's unity among such high-profile and influential individuals mirrors the fractures in the diaspora. While Iranians engage in a wide range of opposition activities in Iran, Iranians abroad have taken to Telegram and WhatsApp channels to come together in support of the uprising, in addition to continuing their social media activities. Those channels themselves are rife with distrust, division, and discord. Mutual accusations of divisiveness and betrayal of the movement lead to the shrinking of these groups as members leave spaces that turn into hostile, partisan battlegrounds. The proliferation of disruptions of speaking engagements on university campuses, in addition to coordinated online harassment campaigns, echoes the raids of celebrations and events in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, when Hezbollahi regime loyalists took it upon themselves to disrupt occasions they felt did not adhere to Islamic principles. We see a diaspora filled with acrimonious fights,

⁵ Arash Azizi, "After a Failed Coalition Effort, Where Is the Iranian Opposition Headed?" Atlantic Council, 10 May 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/after-a-failed-coalition-effort-where-is-the-iranian-opposition-headed>.

⁶ Alliance for Freedom and Democracy in Iran, <https://adfiran.com/en>.

struggling to come together under a united opposition movement as Iranians continue to plead, *Ma ro tanha nazarid!*

Meanwhile, under the banner of a pan-opposition rally in February 2023, a global call was issued for people to gather in support of the WLF movement on February 11 (22 Bahman), the day when the Islamic Republic celebrates its founding each year. The rally announcements typically avoided partisan language or symbolism, although many of them featured the lion-and-sun version of the Iranian flag used by the Pahlavi monarchy until the 1979 revolution. Protesters gathered in Los Angeles, London, Cambridge, MA, and other major urban centers. Reports quickly emerged from those in attendance that they had been misled about the nature of the rally. The message conveyed to them had been one of unity of opposition forces, explicitly avoiding the expression of support for any particular political figure. Instead, once they arrived, speaker after speaker expressed exuberant endorsement of Reza Pahlavi, who has been living in exile in the United States since the revolution. In London, some protesters later reported that some promonarchist attendees had changed the slogan *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi* to *Zan, Zendegi, Pahlavi* in support of Mr. Pahlavi. The transmogrification of a purportedly pan-opposition rally advertised as support for a feminist-led uprising into a partisan promonarchist event generated anger among those Iranians who had joined the rally with the understanding that they were in fact uniting as a democratic coalition in opposition to the Islamist regime in Iran. This sense seemed particularly pronounced for those who oppose the prospect of Reza Pahlavi's return to Iran to take the throne.

Internecine Battles and Antidemocratic Impulses

The WLF movement has brought with it an escalation and intensification of internecine conflict in the Iranian American community. People often find themselves in a no-win situation. Journalists and academics who refer to the movement as a social revolution without calling it a feminist uprising are accused of erasing the oppression of women in Iran; those who call it a feminist uprising are accused of denying the broad-based democratic and antiregime demands of the protesters. Those who point out the economic misery inflicted on Iranians by sanctions are accused of shilling for the regime by promoting sanctions relief; those who talk about mismanagement of the economy by the regime while avoiding acknowledgement of the deep damage caused by US-led broad-based sanctions are accused of being agents of Western imperialism by denying the impact of a known tool of economic warfare. Those who report on the protests themselves with a framing or explanation that highlights the economic pain Iranians are facing are accused of whitewashing the reality of gender apartheid.

Although prior moments of turmoil have resulted in flurries of public accusations of secret loyalty to the regime, this time we have seen prominent members of the community targeted and harassed to the extent that they have canceled speaking engagements because of fear for the safety of their family members, or shifted in-person panel discussions online amid threats to the panelists' well-being. Women activists, academics, and journalists face a disproportionate share of the harassment—a painful irony in light of the feminist-led movement for gender equality in Iran.⁷ This deep polarization has resulted in the emergence of the *sharm-sari*, or public shaming campaign, targeting individuals with accusations of dual loyalty, covert regime support activity, or lobbying for the Islamic Republic. *Nayaki* has become a slur on the level of “terrorist” in some sectors of the community, although it is, in its literal meaning, intended to insinuate association with the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). NIAC is an Iranian American organization accused by critics of

⁷ Article 19 and the Committee to Protect Journalists, “Online Harassment against Women Journalists in the Diaspora” (report), 19 October 2021, <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Iran-Harrasment-Briefing-1.pdf>.

operating as a lobby for the regime. Targets of the word *nayaki* in its pejorative usage do not always hold any legitimate membership in or have a history of collaboration with NIAC. Over time the term has been adapted to take on another layer of meaning: it is sometimes used by detractors as shorthand for someone who does not adhere to the maximalist position against Iran and therefore purportedly sympathizes with the regime.

The objective of this piece is not to defend one organization or another, nor to suggest we should all “just get along.” Indeed, accountability is a prerequisite for justice, and we must help hold each other and ourselves accountable for the various opportunistic or even unintentional betrayals committed in the process of creating a new way of being a collective. Instead, I want to caution against the tendency in the diaspora to take ownership of the movement in Iran and graft its own perspectives and goals from abroad onto Iranians inside the country. We outside of Iran have privilege, and we are obligated to instrumentalize that privilege against the systems that extended it to us and from which we benefit. We cannot choose the circumstances into which we are born. Our country of birth, the nationality and global standing of our citizenship, and our proximity or access to institutions of power are outside the reach of our individual choices. However, it does not follow that we bear no responsibility when using the tools available to us, even those tools we did not ask for, to challenge systems of power that maintain gross inequities and perpetuate hierarchies from which we benefit. Moreover, we must not use our social, political, or economic standing to suppress the legitimate rights of even those with whom we disagree on deeply held political beliefs; to do so is to betray the principles and praxis of democracy. Disagreement does not require character assassination, doxing, threats, intimidation, harassment, and coercion. Unfortunately, we have seen many disagreements in the Iranian diaspora drive such incidents since the start of the WLF uprising.

I would like to respectfully suggest here that there are serious antidemocratic elements in our diaspora that need to be critically assessed so we can work productively toward a more powerful transnational solidarity in this crucial moment. What can and should be done with deeply antidemocratic impulses in a movement purporting to work in support of the establishment of democratic institutions and freedoms? Democracy requires pluralism, and a commitment to pluralism necessitates the acceptance of ideas and groups that do not align with one’s own—provided that they are not themselves antidemocratic. Alliances with fascists in the name of “democracy” only serve to strengthen fascists by lending them legitimacy and providing them space to recruit and organize. This is the core dilemma of all democracies: the vital imperative to safeguard the rights of the minority against the tyranny of the majority can sometimes lead to the tolerance of undemocratic or antidemocratic principles. At the same time, supporters of democracy must be vigilant against allowing the erosion of fundamental democratic values, whether from within the community or an external threat.

I cannot offer a solution to the dilemma of democracy. It is an ongoing tension that societies the world over must decide how to address at institutional, community, and individual levels. Instead, I invite my fellow Iranian Americans to embrace the agonism that comes with the pluralism of a truly democratic politics. In doing so, I hope we will ask ourselves at every opportunity how our engagement with one another can strengthen solidarity among disparate groups coming together to build a future that honors the sacrifices Iranians are making right now for *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*.