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The Iran Crisis: Discourse on Iran’s Human Rights violations, and the Power of the Internet to ensure International Responsibility

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This paper aims to study the ongoing human rights crisis in Iran, and how the international discourse on the same started when a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, was killed by Iran’s Morality Police during her detention for not abiding by their mandatory hijab law. It triggered a conversation on decades of violations by Iran’s religious leaders, which eventually manifested as widespread protests spread across the country, even in its religious centres. It further explores how Iran’s protests are now moving from a reform movement to a revolution, demanding a shift in the way the country’s leadership is structured. The paper further aims to analyse the growing role of the internet in the protests of the modern world, and how it can be utilized to ensure accountability of the nations of the world to impose sanctions and condemn the actions of the offending countries, in addition to the accountability of the offending country itself. Briefly, it studies the gradual, but meaningful, shift of power from being solely in the hands of the world leaders to the people of the world: the artists, lawyers, intellectuals, journalists, and human rights activists.

Keywords: *Iran crisis, human rights, violation, internet, revolution, intellectuals, activists.*

INTRODUCTION

On 16 September 2022, a 22-year-old Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini passed away and left behind in her wake a volley of protests over the gross violations of human rights observed in Iran. A few days before her death, on September 13, Mahsa Amini was arrested in Tehran by the Guidance Patrol, the morality police of Iran, because she had not been wearing the hijab, thus defying the standards set by them. The official Government response was that Amini, while in police custody, had displayed unexpected medical complications which eventually resulted in her death. However, her family and friends refuted these claims, stating that Amini had never suffered from any medical conditions and that the medical records shared by the authorities had been forged to misrepresent the truth. They instead claimed that Amini had been tortured brutally for not wearing the hijab and had died as a result of the same.

This incident sparked a series of protests in Iran over the arbitrary arrests and mass killings made by the religious morality police, the conditions of women under such an increasingly controlling government, and more broadly the status of human rights in Iran over the past decades, which soon took over the world. The situation begs the question of international responsibility, and capability, to stop such a crisis in the 21st century, being observed not just in Iran but in numerous war-torn countries of the modern world such as Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine, which could very well lead to a disaster similar to that of the Holocaust and another world war.

THE AFTERMATH: WIDESPREAD PROTESTS AND POLICE CRACKDOWN

After Mahsa Amini's death, thousands upon thousands of protesters came out onto the streets, speaking out over the dictatorial regime of the morality police. According to The Guardian, this series of protests has been the largest threat to the Iranian government and religious leaders since the 1979 Islamic revolution.¹ Both CNN and The New York Times stated that these protests

¹ Agence France-Presse, 'Fresh Protests Erupt in Iran's Universities and Kurdish Region' (*The Guardian*, 6 November 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/06/iran-fresh-protests-universities-kurdish-region>> accessed 20 November 2022

have been the biggest since the 2009 Iran protests.² While protests in Iran are commonplace, many have speculated over the scale of what's ongoing, and whether it can be considered a revolution. This is because while protests in recent years have all revolved around election results and dissatisfaction with the government, the aim of these ongoing protests seems to be the very overthrow of the Iranian government and the dismantling of the conservative religious regime, which has plagued Iran for decades.³

Iran has had a history of partaking in gross human rights violations over the years, in the name of religion, and the worst of it has come to be borne by women and children, ethnic and religious minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. The fundamental human rights of one's freedom of speech, sexual and reproductive rights, the rights of prisoners, the right to practice one's religion and beliefs in the way they wish to etc. are all dismissed. Where the majority of the rest of the world has come to exercise the death penalty only in the rarest of rare circumstances, Iran has been known to dole it out liberally, and often for minor grievances. The universal rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly are all but a mirage in Iran. When people move to the streets to protest against the regime, they are detained and arrested, or subjected to violent and inhumane measures by the forces such as the use of teargas, war bullets and live ammunition, and torturous interrogation methods. Iran's Penal Code is violative of the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment, still allowing for methods such as amputation, flogging, stoning etc. Further, the authorities are quick to ban access to the internet in such times, shutting out the people's pleas to the rest of the world. The positions of leadership, the news and media, and corporations are all heavily controlled and censored by the government.⁴

Women enjoy no rights under this cruel regime. The mandatory hijab law, under which Mahsa Amini was detained, states that women must always wear a headscarf, along with conservative

² Jomana Karadsheh & Tamara Qiblawi, 'A Barrier of Fear Has Been Broken in Iran. The Regime May Be at a Point of No Return' (CNN, 5 October 2022) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/05/middleeast/iran-protests-regime-intl>> accessed 20 November 2022

³ Michael Georgy, 'Cleric killed in restive Iranian city, protests rage on' (Reuters, 3 November 2022) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iranian-human-rights-lawyers-criticise-clerical-leaders-amid-unrest-2022-11-03/>> accessed 21 November 2022

⁴ Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2021-22 – Iran* (2021)

clothing. If they don't, they risk being arrested or worse. They also have no control over their sexual and reproductive rights. The Parliament recently adopted the 'Youthful Population and Protection of the Family' Bill, which bans the provision of free contraception and mandates pharmacies to only provide it on a prescription, and bans vasectomies and tubectomies except in cases of endangerment to a woman's life. This becomes worse when one finds out that the legal age of marriage for females has been set at 13, and can be even lower if judicial permission is obtained.⁵

Ethnic and religious minorities also find themselves in an extremely disadvantageous situation, making up the majority of arbitrary arrests and detentions on meaningless charges such as enmity against God. They are discriminated against regarding education, employment opportunities, language, representation in politics etc. Religious minorities are faced with impudent behaviour from the authorities such as the demolition of their properties and cemeteries, closure of their businesses, inaccessible education services, hate speech etc. The Penal Code also includes provisions under which people can be arrested simply for not practising Islam.⁶

The new generation is no longer satisfied by the reform of the existing system, they want to build a whole new system. Most importantly, the protests have been joined unitedly by people of all social classes, women and children, especially young-adult women still in schools and colleges, for the first time on such a massive scale.⁷ Ethnic minorities such as the Kurds and the Baloch people have constituted a major part of the voices against the cruel regime, and have also had to bear the brunt of the government's retaliation. The youth has been parading the streets, shouting slogans denouncing the clerical regime, and young women have been defiantly refusing to wear the hijab as a mark of solidarity with each other and as an active condemnation of the country's mandatory hijab law. Even the religious centres of the country have not been free from demonstrations, with protesters joining in the holy cities of Mashhad and Qom. Behind

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ Agence France-Presse (n 1)

all this, replays a chant that has come to signify the purpose of these protests – “Death to the dictator.”⁸

The Government’s response to these uprisings has been expectedly and characteristically cruel, inhumane and brutal. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has dismissed the claims of arbitrary arrests and detentions, mass executions, and Mahsa Amini’s death resulting from police brutality, stating that it’s all just a part of a ploy of the United States and Israel against Iran. The government implemented an Internet blackout, also blocking access to social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, in parts of Iran, starting from Tehran and Kurdistan.⁹

The gravest form of retaliation by the dictatorial regime, though, has come in the form of mass executions and detentions of young activists, lawyers, intellectuals, students etc., including women and children. As of 22 November 2022, at least 416 people including 51 minors and 27 women have been killed by Iran’s security forces, according to the organization Iran Human Rights. Further, what’s concerning is that most of these killings have taken place in regions majorly inhabited by ethnic minorities, such as Sistan, Baluchistan, and the Kurdish cities. The Director of Iran Human Rights, Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, gave his statement regarding the mass genocide committed by the government of Iran: “In addition to the crime of using war bullets against protesters across the country, the Iranian authorities have also systematically and disproportionately killed defenceless people in the Baluch and Kurdish ethnic regions. This amounts to crimes against humanity which the International community must take action to prevent its continuation.”¹⁰

⁸ Jomana Karadsheh & Tamara Qiblawi (n 2)

⁹ Weronika Strzyżyńska & agencies, ‘Iran blocks capital’s internet access as Amini protests grow’ (*The Guardian*, 22 September 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/22/iran-blocks-capitals-internet-access-as-amini-protests-grow>> accessed 22 November 2022

¹⁰ ‘Iran Protests: at Least 416 People Including 51 Children Killed/Islamic Republic Commits Crimes Against Humanity’ (*Iran Human Rights*, 22 November 2022) <<https://iranhr.net/en/articles/5598/>> accessed 24 November 2022

THE REACTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The international community has been slow to voice their dissent against the Iranian government, but there has been some progress and countries have started issuing sanctions against the religious regime. On 22 September 2022, the United States Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) released its statement condemning the actions of Iran's morality police, imposing sanctions on seven senior Iranian officials, holding positions of importance in Iran's security organisations that actively contribute to human rights violations, the suppression of peaceful protests, and the freedom of speech: the Morality Police, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Ground Forces of the Iranian Army, the Basij Resistance Forces, and the Law Enforcement Forces. These officials include the head of the Morality Police, Mohammad Rostami Cheshmeh Gachi; the head of the Tehran division of the Morality Police, Haj Ahmed Mirzaei; Iran's Minister of Intelligence and the head of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), Esmail Khatib; the Deputy Commander of the Basij Resistance Forces, Salar Abnoush; the Deputy Commander of the Law Enforcement Forces, Qasem Rezaei; the LEF Commander of the Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari provinces, Manouchehr Amanollahi; and the Commander of the Army's Ground Forces, Kiyumars Heidari.¹¹

These sanctions imposed by the OFAC mean that any property or interests in property that these designated persons might have in the United States shall be blocked. These sanctions also state that all US persons or people within the US shall be blocked from conducting any transactions that involve the property of the designated persons. Moreover, OFAC sanctions mandate that if any US persons engage or assist in any transactions with or for the designated individuals, they shall do so at the risk of themselves being included in the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List).¹²

Canada has also followed in the footsteps of the United States, barring the entry of more than 10,000 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), under the Immigration and

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury Sanctions Iran's Morality police and Senior Security Officials for Violence Against Protesters and the Death of Mahsa Amini* (2022)

¹² *Ibid*

Refugee Protection Act. Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, explained that since the listing of a regime under this Act is a permanent decision, it is only used in the gravest of circumstances such as the humanitarian crimes being committed by the Iranian government. He further said that Canada was committing a sum of \$76 million which would go toward strengthening its ability to implement and enforce such sanctions.¹³ They have also announced sanctions against 9 entities and 25 individuals who constitute the leadership of Iran, including the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, Mohammed-Hossein Bagheri and the Commander of the Quds Force of the IRGC, Esmail Qaani. In addition, Ottawa has also frozen the assets that the designated person might hold in Canada.¹⁴

The UK imposed similar sanctions, freezing the assets and imposing travel bans on all members of the Morality Police, in addition to the head of the IRGC's Basij Force, Gholamreza Soleimani; the commander of the NAJA Special Forces, Hassan Karami; and the commander-in-chief of the Iranian police, Hossein Ashtari.¹⁵ Numerous countries forming the European Union, including Denmark, France, Germany, and Italy have called for the imposition of restrictive measures such as travel bans and the freezing of assets. Joseph Borrell, the European Union Foreign Policy Chief, stated before the European Parliament that the bloc was deliberating on imposing sanctions on Iran.¹⁶ The European Union External Action Service also publicly condemned Iran's actions and stated that it must ensure that the fundamental rights of its citizens are upheld.¹⁷

¹³ Rachel Gilmore, 'Canada bans more than 10k Iran Revolutionary Guard members from entering country' (*Global News*, 7 October 22) <<https://globalnews.ca/news/9184757/iran-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-terrorism-list-mahsa-amini-protests/>> accessed on 25 November 2022

¹⁴ Saba Aziz, 'Canada slaps new sanctions on Iran over death of Mahsa Amini' (*Global News*, 3 October 2022) <<https://globalnews.ca/news/9171749/canada-iran-sanctions-mahsa-amini-death-2/>> accessed 25 November 2022

¹⁵ 'UK sanctions Iranian officials over protests crackdown' (*ABC News*, 10 October 2022) <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/uk-sanctions-iranian-officials-protests-crackdown-91292140>> accessed on 25 November 2022

¹⁶ Brianna Navarre, 'How Countries Are Responding to Iran's Crackdown on Dissent' (*U S News*, 7 October 2022) <<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2022-10-07/how-countries-are-responding-to-irans-repression>> accessed on 26 November 2022

¹⁷ European Union External Action Service, *Iran: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Death of Mahsa Amini* (2022)

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN ENSURING INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The regime's response to the anti-government protesters shows that it undoubtedly feels threatened by its persistence. The new generation of protesters is no longer to be coerced with fear into submission. They demand change, and they are ready to fight to their deaths if need be so. However, for the first time, in a world as global as ours, the fight does not, and cannot, stay home. With the power of the Internet, we are essentially looking at what could be described as an alchemized version of alliances that were formed during the world wars of the past century, both blown up and scaled down at the same time. The mobilization of people is similar to that observed in the days of independence movements of colonized nations of the past century, except on a much larger scale. The resources and the opportunities to exercise one's voice have become much more accessible.

While the power largely remains with the world leaders and the dictators, there has been a huge shift in the scale of information dissemination, allowing a microscopic amount of this power to escape into the hands of the general public. Since Amini's death, social media platforms such as Instagram have been flooded with comments from Iranians managing to sneak in the use of the Internet between shutdowns, Iranian immigrants living in other countries, and thousands of other supporters and activists. Technological advancements have made it so that even a widespread internet shutdown cannot completely block access to the outside world, with people using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) or the Deep Web to contact others. Whether it be a makeup tutorial or a cooking show, a celebrity's page, or a random viral video, these comments are everywhere. The goal of this is simple: for people to know what's going on, or at least that *something* is going on. And it's working. Between the news and social media, there is hardly a soul out there who does not know that Iran is undergoing a gross human rights crisis, even if they might not be aware of the details. The target group of this is majorly the younger generations that use these platforms. A single comment, of course, cannot present the entirety of the crisis, but when one sees the same comment over and over again, what it does is urge the user to go beyond the post to do their research on the topic. With the facility of being able to share the news with a single click, many celebrities, with their massive followings, also help

spread the information. The role of the internet, then, specifically social media, is to make people aware.

While that may not sound like a big deal, the awareness of people counts for a lot. It can make or break a politician's career, and therefore a country's future. This awareness concentrates a sort of soft power in the hands of the people, the young human rights activists, intellectuals, social workers, and lawyers, as leaders all around the world are put under the spotlight to take some kind of immediate action or condemn the human rights violations committed by the offending country. The Iranian diaspora that is spread around the world makes up an indispensable part of these countries' population, and they are hyperaware of how their leaders choose to deal with the human rights crisis in their country of origin/home country. The politicians, in turn, seek their votes. In a world where everything is always under close observation and scrutiny, the neutrality or ignorance of governments in times of crisis is not favourably welcomed.

The internet also allows communities to help themselves when the response of leaders is lukewarm at best. There are numerous tools that communities can avail of to better their conditions, such as organizing donation and fundraising campaigns that have been thoroughly vetted by activists or NGOs and are legit. While donation camps have always existed, with the internet, a person has the resources available right at the touch of their fingers. By removing middlemen such as dubious NGOs and agencies that might just be fronts for big corporations hoping to clean their money, one can also determine whether their donation will make it to those in need based on the sources that sponsor these fundraisers. In short, the internet has made both procuring and providing assistance exponentially easier.

Most importantly, however, it builds immense pressure for the offending country to know that they're being watched. It is simply not possible anymore for a country to exist in isolation from the rest of the world, and therefore, a country is always answerable in the international arena for its acts. If it continues to commit serious breaches of human rights and refuses to accept responsibility, it risks facing sanctions from the world governments and international organizations. While under international law, there is no single governing body that is capable

of setting down laws to which all nations must necessarily adhere the way they do to their municipal law, there are certain general principles that have come to be internationally accepted as regards the conduct of nations, such as those enshrined under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. If a country does as it pleases, with no regard for international standards of human rights, it does so at the risk of being shunned and cut off by the international community, thereby becoming substantially weaker economically, financially, culturally, intellectually, and politically. In a globalized world, it loses all credibility and opportunities of conducting trade and forming business relations with other nations. Therefore, not only does it lose out on economic growth, but it actively contributes to its loss as it closes off itself to all outside help in terms of resources that might otherwise be scarce within its territories. It becomes more vulnerable in the face of retaliation or attacks from other countries, left to its own devices with no allies. With consequences such as these, most countries choose to abide by these general rules of international law.

CONCLUSION

As of today, the protests in Iran are still going strong, despite the reluctance of the Iranian government and the Morality Police to budge from their rigid stance. People are being detained in thousands and killed while there, subjected to torture, shock, and other inhumane treatment. Everyone on the streets is being targeted, anyone who strays off the trodden path, but most of all the ethnic and religious minorities. The government seems to have found a reason to justify its mass genocide of these marginalized communities, blaming it on 'violent protests' even though the only violence seen has originated from their end. But this time is different. The fight is no longer about the leaders, but the system that these leaders have helped perpetuate over the decades. Protests in Iran come and go, each wave being suppressed with the sheer brutality of force, but each subsequent wave now makes a bigger impact. The people of Iran have been joined by millions of people from around the globe who have become their voices, calling for action from world leaders to provide resources, assistance, and refuge to the survivors of this massacre. There is power in collective action and collective response. Neither can a single individual make a change, nor can a single country imposing sanctions create a big enough dent

in Iran's composure. However, the world coming together can effectively blacklist Iran and push it into a corner of submission, if they persist long enough. With no opportunities for growth in isolation, Iran will sooner or later have to choose between preserving the rights of its people or becoming its downfall.