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Iran solidarity

# One year after the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini and the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising

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**Saturday 16 September 2023 marked one year since the murder of Jina Mahsa Amini and the popular uprising in Iran and Kurdistan known as “Woman, Life, Freedom”, the historic slogan of the Kurdish liberation movement “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi ”.**

This uprising arose in a specific context. Since 2017, we have seen an acceleration and intensification of social protest. The population faces terrible inflation in the price of basic foods, salary arrears can sometimes extend to a year. Half of the population lives below the poverty line, even though the country has the fourth largest oil reserve in the world and the second largest gas reserve. The regime devotes most of its budget to military spending and the enrichment of an oligarchy. It toughens repression against women and LGBTI+ people. It persecutes national minorities (Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, etc.), immigrants (Afghans) and religious minorities (Bahais, atheists, etc. ). Policies of oil extractivism, deforestation and disastrous management of water supply are aggravating the climate crisis, which has an impact on health and makes certain areas uninhabitable.

## Point of no return

This is not the first time that women have taken to the streets, nor that the population has risen up. But the September 2022 uprising is more unifying than all the previous ones. Its massive and revolutionary character marks a rupture, a deep crisis of legitimacy, not only of the government led by President Raïssi but of the Islamic State as a whole. During the green movement in 2009 against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a significant section of the movement defended the possibility of reforming the state. At present, the population has abandoned all hope in this direction and is directly attacking the head of state, the Supreme Guide: down with the dictator, down with Khamenei!

Putting an end to the regime has become a central demand, first raised in the regions of Kurdistan [\[1\]](#) and Sistan-Baluchistan [\[2\]](#), before spreading to the whole country. In a few days and for about six months, thousands of people took to the streets to oppose the regime's murders and proclaim their thirst for freedom and better living conditions. Women, girls and LGBTI+ people took a central place in the movement. There were also more and more protests in schools and universities. There was an increase in strikes in different sectors such as petrochemicals, education, bazaars and refineries. There were also several general strikes across the country and in some cities. The regime has been economically weakened, but not yet sufficiently. It is above all its legitimacy which has been shattered.

A revolutionary uprising is a time of popular awareness and massive and accelerated learning of techniques of struggle. In Oshnavieh, demonstrators took power in the town for a few hours and scared away the police. Schoolgirls chased out the management of their school. Students broke down the barriers separating men and women in university canteens. Above all, despite the repression, the uprising opened a space for expression and confidence in one's own abilities and those of the community. Without making fear disappear, it broke at least for a moment the generalization of fear, the feeling of helplessness and a wait-and-see attitude. In the midst of pain, a field of hope and creativity opened up, as shown in particular by the new production of numerous revolutionary songs. Finally, it forced the population to self-organize to overthrow the regime and encouraged people to ask themselves essential questions concerning the strategy of revolutionary struggle [\[3\]](#).

Despite the decline in street protests after the first six months of the uprising, nothing will ever be the same again. This is demonstrated in particular by the many women and girls who still refuse today, at the risk of their lives, to

submit to the obligation to wear the hijab. The regime has not been normalized in the eyes of the population and has not regained any legitimacy.

## The response of the regime

Initially, the regime counted on the fact that the movement would die down. Furthermore, it was assuming that, apart from symbolic support, very little concrete international support would be provided to the population. It shut down the internet and prevented access to the main social networks. In October 2019, 1,500 people were killed in one month. This time, there were fewer people killed (at least 550) [4] but thousands of imprisonments (at least 22,000) [5], coercion into forced confessions and the use of torture, sentencing to forced labour, mutilations (including blinding), poisoning of girls in their schools (in 28 provinces) and executions (at least 26) [6]. Students were excluded from classes and forced to continue their studies hundreds of kilometres from their university .

The machine used by the regime is directly controlled by the Supreme Guide. It is made up of four main forces: the Ministry of Intelligence (surveillance and espionage), the police (including the famous “morals police” newly baptized “unusual clothing police”), the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basijis (paramilitaries). The “good Muslims” in the eyes of the regime are also encouraged to “do good and prevent what is evil”, a duty enshrined in Sharia law. Concretely, civilians are used to monitor, repress or denounce opponents or acts deemed criminal. In the regions of Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchistan , the army is permanently deployed and there are numerous massacres. On the eve of the anniversary of Jina's murder, we noted the multiplication of repressive measures in Kurdistan. Justice is also directly under the control of the Supreme Guide. In addition to physical repression, a real psychological war is being waged. This nameless brutality is both terrorizing and at the same time, thanks to collective mobilizations, a source of an ever more assertive rejection of the regime.

The regime's reaction was also ideological. Khamenei and the various institutions have used the discourse they have always used to divide the population. A discourse of denigration of the poor, national minorities, women and opponents accused of being agents of the West, enemies of Islam, manipulated beings, devoid of reason or the rejects of society, lazy people and traffickers. The reasons for imposing the death penalty attest to this ideological struggle. Twenty-six of those executed, were hanged or thrown into the void on the grounds of having “gone to war against God” and of having “spread corruption on earth”.

To date, the regime has not acceded, even partially, to any of the movement's main demands: the end of the compulsory wearing of the hijab, apartheid and gender domination, the right to life of LGBTI+ people, the end of executions and the release of all political prisoners, the right to self-determination of national minorities, freedom of political and trade union organization and economic improvement in living conditions. The repression and the refusal to give in to demands have generated tensions within the state. On January 3, 2023, the senior leaders of the Revolutionary Guard Corps reported to Khamenei about defections among their troops. Small breaches have been opened in the military and political apparatus by the movement. But nothing yet that makes the regime tremble.

## Challenges in the solidarity movement in Brussels

Outside of Iran, the uprising has had international repercussions. The uprising brought together exiles, students and descendants of the first two generations of migration. Solidarity movements organized by individuals and political organizations in the diaspora have formed in different places around the world, particularly in Europe, Canada and the USA. The uprising also met with the solidarity of feminist movements and collectives of different political

tendencies. The “woman, life, freedom!” movement, thanks to its massive character, its capacity to integrate multiple demands and its perspective of radical transformation of society, resonates with what can be described as the “fourth wave” of feminism in the countries of the Global North.

But it also encountered the solidarity of liberal and right-wing feminist forces who decided to see in the uprising only the struggle of women against the veil and even against Islam. These tendencies often go so far as to exploit the struggle of Iranian women to defend the supremacy of so-called “Western values” and to justify racist and discriminatory policies towards Muslim women who wear the headscarf, as well as towards immigrant men. At the media level, Iranian women are made into symbols of the woman who is sometimes submissive, who sometimes refuses to submit. This vast, clichéd media coverage contrasts with the weakness of information-sharing on the aspirations and methods of struggle in Iran.

In Belgium, where there is not a large Iranian diaspora, everyone lived their life in their own corner. Public criticism of the regime was very limited. The four national solidarity demonstrations in Brussels brought together an average of 2,000 people each. Participants and organizers made the conscious decision to build a movement of political and cultural solidarity with an open face and to give up, for those who still could, the possibility of visiting their families and friends in Iran as long as the regime is still in place. Decisions that were still unimaginable the day before the uprising.

Opposition to the Iranian regime in exile is no more politically homogeneous in Belgium. It also carries different political trends from the right and the left, themselves made up of different groups with different programmes and strategies, such as the royalists, the Persian nationalists, the Kurds, the communists, the Fedayeen and the People's Mujaheddin. In the present movement, we have seen the emergence of a liberal tendency proclaiming itself “apolitical” but supporting severe sanctions from Western governments and European institutions. We also saw the creation of two new collectives: “Women, life, freedom – Gent” and “Women, life, freedom – Belgium” [7]. The latter was at the initiative of numerous awareness-raising and solidarity actions “from below” [8]. It also relayed the main demands that emerged in the uprising in Iran and attempted to build solidarity on this basis with progressive organizations in Belgium. The movement also mobilized many unorganized people who had not previously taken an active part in organizing solidarity actions.

Behind facade proclamations of solidarity, a few strands of cut hair and the portrait of Jina Mahsa Amini Brandi, the parties in power in the federal government (Liberals, Greens, Socialists and Flemish Christian Democrats) have continued to normalize their relations with the Iranian state. This is demonstrated in particular by the invitation and granting of visas to a delegation of 15 representatives of the Iranian regime, including the mayor of Tehran (known for his bloody repression of protests) at the Brussels Urban Summit last June, which led to the resignation of Pascal Smet. At the same time, the Belgian state continued to put conditions on the granting of refugee status, to detain people in closed centres and to forcibly expel Iranian exiles from the country [9]. Despite international appeals, the Iranian embassy was not closed. During a demonstration in Brussels, the consulate was even barricaded by Belgian police. It is also still possible for Belgian companies and wealthy people to continue their investments in Iran, such as those of the Spoelberch family in technological companies of the Iranian regime [10]. The government also played into the hands of the Iranian state's “hostage diplomacy” by releasing an intelligence agent, Asadollah Assadi, who had been sentenced to 20 years in prison for an attempted bomb attack, in exchange for the liberation of Olivier Vandecasteele. An agreement which was made at the expense of thousands of detainees in Iranian prisons and groups of Iranian opponents of the regime in exile [11]. Let us note in passing that Amnesty International, an important player in the Vandecasteele liberation campaign but invisible in the four major national solidarity demonstrations, has clearly opted for a strategy centred on an individual and indifferent to the political situation.

At the regional level, the Iranian uprising particularly attracted the interest of the N-VA, the Flemish nationalist party in power in the Flemish region and in opposition at the federal level. This party leads a fight against trade-union, feminist and anti-racist forces and notably defends disinvestment in public services, lower wages, limitation of access

to abortion, imprisonment and expulsion of migrants. On December 3, 2022, Theo Francken and Darya Safai , both N-VA deputies in the federal parliament, took part in a meeting with the “7 Aban Front”, a coalition of Iranian Persian nationalists. Darya Safai , Belgian-Iranian, claims to be an activist for the emancipation of women. In reality, his involvement in the solidarity movement strengthened nationalist political tendencies, supporting the intervention of foreign countries and opposed to Kurdish self-determination and the rights of LGBTI+ people.

As with Iraq and Syria, the Belgian and European governments have absolutely no interest in democratic and social political forces emerging in Iran. On the other hand, they could have an interest in a change of regime if a new political leadership favourable to Western economic and political interests emerges. For example, a right-wing, liberal and authoritarian bloc that would turn away from Russia and China. This is not yet the case. Despite at least one attempt with the formation of “The Alliance for Freedom and Democracy in Iran” in January 2023, notably composed of Reza Pahlavi (son of the last Shah of Iran), Masih Alinejad (American journalist), Shirin Ebadi (lawyer), Hamed Esmailion (former spokesperson for the association of families of the victims of flight PS752) and Abdullah Mohtadi (general secretary of the Komal Party of Iranian Kurdistan ). This alliance without principle and ready to ally itself with imperialism without providing either social or democratic guarantees, has encountered numerous criticisms and seems, for the moment, to have ended in failure. But, it was at its strongest moment that Alireza Akhundi (Swedish MP, Centerpartiet ) and Darya Safai called for a major international demonstration in front of the Council of Europe in Brussels on February 20, 2023. The call supported a central demand: the addition of the entire Revolutionary Guard Corps to the list of terrorist organizations of the Council of Europe.

Despite all the political differences highlighted, from the first rally in September 2022, the police declared that they would only give one authorization per month to demonstrations of “Iranians” while justifying themselves with paternalism and not without hypocrisy: “if you want to overthrow this regime, you must be able to demonstrate together”. In fact, this position contributed to strengthening the dominant position of the right wing, better equipped with resources, by marginalizing progressive political forces in the opposition and restricting their possibilities of expression and their visibility.

## What prospects for the future?

In recent weeks, the Iranian regime has stepped up its repression to prevent a new wave of protests. To avoid giving in to despair, it is important to give meaning to the uprising and the mobilizations in which the population took a major “step forward” towards victory.

In this step forward, political forces capable of supporting self-organization and creating the possibility of convergence have yet to emerge and be formed. The population is gaining experience in strategies of self-protection and survival in the face of repression. Progressive forces in Iran and in exile have a key role to play in creating spaces for self-education, strategic analysis and self-organization. If there is one lesson that we can learn from all the revolutions in history, it is that we cannot separate the overthrow of the regime from the question of social and democratic organization, from the project of society to be built. The nature of the coalitions that will make possible the overthrow of the regime will colour the social and political future of the country. Despite physical and psychological exhaustion, many revolutionaries see an essential strategic issue: strengthening alliances between workers, students, grieving families, national minorities and women's groups.

There is just one certainty: new crises and uprisings can only happen. Getting organized means giving yourself the means to better prepare for that and to contribute here to supporting the relationship of forces there.

What are the tasks of the solidarity movement outside the country?

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- Fight any attempt to impose a political alternative to the regime from outside the country.
- Reveal the duplicity and dangerousness of Western governments and those who proclaim themselves as figures of the Iranian diaspora.
- Strengthen international sanctions on senior leaders of the Revolutionary Guards and the Islamic State: boycott, freezing of assets and bank accounts.
- Demand the lifting of banking and commercial secrecy in Belgium and Europe to block the assets of the regime's leaders and stop any economic partnership.
- Establish strong national and international coalitions with trade-union, feminist, anti-racist and socialist forces to build links of solidarity “from below”. For example, for the release of all political and common law prisoners .
- Promote self-education on past and contemporary revolutionary experiences. For example: Syria and Sudan.

It is in this sense that an international coordination of feminist groups and collectives from the Iranian diaspora called for common feminist action in solidarity with the revolutionary movement on Friday, September 15, 2023. To demand the right to emancipation and the need to continue the fight for “woman, life, freedom”! The anti-capitalist left was present to show its support at the rally organized in Brussels.

15 September 2023

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Gauche Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] Jina Mahsa Amini came from this region of the North-West.

[2] A region in the South-East, the poorest in the country.

[3] The charter of minimum demands of collectives and independent unions, published on February 15, 2023 bears witness to this questioning. For more information, see the article by Niloofar Golkar: <https://socialistproject.ca/2023/03/workers-organizations-woman-life-freedom/>

[4] Figure from April, 2023

[5] Figure from March, 2023

[6] Figure from July 2023, based on judicial decisions condemning people explicitly for participation in protests. The number of executions on the basis of other motives (for example dealing in drugs, also increased significantly compared to 2021. The accusation of participating in the drug trade is a central motive for executions in Sistan-Baluchistan. In this way the regime conceals the real motive for the execution of its opponents.

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[7] On Instagram @womanlifefreedom.be et on Telegram @zendegiazadicol .

[8] International solidarity between populations that are oppressed and exploited. in opposition to solidarity “from above”, which places its faith in foreign governments and the imposition of political solutions et alternatives on the population.

[9] See in *Le Soir* : « Vive émotion autour de l'expulsion de Belgique d'une iranienne de vingt ans » ,

<https://www.lesoir.be/467211/article/2022-09-23/vive-emotion-autour-de-lexpulsion-de-belgique-dune-iranienne-de-vingt-ans>, September 23, 2022.

Also *Le Vif* : « La Belgique tente d'expulser trois iraniens » ,

<https://www.levif.be/belgique/la-belgique-tente-dexpulser-3-iraniens-sils-rentrent-en-iran-ils-seront-tues/>, January 23, 2023.

[10] <https://www.lecho.be/entreprises/private-equity/les-spoelberch-en-iran-des-investissements-sensibles/10446639.html>

[11] <https://www.rtf.be/article/la-liberation-dolivier-vandecasteele-en-echange-dun-prisonnier-iranien-cree-t-elle-un-precedent-11204107>