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LA CHRONIQUE

21 September 2022. Nasibe Shamsaei, exiled in Turkey, cut her hair in support of her fellow women citizens in front of the Iranian consulate in Istanbul.

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# WOMAN, IRAN LIFE, FREEDOM

In Iran, following the death in detention of Mahsa Amini a year ago, repression of Iranian women has considerably intensified. Those who defy the mandatory hijab law are severely punished: return of the morality police, university enrolments suspended or cancelled, use of credit card forbidden, vehicle confiscated... To escape the risk of arbitrary arrest, prison and rape, some of these women have chosen to go into exile. *La Chronique* met these women in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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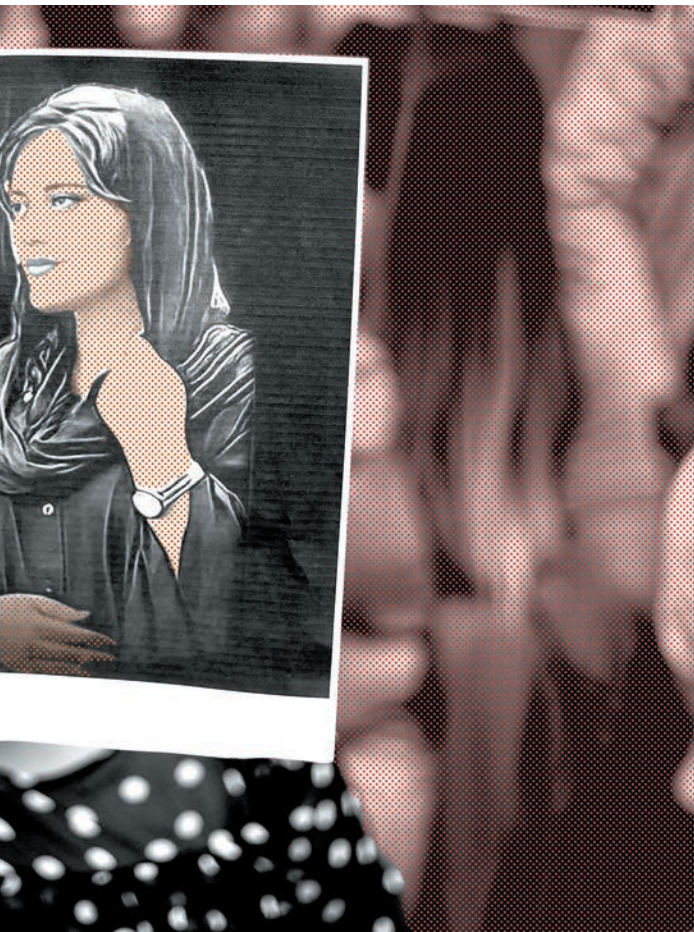
# THE MAHSA AMINI GENERATION



They are Iranian females, often young. They took part in the uprising that followed the death of Mahsa Amini, a student who was detained by the police for wearing a headscarf "incorrectly". Today, they are in exile in northern Iraq to escape the repression of the Iranian regime. Meet these survivors of the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising.

— From our special correspondents in Iraqi Kurdistan, Théophile Simon (text) and Sadak Souici (photos)

On a hot September night in 2022, on the outskirts of the town of Baneh in western Iran, 19-year-old Charwan fled from her family's farm. She headed for the town centre. For several days, this schoolgirl and her friends had been living with a persistent rumour: a student called Mahsa Amini, from Saqqez, a town an hour's drive from Baneh, had been murdered by the Tehran morality police. What was her crime? Wearing her hijab incorrectly during a tourist trip to the capital. "*The whole school was following the case on social media and we were boiling with rage. It could have happened to any one of us. So when the people of Saqqez took to the streets, we followed suit*", recalls Charwan, her hazel eyes shining with anger. That night, the closer she got to the demonstrators' meeting point, the more anxious she became. Although she had never demonstrated in her life, she was well aware of the risks involved in Iran. However, as soon as she reached the main square, her fear disappeared: around 200 girls her age were gathered under the moonlight. None of them were wearing the Islamic hijab. Some even burned



Mahsa Amini has fast become the face of oppressed Iranian women. Here, shown in front of the Iranian embassy, on 23 September 2022, in Brussels.

© KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AFP

### THE AWAKENING OF A GENERATION

In May 2023, the plains of Iraqi Kurdistan were golden with fields of wheat dotted with poppies. Eight months after fleeing her country, Charwan's life has dramatically changed. Without identity documents or resources, and with her future in doubt, the young woman will soon have her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in a military camp run by the Peshmergas, Kurdish fighters who have been battling Tehran for decades. During the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising, the Peshmergas helped to exfiltrate hundreds of female demonstrators seeking to escape the mullahs' relentless repression. Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region in northern Iraq, has thus become a refuge for thousands of young Iranian women of Kurdish origin.

Charwan's story has been repeated all over Iran. In the western town of Bukan, Urisha, a 25-year-old student, marched for a month before being forced into exile; in Sanandaj, further south, Rezan, a housewife of the same age, rebelled for the first time in her life; not far away, Roya, a 19-year-old schoolgirl, coordinated local demonstrations on the Internet; to the east, in the province of Semnan, Sadia, a 34-year-old seamstress, burnt tyres on the

their hijabs in the street, chanting slogans hostile to the regime. Three words in particular rang out loud and clear: "Woman, Life, Freedom". *"I couldn't believe my eyes, but I knew I was in the right place. So I took off my hijab and ran towards the crowd. We were mad with rage, but also with happiness. For the first time in our lives, we were free. It was an extraordinary feeling"*, she says with a wistful smile.

This collective exhilaration was short-lived. After barely twenty minutes, the police arrived and shot at the crowd with lead shot. The demonstrators' slogans turned to cries of pain, before they disappeared into the maze of streets. Charwan, out of breath, managed to get home and slipped silently into her bedroom. As dawn broke over the surrounding mountains, she felt dizzy. *"I realised how serious the situation was. Because of the surveillance cameras and the spies, we were all going to be identified by the police. And for Iranian women, the punishment that precedes imprisonment is well-known – rape"*, continues Charwan. *"So, through the other demonstrators, I got in touch with a network of smugglers. Two days later, without telling my family, I left the house and walked towards the Iraqi border"*.

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« SO I TOOK OFF MY HIJAB AND RAN TOWARDS THE CROWD. WE WERE MAD WITH RAGE, BUT ALSO WITH HAPPINESS ».

– Charwan, age 19.



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LA CHRONIQUE

Sadia, age 34, tells how she witnessed brutal police abuse perpetrated on the fringe of demonstrations.

boulevards for three weeks before fleeing. They all describe the same personal upheaval caused by Mahsa Amini's death. *"In Iran, a woman's life is all about going from being a daughter to being a wife. That's all there is to it. Without realising it, I felt an inner emptiness"*, explains Rezan from her hideout in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, where she took refuge in October. *"When Mahsa Amini died, a strong feeling of injustice overwhelmed me and, for the first time, I went out to demonstrate. On the streets, I realised that my dreams had been stifled by this patriarchal society. I would have liked to continue my studies, but I was discouraged from doing so. I would have liked to be an independent woman, with a job, a salary and independence, but I was married off at a very young age. So, I saw this uprising as a kind of revenge."* Sitting next to her, Urisha nods silently in agreement. Then she pushes the mop of brown hair away from her face to assert in a strong voice: *"These demonstrations have changed me. As I shouted slogans, I realised that it was the first time that something authentic had come out of the depths of my soul. And I wasn't the only one. All around me, women of my generation were suddenly awakening to their condition"*.

### WHITE WEDNESDAYS

Not all the demonstrators were women. Far from it. From the very first days of the uprising, tens of thousands of Iranian men came to lend a helping hand to their fellow citizens. *"The men were quick to join in. It was quite unprecedented, because the few demonstrations my town had seen in the past were often gendered"*, says Roya, who also lives in a Peshmerga base in northern Iraq. Long before Mahsa Amini's death, this photography enthusiast with short hair and round glasses had got into the habit of taking part in "White Wednesdays", a movement against the compulsory hijab, devised in 2017 by feminist activist Masih Alinejad. The idea was to wear a white hijab every Wednesday. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement quickly took on historic proportions and mobilised anger. Mobilisation was particularly strong in Iranian Kurdistan, Mahsa Amini's home region, but the rest of the country also mobilised. According to a count carried out in February by the NGO Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRAI), at least 165 towns and 144 universities were the scene of demonstrations. Galvanised by their numbers, the crowds imagined for a moment that they could topple the mullahs' regime. But, as with every revolt since the Islamic revolution of 1979, the regime crushed the movement, using indiscriminate violence.

Of the 20,000 or so demonstrators arrested by the authorities in the autumn of 2022, nearly a hundred are thought to have been sentenced to death. At least seven have already been hanged, including three the following May. Several hundred demonstrators and passers-by were killed in the street. *"In front of me, I saw a mother and her son shot. A demonstrator was also thrown off a dam by the police. I witnessed that too, in my own town"*, sobs Sadia, now living in exile near Sulaymaniyah, another large town in Iraqi Kurdistan. *"The number of deaths and serious injuries increased. Going out to demonstrate became extremely risky"*. Then, one day, her best friend was taken away by the police. She left the police station unrecognisable. *"The police raped her"*, Sadia murmurs, her eyes unfocused. *"Then she fell into a depression and tried to commit suicide. They are monsters."* Terrorised by the prospect of ending up in the regime's jails, Sadia decided to flee. At the beginning of October, with the help of a network of smugglers, she crossed the steep slopes of the Zagros mountains, the border between Iran

and Iraq. Along with the Turkish border, this is the main route for Iranian asylum seekers.

### KALASHNIKOVS AND MAKE-UP

Mojgan Keshavarz also crossed the Zagros Mountains, risking her life shortly before Mahsa Amini's death. The life of this 41-year-old woman from Tehran is a reminder that the fight for the emancipation of Iranian women preceded last September's uprising. A feminist activist since 2008, she became one of the leading figures of "White Wednesdays" in 2017, before being arrested in 2019. She then suffered the fate of so many Iranian political opponents: imprisonment, torture, sexual assault and a 23-year prison sentence, halved on appeal. In early 2022, she was released on medical grounds after one of her jailers broke her vertebrae with a chair. She then fled and was sentenced to death in absentia. With the help of Amnesty International, Mojgan is now trying to obtain refugee status in Europe. *"I'm very sad for all these women who, like me, have been forced to flee Iran, especially as it is impossible to obtain asylum in Iraq. They are condemned to live in hiding for years"*, she says with a sigh from a location kept secret for security reasons. *"Iranian women are not safe in Iraq. The mullahs have spies everywhere and hunt them down."* The camps where Charwan and Roya live bear witness to this threat. They were reportedly targeted during the winter by Iranian suicide drones, the same as those supplied by Tehran to Moscow to strike Ukraine. *"The Iranian regime has major political connections in Iraq and can easily deploy its security apparatus there. Iranian women who arrive here must therefore be wary of everyone, from taxi drivers to shopkeepers"*, explains Kareem Alwezi, a Peshmerga officer supervising one of the camps where around a hundred Iranian women demonstrators who have just arrived in Iraq are crammed together. According to him, their numbers have tripled since the death of Mahsa Amini. The help given by Kurdish fighters to those who survived the Iranian uprising is not selfless. In exchange for protection, Iranian women demonstrators of Kurdish origin often have to pledge allegiance to one of the paramilitary groups that swarm northern Iraq. Their destinies are thus taken from them. *"I used to dream of becoming an actress, but instead I'm learning to dismantle a Kalashnikov"*, says Charwan sadly from her small, faded room.

*"I have no choice. It's only with my Party card that I can cross the checkpoints in the region, and I have nowhere else to go. My dream is to go to Europe"*. In one corner of the room, an automatic weapon stands next to a small make-up box. On the cracked walls, a stuffed clown stands next to a string of military scarves. Eight months earlier, Charwan was a schoolgirl with a passion for athletics and cinema; Urisha, a steady student, dreamed of becoming a computer engineer; Roya was a lawyer; Sadia cherished the hope of opening her own clothes shop... A feminist revolution and a bloody crackdown later, they have all become unwilling soldiers hunted down by suicide drones. Perhaps for years to come. Unless they finally give in to the brutal methods of the Iranian regime.



In April 2019, Mojgan Keshavarz was arrested for posting a video that went viral. It showed her standing bareheaded, handing out flowers to women in the metro in Tehran.

### THE EMBERS OF THE FEMINIST REVOLUTION

*“The authorities harass my parents to get me to return to Iran”,* says Charwan. Saida’s brother frequently comes under pressure from the police. Roya’s parents have reportedly been bugged. *“Every time I phone them, the police summon them and repeat what we’ve said to one another”,* she says angrily. And sometimes, without warning, threats against the families are carried out. Mamo, a 32-year-old protester from Bukan, lives torn between the need to save his own skin and the need to go back to the Iranian police to free his brother, Sadegh, who has been in prison since he fled. *“In January, the police broke into my family home, beat my parents, took my brother away and tortured him for eleven days. They won’t release him unless I go back to Iran”,* he cries loudly, as if lost in the indifferent whirlwind of a street in Erbil where he was stranded in December.



Urisha and Rezan, both 25 years old, joined the ranks of the Kurdish Peshmerga after taking part in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising.



*“My heart is broken with guilt, especially as my brother was bringing up his son alone. If I’d known it was all going to end like this, I wouldn’t have gone to protest”. Was it really worth it? With the Iranian street now silenced, this is the question that now haunts those who have been forced into exile. Even though some are wavering, most refuse to believe that the uprising was in vain. “This feminist revolution was unprecedented internationally. No one will forget it. It will continue to shape society for years to come”,* concludes Mojgan Keshavarz, before plunging back into a daily life of fear and tears. *“Until Iranian women are free, the country as a whole will not be free either.”* – T. S.



INTERVIEW

# "THE MANDATORY VEIL IS THE BERLIN WALL OF THE REGIME."

Her shock of curly hair is well known to Iranians. So are her diatribes against the mullahs. Living in exile in the United States since 2009, followed by nearly 9 million compatriots on the social media, the dissident Masih Alinejad, 46 years old, wages a tireless fight for the freedom of women in her country. Her struggle has exposed her to several kidnapping and assassination attempts.

– Conversation collected by Théophile Simon

11 February 2023, Washington. Masih Alinejad speaks out at a rally on the occasion of the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution, in Iran.

© ALLISON BAILEY/NURPHOTO/AFP

## The Iranian regime seems to have successfully subdued the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising. Is that so?

**MASIH ALINEJAD** — I don't think so. Revolutions proceed by phases: first there's an outburst of popular anger, fed by years of frustration. Then come the protests, often lasting for weeks. Then comes repression. The repression exerted by the regime was very violent, but it only modified the form of the protest, which still continues, but differently. We are seeing more and more Iranian women committing acts of civil disobedience: removing their veil in public or at the wheel, defying restrictions of a religious nature. We are also seeing a surge of activism at the political and trade union level. Because these initiatives are of a very sensitive nature, I can't say more. But people are organizing. Fear has disappeared.

## The uprising has shown that despite the propaganda and censorship, Iranian women are conveying ideals to their daughters and granddaughters that are different from those propounded by the regime...

That is to a great extent thanks to the social media. I witnessed it myself with the campaign I launched in 2014, called "My Stealthy Freedom". The idea was to post each day on the social media a video or a photo of an Iranian woman defying oppression by the mullahs. These posts, published over the years, have acted like an ideological self-defense manual for thousands of Iranian women. Then a few years later came the campaign "My Camera Is My Weapon" which meant filming

and publishing acts of harassment suffered by Iranian women who walked in the street without a veil, ranging from insults, physical assaults or police arrests. As long as Iranian women can consult the Internet, they will have access to free information and can educate their children in a manner that reflects the course of history: towards greater freedom, greater democratic participation and a respect for fundamental rights. Because this is the path that Iranians hope to follow.

**You are a prime target of the Iranian regime. You have been the subject of many failed attempts at assault and kidnapping. Why are the Iranian authorities so afraid of you?**

In November 2020, a kidnapping attempt was thwarted by the FBI. Since then, I've had to live in no fewer than 12 hideouts. My life has ceased to be normal. In July 2022 a man carrying an assault rifle was seen approaching my house in Brooklyn. Today I am under constant police protection. Why me? I am just an ordinary Iranian citizen who grew up in a poor, very religious family on the edge of the Caspian Sea, in northern Iran. But I chose to say "no" to the dictatorship of the Islamic Republic and to fight for freedom. Unlike many exiles, I've maintained strong links with Iranian

« THE EUROPEAN UNION MUST PLACE THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS ON THE LIST OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS ».

– Masih Alinejad



ABOVE  
Images of several water features stained red in the centre of Tehran were shared online 7 October 2022 by the militant Iranian media "1500tasvir".

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men and women. I reach millions of them thanks to the social media. My struggle against the mandatory veil is a very sensitive one, because it is one of the last symbols of the regime's religious zealotry. It is the regime's Berlin Wall, a symbol of its repressive power. To abolish the mandatory veil would be to destroy one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic.

**Tehran claims it has released nearly 20,000 demonstrators connected with the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising. According to your own information, has this really taken place?**

A number of demonstrators have indeed been released. But the majority are still in prison. More than 50 have been sentenced to death and several have been executed. Let us not be misled by a few prisoner releases for propaganda purposes. The majority of Iranian political opponents, the best known and most active of them, are still behind bars, like for example the relatives of the young militant Pouya Bakhtiari, killed during the November 2019 uprising, or the 14 women who that same year circulated a demand for the resignation of Ayatollah Khamenei [current supreme leader of the Islamic Republic]. The regime has also found new ways of controlling the population, in particular through surveillance cameras. They are increasingly used in the streets to identify as many women as possible who go out without their hijab. This innovation in intimidation techniques shows the despicable nature of the regime.



LEFT AND ABOVE  
Twitter relayed many actions, for example, cutting one's hair at a funeral, or being photographed with head shaved and holding the length of cut hair.

© TWITTER/PRIVATE COLLECTION

**After the death of Mahsa Amini, you declared that "solidarity with Iranian women is not enough". What must the international community do to go further?**

Cutting their hair to show their support, as many women throughout the world have done, is a nice gesture. But we need much tougher actions. The Iranian regime must be isolated as much as possible on the international scene. The European Union must place the revolutionary guards [paramilitaries responsible for repressing the Iranian opposition] on the list of terrorist organizations. European countries must recall their ambassadors. Civil society must also put pressure on its elected officials and diplomats to commit more forcibly to the fight for fundamental rights.

**Do you think you'll go back to Iran one day?**

When I got out in 2009, I thought I'd be able to go back quickly, after the presidential elections and the victory of the reformist camp. But as the years went by, seeing that the reformists [in power in 2013] were not changing the fundamentals of the regime, I lost that illusion and realized that returning to Iran would not be possible. That's why I became so critical of Iranian power. It simply cannot be reformed.

**As someone in exile for more than a decade, what advice could you give to the young women protesters who have had to flee to Iraq?**

Each of the Iranian women who have fled Iran has done it for her own reasons. I prefer not to speak in their name, but I can speak about my own experience as an exile. This condition is far from simple. How often have I dreamed of jumping on a plane and returning to Iran, come what may? I never took that step, but I finally realized that one can be very useful to one's country from the outside. Sometimes even more so than if one had stayed. Thanks to the Internet, I've maintained links with a large Iranian community both in and out of Iran. We will continue the fight for as long as it takes. Going into exile is a kind of sacrifice, but the important thing is to lead a life that can have an impact on world affairs.