



Two Struggles, One Spirit

Ellys Sabet

As the world watches the ongoing political and social upheaval in Iran, one organization in Philadelphia is taking a stand for human rights in the country. With a focus on providing support for Iranians and their underrepresented allies—both in Iran and the diaspora—Philly Iran is working tirelessly to bring attention to the challenges facing those who seek freedom, justice, and equality. To date, Philly Iran has been a driving force in campaign for human rights in the Philadelphia area, via protests and community-oriented events.¹

When searching for what exactly has given rise to the collection of “Women, Life, Freedom” protests in Iran today, one needs not look very far. In November 2022, over a thousand university students, many of whom were women, planned to attend anti-regime pro-

tests—only to come down with a mystery sickness, which they collectively agreed was a deliberate campaign by the regime to suppress dissent.² Then, in March 2023, nearly 1,000 young women across various schools were collectively gassed with a chemical agent while attending classes.³ While there was no apparent culprit, the accident was thought by many in Iran to be an act of retaliation by the Iranian government against its own people for the massive wave of protests that erupted after Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old arrested for not wearing a hijab, died in police custody. The widespread participation of women in the ranks of these protesters was believed to be a particularly motivating factor behind the gassing.

It is critical to note that Amini’s tragic death is only another link in a long chain of oppression that have triggered protests

and their subsequent quelling at the behest of Islamic Republic figureheads. Fueled by anger, Iranian women are boldly breaking social norms and the law by removing their chadors, cutting their hair openly, and dancing on social media for the entire country to see.^{4,5} They have the support of all kinds of people behind them, from the young to the old, from those in the cities to those in the countryside, from Tehran to Baluchestan. Women are at the forefront.

What we are witnessing in Iran today is certainly not a novel development; women have often been the vanguards of defiant resistance movements in Iran.^{6,7} It was women who fervently fought for the formation of the Iranian parliament during the constitutional transition over a century ago, and it was women who were alongside men during the Revolution of 1979. And yet

today, they are not alone within the confines of their borders as they propagate this zealous spirit of resistance. Halfway across the globe, women here in America are also calling for solidarity with Iranian women. In order to shed more light on their work, I had the wonderful opportunity to speak with Mahsa Karimi, a PhD student at Drexel University and an active member of Philly Iran.

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ES: What has Philly Iran done here in Philly and what accomplishment are you most proud of?

MK: We've been able to establish a vast network and cast a wide net. We have a whole network of people ... I might have a friend who is organizing Iranian minority artists here in Philly for a music performance, and someone else in the group may have something similar but on a smaller scale. Through having everyone engage in the community in some capacity, we can connect these smaller blips of resistance to pool together and make a thousand voices ... into one loud voice for change. We've been able to make a mark here in a major U.S. city and it's not like we are going to leave any time soon.

ES: I also have another, I

suppose, more personal question that has to do with your own outlook. I myself am an Afghan-American student so I've often had to contend with feeling like it is difficult, if not near impossible, to have any lasting impact on that which occurs in my homeland, being constrained by the limits of being in the diaspora. It is as if I can do nothing except post photos or videos to my limited audience. So to that point, what would you say to someone who has to contend with feeling as though sometimes the work they do here has a marginal impact across the globe?

MK: If someone like me is here, I would say don't be scared of taking on the responsibilities. From my personal perspective, for those like me here, we are all PhD students, and we are non-resident aliens. We feel like we are walking along a very narrow edge, and then taking a little bit of responsibility is scary, but I would say to take it ... taking that responsibility helps you to avoid that feeling of sitting around being the only thing you can do. And still, to spread that awareness, that is the spark that can prompt direct resistance back home, because people in Iran are constantly asking me if people here in America are talking about them and if they even know what is still going on. So, that sharing of what is going

on, even if it feels like it is nothing to us here, means so much more to those actually dealing with the situation in the present.

You're going to cry. You're going to feel depressed—but do something. Go to communities that have the collective power ... and then it will make you feel stronger in spirit. You'll see that other people are feeling the exact same way.

ES: I completely agree, in that you don't want to be stuck in an echo chamber of your own brain, [where you are] just bouncing off thoughts left and right of "I can't do anything, I can't do anything, my family's back home and I'm here, hopeless."

MK: Yes, every sound, every voice matters. Every hand matters. We cannot do it alone. A revolution would not happen alone. We need to all be together, no matter whether it's in Iran or outside, we can still do something ... we matter, our voice matters, our health matters. So don't sit there and then just expect something to happen. It's not going to happen without every single [person].

ES: What can Penn students or ... other college students in the Philly area do to help make a lasting difference?

MK: Just show up, and if you have any skills, [activist organizations are] more than glad to have your help. As I told you,

[change is] not going to happen with just a single person ... So be part of any groups that you like and that make you feel comfortable to be part of, then be part of this movement. Nothing is easy.

ES: If the installation of a secular government does occur sometime in the future, what should people do to ensure that the marginalization of women and minorities does not persist?

MK: That process actually needs to start even before the establishment of a secular government, and we've taken the first steps to it as a society. Everything should be rooted in the people's choices. Every single thing needs voting, not ... unilateral decision making. Laws of the country should be [subject to] voting. That's the only way [to] make sure that everything would be of acceptable standard for minorities, no matter if you're a sexual minority or religious minority. I also think that back home in Iran, it ... [needs to] be ingrained in education and [we need to teach] people the value of an institution that is not highly-centralized, ... certainly more so leaning towards secularism.

ES: What about here in the diaspora?

MK: We would still hold whoever is in power accountable and listen to the needs of those across the world to serve as their voice here in the West

... and if we have a secular democratic country installed [in Iran], I'm sure that lots of people who got educated here and lived here, who worked here under a secular democracy, would all go back there and help them ... I'm sure that [educated Iranians in America are] going to go back [to Iran], if one day the revolution succeeds, [to] help build a new structure of democratic secularism that ensures rights for any and all minorities from the ground-up.

ES: What do you think is most critical for Americans or those who don't know much about the current situation [in Iran] to understand?

MK: Free news isn't necessarily true news, so I would ask Americans to just read a little bit more. Do not just trust the television and whatever the media is feeding your brain. Go and search for that news to find something which is really truthful, and try to listen to different perspectives to build your own ideas. Do not just have one perspective.

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And so it is with this optimistic nature, albeit weighed down by systematic repression, that resistance in the Eastern and Western hemispheres continues to struggle for the liber-

ation of Iranians. The Islamic Republic's totalitarian regime may have power that rests in batons and tear gas, but groups like Philly Iran here in the United States, as well as those organizing protests abroad, have the power of the people's solidarity, which inspires others to act. Without question, it is incumbent on the youth of our generation, who are the far-reaching branches stemming from the roots of our homelands abroad, to raise awareness so that we can put pressure on authoritarian regimes to improve their human rights records—and hopefully evict them entirely. We can amplify the voices of human rights activists with whatever platforms we have to bring about change for the betterment of those fighting to live.

While change most certainly will not happen overnight, Iranian women and men in their homeland and in the diaspora can taste the sweetness of freedom on the horizon. Until then, the work of Mahsa and people like her will serve to push that dream into reality for all Iranians, most principally the women who are fighting for freedom.

