

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

(Mis)translating the Life Stories of the “Heroes of the Year 2022: Women of Iran”

Ladan Zarabadi

Department of Gender Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA
Email: ladanzarabadi21@ucla.edu

“Woman, Life, Freedom” (*Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) is the main motto of the 2022 Iranian uprising that started in September. This revolutionary movement began after Mahsa Amini’s murder while in custody of the Islamic Republic’s “morality police” due to not wearing hijab “properly.” Iranian women have resisted the sexist policies of the Islamic Republic since its inception. They are protesting in the streets again, endangering their lives to call for structural political change. They have been deservedly recognized as heroes of 2022 in a *Time Magazine* article by Azadeh Moaveni, journalist, writer, and associate professor of journalism at New York University.¹ Moaveni’s approach departs from the Western imperialist and Orientalist image of Iranian and Muslim women as docile individuals, clad in black chadors, and isolated from public spaces. Yet her analysis results in a new misrepresentation of Iranian women: a counterimage that looks anti-imperialist yet projects another one-dimensional reductionist representation that also risks serving the Islamic Republic and fulfilling its need for international legitimacy.²

In response to the *Time* article, I argue that overemphasizing an anti-imperialist image of Iranian women’s movements results in an incomplete representation of women and creates a dichotomous conceptual framework of imperialism/anti-imperialism that prevents a necessary discussion of nuances. This argument does not ignore Moaveni’s valuable analysis revealing Iranian women’s agency; rather, it questions the way she frames part of the narrative. The analysis here focuses on the Moaveni’s article to challenge common, reductionist tendencies in anti-imperialist and postcolonial feminist academic and journalistic discourses. After discussing my theoretical and historical framework, first, I demonstrate how in her article Moaveni reduces to normalcy the significance of unveiled women walking in some public spaces as a symbol of resistance. Second, I describe how her article implies economic problems as one of the main reasons for the uprising and misidentifies the cause of the crisis as primarily a consequence of the US sanctions.

Iranian Women with Double Challenges

Both imperialist and multiculturalist discourses have misinterpreted the struggle of Iranian women against compulsory veiling (as one of their challenges) under the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, their struggles have often been weaponized by imperialist powers to depict

¹ Azadeh Moaveni, “2022 Heroes of the Year: Women of Iran,” *Time*, 8 December 2022, <https://time.com/heroes-of-the-year-2022-women-of-iran>.

² While I am aware of the specificities of imperialisms and colonialisms shaped in specific times, spaces, and contexts, here I am referring to the broader discourse of imperialism and colonialism.

Muslim women as extraordinarily oppressed and in need of “saving.”³ On the other, their struggles against compulsory hijab are minimized in multiculturalist liberal discourses that approach veiling from the standpoint of protecting veiled Muslim women from anti-Muslim racist harassment. This dichotomous vision often results in distorting Iranian women’s efforts to fight against compulsory veiling, along with other forms of state-sanctioned patriarchal oppression.

Framing all women in Muslim majority countries as Muslims, believers, veiled, victimized, and disempowered presents an Orientalist, unrealistic, and homogenized image of Muslim women that historically has justified military intervention to “save” them. In response to this hegemonic, Orientalist understanding of Muslim women, many feminist scholars have called for contextualizing Muslim women’s experiences and reinterpreting the practice of veil.⁴ However, the resulting picture of this anti-imperialist framework has often presented a new simplistic image of Muslim women as veiled, pious, and empowered by freely choosing to veil in the West and in their own countries like Turkey and Egypt. This intervention, while valuable, has produced a new and limited framework that marginalizes numerous women who suffer under and resist discriminatory religious laws. Many women—Muslim or not—in Muslim majority countries (e.g., Iran and Afghanistan) who fight against compulsory veiling (among other misogynistic policies and practices) fall out of this framework. In turn, they risk being perceived as complicit in imperialist perceptions of Muslim women. In other words, secular women do not have a voice or place in such analyses.

Several prominent feminist scholars working in Western universities produce much of this postcolonial and anti-imperialist academic discourse. However, their fixed and idealized perception of anti-imperialist discourse produces a new marginalization that perpetuates a different set of colonial and imperialist values. Anti-imperialist and anticolonial theories generated in the West and under the Western imperialist gaze are not detached from imperialism itself.⁵ Iranian women’s fight against compulsory veiling and unveiling has a long history.⁶ The complexity of this history can not neatly be fitted into narrow imperialist and colonial stereotypes, nor into the postcolonial and anti-imperialist discourses produced in the West about the veil. Without recognizing this complexity and the reductionist anti-imperialist interpretation of sociopolitical phenomena in Iran, we might be left with a dichotomous model that situates “saving women” as an imperialist act in opposition to political inaction, impeding effective transnational feminist solidarity.

Looking for an ideal anti-imperialist stance that fits the binary of colonial/anticolonial and imperial/anti-imperial policy prevents opportunities to discuss nuances and recognize oppressed groups’ efforts against oppressors in their respective contexts. I contend that an anti-imperialist approach is a necessary theoretical tool to critique colonial policies. However, insisting on this dichotomous framework cannot successfully deconstruct the Orientalist and colonial hegemonic narrative; instead, it creates its own master narrative. Adhering to this anti-imperialist master narrative distorts the situation of women in Iran, minimizes the Islamic Republic’s central role in the socioeconomic crisis, and impedes transnational solidarity. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan explain, “models predicated upon binary oppositions cannot move us out of the paradigms of colonial discourse.”⁷

³ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90.

⁴ Ibid.; Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30, no. 1 (1988): 61–88, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42>.

⁵ Grewal and Kaplan in similar fashion see relationality of postmodernism as a strong theoretical tool to critique modernism, and not separated from modernism itself. See Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 4.

⁶ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nina Ansary, *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran* (Los Angeles: Revela Press, 2015).

⁷ Grewal and Kaplan, 9.

Rethinking Feminist History beyond Binary

Unlike the dominant image of Iranian women associated with colonial Western imagination as Muslim, veiled, and victim, Iranian women have been striving for their rights throughout their modern history. Also, contrary to the dominant perception of postcolonial feminist views, Iranian women's fight against compulsory hijab does not simply refer to the 1979 revolution and its state imposition of veiling as a project of modernity. Historical evidence shows that Iranian women's struggle against the compulsion of hijab, along with other forms of patriarchy, goes back to the 19th century.⁸ This time frame coincided with early modernism and the emergence of Western cultural and political impacts on other nations under colonial policies; however, the fact that Iranian women's resistance against veiling was concurrent with Western colonialism does not make it less valid or less aligned with Iranian women's desires.

In the mid-20th century, under imperative modernization, Reza Shah (r. 1925–41) outlawed the veil in 1936, which resulted in the oppression of many pious Muslim women and isolated them from public spaces.⁹ This law was abolished under Mohammad Reza Shah's secular (though authoritarian) reign, which continued until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iranian women have resisted the theocratic patriarchy of the Islamic Republic to regain their rights since the beginning of the revolution. They demonstrated against Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in March 1979, for fear of losing the basic rights that they had achieved during pre-Islamic Revolution era.¹⁰

Some feminist scholars interpret the policy change from choosing what to wear to enforcing the hijab in the early 1980s as an empowering tool for observant women, creating a "safe" space for their participation. However, this policy simultaneously restricted access to the public sphere for other groups, like many middle-class women who were already active in the public domain. Secular women, like Homa Nategh, a history professor, took compulsory hijab as a sign of fighting against American imperialism during the revolution but regretted this naiveté after the establishment of the Islamic state.¹¹ As a result, some educated groups left Iran and other women who could not tolerate the situation faced numerous difficulties.¹² Such historical examples indicate that some anti-imperial approaches do not solve a local problem, but may distract us from seeing a more complicated set of interconnected hegemonic powers. For four decades Iranian women found ways to keep fighting against the Islamic Republic's patriarchal laws through various campaigns and street protests.¹³ The recent movements, particularly the 2022 revolutionary uprising, have opened a door to rethinking anti-imperialist feminist rhetoric.

⁸ For example, Fatemeh Baraghani, known as Tahirih Qurrat-ol-Ayn. See Bahíyyih Nakhjavání, *The Woman Who Read Too Much* (Stanford, CA: Redwood Press, 2015).

⁹ Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

¹⁰ Ibid.; "Women Protesting Forced Hijab Days after the Iranian Revolution, 1979," Rare Historical Photos, 4 October 2016, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/women-protesting-hijab-1979>.

¹¹ Shir_e_Kian, "Homa Nategh_Hijab_English sub," YouTube video, 2:16, 5 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqQ2VzX520s>; Samira Mohyeddin (@smohyeddin), "'Useful Idiot' is a political term meaning a naive or credulous person who is easily manipulated to help advance a cause or political agenda; often unwittingly," Instagram post, 28 December 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cmu4dQFhm1D>.

¹² For example, the pediatrician and activist Homa Darabi, who immolated herself as a sign of protest. See Parvin Darabi and Roman P. Thomson, *Rage against the Veil: The Courageous Life and Death of an Islamic Dissident* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999); "Iranian Women—Before and after the Islamic Revolution," BBC News, 8 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47032829>.

¹³ Campaigns such as One Million Signatures and White Wednesdays that resulted in the Girls of Enghelab Street movement. See Nassim Hatam, "Why Iranian Women Are Wearing White on Wednesdays," BBC News, 13 June 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40218711>; Robin Wright, "Hijab Protests Expose Iran's Core Divide," *New Yorker*, 7 February 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hijab-protests-expose-irans-core-divide>.

Walking Unveiled in Iran

Here, I challenge two viewpoints about the 2022 uprisings that usually circulate in media and at formal and informal academic events, using Moaveni's *Time* article as an example. First is the perception that unveiled women walking in some public spaces is normal and uneventful rather than an act of civil disobedience with high risks. The second is the notion that economic problems caused primarily by US sanctions are one of the main causes of this revolutionary movement.

Moaveni states, "in the past two or three years, young women effectively already canceled the compulsory hijab."¹⁴ She describes being surprised when seeing young women casually and liberally dressed.¹⁵ A video shared via her Twitter account on 3 December 2022 also shows unveiled women peacefully walking in a Tehran mall. By sharing her observations, Moaveni challenges an Orientalist popular perception about Iranian women and constructs an image in which Muslim women are no longer in long black veils and secluded at home, countering the Western colonial narrative. However, this perspective oversimplifies the hijab law by focusing on unveiling among a specific group of women in a northern neighborhood of Tehran whose likely access to economic and political resources puts them in less danger than women from other social classes and locations. It also disregards women's underlying fears and anxieties about facing the morality police or those who advocate for the Islamic Republic in plain clothes. Furthermore, this positioning overlooks the presence of numerous women from various social classes and cities who courageously defy the state by appearing unveiled in streets and paying dearly for doing so.

The Islamic Republic considers hijab a form of protection for women (from men) and imposes hijab law through different institutions. In addition to the right to choose how to dress in the streets, abolishing compulsory hijab would then require women to have equal access to public services and resources, like education, public transportation, formal documentation, and healthcare services, regardless of their dress. How can we claim that the compulsory hijab is canceled when a doctor at a clinic refuses to see an unveiled female patient, and the woman does not have legal protection if she complains to a court? Numerous videos circulating in social media show female supporters of the Islamic Republic attacking unveiled women on city buses, *in the women's section*, with impunity. Sepideh Rashno, while appearing unveiled on a city bus in July 2022, was harassed and filmed by a supporter of the Islamic Republic, which resulted in her arrest, followed by a forced confession on the state's official TV channel. Women walking unveiled in different cities, eating breakfast unveiled in a local eatery, or simply sitting on a beach unveiled to enjoy the breeze are all acts of civil disobedience that have had and will likely continue to have severe consequences for women.¹⁶ Excluding the risk of being harassed from the narrative creates an incomplete image of women's situation under the Islamic Republic, accrediting the regime's false claim of adhering to human/women's rights in international communities. Iranian women have worked and engaged in acts of resistance to change the permissible forms of hijab over the last forty years, and recently exercised their civil disobedience by unveiling completely. These acts supposedly resulted in changes of the Islamic Republic's policy for imposing hijab, from the violent behavior of the regime's forces to fines and civil punishments.¹⁷ Despite these perceived changes in the state's strategies, Iranian

¹⁴ Moaveni, "2022 Heroes of the Year."

¹⁵ See Azadeh Moaveni (@AzadehMoaveni), Twitter post, 3 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/AzadehMoaveni/status/1599170188422696961>.

¹⁶ Masih Alinejad (@AlinejadMasih), Twitter thread, 20 August 2022, <https://twitter.com/AlinejadMasih/status/1560988977821278208>; Fahimeh KhezhHeidari (@Fahimehkhezh), Twitter post, 29 September 2022, <https://twitter.com/Fahimehkhezh/status/157573548505752384>.

¹⁷ In the early years of the Islamic Republic, narratives circulated about women being whipped and tacked on their foreheads for not wearing the hijab properly. Nowadays, the form of punishment has seemingly changed to fines and confiscation of cars, passports, and driver's licenses of mis-veiled and unveiled women. Additionally,

women have not “already canceled the compulsory hijab.”¹⁸ We can confirm the law’s dismantling only when all women in Iran can choose their clothing in any public space without risk or coercion, with full legal protection.

In her article, Moaveni discusses how a female relative’s fines for driving without a headscarf were canceled after she attended a mass lecture, “the equivalent of moral traffic school,” and promised to follow the rules.¹⁹ Importantly, her fines were canceled because she promised to obey the discriminatory “moral” rules of being veiled while driving. Complacency with the cancellation of fines “after promising to abide by the rules” or considering this dispensation an achievement instead of questioning the very act of receiving fines for driving without hijab is a delicate way of normalizing theocratic sexist oppression. This vision portrays the pragmatic nature of the Islamic Republic as a “positive” characteristic: instead of imprisoning women, now the state fines them, while simultaneously continuing to engage in severe punitive acts that can result in killing of supposedly mis-veiled women, as in the case of Mahsa Amini. This pragmatic and redemptive view of the Islamic Republic transforms one type of oppression to another and does not do justice to the revolutionary legacy and demands of Iranian women.

The cover of this issue of *Time* did not reflect the radicality of women’s demands and the anger in their postures and slogans. The cover picture showed three unveiled young women from behind holding each other’s waists as a sign of solidarity while one of the women raises her fingers, showing a V sign. Mona Eltahawy’s insightful Twitter thread analyzes the cover image in comparison to another picture that recently became viral within the Iranian women’s movement (Fig. 1).²⁰ This image shows six unveiled schoolgirls from behind in their classroom while showing their middle fingers to an image on the wall depicting the current Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and the former leader, in 1979, Khomeini.

This comparison demonstrates that although Iranian women are not represented in an Orientalist mode (in chador, victim, and obedient), the *Time* cover image is still relatively docile. The anger, anxiety, courage, and rebelliousness of Iranian women are eliminated. Instead, the cover image exudes “calm” and “normalcy” and deemphasizes that women hold the regime accountable for decades of oppression.²¹

Sanctions and the 2022 Revolutionary Movement

The impacts of Western and non-Western powers on Iran are historically and currently undeniable. Nevertheless, attributing the 2022 Iranian feminist revolution to sanctions without simultaneously recognizing the Islamic Republic’s corrupt economic policies and the broader public discontent with its inescapable oppression of the Iranian people not only misrepresents the revolutionary movement but also acquits the Islamic Republic of accountability. In her cover story, Moaveni highlights Gen Z’s struggles as the result of “years of crushing U.S. sanctions that have devastated Iran’s economy.”²² Comprehensive sanctions

nongovernmental forces, often aligned with the regime’s ideology, can attack such women, even resorting to acts like pouring yogurt on them. See “Four Decades of Imposing Hijab on Iranian Women: From Thumbtack to Yogurt,” *Kayhan London: News and Views for a Global Iranian Community*, 3 April 2023, <https://kayhan.london/1402/01/14/316334>; “Unveiling Crimes Clarified,” *Hamshahri*, April 2023, <https://www.hamshahronline.ir/news/752900/%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%AE%D8%B5-%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%82%DB%8C%D9%81-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A8%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D8%A7-%DB%B2%DB%B0-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2>.

¹⁸ AbdiMedia—Abdollah Abdi (@abdolah_abdi), Twitter post, 18 September 2022, https://twitter.com/abdolah_abdi/status/1571462709736275969.

¹⁹ Moaveni, “2022 Heroes of the Year.”

²⁰ Mona Eltahawy (@monaeltahawy), Twitter thread, 7 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/monaeltahawy/1600501814129991685>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Moaveni, “2022 Heroes of the Year.”



FIGURE 1. Comparing the two pictures in Eltahawy's post. Left: Time magazine cover; right: schoolgirls challenging compulsory hijab.

as a deterrent policy are problematic, causing social suffering and giving totalitarian regimes an opportunity to circumvent the sanctions for their own benefits. However, considering sanctions the major cause for Iran's devastated economy and connecting this to the 2022 Iranian progressive revolution without recognizing the inept economic structure of the Islamic Republic is another mistranslation of the situation in Iran. Iran's economy under the Islamic Republic is structurally maimed. The regime promotes an ideological view of the economy and has created a rentier state, turning the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) into an economic power plant that has "initiated privatization through state contracts."²³ This privatization does not resemble the (supposedly) competitive system in the West. Instead, the privatization under the Islamic Republic is a "clientelist system that guarantees that privatization actually benefits those associated with the ruling elite."²⁴ In fact, the amount of wealth relinquished to the "private" sector will return to the state, a state that already owned 70 percent of the economy.²⁵ The sanctions have strengthened these state-related groups (mainly the IRGC and its dependent entities), but the role sanctions play as a primary reason for the poor state of Iran's economy is debatable.

After signing the nuclear deal agreement (JCPOA) in July 2015, several professors from universities in Iran expressed skepticism regarding the potential for significant economic improvement. In an interview with *Donya-i-Eghtesad* (The World of Economy) newspaper in January 2016, Morteza Afghah categorized the short-term mental effects and mid-term/long-term real impacts of the JCPOA. The former encompassed the transient sense of optimism among people, which might lead to temporary positive changes in certain economic variables, like the currency exchange rate. However, the latter pertained to Iran's international relationships. Afghah argues that expecting mid-term and long-term economic improvement was not realistic due to the ongoing decline in oil prices and the lack of a

²³ Mehrdad Vahabi, "IRGC's Position in Iran's Economy," *Mihan*, 22 December 2015, <http://mihan.net/1394/10/01/562>; Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Historical and Conceptual Preparations for a Multidisciplinary Study of Social Justice in Iran," in *Iran's Struggles for Social Justice: Economics, Agency, Justice, Activism*, ed. Peyman Vahabzadeh (Cham: Springer International, 2017), 14–15, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44227-3_2.

²⁴ Vahabzadeh, "Historical and Conceptual Preparations," 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

secure economic system for national and international participation.²⁶ According to Euronews analyses, two years after the JCPOA inflation rates remained largely unchanged, commodity prices increased (although at a slower pace), and the currency market kept growing.²⁷ Although lifting sanctions may facilitate economic development, it would not be sufficient under current banking systems and the rentier economy.²⁸

With regard to the impaired and ideological economic structure, it remains uncertain whether lifting sanctions can significantly and sustainably improve the lives of ordinary people. The problem lies not with advocating for sanctions or ignoring their long-term consequences on people's life, but rather with condemning sanctions without simultaneously critically questioning the Islamic Republic's economic system and its ideological policies.²⁹ This incomplete view skews the importance of sanctions and makes internal structural problems invisible, hiding the regime's destructive policies behind Western imperialism. This process results in benefiting the regime rather than the people. Economic sanctions as an imperialist or deterrent policy are a valid concern; however, it does not mean that lifting sanctions necessarily and sustainably benefits people's lives. This is what Iranians have understood and projected with sophistication in their slogans.

The main slogan of the 2022 revolutionary movement is "Woman, Life, Freedom," without any emphasis on the economic crisis that causes suffering for many Iranians. Some regime advocates have attempted to degrade protesters not only by distorting their demands for freedom, but by arguing that if one wants to protest it should be about economic problems, because this keeps the regime ideologically safe and potentially opens the doors to anti-West/US criticism.³⁰ This was even reflected in a critique from some of the Islamic Republic's public figures. Mas'oud `Ali, a cleric from a theology center dependent on the Islamic Republic's system, argued that what the protesters "[mean] by freedom is free hugs [i.e., promiscuity]; . . . there was no economic slogan, which is people's main pain,

²⁶ Morteza Afghah is an economics professor at Chamran University in Ahvaz, who explained his views about effects of the JCPOA in an interview with *Donya-i-Eghtesad*. In the same interview, Mehdi Pazouki, an economics professor at Allameh University, explained that 20 percent of economic problems related to sanctions, but 80 percent were due to the state's policies and decision-making systems. See "The JCPOA's Impacts on Ordinary People's Life," *Donya-i-Eghtesad*, January 2016, <https://donya-e-eghtesad.com/%D8%A8%D8%AE%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-62/2995746-%D8%A7%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF-%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AF-%DA%A9%D9%88%DA%86%D9%87-%D8%AE%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86>.

²⁷ "Economic Impacts of JCPOA on Iranians' Everyday Life," Euronews, July 2017, <https://parsi.euronews.com/2017/07/14/iran-everyday-life-after-nuc-lear-deal>.

²⁸ Experts like Ata Bahrami and Hassan Golmoradi explain their views about how Iran's economic improvement necessitates economic structural modifications such as changing banking systems, modifying administration systems, fighting economic corruption, removing rentier economic systems, improving the tourist industry, etc. See "Does Reviving the JCPOA have Significant Influence on Iranians' Life?" Fararu, August 2022, <https://fararu.com/fa/news/569872/%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%AD%DB%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AB%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%90-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA>.

²⁹ In the Fararu interview, Bahrami also mentions that our diplomacy does not align with our economy. This refers to the ideological side of the economy under the Islamic Republic. Also see Suzanne Maloney, *Iran's Political Economy Since the Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 500.

³⁰ For example, Hassan Rouhani, the former president, in one of his speeches said "if people want to curse someone for their (economic) problems, the address is the White House in Washington, DC." See "If People Want to Curse Someone for Their Problems, the Address is the White House," video, 00:56, Khabaronline, September 2020, <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/143612/%D8%A8%D8%A8%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF-%DA%A9%D8%B3%DB%8C-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B4%DA%A9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86>.

but they removed their clothes to say that they want the autonomy of their body.”³¹ However, Iranians from Tehran and Isfahan to Shoushtar and Ahvaz have been chanting for years in the streets that “Our enemy is here, they lie that it [our enemy] is America.” This slogan is a clever counter-response to forty years of the Islamic Republic’s propagandistic slogan of “Death to America,” as an anti-imperialist tool to hide its inept economic, social, and cultural politics. The Islamic Republic has strategically appropriated the anti-imperialist discourse for over four decades and the Iranians’ slogan indicates the failure of the regime’s deployment of this anti-imperialist narrative. Iranians have even tried to find ways to put more economic pressure on the Islamic Republic themselves. Many Iranians joined campaigns like withdrawing money from banks in late 2022 to encumber the government and accelerate its fall, while helping people save their money.³²

During the recent uprising, Iranians have insisted that the US not sign any economic agreement with the Islamic Republic, because financial resources would not be used for the people’s benefit. Several Iranians in the diaspora met President Biden at different events and publicly asked him not to revive the nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic.³³ Also, in an interview with a BBC reporter, some Iranians in Philadelphia, who identified themselves as affiliated with the Democratic Party, expressed their discontent with the party’s lenient stance toward the Islamic Republic.³⁴ Iranians made similar demands during the Iranian Green Movement in 2009, when people inside Iran chanted, “Obama! Obama! Either with them [the Islamic Republic] or with us [Iranian people]!” (Obama! Obama! *Ya ba oona, ya ba ma!*) in the streets of Tehran. After seeing Iranians’ recent courage in streets, former President Barack Obama later regretted that he had not spoken to Iranians’ voices in 2009 (to prevent the accusation of the West interfering in other countries’ affairs or using activists as a tool for imperial purposes).³⁵ When women and men chant for freedom and truly target the totality of the Islamic Republic for their problems (including economic), rhetoric that constantly insists on the impacts of US sanctions misrepresents the narrative of protestors and their emphasis on freedom.

Conclusion

Following the 2022 uprising, an increasing number of women unashamedly have challenged the Islamic Republic as the root cause of their social and economic problems, revealing a more realistic portrayal of the regime. They courageously confront the theocratic patriarchy

³¹ “Mas’oud Aali, the Theology School’s Professor: Rebellions’ Meaning by Freedom Is Free Hug,” video, 1:22, *Entekhab*, January 2023, <https://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/708559/%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%BA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B4%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D8%BA%D9%88%D8%B4-%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>; “Hujat-ul-Islam Aali: It Was Islam That Brought Women Life and Reasonable Freedom,” *JahanNews*, January 2023, <https://www.jahannews.com/news/823875/%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B2%D9%86-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AF-%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A2%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF>.

³² “To Hurt The Regime, Activists Urge People Not To Use Iranian Banks,” *Iran International*, 19 January 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212195734>; Reza Golshahian (@golshahian), Twitter post, 11 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/golshahian/status/1601898083608297473?s=51&t=TaOMG9KjG76nXJcFq-DMw>.

³³ action_for_iran, “The Islamic Republic Is Struggling to Revive the JCPOA,” Instagram post, 20 December 2022, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CmajikVj_SQ.

³⁴ *bbcpersian*, “Bahman Kalbasi among Iranians in Democratic Party Campaign in Philadelphia,” Instagram post, BBC News, 5 November 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkmMUFroebf>.

³⁵ Pod Save America, “Barack Obama Talks Trumpism, Advice for Democrats, Ukraine + Russia, and the Supreme Court,” YouTube video, 1:05:15, 15 October 2022, https://www.youtube.com/embed/m_I0pjrd760?start=1765; CNN, “Obama Speaks Out on ‘Mistake’ during His Presidency,” YouTube video, 2:11, 18 October 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02W_AjgE2wg.

by assertively representing themselves as they wish, despite the humiliation, state harassment, and legal repercussions. Given the restrictions the Islamic Republic has placed on basic individual rights, acts such as blatantly unveiling, singing, and dancing in public are not merely signs of normalcy, but rather serve as powerful means to dismantle this patriarchal system from within. Also, several former regime supporters have gradually distanced themselves from it, doubting the claim of exaggerated Western imperialist impacts on Iran and identifying flaws within the system.³⁶ Recognizing the imperialist influence of the West on non-Western countries remains important; however, overemphasizing this factor alone can lead to a reductionist dichotomous theoretical framework. In this framework, critical views of internal problems may be perceived as complicity in Orientalist and hegemonic Western narratives. On the other hand, downplaying the oppressive behaviors of the state creates an incomplete narrative that portrays the Islamic Republic as moderate and open to negotiation, disregarding the voices of countless women (and men) who oppose the totality of the Islamic Republic.³⁷ This dichotomous theoretical approach ignores nuances, normalizes internal oppressions, legitimizes the Islamic Republic in international communities, and distorts the goals of the Iranians' revolutionary uprising against the totality of the Islamic Republic. It is crucial to remember colonial history to avoid repeating mistakes like military intervention; however, colonial and imperialist policies change over time. We must discover the new faces of imperialism, while taking a double-critique approach against both imperialist policies and totalitarian oppression, remaining unapologetically open to solidarity and strategic assistance—not “saving”—from Western and non-Western powers.³⁸

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³⁶ It does not mean to ignore the impacts of Western hegemonic powers on Iran's situation, but rather to recognize other significant factors (such as internal problems and non-Western hegemonic forces) as well. An example is Mahdi Nasiri, who used to be an advocate of the Islamic regime but recently changed his thoughts and critiques the religious totalitarian system. مهدی نصیری (@mahdinasiri238), “Me, Naser Daneshfar, Rahim Ghomeishi, and Shahab-al-Din Haeri,” Instagram post, 15 June 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/Ctif0_XIMfI/?igshid=YjgzMjc4YjcwZQ%3D%3D. Also, consider Haeri's debate with an advocate of the Islamic Republic, in which Haeri critiques Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy regarding the policy of fighting with the US. Haeri emphasizes that Russia has inflicted more damage on Iran than the US and other (Western) countries. See, AbdiMedia, “Thirty-Five Years of Ayatollah Khamenei Leadership from a Critical Perspective; Controversial Harf-i-No Debate; Haeri—Zou-Elm,” YouTube video, 1:59:20, 25 June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxxK-oB2jlk&t=4185s>.

³⁷ This framework also makes non-Western and multiple forms of colonial and imperialist dynamics invisible.

³⁸ Zeynep Korkman, “(Mis)Translations of the Critiques of Anti-Muslim Racism and the Repercussions for Transnational Feminist Solidarities,” *Meridians* (forthcoming); see also Saida Abbas, “The Echo Chamber of Freedom,” *Boundary* 40, no. 2 (2013): 155–89.

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