

The Mahsa Amini Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to explore what occurred during the 2022 Iranian revolution by comparing how the event is portrayed by American media sources and the testimony of an Iranian American Woman. The paper then explores the relation between women's bodily autonomy and state governments such as the Iranian and French governments who either enforce or suppress the practice of veiling through law. This paper concludes that American Media portrays the 2022 Iranian revolution from an Islamophobic perspective. This paper offers alternative views in which the practice of veiling and the topic of women's bodily autonomy can be viewed in relation to Islam. Additionally, this paper claims that in addition to Iran, Western countries also inhibit the bodily autonomy of women.

KEYWORDS: Islam, Religion, French Law, Islamophobia, Veiling, Hijab



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POINT OF DEPARTURE: UC STUDENT WORKERS SUPPORT EFFORTS IN IRAN

Beginning Monday, November 14, 2022, 48,000 graduate students, along with numerous staff and undergraduate students, began striking against unfair labor practices across the UC system. During this strike, hopes were high and chants were both humorous and uplifting: “Get up! Get down, Riverside is a union town!” Communities gathered, sharing resources to feed the strikers and provided much-needed support to the exhausted student workers. On November 30, organizers at UC Riverside decided to dedicate the day to the Iranian Student Association and hold a protest regarding recent events which were unfolding in Iran. Chants such as “Beat me! Hit me! You can never break me!”, “It’s not about my hair; it’s about my voice! It’s not about my body; it’s about my choice!” rang throughout the campus. Other than seeing a brief news report through social media, for many students this was the first time they encountered the Iranian protests in reaction to the death of Mahsa Amini, dubbed the Mahsa Amini revolution. Suddenly, the strike was not just about the treatment of local underpaid and overworked college students. The strike carried a weight much greater than wage issues; it carried a desolate cry for action, “Iranians made their choice! America be their voice!”

The following paper will discuss the recent Mahsa Amini revolution and achieve the following three goals: discuss how the event is portrayed and misunderstood by popular US media sources, reframe the event in relation to women’s rights and Islam, and discuss how Western nations fail to protect women’s rights in contrast to US media’s claims that Islamic nations fail to protect women’s rights.

THE REVOLUTION THROUGH THE EYES OF AMERICAN MEDIA

On September 22, 2023 a 22-year-old woman by the name of Mahsa Amini died while in the custody of Iranian authorities.

According to Iranian authorities, Amini was arrested and placed in custody as a result of violating a public veiling mandate, which obligates women living in Iran to cover their heads and hair while in public spaces. Laws such as these are influenced by social regulations discussed in religious scriptures such as the Quran and other texts recognized as canon by the Iranian government. These religious scriptures are often characterized and criticized by Western news outlets as being inherently repressive and misogynistic. Western news outlets have coined the term, “morality police” to describe the authorities who regulate women’s bodies in Islamic state governments (Karadsheh and Qiblawi, 2022). Media sources reported that the Iranian “morality police” unjustly arrested Mahsa Amini and physically abused her while she was in custody, eventually leading to her death. For the Iranian public, this was the last straw as many women have been subjected to harassment and physical abuse by Iranian authorities. Within hours of the news about Mahsa Amini, protesters took to the streets in solidarity with her and the many women who have faced similar fates. Chants similar to those at the protest held at UC Riverside could be heard throughout the streets of Iran: “زن زندگی آزادی” which translates to “Women, Life, Freedom.” Videos taken by protesters in Iran show female university students publicly taking off their veils in protest of the regime, police dragging women by their hair through the streets, and paramilitary tactics being used against civilians. In addition to police brutality, attempts have been made by the Iranian government to prevent information from being shared by instituting nationwide internet outages.

In addition to the injustices enacted on women’s bodies, these protests are in reaction to a number of social restrictions put in place by the Iranian government during the last few decades. US news outlets correctly reported that Mahsa Amini was unjustly murdered by an authoritarian government and that there was an outbreak of civil disobedience in solidarity for Mahsa Amini as well as in reaction to ongoing

political conditions. Where US media falls short, however, is its portrayal of Iran as a nation which has always been oppressive as a result of extreme religious ideation. There was no discussion of the history of Islamic law discussed nor of the conditions that led to the creation of an authoritative theocracy. Instead, news outlets pushed an easy and dirty narrative which has become all too familiar to US audiences over the last two decades. US media failed to portray the multidimensional aspects of Iranian society in which women have differing levels of freedom dependent on their social status, economic status, or geographic location in the country. US media also did not inform the public about historical instances of Islamic societies promoting better conditions for women and minority groups. Nor did news outlets discuss the nuanced ways in which political authoritarianism has weaponized religious values.

Building off of fear-mongering and Islamophobia, news articles made outlandish claims, including comparing Iran to North Korea. Many reports argued that Iran's potential for nuclear weapons should be cause for US attention, while overlooking that the government's human rights violations should be enough for international attention: "The only thing worse than a regime that kills and represses its own people is a regime with a nuclear weapon and that kills and represses its own people" (Karadshen and Qiblawi, 2022). Statements such as these give rise to concerns about the intentions of US news outlets. What relevance does the potential for nuclear weapons have to this story? Why would the authors quickly add this point at the end of their report when it does not seem to fit in with the rest of the theme?

Typing the word "Iran" into the popular video-sharing platform YouTube immediately returns videos with titles such as, "US-Iran conflict escalates" by ABC News, and "Iran-backed forces ramp up strikes on US bases in Syria" by Fox News, or "Inside Iran's Raging War on Drugs" by Vice. Scrolling through YouTube's recommended videos based on the keyword, "Iran" shows many dramatic and fear-provoking

titles such as these, with only a few positive titles such as, "Undiscovered Iranian Street Food Tour" by Mark Wiens sprinkled in. With many US citizens now using platforms such as YouTube as a source for news, it is alarming how quickly the platform distributes negative information against Islamic nations such as Iran.

One CNN interview titled, "Iran is Raising the Bar: Ex-NATO commander on the attack against US troops in Syria" asked General Wesley Clark to further comment on the US and Iran's involvement in an ongoing conflict in Syria. General Clark claimed that drones manufactured in Iran have been used to strike US military personnel. The general also claimed that the US does not wish to escalate the situation, but it is prepared to assume a defensive position if needed. General Clark then speculates what Iran might intend to do in this situation and suggests that Iran's goal is to keep Israeli and US troops from organizing in the area so they may take up a more advantageous position and push US presence out of the region; "It's all a part of Iran's quest for regional homogeneity" (CNN, 2023). CNN does not ask what General Clark means by "regional homogeneity" and viewers are left unclear if he meant an Iranian homogeneity of political ideals or cultural identity. CNN reports also do not ask him to comment on the US's intentions in the region. It becomes clear how media outlets such as CNN provide an oversimplified narrative of a complicated conflict in a way that creates a heightened sense of Islamophobia within the American public.

As easy as it is for US media to criticize the Muslim world for inhibiting the bodily autonomy of women, they fail to recognize the ways in which Western society also inhibits the bodily autonomy of women, including anti-veiling laws being passed in nations such as France. US media utilizes the fear of impending or ongoing war by limiting what military generals have to say regarding the ongoing conflict to further paint Arabic culture in a negative light. They also fail to contextualize the complexities of Islamic culture and

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historicize Islam's relation with women's autonomy over time. By leaving out these important perspectives, US media misinforms the public and continues to spread Islamophobic ideology in a nation which claims to be founded on the notion of religious freedom.

THE REVOLUTION THROUGH THE EYES OF AN IRANIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

One Iranian student from UC Riverside, Dina Mirmotalebisohi, has commented on the situation, describing how Islam is a religion that has the potential to be beneficial for society. Rather, it has been used by groups such as the Iranian government to oppress people rather than liberate them. "You can never understand how much they're hurting" (Mirmotalebisohi, 2023). She describes how oftentimes as a result of the Iranian government's policies, people who emigrate from Iran to the US often choose to no longer practice Islam. If they do choose to practice Islam, they do so on their terms rather than how it is prescribed by the Iranian government. She recalls her own mother's life as an immigrant, stating how her mother simply needed to escape said environment. Her mother's struggles did not end with leaving Iran; her mother continues to worry for parents, siblings, friends, and relatives who are still suffering under the Iranian government's policies.

Regardless of the political climate, Mirmotalebisohi affirms that Iranian culture is beautiful, she recounts her time spent with family there stating how lively the environment is, "It's [exciting] and fun, like, there's all that beautiful laughing energy. Family is huge. When I'm [in Iran], I'm ready to be around family 24/7" (Mirmotalebisohi, 2023). Mirmotalebisohi also recounts how in Iran there is diversity regarding the strictness of veiling practices throughout the nation, contrary to how American media-portrays the country as homogeneously appealing to old and outdated ideology. In reality, there is diversity regarding the strictness of veiling practices throughout the nation. Only in cities under strict

government control, such as Teheran, are women in danger of persecution. Mirmotalebisohi says this is because of the way social structures function in the cities, that areas with larger government presence are more restrictive. As we can see through this discrepancy, it is not Iranian culture which aims to persecute women but rather the Iranian government. If veiling were not mandatory, it would likely be the case that while many women would enjoy the freedom of not being legally obligated to veil, others would likely continue to veil whether for religious or cultural reasons. This is contrary to how American media has portrayed the climate of the country which shows how American media tends to give a biased account of a multidimensional social and political climate rather than giving a fair perspective of the entirety of the country's state of affairs.

She recounts how within the homes of Iranian citizens, Iranian women are talkative, confident, and outgoing. She comments how contrary to how American media has portrayed them as being weak and in distress, they are brave and are ready to stand up for themselves and demand respect within their society. Further commenting on the bravery required to do so in Iran, Mirmotalebisohi describes how the risk to do so in Iran is significantly greater than in the US. Since the government is authoritarian and has a monopoly on violence, it can directly silence those who publicly oppose them with little to no accountability. Although we are aware of many women who have faced violence from the Iranian government, the actual amount is undoubtedly much higher due to the government's ability to hide their actions. Additionally, it is the fear of violence from the government which makes it difficult for women or men to publicly display their disapproval of government policies. It is conditions such as these which cause tensions to build to a point in which citizens are frustrated enough to resort to mass civil disobedience such as in the Mahsa Amini revolution.

When asked how much of the conflict is due to political, social, or religious factors, Mirmotalebisohi states that

the conflict is overwhelmingly due to political policy and that social and religious factors play only a small part in the tension being built. This may come as a surprise to an American audience as the Iranian government is a theocracy. However, as Mirmotalebisohi states, it is the political ideology that drives violence against women, that scripture has been manipulated by corrupt officials to serve their purposes rather than being used to serve and liberate people.

Commenting on how people have been attempting to help the situation in Iran, Mirmotalebisohi is concerned about how people utilize social media in unproductive ways. She notes that some social media users are quick to critique those who do not publicly post about the Mahsa Amini revolution; however, it could easily be the case that a person may not feel that it is safe for them or their family to have a public opinion about the topic. Additionally, Mirmotalebisohi points out the hypocrisy of those who frequently post about the situation but refuse to speak about it in person, go to public demonstrations, or donate funds to the cause. “I think there’s more to it than just social media. And we often get that confused, because social media is really easy [to use an end all be all], at least for some people” (Mirmotalebisohi, 2023).

Mirmotalebisohi explains that the Iranian Student Association held a protest in support of those revolting in Iran so they could see that there are people in the US who empathize with their struggles. The Iranian Student Association also wanted to raise awareness of Iranian immigrants and their descendants who are struggling in the US as a result of the conditions in Iran. However, because the issue is related to veiling as a religious practice, it becomes both difficult and nuanced to accurately critique the violent enforcement in Iran without the possibility of one’s message coming off as more aggressive than intended. “It’s hard to yell on campus ‘Down with the Islamic regime!’ What we mean is ‘Down with the Iranian Islamic regime’ right? But what people hear is ‘Down with Islam!’ We’re not saying we hate hijabs. We’re saying we hate the force that’s associated with wearing a

hijab in Iran. We’re saying that we’re against taking away [the bodily autonomy of women]” (Mirmotalebisohi, 2023). In addition to the violation of women’s rights, Mirmotalebisohi notes that while men are able to exist and live in accordance with behavioral standards prescribed by the government, albeit in better conditions than women, men in Iran also have a difficult time navigating the regime’s regulations. Furthermore, those who belong to social minority groups, such as LGBTQ persons, or members of racial minority groups, such as Mahsa Amini who was Kurdish, are more likely to have a difficult time and face neglect as well as harassment from the government. The perspectives of these groups are often overlooked by US media.

REFRAMING VEILING THROUGH A HISTORICAL LENS

According to author Reza Aslan, there is little doubt that the Quran as a scripture was shaped by the surrounding culture for which it was written (Aslan, 2012). Many societies in the past, both Western and Eastern, conceived women as being less of a person than men, which may explain why there are several lines in the Quran seemingly asserting misogynistic values. Aslan argues that it is these parts of scripture that are weaponized by groups such as the Iranian government to justify the policing of women’s bodies. Aslan argues that if one only selects specific parts of the Quran, one could call for almost any form of government from a neo-liberal form of capitalism to a hyper-Marxist form of communism. If one looks at the Quran as a whole, however, it is evident that the Quran argues for an egalitarian society free of social disparities where religious institutions and private individuals pool resources to promote the well-being of marginalized groups, even those who do not practice the Islamic faith. Furthermore, Aslan highlights how the Prophet Muhammad promoted the inclusion of women in public and social life by not discouraging his wives from participating in communal prayers and traveling to places of prayer without a male escort. This is contrary to how the Quran

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is interpreted by the Iranian government which prohibits women from traveling to public places of prayer without the escort of a close male relative. Aslan then elaborates how while the Iranian government attempts to police women's bodies and restrict their choice to veil or not to veil, Western governments are guilty of the same issues (Aslan, 2012).

Sofia Rehman, a scholar specializing in Islam and gender, also discusses the Prophet as a model for behavior in Islamic practice. She points out that while it is a nice thought to argue that the Prophet was inherently feminist and directly argued for the equality of women, this is an oversimplification of reality. One must accept how The Prophet did live in a patriarchal society and as a result, he exhibited patriarchal behaviors. Contrary to what traditionalists argue, the Prophet playing into his role as a male-bodied person in a patriarchal society does not necessarily imply that the Prophet advocated for a patriarchal society, nor a society whose state violently enforces veiling onto women. Rehman elaborates on how the most accurate view is to create a synthesis between these two perspectives. While the Prophet existed and functioned in a patriarchal society, his ultimate goal was to reform it to be more inclusive and welcoming of those who were considered lower class within said context. We see that the Prophet advocated for women's agency in areas such as marriage and divorce by arguing that women should be able to have the opportunity to provide verbal consent to marriage. Additionally, the Prophet argued for the fair treatment of young women who lost their legal guardians due to unforeseen circumstances. Since many instances of the Prophet resisting patriarchal structures exist in the Quran, further arguments can be made in favor of the progression toward an egalitarian Islamic society. For if the Prophet truly envisioned a completely patriarchal society, he would likely have not advocated for better marriage and divorce conditions in marriage nor would he have advocated for better treatment of women without legal guardians (Rehman, 2022). While this aspect of Islam is evident to many scholars, it is often ignored by US media, which continue to portray

countries such as Iran as primitive and lacking understanding in contrast to the West.

Contemporary veiling issues exist outside of Iran, including laws passed by France's ultra-secularist government that target Muslim women and prevent them from veiling in certain spaces, regardless of the women's own choices. Such laws are based on philosophy from the Enlightenment period in Europe which was meant to promote women's liberation. The French term *laïcité* describes a specific type of radical state secularism based on the 1905 Act on the Separation of Church and State which declares that the French government will not recognize or monetarily endorse any form of religion. This notion was then incorporated into Article 1 of the 1958 French Constitution stating that France ought to be a secular and social Republic. This form of radical secularism was meant to promote public and social equality and prevent the abuse of state powers to favor one religious group. Instead, it has been weaponized to disenfranchise religious groups and promote state-sponsored Islamophobia, which while it is not the promotion of religion, certainly does not constitute as religious neutrality.

We can see numerous examples of state-sponsored Islamophobia in France. In one famous 1989 case, three adolescent girls were expelled from a French school because of their refusal to remove their veils when prompted by the school's administration. This event became known as the Creil Affair, and the incident eventually made it to a French court (Baldi, 1970). The court ruled that certain acts or symbols intended to display religious affiliation were not necessarily incompatible with *laïcité* as long as the act or symbol was part of the individual's religious expression. While the court did rule in favor of the use of some religious symbols, symbols that could be considered propaganda, vulgar, or provocative could still come under legal scrutiny. Many Muslim women continued to face scrutiny for attempting to receive an education from French school while veiling in classes. In 1995, French courts made a contrary

proclamation that veiling was to be considered out of line with the notion of *laïcité*; small crosses or small star of David emblems were still permitted. This made it acceptable to legally prevent students from veiling in French schools.

As noted earlier, the French courts have struggled with deciding if public veiling is a violation of *laïcité*. Part of the confusion appears to be whether the veil is considered a religious or political symbol. Baldi argues that the French government bans veiling without any sound logic or use of empirical evidence. Citing how French courts view veiling as inherently enforcing the alienation of women and claim that the practice of veiling is only ever done through coercion and by forceful means. This type of thinking exemplifies dismissive attitudes towards other cultures which may simply have different values as French culture. The depiction of Muslim women as inherently passive and in need of saving from their own culture is both appalling and is a one-dimensional outlook on the complexities of Arab culture (Baldi, 1970). According to author Reza Aslan, “at the heart of this argument is the profoundly misogynistic belief that no Muslim woman would freely choose to wear the veil. [...] That women are incapable of deciding for themselves what they should or should not wear” (Aslan, 2012). This highlights a deeply rooted flaw in the thinking of the French government in that they seem to believe that Muslim women are incapable of deciding for themselves if veiling is good for them. Additionally, the argument that creating a legal obligation to not veil in public does not make sense in the context of the Western definition of dignity, being the ability to autonomously decide for oneself. Given this perspective, anti-veiling laws should be viewed as undignified through the eyes of Western thought.

Another example of French society inhibiting women’s freedom of choice is the Burkini Affair of 2016. Approximately 30 small towns in France passed local laws which prevented Muslim women from wearing a type of one-piece swimsuit that covers the entirety of the body

including the length of one’s arms and legs as well as a hood that covers one’s hair, leaving only the face, hands, and feet exposed. This ban was enacted on the ground that the burkini was thought to be a symbol of Islamic extremism. These laws were fought in court and were only upheld by several courts only to be finally overruled by the French Conseil d’État which declared the ban a violation of fundamental freedoms (Baldi, 1970). We can see through these examples how the veil began as a cultural marker before becoming a tool for governments, whether Islamic or Secular, to control women’s bodies and inhibit their autonomy as free subjects (Baldi, 1970).

CONCLUSION

The Mahsa Amini revolution occurred as a reaction to the unjust treatment of women under Iran’s political policies. US media was quick to present this event as a sign that Islam is inherently misogynistic and used it to portray Iranian society as backward. They did so only by presenting an incomplete version of the larger issue at hand and forgoing the inclusion of veiling’s historical context. By doing so, US media outlets presented only the negative aspects of veiling as a form of misinformation. The lack of historical context allowed US media to peddle the myth that the spread of Islamic society is inherently a threat to US national security, an ironic assertion from a nation that boasts about its acceptance of religions.

The perspective of Iranian-American women makes it clear that the policing of women’s bodies is not inherent to Iranian culture, and that Iranian culture is as modern as any other. Iranian women are both vocal and ambitious in their efforts to achieve equality within their own society. Looking at the history of Islam, it is clear that religion was meant to promote egalitarianism and the autonomy of women rather than the oppression of women through state-sponsored patriarchal laws. It is bad government bodies who take scripture and utilize it to promote their independent ideals rather than religion and culture which seeks to further oppress women

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as a social class. Through this perspective, it becomes evident that the policing of women's bodies is due to bad government bodies rather than bad religion.

Finally, we see that it isn't only Islamic governments who are capable of utilizing ideas that were meant to liberate people and use them to oppress citizens. Western countries such as France are also guilty of policing women's bodies by preventing them from having the choice to veil in public. This has been done through the manipulation of the French constitution to create anti-veiling laws such as the Burkini Affair of 2016 as well as many instances where women were prevented from participating in the public education system for refusing to remove their veil. While the French government claims they do so in the name of Women's liberation, it is clear that their true intention is to disempower Muslim citizens which in no way should be considered religious neutrality.

Following these conclusions, there is much research that must be conducted to further understand the Mahsa Amini revolution. This paper discussed how American media outlets such as popular news websites have covered the issue in addition to how popular search engines such as YouTube present the nation through their search query. This does not cover the vast amount of American news sources such as independent news, television, or American social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Nor does this paper explore how Chinese social media platforms such as TikTok allow the situation to be presented on their platform. In addition to further analysis of how different media outlets present the situation, further research ought to be conducted in regard to how other Iranian voices perceive the Mahsa Amini revolution. Although this paper interviews an Iranian-American woman regarding the situation, there is a plethora of different perspectives which may be had by Iranian or Iranian-American women depending on their social-economic background and cultural affiliation. Finally, further analysis should be conducted to conclude how it is

that the Iranian government interprets the Quran currently and how the Quran has been interpreted historically.

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