

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

***Jin, Jiyan, Azadi* and the Historical Erasure of Kurds**

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Following the murder of Jîna (Mahsa) Amini on September 16, 2022, her parents decided—despite the threats and intimidation by security forces—to hold a public funeral. Protests were ongoing outside Kasra Hospital in Tehran as word spread across the capital of Jîna’s murder.¹ The family transferred her body to their hometown of Saqez the next day. Hundreds of people traveled to the Ayçî cemetery within hours of the announcement of the public funeral on social media. There, they helped bury Jîna among Kurdish chants and songs. Kurdish women threw their scarves in the air and chanted *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* (Woman, Life, Freedom), among other slogans. In addition to the initial print reports about Jîna’s murder by journalists Niloofar Hamedi and Elaheh Mohammadi—both of whom remain imprisoned for their work—social media participated and propelled the protests. Photos, videos, and other types of testimony circulated online. The funeral, solidarity demonstrations in Kurdish cities, towns, and villages, and the observation of mass strikes in the following days captured the attention of Iranians all over the country.

The remarkable acts of resistance following Jîna’s funeral in Kurdistan built on decades of activism and resistance that up to “Jîna’s uprising” were largely unnoticed by the Iranian center. As the uprising began in Kurdistan, it opened a window onto the plight of Kurds and their long history of resistance. Jîna’s murder sparked unprecedented solidarity among marginalized and oppressed peoples of Iran and offered an opportunity to reflect on their struggles, aspirations, and erased histories. In this article, I demonstrate how the Kurdish political legacy has played out in the ways Kurds have responded to the murder of Jîna over the past year, and how the uprising has become a space to reassert their identity, claim space, and challenge their historical and structural erasure in modern Iran. I also discuss how reporting on and commenting about the Woman, Life, Freedom movement (WLF; Kurdish, *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî*; Persian, *Zan, Zendegi, Azadi*) perpetuated their systemic silencing.

A combination of various social, political, and economic crises brought different segments of Iranian society together in the WLF Movement. In reflecting on the uprising, however, it is vital to be attentive to the intersections of oppression and struggle and not overlook the diversity of the demands and the aspirations of marginalized peoples. When Kurds protest an authoritarian regime that uses political and economic oppression, they are also crying out against the denial of their identity by the Iranian state through the erasure of their names, languages, cultures, and histories. This has manifested in vivid expressions of Kurdish identity—chanting of Kurdish slogans, singing of Kurdish revolutionary songs, and recitations of poetry—that have accompanied resistance and commemorations over

¹ “Mourners Who Dared Not Mourn: A Report from Outside Mahsa Amini’s Hospital,” *IranWire*, 17 September 2022, <https://iranwire.com/en/women/107607-mourners-who-dared-not-mourn-a-report-from-outside-mahsa-aminis-hospital>.

the past year. Slogans, poems, and words uttered in eulogies and speeches brim with historical and political significance and situate the current uprising in the long history of the Kurdish struggle for recognition, equality, and justice. For example, in a passionate eulogy at the burial of Komar Daroftade, a teenager shot dead in Piranshahr during a WLF protest, his father said: “I named my son Komar because he was born on 25 Gelawêj (16 August). I am happy he gave his life for freedom and this land. I am happy he became a martyr.”² Komar is a Kurdish word for republic, and 16 August is the founding anniversary of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP). The KDP oversaw the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan in the city of Mahabad, Iran, from January 22 to December 15, 1946.³ A social democratic party, the KDP aims “to attain Kurdish national rights within a federal and democratic Iran.”⁴ However, membership in or affiliation with the party may result in the death penalty or long prison sentences.⁵ By his given name, therefore, Komar’s parents cleverly kept a forbidden history alive, and his death and funeral also became a space to commemorate a prohibited dream, the dream of self-determination. His father’s words and his celebration of martyrdom reaffirmed the continuity of historical resistance of Kurds against their subordination and their unwavering commitment to freedom and justice. His words were widely circulated on social media.

Similarly, at Jîna’s funeral as well as other funerals over the past year, a Kurdish song, “Be Tenya Cêy Mehêllin” (Don’t Leave Them Alone), based on a poem written by the Kurdish poet Refîq Sabîr about Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons against civilians in Halabja in March 1988 has been sung.⁶ Describing “the murder of a city,” the poem begins with a plea not to leave the victims who are “shrouded in haze” alone:

Bless their [thirsty] throats with the Sunrise,
and their wounds with roses.
Cover them with songs,
and the woodland’s green.⁷

Commemorating the collective trauma of the murder of 5,000 civilians in Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan on the occasion of burying Jîna situates her killing in the history of violence committed against Kurds by modern nation-states in the larger Middle East. Reference to violence against the Kurds by the state also was present in the statement published on August 24, 2023 by Jîna Amîni’s family ahead of the first anniversary of her murder. The statement cites a verse, “Tehran does not smile at anyone,” from a poem

² Rudaw Media Network, “Komar Daroftade’s Father over His Son’s Grave,” *Twitter* (now X), 31 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/Rudawkurdish/status/1587150429317627904>.

³ The short-lived, self-governing state existed during the “Iran crisis of 1946” when the Soviet Union did not comply with the Tripartite Treaty of January 1942 to evacuate Iran. Peter Chelkowski and Robert Pranger, *Ideology and Power in the Middle East: Studies in Honor of George Lenczowski* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 339; David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 227; Donald Wilber, *Iran, Past and Present: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 136.

⁴ Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), “About,” accessed 30 October 2023, <https://pdki.org/english/about>.

⁵ “Temanotat, Iran; PDKI: Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan,” Landinfo (Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre), accessed 30 October 2023, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2027641/iran_temanotat_PDKI_april_2020.pdf.

⁶ Akhbar-i Dagh, “Khandan Soroud-i Kordî bar sar-i Mazar-i Jîna Amîni” (Singing a Kurdish Song over Jina Amîni’s Resting Place), YouTube video, 27 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84j6G-zc9Go>.

⁷ Refîq Sabîr, “Lawokî Helebce û Mafî Xawendarêti,” (A Lament for Halabja and the Right of Ownership), in *Rwanîn be Rûnakîda: Le Barey Şîr, Azadî, Jiyan* (Looking into the Light: About Poetry, Freedom, and Life) (Silêmanî: Xezelnûs, 2022), 307–29. Heme Saleh Suzenî, a Kurdish Iranian poet, wrote a poem after Sabîr’s and cites his opening couplets with a slight change. Suzenî’s poem, which has also become popular, is known as “be tenya cêy mehêllên” (Do not Leave Me Alone). Sabîr, *Rwanîn be Rûnakîda*, 309–18.

titled *Zam Pêwan* (Innumerable Wounds) by the renowned Kurdish poet, Şêrko Bêkes (1904–2013).⁸ Bêkes wrote the poem on September 23, 2009 in memory of Foad Mostafa Soltani (1948–79), admired political leader and one of the founders of the Kurdish radical left organization, the Revolutionary Organisation of the Toilers of Kurdistan (Komala), who was killed during the armed resistance in Kurdistan following the 1979 revolution.⁹ Soltani’s legacy, Bêkes wrote “has become the bread and water in every [Kurdish] house,” “a tree in every courtyard,” “a window in every room,” and “a story continuing to be told.” Likewise, Jîna’s name became a symbol, and her unjust death energized the Kurdish resistance.¹⁰

In the early days of the WLF uprising, a song in Persian titled “Baraye” (For the Sake Of) was composed by the Iranian singer Shervin Hajipour, in which he used protest tweets starting with the word *baraye* written in support of the protests. The song soon became the anthem of the movement and was celebrated for offering “a guide into modern Iran, its problems, and the demands and aspirations of its people.”¹¹ On October 9, 2022, Chia Madani, a Kurdish musician and songwriter, published a song in Kurdish titled “Bo” (For the Sake Of), to “put in words just a fraction of what remains unsaid” in Hajipour’s song. In his song Madani highlighted the “invisible pains” of the minorities of Iran:

For Kurds, for Lors, Arabs, Balochis
 For all the peoples without rights
 For centuries of oppression, of submission
 For cultures and identities buried alive.
 Let’s now write this [song] once again,
 With my pains also visible
 This time let’s make sure your freedom
 aspires to set all of us free.¹²

What Madani refers to is the active participation of the Kurds in the 1979 revolution with the hope of achieving their rights. Their political and cultural demands, however, were ruthlessly crushed when the Islamic Republic was established.¹³ Furthermore, over the past four decades the regime has effectively wielded accusations of “separatism” and “terrorism” to delegitimize the Kurdish resistance movements and to dehumanize Kurds and subsequently render their struggles invisible to large segments of the country.

The WLF movement has offered a space to challenge and interrogate the mechanisms of making invisible minoritized peoples like the Kurds. Indeed, some positive developments emerged, and inspiring solidarities were forged, especially inside Iran and among marginalized groups. Nevertheless, silencing, marginalization, and erasures have continued in the mainstream Iranian media, at rallies, in commentaries and academic discussions. Among the most egregious of erasures were Amini’s Kurdish name, Jîna, and the origin of the *Jin, Jîyan, Azadî* cry.¹⁴ Over the past year commentators have routinely ignored or distorted the Kurdish origin of this slogan. This is particularly troubling in scholarly publications

⁸ Akhbar-i Rooz, “Bayaney-i Khanevadey-i Jina Amini be Monasebat-i Avalin Salgard-i be Qatl Residan-i Jina,” 24 August 2023, <https://www.akhbar-rooz.com/213845/1402/06/02>.

⁹ “Foad Mosatfa Soltani,” Washington Kurdish Institute, accessed 30 October 2023, <https://dckurd.org/2018/07/26/foad-mostafa-soltani>.

¹⁰ Şêrko Bêkes, *Hest û Nest* (Sulaymaniya, Iraq: Serdem, 2010).

¹¹ Sara Mashayekh, “Baraye: Understanding Iran’s Song of Protest and Compassion,” Ajam Media Collective, 9 February 2023, <https://ajamcc.com/2023/02/09/baraye-irans-song-of-protest>.

¹² Chia Madani, “Bo” (For the Sake Of), trans. Madani, YouTube video, 9 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mikKozqJWvw>.

¹³ Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, “The Securitisation of Life: Eastern Kurdistan under the Rule of a Perso-Shi’i State,” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2019): 663–82.

¹⁴ Farangis Ghaderi and Ozlem Goner, “Why ‘Jina’: Erasure of Kurdish Women and Their Politics from the Uprisings in Iran,” *Jadaliyya*, 1 November 2022, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44560>.

such as the recent Hot Spots series on Woman, Life, Freedom featured on the Society for Cultural Anthropology's website in June 2023. The editor asserts an inaccurate and misleading history of *Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*, using an odd and unfamiliar script (*xen, xian, e'zadi*) to write its Kurdish version. The writer states that this slogan "first emerged in Kurdish struggles for recognition in Turkey. It was used in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq and the Syrian civil war in the fight against ISIS."¹⁵ What is missing—and I think is telling—is direct reference to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and acknowledgment of the affiliated women's movements that were the actual creators of the slogan.

The presence of the Kurdish flag in solidarity demonstrations in the Iranian diaspora also became a point of contention, and there were reports that Kurds were ousted from some diaspora demonstrations for raising their flag.¹⁶ The media coverage of funerals, protests, and commemorations also regularly have minimized or erased references to Kurdish political history, such as the Republic of Kurdistan, and vivid expressions of political and cultural demands, such as the right of self-determination, in favor of depicting a unified and homogenized picture of the protestors.¹⁷ The erasures by the state, mainstream media, and commentaries, I argue, are systemic and deeply rooted in the foundation of modern Iran and the Iranian national identity. The marginalization, assimilation, and erasure of indigenous cultures and peoples in pursuit of uniformity of language and identity was concomitant to producing the modern state of Iran. Interrogating this uniformity and the Persianization policy and attending to the historical erasures minoritized peoples such as the Kurds have experienced is key to understanding of the current uprising and the forms of resistance displayed in Kurdistan.

In constructing a national identity, the Iranian nationalist discourse emphasized the Persian component to the detriment of other ethnic communities.¹⁸ The integration of Iran's diverse peoples was carried out by coercive measures, but also the prominent use of the Persian language in state education, administration, and the media.¹⁹ In an article attributed to Mohammad 'Ali Forughī (1877–1942), the renowned Iranian writer, politician, and founder of the Language Academy of Iran, he considered publishing Persian and Iranian literary works "the best way to homogenise Iranians." He emphasized that Persianization should not be done, "in a way that is perceived as Persianising them." He stated: "I don't believe in banning speaking in Turkish, Kurdish, or Arabic. Rather, enforce speaking in Persian. Fortunately, Turkish and Kurdish are not literary languages, and our minorities lack the literary and educational ingredient and will be easily assimilated into Persian language and literature."²⁰ Forughī's lack of awareness of centuries-old literary traditions in Kurdish and Turkish led to policies with catastrophic consequences. Semi-independent Kurdish emirates in the Iranian and Ottoman empires nurtured Kurdish culture and literature for centuries and developed Kurdish language varieties into literary languages.²¹ During Reza Shah's reign (1925–41), being Iranian increasingly came to mean being

¹⁵ Milad Odabaei, "Far Away, by Your Side: An Introduction and a Remembrance," Woman, Life, Freedom series, Society for Cultural Anthropology: Hot Spots, 29 June 2023, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/far-away-by-your-side-an-introduction-and-a-remembrance>.

¹⁶ Luke James, "We Are Fighting for Her Name and Our Flag: Why Welsh Kurds Fear Their Identity is Being Airbrushed from Iranian Protests," Nation Cymru, 16 October 2022, <https://nation.cymru/news/welsh-kurds-iranian-protests-zhina-mahsa-amini>.

¹⁷ Ahmad Mohammadpour, "Decolonising Voices from Rojhelat: Gender-Othering, Ethnic Erasure, and the Politics of Intersectionality in Iran," *Critical Sociology* 2023: 12–13.

¹⁸ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Amir Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918–1985* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 126.

²⁰ Mohammad Ali Forughī, "Aqalyatha-ye Keshvar," *Yaghma* 3, no. 7 (1950): 264–67. I am grateful to Mehrdad Rahimi-Moghaddam for bringing this source to my attention.

²¹ Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language*; Boris James, "The Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Emirates (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Century)," in *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, ed. Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Gunes, and Veli Yadirgi

“Persian.”²² He banned Kurdish publications, which resulted in the criminalization of possessing Kurdish books.²³ Kurdish writers’ autobiographies are replete with testimonies of the impact the ban on Kurdish publication had on their lives.

Following the 1979 revolution the militarization and securitization of Kurdistan intensified. Mass killings and extrajudicial executions marked the 1980s. The Kurdish regions also have been visibly marred by an underdeveloped economy, poverty, and a high rate of unemployment.²⁴ A decade of military aggression was followed by the dehumanization and the vilification of Kurds disseminated by the state’s cultural apparatuses and the media, most notably in the “sacred defense cinema” (*sīnimā-yi difā’-i muqaddas*). The Kurdish response to a century of assimilation policies, violence, and erasure has been strong resistance, and the display of activism and resistance in Kurdistan over the past year is a testimony to the failure of assimilation policies. Kurds have continued to develop their language and culture while challenging the hegemony of Persian and systemic state violence. They have found alternative ways through arts and literature to revive their memories and record, but they have paid a heavy price for their resilience.

Although Kurds constitute only 10% to 12% of Iran’s population, they make up almost half of Iran’s political prisoners and constitute a disproportionately high number of those who receive the death penalty and are executed.²⁵ Not accidentally or coincidentally, then, the longest-serving female political prisoner is a Kurd. Zeinab Jalaian has been in prison for fifteen years and is slowly losing her eyesight after an infection was left untreated.²⁶ Hundreds of young women are among those executed in silence, their deaths sanctioned by the government because they are threats against “national security.” The name of one of them, Shirin Alamholi, was recalled in September 2022, twelve years after her execution in 2010, when Atefeh Nabavi, an Iranian feminist and fellow inmate of Shirin, wrote on her Twitter account that she first learned about *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* in Evin Prison from Alamholi: “It was written on the wall, next to her bed.”²⁷ In one of her letters addressed to the judge, Shirin wrote that she had not attended school; she only learned Persian in prison, and when she was first tried in court she did not understand the trial and could not defend herself.²⁸ The government authorities never returned Shirin’s body for dignified burial, the fate of many Kurdish political dissidents.²⁹ The execution of Shirin along with four other Kurdish political prisoners (including Farzad Kamangar, teacher, poet, and activist) on May 9, 2010 sparked mass demonstrations and general strikes in the Kurdish region, yet they were not noted or reported by the center.

In a context in which any form of political activism is extremely risky, young Iranian Kurds have increasingly focused on language revitalization and cultural, civil, and environmental activism. These fields of activism, however, are not risk free, as illustrated in the cases of Moĵan Kavusi, a poet and language activist, who was sentenced to sixty-two

(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 25–44; Farangis Ghaderi, “The History of Kurdish Poetry,” in Bozarslan et al., *Cambridge History of the Kurds*, 707–28.

²² Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 217.

²³ Hassanpour, *Nationalism and Language*, 126; Hejar Mukriyani, *Çeştî Micêwir* (Mehregan, 2007); Homa Katouzian, *Dowlat wa Jame’eh dar Iran: Enqeraz-i Qajar wa Esteqrar-i Pahlavi*, trans. Hossein Afshar (Tehran: Nashr-i Markaz, 2018), 347.

²⁴ Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 67.

²⁵ United Nations, Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3823681>. See also “Rights Denied: Violations against Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran,” Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, 2018, <http://en.cshr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/08/Rights-Denied-Violations-against-ethnic-and-religious-minorities-in-iran.pdf>.

²⁶ “The Plight of Zeinab Jalalian: A Women’s Struggle for Freedom and Justice,” National Council of Resistance of Iran, Women’s Committee, 24 March 2023, <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2023/03/24/plight-of-zeinab-jalalian>.

²⁷ Somayeh Rostampour, “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi (Woman, Life, Freedom): The Genealogy of a Slogan,” CrimethInc, 3 August 2023, <https://crimethinc.com/2023/03/08/jin-jiyan-azadi-woman-life-freedom-the-genealogy-of-a-slogan>.

²⁸ “I Am a Hostage: A Letter from Political Prisoner Ms. Shirin Alam Hooli,” Kurdish Institute, 7 May 2010, <https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/i-am-a-hostage-a-letter-from-political-prisoner-ms-shirin-alam-hooli>.

²⁹ “Shirin Alamhuli Atashgah,” Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, accessed 31 October 2023, <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-5375/shirin-alamhuli-atashgah>.

