



GLOBAL

How to Be a Man in Iran

Morality police have returned to city streets that have become a testing ground for women's rights and everyone's courage.

By Salar Abdoh and Vali Khalili



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After a months-long pause, Iran's dreaded modesty squads are back on the job of policing women's dress. Many Iranian men are quietly asking themselves and one another a question that goes something like this: "Suppose you're walking down the street with your hijab-less wife, girlfriend, friend, classmate, or sister. The morality police suddenly confront you, giving your companion a warning, or worse. What will you say or not say? Will you stand up for your partner?"

Distilled into one sentence, the oft-repeated question translates from Persian nearly word for word as follows: "When that time comes, Iranian man, will you be a hero, or will you be yellow?"

The death last September of a young woman named Mahsa Amini in the custody of Iran's morality police sparked an inferno of rage over issues both related and seemingly distant: ethnic and sexual discrimination, corruption, economic and climate mismanagement—all avoidable indignities in a country with astounding reserves of natural resources and a highly educated population.

The regime met the public outpouring with violence, arrests, and executions throughout the fall of 2022. And yet, the confrontation changed the human face of cities across Iran. Walk today in comparatively well-to-do quarters of Tehran, the capital, such as Karim Khan, Valiasr Street, and Vanak Square; or peek inside the theaters, cafés, and malls of Iranian cities all across the country; and you'll notice that more than the hijab has been discarded. The actual volume of cloth on women's bodies appears to be diminishing. Skin is in.

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A change as visible as this one is a first in the life of the Islamic Republic, and in a sense, the regime allowed it by choosing not to enact a ferocious endgame to shut it down. The same regime, after all, cut off past periods of turmoil, such as those in the summer of 2009 and the fall of 2019, by thoroughly quashing dissent. By contrast, the rebellion of 2022 produced what Persian speakers like to call a *khoruji*, or "exit," though what it really connotes is "results."

After Mahsa Amini, going without hijab has been transformed from an act of civil disobedience to a fact on the ground. Years ago, Iran's rulers made the mandatory

hijab a “red line” never to be crossed. Now the question that dogs the system is what, exactly, to do when citizens cross its red line so matter-of-factly as to make the act utterly quotidian.

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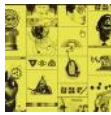
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Last fall, as the protests receded, the Islamic Republic chose to show tolerance—if one can call it that—and removed its despised morality-police vans from city streets. The result was that, for the first time since the early days of the revolution, women with and without hijabs strolled side by side in Iranian cities. Large segments of Iranian society remain traditional and not only accept the hijab but choose to wear it; to see these Iranians together with those on the other bank of the cultural divide, openly sharing public spaces, was a novelty that took one's breath away.

This summer, however, the patrols have returned to the major thoroughfares. They no longer force women inside their vans and take them away, as they used to. Instead, hijab-less women are given a warning to put on their head coverings. Those who don't comply are filmed so that later, through facial-recognition technology, they can be brought to court.

The regime in Tehran is not used to yielding, except when it does. This summer, a video showing a patrol trying to force a young woman into one of its vans went viral. The authorities immediately put out a rather desperate notice on social media, saying that the video was fake and the morality police were staying true to their promise not to get physical with those they deem inappropriately dressed.

At 6 o'clock one evening this summer, as the worst of the afternoon heat began to wane and people ventured onto the streets of Tehran, one of us happened to be in Haft-e-Tir Square, among the busiest spaces in the city. Four women in full hijabs and five men, their colleagues, had created a gauntlet that pedestrians had to pass through to get to the other side. One of the men wore a vest with police insignia and held a camera. A young woman with long, wavy, uncovered hair approached the gauntlet.

A female agent stepped forward to remind her that Iran was an Islamic country and that she needed to wear a hijab. Unfazed, the young woman shot back, "I don't wear hijab."

The female agent half-heartedly turned to her cameraman and bade him to start filming: "She's breaking the law."

Before coolly continuing on her way, the young woman encapsulated the dilemma of the Islamic Republic: "How is it that the law is supposed to protect us from corruption and the wholesale stealing of public funds," she said, "yet nothing's done about those things? Instead, all you people worry about is my hijab."

Not everyone is willing to confront the morality police so directly, but even those who do not no longer seem particularly cowed. Many, when stopped, simply pull shawls from their bags, wear them for several steps past the uniforms, and then stuff them away again. In Parliament, out-of-sync deputies try to pass stricter laws to fine and imprison women who flout the hijab regulations. But even those in power likely know that they are fighting a rearguard battle.

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The regime had to face, and resign itself to, a similar dynamic a decade ago regarding satellite television beaming from abroad: The harder the authorities tried to rid homes of satellite dishes, the more dishes sprouted everywhere. Even confiscating dishes by the tens of thousands and rolling over them with tanks did not reduce the appetite of Iranian households for reception from overseas, let alone their ingenuity in obtaining it.

Satellite dishes, much like the mandatory hijab, were once a regime red line. Today, according to the Islamic Republic's own reports, 90 percent of households have access to satellite TV.

As fall approaches, and with it, the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death and the months of protests that followed, Iran resembles a boxing ring surrounded by rabid spectators, with the regime and its supporters warming up on one side, and on the other—well, everybody else.

And so we find many Iranian men asking themselves and one another: How will they answer the call? The whispered queries have become a countdown, the answers far less definitive than the question is urgent. You might think that these men are waiting for the women of their country to lead the charge. And you would not be wrong.

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