



"Their rebellion is a symbol of the failure of the Islamic Republic," an expert said. Illustration by Adams Carvalho

LETTER FROM IRAN

THE PROTESTS INSIDE IRAN'S GIRLS' SCHOOLS

From the start, women were at the center of the demonstrations that swept Iran last year. Schoolgirls emerged as an unexpected source of defiant energy.

By Azadeh Moaveni

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One morning this past winter, the students at a girls' high school in Tehran were told that education officials would arrive that week to inspect their classrooms and check compliance with the school's dress code: specifically, the wearing of the *maghnaeh*, a hooded veil that became a requirement for schoolgirls in the years after the Iranian Revolution. During lunch, a group of students gathered in the schoolyard. A thirteen-year-old in the seventh grade, whom I'll call Nina, pressed in to hear what was being said. At the time, mass protests against the government were raging across the country; refusing to wear the veil had become a symbol of the movement. An older girl told the others that it was time for them to join together and make a stand.

The inspectors arrived the next morning. The teachers asked six girls from each grade to assemble in the schoolyard. Nina was not among them, but she knew the plan; she sat at her desk, doodling, her heart pounding with excitement. Outside, the winter sunlight cast shadows on the school's weathered brick walls. One of the girls raised her arm, a cue arranged in a WhatsApp group the night before, and then she and the others pulled off their head scarves and tossed them on the ground. For a moment, no one said anything. Then the girls were told to go back to their classrooms. Nina's teacher looked up in surprise as her students returned, bareheaded and flushed, but said nothing. The next day, nearly every girl in school showed up without a head scarf.

From the start, women were at the center of the demonstrations that swept Iran last year, the most widespread revolt against the state since the 1979 Revolution. Iranian women have topped best-seller lists, produced acclaimed films and art work, and, in recent years, outnumbered men among college graduates in STEM fields. And yet they are also subjected to one of the strictest forms of state-imposed gender discrimination in the world. In Iran, women have fewer rights than men in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Their legal testimony is granted half the weight of a man's, making them more vulnerable to rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence. For much of the past forty years, they have been subjected to strict dress codes—generally, a head scarf and a loose-fitting cloak, or *manteau*—which are enforced in public by the country's so-called morality police.

September, people rose up in fury at the killing of Mahsa Jina Amini, a young woman being held in police custody for allegedly flouting the dress code, and then stayed in the streets, demanding an end to clerical tyranny. Schoolgirls emerged as an unexpected source of defiant energy. In October, a video surfaced online of a throng of teen-agers on the streets of Tehran, stopping traffic, ripping up photos of Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, and chanting "Death to the dictator." Similar scenes erupted around the country, with crowds of girls and young women marching down boulevards and waving their veils in the air. One afternoon last fall, I was walking along Revolution Street, in downtown Tehran, when I saw students streaming out of Anushiravan

Dadgar High School, one of Iran's first high schools for girls, with their heads bare. They were chatting and laughing, as if being an Iranian schoolgirl with the sun glinting off your hair were the most natural thing in the world.

Nina's school is on a wide street lined with plane trees in an affluent district of Tehran. She and most of her classmates are from liberal families, with parents who understand that aspects of an Iranian education—"Heavenly Gifts" classes enumerating the virtues of the Shia imams, field trips to shrines of minor religious figures—can inspire eye rolls. Still, Nina's complaints usually elicited a firm rejoinder from her parents. "Maybe not everything you're learning is to your liking," she recalled her mother saying. "But this is school in the society you're living in, and you can't get an education without following the rules."

Now girls at Nina's school were refusing to wear the veil for the annual school picture, and as a result were not allowed to participate. One girl showed up with her hair dyed the color of cotton candy; Nina had heard that another student was suspended after she got platinum extensions. The school authorities often threatened students with low disciplinary marks, and, as the protests intensified, cancelled meetings of the parent governance committee, making it difficult for parents to verify what they heard from their daughters. One day, the school convened a talk with the students to negotiate a solution. If the girls agreed to wear the veil around their necks, the school would no longer demand that they cover their hair. "This was a victory," Nina said.

But it did little to quell the unrest. The students were scrawling protest slogans—"Women, life, freedom" and "Death to the dictator"—on their desks and the bathroom walls. In the schoolyard, some students convened a "model Islamic Republic." One girl served as the Supreme Leader, another as the ineffectual President, and the rest of the class united against them. After a nine-year-old boy was shot and killed in the town of Izeh, in November (state-run media claimed that he was killed by terrorists, but security forces were widely suspected to be the culprits), one of Nina's classmates wrote on a whiteboard, "In the name of the God of the rainbows," a reference to a poetic line the boy had uttered in a video about a school project, in lieu of the orthodox preamble "In the name of God." Another assembly was convened. The students were told not to stick their noses in other people's affairs, Nina said, and that what was going on outside the school walls had no relevance to them.

One of Nina's teachers commiserated with the students, saying that she and her daughter wore the veil only because they were compelled to. She also told them that getting an education was the safest way to secure a better future. The school librarian, meanwhile, demanded that girls write out *ta'abods*, signed disavowals of specific infractions. The students were told that three *ta'abods* would result in expulsion. Nina was often aware of cameras installed in the classrooms and hallways. "They keep telling us that the future of the country is in our hands," she said. "But they make it illegal to talk about what is happening in the country."

That winter, a group of girls in Nina's class pulled down portraits of the country's past and present Supreme Leaders. They scribbled in pen across the faces, the pooling ink turning the Ayatollahs' frowns into black splotches. By then, the state's crackdown had largely quieted the protests. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei participated in a coming-of-age ceremony, and photos proliferated of schoolgirls swathed in floral-patterned chadors surrounding the Supreme Leader. But, even as attention in the capital turned to more mundane issues, such as choking pollution and gas shortages, Nina felt as though she and her classmates were in a direct confrontation with the state. "We want this government to go," a classmate told her. "We don't want this bad government."

The story of women's education in Iran is deeply political. The first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah, a military strongman who took power in 1925, put women at the center of his project to modernize Iran: he banned the wearing of the veil in public, and admitted women to universities. During the reign of his son Mohammad Reza Shah, women won suffrage, entered parliament, and gained dramatically more rights in marriage (though some restrictions remained, such as a requirement that a woman get her husband's permission to travel abroad). At the same time, the Shah imprisoned thousands of dissidents who opposed his authoritarian rule, some of whom were tortured and killed. For many, state feminism became associated with state repression and forced Westernization. Iranians from various backgrounds came together to unseat the Shah in 1979. Some women activists took up the black chador and veiling as emblems of rebellion. "There was a revolutionary fever," Haleh Esfandiari, who founded the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center, in Washington, D.C., told me. "One way of manifesting that you were part of this movement, for women, was to wear a head scarf."

The Islamist radicals who took charge shaped their project for Iranian society around women's subordination. They rescinded the legal rights granted to women, removed restrictions on polygamy and child marriage, and eventually mandated that the veil be worn in public spaces. In May, 1980, one of the two women who had been in the Shah's cabinet, the minister of education, Farrokhroo Parsa, was executed. Many images of women were removed from elementary-school textbooks; those which remained typically depicted women as being segregated from men and performing traditional roles in conservative Islamic garb. The veiled schoolgirl, memorialized in Marjane Satrapi's graphic novel "Persepolis," became the symbol of a system designed to turn out model Islamic citizens by force.

Larger numbers of girls from traditional backgrounds and rural areas were entering the educational system. Their parents, who'd kept them out of school during the Shah's era, felt comfortable allowing them to be educated in an Islamic society. According to the World Bank, women's university enrollment jumped from three per cent in 1977 to sixty-seven per cent in 2015. Many of these women left home to study in distant cities, where they developed new values and world views, only to find that little else was changing in Iran. Educated and highly skilled women struggled to secure jobs that matched their new competencies. Much of Iran remained committed to a patriarchal system, in which men often demanded that their wives not work at all. "The Islamic Republic has unintentionally created a female population in Iran today that exists as a response and in reaction to its own policies," Narges Bajoghli, a professor of Middle East studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins, told me. "They are demanding their rights in ways they've learned within the schools and atmosphere of the Islamic Republic, and that is why the state is having such a hard time suppressing them."

The presence of unveiled women in Tehran and other large cities is the most visible sign of the state's weakening authority. In late March, in the capital, with the snow-dusted Alborz Mountains towering over the city, women were shopping, shepherding toddlers, riding the metro, and lunching on saffron risotto with their heads uncovered. One afternoon during Ramadan, I saw a group of unveiled young women smoking cigarettes on the marble steps of a mosque. They did so nearly every day, until the mosque erected a metal barrier out front.

In Tehran, the black chador is now associated more with support for the regime's ideology than with piety. A woman I know who had always worn the chador had recently stopped wearing it. She runs sightseeing tours and chronicles her journeys around the country on Instagram. Once the protests started, she told me, her posts were littered with abusive comments calling her a "regime mercenary" and a *parastou*, or "swallow," the term for state agents who are deployed in honey-trap operations. "The women of my family have worn this since the time of Reza Shah—it's our tradition," she told me. But even in her neighborhood, near the Tehran bazaar, traditionally a more conservative part of the city, passersby would jeer at her.

In April, the Supreme Leader said that unveiling was "religiously and politically sinful." Mohammad Hadi Rahimi Sadegh, the head of the seminary of Tehran province, warned that if unveiling wasn't dealt with "nothing will remain of the Islamic system." But, like the legal structure of the Islamic Republic itself—accountable to both God and the will of the people—the mandatory wearing of the hijab is, in some sense, an invention of the late Ayatollah Khomeini. Officials have expanded digital and video surveillance, using footage of unveiled women to deny services and impose fines, but they still claim that persuasion and "cultural work" are the best ways to encourage compliance. When I arrived at a regional airport on a recent trip to Iran, an SMS pinged on my phone, informing me that "hijab is immunity, not a limitation," and asking me to respect myself and others by obeying the law.

Esfandiari said that the state was trapped in a dogma of its own making: if, in the face of the initial protests, it had simply dropped its enforcement of the hijab, it might have defused Iranians' anger. Instead, the state responded with a vicious wave of repression, arresting thousands of people, killing some five hundred protesters, and executing several others following sham trials. "Months ago, it was the hijab," Esfandiari told me. "Now people want to overthrow the regime." The students at the girls' schools posed a particular challenge. "This is the youth who were born under this regime, who were indoctrinated by its schools, who were told what to do, told to pray, told to put the hood on their heads since the age of six or seven," Esfandiari said. "Their rebellion is a symbol of the failure of the Islamic Republic."

Mahsa Jina Amini was born in Saqqez, a city in Iran's Kurdistan province, near the border with Iraq. She had finished high school and was preparing to attend university in Orumiyyeh last fall. On September 13th, she was visiting family in Tehran, when she was stopped by the morality police outside a metro station. She was reportedly dressed in a black cloak and a black head scarf, a conservative ensemble by the capital's standards, but the police arrested her anyway, shuttling her off in a white van to a processing center where dozens of women were being held. In video footage from that day, which was later released by the police, a woman identified as Amini, who was twenty-two, with long, wavy hair and a lively smile, walked up to an officer at the precinct's "orientation class," gestured at her head scarf, and then collapsed. She was taken to a nearby hospital, where she was placed on a ventilator. After three days in a coma, she died.

The authorities insisted that she'd suffered a heart attack owing to underlying health conditions. The state coroner's report later attributed her death to organ failure brought on by cerebral hypoxia. According to her cousin Erfan Mortezaei, eyewitnesses in the police van told Amini's family that throughout the ordeal she had been insulted and beaten, claims that the authorities have denied. At her funeral, in Saqqez, women mourners waved their head scarves in the air and chanted "Women, life, freedom," a slogan of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the region's most prominent Kurdish militant group.

Amini's funeral was the first major demonstration in what became a nationwide uprising. Two weeks later, according to Human Rights Watch, security forces killed several dozen people at a protest following Friday prayers in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan and Baluchestan province, home to the ethnic Baluch, in the country's southeast. Police and other forces were seen stationed on rooftops near the city's main mosque and prayer hall, firing on protesters and bystanders; forces on the ground shot at cars driving injured protesters to a nearby hospital. The incident came to be known as Bloody Friday—the largest single-day death toll of the protest movement.

That fall, Mortezaei gave a series of television interviews in which he said that, in the wake of Amini's death, the Iranian people wanted "human rights, a peaceful country, and regime change," adding that "the old dictator is in his last days." At times, Mortezaei was seated in front of the flag of Komala, a militant group that seeks greater autonomy for Kurdish people in Iran, and which has a history of secessionist ambitions. Not long afterward, the Kurdish town of Mahabad appeared to fall under the control of protesters. Demonstrators reportedly blocked a town entrance, pelted the governor's office with rocks, and set fire to a police station. The Revolutionary Guard Corps dispatched troops to support the local police and launched a fresh round of artillery and drone attacks on Kurdish-separatist bases in Iraq. Vali Nasr, a professor at Johns Hopkins, told me the Iranian authorities were convinced that armed militiamen from Komala, not civilian protesters, had taken over the town. "They felt as though they were dealing with not just a serious law-and-order issue but a much more serious security issue," Nasr said.

For years, the regime has worried about foreign plots to break up the country, especially in Iran's restive border regions, where there are large populations of ethnic and religious minorities. "It's important to consider the mind-set of those in charge," Nasr said. "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you." In 2018, Naftali Bennett, Israel's education minister, introduced the idea of an "Octopus Doctrine." No longer should Israel deal exclusively with Tehran's proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Gaza Strip, he said; it should take the fight to Iran itself, the head of the octopus. Later that year, the Trump Administration withdrew from the nuclear deal with Iran, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that the U.S. was seeking regime change. After Amini's death, Nasr had heard that the Revolutionary Guard thought that a majority of the unrest in Kurdish towns was coming from across the Iraqi border. "You could say they believed that the outside was actually involved," Nasr said of the regime, "or that they were in a moment of weakness and moved quickly to keep the outside from taking advantage."

Iran International, a Persian-language television network, which is based in Washington, D.C., and watched avidly inside Iran, fanned the unrest. The station was set up, in 2017, by a company whose director is a Saudi businessman, and it makes little pretense of objectivity. During "Jina's revolutionary uprising," as the network's on-air personalities called the protests, Iran International featured a steady stream of commentary from militant separatists, monarchists, and anti-regime activists, including Reza Pahlavi, the son of the last Shah, who lives in the United States. News bulletins often included details of where and when demonstrators would gather. "This grand uprising of the Iranian people turned forty-one days old yesterday," a broadcast in October began. "All four corners of this ancient land, our dear Iran, scream in unison that this regime is a goner and that this generation is united to overthrow it." (The network has denied that it has any affiliations with the Saudi government, and maintains that its coverage is "independent" and "uncensored.")

Soon, government officials were speaking openly about how the “women, life, freedom” movement was part of a coordinated campaign to destabilize Iran. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the foreign minister, tweeted that the “various security services, Israel and some Western politicians who have made plans for civil war, destruction and the disintegration of Iran, should know that Iran is not Libya or Sudan.” According to Nasr, such warnings were largely directed at hijab-observing women who, the regime feared, felt some kinship with the protest movement. “There was an amazing amount of sympathy among more conservative and regime-affiliated women for these girls and the arguments they were making,” he said. In online chat groups, he went on, conservative women “were saying things like ‘We know what the morality police is, because we have one in the house. He’s called father and brother.’”

One woman from a conservative family told me that her sisters had initially equivocated about the protesters’ demands, parsing what they agreed with and what they thought went too far. But, eventually, each of them turned against the movement, believing that such a confrontation with the regime would do more harm than good. “They belong to WhatsApp groups where they receive ideological instructions and everything they say sounds the same,” the woman told me. “They believe they must cling to the system, otherwise the whole edifice of religion will fall.”

This message was reinforced with impressive propaganda. In November, a slickly produced music video called “For the Girl Next Door” surfaced online. It was set to the song “Baraye,” by the Iranian musician Shervin Hajipour, which had become the anthem of the protests and won a special Grammy, presented by Jill Biden, for Best Song for Social Change. The video opened with George W. Bush touting, in 2001, the U.S.’s success in combatting the Taliban’s “brutal oppression” of women in Afghanistan, and ended on Joe Biden’s remarks last year, at the height of the protests, about how the U.S. might “free” Iran. In between were clips from two decades of Afghan women’s suffering. The lyrics warned the girls of Iran not to let themselves be similarly victimized by the West: “For you, the girl next door / don’t let your home get ruined like ours / don’t let your dreams become like our stories / don’t let war happen in your country.”

On February 14th, an official in the holy city of Qom announced that a hundred and seventeen girls’-school students had been taken to medical centers with “suspected symptoms of poisoning.” The official attempted to calm the public by noting that most of the children had recovered quickly, but panic soon spread in the city. Images circulated online of ambulances parked outside schools and of schoolgirls on ventilators in hospitals. A crowd of angry parents gathered outside a local government building, demanding an investigation. One woman screamed, “This is a war! They are doing this at a girls’ high school in Qom to force us to sit at home. They want girls to stay at home.”

By then, reports of mysterious poisonings had been surfacing across the country for months. Victims described smelling peculiar odors, such as citrus, rotting fish, or chlorine, before experiencing symptoms that included vomiting, dizziness, shortness of breath, and fatigue. Schools were generally told to remain open, and parents were advised to get their news from official state media. Finally, in late February, a deputy health minister, Younes Panahi, held a press conference, in which he said that the students were getting sick from non-military-grade chemicals. He said it appeared that “some people wanted all schools, especially girls’ schools, to be closed down.”

Soon afterward, Panahi walked back his comments. Other state officials suggested that the girls might be inventing their symptoms, and claimed that some ninety per cent of the students were experiencing stress-related effects. Ali Pourtabatabaei, a prominent journalist in Qom who was investigating the attacks, was arrested. Independent news outlets reported that, in nearly a dozen provinces, more than a thousand girls had been poisoned in fifty-eight schools. “Has Boko Haram showed up in Iran?” Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Iran’s former Vice-President, demanded on Instagram. Security officers clashed with parents and teachers outside schools, spraying them with tear gas. Protesters added a new chant to their repertoire: “Death to the child-killing government.”

Nina said that security guards at her school began escorting girls to the bathroom. She and many of her friends started bringing packed lunches, fearful of eating the cafeteria food. On WhatsApp, classmates urged one another not to attend school at all. Nina ultimately stayed home for a few weeks. The intent of the attacks seemed clear. “It’s revenge for the disturbances we made,” Nina said. “Not a single person disagrees.”

Parents asked the principal at Nina’s school to shift to remote learning, on a platform that had been established during the pandemic. The school insisted that physical attendance was mandatory. Nina said that, not long afterward, her mother received a phone call from her teacher, asking why Nina wasn’t showing up to class online. Remote instruction had been made available but wasn’t formally acknowledged.

A teacher at a girls’ high school, who asked to be called Maryam, went to work but kept her eight-year-old daughter at home. “I was too scared to send her,” she said. The first day her daughter stayed home, her elementary school was targeted. A noxious smell filled the school’s courtyard, and a number of girls became sick. Shortly afterward, at Maryam’s school, the principal sent someone to her classroom to tell the students to put on masks—a strange odor was wafting through the corridors. “My legs went numb,” Maryam said. “I thought, Dear God, what’s going to happen to us?” She wore two masks with heavy filters but could still smell a scent of burning tires. She felt nauseated and dizzy. “Everyone was so paranoid,” she said. “We didn’t know what was real or not.” In the end, Maryam isn’t certain that it was a poisoning. Two of her colleagues felt ill, but none of the students collapsed or had to be taken to the hospital.

In March, the state acknowledged that the nation’s schoolgirls were not victims of mass hysteria. Ayatollah Khamenei called the poisonings “an unforgivable and huge crime” and declared that authorities would track down and severely punish the perpetrators. Authorities soon announced the arrests of more than a hundred people who, according to the Interior Ministry, “out of mischief or adventurism and with the aim of shutting down classrooms,” had “taken measures such as using harmless and smelly substances.” Most of the suspects weren’t identified; those who were included a disgruntled student and individuals who the state claimed were being investigated for possible links to extremist opposition groups. None of them seemed capable of orchestrating a nationwide infiltration of schools with toxic chemicals. Maryam told me, “If you want to pass out cookies in a high school, it’s a major logistical feat.”

Another explanation, which was widely floated in moderate political circles, was that hard-liners within the Revolutionary Guard, the judiciary and clerical establishments, and state media were responsible. One expert told me that the attacks corresponded with the regime's strategic use of executions to quell the protests. "It's really a way of terrorizing the parents and recruiting them as law enforcement," he said. "It creates a cost, and the message is to the parents: Is this really worth it to you? Is hijab that important?"

Maryam told me that morale in her classroom was at a new low. "School holds no appeal anymore, for neither teachers nor students," she said. "It's not just the hijab that's the issue. Everything is messed up. In whatever corner you look, there's a problem."

At Nina's school, authorities reacted harshly to the defacement of the Ayatollahs' portraits. "The atmosphere was tense," she said. "Everyone was angry and shouting." Officials reviewed the surveillance footage, which, they said, showed a student taking a pen from Nina's hand moments before the portraits were pulled down from the wall. Nina insisted that she had tried to dissuade her friends from vandalizing the portraits. She sat in the school office, trembling, reluctant to inform on her friends but also scared of what might happen if she took the blame. She couldn't afford to be expelled. Iran, she believed, was fundamentally unsafe; a high-school education was necessary to leave it.

School authorities checked the footage again and, Nina told me, determined that she was innocent. Still, the whole class was punished. All of the students wrote out disavowals and were ordered to fix the ruined portraits. They tried to wipe off the ink with wet towels, but the paper grew damp and the Ayatollahs' faces warped under the laminate.

The role of the Supreme Leader is the subject of some debate in Tehran. "Many interlocutors say he's in full control and many say he has totally lost control," Adnan Tabatabai, a policy analyst who runs a think tank in Germany, told me. "There is no middle ground left and no final conclusion." Tabatabai had heard from a former government official in Tehran that, during the winter, state authorities had instructed certain girls' schools to relax their dress codes. But, in recent weeks, the state's hard-line supporters had grown angry, and mobilized. Authorities, Tabatabai said, were "using some of this outrage to show the public there is more demand for them to be strict about unveiling."

Vigilantism was on the rise. A woman in the city of Rasht told a podcast that armed men on motorbikes roamed the streets, ordering unveiled women to cover up. At a corner market in Tehran, a customer threw yogurt on two unveiled women, both of whom were later arrested for breaking the hijab law. (The man was arrested for disturbing order.) A video circulated of a scene in Ramsar, near the Caspian Sea, of a man screaming that "all the women in this restaurant are naked!" A chador-wearing woman threatened that, if the state didn't act, "we will fire at will." She used the term *atash be-ekhtiyar*, meaning "permission to fire," which has come to refer to the extrajudicial powers that the state has given its supporters. It is akin, a well-known academic said on his Instagram page, to state-sanctioned violence against women.

In March, the country's most prominent extremist cleric, Ahmad Alamolhoda—who is also President Ebrahim Raisi's father-in-law—suggested that an unveiled woman on the street should be prepared to "face the complaints of the people, to see that she has no place." Even according to the regime's own polling, a minority in Iran holds such views. But if they aren't catered to, Tabatabai told me, the system risks alienating its most loyal supporters, "those who turn out on the street when you need them." The Islamic Republic has a long history of playing such politics, deploying plausible deniability to distance itself, Tabatabai said. "They can do the work that the state doesn't want to do."

In practice, the "complaints of the people" are often dismissed as background noise. A few days after the Persian New Year, I visited a small town in a southern province, some five hundred miles from Tehran. The route out of the capital passed through the flat desert plain surrounding Qom. At a rest stop, where holiday travellers gathered for espresso and lunch, an employee asked unveiled women to put on their head scarves. She was either ignored or told to "get lost." As I stepped onto an elevator to go up to the food court, I heard her yell, "If you don't like it, there's the door!"

This spring, various state bodies declared that a crackdown was coming. Shortly afterward, a hundred and fifty cafés and shops were reportedly shuttered for failing to enforce the hijab law. In late April, Tehran's mayor, Alireza Zakani, announced that unveiled women attempting to use the metro would be issued warnings, and eventually prevented from entering stations. Transportation officials said that traffic-surveillance cameras would detect unveiled women drivers and impound the cars of repeat offenders.

The stepped-up enforcement may have been intended to preempt the annual summer flouting of dress codes, which has historically pitted the state against women in Capri pants and sandals. These days in the capital, the bared navel is common. A taxi-driver told me, with horror, that he'd picked up a young woman at Haft-e Tir Square, in central Tehran, who was wearing what sounded like a bustier under a jacket. A recently proposed law could impose a range of new penalties, including substantial fines and the "deprivation of social rights," on women who defied the dress codes or even advocated against them online. A prominent hard-line figure complained that the measure didn't go nearly far enough, calling it a bill "to support the unveiled."

Meanwhile, the protest movement had hastened regional realignments that once seemed unthinkable. In March, Iran and Saudi Arabia announced that they would reestablish diplomatic ties after years of hostility. It was reported that one of Tehran's key demands was for Riyadh to tone down Iran International. In early May, the Arab League agreed to readmit Syria, Iran's key regional ally. But the Iranian regime remains unflinchingly brutal within its own borders. By the end of spring, at least sixty people had been executed, on charges ranging from drug offenses to blasphemy, including a half-dozen men involved in the protests.

In mid-July, just before the start of the holy month of Muharram and two months before the anniversary of Mahsa Jina Amini's death, a spokesman for Iranian law enforcement formally announced that the morality police would return to the streets. I was in Tehran, and a friend called to warn me to take a head scarf when I left the house. She'd heard that one woman was recently given the option of washing corpses in a Tehran morgue as punishment for not wearing a head scarf. "I'm going to wear the hijab today," she told me. "I don't want to wash corpses."

Nina had returned to school at the end of April. The wearing of the *maghnaeh* was no longer enforced. Girls arrived bareheaded and left bareheaded, and even some of their teachers took off their head scarves in the classroom. Nina is looking forward to improving her English next year, part of a plan to attend college abroad and become an international lawyer. For a year-end outing, her class went go-karting. A class of boys was there, too. Teen-agers in Iran aren't used to inhabiting a public space without the segregating effect of head scarves. Some of the boys pulled out their phones, saying that they were going to document this *kashf-e hijab*, or unveiling. Soon all the boys were gone. The event's organizers, Nina later learned, had thrown them out. For the rest of the afternoon, the girls of her class played in peace, their hair flowing freely around the race course. ♦

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