



I CREATE; I RESIST

IRANIAN ARTISTS
ON THE FRONTLINE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

ARTISTIC
FREEDOM
INITIATIVE

VOICES
UNBOUND

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Artistic Freedom Initiative
& Voices Unbound

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CREDITS

AUTHORS

JOHANNA BANKSTON
SKYLAR DAVIDSON
SANJAY SETHI
JENNIFER LAOUROU

CONTRIBUTORS

AYESHA ASAD
YASAMEEN JOULAE
JOANNA ONG
ALEXANDRA PELL

GRAPHIC DESIGN

SIAVASH FANI

COPY EDITOR

MIRA FEY

ARTWORK

NAZANIN NOROOZI

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Art/Culture/Action
هنر/فرهنگ/کنش
artcultureaction.com

Berkeley Law | Pro Bono
Program



LIST OF ACRONYMS

Art / Culture / Action **(ACA)**

Artistic Freedom Initiative **(AFI)**

Civil Society Organization **(CSO)**

Cultural Institute of Radical Contemporary Art **(CIRCA)**

European Union **(EU)**

Human Rights Council **(HRC)**

Human Rights Defender **(HRD)**

Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran **(FFMI)**

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights **(ICCPR)**

Iranian Artists Support Project **(IASP)**

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps **(IRGC)**

Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance **(MCIG)**

Ministry of Intelligence and Security **(MOIS)**

Non-Governmental Organization **(NGO)**

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights **(OHCHR)**

United Nations Committee on Civil and Political Rights **(CCPR)**

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization **(UNESCO)**

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees **(UNHCR)**

United Nations **(UN)**

United Nations Secretary-General **(UNSG)**

United States of America **(US)**

ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

Led by immigration and human rights attorneys, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) facilitates pro bono immigration representation and resettlement assistance for international artists at risk.

Dedicated to safeguarding the right to artistic freedom, AFI was founded on the notion that artists are uniquely situated to positively and powerfully effect change, provided their voices can be heard. As artists are increasingly censored, imprisoned, restricted from moving freely across borders, tortured, or even killed, it is more critical than ever that we safeguard the right to artistic freedom and zealously champion the courageous artists who exercise it.

To this end, AFI directly assists artists who have experienced persecution, censorship, or other restrictions on their freedom of expression and supports artists who have demonstrated a commitment to advancing progressive social change and fundamental human rights. We work with immigrant artists to champion art produced in exile, advance creative cultural exchange, improve conditions for artists in their home countries, and safeguard their ability to express themselves creatively through the arts.

Through our advocacy program, AFI produces thematic reports related to the protection of free artistic expression and the expansion of artists' rights around the world. Building on our research, we campaign to create new opportunities for the realization of artistic expression and to strengthen existing rights protection mechanisms related to artistic freedom.

For more information about AFI or to read our previous advocacy reports, please visit our website.

www.artisticfreedominitiative.org

VOICES UNBOUND

Founded in 2023 by a group of human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, Voices Unbound (VU) was established with the goal to provide safe haven and support for journalists and activists at risk.

VU facilitates humanitarian aid by making connections to pro bono legal service providers and services aimed at social, civic, and economic integration in the United States. Dedicated to safeguarding the rights of journalists and activists at risk, VU was born on the notion that activists and journalists are uniquely situated to positively and powerfully affect change, provided their voices can be unbounded.

www.voicesunbound.org



FOREWORD



JASON REZAIAN

In April 2023 the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Iran issued a death sentence to the internationally renowned rapper, Toomaj Salehi, finding him guilty of “spreading propaganda against the regime” for songs he released in support of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest movement that began in 2022.

Though Salehi is the first artist to receive a death sentence under this law, he is only the most recent in a growing list of artists that have been arbitrarily prosecuted since the outbreak of the 2022 protests, including musician Shervin Hajipour, who was sentenced to three years and eight months in prison for his song “Baraye”, and cartoonist and activist Atena Farghadani, who will serve up to six years in prison for hanging one of her political cartoons near the Presidential Palace.

International public condemnation of the sentencing of artists like Salehi, Hajipour, and Farghadani has been broad and encouraging. Hundreds of media outlets around the world dedicate coverage to their stories, advocacy groups and international human rights organizations release statements rebuking the rulings, and celebrated artists and other public figures use their platforms to demand the release of these fighters for freedom of expression. In many cases, this international outcry can have a profound impact for Iranian artists, even if it is limited. For example, in June of this year, under intense pressure from the international community, the Supreme Court of the Islamic Republic reversed Salehi’s sentence. The reversal was an important, hard-won result that is a testament to the mobilization of activists, journalists, and supporters across social and news media to denounce the verdict, and to the civic power of Iranian and international human rights organizers and advocacy groups.

However, while the world celebrates this recent success, the person most affected by it is unable to join in because he remains in prison. Frustratingly, as international media and influencers move on to other causes, Salehi has gone through a grueling, multi-year legal battle only to end up in the same place he started, imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of expression under illegitimate laws. Meanwhile, artists like Hajipour and Farghadani receive no vindication at all because their sentences were not ‘severe enough’ to generate the level of international scrutiny and outrage needed to apply pressure on the Iranian State that might result in a reversed or lowered sentence. Finally, young artists and creatives with a lower profile contend with a deeply repressive environment with little to no public support.

As an Iranian-American journalist that was illegally and arbitrarily detained and held hostage for 544 days in Iran, I must emphasize that the conditions under which Salehi, Hajipour, and Farghadani are held are degrading and undignified, and their mental and physical health is likely being compromised as a result. Further, despite the slate of injustices to which they have already been subjected, these artists may also face restrictions on their mobility, work bans, or other illegitimate punitive measures as conditions for release after they complete their time served.

As an advocate for freedom of expression and for the rights of hostages worldwide, I urge the international community to acknowledge the fact that hundreds of Iranian artists, journalists, and activists remain in prison today on arbitrary grounds. As we approach the second anniversary of the death of Mahsa Jina Amini and the

subsequent period of protests against the injustices of the State, it is more important than ever that we continue to shine a light on the human rights abuses committed by the Islamic Republic. Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) and Voices Unbound's (VU) research on the State-led repression and persecution of artists over the past two years is an important step in the effort to expose these abuses and to call for meaningful reform.

Aware of the highly influential position of Iranian artists that use their craft to advocate for social or political change, the Iranian government has cracked down on both individual artists and artistic expression more broadly. AFI and VU's research looks at numerous State-led efforts to silence artists over the past two years, identifying the laws, policies, and strategies used against them. In doing so, they underscore the systematic nature of the government's attacks on artists, which has been underappreciated until now.

I Create; I Resist highlights how the powerful work created by artists brought the protest movement to life for Iranians and the rest of the world, making artists key players in the advancement of the protests of 2022 to present. In particular, the report emphasizes the tenacity of Iranian women artists, who use their creative talents to assert their rights and call for change. It also shines a light on the role of ethnic and religious minorities who have long been persecuted in Iranian society. Through their keen analysis, AFI and VU make the case for recognizing the Iranian artists and cultural workers that use their creativity to foster social dialogue and push for change as the human rights defenders they are.

In the years I have spent as an advocate in the field of international human rights, I have seen that it is unfortunately all too common that the valuable insights and first-hand knowledge of grassroots-level aid practitioners is overlooked in policy discussions. As such, I appreciate that the findings and recommendations in this report are shaped by AFI and VU's cumulative seven years of experience providing direct legal and resettlement services to Iranian artists, cultural workers, journalists, and activists at risk through a number of initiatives, including the 2022 Iranian Artist Support Project (IASP), which to date has resettled 53 artists and activists at risk of persecution in Iran. AFI and VU's deep awareness of the support needs of human rights defenders at risk makes them uniquely positioned to issue recommendations that are guided by sound research and grounded in lived experience.

I Create; I Resist serves as an important reminder that there is no real victory for any singular artist until all Iranian artists that have been arbitrarily imprisoned for their work are unconditionally released and until legal reforms are passed to ensure that no one will be arbitrarily prosecuted for exercising their right to freedom of expression. As democratic values are increasingly under threat by authoritarian regimes around the world, it is imperative that we give our attention to human rights defenders at risk and that we mobilize our resources to support them in a meaningful way. I encourage you to read *I Create; I Resist* and let it galvanize you to take action.

Jason Rezaian

Journalist, writer for Global Opinions at the Washington Post, author of "Prisoner: My 544 days in an Iranian prison", host of the podcast "544 Days"

ABOUT THE ARTIST

AFI and VU are pleased to feature six new works from Iranian visual artist Nazanin Noroozi throughout *I Create; I Resist*. Noroozi, who was AFI's 2021 Visual Artist in Residence, collaborated with AFI and VU to create a series of visual artworks related to the themes of *Woman, Life, Freedom*. Her works are featured on the cover of the report and at the dividers marking the executive summary and main chapters.

In her broader body of work, Noroozi utilizes moving images, printmaking, and alternative photography processes to touch on themes of collective loss, displacement, and the relationship between society and history. She uses imperfect images - including pixelated, obscured, low-quality, overexposed, shaky, and amateur photographs and recordings - as a reference to the literal movement of time and the elusiveness of memory.

The series of works featured in *I Create; I Resist* is an extension of an archival and artistic project that Noroozi started after the outbreak of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest movement in September 2022. Deeply moved by the protests, the artist collected and categorized thousands of traumatic yet powerful images and videos captured by anonymous Iranians involved in the protests. Her multi-media collage pieces seek to amplify the lived experiences of the protestors by incorporating the images they captured on the ground. Noroozi created the series on a base sheet of used, handmade paper and print works, layering them with cut-out photographs and still images from the protests in Iran. The pieces feature pixelated elements which Noroozi achieved by toner-transferring the collaged images with acetone and solvents, which she then painted, scratched, tore, and drew over multiple times in an effort to elicit the same illegibility of the original footage taken by the anonymous protesters, who shakily photographed their surroundings while running from the police and militias. Noroozi's works viscerally communicate the chaos, fear, and anger felt during the initial protests as well as the resilience and daring of the protestors.

Noroozi's work has been exhibited internationally, including at SPACES, Cleveland, OH; Athopos, Athens, Greece; Golestani Gallery, Dusseldorf, Germany; Immigrant Artist Biennial, NARS, Brooklyn; Noyes Museum of Art, New Jersey; as well as NY Live Arts, School of Visual Arts, and Postcrypt Art Gallery at Columbia University. She is the recipient of awards and fellowships from New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, the Marabeth Cohen-Tyler Print/Paper Fellowship at Dieu Donne, Artistic Freedom Initiative, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, and Mass MoCA residency. She is an editor at-large at "Kaarnamaa," a journal of art history and criticism. Noroozi holds a master's degree in Art History from the Tehran University of Art and an MFA in painting and drawing from Pratt Institute. Her works have been featured in BBC New Persian, Elephant Magazine, Financial Times, and Brooklyn Rail.

To learn more about Nazanin Noroozi's work, please see her website.

www.nazaninnoroozi.net

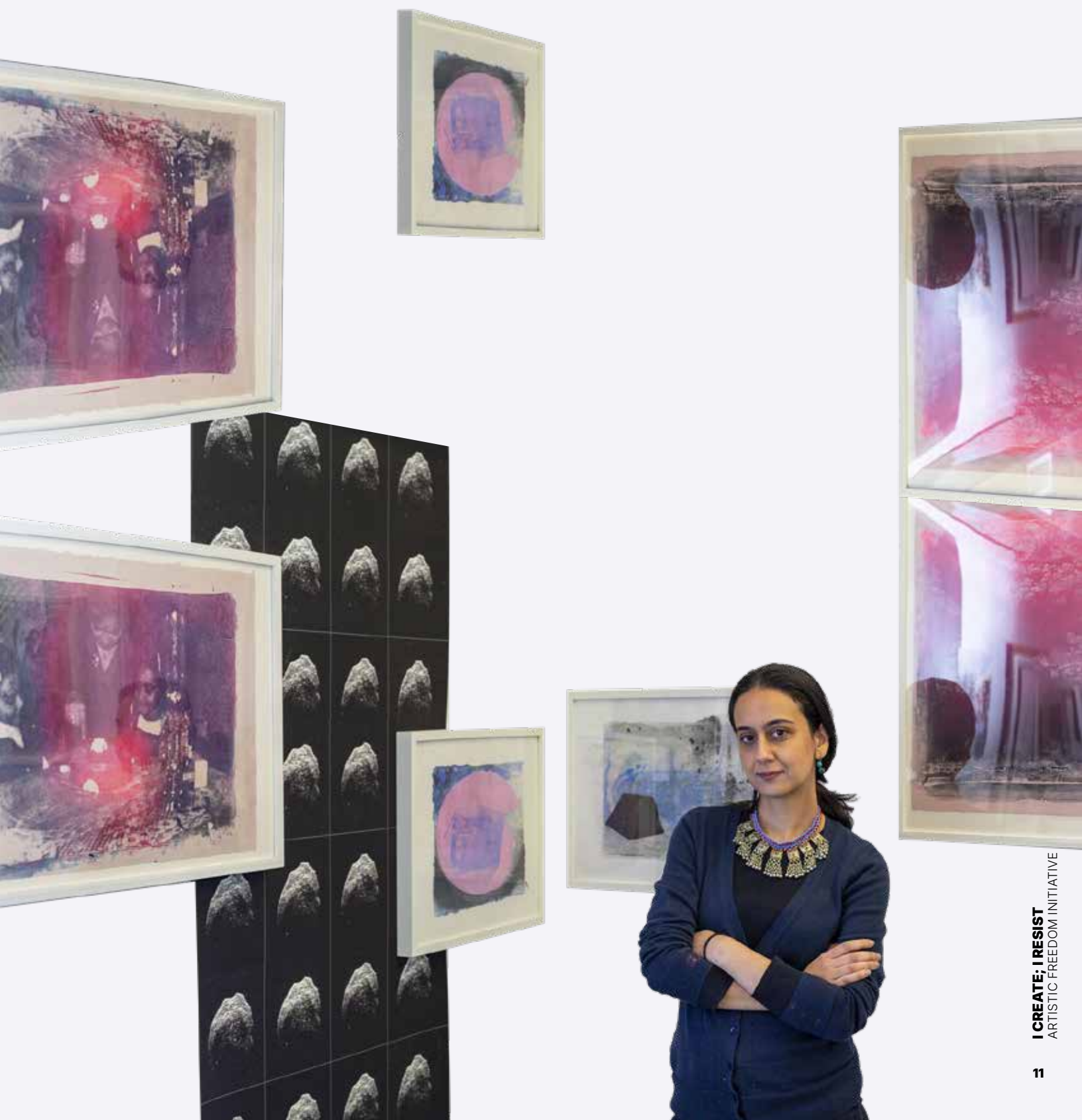


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Painting by: Nazanin Noroozi, 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In Iran, where the right to freedom of expression is heavily repressed, artistic expression is a form of resistance.



On September 16, 2022, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, Mahsa Jina Amini, died in police custody at a Tehran hospital after she sustained several blows to the head from officers, which put her in a coma. Amini was taken into custody three days prior for allegedly wearing an “improper hijab,” referring to the mandatory dress code enforced against Iranian women. As details of Amini’s tragic death were shared across the media, the public responded with grief and outrage over the injustice. Thousands of Iranians attended Amini’s funeral in the province of Kurdistan, and protests erupted across the country.

In the weeks that followed Amini’s funeral, ongoing protests evolved from demonstrations of solidarity into a more comprehensive movement denouncing the government’s systemic discrimination against women and girls, employment of violence to stifle dissent, disregard for the rule of law, and staunch repression of Iranians’ rights. Many protestors called for a total change of the regime. Eventually, the movement became associated with a popular chant by protestors, “*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*” (Woman, Life, Freedom), which crystallized Iranians’ denunciation of the regime and their demands for rights and freedoms.

As *Woman, Life, Freedom* developed, Iranian artists played an instrumental role in amplifying the message to a global audience. From the first days of the protests, artistic tributes to *Woman, Life, Freedom* were shared widely across social media. A variety of artistic works and cultural expressions animated the movement, including graphically designed images of a resolute Amini, photos of unveiled women defiantly cutting their hair in the streets of Tehran, rap songs predicting the fall of the regime, and videos of Iranians dancing together in public, among others. In particular, many of the artworks that were produced in this period highlighted the experiences of Iranians who were harmed, arrested, or killed by the regime in relation to the protests.

Given the critical role that Iranian art played in inspiring and sustaining the movement, artists were among the first groups to be targeted by the Islamic Republic as the government cracked down on the protests. From September 2022 to present, Iranian artists have reported being threatened and harmed for their work in support of the movement. Further, the government has launched numerous attacks on Iranian artists, including work bans, arbitrary arrests and prosecution, torture and the solicitation of false confessions, restrictions on mobility, and transnational repression.

In Iran, where the right to freedom of expression is heavily repressed, artistic expression is a form of resistance. As artists continue to publicly engage in creative acts as forms of protest, they are protecting and fortifying the fundamental right to free expression. Considering their valuable advocacy in the context of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, Iranian artists who contributed to the movement deserve due recognition as human rights defenders (HRD).

Artists often struggle more than other HRDs – such as activists, lawyers, and journalists – to receive humanitarian aid or immigration relief because practitioners do not always recognize art as a form of political expression. Former special

rapporteur on cultural rights, Karima Bennouna, exposed this shortcoming and highlighted the need to carve out space for artists, whom she recognizes under the term cultural rights defenders, alongside other HRDs in her 2020 thematic report presented to the Human Rights Council (HRC) at its forty-third session:

*"The rights that cultural rights defenders defend are a core part of international human rights law. They are vital to the human experience and critical to implementing other human rights [...] They include [...] the [right] to freedom of artistic expression [...]. Despite the importance of these rights and their normative grounding, they are not always given the attention they deserve and not always recognized as human rights with the same standing as other rights. Cultural rights defenders are therefore often not fully recognized for their work, do not receive adequate support, and are not granted appropriate protection. This must change, and both cultural rights and those who defend them must be acknowledged as critical to the human rights framework and its full implementation."*¹

Under threat from authorities for their critical work and their role in *Woman, Life, Freedom*, many Iranian artists and cultural workers are in urgent need of support from the international community, immigration relief, and resettlement assistance, as the crisis facing artists in Iran continues. To ensure they receive essential humanitarian protection, the international community must recognize their contributions to the movement as expressions of political activism in defense of human rights.

Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) and Voices Unbound (VU) have released *I Create; I Resist: Iranian artists on the frontline of social change* to emphasize the vital role that many Iranian artists played in defending human rights through their involvement in *Woman, Life, Freedom* and to expose the Islamic Republic's systematic attacks against them. To effectuate this aim, we consulted a variety of sources to identify the laws, policies, and practices the Islamic Republic of Iran uses to oppress artists and to uncover the role that many Iranian artists played in defending human rights in this movement. Our legal analysis is provided by the expert human rights lawyers on our joint team, who have extensive experience working on cases of Iranian artists at risk. Finally, to relate our findings to the lived experiences of affected artists, we interviewed three Iranian artists and two representatives of an artist collective who spoke about censorship in Iran and their involvement in the September 2022 protests and the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement.

The first chapter of the report provides a brief context to the outbreak of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest movement. It outlines several of the tensions at play leading up to September 2022, details Amini's death and public reactions to her story, and depicts the State's violent response to the demonstrations. The chapter emphasizes that the State's crackdown on the protests resulted in widespread harm to protestors and violations of their fundamental rights.

The second chapter of the report focuses on the key role of artists in the development of *Woman, Life, Freedom* from 2022 to present. The chapter features 26 examples of artworks borne out of the movement that demonstrate how artists have used their craft to mourn Amini's death, reveal the corruption and human rights abuses of the Islamic Republic, and share Iranians' struggle for rights and freedoms with the world. It includes several works from Iranian diaspora and dual-national



Our findings show that after September 2022, the MCIG significantly increased its efforts to suppress artistic expression and exert control over influential artists, including through online surveillance, the creation of celebrity task forces, issuing work bans, and threatening legal action.



artists who used their platforms to amplify the messages of *Woman, Life, Freedom* and to demand protections for Iranian artists at risk under the Islamic Republic.

In the third chapter of the report we outline a number of the tactics the government of the Islamic Republic has used to repress free expression, including censorship, surveillance, and the introduction of new punitive measures against artists led by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). Our findings show that after September 2022, the MCIG significantly increased its efforts to suppress artistic expression and exert control over influential artists, including through online surveillance, the creation of celebrity task forces, issuing work bans, and threatening legal action.

Finally, in the fourth and most robust chapter of the report AFI and VU analyze several laws routinely employed against artists who demonstrate support for *Woman, Life, Freedom*. We discuss 15 artists' cases that are emblematic of the regime's wielding of the law to punish dissidents. Our analysis suggests that by arresting, charging, and prosecuting artists under a series of vague and overbroad laws related to the dissemination of propaganda, the protection of national security, and the protection of public morality, the regime has explicitly violated its legal commitments to protect and respect the right to freedom of expression.

Throughout the report, we feature the stories of several Iranian artists and creatives to highlight Iranians' lived experiences with protest, censorship, and legal persecution under the Islamic Republic. In the first featured interview, the multidisciplinary visual artist Jinoos Taghizadeh discusses her experience of censorship in Iran, the role of artistic expression during the 2022 protests, and her experience as an artist in exile. In the second featured interview with multidisciplinary visual artist Nazanin Noroozi, the artist offers insight into the forms of censorship she experienced as an art student in Iran, as well as how art continues to connect Iranians throughout the diaspora. The third interview features two representatives of Art / Culture / Action, an anonymous global collective of creatives dedicated to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, who discuss the layers of censorship ingrained in the Iranian arts and culture sector and emphasize the power they believe that Iranian artists hold to change the future of the country. In our final featured interview, the award-winning photojournalist Yalda Moaiery describes her experiences of arbitrary arrest, torture, prolonged detention, and prosecution as a result of her efforts to photograph the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, offering valuable insight into the State's wielding of the law to silence artists.

The creation of *I Create; I Resist* is inspired by AFI's seven years of experience providing direct services to Iranian artists and cultural workers at risk in its capacity as pro-bono legal aid and resettlement practitioners. In 2022, in response to the outbreak of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, AFI established the Iranian Artists Support Project (IASP), an emergency response project designed to meet the protection needs of artists during the state's violent response to the protest movement. Having witnessed the outstanding protection and support needs of Iranian artists, journalists, and activists who remain at risk under the Islamic Republic, AFI and VU decided to develop research on the regime's tactics to silence artists.

The central aims of our research are to increase recognition of Iranian artists' vital

contributions to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement and raise awareness about their protection needs as HRDs. By sharing our findings, we seek to galvanize the international community to increase resources and launch new initiatives to support Iranian artists at risk.

Nearly two years after the outbreak of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, many Iranian artists that support the movement remain at risk of persecution. AFI and VU urge the Iranian government to cease unlawful practices, align national laws with international human rights standards, and foster an environment where every member of society, including artists and cultural workers, can freely exercise their rights and freedoms without fear of harm or reprisal. To this end, we have included a list of actionable recommendations in the final chapter of *I Create; I Resist* that, if implemented, can improve conditions for Iranian artists.



Photo by: Yalda Moaiery, 2022

CHAPTER 1

WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM



Painting by: Nazanin Noroozi, 2024

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Many Iranians have been unjustly sentenced to lengthy prison terms and, in some cases, execution for challenging the government or Islam.

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WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM

The 2022 protests in Iran and the accompanying *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement began as a response to national outrage over the death in police custody of Mahsa Jina Amini. By and large, the public reaction to Amini's death revealed Iranians' breaking point after decades of escalating frustration with the Islamic Republic's human rights abuses and their systemic discrimination against women and girls, stemming back to the first days of the regime.

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

The Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979 as a theocracy guided by conservative interpretations of the teachings of Islam. Following decades of extreme wealth inequality, civil unrest, political repression, and forced Westernization, many Iranians were eager to welcome a new rule. Though supporters of the revolution initially believed that the monarchy's ousting would lead to more rights and freedoms, the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, quickly took repressive measures against Iranians, abandoning the promises of the revolution.²

Shortly after the Islamic Republic's ascension to power, the state ratified a Constitution that has allowed the regime to criminalize dissent and commit persistent human rights violations for the past forty-five years. The judiciary has been complicit in these abuses by prosecuting hundreds of demonstrators, civil society activists, and journalists without probable cause, access to lawyers, or fair trials. Many

Iranians have been unjustly sentenced to lengthy prison terms and, in some cases, execution for challenging the government or Islam.³ The Islamic Republic perpetuates its rule by allowing state security forces, including intelligence agents and police officers, to use disproportionate violence against protestors and dissidents.⁴

Furthermore, the Islamic Republic's rule is characterized by systemic discrimination against Iranian women and girls. At present, Iranian women do not have equal rights to education, marriage, divorce, parental custody, or political participation.⁵ They are also discriminately subjected to laws that seek to control their conduct in public. In 1983, the government passed a formal law mandating a dress code for women, including a hijab. Located under Article 638 of Iran's Islamic Penal Code (hereafter 'Iranian Penal Code'), the law states that women caught in public without a hijab will face a ten-day jail term or a fine.⁶ Since the passing of the law, Iranian women and the police have continued to clash over the mandated dress code, making it one of the most contentious issues in the country. A special security force called the morality police was created in 2005 to enforce the hijab mandate, relying on intimidation and violence to punish offenders.⁷ For many Iranians, the enforced hijab has become a symbol of the Islamic Republic's violence against women and the suppression of free expression at large.⁸

ESCALATING TENSIONS FROM JUNE TO AUGUST 2022

In the years leading up to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, women engaged in several high-profile



Illustration by: Sahar Ghorishi

demonstrations against government repression. On December 27, 2017, Vida Mohaved staged a silent protest on Enghelab (Revolution) Street in Tehran by standing on a public platform, removing her hijab, placing it on a stick, and waving it as passersby watched. Movahedi was arrested and jailed for several weeks only days after a video of her protest spread online. Emulating Mohavedi's act of dissent, thousands of young Iranian women, now referred to as the Girls of Revolution Street, have continued to repeat the gesture as a sign of protest.⁹

In 2022, tensions over the mandated hijab spiked again as the government took several initiatives to increase enforcement, and Iranian women continued to fight back. The

government's punitive policies against women increased throughout the year, including denying women who refused to wear the hijab access to employment, healthcare, and transport. More than 1800 businesses were shut down for failing to require compulsory hijabs for their staff or customers.¹⁰

In June 2022, the government announced the expansion of morality police street patrols.¹¹ Officers reportedly targeted both women without hijabs and women wearing "loose hijabs" with harassment, physical violence, and arrest.¹² In July 2022, President Raisi voiced his concern that women's failure to comply with the Chastity and Hijab Law constituted "*an organized promotion of moral corruption in Islamic society.*"¹³ He signed a decree

“

For many, the details of Amini's arrest and detention closely resembled their own or a loved one's experiences of routine harassment and violence from Iran's morality police.

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ordering further repressive measures against dissidents by state police and intelligence agencies.¹⁴

As the morality police became increasingly violent in their enforcement of the mandatory hijab, women responded with greater defiance. Protests against the compulsory hijab multiplied, and on July 12, 2022, the “National Day of Hijab and Chastity,” protestors demonstrated their opposition to the law by posting videos and pictures of scarves lying on the street, as if discarded.¹⁵ Many Iranian women who choose to wear the hijab also joined in the social media campaigns against the mandate and related police violence, vocalizing their shared demands for rights and freedoms.¹⁶

In September 2022, the government announced its intention to use surveillance cameras to identify and take legal action against women who refused to comply with the law. The same month, they arrested 300 “anti-hijab activist ringleaders” using the new technology,¹⁷ less than two weeks before Amini's death in police custody.

ARREST AND EXTRAJUDICIAL DEATH OF MAHSA AMINI

On September 13, 2022, Mahsa Jina Amini, a twenty-two-year-old Iranian-Kurdish woman from Saqqez, was arrested in Tehran by the morality police for allegedly failing to wear her hijab properly.¹⁸ Officers told Amini and her family that she would be released after participating in a one-hour “re-education class,” a common punishment assigned by Iran's morality police.¹⁹ While in custody, however, Amini sustained several blows to the head by police batons, causing a severe brain

hemorrhage.²⁰ Eyewitnesses in the detention center stated that officers ignored several complaints of pain and requests for medical assistance from Amini. Corroborating video footage from inside the centers later showed that when Amini collapsed on the ground after two hours in detention, officers ignored her for several minutes.²¹ Thirty minutes after collapsing, Amini fell into an irreversible comatose state and was transferred to a nearby hospital, where her family was denied access to her medical records and given limited visitation rights.²²

Photos leaked to the media showing Amini in a battered physical state – bleeding from the ear and with bruising under both eyes – and another of her parents hugging each other in the hospital were shared widely across social media, amassing national attention.²³ For many, the details of Amini's arrest and detention closely resembled their own or a loved one's experiences of routine harassment and violence from Iran's morality police. Her young age also profoundly resonated with Iran's Generation Z, which was already known for its insistent rejection of the enforced hijab.²⁴ Within days of Amini's hospitalization, thousands of Iranians were following her case. Amini died three days later, on September 16, 2022.²⁵ Her death sparked massive, nationwide demonstrations of grief and outrage.

OUTBREAK OF THE WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM PROTESTS

The protests that broke out in response to Amini's death represented both a collective demonstration of mourning and a vehement rejection of the regime's abuses of Iranians' rights. Thousands of women and girls engaged in the

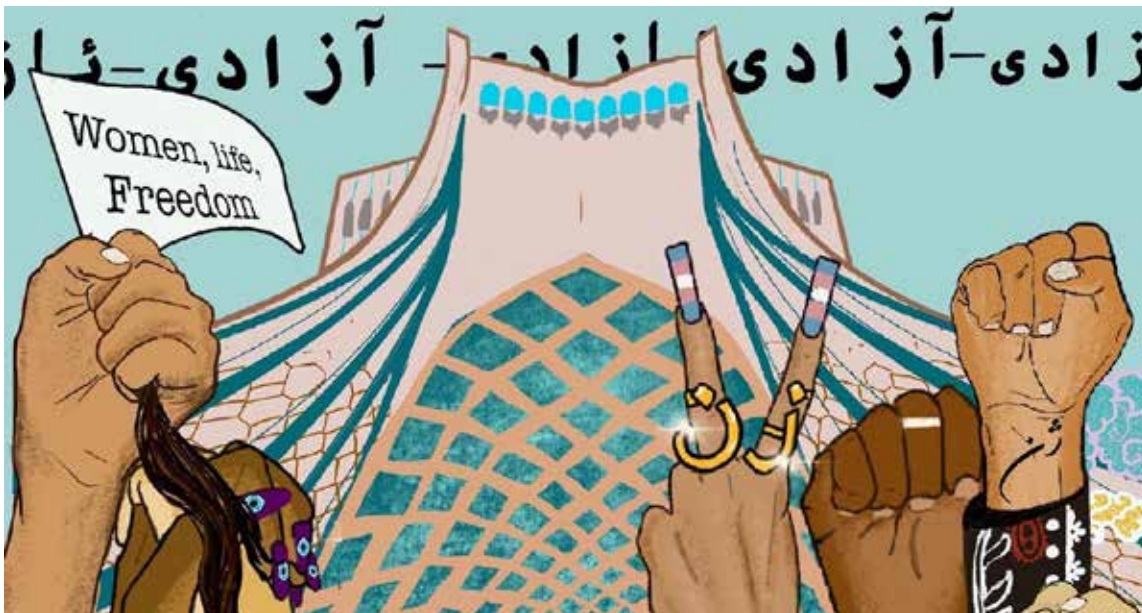


Illustration by: Sahar Ghorishi

symbolic acts – including removing their hijabs and cutting their hair – to honor Amini’s memory and demonstrate their refusal to comply with the regime’s systemic discrimination against their gender. As thousands of Iranians banded together to voice their dissent, one chant in particular united the protestors, “*Woman, Life, Freedom*.”²⁶ The phrase evokes Iranians’ demands for equal rights for all and justice for those harmed by the regime.

As demonstrations in response to Amini’s death amassed around Iran, the government employed excessive and lethal force against civilians. At many protests, authorities displayed clear intention to maim or harm protestors by defaulting to violent measures and using assault weapons. When schoolgirls across the country began holding protests of their own, tearing down portraits of Ayatollah Khamenei in their classrooms and waving their headscarves in the air at school, the authorities reacted violently. Overall, at least fifty-eight children died as a result of authorities’ unlawful attempts to thwart the protests.²⁷ The central position of Iran’s youth in the protests is further evidenced by the sobering statistic that the average age of people detained during the protests

in the weeks following Amini’s death was fifteen.²⁸ Hundreds of protestors have reportedly lost their eyesight or sustained damage to their optical nerves after being shot in the eye.²⁹ Medical records also indicate that security forces specifically targeted women protestors with sexualized violence by shooting at their breasts and genitals, leaving them with significant injuries.³⁰ According to the only official assessment that the Iranian Interior Ministry released in December 2022, more than 200 people were killed as a result of the so-called “riots” since September 2022.³¹

As protests in the name of *Woman, Life, Freedom* continued over the following year, more than twenty thousand Iranians were arrested on charges of disturbing public order, threatening national security, and violating public morals.³² In addition to the mass detention of protestors, security and intelligence agents have arrested a large number of HRDs, including many artists, to punish them for speaking out against the government and standing with the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement.³³ Despite widespread condemnation from the international community, the state has continued its violent campaign to stifle dissent over the past two years.

“As thousands of Iranians banded together to voice their dissent, one chant in particular united the protestors, “*Woman, Life, Freedom*.” The phrase evokes Iranians’ demands for equal rights for all and justice for those harmed by the regime.”



Jinoos Taghizadeh, photo by: Mahsa Alikhani

JINOOS TAGHIZADEH

Jinoos Taghizadeh is a multidisciplinary visual artist, critic, and writer from Iran. Fearing for her safety after participating in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest movement in 2022, Taghizadeh relocated to Canada, where she is currently living in exile. In her interview with AFI and VU, the artist discussed her firsthand experience of censorship in Iran, the role of artistic expression in the 2022 protests, and her experience of creating art in exile.

As a young woman in Iran, Taghizadeh was drawn to visual art because it presented an opportunity for expression in an otherwise heavily restricted environment. Taghizadeh described herself as a storyteller who uses art to communicate her opinions and perspectives with the world. In Iran, she explained, many of the subjects she wanted to explore were considered taboo or were censored by the government. Visual art allowed Taghizadeh to share her perspective with the world through imagery and symbols: *"Art was the only thing that I had. Sometimes I think*

that if I grew up in a free country, maybe I could be a journalist or a social worker or an environmental expert... I think, in my situation, I didn't have another choice. As I mentioned, [making] art was a place where I could feel free. The only place."

“Working as an artist in Iran is like navigating a labyrinth of restriction and censorship.”

Given the prevalence of censorship and the surveillance of artists by the regime, Taghizadeh noted that most artists engage in self-censorship as a protection mechanism: *"Working as an artist in Iran is like navigating a labyrinth of restriction and censorship."* In her experience, self-censorship is a demoralizing process that takes an emotional toll. In 2016, Taghizadeh traveled to Dublin, Ireland, to participate in a one-year art residency. She recalled being asked by the curator to describe her experience working in a new arts and cultural environment abroad. Taghizadeh said that the moment of reflection led her to tears as she felt the full impact of decades of self-censorship: *"Imagine a kid who was raised in a small box. Now you open that box, but all of the bones and muscles are transformed. [The kid] can't walk normally, and their brain is completely blank. They don't have any ideas, and it takes time to find themselves... As some face censorship for a long time, [it] eats your soul, and always fighting with that is really complicated."* She emphasized that creating in a safe and free environment for the first time allowed her to rediscover herself as an artist.

From that point forward, Taghizadeh aimed to subvert the metaphorical box of self-censorship in Iran in any way she could, which she said gave her an internal sense of agency. Nevertheless, she continued to face government pressures and disclosed that a majority of her works, including several of her visual artworks and books, were censored before they could reach the public.

Throughout the early 2000s, Taghizadeh worked as an editor at *Tehran Avenue*, one of Iran's first bilingual online artistic and cultural magazines. At the time, she said, the Iranian government body responsible for regulating and policing culture, the MCIG, was still limited in its ability to censor the internet, which allowed the online magazine to gain popularity in Iran. It also gave the editors and contributors an outlet to express their creativity and grow as artists. When the MCIG started policing the internet in 2009, *Tehran Avenue* was given the option to either censor its work or close the magazine altogether. The editorial board of *Tehran Avenue* refused to agree to the government's terms and decided to close instead.

Taghizadeh was living and working in Tehran in 2022 when she learned of Mahsa Amini's death. As the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests unfolded, Taghizadeh noticed a qualitative difference from previous demonstrations in which she had participated: the protestors were unified in their demands. She believed that Amini's death in police custody struck a chord with Iranians of all backgrounds because her case was relatable for many who have also experienced arbitrary arrest and police brutality. Her death, therefore, came to represent the systemic suppression of the Islamic Republic against its citizens. This unity, Taghizadeh said, deepened the protestors' resolve: *"The people, [who were] mostly young people and women, were bolder than ever. They did not disperse when the anti-riot police attacked. I have never seen such courage like that before, a full-scale rebellion of people who were fed up with pressure and social control over life, financial issues, basic freedoms... Everything [...] Everybody who was able to connect on social media and could amplify what was happening in Iran did. I was one of them."*

The governmental response to the protestors was rapid and violent. Taghizadeh shared that several of her friends were arrested for their participation in *Woman, Life, Freedom*, and others were attacked in their homes.

According to Taghizadeh, protestors used artistic expression to amplify the demands of *Woman, Life, Freedom*. In the movement's early days, Taghizadeh noted the viral spread of music, videos, and graphics related to the protests online. Many protestors who were not artists by profession also used artistic methods to express their dissent including through performances and installations: *"I remember a very good photo from the Iranian metro underground. [Someone] put sanitary pads on CCTVs. For Woman, Life, Freedom, this is a very powerful installation. I don't know who did it. Maybe someone who didn't consider themselves as an artist, but it was a very creative and artistic act."*

Taghizadeh was present at the very first protests following Amini's death. The artist, who has dyed, multi-colored hair, recalled the dangerous position she found herself in due to her uncommon appearance. After Taghizadeh attended one of the early protests, she appeared in photographs that fell into the hands of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Because of her colorful hair, interrogators quickly identified Taghizadeh and began to monitor her whereabouts. As the State crackdown on protestors became increasingly severe, she began to worry about how her involvement might negatively affect her family: *"In that time, my son was waiting for his visa to be a student in London, and I felt [that] if I was arrested, he would not be allowed to [leave the country to attend his course]. I can make decisions about myself, about my body, about my life, but I can't decide about his career, [since it] is something that he tried hard to achieve for three years. At first, I wanted to leave Iran just for one or two weeks to Istanbul, and after [the] visa for my son came in, I would come back. But my mother said, 'I am too old to follow you to [prison]. Please, please don't, I can't handle that.'"*

Concerned by the mounting and systematic violence against artists like herself, Taghizadeh decided to leave Iran to ensure her safety. Fortunately, Taghizadeh had a valid tourist visa for Canada, so she left Iran with the initial aim of taking temporary refuge abroad until the State's violent campaign against the protestors subsided. However, the Islamic Republic's attacks on artists only intensified over the following year. Unable to safely return to Iran under the circumstances, Taghizadeh lived in exile, a status she has struggled to accept: *"I had a conversation with my friend about a joint exhibition in New York. Out of the blue, my friend asked, do you want to show any artwork created after your exile? At first I didn't fully grasp what he meant, so I asked him to repeat himself. He casually reiterated 'after exile.' It felt like an electric shock hurt my body. I had never even talked about this word before. I had to pause, and I told him I would call back in a few minutes. After hanging up the phone, I felt a hole in my life. And I understood that the situation had changed... Over time I tried to digest these two words, 'immigration 'and' exile,' and I think I still haven't been able to."*

As she grappled with her new reality, Taghizadeh turned to her art as a source of strength. However, she said that, like many other artists in exile, she has found it challenging to restart her career abroad without established access to resources or networks in the host country: *"After decades and decades of professional activity, all of my artwork is in Iran in my mother's house. I lost access to my artwork. What*

about a studio? How can [artists] start over when they are probably not young enough to go back to college? How do I survive? Everyone expects artists to be a voice for others and to be bold...but their survival is somehow not anyone else's problem (...). I suggest that for institutions who want to support artists at risk, consider the meaning of risk. What is risk? In some situations risk means someone who wants to kill you. But the meaning of risk changes... for an artist in exile without a studio, without money, without everything. When we talk about risk, what exactly is risk for an artist? I think this is important."

Taghizadeh encourages institutions that want to meaningfully help Iranian artists in exile to create the necessary support infrastructure for artists transitioning to a new environment, thereby enabling them to continue their vital work without facing additional logistic and social challenges.

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CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE OF ART IN THE PROTESTS



Painting by: Nazanin Noroozi, 2024

ARTISTS AT THE FRONTLINES



We feature 26 artistic works and actions borne out of *Woman, Life, Freedom*. They represent only a small fraction of the innumerable works that Iranian artists have created from 2022 onward to mourn Amini's death, expose the Islamic Republic's abuses, and engage the world with the movement.



Amini's death in police custody ignited a nationwide outcry against decades of gender-based violence, corruption, and other injustices perpetrated by the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the weeks that followed, protests erupted across all thirty-one of Iran's provinces.³⁴

As *Woman, Life, Freedom* formed into a broader movement against the regime, Iranian artists emerged as powerful proponents for social change, lending their creative skills to the widespread protests that ensued. Iranian artists expressed solidarity with the protestors through various mediums such as visual art, installations, music, and performance, capturing the essence of their grievances and contributing to a visually compelling narrative that transcended conventional forms of protest.

Iranian artists in the diaspora took immediate action to mobilize their networks, resources, and creative skills to amplify the demands of *Woman, Life, Freedom* from abroad and denounce the human rights abuses of the Iranian government against its citizens. Free from the censorship and suppression of the Islamic Republic, Iranian diaspora and dual-national artists continue to develop artistic projects around *Woman, Life, Freedom* to keep the spirit of the movement alive, hold the government of the Islamic Republic accountable, and demand rights and protections for Iranians.

Today, the phrase *Woman, Life, Freedom* is recognized and supported worldwide thanks, in part, to the proliferation of protest images and artwork online and in the media. Hundreds of thousands of international

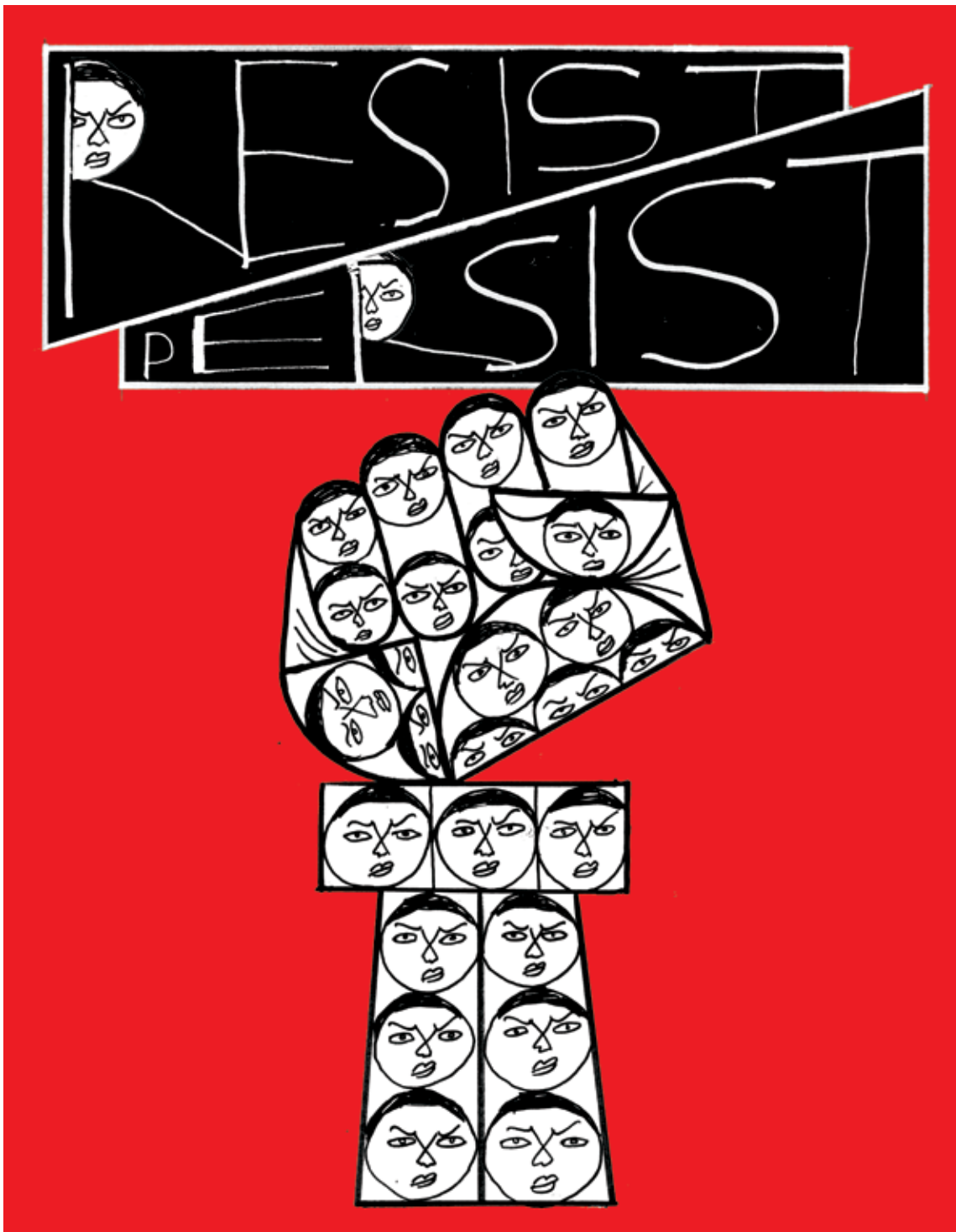
supporters reshared artists' works – including photographs, videos, and graphically designed protest art – about *Woman, Life, Freedom* across social media before taking to the streets in their own countries to demonstrate their solidarity with Iranians' fight for justice. By using their work to bring the messages of *Woman, Life, Freedom* to life for a global audience, Iranian artists accelerated the movement and served as powerful advocates for change.

In Iran, where the right to freedom of expression is repressed through censorship and punitive measures, the act of creative expression is a form of resistance. By creating works in support of *Woman, Life, Freedom* despite the very real risk of government reprisal, Iranian artists boldly asserted their right to free expression. Moreover, their works also advocated for the recognition of other rights by calling attention to injustices and showing their hopes for a future without restrictions in Iran.

Below, we feature 26 artistic works and actions borne out of *Woman, Life, Freedom*. They represent only a small fraction of the innumerable works that Iranian artists have created from 2022 onward to mourn Amini's death, expose the Islamic Republic's abuses, and engage the world with the movement. These artworks and actions are a testament to Iranians' fierce solidarity with the movement and evidence of the powerful role that artists play in the defense and promotion of human rights in Iran.

PERFORMATIVE ACTS OF PROTEST

The global reach of *Woman, Life, Freedom* owes much to the powerful acts of performative and artistic protest that have characterized the movement



Designer: Iman Raad

from the beginning. At Amini's funeral, dozens of women removed their hijabs and cut their hair to demonstrate their grief and protest the injustice of her death. The practice of cutting hair as a symbol of mourning or protest dates back to the 1000-year-old Persian epic, *Shahnameh*. The text is considered one of the most important works in the Persian language and has been a fundamental influence on Iranian culture

for centuries.³⁵ Writer and translator Shara Atashi emphasized the connection between poetry and the symbolic act in a tweet:

*"Women cutting their hair is an ancient Persian tradition [used] when the fury is stronger than the power of the oppressor. The moment we have been waiting for has come. Politics fueled by poetry."*³⁶

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In Iran, where the right to freedom of expression is repressed through censorship and punitive measures, the act of creative expression is a form of resistance.
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As Iranians took to the streets to protest, thousands of women and girls removed their hijabs, set them on fire, or waved them in the air defiantly to demonstrate their refusal to cooperate with the government's discriminatory policies.

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Photograph: @ksadjadpour on X; daughter standing in front of her mother's gravesite without a hijab.

As Iranians took to the streets to protest, thousands of women and girls removed their hijabs, set them on fire, or waved them in the air defiantly to demonstrate their refusal to cooperate with the government's discriminatory policies. Many also cut their hair in solidarity with Amini and in protest of gender-based oppression in Iran.³⁷ Photographs and

videos of women and girls performing these gestures throughout the country, in groups or individually, went viral on the internet and in the media,³⁸ making performative expressions a vital feature of the movement.

An anonymous video posted on September 21, 2022, and reshared more than 5,500 times shows a woman in Kerman standing on top of a maintenance box cutting her hair while thousands of protestors cheer her on, chanting "Death to the Dictator."³⁹ In a photograph shared more than 34,000 times across X, formerly Twitter, the daughter of Minoo Majidi, a woman who was killed in police detention after being arrested for participating in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, stands in front of her mother's grave, holding flowers in one hand and her cut hair in the other. Without a hijab and with her head fully shaved, she stares defiantly at the camera.⁴⁰

Images and videos of Iranian women cutting their hair in protest resonated with viewers worldwide. Many influential figures from other countries cut their hair to demonstrate their solidarity with Iranians, including the Swedish MP Abir al-Sahlan, who cut her hair on the floor of the European Parliament and called on the European Union (EU) to sanction Iran.⁴¹

Additionally, thousands of Iran's youth uploaded videos of themselves removing or burning their hijabs in public, cutting their hair, joining protest marches, singing or chanting protest songs, and tearing down posters of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Tiktok, Instagram, and Facebook. Young female students also demonstrated defiance through protest and large-scale performative action. In a video uploaded to X, formerly Twitter, on October 4, 2022, an unidentified girl, without a hijab, turns over a photograph of



Anonymous; images of bloody street art.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that was hanging on her classroom wall and rehangs it to reveal the phrase *Woman, Life, Freedom* written on the back.⁴² In another video, a group of students at Hormozgan University tear down a wall meant to segregate male and female students in the cafeteria.⁴³ In a third video uploaded on October 3, 2022, a large group of schoolgirls at an unspecified location chant, "*Death to the Dictator*," while waving their hijabs in the air and stomping on photos of the Ayatollah.⁴⁴

ANONYMOUS STREET ART

Graffiti and street art in support of *Woman, Life, Freedom* were widely documented throughout 2022 and 2023. The large gatherings of protestors provided street artists a certain degree of camouflage and anonymity, which many took advantage of by spray-painting stenciled phrases and images and staging artistic sculptures or installations throughout Iran. Though many paintings and installations were soon covered or removed by authorities, photos of the works are preserved and circulated online, widening their impact.⁴⁵

Handmade graffiti stencils showing the faces of Amini and *Woman, Life,*

Freedom protestors killed by the regime have continued to appear on the streets of Iran since the beginning of the uprisings.⁴⁶ The stencils depict Amini and other protestors who suffered at the hands of the Iranian state, including Sarina Ismailzadeh, a 16-year-old girl who died after being brutally beaten by police during a protest,⁴⁷ Minoo Majidi, a mother of two who was killed by the morality police, and Ghazaleh Chelavi, a woman who was shot while filming a protest in which she was involved. Chelavi's last words were caught in her video, "*Don't fear, don't fear; we are together!*"⁴⁸

In an effort to link historical cultural events with the current protests, a fountain in Student's Park was dyed red, evoking blood, on October 7, 2022. Over the course of the month, several public fountains in parks, plazas, and outside government or cultural buildings were also dyed red. Across social media, the installations picked up the name "*Tehran covered in blood.*"⁴⁹ In the 1980s, the government of the Islamic Republic commissioned several art works to commemorate those who lost their lives in the Iran-Iraq War, one of which was a famous work of a fountain bubbling with red water to symbolize the flowing blood of the martyrs.⁵⁰ "*Tehran covered in blood*" boldly reappropriated the

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By juxtaposing the small physical stature of an adolescent heroine with the looming presence of state violence, Azarad's work conveys the profound impact that the young women spearheading Woman, Life, Freedom have on Iranian society as they fight against the systemic repression that characterizes their everyday lives.

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"A fighting girl", designer: Meysam Azarad

well-known government-commissioned artwork to declare that Amini— and the protestors who have lost their lives at the hands of the police— are martyrs in a new Iranian conflict against the regime.

Following "Tehran covered in blood", red paint or elements to symbolize blood became a common fixture of graffiti and street art. In a similarly symbolic performance, several nooses hanging from a tree appeared in Daneshjoo Park, their loops covered in red paint, on

the next day, October 8, 2022.⁵¹ While police quickly removed the installation, a photograph of the work continues to circulate on Instagram, where the original post has received over 87,000 likes as of May 2024.⁵²

On November 15, 2022, an anonymous street artist covered a city mural of Iran's leaders with red paint, evoking 'blood on the hands' of the leaders.⁵³ Murals and other public spaces throughout the country have been covered in red

paint or spray-painted with slogans from the protests. Though the government censors the physical images by covering them, their digital reproductions have accumulated thousands of views online.

On November 1, 2022, a photo was posted to X by an anonymous account showing a sculpture of a pair of arms and legs tied to a street sign pole on Siyasi Alley.⁵⁴ The sculpture evokes the viral photograph of the now-deceased prisoner, Khodanoor Lajaei, who was tortured in police custody. When Lajaei asked officers for water, they refused and mocked him by tying him to a pole outside and placing a full cup of water just out of his reach. The officers published the photo online, presumably to publicly humiliate him. Lajaei was released on bail but was tragically killed by police officers during a *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest on October 1, 2022, when police indiscriminately opened fire on a crowd of protestors.⁵⁵ Following his death, the photograph of Lajaei resurfaced and was circulated thousands of times. Many protestors took photographs of themselves imitating the picture in public spaces, including the students at emphasizing the everyday struggle of Iranians against the police state.⁵⁶ The sculpture on Siyasi Alley similarly depicts this struggle; *Siyasi* means “politics” in Persian, and as such, the sculpture’s placement on “Politics Alley” serves as a commentary on the police state. The sculpture was removed only days after it was installed, but another unknown artist later covered the ground where it had been with red paint.⁵⁷

GRAPHIC DESIGN, VISUAL ART, PHOTOGRAPHY

The artists of *Woman, Life, Freedom* also use graphic design to further the movement’s aims. Filmmaker



“My Hair is Not Your Battle Ground”; designer: Roshie Rouzbehani

and graphic artist **Meysam Azarad** designed several posters to commemorate the young women of the movement. Most of her works depict young women protestors in black and white surrounded by male soldiers, nationalistic poetry, or religious phrases, emphasizing the state-led violence and repression that women and girls are constantly confronted with in Iran. For example, an untitled 2023 poster shows an unveiled young woman standing with her fist in the air, defying a fleet of soldiers with machine guns in front of her. The text below the girl is extracted from the *Shahnameh*, which traditionally tells the story of a male hero. However, in Azarad’s work, the name of the hero is replaced with “a fighting girl” (*dokht-e jangi*).⁵⁸ By juxtaposing the small physical stature of an adolescent heroine with the looming presence of state violence, Azarad’s work conveys the profound impact that the young women spearheading *Woman, Life, Freedom* have on Iranian society as they fight against the systemic repression that characterizes their everyday lives.

Visual artist **Roshie Rouzbehani** also

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By covering the Freedom Tower, one of Iran's most recognizable government buildings, with Matisse's images of naked, dancing women, Jalz juxtaposes the regime's promise of freedom with its suppression of women's rights.

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Designer: Jalz

used graphic design to commemorate performative action and protest in her 2023 work, "My Hair is Not Your Battle Ground."⁵⁹ The poster depicts a young woman with a long braid, holding scissors to her hair while looking upwards with a defiant expression toward the phrase "Woman, Life, Freedom." Widely circulated online, the poster effectively embodies the resilient spirit of Iranian women and girls.

Jalz, another Iranian graphic designer, created an image of Iran's "Azadi" (Freedom) Tower superimposed behind Henri Matisse's dancers shown below the phrase "Women, Life, Freedom."⁶⁰ The last Shah of Iran initiated construction on the tower before the 1979 revolution. When the new regime came into power, it removed all public

associations with royalty, renaming the building the "Freedom Tower" to reflect the ideals of the revolution.⁶¹ By covering the Freedom Tower, one of Iran's most recognizable government buildings, with Matisse's images of naked, dancing women, Jalz juxtaposes the regime's promise of freedom with its suppression of women's rights. His artwork may also be a reference to the restrictions placed on freedom of expression more broadly, as dancing in public or mixed-gender groups is banned by the government.

Following the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, visual artist **Emad** dedicated a series of paintings to the Iranians who were detained or killed during the movement. Emad's oil canvases use metaphor and symbolism to provide a contemplative perspective on the



Designer: Touraj Saberivand

uprising and Iranians' struggles under the regime. For example, one of his canvases depicts a birthday cake in an acknowledgment of the stolen futures of the young protestors killed by the Islamic Republic.⁶² Although Emad has only revealed his first name to ensure his safety, his paintings serve as a primary example of how Iranian artists in hiding have taken inspiration from the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement to honor the victims of the violent crackdowns in Iran and the inspiring women leading the uprising.

MUSIC, POETRY

Iranian musicians and authors have also used their craft to shed light on societal issues, providing a platform for dialogue

and reflection. In October 2022, Iranian musician **Shervin Hajipour** released a video of himself singing his song "Baraye" (*Because of*), which references tweets Iranians posted online to explain why they were participating in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests. A verse of Hajipour's song reads:

*"To be able to dance in the street"
 "For the impoverished child and his dreams"
 "For students, for the future"
 "For your sister, for my sister, for all our sisters"*⁶³

The song quickly went viral, and while Hajipour was arrested and forced to remove the video from social media, it had already been viewed millions of times across various platforms and

remains an anthem for *Woman, Life, Freedom*.⁶⁴ Hajipour's work earned international recognition when he received the 2023 Grammy Award for Special Merit for Best Song for Social Change for "Baraye".⁶⁵

New generation female rapper **Roody** released the song "Zan" (*Woman*) in response to the destructive fire at Evin Prison on October 15, 2022, where many political prisoners and arrested protestors were held after the protests following Amini's death. The song speaks to the challenges that women face in Iran from authorities and calls attention to the children and youth who were killed during the protests.⁶⁶ Because girls and women are forbidden to sing or perform music as solo artists in Iran, Roody operates underground and maintains anonymity in her music videos.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, these restrictions did not stop her from voicing her support for the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement.

Popular Iranian singer and lyricist **Mona Borzouei** recited poetry in support of the protests via social media. In her video, posted in September 2022, she read the following verse: "*We will take this homeland back from your hands*".⁶⁸ In October 2022, Iranian poet **Behrouz Yasemi** posted a video of himself reciting a poem on his Instagram account defending the protests. A line of his poem read, "*Floods are the founders of the water, the rain drops must come together*".⁶⁹

restrictions imposed on Iranian artists by the government, Iranian artists in the diaspora use their work to highlight the regime's human rights abuses, amplify the struggles of their compatriots at home, and make direct calls for change.

Since moving to the United States of America (US) in 1974 to complete her education and finding herself unable to return to Iran following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, **Shirin Neshat** has lived in exile for most of her adult life.⁷⁰ As a celebrated Iranian visual artist and filmmaker, Neshat created the "*Woman, Life, Freedom*" exhibit for the Cultural Institute of Radical Contemporary Art (CIRCA) during the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests in October 2022 to express her solidarity with those risking their lives for human rights in Iran. The exhibit consisted of two of Neshat's pieces from her "*Women of Allah*" series (1993-1997), which addresses the complicated nature of women's identity in Iran's changing political and cultural landscape following the 1979 revolution.⁷¹ During the week that Neshat's work was on display in London and Los Angeles, Iranians in the local diaspora held widely-attended protests in line with the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, demonstrating artists' unique power to create work that resonates with people of all background during times of political injustice. Notably, Neshat's advocacy is also rooted in universal action; while her work centers on the fight for rights in Iran, her message also extends to people worldwide who face human rights abuses.⁷²

DIASPORA ARTISTS MOBILIZE SUPPORT

Iranian artists in the diaspora have played a significant role in conveying the message of *Woman, Life, Freedom* to the world and mobilizing global support for Iranians' struggles. Free from the

Iranian visual artist **Arghavan Khosravi** similarly creates art that represents the experience of Iranian women and women who face human rights abuses globally. Khosravi came to the US in 2015 to continue her art education and was forced to remain in the country after the adoption of the controversial "*Muslim ban*," which would have



"Fractured Spaces" 2023, by Arghavan Khosravi

prevented her from re-entering the US after a potential visit to Iran.⁷³ After the protests broke out in September 2022, Khosravi watched women's hair become a powerful symbol of protest. While she had previously depicted women's hair in her own work, she took to Instagram in October 2022 to voice her support for the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement by posting a video of her painting an image of hair with the caption, "*These days when I'm painting hair, I'm filled with anger and hope. More than ever...#MahsaAmini.*"⁷⁴ Khosravi later created a set of three-dimensional sculptural works of women that change as the audience moves around them, referencing the contrast between Iranian women's identities expressed in the safety of private spaces and the personas they are forced to take on in public under the scrutiny of state authorities.

Ali Abbasi, an Iranian filmmaker in exile based in Copenhagen, released his film "Holy Spider" in 2022, just as civil unrest

and mass protests against the Iranian government started. Based on the "Spider Killer," Saeed Hanaei, who killed sixteen sex workers in Iran between 2000 and 2001, Abbasi's film depicts the violent misogyny and injustice women regularly face in Iran.⁷⁵ Throughout the film, Abbasi showcases the bodily experiences of female characters, which are often rendered invisible in Iranian cinema due to government censorship.⁷⁶ Though based on events from two decades prior, Abbasi's film relates to the themes of *Woman, Life, Freedom* by emphasizing the ongoing systematic repression of women's rights and their subjugation to gender-based violence.

French-Iranian director, writer, and illustrator **Marjane Satrapi** curated and released a visual collection of graphic novel-style essays entitled "Woman, Life, Freedom" in March 2024. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, when she was 14, Satrapi's parents sent her to Europe, where she has since lived in exile.⁷⁷ In collaboration

with international activists, artists, journalists, and academics, Satrapi depicts the 2022 protest movement through comics that show content which would be censored in Iran. Similarly to Abbasi, Satrapi uses her book to convey her solidarity with Iranians and contextualize it within the long history of Iranian women activists whose rights were violated by the regime.⁷⁸ In particular, the book emphasizes the resilience of Iranian women in their fight for rights and freedoms. The chapter “The Art of Rebellion” by illustrator Zac Deloupy and political commentator Farid Vahid depicts a young woman going through routine aspects of her day, including putting on makeup, going on a run, smoking a cigarette, and choosing an outfit. In most of the illustrations, onlookers watch her from afar. The chapter emphasizes how politics are embedded into women’s simplest everyday choices in Iran. It also underscores the growing divide between the state-imposed restrictions women face in public and the freedom they experience in their private lives. One of the illustrations reads:

“Living alone, being single, not relying on a man, going for a run, wearing makeup, painting my nails, having a piercing or tattoos, letting my hair be seen under my veil, or not wearing a veil at all, dressing in colorful clothes, wearing leggings or an unconventional jacket, riding a scooter or a motorbike, working, being independent, playing music, singing, smoking, drinking alcohol, flirting, traveling alone, not wanting children, sleeping with a man, or a woman... being free! All of these small acts, some of which are forbidden and severely punished by the law, are far from trivial.”⁷⁹

Artistic collectives and other groups have engaged in protests to raise awareness about *Woman, Life,*

Freedom. In November 2022, activists from the **Anonymous Artist Collective** for Iran hung twelve red banners with the words “Women, Life, Freedom” from the balconies of the Guggenheim Museum. In a statement, the group called their intervention a “*call for action to support the current revolution in Iran, led by brave Iranian women risking their lives to stand up against oppression to overthrow a longtime authoritarian regime.*”⁸⁰

The above artworks demonstrate how Iranian artists used their skills and creativity to support *Woman, Life, Freedom*. Through their creative expressions, they challenged censorship, denounced injustices, and defended Iranians’ rights. Their work not only documented the struggles and resilience of the Iranian people under the Islamic Republic’s repression, but it also inspired action and solidarity within and beyond Iran’s borders. Diaspora artists amplified these efforts by leveraging their platforms to bring international attention to the plight of Iranians, thereby fostering a broader coalition for human rights and freedoms. Together, these artists—within Iran and in the diaspora—form a powerful force for change in Iran.

CREATED BY
MARJANE SATRAPI

WOMAN LIFE FREEDOM



Woman, Life, Freedom, Author: Marjane Satrapi; Publisher: Seven Stories Press



Nazanin Noroozi, photo by: Wesley Kingston

NAZANIN NOROOZI

Nazanin Noroozi is an Iranian multidisciplinary visual artist, now residing in the United States. Her work spans various mediums, including filmmaking, still images, and collages. Living in exile since 2012, she has become increasingly vocal about human rights abuses in Iran through her creative work. In her interview with AFI and VU, Noroozi discussed the censorship and repressive measures she experienced as an art student in Iran. She also shared that, in her experience, art has been both a means to stay connected to Iran from abroad and a platform to participate in the struggle for Iranians' rights and freedoms.

Speaking of her experiences as an early-career artist in Iran, Noroozi reflected on the difficulties inherent to developing a career as an artist in a heavily restricted environment. She explained that government oversight at the university level meant that students had limited exposure to art history, theory, and contemporary practices. As a student at the Tehran University of Arts, Noroozi recalled that she and her peers were forbidden from using nude models to learn to paint the human body, an essential skill in visual arts education: *"Anatomy was impossible to learn in a university, because you couldn't study the human body. [As a visual artist], I*



“I personally believe that [art is] about the exchange of ideas, and it’s about the community, it’s a living organism. When you’re isolated, when you can’t talk to your peers, when you can’t see their work, or when they can’t come to you, how much [...] good art can you produce?”

needed to know how fingers are, or how the body is joined, to understand human anatomy.”

Opportunities to study abroad or participate in international art events were also few and far between, and achieving government permission or funding was difficult. Noroozi emphasized that isolation from the global arts community put Iranian students at a stark disadvantage, hobbling their professional growth: *“I personally believe that [art is] about the exchange of ideas, and it’s about the community, it’s a living organism. When you’re isolated, when you can’t talk to your peers, when you can’t see their work, or when they can’t come to you, how much [...] good art can you produce?”*

To supplement the areas where their arts education was lacking, Noroozi and her peers formed “small circles”—private gatherings among like-minded artists—to learn new skills and develop their craft in an open, supportive environment. These circles served as intimate spaces where the young artists could share their work, exchange ideas, and collaborate outside of the scrutiny of authorities. During these gatherings, the participants engaged in various activities ranging from drawing sessions and documentary screenings to literary discussions, fostering a dynamic exchange of creative and cultural ideas: *“We had sessions with a group of friends where we would watch documentaries together every Wednesday at four o’clock. Within these circles and exchanges, we would watch films together, draw together,*

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Over the course of her studies, Noroozi was questioned several times and was asked to go to the dean's office on five separate occasions to submit a written statement confirming that she would behave 'properly.'

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read books together. These places did not exist in the public sphere, so we made them for ourselves."

Outside of the supportive environment of the small circles, Noroozi and her peers faced various challenges from authorities, particularly university administrators. After passing the entrance exam to study for her master's degree in art research, the academic evaluation committee called Noroozi in for questioning. In an interrogation session that lasted over four hours, she was asked about her personal and political beliefs, including whether she believed that Iranian elections were fraudulent and if she supported the Ayatollah. Over the course of her studies, Noroozi was questioned several times and was asked to go to the dean's office on five separate occasions to submit a written statement confirming that she would behave "properly." She was never given an explanation as to why she was subjected to these measures, and she often feared that the authorities would prevent her from graduating with her degree or finding a job afterward.

More than 15 years later, Noroozi indicated that she still wonders why she was targeted by the authorities. Factors such as her political activism, family background, lifestyle choices, and artistic work all likely contributed to the government's interest in her case. Regardless, the lack of transparency around the interrogations and disciplinary measures intimidated her: *"I feel that this is what authoritarian regimes want the most [...] lack of transparency is the best tool that they have because it keeps you as a citizen and as a member of society in the dark. You don't know exactly what's going on. It's like gaslighting everyone, you know, in a way [...] I feel like this is very intentional, that the charges against you are never clear."* Aware of the government's constant surveillance, she said, many Iranian artists choose to self-censor to avoid reprisal.

Noroozi relocated abroad in 2012 and has since established her career in New York City. In 2022, she followed the media closely as the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests shook Iranian society. Despite the physical distance, Noroozi said the emotional impact of Mahsa Jina Amini's death was felt deeply throughout the Iranian diaspora. She recounted attending a demonstration at Washington Square Park in September 2022: *"Everyone was crying, all of us artists who are in New York City [more than] 1000 miles away. I saw my friends hugging each other, sobbing because it felt like [...] a representation of all the injustice and all the atrocities [...] that we have endured as a nation for the past 45 years."* In the following months, as the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests developed into a broader social movement, Noroozi said she was glued to her phone, anxiously anticipating each development.

Over the course of the protests, Noroozi was particularly moved by the bravery of Iranian women fighting for their rights amidst extreme repression. According to Noroozi, their rejection of the enforced hijab is the continuation of a decades-long struggle against gender-based discrimination that they inherited from generations of female activists before them. She drew parallels between historical activists, such as Homa Darabi, who set herself on fire in 1994 in protest of the mandatory hijab, and the current generation's boldness in demanding freedom of expression and choice: *"I believe that history is like a chain. It's linked, and everything has some kind of a domino effect. So, if we had someone as amazing as Homa Darabi who was willing to sacrifice her life [over] being forced to wear the headscarf, It's obvious that maybe it should have happened sooner. But it's obvious that 20 years*

later you will see thousands and thousands of young women refusing to do that."

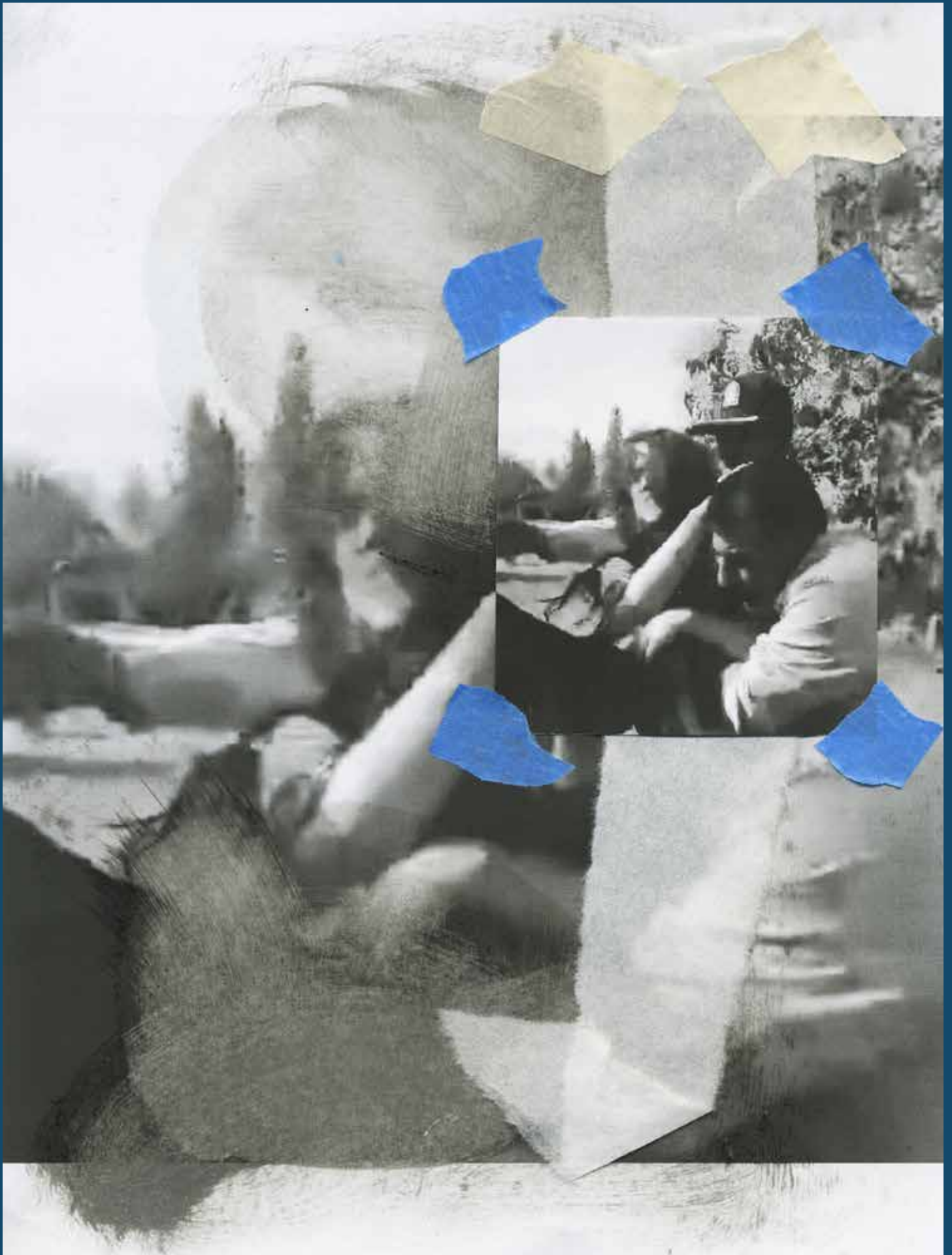
Noroozi was also inspired by the role that art and artists played in the 2022 protests. In particular, she was struck by the surge of performative gestures that symbolized resistance and liberation. Ordinary people and artists alike engaged in spontaneous acts like cutting their hair, burning scarves, and reenacting scenes, to name a few—an outpouring of creative defiance against oppressive norms: *"One thing that is quite interesting to me in the Woman, Life, Freedom protests is the number of performative acts by normal people and by artists without them really knowing about it, you know, [like] people cutting their hair..."* *"This is a very, very radical form of art."* To Noroozi, the act of documenting and sharing these performances further amplified their impact, transforming small personal gestures into collective statements of resistance.

As she watched the events unfold from abroad, Noroozi said the movement made her reevaluate what it means to be a diaspora artist; now, she feels a newfound onus to contribute to Iranians' unified struggle for rights and freedoms. In 2022, Noroozi served as a curator for the magazine publication "Kaarnamaa" in its dedicated section "Meta-Text."⁸¹ Noroozi's section featured a unique picture book divided into three thematic sections: Woman, Life, Freedom. As part of this project, the artist and collaborators curated an extensive archive of over 3000-4000 photographs, capturing poignant moments and narratives from the first six to seven months of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement.⁸² Through a carefully crafted collage of images, the publication aimed to reconstruct a fragmented narrative, juxtaposing diverse snapshots of Iranians' everyday lives with the protest movement. Noroozi's hope for the series was that it would serve as a vessel for collective memory, preserving and contextualizing moments of significance within the broader context of social change: *"This is my contribution as an artist, specifically to Woman, Life, Freedom. It's a broken narrative, juxtaposed pictures of what happened to the Iranians during the first six or seven months of the movement. It starts from when Mahsa was killed [and spans] until the first two executions [of protestors] last year."*

Today, Noroozi hopes to center her work at the intersection of art and activism, using her creativity to provoke dialogue and advocate for social change. Her journey—from navigating censorship in Iran to amplifying voices in exile—underscores the power of art as a catalyst for societal transformation. Despite the daunting challenges that remain, Noroozi is optimistic about the possibility of democratic reform in Iran and she believes that the diaspora can be instrumental in supporting that cause. She emphasizes that international connection, unity, and collective action will be essential strategies for effecting lasting change in Iran.

CHAPTER 3

CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE OF ARTISTS



Painting by: Nazanin Noroozi, 2024

CENSORSHIP AND SURVEILLANCE OF ARTISTS

In response to the prevalent role that art played in *Woman, Life, Freedom*, the regime has tightened its grip on the arts and cultural sector by reinforcing existing censors and introducing new repressive measures, including surveillance and punitive measures carried out by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG).

The Iranian state has embedded censorship into the creative sphere by placing all arts and cultural institutions under the purview of the MCIG, which was established in 1987 with a mandate to regulate Iran's cultural affairs and promote Islamic values in the arts. The MCIG's formal duties include creating guidelines and regulations for cultural activities that ensure they align with Islamic principles and exercising censorship over cultural products that challenge Islamic beliefs.⁸³ The MCIG oversees all media as well as arts and cultural institutions in the country, including media outlets, TV networks, museums, publishers, libraries, theaters, and production companies.⁸⁴ They are responsible for the distribution of state grants for the arts, meaning that many Iranian arts and cultural institutions are dependent on them for vital funding and must either comply with their regulations or face closure.

CENSORSHIP

Despite the MCIG's influential role in Iranian society, it is one of the country's most inaccessible institutions. Iranian artists and cultural institutions have complained that the MCIG's decisions to reject or censor content are generally

vague or provide no explanation at all. Further, there is no means to challenge the MCIG's decisions outside of court.⁸⁵ To date, the MCIG has failed to provide publicly available standards or guidelines for arts and cultural production. Consequently, artists and art institutions have no reference guide when creating a proposal for the MCIG. As a result, they have little to no understanding of what they can successfully create and are subject to unrelenting state censorship.

According to the Ministry's own data, the MCIG rejects a majority of artists' submissions and proposals for artistic events across industries. In parliamentary hearings in 2012, they stated that they only approved 20 percent of songs submitted for review and only 50 percent of screenplays.⁸⁶ The minority of cultural project proposals that are approved for production must first undergo extremely rigorous scrutiny. For example, for a film to be shown publicly, a licensed production company must present the screenplay to the MCIG, which gives notes about what to remove.⁸⁷ Then, the production company must obtain the proper permits from the MCIG and permission from the national intelligence agency if the film references the government or police.⁸⁸ The film is also subjected to various rounds of notes and editing before the public can see it. In effect, the MCIG uses a system that allows them to exert extensive control over what art and media the public can access, with little room for art that is critical of the regime to slip through the censors.

The MCIG has used its authority to order the closure of popular publishers, cinema production companies, theaters, and other arts organizations. In January 2012, the MCIG infamously ordered the closure of the Iranian House of Cinema, the largest film organization



"The Enclosed Garden" 2021, by Arghavan Khosravi

in the country with more than 5000 members. Initially, the MCIG said that the order resulted from the House of Cinema's failure to follow proper procedures for setting up a non-governmental organization (NGO) and for other unspecified crimes. However, a legal representative of the organization clarified to news agencies that they had obtained all proper licenses and received the MCIG's formal approval in August 1994.⁸⁹ In response, Minister of Culture and Islamic Affairs Mohammad Seyyed Hosseini alleged that the forced closure was also related to the content of the works shown by the House of Cinema.

"This is not just a legal issue; religious people in our society have questioned and objected to things

*that have been happening in [House of Cinema's] recent festivals."*⁹⁰

Additionally, the MCIG has been accused of using its oversight authority to hobble the careers of artists they perceive as dissidents. For example, a young anonymous writer alleged that their book of short stories submitted to the MCIG for review in 2022 was arbitrarily rejected for publication. The author said that the rejection did not indicate what specific content or themes the MCIG objected to in the work, but it did indicate that the author's "online activities" were deemed objectionable.⁹¹ The decision in this case demonstrates that the MCIG's role encompasses not only the arbitrary censorship of artists, but also the surveillance of them, making the institution an essential arm of

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50 year old Parvaneh Ojaghi, and her 19 year old daughter, Golzar Tarverdian, pose for the camera in Pardis city near Tehran. Both women were arrested and held in prison for participating in the 2022 protests. Photo by **Yalda Moaiery**

the state's control apparatus.

FINANCIAL CONTROL

In addition to the MCIG's position as the primary arbiter of artistic censorship in Iran, they also have complete financial control over public artistic production. AFI spoke with representatives of **Art/Culture/ Action (ACA)**, a collective of Iranian artists and cultural workers, who provided more insight into how the MCIG operates and makes funding decisions. According to ACA, all funding for Iran's arts and cultural sector is funneled through the MCIG. The concentration of state funds in this singular institution forces artists to contend with financial instability or adapt their work to fit within the parameters of what they believe the MCIG will deem acceptable.

The MCIG has also used grants and professional opportunities to coerce artists into submission or self-censorship. For example, in April 2023, the MCIG offered free studio space to artists involved in the 2022 protests on the condition that they publicly

expressed regret for their actions.⁹²

The representatives of ACA noted that the artistic community in Iran deeply frowns upon any collaboration with the government since working with the regime means giving away the little autonomy Iranian artists have to create and publicize critical work. Corroborating ACA's claim, several Iranian actresses and authors recently voiced their refusal to contribute to projects funded by the MCIG in response to its attempts to incentivize government support.⁹³

Rather than go through official bureaucratic channels, many Iranian artists try to work independently by producing their work underground or abroad. However, they often struggle to establish connections with international donors, patrons, and institutions due to restrictions on international monetary transactions.⁹⁴ Consequently, many are forced to submit to the MCIG's regulations to continue their work as artists in Iran. For example, **Paraffin Tehran**, created by musicians and entrepreneurs **Azim Fathi**, **Payam Parvizi**, and **Ramtin Niazi**, is a music



A female officer of the morality police (2007), photo by [Yalda Moaiery](#)

events brand based in Iran that provides Iranians with an inside look into the underground electronic scene that has thrived for decades despite the Islamic Republic's strict censorship of art and culture. The founders initially sought to establish a global record label specializing in vinyl. However, the group encountered financial sanctions in Iran and had limited options for international money transfer, which made it difficult to send and receive funds for production costs.⁹⁵ Consequently, Paraffin Tehran changed its focus towards bringing worldwide techno talent to Iran, but they can only do so by adhering to the MCIG's strict live performance laws. Paraffin Tehran is required to submit a recording of every set they produce to the MCIG in advance. The group shared that because authorities are likely to censor songs with lyrics, vocals, or obvious rhythms, they focus on ambient and dub techno genres in order to receive approval.⁹⁶

SURVEILLANCE

The MCIG has increasingly targeted

artists for both their creative works and their support of protests.⁹⁷ While it is unclear whether the MCIG directly refers artists' cases to the prosecutor's office, it is suggested that they are responsible for surveilling and issuing warnings to artists whose work is allegedly noncompliant with the law. A fact-finding mission established by the HRC in November 2022 uncovered a key role that the MCIG plays in this regard:

"In July 2023, for instance, the Deputy Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohammad Hashemi, reported that approximately 1,000 artists had 'broken the law' and 300 artists had 'refused to conform with the system' even though they had been 'warned' of their alleged illegal conduct. He noted that, as a result, 300 artists had faced restrictions to their work, including a prohibition to exercise professional activities."⁹⁸

Following the outbreak of the protests in September 2022, the MCIG has taken initiative to surveil and target artists who support *Woman, Life, Freedom*.



Last year the MCIG announced that it would institute a work ban for actresses who have not complied with the enforced dress code.



Documents leaked to the BBC reveal that the head of the MCIG commissioned a “Celebrity Task Force” to track and sanction artists that made statements either denouncing the death of Mahsa Jina Amini or supporting the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests. The list included more than 141 writers, actors, directors, poets, and musicians. The MCIG called for unspecified “restrictions” to be placed on them. The statement also called for the criminal indictment of two actresses, **Fatemeh Motamed-Arya** and **Katayoun Riahi**, for removing their hijabs and making public statements in support of the movement. Riahi was arrested in November 2022 on charges of “collusion” and “acting against Iran’s authorities.”⁹⁹

Last year the MCIG announced that it would institute a work ban for actresses who have not complied with the enforced dress code.¹⁰⁰ In October 2023, it released a list of 20 actresses prohibited from working in Iran for posting images or videos of themselves without a hijab or appearing in public without one. The list included actress **Taraneh Alidoosti**, the star of the 2017 Oscar-winning film “The Salesman,” who was arrested in 2022 after posting a photo of herself without a hijab, holding a sign that said *Woman, Life, Freedom*, on her Instagram account.¹⁰¹

The Iranian parliament recently ordered the MCIG to increase its efforts to monitor citizens’ personal lives to determine whether their online content consumption aligns with the Islamic Republic’s values.¹⁰² In particular, the MCIG tracks the online media that Iranians engage with, their inclination toward foreign-based media for news and information, and how they utilize communication tools.¹⁰³ Through cyber-policing, authorities identified and targeted several street musician groups that posted videos of their performances on social media. The groups received a message from the

government stating that their Instagram accounts were blocked “due to criminal content” and that the individuals playing the instruments in the photos would be prosecuted.¹⁰⁴ Such cases of prosecution through online surveillance and cyber-policing make artists wary of sharing their work online or on social media.

In May 2023, ACA issued a statement calling on all artists and arts and cultural institutions to boycott the MCIG and refuse to acknowledge them as an authority. The statement articulated the freedom of expression as a central aim of *Woman, Life, Freedom*. It argued that the rejection of state institutions practicing censorship is a necessary step in the progression of the movement:

“Reclaiming the right to freedom of expression and being, and the liberation of artistic and intellectual creation from censorship, which has been fought for for years, is widely and deeply on display in the progressive movement of Woman, Life, and Freedom, [...] Now and following this movement, the Iranian artistic community has shown that it no longer obeys the regulations of the aggressive institutions of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance [...] and other repression and censorship institutions.”¹⁰⁵

Several publishers, cinema companies, and artists have joined ACA’s boycott by exposing the MCIG’s repressive practices and publicly denouncing their authority. However, boycotting or otherwise defying the MCIG comes at a steep cost for many Iranian artists. Since the beginning of the 2022 protests, dozens of artists who have defied the MCIG or demonstrated their support of *Woman, Life, Freedom* have been charged with spreading propaganda, conspiracy against the state, committing blasphemy, or related



Sepideh Berenji is sitting in the visitation room of Qarchak prison (2015), photo by **Yalda Moaiery**

crimes. Iranian artists continue to face imprisonment and other severe punishments for demanding artistic freedom, demonstrating the MCIG's unlimited discretion as a mechanism of surveillance, censorship, and control in Iran.

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Amir Soltani of Art/Culture/Action

ART/ CULTURE/ ACTION

Currently based in the United States, Iranian writer, journalist, and human rights activist, Amir Soltani, works with an anonymous Iranian academic, researcher, and artist to advocate for freedom of expression in Iran and across the world. Both individuals are members-at-large of Art / Culture / Action (ACA), an anonymous, global collective of Iranian artists, critics, and writers whose advocacy is dedicated to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement. Soltani and the other ACA representative discussed the layers of censorship ingrained in the Iranian arts and cultural sector and shared their belief in the power of Iranian artists and civil society to shape the country's future.

In their interview with AFI and VU, the pair emphasized that it is impossible to talk about artistic freedom in Iran today without recognizing the embeddedness of censors at every stage of artistic production. Having studied and worked as an art researcher in Iran, the ACA representative shared that the oversight of the MCIG looms heavy over the sector; he explained that any artist who would like to share their work with an audience, including at a cinema, gallery, or an exhibition, must submit the work or proposal to the MCIG for evaluation and approval: *"Every single [artistic] work produced in Iran, if it wants to be seen or read or presented to the public, must go through this censor organization [...] The MCIG may loosen its pre-exhibition screening policy from time to time in the case of visual arts, but galleries operate under constant surveillance of the MCIG and the police, forcing them to strictly monitor themselves and what they show."*

The MCIG, the anonymous ACA representative explained, will not approve any artwork or proposal that features criticism of the government or challenges to social norms. Occasionally, artists use symbols that serve as veiled criticisms of the regime which slip by the censor unnoticed, but it is difficult to do so and could be potentially costly for artists if the criticism comes to light. Consequently, most critical pieces are never seen by the public. Echoing those comments, Soltani said that the true impetus of the MCIG is to provide a structure for the state to exert control over who generates culture.

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The pair also pointed to the legal cases being leveled against artists as a more coercive form of repression. Through their work, they have learned of many artists being prosecuted by the government as punishment for their critical work: *“We’re seeing this [trend] of artists being targeted and thrown into Evin Prison.”* Soltani pointed to the case of the famous Iranian Director, Jafar Panahi, who faced a twenty-year work ban and countless legal charges for his work: *“He was banned from making films for [around] 20 years or something like that. When you go after an internationally acclaimed film director, like Panahi, you’re essentially sending a message to the entire film community about what’s permissible, and [...] what’s not.”* These cases, he said, have had a chilling effect on artistic expression at every level.

Soltani expressed his belief that the regime uses censorship and suppression of artists to achieve a “cultural annihilation” in Iran. He articulated his conviction that art has the unique power to capture a nation’s social and political reality and in doing so, bear witness to the nation’s history and identity: *“Artists reflect a nation’s reality, its imagination, its resistance, its depression.”* When you repress artists to the degree the Islamic Republic has, he said, all that is left of Iranian cultural history is the state’s official version of it, not the lived realities of the people, which artists are best situated to document.

According to Soltani, in addition to undermining culture, the state’s repressive measures also take a deep personal toll on artists: *“I know that [Panahi], when faced with this work ban, was nearly suicidal.”* For many Iranian artists, he also said, being unable to work for fear of government reprisal forces them into an existential crisis: *It’s like the famous Descartes quote, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ With artists, it’s: I paint, I draw, I speak, I experiment, therefore I am.”*

Reflecting on the events of September 2022, Soltani shared that the death of Mahsa Jina Amini was an inevitable breaking point for Iranians after decades of state repression and violence: *“[The movement] revolves around the complete loss of faith in the government to hear the people, to address their grievances, [and] to respect them. So that’s the break; it’s a complete break between state and society. And again, it doesn’t happen out of the blue. This has been building up. And it’s just layers and layers of failure on the part of the government to hear and respect the voices of the Iranian people.”* While he is a strong proponent of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, Soltani would like the international community to recognize that it is not an unprecedented response to a singular event; rather, it is part of a long history of activism, notably women-led, in Iran.

The anonymous ACA representative saw a qualitative difference in the activism of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, which he attributes to the involvement of the new

generation of activists. He believed that these younger activists have a clear vision of the change they want to see in Iran, a future without conditions. He recognized that the new generation has successfully learned to wield social media as a political tool to organize and amplify their demands: *"There was a generational difference. All the people we know, the heroes of Woman, Life, Freedom, were completely in command of the tools that they were using to protest against the Islamic regime."*

On the global response to *Woman, Life, Freedom*, Soltani and the other ACA representative said they were disappointed at the lack of international attention given to the protests and the regime's crackdown. They felt that the impressive scale of the protests was not reflected in international news, and they were disturbed that cases of artists who have been exiled, detained, or even killed for their art and activism have received little or no coverage. Now, Soltani and the other ACA representative believe it is the duty of Iranians in the diaspora to amplify the voices of the Iranian artists resisting repression and fighting for their rights on the ground: *"Every aspect and dimension of Iranian culture is under threat. When you have chemical attacks against girls' schools, because girls are leading small protests in their schools, the dimensions of what you're up against are [right there] before your eyes. The length to which this regime is willing to go to silence and squash dissent is clear."*¹⁰⁶

As activists, Soltani and the anonymous ACA representative aim to use the freedoms they have as artists in the diaspora to expose the Islamic Republic's abuses and share Iranians' reality with the world. Soltani's graphic novel, *"Zahra's Paradise,"* features the search for an Iranian protester who disappeared in the aftermath of the 2009 elections, exposing police brutality and human rights violations routinely employed against dissidents. His book was translated into sixteen languages and received international media coverage, demonstrating the power Iranians in the diaspora have to call global attention to the experiences of Iranians living under the Islamic Republic. The anonymous ACA representative also referenced a new statement by Iranian artists and filmmakers to publicize the untimely death of Dariush Mehrjui, one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers. After Mehrjui became increasingly vocal, issuing video statements denouncing the policies of the MCIIG, nearly one hundred Iranian artists and filmmakers saw reason to believe that the murder was politically motivated and took matters into their own hands: *"The biggest frustration is that we don't know how to find the truth, since there is absolutely no way for us to have [an] independent court [or] independent trials to understand the situation. So what we are doing at ACA is publishing a statement to express our concerns about the case and about the way things are going right now, and hundreds of people have joined us in defending his case."* Through its advocacy on this and other cases, ACA holds the Iranian government accountable by placing pressure on the Iranian leadership to respect and protect Iranian artists' rights in the future.

The representatives of ACA also spoke of the powerful role that Iranian civil society groups can play in the struggle for rights and freedoms in Iran. In light of the Islamic Republic's stark repression of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iran, they saw advocacy by CSOs in the diaspora as an important resource in the fight for change: *"Part of what makes Art / Culture / Action so important and so powerful, is that by itself, it is a manifestation of Iranian civil power and Iranian civil society, of our ability to get together, speak together, work together, think together, and act*

together. And that togetherness is something that is constantly threatened."

In their closing thoughts, Soltani and the anonymous ACA representative urged the community to provide real and actionable support to Iranian artists in their struggle for rights and freedoms. An important way this can be achieved, they said, is by creating opportunities for them to share their work with the world and offering them the aid and support they need to continue developing their craft: *"Artists are shimmering symbols of freedom, and we need to recognize them and publish their work. It comes back to that classic saying, 'don't curse the darkness, light the candle.' We can create spaces in which the work and the voices of artists are reflected. That's one of the reasons we have ACA. We've worked with other organizations to do just that. An artist needs to produce work the way a fish needs water and we need oxygen. So we need to help them do their work, whatever that work is. They have to be able to do their work."*

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Artists are shimmering symbols of freedom, and we need to recognize them and publish their work. It comes back to that classic saying, 'don't curse the darkness, light the candle.' We can create spaces in which the work and the voices of artists are reflected.

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A girl is holding a placard of *Woman, Life, Freedom* in the street on Keshavarz Boulevard (2022), photo by **Yalda Moaiery**

CHAPTER 4

STATE-LED PERSECUTION OF ARTISTS



Painting by: Nazanin Noroozi, 2024

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Today, dozens of Iranian artists are facing criminal charges for acts of creative expression. They are subjected to detention and possible torture during their criminal proceedings and summary trials before judges who are overtly biased toward the state.

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“Mesmerized, Listen to the Big Brother” (2019), by Arghavan Khosravi

STATE-LED PERSECUTION OF ARTISTS

The central role of artists in the proliferation of Iran’s *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement has provoked a wave of state action targeting creative workers and suppressing artistic

freedom, including through prosecution under laws that are incompatible with international human rights treaties protecting free expression. Under the guise of law, Iran’s government has increasingly deployed the Ministry of Justice, and two national intelligence agencies – the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) –

to punish a wide variety of creative expressions across artistic disciplines. Aside from the direct impact on the lives of persecuted artists, the government's actions also serve as an warning to artists who are critical of the government or express solidarity with *Woman, Life, Freedom*, highlighting that dissent will have immediate and concrete repercussions.

As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated under international law to uphold the right to freedom of expression. Based on these commitments, Iran is overtly violating international human rights law by arresting, charging, and prosecuting artists without due process under a series of overbroad laws related to the dissemination of propaganda, national security, espionage and collusion, and the protection of state-sanctioned religion. In response to this alarming development, eight UN Special Rapporteurs released a joint statement in December 2022 recognizing the critical posture of artists in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement while expressing concern about detained Iranian artists facing prosecution and capital punishment as a direct consequence of their artistic expression:

"These arrests and indictments appear solely to be related to the peaceful exercise of their legitimate right to freedom of artistic expression and creativity. They are only aimed at silencing dissenting voices in the country and constitute undue restrictions on the right of all persons in Iran to enjoy and have access to the arts and to take part in cultural and public life."¹⁰⁷

Since the publication of the joint statement, the Islamic Republic has only intensified its efforts to prosecute artists under laws that are incompatible with

international human rights standards. Today, dozens of Iranian artists are facing criminal charges for acts of creative expression. They are subjected to detention and possible torture during their criminal proceedings and summary trials before judges who are overtly biased toward the state. Some face execution as a direct result of their work. Even artists who have relocated abroad continue to be attacked by the regime to intimidate them into self-censorship. The State's attempts to repress artists abroad include threats of physical harm, punitive measures against family members that remain in Iran, and/or prosecution under the same illegitimate laws used to punish artists who remain in Iran.

This section will detail how the Islamic Republic employs the state's power to limit artistic expression and punish artists who transgress the boundaries of free expression as set forth by the regime.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK PROTECTING ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN IRAN

Iran has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees freedom of expression and sets forth permissible limitations to this right:¹⁰⁸

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through



any other media of this choice.

3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

- A. For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
- B. For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.

The UN Committee on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) has confirmed that Article 19 § 2 of the ICCPR protects “cultural and artistic expression.”¹⁰⁹

Despite being a signatory to the ICCPR, Iran’s constitutional provisions on freedom of expression fall far short of the standard outlined in Article 19. While Article 23 of the Iranian constitution does recognize the right to hold a belief or opinion, the individual right to freedom of expression is not explicitly recognized. Article 24 of the Constitution does recognize freedom of expression for the press. However, it limits that right where the expression is “*detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public.*”¹¹⁰ Such broad language empowers state investigatory bodies and judges to use their discretion to decide which expressions are impermissible under the Constitution.

Given the deficiencies in Iran’s constitution, the ICCPR theoretically stands as a bulwark against state interferences in the freedom of expression. However, shirking its international legal obligations, Iran has enacted a series of laws that are

regularly employed to restrict or punish free expression and, most recently, have been used to sanction artists.

SUBSTANTIVE VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHT TO FREE EXPRESSION

State authorities in Iran regularly wield the law as a tool to persecute dissident artists, a phenomenon that has been particularly acute since Mahsa Amini’s death in police custody. Under international human rights law, governments can take proportionate action to limit free expression for a discrete number of permissible reasons, including for the protection of the rights and reputations of others, national security, public order, and public health or morals.¹¹¹ However, the recent spate of arrests and prosecutions of artists in Iran have been made pursuant to a series of laws that either do not articulate a legally recognized basis for a restriction on free expression, as articulated in Article 19 of the ICCPR or are so vaguely worded as to hand unfettered authority to the state to decide when the individual right to expression can be retracted and perceived infractions punished. The Islamic Republic most frequently relies on the following laws to limit artistic expression:

ARTICLE 500: PROPAGANDA AGAINST THE REGIME

One of the most common laws used against artists who voiced their support of *Woman, Life, Freedom* is Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code related to the spreading of “propaganda against the government.” The text of the article reads:



A terrified young girl looks at the camera, while agents raid her house. Photo by: Yalda Moaiery

"Anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations, shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment"¹¹²

This law is facially non-compliant with Article 19 of the ICCPR, as the text does not articulate a permissible reason to restrict free expression. Propagandistic speech can be restricted where it is a threat to national security or public order—and the Islamic Republic would undoubtedly claim that Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code is designed towards this end—but the text of the law does not tie the propaganda limitation to larger security concerns. Indeed, the law is writ large designed to quash dissent and prevent support for opposition groups, both illegitimate aims to restrict expression.

Article 500 also runs afoul of Article 19 of the ICCPR, as the generic propaganda ban is vague and overbroad, allowing law enforcement and the judiciary to decide when speech and expression violate the law. Most egregiously, the law fails to define "propaganda," leaving

Iranians without guidance or clarity on which expressions will be considered propaganda by the government and causing artists to self-censor for fear of prosecution.

In practice, the Islamic Republic employs the term "propaganda" as a blanket category capturing any speech or expression it deems to be a threat to its rule. Article 500 has been widely used to criminalize Iranian dissidents, including artists, lawyers, journalists, and activists.¹¹³ While this article was also used before *Woman, Life, Freedom*, there has been an uptick in its use against artists following the outbreak of the protests.

In October 2022, poet **Atefeh Chaharmahalian** was arrested for participating in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests. While in detention, authorities charged her on multiple counts, including "propaganda against the government" under Article 500.¹¹⁴ The artist was sentenced to two years and eight months in prison but was granted amnesty along with hundreds of other protestors imprisoned during the protests.¹¹⁵ Chaharmahalian refused

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In March 2024, the grammy-award-winning singer Shervin Hajipour was sentenced to three years and eight months for his song 'Baraye' written in support of *Woman, Life, Freedom*.

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the amnesty offer, stating: *"I neither accepted amnesty - I would never consider writing and defending people's rights as a crime that requires amnesty – nor put down the pen."* Following her refusal, the Islamic Revolutionary Court reissued her full sentence.¹¹⁶ In addition to the time served in prison, the poet is also banned from leaving the country, faces restrictions on her social media and internet use, and may not join any political parties.¹¹⁷

In August 2023, filmmakers **Saeed Roustayi** and **Javad Noruzbegi** were sentenced to six months in jail for producing and disseminating "propaganda of the opposition against the government" after debuting their film, *Leila's Brothers*, at the Cannes Film Festival – which won the prestigious FIPRESCI award – without the permission of the MCIG. *Leila's Brothers* is about a Tehran-based family dealing with financial troubles in Iran's poor economic climate. The film has been banned in Iran since its initial debut after the filmmakers refused to make suggested edits by the MCIG. Roustayi's sentence prohibits him from making films in Iran for the next five years. It requires him to take a filmmaking course under the supervision of the MCIG on "preserving national and ethical interests."¹¹⁸

Most recently, in March 2024, the grammy-award-winning singer **Shervin Hajipour** was sentenced to three years and eight months for his song "Baraye" written in support of *Woman, Life, Freedom*.¹¹⁹ As mentioned in Chapter One, the song lyrics are inspired by tweets from Iranians listing the reasons they were participating in the protest movement.¹²⁰ Hajipour was officially charged with spreading "propaganda against the regime" under Article 500 of the Penal Code and sentenced to three years and eight months in prison. Hajipour was also

banned from leaving Iran for two years following his imprisonment and must engage in activities that "promote the achievements" of the Islamic Revolution as a part of his sentence.¹²¹ In addition to the time served, Hajipour was ordered by the government to write songs about crimes committed by the US government and to publish them online.¹²²

In January 2024, the Iranian musician **Mehdi Yarrahi** was sentenced to two years imprisonment and more than 70 lashes for his song "Roosarito" (Your Head Scarf).¹²³ Before his sentencing, Yarrahi dedicated his song to "the noble women of my homeland, who bravely shine in the front line of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement." The song protests the enforcement of a dress code, including the hijab, on Iranian women through lyrics such as *"Take off your scarf, let your hair flow."*¹²⁴ The court convicted Yarrahi on multiple charges related to political crimes and morality, including producing "propaganda against the state" and "producing and distributing obscene and immoral content online."¹²⁵

ARTICLES 501 AND 508: ESPIONAGE, COLLUSION, AND CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE STATE

Crimes related to state sabotage and espionage have also been used against Iranian dissidents in recent years, particularly those with international careers or dual nationality. While there is not a clear definition of espionage in the Iranian Penal Code, the most explicit mention of espionage is made under Article 501, which states:

"Anyone who, knowingly and intentionally, provides maps or secrets

*or documents regarding the national or international policies of the state to those who are not authorized to have access, or who informs them about their content in a way that constitutes espionage, taking into consideration the circumstances and stages [of the crime], shall be sentenced to one to ten years' imprisonment."*¹²⁶

While the prevention of espionage can be a legitimate aim of restricting free expression, as detailed below, this law has been wrongfully used to punish those who seek to form connections with international arts and cultural institutions and/or to develop critical works in safe spaces abroad, outside of the immediate scope of surveillance of the Iranian government. In practice, the charges are used to hobble the careers of Iranian artists seeking to show their critical work in less restrictive environments abroad.

Article 508 criminalizes "cooperation" with a foreign government. The text reads:

*"Anyone who cooperates by any means with foreign States against the Islamic Republic of Iran [...] shall be sentenced to one to ten years' imprisonment."*¹²⁷

The article is concerning because it fails to provide a definition for "cooperation," once more leaving broad discretion to the law enforcement apparatus on what level of foreign association is prohibited. In practice, Article 508 has been used to criminalize legitimate forms of association, including contacting foreign media or participating in international arts and cultural events. This greatly restricts the career potential of Iranian artists and cultural workers, who may choose not to participate in foreign arts events and exhibitions or engage with foreign media for fear of prosecution.

In 2022, the Iranian parliament began

developing regulations that would authorize death penalty sentences for those convicted of espionage for sharing information with foreign media or organizations that in any way denigrates the government of Iran or its Islamic law.¹²⁸ Such a severe sentence is grossly disproportionate to the seriousness of the offense, and it demonstrates the Islamic Republic's resolve to repress Iranian's fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and association.

On May 8, 2024, internationally acclaimed film director **Mohammad Rasoulof** was sentenced to eight years in prison for "collusion with the intention of committing a crime against the country's security" ahead of the Cannes Festival premiere of his newest film, *The Seed of the Sacred Fig*. Iranian authorities had put pressure on the director and the festival to withdraw the film for allegedly failing to obtain the proper permits and because several female characters in the film do not wear hijabs in their scenes. However, they did not capitulate and the film, presented by Germany at the competition, was awarded the Special Prize of the Jury on May 25, 2024. Rasoulof had to flee Iran to avoid arbitrary imprisonment. Authorities had confiscated his passport years prior as a punitive measure for previous cases related to his artistic work, so the director was forced to flee through the land border. Key members of the production, including the leading actors of the film **Missagh Zareh** and **Soheila Golestani**, are banned from leaving the country.¹²⁹

The writer and illustrator **Mehdi Bahman** was arrested in October 2022 on espionage charges for his criticisms of the government and activism. As an artist and activist, Bahman has worked to promote religious tolerance and co-existence in Iran. Earlier that year, he created artworks containing symbols from various religions and presented

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The ability to build an international network and access opportunities abroad is essential for artists and cultural workers seeking to develop their careers and expand their audience. Fearing reprisal under these articles of the penal code, Iranian artists may refrain from engaging with international media or arts organizations.

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them to minority religious leaders in Iran as gifts and gestures of peace. In April 2022, Bahman gave an interview to an Israeli news outlet criticizing the Islamic Republic's imposition of Islamic law on Iranians. Following his arrest, Bahman was sentenced to death by the Islamic Revolutionary Court; he is currently on death row.¹³⁰

Several high-profile cases related to espionage and collusion from the past decade continue to have a chilling effect on artists' free expression today.

In 2016, **Karan Vafadari** and **Afarin Nayssari**, the Iranian-American owners of the Aun Gallery in Tehran, were imprisoned on charges related to espionage and undermining national security. The gallery had been closed since the previous summer when members of the IRGC destroyed several works and confiscated others before arresting the couple. The couple's case was assigned to a hardline judge known for imposing disproportionate sentences on dual-nationals, who added "associating with foreign diplomats," "attempting to overthrow the Iranian government," "recruiting spies," "collusion against national security," and "dealing in indecent art" to the charges.¹³¹ The couple was released on bail after two years in jail and currently await a decision on their appeal.

In 2014, the documentary filmmaker **Mahnaz Mohammadi** was arrested for "colluding with the international news network BBC against the Islamic Republic of Iran." Mohammadi said that she never worked with the BBC or received any money from them. She shared that in detention, her interrogator pointed to her documentary film, "Travelogue," which received an award at the Iranian Truth Festival in 2006, as evidence of her crimes.¹³² In "Travelogue", which was shot on a train traveling from Tehran to Ankara, Mohammadi asks travelers

leaving Iran about their reasons for exiting the country. Mohammadi has since been banned from emigrating, though she continues to create films and advocate for Iranian women's rights. In December 2022, unable to attend a film festival in India where she was to receive an award, Mohammadi instead sent a lock of her hair and asked a representative to give the following speech on her behalf:

*"This is my hair cut short to show my suffering. This symbolizes the end of my suffering... Get up and move on. Many people are killed and executed. Yesterday, 23-year-old Moshan Shakari was executed for protesting against injustice as well as many executions. I am sending you this because this day we all need solidarity to reclaim our natural rights. Women. Life. Freedom."*¹³³

The ability to build an international network and access opportunities abroad is essential for artists and cultural workers seeking to develop their careers and expand their audience. Fearing reprisal under these articles of the penal code, Iranian artists may refrain from engaging with international media or arts organizations. In effect, the legacy of these high-profile cases continues to influence self-censorship in Iran today.

ARTICLE 286: SOWING CORRUPTION ON EARTH

Chapter 9, Article 286 of the Iranian Penal Code criminalizes "sowing corruption on Earth"; (*efsad-e fel arz*); the Islamic Republic uses this term to refer to a comprehensive slate of offenses related to national security and morality.¹³⁴ The text of the article reads as follows:

"Any person, who extensively

*commits [a] felony against the bodily entity of people, offenses against internal or international security of the state, spreading lies, disruption of the economic system of the state, arson and destruction of properties, distribution of poisonous and bacterial and dangerous materials, and establishment of, or aiding and abetting in, places of corruption and prostitution, [on a scale] that causes severe disruption in the public order of the state and insecurity, or causes harsh damage to the bodily entity of people or public or private properties, or causes distribution of corruption and prostitution on a large scale, shall be considered as mofsed-e-fel-arz [corrupt on earth] and shall be sentenced to death."*¹³⁵

The law includes a range of severe penalties, including execution. The article is incompatible with Article 19 of the ICCPR as the overbroad and vague wording allows Iran's law enforcement and prosecutorial system exceptional latitude to prosecute a wide range of expression. In practice, "corruption" and "prostitution" have been attributed to legitimate forms of expression, including criticizing the government or challenging restrictive laws and/or social norms.

In October 2022, rapper **Toomaj Salehi** was arrested after releasing new songs in support of *Woman, Life, Freedom*. The music video for one of his songs, *Divination*, shows Salehi reading coffee grounds, while his lyrics predict the eventual toppling of the regime by resisters. His lyrics also speak to the repression of the protestors and of Iranians more broadly, he sings:

"Someone's crime was that her hair was flowing in the wind.

Someone's crime is that he or she was brave and...outspoken"

Salehi disappeared days after the music video was released and was later discovered to be in police custody. He faced a number of charges for his video, including "sowing corruption on Earth" and spreading "propaganda against the regime." Salehi was released on bail but was put back in prison in November 2023 after publicly exposing the torture he endured in police custody, which included being placed in solitary confinement for 252 days while in detention. In April 2024, the Islamic Revolutionary Court sentenced him to execution, the maximum penalty under Article 286.

A UN Group of Experts denounced the sentence and the articles on which it is based in a joint statement. They emphasized that the government of the Islamic Republic has wrongfully used the articles to crush artistic freedom and attack Iranian dissidents, including artists:

"Criticism of government policy, including through artistic expression, is protected under the rights to freedom of expression and the right to take part in cultural life. It must not be criminalized [...] Art must be allowed to criticize, to provoke, to push the boundaries in any society."

Salehi's sentence was later reversed by Iran's Supreme Court in June 2024, and in August 2024 he was cleared of the corruption charges by a lower court. However, the rapper will remain in prison until he receives a sentence on two other charges that were leveled against him in relation to his work, including "disturbing public order" and "publishing false statements on social media."¹⁴⁰





A young girl who has come to Rahian Noor camp (2009); Yalda Moaiery

ARTICLES 499, 500, 513, AND 514: BLASPHEMY LAWS

Iran's blasphemy laws are a cornerstone of the legal system, tightly interwoven with the branch of the country's legal system based on Sharia, the Islamic Revolutionary Court. Articles 499, 500, 513, and 514 of the Second Book of the Iranian Penal Code define "blasphemy" as any act or expression that insults or shows disrespect towards the religion of Islam, its Prophets, or the religious leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, notably the country's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁴¹ As blasphemy is considered an especially serious offense in Iran, all four of the articles carry capital punishment as a possible sentence.¹⁴²

Iran's blasphemy laws are incompatible with Article 19 of the ICCPR because they limit the right to freedom of expression by using the law to protect the feelings of a particular religious group, which is not a legitimate aim of

the law. In 2019, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, David Kaye, provided an analysis on why blasphemy laws are incompatible with Article 19 of the Covenant:

*"To be clear, anti-blasphemy laws fail to meet the legitimacy condition of article 19 (3) of the Covenant, given that article 19 protects individuals and their right to freedom of expression and opinion; neither article 19 (3) nor article 18 of the Covenant protect ideas or beliefs from ridicule, abuse, criticism or other "attacks" seen as offensive. Several human rights mechanisms have affirmed the call to repeal blasphemy laws because of the risk they pose to debate over religious ideas and the role that such laws play in enabling Governments to show preference for the ideas of one religion over those of other religions, beliefs or non-belief systems."*¹⁴³

While ostensibly aimed at protecting religious sentiments, Iran has used these articles as tools to suppress dissent and protect its theocratic rule. Certain

artists, like cartoonists or satirists, are particularly vulnerable to facing blasphemy charges because of the nature of their works, which occasionally use religious vignettes to provoke a reaction.

On April 13, 2024, cartoonist **Atena Farghadani** was arrested by intelligence agents while attempting to post one of her caricature artworks on a wall outside of the Presidential Palace. According to information Farghadani shared with her lawyer and her husband, before being transferred to prison, she was severely beaten by agents in an undisclosed location, including through blows to her head and nose. After being transferred to Evin Prison – a maximum security facility – she was charged with several crimes, including a blasphemy charge for “insulting the sacred Messiah.” She was also charged with spreading “propaganda against the state.”¹⁴⁴ She is currently being held in Evin Prison and awaits a hearing.¹⁴⁵

ARTICLE 638: CHASTITY AND HIJAB LAW

Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code enforces a dress code on women based on conservative interpretations of Islamic law. The law is one of many measures taken to limit the free expression of women and girls by requiring them to cover themselves in religious clothing, regardless of their religious belief or desire to wear the garment. The text of the article reads as follows:

“Anyone in public places and roads who openly commits a harām (sinful) act, in addition to the punishment provided for the act, shall be sentenced to two months’ imprisonment or up to 74 lashes; and if they commit an act

*that is not punishable but violates public prudency, they shall only be sentenced to ten days to two months’ imprisonment or up to 74 lashes. **Note-** Women, who appear in public places and roads without wearing an Islamic hijab, shall be sentenced to ten days to two months’ imprisonment or a fine of five hundred to fifty thousand Rials.”¹⁴⁶*

The investigation by the Fact-Finding Mission on Iran (FFMI) revealed that Mahsa Jina Amini’s arrest and subsequent death were directly linked to laws and policies enforcing the mandatory hijab, which violate the right to freedom of expression, among other fundamental rights.¹⁴⁷ The enforcement of dress codes for women and girls in Iran constitutes a breach of international human rights law. Even though the right to freedom of expression is subject to limitations, these restrictions must adhere to strict regulations, as outlined, inter alia, in General Comment No. 34 of the Human Rights Committee, which unequivocally asserts that “dress” is a means of expression.¹⁴⁸ Corroborating this aspect of accepted restrictions, a group of Special Rapporteurs underscored in a Communication to Iran that a woman’s freedom to express her identity and convictions is safeguarded under Article 19 of the ICCPR.¹⁴⁹

For decades, Iranian women have protested the enforced dress code only to be met with violence and coercion by state forces. As more women chose to reject the enforced hijab following the outbreak of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, the state changed tactics and intervened at the legislative level to criminalize their protest. On September 20, 2023, Iran’s parliament passed the Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, which increased the penalties under Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code, including mandated fines

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For decades, Iranian women have protested the enforced dress code only to be met with violence and coercion by state forces. As more women chose to reject the enforced hijab following the outbreak of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, the state changed tactics and intervened at the legislative level to criminalize their protest.
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up to USD 720, flogging, restrictions on travel and internet access, or up to ten years in jail.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, the law requires public institutions to deny essential services to women who do not comply with the compulsory hijab mandate. Accordingly, directors and managers of organizations that fail to enforce the law among their staff and/or customers also face heavy punishments such as fines, bans on leaving the country, or even prison terms.¹⁵¹

Since *Woman, Life, Freedom*, the law has been enforced against influential women artists who use their platforms and large follower bases to criticize the government and call for change. Many Iranian women artists, both in the country and in the diaspora, have taken to social media to demonstrate their discontent with the government's enforcement of the Chastity and Hijab Law, their treatment of protestors, and the state's overall repression of women and girls. As mentioned in the previous chapter, many have taken videos of themselves removing their hijab or cutting their hair in rejection of the enforced dress code and of the regime in general. Aware of the integral role of social media in the proliferation of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, the Iranian government has taken several initiatives to surveil and police influential Iranian women online, including prolific artists, and punish them for not complying with the dress code in their online expression.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in late 2022, actress **Taraneh Alidoosti** posted a picture of herself without a headscarf to her Instagram account, holding a sign that said, "Woman, Life, Freedom." Alidoosti's post had a far-reaching and viral spread, as her account had more than eight million followers at the time. Within days, she was arrested under charges of "spreading falsehoods" and jailed for

two and a half weeks, and her Instagram account was disabled.¹⁵² Alidoosti was included in the government's list, published in November 2023, of more than twenty actresses banned from seeking employment in Iranian films for their refusal to comply with the Chastity and Hijab Law.¹⁵³ Undeterred by the ban, Alidoosti later stated on her social media, "*I will not comply with your headscarf that is still dripping with the blood of my sisters.*"

PROCEDURAL VIOLATIONS OF ARTISTS' RIGHTS

In addition to being charged under one of the many laws criminalizing legitimate forms of expression, artists that produce controversial, socially or politically engaged works in Iran also contend with empowered and overzealous law enforcement agencies that subject them to gross violations of their rights to liberty, security of person, and a fair trial, all protected under Article 9 of the ICCPR. Both independent reporting and the creative workers interviewed by AFI confirm that artists in Iran are frequently subject to arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, physical harm, and/or torture as a result of their creative work. Further, the Islamic Republic's judiciary perpetuates violations of defendants' procedural rights, conducting criminal proceedings in a manner that is highly biased towards the state, denying legal representation to the accused, and holding summary trials rather than trials by an impartial jury.¹⁵⁴ Artists found guilty of the aforementioned laws restricting expression must also contend with judges issuing grossly disproportionate sentences, including lengthy imprisonment, flogging, amputations, or death sentences.¹⁵⁵ The mere possibility of facing a proceeding in Iran's draconian justice system can deter artists from producing works



Two young girls who were arrested by the morality police for not observing the Islamic dress code (hijab) are screaming while getting ready to be transported to the station. Photo by: Yalda Moaiery

“Due to Iran’s expansive definition of who constitutes a threat to the Islamic Republic, the regime directly assaults exiles involved in any opposition against the State through a multitude of repressive tactics, including coercion, intimidation, surveillance, and assassination.”

the government could perceive as challenging their authority.

Since the death of Mahsa Jina Amini, the regime imprisoned tens of thousands of protestors, holding them on arbitrary grounds to punish them for their participation and discourage them from taking part in future protests. Among them was photojournalist **Yalda Moaiery**, who was detained while taking photographs at one of the first *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests in September 2022. Moaiery told AFI and VU that she was given no explanation for her arrest. After being identified by police officers while she was in prison, Moaiery was separated from the other women protestors and placed into solitary confinement for extended periods. Moaiery, who is currently in the US, explained that she had been arbitrarily detained and tortured by authorities several times throughout her career prior to this instance, and that the experience of being subjected to solitary confinement continues to weigh heavily on her mental and emotional health.

While in prison, many inmates

experience torture and are coerced into giving false confessions under duress. Whether extracted through physical abuse, psychological pressure, or threats against loved ones, these confessions are often used as the primary evidence in trials, leading to wrongful convictions with harsh sentences.¹⁵⁶

In July 2022, weeks into the government’s initiative to rigidly enforce the Chastity and Hijab law, Iranian writer, poet, and activist **Sepideh Rashno** was arrested for non-compliance. Earlier that year, Rashno was filmed engaging in a verbal confrontation on a city bus with a woman who was chastising her for not wearing a hijab. The video was widely circulated online. Shortly afterward, Rashno was arrested and held in detention for weeks before suddenly appearing on Iranian state television to confess her regret for flouting the law. Rashno looked tired and in pain and appeared to have bruises on her face and around her eyes, raising concern that she may have been tortured until she agreed to confess.¹⁵⁷ Despite the confession, Rashno was sentenced

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Ultimately, the Islamic Republic's repressive tactics against Iranian artists extend beyond national borders, endangering the lives of both Iranians in the diaspora as well as their families in Iran.

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under charges of “propaganda” and “promiscuity” in January 2024; she will serve a three-year and eleven-month sentence in Evin Prison and is barred from leaving the country.¹⁵⁸

TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION OF ARTISTS

Facing extreme repression in Iran, many artists and cultural workers choose to relocate temporarily or permanently abroad, where they can continue to develop their craft in less restrictive environments. Some seek political asylum in a host country, while others live in indefinite exile, awaiting a safe time to return to Iran. Regardless of their immigration status, Iranian artists in the diaspora who continue to identify with the struggle for rights and freedoms in Iran, either through their activism and/or their artwork, are increasingly subjected to transnational repression by the Iranian government.

MOIS and the IRGC are the primary government agencies involved in repressing dissidents at home and abroad. Due to Iran's expansive definition of who constitutes a threat to the Islamic Republic, the regime directly assaults exiles involved in any opposition against the State through a multitude of repressive tactics, including coercion, intimidation, surveillance, and assassination. To place more pressure on Iranian dissidents in the diaspora, the regime also threatens their family members in Iran by detaining relatives of exiles or refusing to allow them to travel abroad.¹⁵⁹

While the Islamic Republic has a long history of implementing mechanisms of transnational repression, there has been a significant uptick in threats as well as attempted kidnapping and assassinations of exiled Iranian artists

over the past fifteen years. In 2012, **Golshifteh Farahani**, one of Iran's biggest film stars, appeared in a black and white video to promote the César Awards Ceremony. Farahani bared her right breast to symbolize her commitment of body and soul to her art alongside the other actors in the promotional video.¹⁶⁰ Almost immediately after the video was released to the public, Farahani's parents received a call in Tehran from a man who said he was an official of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Republic, threatening punishment and that Farahani's breasts would be cut off and presented to them on a plate. Farahani was already living in exile in France. Still, this incident led to her permanent banishment, and her father had to be admitted to the hospital under psychological stress after he received repeated threats against his family,¹⁶¹ demonstrating the harsh emotional toll of the regime's transnational repression of dissidents and their family members.

Iranian singer **Sassan Heydari-Yafteh**, also known as Sasy Mankan, released a music video for his song “Tehran Tokyo” in March 2021 that features pornographic film actress Alexis Texas and depicts the actress removing a hijab.¹⁶² Although Sasy had lived in California for over a decade, Iranian authorities threatened to take action against him through international legal authorities when he posted promotional snippets of the video on social media. When the music video was released, Iranian authorities arrested the brothers who arranged the song, **Mohsen** and **Behroz Manuchehri**, in Shiraz, Iran and continued to threaten Sasy.¹⁶³

In July 2021, the US Department of Justice informed Iranian author, journalist, and activist **Masih Alinejad** that she was the target of a kidnapping plot orchestrated by the Iranian government. The Iranian government



A woman returning from work is standing on a bus on Valiasr Avenue in Tehran without the mandatory hijab. Many Iranian women refused to observe the mandatory Islamic dress code after Mahsa Jina Amini was killed by the morality police. August 16th, 2022. Photo by: Yalda Moaiery

reportedly hired a private investigator to track Alinejad and her family's movements in New York, researched ways to abduct her, threatened her family members still living in Iran, and tried to lure her to a third country where she could be forcibly returned to Iran.¹⁶⁴ In January 2023, the US Department of Justice charged three men in another alleged plot that originated in Iran to assassinate Alinejad, following a similar pattern of Iranian government-sponsored efforts to silence Iranian activists around the world.

In April 2024, **Saman Taherpour**, an Iranian artist and designer specializing in contemporary jewelry and accessories based in Gothenburg, Sweden, received death threats via phone from an individual claiming to represent the Office of the President of Iran. The caller allegedly accused Taherpour of committing offenses against the country's security and violating the Islamic Republic's regulations and threatened to harm his family.¹⁶⁵ Iranian security agents summoned and questioned Taherpour's associates in Iran. Taherpour was also told that Iranian

authorities would come to Sweden and force his return to Iran: they noted descriptive details of his office and house to demonstrate that they were surveilling him.¹⁶⁶

Ultimately, the Islamic Republic's repressive tactics against Iranian artists extend beyond national borders, endangering the lives of both Iranians in the diaspora as well as their families in Iran.

As the cases listed above demonstrate, the prosecution of artists and the imposition of severe sentences against them are powerful tools in the regime's arsenal to crush dissent. Recognizing the regime's systematic violations of Iranian artists' rights through these means, the international community must support artists at risk by demanding their immediate and unconditional release. The international community must also take measures to protect artists in exile by sanctioning the regime for its transnational repression.



Yalda Moaiery, photo by: Hossein Fatemi, 2024

YALDA MOAIERY

Yalda Moaiery is an Iranian photojournalist currently residing in the US. Moaiery began her career as a photojournalist in Iran when she was twenty-one years old. Due to unofficial policies in Iran preventing women from working in photojournalism, Moaiery faced immense adversity from the Iranian government throughout her career. In her conversation with AFI and VU, Moaiery discussed the systemic discrimination, routine violence, and punitive measures that Iranian women artists and journalists confront throughout their careers.

Moaiery has dedicated the past two decades to documenting women's experiences in Middle Eastern countries through her photography. She was inspired to pursue this subject after covering the thirty-day war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006. She said of the experience: *"When I was working in Lebanon, I saw a lot of young women whose husbands were killed and they were [left] home all alone with a lot of children. Suddenly [...] I didn't want to take pictures of the war [outside anymore]. I thought that a real war was going on inside these women. So I started taking pictures of them."*

Since that formative experience, Moaiery made it her mission to document the experiences of women that she felt were ignored by Western media. In particular, she captured hundreds of striking images of women in both private and public life in Iran, a number of which are featured in the present report. Her series shows modern Iranian women in their everyday lives, including images of women texting with friends, preparing for parties, weight training at the gym, and eating ice cream. Many of her photographs display Iranian women, in relaxed clothing that does not adhere to the government-imposed dress code, or engaged without hijabs in

activities that are prohibited for women in Iran, like dancing or singing in public.

When asked if she sees her work as a form of activism, Moaiery points to the subjects in her photos as the real activists. Through their small, everyday acts, she says, they bravely defy the government's discriminatory policies and reshape social norms. She sees her photography as a conduit for their messages: *"I look at a picture as a document, not just as a picture of someone. [My work offers] a perspective, or view of modern Iranian life. I think that's what I captured, and I think that's why there were a lot of problems. For example, I took a picture of three women that were eating ice cream which was published in many newspapers. For me, that picture was a mirror of new modern Iranian women who had courage to do something like eat ice-cream, which is a very [sexualized] thing in my country that is better not to do in public [...] I stood up for these things because it [represents] more than just one person or two people."*

As a result of her subject focus on the everyday lives of women and girls and the ways that they are changing and defying social norms, Moaiery faced frequent backlash from the government, including through censorship of her work, arbitrary arrests and prosecution, and solitary confinement.

Moaiery was arrested for the first time approximately twenty years ago, at the start of her career as a photojournalist. She attended an annual demonstration in front of Tehran University, where authorities arrested her to stop her from photographing the event. Even though Moaiery had not captured any photos at the protests, she was taken into custody at a local prison and placed in prolonged solitary confinement – a recognized form of torture¹⁶⁷ – for twenty-one days before being released with a warning not to continue her work. As a result, Moaiery continues to suffer from a deep fear of confined spaces as well as anxiety and depression more than 20 years after the experience: *"When [the authorities] arrested me, [...] they tied my hands and put me in a solitary cell for [nearly] a full month. I remember everything about that time [...] I can stay in public prison for years, but I have a phobia of solitary. It really makes me feel like I am going to die."*

Moaiery shared that she has upwards of ten cases open with one of Iran's intelligence agencies, the IRGC, because of her work as an artist and journalist between 2006 and 2022. In 2017, she was arrested and sentenced to two years in jail for her famous photo, "Woman in the Dust", which portrays a young woman during the 2018 demonstrations at Tehran University courageously raising her fist in the air as she covers her face to avoid smoke and tear gas. Following her arrests, Moaiery noted that many of her journalist colleagues refused to collaborate with her on articles for fear of government reprisal. Additionally, art and photography galleries, even those owned by Moaiery's friends, refused to host exhibitions for her work after she was sentenced in 2017. Moaiery says that their responses show the degree to which the government has succeeded at inspiring fear in Iranian artists:

"I know some painters who painted with clear [anti-government] subjects. The government censored all of them and didn't let them work. I think most of them left the country [...] this is not only about the [visual] artists, like painting or photography, we even have this problem with theater and movies. And recently, I've heard from my friends in Iran, that there are many [clandestine] galleries and theaters hidden inside homes and buildings [...] everything is going underground."

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Zohreh (middle) eating ice cream with her two daughters at a resort in the north of Iran. As Moaiery mentions in her interview, this photograph was highly controversial because eating ice cream in public was considered inappropriate for women at the time. Summer 2001. Photo by: Yalda Moaiery

Moaiery believed she was one of the first people to know about the death of Mahsa Amini, as she was informed by a friend who was a relative of Amini. Shortly afterwards, Moaiery saw the news reports break on Instagram and X, formerly Twitter, and witnessed Iranians' outrage and desire to protest unfold in real-time. Even though Moaiery has taken photos of Iranian protests for more than twenty years, notably through her documentation of the Green Movement in the 1990s, she noted that the demonstrations following Mahsa Jina Amini's death were distinct from protests of the past. Moaiery described the demonstrations in support of the Green Movement as calm and peaceful, whereas the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests were led by a new generation of young people who she said appeared unafraid to fight with the police and the Iranian government: *"These protestors saw the history, they saw the past, they said, 'ok we were calm [back then]' and nothing happened. Nobody listened to us.' So, they saw a new way forward."* According to Moaiery, this generation's "new way forward" is characterized by a more radical, unabashed spirit that she hopes will help them to make real change.

Moaiery was arrested again while documenting the first mass *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest after Mahsa Jina Amini's death. She and other protestors were attacked with tear gas before authorities arbitrarily arrested hundreds for allegedly 'disturbing public order.' Because she believed that the government would soon limit internet access in response to the protests, Moaiery posted an Instagram story on the way to the prison stating that she was captured. Only fifteen minutes after her arrest, while in transit to the prison, Moaiery noticed that the internet was down. During previous protest movements, the government decreased internet speed to prevent people from using their phones to communicate and organize through social media. When Moaiery's brother attempted to come to her aid at the jail where she was being held, he could not access a GPS signal because the internet had been cut off, leaving many protestors in precarious situations. Throughout *Woman, Life, Freedom*, the government continued to restrict or blackout internet access

to undermine the protests. The HRC condemned such measures as violations of international human rights law.¹⁶⁸

While most of the protesters arrested along with Moaiery were released after ten days, the IRGC took over Moaiery's case. It extended her detention indefinitely to punish her and deter her from continuing to document the protests. Moaiery reported that she was placed in prolonged solitary confinement during this time, an experience which she says was extremely difficult to endure and continues to affect her mental health today.

In late 2022, Moaiery was sentenced to six years in prison for "spreading propaganda against the regime" under Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code for documenting the protests. As documented in chapter four of this report, Moaiery was one of many Iranian artists to be arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted under Article 500 during *Woman, Life, Freedom*. Months later, Moaiery was released and granted amnesty for her alleged crimes along with numerous other prisoners as a gesture of goodwill by Ayatollah Khamenei for the anniversary of the Islamic Republic. Far from being relieved, Moaiery said that the experience scarred her and her fellow prisoners, and she fears further government persecution if she continues her work in Iran.

After her release, Moaiery developed a photo series, *Life After Prison*, as a tribute to the women she lived alongside in detention. Through the series, she seeks to memorialize the identities of the approximately 1,200 women who circulated in and out of Evin Prison while she was there. Moaiery emphasized that the series is personal for her because she considers the women in the photographs as friends rather than subjects, and she sees the series as an expression of solidarity with other Iranians who experienced harm or repression during the movement. She discussed one case in which a mother and daughter were arrested at the Mahsa Amini protests: "[The mother] was arrested with her daughter. On the first day she [was granted release], but they wanted to keep her daughter, so the mother didn't go out. She stayed there for four months with her daughter." The photograph Moaiery took shows them stoically posing for the camera in Pardis city near Tehran.

Speaking to the future of *Woman, Life, Freedom* in her closing thoughts, Moaiery shared a profound sense of optimism that Iranians will find a path forward and succeed in their protests someday: "The name of the movement might change, but the soul will remain, and it's not going to stop, I'm 100% sure."

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”

CALL TO ACTION

Through *I Create; I Resist*, AFI and VU sought to highlight the invaluable contributions that Iranian artists made to the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests of 2022-23 and provide evidence of their role as human rights defenders in the context of this movement. We highlighted 26 artworks created in support of the movement that helped bring the protestors' demands to life for a global audience. Risking punitive measures for exercising their right to artistic expression, Iranian artists boldly defended the rights of all Iranians.

Acknowledging artists' crucial role in accelerating *Woman, Life, Freedom*, AFI and VU encourage protection officers, humanitarian aid practitioners, and resettlement facilitators to afford them due consideration as human rights defenders when assessing their requests for relief.

I Create; I Resist also brought attention to the gravity of the situation that Iranian artists remain entrenched in following the outbreak of *Woman, Life, Freedom*, as the State continues to persecute them, including through arbitrary arrest, prosecution, torture, and disproportionate sentences, including the death penalty. Our findings indicated that the Islamic Republic is systematically prosecuting artists under laws that are incompatible with the ICCPR to criminalize dissent. Despite condemnation from the international community, the Islamic Republic has increased its prosecution of artists under these laws; as a result, dozens of Iranian artists are serving prison terms, and some face execution as a direct result of their creative work.

Recognizing the regime's systematic violations of Iranian artists' rights through censorship and punitive measures, AFI and VU urge the international community to support Iranian artists at risk by demanding their immediate and unconditional release; furthermore, we exhort them to take measures to protect artists in exile by sanctioning the Islamic Republic for its transnational repression.

AFI and VU support the Iranian artists and activists highlighted throughout this report. By sharing their personal experiences, we sought to emphasize the human impact of the Islamic Republic's campaign to restrain expression through violence, censorship, and arbitrary punitive measures. We also amplified their calls for increased support for Iranian artists at risk, including through holistic immigration and resettlement initiatives that empower exiled artists with the tools they need to develop their careers in their host countries.

Our findings also showed that women artists' intersectional experiences put them at a heightened risk of harm from the Islamic Republic's government, as it continues to undermine freedom of expression and women's rights. Recognizing their intersectional struggle, AFI recommends creating programs to meet the multi-layered protection and professional support needs of Iranian women artists.

Finally, AFI and VU hope that our research will engage the international community with Iranian artists' struggle for rights and freedoms and that it will galvanize relevant stakeholders to develop targeted policies and programs to meet the needs of artists at risk. To this end, we have included a list of actionable policy recommendations for relevant stakeholders that, if implemented, can improve conditions for Iranian artists and fortify the right to free expression for all.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For decades, artists and cultural workers in the Islamic Republic of Iran have faced systemic repression and oppression for expressing discontent with the regime. The death of Mahsa Jina Amini in September 2022 and the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement marked a dark moment in Iran's recent history, as the government responded with violence and intensified their efforts to repress Iranians' rights. While women and minorities appear to be the primary targets of the regime, many artists and cultural workers suffered violence and persecution at the hands of the authorities as well because of the prominent role they played in the proliferation of *Woman, Life, Freedom*.

Artistic freedom is not merely a luxury but a fundamental pillar of a democratic society. It serves as a conduit for expression, challenging societal norms, fostering critical thinking, and enriching cultural diversity. In Iran, where dissent is often met with harsh reprisals, protecting artistic freedom is paramount to upholding broader human rights principles and fostering a vibrant, pluralistic society.

AFI and VU call on the international community to continue exerting pressure on the Iranian government, urging the authorities to align national laws with international human rights standards and to foster an environment where every member of society, including artists and cultural workers, can freely exercise their rights and freedoms without fear of persecution or reprisal.

The recommendations outlined herein are tailored for the Iranian authorities, international bodies, and national governments hosting Iranian migrants and asylum seekers. We extend an invitation to fellow NGOs to join us in advocating for the adoption and implementation of these recommendations by the aforementioned stakeholders. Collective action is essential in affecting meaningful change and ensuring the protection of human rights for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S GOVERNMENT, PARLIAMENT, AND JUDICIARY:

1. Cease the systematic targeting and persecution of artists and activists that supported the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protest movement.
 - A. Unconditionally release artists and activists who are currently in detention for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of expression.
 - B. Unconditionally terminate criminal proceedings against artists and activists who have been arbitrarily targeted for acts of expression under the pretext of violating immorality, propaganda, and/or national security laws.
2. Revise Iran's Islamic Penal Code (hereafter 'Iranian Penal Code') to bring it into conformity with international norms and standards on freedom of expression, including by:

A. Revising or repealing laws and regulations that criminalize and/or penalize “immorality” to respect individual freedom of choice and expression, including but not limited to the following:

I. Book Five, Chapter 18, Article 638 of the Iranian Penal Code related to the enforced dress code for women and girls

II. Book One, Chapter Nine, Article 286 of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran related to “sowing corruption on earth”

B. Revise laws related to blasphemy to ensure they do not endanger the right to life.

I. Book One, Chapter Two of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Articles 499, 500, 513, and 514 related to: “Insulting sacred religious values and criminal attempt on national authorities”

C. Clarify vague laws in the Iranian Penal Code related to propaganda and crimes against national security to prevent arbitrary enforcement and ensure legal certainty.

I. Book Five, Chapter One of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 500: related to the dissemination of propaganda against the State

II. Book Five, Chapter One of the Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Articles 501 and 508: related to conspiracy and collusion to against the State

3. As a state party to the ICCPR, uphold citizens' fundamental rights by refraining from arbitrary arrests, prosecutions, and sham trials, ensuring due process rights and fair treatment for all individuals within the legal system.

4. Enact laws and policies to protect the rights and freedoms of women and minorities, prohibiting discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or religion.

A. Dissolve the morality police and establish mechanisms to hold law enforcement accountable for any brutality, corruption, or misconduct.

5. Implement measures to tackle corruption and/or malpractice within legal institutions, ensuring fair and impartial administration of justice.

6. Cease the systematic targeting and persecution of human rights defenders, including artists that support *Woman, Life, Freedom*, for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

A. Refrain from using mechanisms of transnational repression against Iranian dissidents and activists abroad.

B. Implement oversight mechanisms for intelligence agencies, such as the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) and the intelligence organization of the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to prevent abuses of power and protect citizens' rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

C. Instruct the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) to refrain from practices that restrict artistic freedom, including censorship, surveillance, cyber policing, work bans, and the deployment of Celebrity Task Forces.

7. Establish mechanisms to provide justice and reparations for individuals harmed by state actions, including those affected by repression and violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL BODIES AND AGENCIES, INCLUDING THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, THE UN SECRETARY-GENERAL (UNSG), THE UN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL, THE UN EDUCATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO), THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR), AND THE OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (OHCHR):

1. Advocate for the formal recognition of the role that artists can play as human rights defenders to ensure they receive necessary humanitarian protection during crises, aligning with the recommendation of former UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights (2015 - 2021) Karima Bennouna.
2. Continue to provide support and resources to the Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFMI) in its efforts to uphold human rights and ensure justice and accountability.
3. Advocate for the Human Rights Council to remain actively engaged with the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in response to the findings of recent missions and reports.
4. Call upon UN human rights mechanisms, including Special Procedures and treaty bodies, to actively follow up on the findings and recommendations of recent missions to Iran.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO OTHER COUNTRIES

1. Grant asylum and humanitarian visas to victims fleeing persecution for their involvement in or defense of human rights during protests in Iran, including artists and cultural workers.
2. Explore international and domestic avenues for accountability outside Iran's borders to ensure justice for victims of human rights violations.
3. Advocate for mechanisms that hold perpetrators accountable for their actions, regardless of geographical boundaries, promoting accountability and deterrence.
4. Call for the implementation of transformative reparations for victims of human rights violations in Iran, including restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, and satisfaction measures such as commemorations and tributes.
5. Stress the importance of guarantees of non-repetition to prevent future occurrences of human rights abuses and promote lasting peace and stability.

NOTE OF THANKS

AFI and VU would like to thank everyone who supported us in the development of *I Create; I Resist* notably the Iranian artists and activists who took the time to speak with our team: Amir Soltani and another representative of Art/Culture/Action, Jinoos Taghizadeh, Nazanin Noroozi, and Yalda Moaiery. Their exceptional contributions highlighted Iranian artists' lived experiences of protest, censorship, and persecution in Iran. It is our sincere hope that their insight will motivate the international community to develop policies and initiatives that support Iranian artists at risk as they navigate the challenges of life in exile.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Iranian visual artist Nazanin Noroozi for the extraordinary artworks she created for this report. We also thank Yalda Moaiery for her phenomenal photographs and Arghavan Khosravi for kindly sharing reproductions of her incredible artworks with us for our report. AFI and VU extend a special thank you to the other artists that donated reproductions of their artworks to illustrate works borne out of *Woman, Life, Freedom* as showcased in chapter two of *Create, I Resist*.

AFI and VU would also like to thank the following individuals and institutions for their valuable contributions to the analysis of the primary laws, policies, and institutions used to target artists in Iran and for raising awareness of the critical role Iranian artists play in the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement: AFI's board of directors and advisory board members, and the UC Berkeley School of Law AIR Pro Bono Program.

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Painting by: Nazanin Noroozi, 2024

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