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## Q&A With Professor Nermin Allam on the Women-led Protests in Iran

By Lawrence Lerner

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*On September 16, a 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, was arrested by the country's morality police for allegedly not wearing her hijab properly during a visit to Tehran. Witnesses say she was beaten severely during her arrest, and while in custody she died from what lawyers and human rights advocates are calling a fatal head injury. The event sparked unrest that eventually spread to more than 30 cities and towns, with female protesters burning their hijabs and cutting their hair in public in defiance of the rules imposed by Iran's Islamic government, which has countered the protesters with a brutal crackdown, arresting nearly 15,000 and killing more than 300 people, including many teenagers, according to lawyers, human rights organizations and journalists.*

*On Monday, 227 (out of the 290) Iranian lawmakers signed a letter to the judiciary urging harsh punishment for the protesters, a move that has unsettled the international community.*

*Assistant Professor Nermin Allam, of Rutgers University-Newark's Political Science department, Allam, was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt. Her research focuses on social movement theories,*

*democratic transition, Middle Eastern and North African studies, political Islam and gender politics. Her book Women and the Egyptian Revolution: Engagement and Activism During the 2011 Arab Uprisings (Cambridge University Press) examines the role of women's collective action in that event. We sat down with Allam to discuss the situation in Iran, the wider context of gender-based discrimination and protest in both Iran and the region, and the likelihood of continued resistance in the face of ongoing oppression.*

**How much of Amini's arrest, and especially death at the hands of police, do you attribute to her ethnicity and how much to female transgression?**

Mahsa Amini, whose Kurdish first name was Jina, was from Kurdistan province in northwest Iran. The Kurdish question and the group's relation to the clerical regime in Iran have been historically contentious. But while the rallying cry of Mahsa's mourners, "Women, Life, Freedom," and the subsequent calls for the downfall of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei began in the Kurdish region, they quickly spread across Iran and its major cities.

Her arrest and death reflected the looming threat of punishment for any women who dare 'transgress' the regime's moral and social-gendered structures. Women across different groups in Iran for long feared this threat and struggled under its disciplinary power. While Mahsa's ethnicity might not have been a factor in her arrest or subsequent death, or at least, we do not know for sure, it emphasizes the intersectionality of women's issue, body politics, and state-society relations in Iran, like elsewhere.

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**Modesty politics have played a central part in women's oppression in the region, yes?**

Indeed, women and their bodies played edificatory roles in projects of modernization, nationalism, and later Islamization across the Middle East and North Africa. Feminists studying body politics in the Middle East show how modesty politics have been central in defining the character of the state and society. By "modesty politics," I mean the regulations around women's bodies, gender roles, and dominant norms of femininity and masculinity in society. These regulations outline a crosscutting web of religious and extrareligious meanings and are embedded within them. Their meanings are not static; they are situated within shifting relations of power as well as resistance that change across different contexts and at

key historical junctures. The arrest and death of Mahsa for transgressing the regime's gendered morality norms draw further attention to the multilayers of inequalities and hierarchies that characterize the rule of the clerical regime, and the character of conventional and contentious politics in the region.

**What were your initial thoughts and feelings when these protests first erupted, and then spread, after her death?**

The protests are the latest and most prominent, yet not the first, episode of contention where modesty politics were central. Women in Iran have a long history of using the veil as a repertoire of contentions to contest the regime, its morality discourses, and autocratic policies. In 1978–79, women used the veil during protests against the Shah of Iran before the Khomeini regime made it mandatory. Over the past few decades, women have been taking off the veil as a protest tactic in public, or by posting photos of themselves on the internet without their veil. And in 2017, in a sign of defiance of the Iranian regime, female protesters participated in nationwide protests and challenged the compulsory hijab law. The series of protests came to be known as the Girls of Enghelab Street (Girls

of Revolution Street). It was part of a larger protest movement fueled by the political and economic situation in Iran. While the protests on the ground waned in early 2018, female protesters continued their campaign of civil disobedience on social media, challenging the compulsory law that forces women to wear the veil.

The death of Mahsa Amini while she was in the custody of the police for allegedly breaking the country's compulsory hijab on September 20, 2022, was a powerful symbol of the regime's brutality. A strong symbol that further fueled the discontent already brewing among women and forced people, bystanders and spectators to come eye-to-eye with the regime's brutality. It made it really difficult to turn your head away from the regime's atrocities. Her death mobilized the masses in Iran in the same way that the death of Khalid Saïid in Egypt in 2010, and the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in the 2010/ 2011 Arab Spring, mobilized the masses to revolt against and eventually oust the long-standing autocratic regimes in these countries.

**What do you make of the Iranian parliament's letter to the judiciary, calling for harsh punishment for protesters in custody, which reports say includes as many as 15,000 people?**

It signals the regime's fragility and its failed attempts to contain discontent and contention. However, as regimes move to escalate repression, they create further grievances among the masses and widen contention: That is, their actions may end up encouraging rather than quelling further collective action. The flipside of fear, or threats of suppression, is not always inaction, but it can rather become that the cost of inaction is so high that mobilization is the only choice. Social movement theorists define threats as not only the costs that social groups will incur if they do take action but also the costs that they expect to suffer if they do not take action. So, threats can discourage as well as encourage actions. The move by the Iranian parliament to impose the death penalty on all protesters in custody can exacerbate the cost of inaction. At the international level, it will and did create public outcry and likely more pressure and condemnations from the international community.

**Protesters have included teens, young adults and students, along with lawyers, activists, athletes and celebrities. What do you make of that?**

The degree of mobilization and the intensity of participation in the protests are remarkable. They reflect the wide spread of contention across age, gender, class and ethnicity. Regardless of the success or failure of these protests, they might introduce some shifts and changes to state society relations, and conventional and contentious politics in Iran. The spread of contention beyond women's groups will make it exceptionally difficult for the regime to contain this episode without providing some sort of concessions in the form of maybe minor reforms. The current protests started as women challenging the terms of their citizenship rights and in a sense challenging and renegotiating the social contract with the state, but this push resulted in mobilizing youth at large to challenge and demand a new social contract, and we might expect them to be further politicized and more open to displaying attitudes and actions that directly challenge the regime long after the decline of contention.

**Thank you for sitting down with us.**

Thanks for your interest in this story.



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