FRAGMENTS OF A REVOLUTION

Women's Non-Heroic Movement in Post-1979 Iran

By
Shadi Mandani

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Supervisor: Dr. Nadia Jones-Gailani
Second Reader: Dr. Adriana Qubaiova

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institutions and no other material previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following thesis are accurate:

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies women's movements in Iran, aiming to trace their changing forms of resistance and protest from 1979 to the present. Challenging the conventional idea that significant social and political change follows rapid, conscious, and organized movements, I conduct content analysis on the material I extract from social media, to showcase the nuanced and unplanned acts of political dissent that are often seen as driving forces of social and political change. The study utilizes several theoretical frameworks, including Asef Bayat's concept of nonmovements, James C. Scott's theory of hidden and public transcripts, and Judith Butler's performative assembly, to explain how acts of everyday resistance mobilize and create moments of rupture in the dominant narrative and how do they connect and create larger alliances across time and space.

This research delves into the significance of hijab in the context of Iran as both a symbol of state ideology and a focal point of resistance to unveil the interconnectedness of protesting hijab and other forms of domination and oppression. Arguing for the emergence of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement from "non-heroic" acts, I see it as a plural movement, empowered by its decentralized and spontaneous acts of resistance. My thesis, therefore, challenges the traditional notions of social movements that rely on hierarchical structures, advocating the effectiveness of grassroots and decentralized activism in structural social change.

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INTRODUCTION

I moved from Tehran to Vienna in September 2022, only two weeks before the Woman Life Freedom movement spreads throughout Iran. In the irony of moving to Europe for a Gender Studies degree when a woman-led uprising erupted in my home country, I was overwhelmed by contradictory feelings of joy, despair, fear, rage, and above all, astonishment. The course of events in Iran kept breaking through my anticipations. In the countless photos and videos that I was obsessively watching all day, something was happening beyond my wildest imagination.

After the 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini was killed while in police custody following her arrest over wearing "improper hijab" in Tehran, women ran to the streets all over the country, burning their headscarves, and shouting: "We are all Mahsa, we will fight you back". The protests soon took over more than 160 cities and moved beyond the question of hijab, keeping the country in a state of unrest for months.

The uprisings swiftly made the international news headlines, receiving astonished reactions at the idea of a movement led by women from the middle east. Called by many a "feminist revolution", it came as no surprise that for the Western spectator that sees itself in the "origin" of feminism, the rebellion of oppressed women in an Islamic country was unfathomable. But as a woman who, upon her arrival to Vienna, had resentfully kept her headscarf in her suitcase to wear when she goes back, I was equally stunned. Not only by the unbridled rage and the awing bravery of the women in the face violence and terror, as I had lived through that for many years, but by the unprecedented plurality of the people participating.

This was not the first mass protest in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 against the monarchy of Pahlavi dynasty. The first demonstration took place only two weeks after the Revolution by women, trying not let their rights be sidelined after the revolution in response to

the news about mandating hijab for women. The next large-scale demonstrations took place in 2009, known as the Green Movement of Iran, protesting presidential elections fraud and demanding a democratic reform in the structure of the country (Karimi 2018). Several uprisings happened from 2017 to 2019, mostly triggered by economic hardships but demanding the overthrow of the regime (Mahdavi 2023). The WLF uprising was not the first uprising since the 1979 Revolution, but it was certainly distinct from all the preceding ones in so many ways.

Huge crowds of people from different social, gender, and ethnic groups were unanimously shouting "Woman, Life, Freedom". For the first time in the history of Islamic Iran, women burned their headscarves in the streets. On the campus of the university that I used to attend, where women had a special entrance and had to go through a small room with two hijab-policewomen, checking their appearance and decided if they would let them in, students were setting their headscarves on fire. Figures that emerged from the movement were nothing like the heroic figures that one expects to see at the center; from Jina, herself, a Kurdish woman whose ethnicity was erased even to the extent of her first name, to Khodanour, a Balooch man who, like many other Balooch people did not have identity documents and therefore, was not even considered a citizen.[1] Elderly women who are normally excluded from political action, Afghan refugees, prisoners; the flood of figures and symbols was unlike anything I had ever seen.

An essay by an anonymous writer inside Iran, helped me greatly in understanding this. From the unique perspective of someone in the protests, in the streets, "L", writes about the pictures of the protests and the figures they create. She explains how the facelessness of the figures and the "frozen" nature of the photo as opposed to videos creates a desire in the

[1] Khoanour Lajei was one of the victims of the "Bloody Friday" in Zahedan, had previously made headlines due to the publication of a photo showing him being tortured by the forces of the Islamic Republic. In this photo, Khodanour is seen with his hands tied to a flagpole while a glass of water is placed in front of him. It was reported that he remained in this position all night. He had asked for water, the officers placed the water in front of him but out of his reach. His posture, tied to the pole with a glass of water in from of him was repeatedly recreated during the WLF uprisings.

spectator to become that figure (L 2022). Drawing on several images from the movement, she explains the "feminism" of the movement in "creation of a new figure of resistance", and not the "transformation of the self into an ideal body," (L 2022).

Formulation Iranian women's political action before that, was mostly confined to two categories of politically repressed activists and small-scale everyday resistance. But the actors of the Woman Life Freedom (WLF) movement could not be categorized in any of them. WLF did not represent one identity category that could be formulated through the conventional analyses of movements. It refused to follow a central leader and strong figures as conventionally assumed to be the creators of social and political change. Instead, it constantly created non-heroic figures and created spaces where they could be their own voice. From the very beginning, I saw it as a movement for the right of the Other.

I will start with a central point of inquiry that some theorists of social movements and public assembly have recently started to address: if we only follow the mainstream understanding of public demonstrations, how can we explain the movements that happen and originate from below (Bayat 2013, Scott 1990, Butler 2015)? Does it mean that we see no resistance or action on the part of those who have been excluded from public space? While the short answer to this question is no, there are different ways of getting to that answer.

To find an answer to these questions, I took a step back to look at the bigger picture and interconnectedness of events since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. By reviewing the literature that focus on the gender politics of the Islamic Republic, I demonstrate the significance of hijab as a symbol to the state's ideology which goes beyond religious and cultural symbols to argue that targeting hijab in the context of post-Revolutionary Iran is a revolutionary act in itself.

While acknowledging the long-standing and consistent everyday resistance of women, I believe confinement of analysis to this reading leaves out many sides of the creative and changing forms of Iranian women's resistance. At the same time, it disregards the role of the

state as an actor, actively politicizing hijab through the regulation and surveillance methods it adopts, both creating and eliminating spaces of resistance and protest. Furthermore, this approach assumes a homogenous identity for the "Iranian woman", which excludes the varying conditions of women's lives depending on their ethnicity, religion, and social status, and so on (Mohammadpour 2024). Therefore, I particularly focus on ordinary (as opposed to activist) individuals in unplanned and spontaneous moments that are mostly disregarded as the driving forces of social and political change and reformulate the agency of women beyond the binary of either covert acts or organized activism. These moments were initially instances of women's encounters with hijab enforcers that went viral through social media and elicited considerable media reaction. However, while conducting this research, I realized, although my focus is on the pre-WLF era, very similar instances have happened and keep happening and each seems to be slightly affected by the other moments before them. This made me broaden the scope of my research and look for those instances up to the present day.

Eventually, I focused on three figures before and two figures after the Jina uprising, to provide an analysis of the WLF, not as a starting point in contentious movement of Iranian women, but as a part of embodied political actions throughout years that have made significant social transformation as they have transformed themselves. Furthermore, I argue that the Woman Life Freedom movement emerged from incidents so nuanced, unplanned, and often without political intention that are easily disregarded as decisive factors in forming revolutionary moments.

Structure of the Thesis

In the following chapter, I provide and delve deep in the employed theoretical framework and at the same time discuss the relevant literature of the current study to situate my research within the greater body of studies on social movements, mainly in West Asia, and particularly the

ones adopting a feminist approach. Key theories to my research, including Asef Bayat's theory of nonmovements, James C. Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts, and Judith Butler's theory of performative assembly, and their relevance to my research are discussed.

In Chapter Two, I explain and justify the use of content analysis as my main methodological tool and elaborate on the analytical application of the key theories in my research. Furthermore, I reflect on my positionality as the researcher and the ways I maintained my objective stance as a researcher, while including my knowledge of the context as an "insider".

Chapter Three follows by providing a historical context to politic of hijab in contemporary Iran through existing literature which explains the focus of my study on "hijab" and women's resistance against it by unveiling the significance of hijab as a core ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Chapter 4 starts with a rather brief history of women's movements in Iran after the 1979 Revolution, discussing women's 6-day uprisings against hijab in March 1979 and the One million Signatures Campaign. In this chapter, I cover significant protests, including the Women's 6-day Uprising, and explores various forms of resistance that women have employed over the years. Then, I engage with the analysis of my case studies on Girls of Enghelab Street, Sepideh Rashno, and Pooyeh Noorian.

In Chapter Five, I focuse on the Woman Life Freedom (WLF) movement, analyzing some of its photos and emphasize the role of non-hierarchical and decentralized ordinary individuals in creating social change.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the theoretical landscape of social movements, with, specifically in Iran. By exploring the relevant literature on key movements such as the Arab Spring, the 2009 Green Movement in Iran, and the ongoing struggle against compulsory hijab, I aim to highlight the critical role of digital technologies, grassroots networks, and informal acts of resistance in the creation of uprising in oppressive regimes. More importantly, I delve into the nuanced gender dynamics that shape movements, drawing on theories of performative assembly (Butler 2015), nonmovements (Asef Bayat 2013), hidden transcripts (Scott 1990), and weak resistance (Majewska 2021) to provide a comprehensive understanding of how women in Iran navigate and challenge the socio-political constraints imposed upon them. At the same time, through reviewing the literature, a brief historical background on Iranian women's movements and forms of resistance after 1979 is also portrayed.

Social (Non)Movements

With the moving nature of social movements, the theories in this field have also changed drastically through time. From resource mobilization theory, which requires active social subjects and rational political action (Tilly 2004), to new social movement theories, which focus on collective identity formation through shared objectives (Melucci 1996), social movement theories often highlight the need for structural organization at some point during a movement. After the wave of spontaneous pro-democratic uprisings across the Arab world in the early 2010s, known as the Arab Spring, many theories of social movements proved inadequate in explaining the emergence and process of those revolts, which indicated a need to revisit the politics of assembly and public protests (Bayat 2013, Butler 2015).

Analyzing the role of digital technologies and social media in the mobilization and organization of the masses has been one of the most recurrent approaches to studying uprisings and movements in West Asia and North Africa. The dominant theories of social movements were incapable of explaining the grassroots networks and self-organizations as the origin of those uprisings, as demonstrated in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt by Victoria Carty (2014). Before the Arab Spring, the 2009 Green Movement of Iran against presidential election fraud also benefited greatly from Facebook for both organizing mass protests and transnational communication (Ansari 2012; Moghanizadeh 2013).

In Gender Studies, scholars have been trying to highlight the gendered dimension of social and political movements. Nadjie Al-Ali (2012) writes about gender's centrality to the ideologies and discourses of the state in controlling communities, maintaining power, and repressing dissent, focusing on the backlash of the Arab Spring when women did not receive support against the states' gender-specific forms of repression such as harassment and sexual violence to control the uprisings. In the specific context of Egypt, Afaf Jabiri (2017) similarly highlights how the state produces gender-normative discourses to justify violence against women and halt the protests.

This can also be seen in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution when thousands of women came to the streets of Tehran to protest the newly introduced mandatory hijab law. Mahnaz Matin and Naser Mohajer (2010; 2013) undertook a comprehensive historical study of those protests, known as the women's 6-day uprising, to address the question of why, despite women's crucial role and active participation in the Revolution, their demands were sidelined and silenced in the process of political development. Among the different reasons provided by women who took part in those protests, the most recurrent ones were violent attacks on women protesters by the supporters of the Islamic government and the lack of support from left and democratic organizations under the pretext of protecting the revolution and focusing on the priorities (Matin and Mohajer 2013). Haideh Moghisi (1996), a leftist activist during the 1979

Revolution, writes about male-centered perceptions of social change that led to the elimination of women's activism after the Revolution. She also believes the discourses that worked toward excluding women from engagement in political organizations once the Revolution was over were shared by both Islamists and leftists.

The Islamic Revolution, however, was not the starting point of Iranian women's struggle to gain autonomy over their bodies and identities. In Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling (2007), Hamideh Sedghi investigates the intertwinement of politics, religion, and gender in the transformation of Iran from the late Qajar's patriarchal households to the modernization period of Pahlavi and the mandate of hijab in the Islamic State. Despite the reshaping politics throughout this era, "controlling women's sexuality remained at the core of the power struggle between […] the political system and […] the clerical establishment" (Sedghi 2007, 201). Faegheh Shirazi (2001) writes about the discourses that mobilized hijab in creating the "new Muslim woman," as a devoted protector of the Islamic Revolution and the national borders of the country, distinct at the same time from the constructed image of modern Iranian women by the Pahlavi Dynasty and the Sunni Muslims during the Iran-Iraq war. Similarly, Zahedi (2007) views the veil as a political metaphor in the creation of an essentialized singular image of Iranian women through imposed unveiling and re-veiling, portraying them as either modern or Islamic, depending on the regime's ideology. In the following chapter, I build on this literature and use excerpts from Ayatullah Khomeini, Khamenei, and a few other state officials' speeches to argue that hijab, as a visible symbol of the regime's ideology, turns the mere public presence of women into a potential political act and the women into political subjects. Therefore, challenging the idea of hijab in Iran goes beyond an act of civil disobedience as it targets the regime in its totality.

1.2 Post-Islamist Feminism and the Reformist Era

Despite the strict limitations and attempts at the erasure of feminist activism in post-revolutionary Iran, women continued to find ways, such as campaigns, publications, and magazines, to gain equal rights within the social and legal boundaries of Iran (Bayat 2013). The most notable example is the One Million Signature Campaign, initiated in 2006 by several men and women activists in different cities who went door to door, discussed social and legal inequalities, and collected signatures for a petition to reform the discriminatory laws against women (Afary 2009). Asef Bayat (2013) calls that era post-Islamist feminism, indicating that the claims made by women were within the scope of Islamic discourses. They did not accuse Islamic doctrines but pointed to the "political and patriarchal perceptions" and "legal and theological contradictions" as discriminating against women (Bayat 2013, 96-103).

Women's public presence and contribution to the socio-political aspects of the country have also been highlighted during the reformist era, mainly under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami and specifically in the 2009 Green Movement of Iran. In "The Iranian Green Movement of 2009: Reverberating Echoes of Resistance," (2018), Karimi explores the integral participation of women in the protests that erupted following the disputed 2009 presidential election. Karimi argues that women were not only present in the protests but were also prominent active participants and symbols of the movement who defied the traditional and restrictive norms of the Islamic Republic (Karimi Chap. 6). My methodology very much follows Karimi's content analysis of the photos and videos of the movement, gathered from social media, along with a discourse analysis of speeches by the main state figures.

A rather different figure of activism that emerged from the Green Movement is the "Mourning Mothers of Iran," also known as the "Mothers of Laleh Park," a group of "justice-seeking" women whose children were killed, imprisoned, or disappeared in the violent repression of the protesters (Khosravi Ooryad 2024). Khosravi Ooryad has studied their

connections and solidarity with other justice-seeking mothers, such as the ones who lost their loved ones in November 2019 uprisings, through digital activism.

1.3 Everyday Resistance

In the case of women in Iran, where the strict dissolution of women's organizations and harsh breakdowns of mobilized demonstrations have made public protests and activism simply impossible, one recurrent approach has been to study women's resistance through informal and non-public acts and grassroots networks of solidarity (Bayat 2013, Sadeghi 2007, Kian 2023, Esfandiari 1997). This different perspective illuminates how Iranian women have been actively making social change through what Asef Bayat (2013) calls "everyday acts of resistance" or "social nonmovements."

The concept of nonmovements, introduced by Asef Bayat, provides a foundational understanding of Iranian women's resistance since 1979. In his book, Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East (2013), Bayat studies how social and political change happens in countries and regions where strict state control and harsh crackdowns on collective protests do not allow the mobilization and organization of public demonstrations. Nonmovement, in his definition, is "the collective actions of noncollective actors," performed through everyday practices that can cumulatively bring about significant social change (Bayat 2013, 15).

Bayat maps out what he terms a "feminism of everyday life," where women's daily acts of defiance, although small, subtle, and sometimes unconscious, result in significant social change. The most visible example of this is the dress code for women in Iran and the transformation of acceptable hijab. "Those who did not wish to wear veils defied the forced hijab in public for more than two decades in a 'war of attrition' with the public moral police

until they virtually normalized what the authorities had lamented as "bad-hijabi"—showing a few inches of hair beneath the headscarves" (Bayat 2013, 18).

Non-movements, he notes, although not publicly mobilized, form a "passive network" between individuals based on their commonalities, communicated through symbols (Bayat 2013, 23). To clarify Bayat's definition of passive networks, I will refer to a personal experience. Walking in the streets of Tehran without a headscarf, I would occasionally receive a V sign, a playful wink, or a supportive smile from other unveiled women. These communications connected us and gave us a sense of fighting alongside each other in the absence of organizational groups or mobilized acts.

However, Bayat does not recognize the informal everyday acts of nonmovements as politically charged and capable of posing a serious challenge to the dominant power unless they face direct confrontation from the authority. In other words, the danger of suppression is the intervening factor that turns mundane practices of everyday life into mobilized mass protests; he makes sure, however, to note that this mobilization is by no means always a given (Bayat 2013). Going back to my personal example, the unveiled women on the street, such as myself, would wear their headscarves if, for instance, they saw a police car approaching. In this way, the defying act of not wearing hijab would remain in the private interactions of people and, although it creates a lasting effect in society, does not directly challenge the sovereignty of the state or disturb its official narrative that all women in Iran willingly wear hijab.

While Bayat offers an insightful depiction of daily struggles and "street politics" in the Middle East, his formulation of nonmovement eliminates a will for the social subjects to not yield to their informal life and politics outside of the state boundaries but to face the state in the very public site and openly demand a different life. A similar stance can be detected in his formulation of the Arab Springs as "refo-lution" and "more reformist than revolutionary" (Bayat 2013, 274). This is where Scott's theory of hidden and public transcripts becomes

relevant, as I will explain in Chapter Five, in accounting for the autonomy of the social subjects and a voluntary rupture in the official narrative of the state.

1.4 Hidden/Public Transcripts

In his book, Weapons of the Weak (1985), Scott examines everyday acts of resistance among Malaysian rural peasants, highlighting covert, individual actions similar to Bayat's concept of nonmovements. However, while Bayat views organized protests as responses to immediate danger, Scott's theory diverges by suggesting these hidden acts can transform into collective action. In Domination and the Art of Resistance (1990), Scott discusses "hidden transcripts" to refer to "the private, covert, and often informal ways in which people resist and challenge the dominant power relations that shape their lives" (Scott 1990, 5). Scott emphasizes the conscious acts of public disobedience when the subordinate brings the hidden transcript to the realm of the public, disturbing the official narrative of the dominant. Therefore, for Scott, these political acts, performed individually, are conscious moments of public disobedience, rather than inevitable collective responses to the danger posed by the authority, as Bayat suggests. In other words, the subordinate might willfully seek the attention of the dominant in Scott's theory but would merely react to the imposition of power and discipline in Bayat's. The distinction between the two theories is, at its core, a matter of defense/offense tactics. I use this framework in Chapter Five to argue that we can see this rupture between the hidden and public transcripts in women's forms of resistance, most notably in the Girls of Enghelab performance.

The Girls of Enghelab was a decisive moment in the history of Iranian women's fight against compulsory hijab and a shift in the form of women's acts of protest in Iran. It started with Vida Movahed's one-woman performance in 2017 when she climbed a utility box on Enghelab (the Farsi word for Revolution) Street in Tehran, waving her headscarf tied to a stick. As other women repeated this performance in different places, they became known as the Girls

of Enghelab. If the problem of mandatory hijab was, up to that point, confined to the private and unofficial sphere of homes, and its only representation was through Western opposition media and their audience, the Girls of Enghelab forced it into the public. However, the movement was sometimes associated with campaigns such as "My Stealthy Freedom" and "White Wednesdays," founded by Masih Alinejad, a US-based Iranian journalist, claiming her to be the "leader" of these new forms of protest. This association has been critically approached by Ranjbar (2021), who scrutinizes the selective coverage of women's photos and videos opposing hijab in My Stealthy Freedom's social media and demonstrates that they are far from similar to that of GES. Ranjbar argues that through a politics of recognition, the Western-based campaigns reproduce orientalist representations of Iranian women and overshadow certain political implications of GES's act. Furthermore, Tafakori (2021) suggests that the duality of local and authentic versus diasporan and Western feminism is produced through mediated affect and emotion in online communications and calls for the mobilization of affect to reterritorialize both local and global and create possibilities of transnational feminist solidarities. Both studies challenge the false assumption that political enactments necessarily need to be attached to a leader or organizing structure and highlight the importance of studying movement from within. Reading a movement outside its context could lead to the appropriation of grassroots movements and strip them of their political signification.

1.5 Performative Assembly and Virtual Solidarity

Additionally, I incorporate Judith Butler's performative theory of assembly (2015), which explores the spatial and temporal dimensions of political action. Butler argues that we form assemblies in the interaction of our bodies with other bodies and the space that is created in between through both linguistic and bodily gestures. Since the conditions of space and other bodies we interact with are not in our control, Butler points to the spontaneity and

unpredictability of embodied political engagement that leads to fostering solidarity. Following Butler's theory, I use examples of viral videos of women's encounters with hijab enforcers, such as that of Sepideh Rashno, to demonstrate that solidarity is built not only in the simultaneous physical presence of bodies in a public space but also through virtual networks, which expand the solidarity through time and space.

This can also be studied in the WLF movement, as done by Sajadi (2023), who studies the factors that had a role in turning the previously limited and narrowly supported women's efforts in combating the political structure into an internationally supported movement. This happens, he writes, with the online circulation of news and footage by the youth and individual acts of protest by celebrities as the most effective tools.

In their discussions on social embodiment and performative assembly, Butler also emphasizes that bodies are not merely containers of our personal experiences; they also appear to others, whose perspectives are equally significant. In any space, "the body is always exposed to people and impressions," and their interaction creates a space between bodies which is necessary for the formation of any assembly. At the same time, the body "does not have a say about, does not get to predict or fully control […] these conditions of social embodiment" (Butler 2015, 152). In other words, we cannot control the spaces we traverse or the spaces we create by appearing alongside other bodies, indicating the spatial (and temporal) unexpectedness and spontaneity of political enactment, which according to Butler, bear a higher potential for solidarity than those we enter deliberately and knowingly (Butler 2015). As connections and networks are formed, according to Butler, not only in public squares and streets but also often through the virtual domain, the creation of virtual solidarities both in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 will be discussed (Butler 2015, 15).

1.6 Non-heroic Movements and Alliance

The widespread uprisings following Jina's death have been studied through other theories, with almost all the instances I have read highlighting that it did not occur in a vacuum (See for instance Darvishi 2023; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023; Afary and Anderson 2023). Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2023) studies gender oppression alongside ethnic marginalization, religious democracy, and authoritarian neoliberalism to demonstrate how their complex historical lineages have formed what Stuart Hall calls a conjunctural crisis that gave way to the WLF movement. His analysis illuminates the multi-faceted nature of the uprising; however, gender oppression is only one of the axes in the lineages of revolt, which does not explain how these different factors came together in one movement with the centrality of gender (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2023). Afary and Anderson (2021) provide a comprehensive overview of protests before WLF, such as the mass protests of November 2019 after a sudden increase in the gas price, to show that WLF encompasses all earlier discontents. Aram (2024) also focuses on previous movements, such as the 2009 Green Movement, to argue for the emergence of a new political subjectivity that expands through different social classes and geographical locations. In the only study of the movements songs that I could find, Simadoust (2023) discusses the emergence of a new musical genre during the WLF uprising which is made by university students. Simadoust showcases how these songs use elements of other protest anthems, but thematically focus on women's liberation and serve as a powerful form of protest

Integrating these insights, I also partly use Ewa Majewska's (2021) notion of weak resistance and non-heroic forms of protest and political act to explain the WLF movement as a movement that builds solidarity across different identities by creating connections with other historical forms of protest and creating a "common" that includes the demands of different groups of people in their plurality. Majewska borrows the notion of "subaltern feminist counterpublics" from Nancy Fraser and expands it through a postcolonial understanding of the private/public sphere (Majewska 2021, chap. 2). She uses the word "non-heroic counterpublics" as opposed to the conceptualization of the "public sphere of strong subjects"

in mainstream political theories as the historical examples of political agency (Majewska 2018, 52). The weak, as she notes, by departing from this dominant knowledge, get closer to the "common" and, therefore, carry a universality that creates networks of solidarity across identities (Majewska 2018, 51).

To explain the non-heroic counterpublics, Majewska uses Polish women's movements against anti-abortion law. In her view, the Polish women's movement after 2016 transverses across past and future by, for instance, borrowing forms and styles of protests from other movements in history and mainly Solidarność, the anti-authoritarian Polish movement in the 1980s (Majewska 2021, chap. 2). This aligns with my point on the connections that the WLF creates between the different struggles and movements, such as the Green Movement and the uprisings of 2017 and 2019.

Furthermore, the interconnectedness of the WLF protests in examples such as men's active participation in protests against compulsory hijab or widespread support of ethnic and religious minorities in the dominantly Fars-Shi'i cities could be studied as "alliance" in a Butlerian sense. Alliance, in Butler's view, is a form of interdependency and cohabitation which is possible by defending the rights of the "precarious" and the refusal of any "political and legal recognition and rights […] if the allocation of [those] rights to one group is instrumentalized for the disenfranchisement of basic entitlements to another" (Butler 2015, 70). They define precarity as political conditions that target certain already subordinated populations, such as women, transgender people, or migrants "more than others" and make them "differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2015, 33). They emphasize further that the formation of this alliance does not mean any group of people should give up their existing basic rights in favor of the other but it means understanding that our "rights are only meaningful within a broader struggle for social justice" (Butler 2015, 71).

Butler sees the potential in "queer" as they believe that "the population of gender and sexual minorities […] draws from various class, racial, and religious backgrounds, crossing communities of language and cultural formation" and suggests "queer" as the term that can be used beyond an identity description and as an alliance (Butler 2015, 68). However, situating "queer" at the center ignores the fact that this terminology is not translatable or does not even exist in all languages and cultures. Therefore, I propose "woman" as the term that encompasses other precarious lives in the WLF movement, which is a collective fight against gender apartheid, poverty, religious fundamentalism, ethnic marginalization, eco-injustice, and more.

Conclusion

The examination of social movements, particularly within the context of Iran and the broader Middle East, reveals the intricate interplay between gender, politics, and resistance. From the early days of the Islamic Revolution to the recent WLF movement, Iranian women have continuously navigated a complex landscape of repression and resistance. This literature review has highlighted the evolution of social movement theories, the significant role of digital media and grassroots networks, and the powerful impact of everyday acts of defiance. Proposing the theory of hidden and public transcripts, I underscored acts of resistance such as Girls of Enghelab Street, as not mere responses to immediate threats, but as conscious efforts to challenge and reshape the socio-political order. I also discussed theories of performative assembly and weak resistance that will be applied both to the WLF movement and earlier forms of resistance in Iran.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, I employ a multifaceted methodology focusing on close readings of multimedia material produced between 2017 up to present. Partly, I incorporate a close reading of media reports and news articles from both local and international sources, when necessary, to shed light on how each case was perceived and portrayed by various media outlets

The study also includes an examination of speeches and statements by key state figures, such as Khamenei and Khomeini. Their speeches are analyzed particularly to illustrate the ideology of hijab in the Islamic Republic from the viewpoint of its two leaders. Khamenei's speeches were retrieved from IRNA and Fars two state-run news agencies, reviewing the entries of "Supreme Leader" with the keyword "hijab" from 2017 onward, whereas for Khomeini's speeches I referred to *Sahifeh-Ye Imam,* a compilation of his speeches, interviews, letters, and sermons reviewed speeches on women and women's role during the years 1979-1985, the years immediately after the Revolution. Except for Khomeini's speech that was translated to English, all the other translations are mine.

For this thesis, I examine widely circulated audiovisual material from social media (Instagram and Twitter), media reports, and official speeches. this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Woman Life Freedom movement. Considering the limited scope of my thesis and the few cases I aimed to study, I chose the social media content following Kimberly A. Neuendorf's purposive or judgement sampling (2002). This method was particularly helpful as it allowed me to include my "insider" knowledge of the context and trust my judgment as a researcher to select examples that I know to be representative, widely known and constantly referred to in the context of Iran. It also offered a flexible framework that allowed me to reframe my criteria of analysis and adapt them to the case studies. As I did, for instance, in expanding my initial research plan, limited to the period before the WLF, when I noticed similar patterns in the post-WLF era.

This made the writing process very much longer and more laborsome as I constantly had to reframe my research objectives and inquiry as I came across new material. However, this process, in the end, helped my thesis as it made me reflect on my relationship with the research on every turn.

Choosing this topic, I had two main concerns: whether to conduct research on a movement that was still ongoing, and whether to research something I am so personally attached to. Both concerns were shaped around my objectiveness as a researcher.

The first concern involved the unpredictable nature of an ongoing movement, which could affect my argument. I was wary of either "gambling" on the movement, hoping for the future developments to align with my thesis, or distorting my argument in order to adjust it to the trend. The second concern stemmed from my deep personal ties to the subject matter. I could not recall a second of my life not affected specifically by the headscarf ever since I was a child. This brought a level of emotional involvement that I was not certain I could manage.

Both issues made writing this thesis extremely difficult but also more insightful. I had to be very conscious in every step to not let the emotional me take over the researcher me. At the same time, my perspective as an insider added nuances and insights in the research that I would simply not see otherwise. As I realized my personal reflections sit well in the overall thesis, I stopped the attempt to completely exclude them, yet I was constantly trying to remain aware of my position as a researcher and the ethical responsibility that came with it.

At the core of my methodology is content analysis of viral videos of women's encounters with hijab enforcers. I focused specifically on three instances as my case studies, but I occasionally refer to some other instances throughout the thesis to stress a point. One of the cases is Vida Movahed, the first girl of Enghelab. Considering my approach in highlighting the less known actors and events, along with my non-essentializing viewpoint that avoids homogenization, choosing Vida Movahed, of all the other Girls of Enghelab might seem a

strange choice. However, I want to note that Movahed is the least known character among all of the others that we know by face and name. She neither engages in interviews nor expresses her activism in any other way than spontaneous and creative ways. She is the figure that aligns with what I call in the last chapter as "figure of the revolution". A figure that anyone can embody, she is the Girl of Enghelab Street. This, particularly, is what connects her to the WLF movement and what, I believe, made her act possible to reperform and continue.

The second Case in Sepideh Rashnu, a woman that was arrested in Tehran after an altercation with a hijab enforcer. Despite the very wide media coverage of her story, I could not find a trace of her in academic papers besides a few mentions of her name. However, I find her story that stretches across times and links to the WLF movement, very relevant in studying Iranian women's movements.

The third case is the least known one, yet it still received strong reactions both in social media and in the news agencies. It is the case of Pooyeh, a woman who complained about her taxi driver's intrusive behavior about her hijab, yet ended up publicly apologizing while the driver received the admiration worthy of a hero.

In the last chapter, I apply a less confined approach in choosing photos and videos as I aim to only point to figures. My argument is that the figures, faceless and unknown, are the WLF itself. Therefore, their analysis is the analysis of the movement itself. A note worth mentioning here, is that the case of WLF had a tangible effect on my methodology. It did not allow me to be very structured and committed to one certain methodology as it would be contradictory to my analysis and argument. While I basically collected a handful of photos and videos from Twitter, I proved more detail on how I got to those particular examples in Chapter Five.

HISTORY AND POLITICS OF HIJAB IN POST-1979 IRAN

A couple of months after the street protests in Iran had been repressed, in a friendly gathering, I was accosted by a strange question: "So, Shadi, what happened to your feminist revolution? Now you don't wear hijab in the streets and you are happy?" Startled, my first reaction was: "No, we are not happy. They killed so many people, that's what happened," and I expected the inquiry to end there. Nevertheless, a discussion ensued on why revolutions from the global south often turn into attempts to Westernize oppressive regimes. The question was based on the wrong assumption that the uprising ceased because the state had retreated on its stance on hijab, while in reality, it was a daily war between the government and the women who refused to go back to the pre-Jina moment. This assumption came from a perspective that sees wearing hijab as merely a religious doctrine being imposed on women.

In this chapter, I provide a contextual history of hijab from the regime of Pahlavi into the Islamic Republic's rule to indicate veiling/unveiling as methods of controlling women's bodies in favor of their political agendas. I particularly argue that, as the main ideology of the current Islamic regime of Iran, hijab is signified as the symbol of cultural and religious difference from the West, to mask its resemblances in adopting neoliberal capitalist models to the West. Therefore, the WLF protests, which started over protesting hijab, soon expanded to cover different layers of injustice, including economic situations. In doing so, the protests targeted not only the state but also the structural inequalities of global neoliberalism.

This chapter reviews the literature on the politics of veiling in the contemporary history of Iran to argue that, as a symbol, hijab is signified beyond religious and cultural norms and is central to the Islamic state of Iran's ideology and politics. Furthermore, I briefly overview women's long-term resistance that has transformed the form of hijab through time, despite the state's increased controlling methods.

3.1 Hijab as the Central Ideology

During the protests leading to the 1979 Revolution, some secular women wore headscarves voluntarily as a symbol of resistance against the monarchy and imperialism. However, as the revolution progressed, a negative view emerged towards women who protested without hijab, labeling them as bourgeois and Westernized (Matin and Mohajer 2013). This view was intensified during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). In the context of the "Holy Defense," hijab was linked to honoring the martyrs of the war, coupling the Islamic discourse with national defense (Shirazi 2001). Studying posters, banners, billboards, and postage stamps of the time, Faegheh Shirazi argues that "in order to mobilize the hijab for the war with Sunni Iraq, [hijab] had to change its semantics yet again. No longer could it just symbolize the perfect mother, wife, sister, or daughter; now it had to be worn by the mother, wife, daughter, or sister of a martyr" (Shirazi 2001, 97). Their significant role in the 1979 Revolution and then in the Iran-Iraq war was used in the creation of the discourse that portrayed and celebrated women as guardians of the family, Islam, and the nation (Bayat 2013).

At the same time, the Iranian hijab was formed in a unique model; while a sign of independence from the West, it was also distinct from Sunni Muslims.(Shirazi 2001) While chador (a black long veil covering the body from head-to-toe except for the face) was widely advertised as the greatest form of hijab (hejab-e bartar), a more modern form, consisting of manteau, loose trousers, and a headscarf that fully covers the hair, was also acceptable. This indicated that hijab created no restrictions for women to be active members of society and be present in public alongside men while maintaining the values of the Islamic Revolution. Hence, the public presence of women was allowed and even celebrated as long as it adhered to the Iranian Muslim woman identity and represented the woman saved from Western moral decay.

However, it was not only the face of the Iranian Shi'a woman that the Islamic regime needed; it also needed their free labor. Both before and after the 1979 Revolution, Khomeini frequently addressed women, acknowledging both their contribution to the Revolution's victory and emphasized their critical role as women to protect the Revolution, uphold Islamic

morals, and reject Western values of the previous regime. He stated in a speech, "You [women] should be present in all arenas as much as permitted by Islam, […] as men have to interfere in political affairs and safeguard their own society, women also have to interfere in social and political activities along with men. Of course, they should observe what Islam has ordered, which is fortunately the case in Iran".[2] In this way, women, after the Islamic Revolution, were constructed as the opposite of what they had been defined in the previous regime—a blend of national pride and religious piety.

In March 2019, in a speech pointing to the Girls of Revolution Street, Khamenei repeated his old scenario of the "Western Enemy's scheme," which has resulted in "four girls [being] deceived and remov[ing] their hijabs in the street," so "but their efforts are fruitless. The result is that four people—now four girls in some corner—are deceived or find different motivations; some of them might even get paid—I don't know, I can't say for sure—and remove their headscarves, meaning what exactly? The result of all that effort is summed up in this insignificant, petty outcome".[3]

He goes on to talk about some individuals associated with the Islamic Republic who proposed that hijab should not be mandatory:

"Well, up to this point, there is no issue. [But] what makes me sensitive is that suddenly you hear some individuals, who are considered among the elite, raise the issue of "mandatory hijab." This means that some people unknowingly—now I say unknowingly; hopefully, it's unknowingly—are following the same line that the enemy, despite all that spending, could not succeed in advancing in the country; they are following that same line. Among them, there are journalists, among them, there are pseudo-intellectuals, and among them, there are clerics. [They say] "When the Imam said women should wear hijab, he didn't mean all women!" Nonsense! We were there at the time, we know; how is that so? Imam stood like a mountain against a clear wrong that had been brought about in the country by the Pahlavi regime and its followers, saying that hijab must be present. Now some guy says, 'Hey! This sin isn't greater than, for instance, backbiting; why don't you pursue someone for backbiting, but you do pursue someone for, for example, removing their headscarf or being without a hijab?' […] We didn't say that if someone in their own home removes their headscarf in front of a non-mahram (stranger), we would pursue them; [no] we don't pursue them, they are in their own home, doing a personal act. The action that takes place in public, on the street, is a public act, a social act, a public teaching; this [mistake] creates an obligation for a government that has come to power in the name of Islam".[4]

[2] *Sahife-ye Emam*, Vol. 18. P 402-403.
[3] See https://farsnews.ir/news/14010430000199/
[4] ibid

This part of his speech sounds like a religious take on Scott's theory. He is clearly setting boundaries of the hidden and the public, attributing hijab directly to Islam, and bi-hejabi to Pahlavi; claiming these two should never have a similar public face. As the issue of hijab becomes more and more visible, this distinction is expressed more clearly. On April 4th, 2024, Khamenei described removing one's hijab as "politically haram (sinful)".[5] In another instance, Mohammad Dehghan, the Vice President of Legal Affairs, said: "We cannot ignore the issue of hijab […] Hijab is the symbol of the Islamic Republic".[6] The Islamic regime of Iran has imposed its main symbol of superiority and difference from the West on women's bodies, and with directing all aspects of its structure toward that symbol, all forms of dissatisfaction also target that symbol; hijab.

Forms of acceptable hijab changed over time as women pushed the boundaries of "proper hijab." During the reformist era in post-Revolutionary Iran (1997-2005), under the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, alongside the advancement of liberal and market-based economic plans that had started from the previous presidency, the social and political life was also less controlled (Keddie and Richard 2006, 265). Women began covering less of their hair, wearing tighter and shorter clothes, and following fashion trends (Keddie and Richard 2006).

However, Iran's economic model is not fully neoliberal. Pavoy (2019) argues that the privatization, however partially implemented, is making the Islamic Republic's bodies like IRGC stronger and the population of Iran poorer. But since neoliberalism is not hegemonic in Iran, Pavoy (2019) suggests, there is a possibility for popular mobilization against the regime that targets the neoliberal model at the same time (Povey 2019). She brings examples of the uprisings in 2017 and 2018, over high living costs and economic hardship, and worker's movements in Iran that can mobilize against the regime if they connect their protests to other

[5] See https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/clmdvdj2xvno
[6] See https://www.irna.ir/news/85031385/

parts of society. Zarbighalehhammami and Abbasi (2022) see the potential of this unity in the Woman Life Freedom.

Woman Life Freedom was repeatedly tied the economic uprisings, from chants in the street "Aban[7] the month of blood", to the lyrics of its songs "We are the bloody flood of Aban" to several artwork and recalling the protester's names who were killed in those protests, WLF has already bridged to the uprisings of 2017 and 2019.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how the state's control over women's bodies and dress codes in post-1979 Iran reveal a complex interplay between state ideology, cultural identity, and economic structures. From its initial role as a symbol of resistance against Western influence to its enforced status as a marker of Islamic and national identity, hijab has been central to the Iranian regime's narrative. The recent Woman Life Freedom movement exemplifies how protests against hijab extend beyond religious or cultural opposition, addressing broader issues of economic injustice and political repression. By scrutinizing these historical and contemporary contexts, we gain a deeper understanding of how hijab functions as a tool of both control and resistance in Iran, reflecting the ongoing struggle for autonomy and justice among Iranian women. This multifaceted resistance challenges not only the state's impositions but also the underlying structures of global neoliberalism. This historical context sets the stage for understanding the ongoing struggle against compulsory hijab and the ways in which women have navigated and resisted these constraints.

[7] Aban in Iranian calendar is parallel to November.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN POST-1979 IRAN

The 1979 Iranian Revolution brought significant changes to the country, not least of which was the imposition of compulsory hijab. One of the earliest and most notable protests against this mandate was the Women's 6-day Uprising two weeks after the Revolution. Another one, briefly discussed in Chapter One, is the One Million Signatures Campaign. These two are known as Iranian women's "movements". There are no formal uncertainties to define them as nonmovement or coin a new a word to explain them. Briefly looking at the two, I examine how these movements are perceived, especially in Academic Iranian diaspora, and how relevant that is to the reality of Iranian women's movements.

After that, I delve into the concept of moments of rupture, and analyze the different forms of women's protests, using the analytical framework I set out in Chapter One.

Earlier Movements: Context and Criticism

Two weeks after the revolution, Khomeini's speech printed in Keyhan newspaper on March 7, 1979, sparked significant backlash: "Ministries of an Islamic country should not be a place to commit sin. Women should not go to work half-naked as they used to in the previous regime. It is ok for the women to work if they want to, but they must adhere to Islamic hijab" (Matin and Mohajer 2013, 47). On the following day, thousands of women spontaneously gathered in the streets to protest this violation of their rights.

A significant portion of literature on the women's movement in Iran has been dedicated to identifying the reasons why those protests did not grow among a larger population and quickly subsided (Matin and Mohajer 2010; 2013; Higgins 1985; Moghisi 1996). Among the reasons are the violent attacks on women protesters by supporters of the Islamic government,

media and press propaganda labeling the protesters as monarchists and anti-revolutionary, lack of support from the main left and democrat organizations, and conflicts and divisions within the supporting groups (Matin and Mohajer 2013, 615-616).

Moghisi criticizes the feminism that studies Iranian women's movements through a lens of cultural relativism and ignores their agency and history of resistance. She writes, "For example, Patricia Higgins suggested that the plight of women in Iran concerns only middle- and upper-class women, implying that the horrendous consequences of the revolution were not significant for most Iranian women" (Moghisi 1996, 8). However, I believe Higgins' study (1985) points to an important dimension of the Iranian context usually left out in research.

Higgins explains how the social and cultural context had a much stronger impact on women's lives compared to legal changes: "There is reason to believe […] that Iranian women's latent or overt opposition to the changes instituted by the Islamic Republic is simply not as great as many assume. Changes in the position of women that Western feminists (and Western-educated Iranian feminists) find offensive may not have seemed so negative to the bulk of Iranian women" (Higgins 1985, 478). By agreeing with Higgins, I am not suggesting that having autonomy over one's body is antagonistic to rural or lower-class women's demands and agency, as evidenced by the opposite in the Jina uprising. Quite the contrary, I argue that the very assumption that fighting against mandatory hijab in the context of the 1979 Revolution represents resistance and agency comes from an unmediated application of Western Feminism on the Iranian context. As Higgins argues, there was a different perception of veiling for a significant portion of society outside the middle and upper-class urban women, mainly because, in those contexts, cultural norms were decisive in people's lives, not legal boundaries, and the law was usually interpreted and adapted within a specific cultural context.

To argue that hijab was not a primary concern for most women in 1979 is not to deny their agency but to highlight that fighting against hijab has not necessarily been a sign of

feminist struggle. Even among intellectual and leftist figures, hijab was not a priority. Simin Daneshvar, a prominent Iranian writer, was one of the first figures who publicly reacted to Khomeini's speech and the protests. In a letter in Keyhan newspaper, three days after the uprising had started, she wrote:

"Whenever we can make this ruined house habitable, fix its economy, bring its agriculture to a better place, establish a just and free government, and all the people of this land become full and covered and have a secure roof over their heads and benefit from universal education and health, then we can address secondary and subsidiary issues. We can take the opportunity to sit comfortably at home and take care of women's affairs."[8]

Homa Nategh, a historian and university professor, also published a note in the same newspaper two days later: "We shouldn't have a problem called the women's issue in these conditions. […] we shouldn't create tension for this issue, […] even if we wear a headscarf as long as we know that there is no conspiracy against us and the imperial system is not restored".[9]

The 1979 Revolution was marked by its Islamic and anti-imperialist nature and spoke in the name of the deprived and the poor (Keddie 2007, 23). Just as the entanglement of hijab with various economic and social aspects of the Islamist state of Iran is observed in the current context, unveiling was then associated with the injustices of the Pahlavi regime. Mehrangiz Kar, an Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, writes about an experience on May 13, 1979, the day when the Shah of Iran left the country: "An old street vendor who was struggling hard to carry his cart blocked my way as I was passing through a narrow alley and unleashed the resentment of years of poverty and discrimination on me. He spit on my face and said: 'We kicked your bastard Shah out, and we will soon kick you whores out too'".[10]

Kar believes this man and many others from his social class had been made to believe that poverty and destitution were the results of a system in which women could attend school

[8] https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/
[9] ibid
[10] See https://iranwire.com/fa/blogs/21279/

and work without hijab. The government and intellectual elite had failed to weaken this long-held belief in them.[11]

The same criticism goes for the *One Million Signature Campaign*. The feminist literature on the campaign repeatedly lauds its transnationality and global recognition, pointing to international awards for women activists such as Shirin Ebadi and Nasrin Sotoudeh, Iranian lawyers and human rights activists who were campaigners (Tohidi 2010). However, as Azadeh Kian notes, these campaigns "initiated by middle-class activists in the capital" were better known outside of the country than inside and had no effect on the lives of subaltern women who were not connected to their social networks (Kian 2021, 77).

I mentioned these cases to stress the importance of the intertwinement of women's movements with the general socio-political conditions as the two cannot be separated. One important thing about the Girls of Revolution Street was its timing, it started only a few days before the uprisings of 2017, protesting the difficult economic conditions but strongly demanding the overthrow of the regime, and continued after. In this way, it did not simply merge with the uprising, but embodied it. It, unintentionally, asserted its urgency and everydayness at the same time. As if saying: I will be here regardless of what happens to the other aspects of life. If prices suddenly drop, I will still be here. Because this is the key about hijab in the Islamic Republic, you cannot imagine it without it. So, the timely presence of Girls of Enghelab Street, was in a way, saying, if you want to overthrow the regime, you must stand on the utility box with me.

[11] ibid

Moments of Rupture

The year before I moved to Vienna I stopped wearing the headscarf. Depending on where I was going and how much capacity I had, I would either pack a headscarf in my bag or wear one around my neck. On July 19th, 2022, I took my Covid-positive mother to a clinic and while she was getting an IV, I ran to the pharmacy across the street to get her medication. Suddenly I realized I had forgotten to pack a scarf while I was right at Enghelab Square, where you can usually find the morality police. In the 15 minutes it took me to get back to the clinic, the only thing I could think about was what if they took me away? I would tell them my mother was sick and waiting for me and they wouldn't listen and take me anyway.

Like every single time that I left the house that year, I got lucky, and nothing happened. Later that day I saw a video of a woman in the street begging the police not to take her daughter because she was ill. The woman was standing in front of the morality police van, trying to stop it from moving but they left nevertheless and took her daughter with them.[12] With this video, the fear that had become a part of my everyday routine, turned into fury.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework (Chapter One), Butler argues that bodies are not just autonomous isolated beings but they also interact with other bodies, creating spaces necessary for assembly and political action Due to the unpredictability of the conditions of public spaces, these interactions occur spontaneously and cannot be fully controlled. However, according to Butler, they fosters greater potential for solidarity than deliberate, pre-planned spaces (Butler 2015, 153). Similarly, through her completely unplanned act, the woman in the video, embodied the fear that only existed in my head and in doing so, gave it legitimacy and significance. Instead of piling it on top of my "everyday traumas", this everyday experience was mobilized through shared experience and identification.

[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFPSRJYjYY0

Girls of Enghelab Street (2017)

On a winter morning in 2017, a young woman in a dark blue sweater and pants, climbed a utility box in Enghelab street of Tehran with her headscarf not on her head but tied to a stick. Back in 2017, it was not very uncommon to see a woman in public with uncovered hair. Most of the time, no one would even turn their head as the scene was becoming slowly normalized. But everything about this case was different; the busy street on a Wednesday morning in the center of Tehran, people looking up and turning their heads as they passed by to take another look at this uncanny scene of a woman with uncovered hair who was not trying to hide but was making sure to be seen.

By astonished social media users like me, she was nicknamed “the Girl of Enghelab Street”, after the name of the street she had appeared at, which in Farsi is the word for Revolution. After inquiring about her identity and whereabouts through the hashtag “Where is the Girl of Enghelab Street” (#دختر-خیابان-انقلاب-کجاست) she was identified as Vida Movahed and in police custody after her act. In the following months, at least three-seven other women and

at some cases men, repeated the act across the country, all of whom were arrested (Kian 2021, 79).

The Girls of Enghelab was a decisive moment in the history of Iranian women's fight against compulsory hijab. Unlike the 1979 women's uprising as it was not a collective demonstration and it differed from the quiet encroachment of the years in between by its public expression. Instead of maintaining her unofficial form of living, by standing on a utility box in one of the most crowded parts of the city, she accentuated her presence and insisted on her visibility, as if she called the authorities to herself.

Critiquing Hanna Arendt in her idea of political act as public speech, Butler moves beyond the necessity of linguistic expression in political enactment and points to its bodily forms of appearance (Butler 2015). They argue that when bodies appear where they are not allowed to be, just by practicing a right that they do not have, they question the state's legitimacy. They also note that these acts can be spatially dispersed, as the inclusion and exclusion from the public sphere is directly regulated by the police and not all bodies have the possibility of appearing in public.(Butler 2015) In the same way, without uttering a word, the Girls of Enghelab proclaimed their protest loud and clear and brought to the surface of the public, what the state had been trying to present as under control. This rupture turned into a performative assembly, when other women, inspired by Movahed's photos and videos that circulated in social media, proceeded to repeat the performance, however individually and at different times and places.

These acts were connected, repeated, and recreated in more complex ways through time and space. On the 8th of March 2018, a video was circulated in social media of three women in a subway train, holding hands, not wearing headscarves, and signing the "Song of Equality", a famous feminist song that is associated with the One Million Signatures Campaign, for the other women on the train (Khosravi Ooryad 2021). Interestingly, one of the three women in

the video, was one of the Girls of Enghelab in 2017 who climbed a utility box in a street in Tehran and waved her headscarf in protest to mandatory hijab (Khosravi Ooryad 2021). Another one of them was arrested in the first anniversary of Jina and recently received a 6-year prison sentence. These women and all the Girls of Enghelab were, at the end, "activists", if we assume for a moment that activism is a voluntarily political act of protest. But there are also instances in which the fight against mandatory hijab came to the focus of attention through accidental encounters.

Spontaneous Stages, Improve Actors

Butler emphasizes the unpredictability and spontaneity political actions, highlighting how our bodies and their appearances in public and virtual spaces contribute to the creation of assemblies (Butler 2015). Majewska, similarly, highlights the significance of unintended and spontaneous actions in non-heroic movements, that lead to social change, but not by extraordinary figures and bold characters, as we might conventionally expect.

On the other side of the hidden, Scott says, lies the public transcript as the dominant's attempt to naturalize and assert its power through what he calls "the dramaturgy of power" (Scott 1990, 45-50). We can say, whenever the subordinate is being surveilled, it is walking within the public transcript. This is true in the context of Iran, where the state is aware of the contradictory transcripts in the public and private spheres but employs its regulatory forces on keeping the private from appearing in the public and maintaining its constructed image.

According to Scott the dramaturgy of power could be broken by improvisation of the subordinate when they take the stage, however, he also emphasizes on the hidden transcript as backstage practice which could be achieved if "the social conditions under which a hidden transcript might be generated among subordinates are eliminated" (Scott 1990, 83). He

mentions techniques of "atomization and surveillance" used in North Korea and China prisons during the Korean War as a method to eliminate any sense of support and solidarity among prisoners and elicit confessions. Despite that, prisoners often found ways to communicate subtly; for example, "in a publicly read apology or confession before other prisoners", they inserted "small linguistic nuances" to indicate "that their performance was forced and insincere" (Scott 1990, 84).

Scott admits that even in that context it is not always possible to maintain the absolute solitude of individuals. As soon as bodies interact within a space, their shared precarity creates a sense of support and increases the possibility of solidarity formation. As mentioned earlier, through photos and videos shared in the virtual domain, social connections and networks do not necessarily need to form in public squares and streets (Butler 2015, 153). Therefore, the space between the bodies, which is where the action takes place, can be extended across time and space. As mentioned earlier, nowadays, social connections and networks are formed mainly through the virtual domain rather than public squares and streets (Butler 2015, 153).

I want to use the notion of spontaneity and virtual networks to tell the story of Sepideh, who had no idea she would be walking on a stage when she boarded the bus that morning.

Case One

In July 2022, two months before the WLF protests erupted across Iran, a video of two women arguing over hijab on a bus went viral. Recording the harassment by hijab enforcers initially started as part of the My Stealthy Freedom campaign, founded by US-based Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad, with the hashtag "My Camera My Weapon" (Basmechi, Barnes, and Heydari 2022). In this case, as the pro-hijab woman was filmed, she began filming back, saying: "You're going to send this to Masih Alinejad, what can she do for you? I'll send it to Sepah (Islamic Republic Guard Corps), and they'll teach you a lesson," to which the other woman

responded: “I’ll send it to the whole world.” As the argument escalated, other women on the bus got involved in support of Sepideh, pushing the hijab enforcer off at the next stop. A short video followed, showing another woman’s scratched hand from the altercation.

The video was not published by Alinejad but by the Instagram page “1500 Images,” created to seek justice for the 1500 people reportedly killed during the 2019 Bloody November protests. Both sides apparently fulfilled their threats, as the IRGC-owned Fars News Agency reported the woman was a member of organized networks connected to Masih Alinejad and was arrested along with several other members of their network on the same day, “before sunset” (FNA 2022).

For several days, there was no news of the woman’s status who was identified as Sepideh Rashno, a young writer and poet. Social media users protested in support of her, using the hashtag #سپیده_کجاست (Where is Sepideh) and demanding information about her whereabouts, accountability from officials, and her immediate release. After nearly a month, a video was aired on television in which Sepideh, with a devastated and visibly bruised face, confessed to connections with anti-regime opposition groups, particularly Masih Alinejad, and involvement in activities against national security (MN 2022a). It was reported earlier that she had been taken to the hospital for internal bleeding prior to the staged confession (MN 2022b).

The woman who confronted Sepideh about her hijab, Rayeheh Rabiei, was a non-state actor, following the “fire at will” (atash be ekhtiyar) command of Ali Khamenei’s, the current leader of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei used this military expression to call the “officers of soft war” to act whenever necessary without the need to consult an authority (DW 2017). Rabiei was admired for being a responsible citizen and in another video aired on television, the woman who had gotten involved in the altercation and published a video of her bleeding hand after Rabiei had scratched her, apologizes to her.

The forced confession of Sepideh, and her broken voice and her downcast gaze, created a great sense of identification and sympathy among people. It indicated that as an ordinary person, you could be on your way to work on a normal day and be prosecuted as an agent of foreign opposition groups the next day. By mobilizing vigilantes and expanding surveillance over citizens, the state had primarily targeted women, bearers of its ideological symbol, hijab. Therefore, any public appearance of women that either intentionally or unintentionally contested this symbol, is heavily political.

Figure 2: Sepideh Rashno's forced confession aired on national television

Case Two

In another example in 2019, Pooyeh Noorian shared on Twitter that a driver made her exit an online taxi company car in stormy weather on the highway for refusing to wear her headscarf. The tweet received significant public attention, prompting the Judiciary spokesperson to address the issue: “These days, we witnessed the behavior of a dear brother, a driver, who felt responsible to promote virtue in the face of an improper act. His action was so effective that the mentioned company and the individual themselves announced that they consider

themselves committed to the achievements of society".[13] State television organized an interview with the driver, who stated he acted according to the company's hijab rules. When asked about company measures for non-compliance, described his act as "fire at will".

Days later, a photo of the passenger girl with her parents next to the driver was published in state-run media, claiming they had apologized to the driver and the driver gifted her a Quran and few other religious books. The mother's downcast look and the daughter's empty gaze at the camera left much room for interpretation. One Twitter reaction stated: "This is all of us, take a good look."

Pooyeh later deleted all her tweets about the incident followed by another tweet in a very formal tone resembling a forced confession: "I apologize to the Snapp[14] driver, the Snapp company, and everyone whose feelings have been hurt by the recent incident. I would like to state that I am committed to adhering to the laws of my country." Shortly after, she deactivated her account.

[13] https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1269367/
[14] Snap is the name of the online taxi company.

Figure 3: Pooyeh Noorian and her parents meeting the taxi driver

Conclusion

Decades after the draconian prisons of China and North Korea in Scott's example, this pattern repeats under current conditions. Now, nuances extend beyond language to gestures as subtle as not looking at the camera. With the online circulation of images, emotions, and ideas, maintaining isolation has become impossible, even when the bodies are secluded.

The state's surveillance and punishment methods create stages for social embodiment and politicization of everyday life. First, by expanding its public transcript through above-the-law actions, and second, by turning hijab into a matter of national security, staging confessions and apologies, and leaving signs of coercion visible. Social media's wide circulation of these examples vividly depicts "the dramaturgy of power," where the state aims not necessarily to delegitimize people's offstage lives but to threaten the publicization of offstage narratives

(Scott 1990, 50). Following this notion, I see the roots of the WLF movement shaped in the spontaneous moments of appearance and improvised acts of defiance and creative forms of resistance which reflect the unmediated voice of the movement and the plurality of its participants while creating large-scale assemblies by expanding their space of occurrence through their online circulation.

JIN, JIYAN, AZADI

Only two months after Sepideh, Jina happened. I had just moved to Vienna, and I was embarrassingly homesick. I was avoiding too much input from Iran to not completely detach from the new space I have just arrived at. I had been nervously scrolling down news about a girl in a coma. Then I read it on my mother's Instagram story: "Iran's daughter flew away."

People spontaneously assembled in front of the hospital after they confirmed her death, several were detained. Thousands gathered at her funeral in her hometown, Saqez, Kurdistan; her uncle wrote on her grave in Kurdish: "Dear Jina, you will not die. Your name becomes a symbol". At her funeral, women waved their headscarves in the air, and everyone chanted "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi". They did not leave the streets after; they were shot at. In Sanandaj, capital of

Kurdistan province, people came to the streets, shouted: “Saqez is not alone, Sanandaj has its back”. And then the whole country shouted back: “Jin Jiyan, Azadi”. The first video from Tehran, 12 seconds: A young woman standing on a half-burnt police car, another woman who is recording calls on her: “Say it sister, say it”. With a broken but loud voice, she shouted: “We don’t want the Islamic Republic!”. Cut.

After that, everything happened with an incomprehensible speed: women on the street, passing by, stopped to hug each other as if they were old friends who had just found each other. Old women uncovering their white and thinning hair. Girls tied their hair back as a sign of going to war. Women dancing in the streets, dancing and burning their headscarves. The flood of figures, gestures, and symbols was streaming incessantly. I was frustrated that not wearing a headscarf did not mean anything where I was, at the same time, I occasionally caught myself looking for one before leaving the house, as a force of habit. I was in a contradictory and complex way, connected to the movement from very far away. Just as “L”, the anonymous protestor (see Introduction), writes in her essay, I was bombarded, overwhelmed, and to some extent jealous by the figures, by the “images of uncovered hair with clenched fists. The figure of bodies on trash bins and automobiles” (L 2022).

Before I start writing the thesis, I decided to revisit some of the pictures. To find the photos I had in mind, I searched the only way I could describe each of them in Twitter: “the green-haired girl”,[15] there it was, I found the still image of the five-second-long video, a girl with green hair with her back to the camera facing the police, almost attacking them and shouting: “Don’t you dare touch me!”, with the first attempt. Next one: “I’m not afraid of you”[16], the short POV video by a girl who approaches the police to fist bump him,[17] her hands

[15] دختر مو سبز

[16] نمی‌ترسم ازتون

[17] People used to fist bump strangers in the street and then give them a piece of paper that was in their fist with nice encouraging sentences written on it, for example to women who largely did not cover their hair by then they would write: “Thank you for adding beauty to the streets with your hair”.

trembling, she says that short sentence to the police. “We are from Azadi school”,[18] Another POV video from three school girls.

Plainclothes officer: Which school are you from?

First girl: What’s it to you?

Second girl: We are from Azadi School.

First girl: Our name is Mahsa Amini.

Third girl: And I’m Nika, and this is Sarina.[19]

The figures were so strong that everyone knew them by some common words that could be used in any context. At the same time, none of them had a face or a character. They could be anyone, they could be embodied through acts and gestures.

[18] ما از مدرسه‌ی آزادی هستیم. Azadi is the Farsi word for freedom.
[19] https://x.com/SaaraJavan/status/1581752180503064577

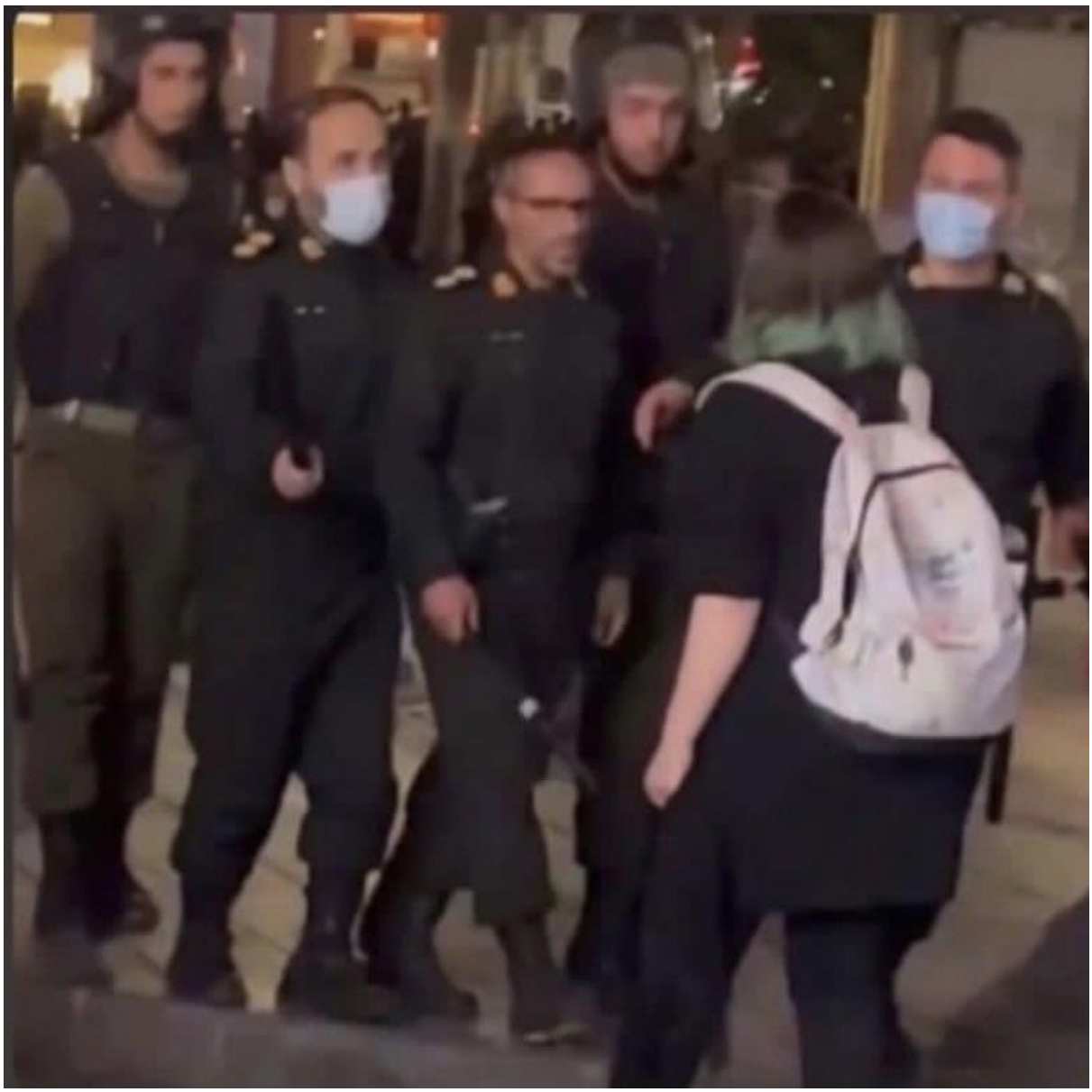

Figure 4: The Green-Haired Girl

In his latest article, Bayat reviews the history of protests and women's non-movements in post-revolutionary Iran up to the WLF movement, and asserts: "that very 'non-movement,' impelled by the murder of one of its own, Mahsa Amini, has given rise to an extraordinary political upheaval" (Bayat 2023, 22). In saying that, he is, again, referring to his idea of "passive networks (Bayat 2013). Here, Bayat repeats his dichotomy of nonmovements and public demonstrations that, as I argued earlier, ignore the significant moments, events, actions, and gestures that are performed individually but cannot be categorized as nonmovements.

Bayat also addresses the question of whether we can call WLF a revolution and in that, clearly states that Iran is still far from another revolution, mainly due to lack of central organization and leadership; instead, he refers to this uprising as the beginning of a "revolutionary course" in Iran (Bayat 2023, 24). My intention is not to engage in a debate on whether Iran is on the verge of a revolution; rather, I want to argue the revolutionary potential of the WLF movement lied specifically in its lack of central leadership and the horizontal nature of the movement that comes from the position of its leading actors, women, but not only women, faceless women.

In the following part, I briefly portray two more significant moments that have happened rather late, after the spectacular mass protests were cracked down and supposedly, the movement was "over". For me, these are the same as bodies I discussed in the previous chapter; what seems different about them, because something certainly does, is that now, they are more confident about the "space between the bodies", the space we have no control over and where assembly takes place. Now in moments of defiance, they know, and everyone else knows, what they are referring to, to Woman, and Life, and Freedom.

Figure One

During a voting session for the executive board of the Tehran Engineering Organization, one of the female candidates walked on the stage, her headscarf on her shoulder, and said: "I do not recognize the legitimacy of an assembly that does not allow candidacy due to not wearing a headscarf. I do not recognize the legitimacy of an assembly who has denied entry to some of our coworkers because of hijab." As her microphone was cut out, she also said the board elections were nothing more than a facade and that the list of new board members had been predetermined even before the elections took place. She then threw her headscarf on the stage and walked out among the applause of people.

Figure Two

Karevan Shakeri, 16 years old, was one of the many minors killed during the WLF uprisings.

In his 40-day anniversary, her mother reads the following speech:

"Welcome to all the dear guests who attended the 40-day anniversary of my martyred Karevan, especially the Mobarez families whose children have been killed, kidnapped, arrested, or injured for the same cause as my Karevan's. I have great respect for them. Welcome, welcome to martyr Karevan's memorial (applause). I have some words I would like to say (opens a paper). Many say my son was a child. While this is true, I want to emphasize that my son was biologically young but had a mature mind. Do you know why? Because we live in a society where, unfortunately, people grow up too fast. We live in a society with so much inequality that anyone with humanity and a sense of justice cannot remain indifferent. These issues become apparent to children like Karevan very early. He noticed these inequalities and couldn't stand them. Today's children are aware and vigilant. They know there could be a better world and cannot be indifferent to it. In this society where children grow up too fast, I, Afsaneh, Karevan's mother, was one of those who grew up too fast. I got married at the age of 14 and became Karevan's mother at 15. I did not experience childhood, its sweet and bitter moments, school, or any of it. If I didn't understand until yesterday, I understand today why my Karevan and the children of this land take to the streets and expose themselves to bullets. If I didn't know what I wanted from this world until yesterday, and why I live, I know today that there is a greater purpose. And that is to continue the path of Karevan and those who sacrificed their lives for a better world without inequality, discrimination, and cruelty—a world they strived for and deserve more than anyone else. We all deserve a better life. A life that today is symbolized by the motto of 'Jin, Jian, Azadi' and the equality of all human beings. Jin, Jian, Azadi... (others respond). Karevan and all the martyrs, their path will be continued. The martyrs don't die..."[20]

As we can see, the implications of WLF have expanded even more to even include and address inequality in a space like an Engineers Assembly and directly connect to socio-political issues that are not perceived to be a problem of mandatory hijab.

In the second instance, Afsaneh takes the space of her son's death anniversary and uses it to point to her own experience of child marriage and bring into focus, yet another form of

[20] https://www.instagram.com/reel/CoVE1WIj3gC/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link
The speech is in Kurdish and the video has Farsi subtitles. I have translated the subtitle from Farsi to English.

precarity. Afsaneh is also one of those figures, that is in contrast to “the figures we had seen previously of well-known politically active women”.(L 2022)

Butler explains precarity as political conditions that targets certain already subordinated populations, such as women, transgender people, or migrants “more than others” and makes them “differentially exposed to injury, violence and death” (Butler 2015, 33). The alliance that Butler talks about is a form of interdependency and cohabitation which is possible by defending the rights of the precarious and the refusal of any “political and legal recognition and rights […] if the allocation of [those] rights to one group is instrumentalized for the disenfranchisement of basic entitlements to another” (Butler 2015, 70). They emphasize that this does not mean any group of people should give up existing basic rights in favor of the other, but it means understanding that our “rights are only meaningful within a broader struggle for social justice” (Butler 2015, 71). An example of this, I believe, is not only evident in the WLF movement, but is one of its main characteristics.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I explored the multifaceted and dynamic nature of women's resistance movements in post-1979 Iran, focusing particularly on the Woman Life Freedom (WLF) movement. By examining various theoretical frameworks and conducting several case studies, I aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how ordinary individuals navigate and challenged the socio-political constraints imposed upon them.

As discussed, in the context of post-1979 Iran, hijab is not merely a religious or cultural doctrine, but a political tool used to assert control over women's bodies and control the state's public image. I demonstrated, however, this symbol of the Iranian regime's ideological control, has also worked as a focal point of resistance which has challenged the state's authority and disrupted its official narrative.

Following Butler, I emphasized the space between the bodies, where the conditions are not in our control, as the site of assembly and this lack of control results in spontaneous and improvised acts of resistance. Through this, I explained the centralization of the most precarious in the WLF movement is its empowering point through which strong networks of solidarity are built beyond identity categories.

Another point I highlighted was the formation of connections and sense of both physical and virtual spaces, expanding the movement through space and time. I characterized the WLF movement as non-heroic, advocating for the centrality of ordinary people as the main drivers of social change.

Tracing cases of individual non-heroic acts in the context of Iran throughout years, I challenge our definitions and understandings of revolution as a sudden, often violent exchange of power that have historically sidelined the rights of women and minorities after the revolutionary process is passed and suggest to instead, look at acts that create structural social change through

time and revolutionary processes. Revolution, in this sense, may not create rapid political change, but it will definitely not do so at the expense of the other's right, for it is a revolution for the right of the Other, or as Butler puts it, an alliance.

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