

# Does Liberty Have a Future in Iran?

Since September 2022, when the 22-year-old woman Mahsa Amini died at the hands of “morality police,” Iran has been shaken by massive anti-regime demonstrations. The protestors demand freedom from an authoritarian regime that has ruled in the name of religion since 1979. Do they have a chance? Or is the Islamic Republic strong enough to survive for the foreseeable future? And what are the lessons from Iran for other Muslim-majority nations, where the role of religion in public life keeps being contested? Cato research fellow **Sahar Khan** moderated a discussion with senior fellow **Mustafa Akyol** and **Mohamad Machine-Chian**, an Iranian intellectual who has been on the forefront of the freedom movement within the Islamic Republic, and who has personally experienced the regime’s brutality.

**Sahar Khan:** Last September, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, was killed by the morality police in Iran. That started a wave of protests that continue to this day. About 20,000 individuals have been arrested, over 500 have been killed by security forces, 18 people have been sentenced to death, and 4 have already been killed.

Mohamad just came from Iran, and he has experienced some of the protests firsthand. Mohamad, please tell us your story and how you found yourself here today.

**Mohamad Machine-Chian:** My story started as a frustrated teenager. At that time, I really felt like I was alone. I was frustrated from the situation, the human condition there. I was very much interested in liberty and individual autonomy and freedom of religion. I began researching, and somewhere I found out about this guy called John Locke. I tried to look him up and I couldn’t find much. It took me a couple of years, but thanks to a new thing called the internet, I found him. At the time, I had no idea this school of thought had a name. Nonetheless, I found *A Letter Concerning Toleration* by John Locke. It was a difficult read for me, so I had to buy a second, bigger dictionary to be



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able to understand it. Even then, I had to write down certain passages to piece it together and make sense of it. What I ended up with was the start of my career because I ended up with, more or less, a translation of John Locke.

It did not feel like something that was written 300 years ago; it was as if this guy wrote it last week. And like he wrote it for me; it was that personal. I published it online anonymously.

A couple of years later, I learned that when John Locke first published his work he also did so anonymously. That made it all the more personal to me. I became even more interested, more infatuated with translating and talking about these things. I soon started a blog and started writing about what I was reading and about the things that were happening around me. That is how I started as a translator, and then became a public intellectual, and eventually a journalist.

When we in Iran talk about getting detained, getting beaten up, or receiving threats, I know that to people in the free world, the developed world, that sounds like a big deal. But working as a journalist or having a public life in a place like Iran, it is expected. It is not a special thing. It is mundane. There are tortures, there are threats. It is sad to say that after a while you get used to it.

But at least whenever I was questioned, I had done something that led to that. The situation in Iran today is different. Many people are being detained, arrested, tortured, and even killed, not for saying something, but for just being there. Mahsa Amini’s crime was being a girl; that was it. She didn’t do anything. For my part, I knew what I was getting into. And every now and then I tasted the cruelty—cruel and unusual punishments. I am happy it’s in the past now that I am out of Iran.

**Khan:** I want to go into the regime’s decades-old policy of religious coercion, such as the

hijab by law and severely punishing blasphemy and apostasy. Mustafa has argued that these measures have made Iranian society not more religious, but rather less religious. What is your take on that?

**Machine-Chian:** We have abundant data to support that decades of religious coercion policies such as the hijab law, and severe punishment for blasphemy and apostasy, have made Iranian society not more but rather less religious. All the anecdotal experiences point in the same direction. Almost anybody that travels to Iran makes the same observation. Alcoholic beverages are readily available. I think it was a writer for *The Economist* that mentioned that your alcohol could get delivered to your house sooner than your pizza in Iran. Hijab is not taken seriously. Even surveys done by hard-liners within the regime indicate that. And mind you, when you're answering questions on a survey in Iran, you must be very careful. Nonetheless, the best result the regime could come up with was that 70 percent of people completely reject mandatory hijab in Iran. Seventy percent! Other surveys indicate it is even more people—as much as 85 percent. And I assure you, if there are 15 percent of Iranian people really in favor of mandatory hijab, they're definitely not the young generations. They're not the future of Iran.

**Mustafa Akyol:** Locke writes about just that last point in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. He criticizes the people who want a Christian commonwealth and says all the coercive measures that the state uses lead to the “contempt of his divine majesty.” It leads to contempt. When you create a religious regime, which tends to be authoritarian, and which forces religion on people, it doesn't make them more religious, it makes them less religious, and it makes them contemptuous of religion. Somebody can be totally secular but still respectful of religious people. But the regimes like Iran end up creating societies that are angry at religion. So it's counterproductive what they're doing.

We see this in Iran, and in other parts of the world. We see this in my home country, Turkey. It's not comparable to Iran; what has happened in Turkey is still much milder than Iran; but there has been a return of Islam to power, especially in the past 10 years. You see



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the government building mosques everywhere. Wearing a hijab is now an advantage, not a disadvantage as it was once. And both are wrong, obviously—it should not be the government's business. Our “very populist” president says they will raise pious generations through state power and state schools.

What has actually happened in Turkey is a new movement among Turkish youth. They are becoming deists. They believe in God but

not religion. That's a very Enlightenment concept that is now flourishing in Turkey. The supporters of the government are saying this must be a conspiracy. “Whose conspiracy is this? How are the imperialists cooking this up?” Well, it is your conspiracy, and your unwise policies. If you create an authoritarian government that is corrupt, people don't respect it.

And in Iran, a lot of surveys indeed show that there's widespread secularization, which of course makes the regime quite unhappy. There is also a very interesting tide of conversion to Christianity. And of course, converts go through a lot of terrible experiences there because it's a crime to convert to another religion. They can put you in jail, even on death row.

I see Iran as an amazing lesson that we need to bring Islam and liberty together, otherwise it is destructive for society and even Islam itself.

**Khan:** I'm from Pakistan. There's a great deal of religious laws on the books in Pakistan; you can certainly go to jail for a blasphemy, for apostasy. There is a community of Muslims called the Ahmadiyya community. In Pakistan, it is unconstitutional to be an Ahmadiyya Muslim, and they're officially declared as non-Muslims. This is the government that is declaring a group of individuals as non-Muslims. In terms of religious coercion, certainly Pakistan also has a lot of lessons to offer, similar to Turkey. And to your point about accessibility of alcohol, in Pakistan there are similar stories, you can get your alcohol faster than pizza.

**Akyol:** People also die of bootleg alcohol in Iran. That's another unintended consequence of trying to make society more pious.

**Machine-Chian:** There is also an interesting economic aspect to it. In Iran there is price control; the price of everything is set by the government. However, there is a huge black market with almost everything a normal human being would want that is illegal. Currently, we have a high inflation, so everything

is getting more expensive. However, the black-market prices are more or less stable. Which is very ironic. If you want to buy bacon or alcohol or drugs, the price isn't growing with inflation.

**Khan:** Can you talk a little bit about the brighter side in terms of your engagement with Shia clerics, what they say, what their stance is on Iran's religious evolution?

**Machine-Chian:** Let me say this to preface. Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretation of Shia Islam has been promoted for the past almost five decades. They have been pushing this idea that his understanding, his interpretation is the main line—is the orthodoxy. However, his understanding and interpretation are very radical, and have nothing to do with the tradition. Not that traditional Shia Islam has no problems; I would be the first to point out the flaws. However, Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretation has nothing to do with that; it is a very radical understanding.

His interpretation is that the religious scholar should be the head, the philosopher king, or the absolute guardian—an ayatollah being the guardian to 80 million people. This understanding is very radical and irregular, and was never accepted by the highest-ranking religious leaders in Shia tradition, much less in other sects. This is a summary of how it used to work; the traditional way of doing things: we had competing authorities with overlapping jurisdictions. It had flaws, but especially to a libertarian, it's a magnificent system. The different authorities with overlapping jurisdictions were funded by people's donations and voluntary taxes. Ayatollah Khomeini never liked it though, and a lot of other people of his ilk agreed. They wanted more power. They wanted government money.

Ayatollah Khomeini had to look beyond the tradition, especially in Shia, to find inspiration. To draw inspiration because of what he wanted to create.

**Akyol:** Ayatollah Khomeini found the inspiration he was looking for, not in John Locke, but the Soviet Union.

He actually copied the Soviet model, combined with Islamic concepts, and that's the structure of the Islamic Republic.



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This explains the Revolutionary Guards' controlling a big chunk of the economy, and the whole economic structure. Clerics cannot speak out because they are all tied to the government forces' funds.

**Machine-Chian:** Another example is the institution of private property. It is sacrosanct in Islam. After the revolution, they confiscated property with the flimsiest of justifications. And the argument was not theological at the time. The argument was, these are imperialist capitalist pigs, and we need to

get rid of them. Similarly with hijab. During the revolution, mandatory hijab was never on the menu. But after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini—when he argued for hijab, when he introduced mandatory hijab—a lot of educated, elite academics agreed with him even though they were secular Marxists, mostly.

Ayatollah Khomeini saw the modern woman, typically more active in society with makeup and Western clothes, as a symbol of imperialism and capitalism. They couldn't tolerate that symbol everywhere they looked. That symbol happened to be very attractive, so they had to get rid of it. A lot of secular people, very educated people, agreed.

Because it was anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, as they put it.

**Khan:** The protests that we are seeing today stem from Mahsa Amini, who was arrested essentially for not wearing the hijab properly. The morality police detained her and during detention they beat her so much that she had a concussion and passed away. A healthy 22-year-old, according to her family, dead within 24 hours of being arrested.

These protests that we're seeing today is not the first time that Iranians have gone to the street to protest. The protests of today, are they different from the protests of 2009, of 2019?

**Machine-Chian:** I've had people tell me: "You Iranians, you're in the streets every other year. And what are you doing? It's just repeating itself."

It is not just repeating itself. People's demands have been evolving. In 2009, because the regime had a pretense of democracy—nothing more than a pretense—but nonetheless, a lot of people tried to reform the country using democratic processes. And the main demand during those protests was, "Where is my vote?" These days, nobody is talking about their votes anymore.

**Akyol:** They don't even want to vote in it, they want the system to go away. ■